

The One Enduring Empire Daniel 2:27-49

Now, if you remember, Daniel begins this book by writing about two kings – the king of Judah and the king of Babylon, and one conquering the other. And that theme of kings and kingdoms and power is arguably the major theme of the book. And it doesn't matter what your politics are. Who exercises power, and for what ends, matters, for all of us.

You see, in the West, as societies have moved away from worshipping the God of the Bible, and instead settled on the gods of freedom or money or sex, so what the power of the state advances, or opposes, has also shifted. And as Christianity has been slowly, or not so slowly, pushed to the sidelines, so the power of government has shifted from advancing what was, at least superficially, a traditional Judeo-Christian ethic, to advancing an agenda of personal freedom, or personal gain.

So, if our faith is to thrive in this changing landscape, and if we're to seek the welfare of society in ways that are meaningful, then we have to understand power. And Daniel's a great example of that.

The Source of Power

Look at v29, where Daniel says to King Nebuchadnezzar, "To you, O king, as you lay in bed came thoughts of what would be after this." So Nebuchadnezzar, this ambitious and immensely powerful young man, head of the world's supreme superpower, had gone to bed and as he lay there his mind had begun to run. Maybe you know what that feels like! And as he's lying there it seems he starts thinking about the future, maybe about how long his reign will last, how long he would be able to keep the crown. And he'd fallen asleep, and then this dream came.

And where every other Babylonian wise man had failed, Daniel could tell the king what he'd seen. Verse 31, "You saw, O king, and behold, a great image." And it's a statue in human form, and Daniel says, v31, "This image, mighty and of exceeding brightness, stood before you, and its appearance was frightening." Now, why was it frightening? I mean Nebuchadnezzar is a man of war, surely he's not frightened by a statue? But this statue was different, wasn't it? Somehow, this statue conveyed what CS Lewis called, the 'hideous strength' of government and humanity exercising power apart from God. And the visual representation of such power terrified even a man like Nebuchadnezzar. And it should, shouldn't it? I mean, imagine the combined terror of the power exercised by Hitler, and Stalin, and Mao, and Pol Pot, and ISIS, and somehow that terror being conveyed through a statue in a dream, it would be deeply frightening.

And Daniel is able to tell the king that that's what this statue is about – that it represents the empires, the powers, that are going to rise and fall over the coming centuries. And it's the first and the fourth empires that get the most

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coverage. And he begins by telling the king, v38, 'you [Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar's empire] are the head of gold.'

Now does anything strike you about that? You see, of all the metals represented gold is the most precious. So in this dream, God gives the place of prominence, in worth and glory, to Babylon. Which means that for all the faults of this mighty empire, for all the fact that it is part of this terrifying spectacle of man exercising power apart from God, God's assessment of Nebuchadnezzar's reign was not all negative. If it was, he would have portrayed it perhaps as a rotten, moth eaten head. But he doesn't. And history and archaeology tell us that there was indeed something golden and glorious about Nebuchadnezzar's reign. Was it perfect? Absolutely not, but it seems there were things that God could affirm about it.

Now why does that matter? Because it should give us pause when we criticise or critique our own governments. You see, when we see all that is wrong, and the trajectory of our societies and governments, it's easy to become cynical. But God is not a cynic, and neither was Daniel, and neither should we be. We should recognise and support what we can.

But imagine the temptation to pride this could be for Nebuchadnezzar. After all, he's the most precious of the metals – everyone else compared to him is just silver or bronze or iron. But he's gold! Plus, he's the top, he's the head. And for anyone who achieves a position of power or prominence, whether that's in society, or the workplace, there's always this temptation to think that you've got yourself there.

And so, whilst Daniel speaks respectfully, even deferentially, Daniel makes it clear to Nebuchadnezzar that it's God who has given Nebuchadnezzar this power. And twice he uses the words 'has given' to drive it home to him: v37, 'You O king, the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, and the might, and the glory.' Verse 38, "And into whose hand he has given, wherever they dwell, the children of man, [and] the beasts of the field." So whatever Nebuchadnezzar, or any president or prime minister since, might think, his power is not absolute, it's derivative.

It's why the Cambridge historian, Henry Butterfield wrote, 'Judgement in history falls heaviest on those who come to think themselves gods, who fly in the face of providence and history, who put their trust in man-made systems and worship the work of their own hands, and who say that the strength of their own right arm gave them victory.'¹

And for any of us who exercise leadership or have some degree of power or decision making ability over others' lives, to understand that ultimately all

¹ Quoted in Lennox, 113.

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power is derived is critical, and it should humble us. But lose that sense of power being something entrusted to us by God, and we're on the verge of becoming bullies, or of systems becoming tyrannies.

