

Daniel chapter 2 – Serving Obediently

At some point soon, if it hasn't happened already, a number of Syrian refugees will be settled in Stevenage. I find it hard to imagine what that will be like for them: To lose your home, to see many of your family and friends die or be left behind, and to be taken into account you don't speak the language, where the culture and values are vastly different and where you feel a long, long way from home.

As we heard last week, Daniel faced something very similar, only he hadn't escaped an oppressor, he had been captured. Because of their disobedience and idol worship God's people Israel had fallen prey to powerful nations around them and in around 605 BC Daniel and many of the other talented young men had been taken into exile. As Dan explained at last week, they had been educated in the language, culture and wisdom of Babylon and set to work for King Nebuchadnezzar. I guess in their position we might have been tempted to do our bit to undermine the regime and get back home, but the words of the prophet Jeremiah were foremost in Daniel's mind. Let me read you Jeremiah 29:4 – 7. *'This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, for if it prospers, you too will prosper."* For a defeated, captured and exiled people those must have been hard words to hear, but they were the demands of God and Daniel was determined to obey them.

And that's what Daniel did. He and his friends studied hard, learnt well and so entered into the King's service. And as verse 20 in chapter 1 tells us, *"in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king question them, he found them 10 times better than all the magicians and enchanterers in his whole kingdom."*

And it was just as well. Being an outsider, people are naturally suspicious. We see it in our own culture don't we? It's very often not what you know but who you know that matters. And if that's true in the good times, when things are going well, how much more so is that the case when times are hard. In a foreign land, when those in power are looking for scapegoats, it is almost always the foreigner, the immigrant and the outsider that has the finger pointed at them first of all. But through those tough times, and as we'll see over the next five weeks, Daniel and his friends had some immense challenges to face, they always handled themselves with dignity, wisdom and tact, while at the same time always being faithful to the one true God who was with them and was at work through them even as they served obediently and conscientiously in the heart of the Babylonian civil service.

When that's some background but let's turn to the issue in chapter 2 where we find that the King has a problem: he cannot sleep. Verse 1 tells us that his mind was troubled and it's pretty clear that he has had some disturbing dreams. Like me, I guess you have those from time to time. For me they're often directly related to what I've eaten or what I've watched on TV, but for the king it was different. He knew that his dream meant something and he didn't know what it was. And for a King who had absolute power over all he surveyed that was very unsettling. The Kingdom of Babylon was enormous, covering all of modern Israel, Jordan, Iraq and Syria, most of Turkey in the north and including half of Saudi Arabia to the south and east. And of course the power the Empire projected went far wider than that, yet King Nebuchadnezzar was deeply uneasy. In the light of his dream all his wealth and power seemed as concrete as shadows.

And of course he was right to feel that way. Dream or no dream, our wealth and position, our jobs and family and health are all fragile and fleeting. They can all disappear in a moment, and even if they do last our whole lives through, they are still only mere blips in the fabric of time. Only God's kingdom is eternal; only his promises are certain; only our inheritance in Christ is utterly dependable. Nebuchadnezzar had sensed something that we all need to bear in mind, the fragility of the things of this world, and he was deeply shaken.

His solution was to call his advisers and experts and ask for their help. Verse 2 calls them the magicians, enchanterers, sorcerers and astrologers, and they came willingly to hear what the king said. He tells them about his dream and

that he wants to know what it means. They respond in verse 3 as you might expect, *“tell your servants the dream, and we will interpret it.”* But the King seems to doubt their abilities. He wants them to tell him both the dream and its meaning! No doubt these astrologers and advisers have claimed great wisdom and power from the gods and he wants to know if these gods are worth anything or if his advisors are all talk. So he says in verse 5: *“If you do not tell me what my dream was and interpret it, I will have you cut into pieces and your houses turned into piles of rubble!”*

Unsurprisingly his many advisers freak out. Verse 10: *“No King has ever asked this of any magician or enchanter or astrologer. What the king asks is too difficult. No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among humans.”* But the King is not impressed with their arguments, and he is so angry that he issues a decree to put all his wise men to death.

But although Daniel is undoubtedly frightened when he finds out what the King has said, he is not defeated. He speaks with wisdom and tact to the commander of the Kings guard and then, approaches the king to ask for a little time. And then he turns to prayer, not just on his own but by urging his three friends Hananiah, Azariah and Mishael to plead for mercy from the God of heaven that this mystery might be revealed.

