

The Revealer of Mysteries

Daniel: When Kingdoms Collide

Daniel 2:1-30

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August 16, 2020

There's something happening here.

In 1967, Stephen Stills had a hit single with his song, "For What It's Worth." The song was about the curfew riots on the Sunset Strip, but soon became an anthem for protest in the late sixties. In the opening lines of the song, he spoke for a generation wrestling with civil rights and the Vietnam War: "There's something happening here, what it is ain't exactly clear."

Twenty twenty has been a year like that. There's something happening here. But what it is ain't exactly clear. We know what we see is troubling. It makes us wonder what's going on in our country and in our world. What's God up to? Are we going to be okay or are we heading over a cliff? It ain't exactly clear.

Where should we look for clarity when we're living in troubling times? Many are looking to their favorite news pundits. Others to economists, sociologists, scientists, or government. There are a lot of opinions. Stephen Stills describes our day in the last verse of the song: "What a field day for the heat. A thousand people in the street. Singing songs and carrying signs. Mostly say, hooray for *our* side." In our day, people are carrying signs, either literally or figuratively. And they generally think their analysis of the situation is on the right side.

But let's be honest. Do these sources really bring clarity? And if not, where will we get it? Where's the primary place to look for wisdom? How do we make sense of what's happening in our world?

Our text this morning is the first part of Daniel 2. It sets up Nebuchadnezzar's dream. The dream itself tells us what's happening in our world, at least at a high level. It gives us the truth. But we're not going to cover the content of the dream this morning, that's for next week. This morning we learn something more foundational. We learn about the source of truth. We discover where we can find wisdom in the confusion.

But before we determine where we find wisdom, I think we need to define what wisdom is. In the Bible wisdom can refer to knowing how to live in God's world. Specifically, how to live in right relationship with God, with one another, and with the created order. But it can also involve knowing what God's doing in the world.

Another way the Bible talks about God's wisdom is with the language of mystery. In the Bible, a mystery is not simply something that's confusing. It's something hidden that needs revealed. God's plans for the fullness of time are described as a mystery; they're hidden. But that mystery is eventually revealed; it's uncovered. And when the mystery is revealed, the Bible calls that God's wisdom.

In our passage, Nebuchadnezzar's seeking this second kind of wisdom. He wants the mystery of his dream to be revealed. He wants wisdom to know what God's doing in the world. And in this passage, there are two approaches to seeking wisdom. One is seen in Nebuchadnezzar and the wise men (1-13). The other is found in Daniel and his friends (14-30).

NEBUCHADNEZZAR (VV. 1-13)

Let's begin with Nebuchadnezzar and the wise men. How do they seek wisdom? According to David Helm, Nebuchadnezzar is characterized by three things. He's restless, unrealistic, and eventually enraged.

Restless

At the beginning of the story Nebuchadnezzar wakes up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat. He's experiencing what some of you have experienced before. He keeps having a recurring dream and doesn't know what it means.

Verse 1 says, "In the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his spirit was troubled and his sleep left him."¹

There's an irony in here. Nebuchadnezzar is *the* king of the most powerful kingdom in the world. But he's powerless to understand what his dreams mean. They trouble him. In fact, they frighten him (v. 31).

His worldview is deeply religious. He believes the gods use dreams to communicate truths about the future. And there's something about these dreams of the future that trouble him. Maybe they're an ominous sign from God that there's something happening in the world. But it's not exactly clear.

Is his kingdom in danger? He needs to know what his dreams mean, so he can counteract them or be prepared.

Nebuchadnezzar is named after the Babylonian god of wisdom, Nabu. But he lacks wisdom; he's in the dark.² He's left completely restless.

So, he calls for the wisest men in his kingdom: the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans (v. 2). They're like the fortune tellers of our day. These men were supposed to be experts at interpreting dreams. They would use dark magic, mysterious incantations, and the position of the stars to predict the future and even prevent bad things from happening.³ Nebuchadnezzar seeks wisdom from them.

Unrealistic

The Chaldeans (or astrologers) are the first to speak up. They're eager to give the king an interpretation of his dream. So, they ask him to tell them the dream (v. 4). But the severity of the situation leads the king to ask them to do something out of the ordinary. He makes an unrealistic request of them. He not only wants them to tell him the interpretation. He also wants them to tell him what he actually dreamed! That should prove they're able to give the interpretation.

Look at verses 5-6: "The king answered and said to the Chaldeans, 'The word from me is firm: if you do not make known to me the dream *and* its interpretation, you shall be torn limb from limb, and your houses shall be laid in ruins. But if you show the dream and its interpretation, you shall

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

² David Helm, *Daniel for You*

³ Rodney Stortz and R. Kent Hughes, *Daniel: The Triumph of God's Kingdom*, Preaching the Word Commentary Series

receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor. Therefore show me the dream and its interpretation.”