But two other things should also serve to humble Nebuchadnezzar here. Look at verse 31, "You saw, O King, and behold, a great image." So, despite the fact that he's the head of gold, despite all the power and control he exercised over others' lives, when it comes to the future, Nebuchadnezzar is a mere spectator. We all are, aren't we. In some sense, we can only ever stand and watch as God builds his kingdom, and works out his purposes, and no one, not Nebuchadnezzar, or anyone modern day equivalent, can stand in his way.

But secondly, the fact that the whole statue was not of gold also told Nebuchadnezzar something. That he is not the whole image; that neither his rule, nor his life, will be endless. As Daniel tells him in v39: 'Another kingdom inferior to you shall arise *after you*.' Nebuchadnezzar, there will be a time after you, you will come to an end. And if knowing that any authority we have is derived, and that ultimately we are spectators of God's unstoppable work, so understanding that one-day we will be gone, should keep us humble.

But if such a message is humbling, it should also be deeply encouraging, shouldn't it? Because it tells Daniel's first readers, and us, that Babylon, ancient or modern, will not last forever. The one who currently seems to have all the power is passing away, and he has one less day in power today than he had yesterday. So don't sell out to power. Don't despair, but also don't compromise.

However, if Daniel's message for the king is that power comes from God, so too does influence. And again we see Daniel making it clear that his ability to interpret the dream is from God, not from himself: v30, "But as for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because of any wisdom that I have." And that should tell us that any ability to work within the pagan systems of Babylon, as Daniel does here, or any attempt to critique or influence the system, should also be done with deep humility. Whatever skills we have to influence come from God. And they are to be used, not for our selfish advancement, but for others' good and God's glory.

Ok, but if that's the head, what about the rest of the image?

The Weakness of Power

Verse 39, "Another kingdom inferior to you shall arise after you, and yet a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over all the earth." Now, there's plenty of academic debate as to who these next kingdoms are. But to me at least it seems obvious that if the golden head represents Babylon, then the chest of silver is the Medo-Persian empire that conquered Babylon. And after the Medes and Persians came the Greek empire – the middle and thighs of bronze.

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But then comes the fourth empire, the legs of iron and feet of iron/clay mix – it's the crushing military might of Rome. And so, alongside the decreasing value of the metals, gold, silver, bronze, iron, there's this increasing hardness. It's interesting isn't it? We like to think that civilisation is on an ever-upward trajectory. And in many ways we are. But from God's perspective, not everything is seen through the rose tinted spectacles of so-called human progress, is it. And this decreasing value and increasing hardness of metal is a reminder not to put our hope in technological or political advances, or in mankind's ability to save ourselves. Rather, we need a solution to our problems from somewhere other than human power.

Now, then look how he describes the fourth empire: Verse 42, "And as the toes of the feet were partly iron and partly clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly brittle." In other words, whilst it will exert massive, crushing power, it will also be intrinsically weak.

Now, I'm sure you know this, but it's from this dream that we get the expression, 'feet of clay.' 'He's a great man' we say, 'but he's got feet of clay.' She's got character flaws that make her vulnerable; that could, or did, bring him or her down. And you can probably think of someone with character flaws, who you're really glad is not in charge of a nation. But it is these character flaws that make leaders and therefore empires and governments and organisations, vulnerable.

But it's not just high up leaders who have feet of clay, is it? We all do. I've used this story multiple times you're probably bored of it, but GK Chesterton, when he saw an invitation by the Times newspaper for people to submit essays on the subject, 'what is wrong with the world?' sent one in that went: 'Dear sir, what is wrong with the world? I am. Yours, GK Chesterton.' As John Stott said, 'The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart.' The problem with humanity is humanity.

And so Nebuchadnezzar's image reminds us that there is this fundamental flaw in humanity. And there lies a problem. You see, like never before, our societies pour their trust into humanity. And we believe in ourselves. And we are self-confident in our abilities. And the great right to trump all rights is our personal freedom to decide for ourselves what is right and wrong. In other words, we're autonomous, and we've placed man at the centre of the universe, and we've replaced faith in God with faith in man. And man has become God.

So, don't you think it's incredibly fitting that the image Nebuchadnezzar saw was an image of a Man. A man of power and dominion and empire. But... a man of power apart from God, a man with feet of clay. And it's that fundamental flaw that should warn us from putting faith in human nature, or think that

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government, or even education, can ultimately solve humanity's underlying issues of self-centredness, and pride.