Daniel would agree with the other pagan astrologers that there is no way he can know this mystery and that only God knows the dream that so disturbed the King. But Daniel knows that God is a God who speaks and who does live among humans. The God of Israel rescued his people from Egypt, led them by the hand through the desert, spoke to them at Sinai and gave them his Law. This same God put his glory in the Temple at Jerusalem and as even the King’s own dream was about to announce, would one day come and live among us in the person of Jesus Christ. The God of Israel, our God, is a God who hears prayers, and speaks and who is present with his people. Daniel knew this God as his God, and so with his friends he prayed fervently through the night.

And the result? God heard him and during the night he revealed to Daniel both Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and its meaning. No wonder he breaks into praise! *“Praise be to the name of God forever and ever; wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning. He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him.”* That is the God of Daniel. That is the God we worship today: a God of power and might; a sovereign God who is in control of his world; a speaking God who reveals himself and his will to those who seek him.

Daniel lets the commander of the Kings guard know that he has an answer for him, and although the commander tries to take some of the credit for finding a man amongst exiles from Judah who can tell the king what his dream means – the rest is up to Daniel.

It’s interesting that although the king had promised untold riches and honour to the one who could tell him the dream and interpret it, Daniel is absolutely clear that it is God who has revealed that the mystery and not him. *“No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. And he has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come.”*

We will look at Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in a moment, but let me just say this. If you are in the dark about God, or about the reason for your existence: If you’re uneasy about the right way to live, the way to find true and lasting peace, how to get through death or the way to know for certain that you have eternal life, then no amount of stargazing or meditation or delving into eastern philosophy or immersing yourself in science or messing with the occult is going to give you the answers you need. Not only does the Bible warn us about many of these things but there are some things that all the learning of this world cannot answer. Without God’s intervention into our world, bringing his light and speaking words of truth, we would all be walking in the dark. But praise God we have a God who speaks! He has spoken through the prophets, and most perfectly and most gloriously in the person of Jesus Christ, and he continues to speak by his Spirit through his word the Bible. If you are in the dark right now it’s because you haven’t listened to the God who speaks and who has spoken and revealed himself to us. So listen! Open the Bible and read. Seek out the God who revealed his truth to Daniel and who has revealed himself through his word in the scriptures and you will find comfort and hope and peace. Yes, some of what you read will challenge

the way you think, and confront the way you live and convict you, as it does everyone, of your sinfulness and rebellion against God. But there is hope here and joy here and peace here that the world cannot give. Don't think you can meet your spiritual needs on your own. You can't. But God can, and he will, if you seek him.

With the revelation God had given to him, Daniel approached the king to talk about his dream.

The focus of the dream was a huge statue with a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron and feet of iron and clay. Nebuchadnezzar would have been familiar with large statues – we will see that in chapter 3 - but the construction of this particular statue with its different materials was very odd. But what was most disturbing to Nebuchadnezzar was that as he was watching, verse 34, *“a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were all broken to pieces and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole Earth.”*

As Daniel explained the statue represented four kingdoms each huge and powerful but less glorious than the last. Babylon itself and King Nebuchadnezzar in particular, was the head of gold. Daniel told him that in verse 37 onwards: *Your Majesty, you are the King of Kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; in your hands he has placed all mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds in the sky. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold.”*

What all Kings seem to want isn't just a glorious kingdom but a dynasty so that their legacy is protected and honoured; but it is clear from the dream that was not going to happen. The mighty Kingdom of Babylon would be replaced by another kingdom that would be replaced by another kingdom and another kingdom until this rock, cut not by human hands, crushed them all to pieces. The point of these kingdoms being ground so fine that they would become like summer chaff and blown away by the wind is to emphasize the total and absolute victory of this fifth kingdom. This kingdom has no glory of gold, no worth of silver, no gleam of bronze or strength of iron yet it conquers and dominates all that has gone before and all that would come after. Nothing can stand against the kingdom of the rock.

If you read through a variety of commentaries and you will find many different interpretations of these four kingdoms. To me it seems that the simplest explanation is that the first four kingdoms represent Babylon, the kingdom of the Medes and Persians, the great Greek kingdom under Alexander the great and then the mighty Roman Empire, which came one after each other, but as I said there are plenty of other explanations out there.

