

Ultimate Questions

SERIES: DANIEL: LIVING BY FAITH IN A FAITHLESS WORLD

We last left Daniel and his friends as they were finishing up their three years of training for the King's court. We saw in chapter 1 a graphic illustration of the sovereign power of God as he honors those who honor him. Daniel and his friends made the hard choice to live by conviction rather than compromise and they graduated from the University of Babylon with highest honors. We are left with no doubt as to who was behind that. Verse 17 says, **"God gave them knowledge and intelligence in every branch of literature and wisdom; Daniel even understood all kinds of visions and dreams."** So Daniel and his friends enter the King's service, though they are still low-ranking officials in a massive bureaucracy.

This morning we come to chapter 2. Chapter 2 is rather long - 49 verses. Because of its length, many preachers chose to preach it in two weeks. But I'm convinced this is one story and it's important to tell the whole story or else the point of the story is lost. Imagine telling the story of the three little pigs and stopping before the wolf got to the third house! So we're going to tell the whole story, but we're going to have to move along rather quickly and refrain from reading every verse. Chapter 2 is another graphic example of the sovereign power of God. It's a story that revolves around a personal crisis in the life of King Nebuchadnezzar, the most powerful man on earth. Now, of course, when a man like that goes through a crisis, that's bad news for those around him. And so, Nebuchadnezzar's crisis becomes a crisis for those who serve him, and this is where Daniel and his friends come in.

A few years ago at our all-church retreat we had a speaker named Willie Murray. Willie was a Scot and his theme for the weekend, which he recited repeatedly in Scottish brogue, was "what to do when you don't know what to do." I've never forgotten that. Our story revolves around what to do when you don't know what to do. What do YOU do when you don't know what to do? We live in a culture of experts. Even though we may not know what to do, we know who to call. Your car breaks down? No one can fix their own car anymore; call an expert. Having trouble managing your money? Call a financial planner. Technologically challenged? Call a consultant. Sick? Call a doctor. Depressed? Call a psychiatrist. WE KNOW WHAT TO DO WHEN WE DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO! We call an expert. But there are times, if we're honest, that life presents us with questions and problems that no expert can fix.

I. NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S TROUBLING DREAMS 2:1-13

Nebuchadnezzar was having one of those bad spells. He was restless. He was troubled. He couldn't sleep. Look at vv. 1-6,

"Now in the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; and his spirit was troubled and his sleep left him. Then the king gave orders to call in the magicians, the conjurers, the sorcerers and the Chaldeans, to tell the king his dreams. So they came in and stood before the king. And the king said to them, 'I had a dream, and my spirit is anxious to understand the

dream.' Then the Chaldeans spoke to the king in Aramaic: 'O king, live forever! Tell the dream to your servants, and we will declare the interpretation.' The king answered and said to the Chaldeans, 'The command from me is firm: if you do not make known to me the dream and its interpretation, you will be torn limb from limb, and your houses will be made a rubbish heap. But if you declare the dream and its interpretation, you will receive from me gifts and a reward and great honor; therefore declare to me the dream and its interpretation.'"

Nebuchadnezzar is haunted by these dreams. I think he kept having the same dream and in that dream he saw something that terrified him but he didn't know exactly what it was or meant. This dream wouldn't go away. Every dreaded night he enters his own personal little hell. Eventually, he couldn't even get to sleep. We can see him pacing around the palace in his pajamas. Like many men today, his mood is dark and morose and angry. Everyone is trying to cheer him up but nothing works. His wife and his kids are worried sick about him.

So what does he do? He calls in the experts. There are people he pays good money to fix these kinds of things. They had reference books with every possible dream a person could have and their meaning. He calls them in and says, "I had a dream and I can't get it off my mind and I need to know what it means." The experts are no dummies. They start out, "O King, live forever!" That's a good way to start when your boss is in a bad mood, "O boss, live forever!" They go on and say, "Tell us the dream and we'll look it up and tell you what it means." But for some reason Nebuchadnezzar doesn't trust these guys. He thinks that if he tells them the dream they will just make up any old interpretation to keep him happy. He has a bad feeling about this dream and he wants the truth. He says, "I've made a firm decision, I demand to know both the dream and its meaning. Do you need some incentive? If you don't tell me, I'll cut you into pieces and demolish your houses. But, if you do tell me, I'll make you rich and powerful."

This is a king who is used to getting what he wants. He can buy what he wants. If he can't buy it, he can use force. Money and power - time honored methods of getting what you need. But it's not working. His experts go off for a conference, but they know they're in trouble. There's nothing in their books for this one. They decide to approach the king again, hoping his depression has lifted and he's come to his senses. In v. 7 they ask him again to just tell them the dream so they can interpret it. This time he accuses them of stalling and conspiring to lie. He's not only depressed and scared, but now he's paranoid as well.