The Chaldeans know they're stuck. So, they ask a second time for the king to simply tell them the dream (v. 7). But Nebuchadnezzar knows they're stalling, so he reiterates his wishes and the consequences if they should fail to comply (vv. 8-9).

The Chaldeans' response gets to the heart of the matter. And it's critical for our understanding of the passage: “There is not a man on earth who can meet the king's demand, for no great and powerful king has asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or Chaldean. The thing that the king asks is difficult, and no one can show it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh” (vv. 10-11).

They say he's asking the impossible. A man can't read another man's mind. Only God can do that (cf. 1 Cor. 2:11)! And in their mind, this poses a serious problem, because they don't believe man has access to the gods.

Enraged

At this point, Nebuchadnezzar's restlessness leads to rage. “The king was angry and very furious, and commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be destroyed” (v. 12). Not only the Chaldeans standing before him, but all the so-called wise men will be torn apart. He's lost confidence in their wisdom. And that means trouble for Daniel and his friends. As verse 13 says, “So the decree went out, and the wise men were about to be killed; and they sought Daniel and his companions, to kill them.”

This leads us to the next part of our story. But before we get there, let's just pause for a moment. I know this story happened over twenty-five hundred years ago. But do you see the connections with our day?

The things we see happening around us today are confusing. And they can cause us to be restless and uneasy, because what's going on is not quite clear. Our restlessness leads us to seek wisdom. Many people expect the wisdom of this world to reveal what God's doing in the world. Some may look to religious sources like Nebuchadnezzar did. Things like astrology and fortune telling are still a part of our world today. But many are looking to secular sources, not religious sources, like I mentioned earlier—the economists and sociologists, scientists and government.

And there's some truth to be found in these things. But they don't have the ability to see beyond what's right in front of us. And they can't answer the fundamental questions we have about life. And so, they will leave us restless and maybe even angry.

So, where should we look for clarity and ultimate wisdom? Daniel and his friends show us a different way.

DANIEL (VV. 14-30)

There's an intentional contrast between Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar is the most powerful man in the world. Whereas, Daniel is likely a seventeen-year-old captive.⁴ But Daniel

⁴ Mike, Bullmore, “[A King's Dream, A Fragile Statue and A Kingdom that Endures Forever](#)”

knows the King of heaven and trusts him. Nebuchadnezzar's named after the god of wisdom, even though he's in the dark.

But in verse 14, we're told that "Daniel replied with prudence and discretion to Arioch, the captain of the king's guard, who had gone out to kill the wise men of Babylon." Nebuchadnezzar lacks wisdom, but Daniel has prudence and discretion.

And his prudence is seen in three characteristics that contrast Nebuchadnezzar. He's poised, prayerful, and he proclaims the truth.

Poised

In the face of imminent death, Daniel's not restless; he's poised. He asks Arioch, "Why is the decree of the king so urgent?" (v. 15). Then he goes to the king and asks for more time so "that he might show the interpretation to the king" (v. 16). He has confidence that the king will receive the interpretation.

Prayerful

But his confidence is not in his own abilities; it's in God. In verses 17-18 he goes to his friends "and told them to seek mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery." That's what they do. They pray; they make a request to God.

And he answers their prayer. Verse 19 says, "Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision of the night." This is the climax of the chapter. The turning point.

God's purposes in the dream and his plan for his kingdom have been made known to Daniel. And that leads Daniel from petition to praise. The center of this chapter is found in verses 20-23. And the move from story to song highlights the emphasis:

Daniel 2:20-23

*20Blessed be the name of God forever and ever,
to whom belong wisdom and might.
21He changes times and seasons;
he removes kings and sets up kings;
he gives wisdom to the wise
and knowledge to those who have understanding;
22he reveals deep and hidden things;
he knows what is in the darkness,
and the light dwells with him.
23To you, O God of my fathers,
I give thanks and praise,
for you have given me wisdom and might,
and have now made known to me what we asked of you,
for you have made known to us the king's matter.*

The main point in chapter 2, as with every chapter in Daniel, is about God. It's not mainly about how to *seek* wisdom. It's about the *source* of wisdom. God alone is the source of wisdom and strength. And he wants to make his plan for all of history known to the world. In fact, he wants to make himself known!

Proclaiming

This is drawn out as the story continues. Not only does Daniel praise God for revealing the dream, he also proclaims God's revelation to Nebuchadnezzar.