But what is absolutely clear is that the God of heaven knows in advance what is going to happen. God wasn't surprised at the Brexit vote or that Theresa May became Prime Minister. If America takes leave of its senses and Donald Trump wins the US presidential election, God will not be shocked or confused, because ultimately history works to his command. God is absolutely sovereign. That's why Daniel could tell King Nebuchadnezzar about the coming kingdoms.

But the most important thing here is the fifth kingdom, the kingdom represented by the rock that was not cut by human hands. You see, it wasn't weakness that destroyed these mighty empires but the purposes of God fulfilled in this kingdom that will never end.

What is this rock? This rock represents God eternal kingdom, inaugurated by the death and resurrection of Jesus and embodied today in that most unlikely of institutions, the local church. We may not be spectacular; there is little glitz or glamour about the church and certainly today in this country we have very little power or influence, but we are part of God's eternal kingdom that can never be shaken.

And that means that the work of the church spreading the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection through sermons and the witness of individual Christians is the most important mission on this planet. It trumps finding a cure for cancer; it's of greater importance than free education for all and it is more vital for human flourishing than

ending starvation or providing clean water because the gospel gives us access to God and brings us into his eternal kingdom which will never end. Those mighty tower blocks in the city of London, statues to the god of wealth and prosperity, will one day come tumbling down and all the riches they have created will come to nothing. But the kingdom of Jesus; the rock that overcame all the empires of the past and that will overcome all the present empires and empires yet to come will last forever, and the glorious rule of King Jesus will never, ever end.

Nebuchadnezzar got a glimpse into the future and the fact that Daniel had interpreted his dream caused him to fall on his face in homage. In some ways Daniel is treated like god; offerings and incense are presented to him; and it's not long before Nebuchadnezzar gives him great wealth and power in his kingdom. But whilst Nebuchadnezzar was certainly impressed by Daniel's God, this sadly wasn't a conversion. Nebuchadnezzar may have been attracted to Almighty God, but he wouldn't submit to him. He might have worshipped Almighty God, but he wouldn't worship him alone. He may have acknowledged Almighty God as powerful but he continued to live life his own way.

And so many people are the same. So many people are inspired by Jesus and are attracted to him but won't acknowledge him as their Lord. So many people like hanging around with Christians and enjoying the atmosphere and beauty of the church but will not acknowledge their need of forgiveness or come in humble repentance before Almighty God. And if you fall into that category then you need to know that right now you are not a Christian or part of God's family, but you can be.

Watching people play football doesn't make you a footballer and hanging around at church doesn't make you a Christian. To be part of God's kingdom we need to acknowledge our sin, to confess and turn from our sin and rebellion against God and put our trust in Jesus both as our saviour, dying on the cross for us, and as our Lord by seeking, with God's help, to live obediently for him.

Well it's time to close let me leave you with two brief thoughts.

We began by thinking about Daniel serving obediently and diligently in the courts of King Nebuchadnezzar. And in that, Daniel is a wonderful model for all of us. Colossians 3:17 tells us this: *And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.* Daniel did that, and because he proved himself faithful and reliable, he had opportunities to witness and glorify God, that would not have come had he rebelled against the king or simply done the minimum. Likewise, if God is to get the glory then we must serve him in all we do and rely on him in all circumstances.

So wherever we work, whether that's in the civil service Daniel or in schools or offices or shops or the armed forces we need to be those who, for the glory of God, serve to our utmost. And likewise wherever we volunteer, with our neighbours, or in the church; and in day to day life in our driving, in the way we shop, in the way we play golf or dance or whatever it may be, like Daniel, let's always aim to obey and glorify God by serving our employers and colleagues and neighbours wholeheartedly and diligently in all we do.

Here's the second, we need to remember that ultimately our riches are in heaven. Daniel's ultimate trust was not in himself or his education nor in his talents but in God. And when God answered his prayers and great wealth and power and influence were his, none of that changed. Daniel's greatest joy, his greatest hope, his greatest treasure was in God. Friends this world, like the kingdoms in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, is just temporary. But in Jesus we have access to a kingdom that will never be shaken, a hope that will not disappoint, and a future that is steadfast and certain. The hymn writer put it this way: *"fading is the worldling's pleasure, all its boasted pomp and show; solid joys and lasting treasure, none but Zion's children know!"*

May our eyes be fixed on that future and may our delight be in God's kingdom so that like Daniel we can serve obediently and diligently both our earthly kings and rulers and the one who truly is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. Amen.