Finally, they just tell it like it is. Look at v. 10, **"The Chaldeans answered the king and said, 'There is not a man on earth who could declare the matter for the king, inasmuch as no great king or ruler**

has ever asked anything like this of any magician, conjurer or Chaldean.”

I like these guys. Would that the so-called experts of our day had the guts to just say, “No man can do this. This is a God-thing!” I appreciate their honesty. I wish we had some of that honesty in our presidential debates. I would just love Jim Lehrer to ask one of those candidates a question and have one of them just say they haven’t the slightest idea. I’d vote for him because he’d be the only one that was really honest. I’ll take a leader like Winston Churchill any day. He said with tongue in cheek, “The main qualification for political office is the ability to foretell what is going to happen tomorrow, next week, next month and next year - and to have the ability afterwards to explain why it didn’t happen.” We want a guy who knows everything; who always knows what to do. That’s what Nebuchadnezzar wanted, but these guys had the guts to say, “You’re asking something that’s out of our league.” In a sense, they were right. It’s true, this is a problem no man can solve; only God can solve this problem.

So the king says, “You’re out of luck, boys.” In a rage, he gives the order for all the wise men of Babylon to be executed. Up until now Daniel has not been seen in this story. But, with an ominous tone, the writer says in v. 13,

“So the decree went forth that the wise men should be slain; and they looked for Daniel and his friends to kill them.”

What started as a personal crisis for the king has now become a crisis for Daniel and his friends.

Before we see how Daniel responds to this crisis, let’s reflect a bit on Nebuchadnezzar at this point. Here is the most powerful man in the world facing a personal crisis. If you would have asked any common man on the streets, he would have told you that the king had it made. Never in their wildest dreams would they think he was insecure and depressed and angry and paranoid. But Nebuchadnezzar is the prototype of so many in politics down through the ages whose lust for power is prompted by a dark, subconscious realization of the insecurity of their own existence. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, “Man is tempted by the basic insecurity of human existence to make himself doubly secure,” and so he grasps for position, fame, wealth and power. But the higher he climbs, the more insecure he feels, because the greater his fall could be. And so, in his insecurity, he becomes depressed and angry and suspicious and even brutal.

But it’s not just politicians. The Nebuchadnezzar complex has been repeated in boardrooms, hospitals, universities, churches and even homes. Men and women at the top who have to hold on because if they lose what they have, they ARE nothing. And so, within their own little empire they become manipulative, coercive, fearful, paranoid and irrational. The bottom line is they can’t let go because there is nothing unshakable at the foundation of their lives to give them meaning and purpose.

At the root of the Nebuchadnezzar complex are the ultimate questions of our existence; questions asked not just by the Nebuchadnezzars of our day but by ordinary people like you and me. What is the purpose of life? Why am I here? Where am I going? Why, at what should be my happiest moments, am I strangely disturbed by the thought that it could all be lost in a moment? A phone call. A test result. A drunk driver. Will it all just end? Is that it? Six feet under. Or, if I’m environmentally enlightened, a pot of ashes flying over

Monterey Bay? It’s like that old song, “You know there’s something missing and you don’t know what it is, do you Mr. Jones?” The experts can’t answer those questions. The doctors can’t, the psychiatrist can’t, the financial planner can’t, the computer guru can’t, wine, women and song can’t.

If they only Nebuchadnezzar and the experts knew the truth. You see, the experts were only half right. It is true, only God has these answers. But, they were mistaken on the second part. They said, “The gods don’t dwell with mortal flesh.” In other words, “They don’t hang around down here and tell us these kinds of things. We can’t just ask them and expect to get an answer. We don’t hang out with the gods like they’re our friends.” Yet Scripture says, **“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...”** (Jn. 1:1, 14). And He does speak. Jesus said, **“No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave doesn’t know what his master is doing, but I’ve called you friends, for all things I have heard from my Father I have made known to you”** (Jn. 15:15).

What do you do when you don’t what to do? Where do you go for answers to life’s ultimate questions? You go to the Living God who made you. You enter into relationship with Him and He will begin to make sense of your existence. This is where Daniel comes in. In contrast to the king, Daniel knows where to turn.

II. DANIEL’S WISE RESPONSE 2:14-30

Daniel’s wise response to this crisis is recorded in vv. 14-30. In Daniel’s example we see a young man in relationship with God, and through that relationship he demonstrates that God really is the answer to life’s ultimate questions. As we move through these verses I want you to notice five things about Daniel.