In verse 25 he goes to Nebuchadnezzar. And verse 26 says, "The king declared to Daniel, whose name was Belshazzar, 'Are *you* able to make known to me the dream that I have seen and its interpretation?'" At this point Daniel gives a surprising answer. We expect him to say yes, but instead he says no, I can't. "Daniel answered the king and said, 'No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or astrologers can show to the king the mystery that the king has asked'" (v. 27).

He's basically agreeing with the Chaldeans on this point. Remember, they said, "no one can show it to the king except the gods" (v. 11). Daniel agrees. Wisdom and knowledge of God's plans in the world are not found in man.

But the Chaldeans also said the gods do *not* dwell with flesh. In other words, the gods are inaccessible. And Daniel *disagrees* with them on this point. *His* God *is* accessible! His God is *able* to reveal mysteries. And his God *wants* to reveal mysteries. Listen to what he says in verses 28-30: "But there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days. Your dream and the visions of your head as you lay in bed are these: To you, O king, as you lay in bed came thoughts of what would be after this, and he who reveals mysteries made know to you what is to be. But as for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because of any wisdom that I have more than all the living, but in order that the interpretation may be made know to the king, and that you may know the thoughts of your mind."

Only God is able to make his plans and purposes known. And God wants to make them known. So, we should look to him. Therefore, we should look to God who alone is able and willing to make his plans and purposes known.⁵ That's my sermon in a sentence.

In verses 31-45 Daniel gets into the details of the dream. And he reveals the mystery of God's plan for all of history. He gives the wisdom of God's plan for all history. But like I said earlier, we're not going to talk about that this week. The main point for this week has to do with the *source* of wisdom.

WISDOM FOR TODAY

How does all of this apply to us today? Where do we seek wisdom today? Let me offer three primary ways God makes himself known to us today.

God's Word

The first way God makes himself known is in the Bible. I acknowledge that God does sometimes use dreams to draw people to himself, but that's not the main way God reveals himself to us. The main way God makes himself known is in his Word.

⁵ Iain M. Duguid, *Daniel*, Reformed Expository Commentary

Daniel was a prophet. And the things God revealed to him were written down in Scripture. Other prophets also wrote down what they received from God. And now we have the Bible. God's revealed himself to us in his Word.

And so, if we want to know the wisdom of God, we have to look to the Bible. That doesn't mean that if we read the Bible all of the troubling things going on in our world will automatically become clear. And that doesn't mean there's not wisdom to be found outside of the Bible. But if we want to hear God speak, if we want God's perspective on our world, we have to look primarily to God's Word. All other voices need to take a backseat.

So, what are you spending your time with in these days? Is it mainly the news? Or is God's revealed Word filling your heart and mind?

God's Son

God not only makes himself known in his Word. He makes himself known supremely in his Son. Hebrews 1:1-2 says, "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son...."

Our God speaks through his Son. And when the Son speaks, we learn the wisdom of God. The mystery of God's plans for the world is revealed to us.

In Ephesians 1:7-10, Paul says, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making know to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."

And what is that plan that Christ has revealed? Eventually everything in all creation will be united in Christ. That is, all things in heaven and on earth will come under his reign; they'll be placed under his feet. Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Christ is Lord!

And that is a daunting reality, because in our sin we are all rebels against God and deserve his judgment. But here's the good news: God's plan in Christ also provides a way for us to be saved from his judgment. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses. Because Jesus died on the cross, we can be forgiven of our sins. And we can become citizens of the kingdom of God.

In this life, we may never fully understand all of the troubling things that are happening in our time. But God has revealed very clearly to us the mystery of his plan for the fullness of time! And that high level, long-term perspective is what we need to live faithfully in our time.

The Chaldeans didn't believe that the gods made their dwelling among flesh. But the Son of God actually took on flesh and dwelt among us (Jn. 1:14). Then he died for us on the cross. The wisdom of this world doesn't believe God is accessible. But in Christ he is. The wisdom of this world looks to might and power. But the wisdom of God is found in the cross (1 Cor. 1:18, 24)!

This is the clarity we need in the confusion of this world. All things will come under Christ on the day of judgment. But you can be saved from the judgment of God today if you will come to Jesus.

God's Gospel

God reveals himself in his Son. But the only way the world will come to know the Son is if we proclaim the gospel. That's the third way God makes himself known.

God could've allowed Nebuchadnezzar to understand his dream. But he set things up differently. He revealed it to his prophet, Daniel. And then Daniel proclaimed it to the king. And that is God's normal pattern in the Bible.

We have been entrusted with the gospel. The mystery of the gospel has been made known to us through the Scriptures. We now have a responsibility to make it known to the world. God has made himself known. And he's done that because he wants to be known. So, we must take the gospel to the ends of the earth.