First, Daniel was wise. In v. 14 it says, “Daniel replied with....,”

“Then Daniel replied with discretion and discernment to Arioch, the captain of the king’s bodyguard, who had gone forth to slay the wise men of Babylon;”

The NIV may put this better when it says he responded with “wisdom and tact.” Daniel knew that he had to do something. He didn’t just sit back and sing, “Que sera, sera, whatever will be will be.” He wasn’t fatalistic. Yet, when he did act, he didn’t just jump into the situation without thinking about it. We don’t know all that he said to Arioch, but we know that he was somehow able to convince him to give him a hearing with the king. Part of being in relationship with God is knowing how, on a very practical level, to deal with people with discernment and with tact. How many situations have we blown because we jumped in head first and didn’t think it through?

Second, Daniel was bold. We’re told in v. 16 that he went into the king and asked for time “in order that he might declare the interpretation to the king.” That’s a gutsy thing to do. It’s gutsy because the king had already said the time was up. Why he was willing to give Daniel time, we’re not told, but I wonder if it was this young man’s confidence in the king’s presence to make such a bold and matter-of-fact statement. There are times when we have to just say it. There is a kind of fearlessness that goes along with being in relationship with the Living God. It was that fearlessness which allowed Moses to say to Pharaoh, “Let my people go!” It was that fearlessness which caused Peter to say to the Jewish Sanhedrin, “We will obey God, not man. We can’t stop speaking

what we have seen or heard.”

Third, Daniel was prayerful. After meeting with the king, what do you think he did? What would you do? Drive to the library and start looking for books on the abnormal psychology of kings? In v. 17 we see that Daniel went straight to his friends' apartment and asked them to start praying. It wasn't enough for Daniel to go home and pray by himself. Daniel knew that there was a need here for God's people to gather together and storm heaven in a kind of concert of prayer. The request was simple: v. 18, “so Daniel and his friends might not be destroyed...” That's pretty simple: “Lord, deliver us!” Would that we were so specific in our prayers. Would that we saw the urgency of prayer as these young teenagers did. Would that we saw prayer NOT as supplemental to our life as a church but rather as fundamental. And would that we all had a small group to run to and request prayer from as Daniel did.

In v. 19 we're told that “the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a night vision.” I love this! Daniel went home from the prayer meeting and it seems he went to sleep! That's confidence! And while he is asleep God reveals the mystery. So the wise men WERE wrong - God DOES hang out and talk to mortal flesh. So Daniel gets the vision and he immediately breaks out in this hymn of thanksgiving recorded for us in vv. 20-23. This is the fourth thing - Daniel was thankful. Daniel praises and thanks God not just for answering their prayer and revealing the dream and its meaning, but also for what he learned about God from the dream. He learned that “wisdom and power belong to him.” He learned that God was in charge of history: “It is he who changes the times and epochs; he removes kings and establishes kings.” He learned that God indeed does reveal his “profound and hidden things” to his servants. When God moves in your life, when he reveals something of himself to you, when he answers a prayer, when he shares something of his wisdom and power with you, do you take time to thank him? Are your prayers laced with thanksgiving and praise for who God is and what he's done? Or, like mine, are your prayers a kind of reading off your grocery list of requests to God? I dare you this week to spend one half hour in prayer just thanking him and praising him for who he is and for all he's done for you.

Now I want you to notice something at the end of this prayer which will lead us into the fifth and final thing we learn from Daniel. Notice at the end of the prayer he uses the first person plural. He says, “You have made known to me what WE requested of you, for you have made known to US the king's matter.” The fifth thing we learn from Daniel in facing this crisis is he was humble. Even in this prayer he is mindful of the fact that this thing was a team effort. Without his friends' prayers there never would have been a hymn of praise.

Jenny Thompson is the most decorated women in Olympic history. She won 10 medals in the last three Olympics, eight of them gold. But, her ability has been questioned because she didn't win any golds in an individual event, rather she won them in relays with three others. She had to say “we” instead of “I.” Despite the fact that we live in an ego-driven culture, the Christian life is a relay rather than an individual event. It's about “we” rather than “I.” Daniel was humble enough to accept that.

His humility is even more pronounced later as he is

brought before the king by Arioch. Arioch ushers him in and says to the king in v. 25, “I have found a man among the exiles of Judah who can make the interpretation known to the king.” Notice his use of “I.” Arioch is NOT humble. He takes credit for finding Daniel. He's looking for a raise. In contrast to that, when Daniel comes before the king he wants one thing made very clear. Look what he says starting in v. 27,

“Daniel answered before the king and said, ‘As for the mystery about which the king has inquired, neither wise men, conjurers, magicians, nor diviners are able to declare it to the king. However, there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will take place in the latter days. This was your dream and the visions in your mind while on your bed. As for you, O king, while on your bed your thoughts turned to what would take place in the future; and he who reveals mysteries has made known to you what will take place.’”

Daniel wants the king to know that it's not about him, it's about God. He wants the king to know that there is a God in heaven, and he is a God who delights to reveal his mysteries to people, and he reveals his mysteries to people not because they are wise but because he cares about them and longs to be in relationship with them. Daniel won't take any credit for what he is about to tell the king. He's not looking for a promotion. That's humility. Humility before God is at the foundation of all these other things. It's humility that makes us thankful. It's humility that makes us prayerful. It's humility that makes us bold. And it's humility that makes us wise.

What do you do when you don't know what to do? You develop a humble, dependent, prayerful relationship with the Living God. As you do that, God will reveal the answers you need to life's ultimate questions.

III. GOD'S PLAN FOR THE AGES 2:31-45

Now you're probably wondering at this point how in the world I'm going to get through the rest of this chapter in the time I have left. You're thinking either this is going to be a very long sermon or a very short report on the dream. And, of course, this is what you've been waiting for. Most sermons on Daniel 2 focus on the contents of the dream because the dream is about what Daniel calls the “latter days” and we all want to know about the latter days. But, as important as the dream is, the contents of the dream are not the main point of this chapter. The main point of this chapter is the fact that only the one who knows the Living God can interpret it.

But the dream does have an important message. It's a message that Nebuchadnezzar needed to hear. It's a message that Daniel and his fellow exiles needed to hear. It's a message that we need to hear. It deals with the granddaddy of all ultimate questions. Who's in charge and where is this whole thing headed? In vv. 31-35 Daniel recounts the dream. He says in this dream the king saw a huge statue. It was divided into four parts from head to toe with each descending part being made of a different material. The head was made of gold, the breast and arms of silver, the belly and thighs of bronze, and the legs and feet of iron and clay. He then describes how a stone cut without human hands struck the statue at its feet and the whole thing was crushed and became like dust blown away by the wind. It's like a film clip I saw of when they blew up the Seattle Superdome. It was just leveled from the base. He then saw how that stone became a great mountain that

filled the whole earth.

You can see why Nebuchadnezzar might not have liked this dream. He's thinking, "I'm that statue!" Daniel goes on and gives the interpretation. It's kind of a good news, bad news thing for Nebuchadnezzar. He starts out and says, "You Nebuchadnezzar are the head of gold and there is a strength and glory to your kingdom that surpasses all others. That's the good news. The bad news is your kingdom will be succeeded by another, and then another, and then another after that." Notice he doesn't tell us what these kingdoms are and we should be careful not to be dogmatic about something that is not there. What he is clear about is how it all ends. Look at vv. 44-45,

“And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever. Inasmuch as you saw that a stone was cut out of the mountain without hands and that it crushed the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold, the great God has made known to the king what will take place in the future; so the dream is true, and its interpretation is trustworthy.”

What's this dream really saying? We should be careful here to make the main things the plain things. What's plain about this passage is that this is the answer to the ultimate question of ultimate questions: Where does it all lead? Where are we going? Where is this whole thing going to end up? Who's in charge? The answer is that God is in control of history and ultimately his kingdom will triumph over all other kingdoms. History is going somewhere. History will culminate in the establishment God's reign on earth. God's in charge. This is what God wanted Nebuchadnezzar to know. This is what God wanted his people to know as they sat in exile in a foreign land. This is what he wants us to know as we sit in our easy chair and watch the news and hear about all the fighting in Israel and wonder how it's all going to end.

The question for us is what do we do about that today? Well, it seems to me that any smart person is going to want to align himself with that final kingdom which is to come. Nebuchadnezzar made a first step in that direction as he honored and promoted Daniel and said, **“Your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings”** (v. 47). But how do we do that? These verses mention a stone, not made with human hands; a stone that becomes a mountain that fills the whole earth. I don't think it's any mistake that throughout the NT Jesus Christ is referred to as “the stone.” On one occasion Jesus said of himself, **“The stone which the builders rejected became the capstone. Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed”** (Luke 20:17b-18). Years later, Peter said the one who trusts in that stone will never be put to shame. He said to those who believe this stone is precious, but to those who don't believe this stone is a stumbling block (1 Peter 2:6-8).

CONCLUSION

This morning I would ask you, where do you find yourself in this story? Are you a Daniel who has entered into a relationship with the Living God and even though you don't what to do you know where to turn? Are you a Nebuchadnezzar wandering around angry and morose and depressed because you're haunted with ultimate questions and you have no idea what to do? Get yourself in a relationship with the Living God. Put your faith in that stone who one day will come again. Let him become precious to you because he loved you enough to die for you.