What we need is a man without feet of clay. A man who does not live for his own glory; who does not succumb to pride; who does not live autonomously of God, but who uses his power to lift up rather than put down. And in Christ we have such a Man. And ultimately it's only the gospel of Jesus Christ that can uproot our pride. Because it's only the gospel that tells us that we're the ones who are wrong, and we cannot save ourselves. You see, every other religion feeds human pride because it says 'you can do it'. You can save yourself, you can be enlightened, you can be part of the great attempt at human progress. But the gospel says that only an undeserved, gracious intervention from outside can transform our hearts.

The only answer to our fatal flaw is not more of ourselves, it's God's transforming power from outside our world. And that's what the gospel offers. And so, in contrast to this terrifying but flawed man, Nebuchadnezzar also saw a stone.

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Verse 34, "As you looked, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay and broke them in pieces.... But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.'

So this final kingdom is going to be different. It's not a part of the statue, and it's not of human creation. So this is not some kind of man-made theocracy, or some utopian final world government. It's the kingdom of God coming in power. And as the stone hits the feet of the statue, the whole statue disintegrates. So however golden Nebuchadnezzar's reign was, however much of it God could affirm, the ultimate verdict was clear, as Daniel stood there telling him that it will all, eventually, pass away and be scattered to the four winds.

But the outcome for the rock is very different. It becomes this huge mountain that fills the earth and, verse 44, "The God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people." So unlike every other empire, God's empire will be indestructible, and everlasting.

Now why does Daniel record all this, when it is centuries, millennia, away from realisation? Because for Daniel's first readers, living out their faith under Babylonian and then Persian power, and for believers later under Rome, and for us now in our situation, it tells us, firstly, be patient. Things may not be as you want them now, but God's kingdom is coming. Secondly, don't fear human power or cultures or societies. These will not last. Only God's kingdom will endure, so you can endure. And thirdly, don't invest your ultimate hope in them. You see, whilst Daniel and his friends poured their lives into serving Babylon and then

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Persia, they knew Babylon, or what came after, wasn't it. They knew that ultimately, the kingdom of God does not come through inner renewal of human political systems.

You may recall that when President Obama was first elected they produced those t-shirts with his picture and the word 'hope' underneath. It invested him with almost messianic expectations. And for very different reasons, and for a very different constituency, the same has happened with Trump. But Nebuchadnezzar's dream, whilst keeping us from cynicism, should also remind us that our current government, or the opposition that we support, is not *it*.

You see, when we face being in exile, the danger is we pin all our hope on politics or politicians to effect the change we want to see. And the danger is that the church can become synonymous with one particular political party. But whether it's the divine right of kings, or the concept of Christendom, or the Holy Roman Empire, or a specific political party, right or left, or Christian prime-ministers or presidents, these are not the rock cut without human hands. And our ultimate hope does not lie in some politician to come and save us, or turn back the tide, or bring in a conservative or liberal agenda. As Christians, our ultimate hope is not in man, it is in the God-man, the Lord Jesus. And whilst we're to seek the welfare of the city, we realise that we're not building Jerusalem. We are waiting for it to be brought by the one king who *will* reign forever.

After all, Daniel wasn't the first to speak of this stone, was he? Psalm 118 talks of a 'stone that the builders rejected that has become the cornerstone'. Then Isaiah speaks of the Lord becoming 'a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling' (Isaiah 8:14) on whom people will be broken.

And then Jesus came, as Rome, the fourth kingdom, was exerting its iron grip. And in Luke 20, Jesus takes Psalm 118, and Isaiah 8 and applies them to himself. And then he says something remarkable - he alludes directly to Nebuchadnezzar's dream, and says it's about him: Luke 20:17-18, "'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.' Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, *and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.*" But the extraordinary thing is that Jesus says that in the context of telling a parable about a vineyard owner's son, who is killed by the tenants of the vineyard, so they can be free of the vineyard owner's power.

So can you see what Jesus is doing? He links him being this empire shattering stone, with his death and his being crushed by the power of Rome. That it's through his death, through his seemingly crushing defeat, that the stone strikes the feet of the statue and begins to shatter every other kingdom. It's why Jesus turns to Pilate at his trial, the human representative of Rome's power, and says, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:10-11).

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You see it's at the cross, and in God raising him again from the dead, that Jesus smashes the powers of sin and death, and shatters our claim to self-rule.² You see, like mini Nebuchadnezzars, or mini Caesars, we want to be the one who rules, we want to be our own little emperors, ruling our own little kingdoms. We want to be the gold head, or the iron legs. But Jesus' resurrection shatters all such pretensions, because it tells us, he's the king, he's the one with the power, not us.

And with Jesus there is no 'after you', as there was with Nebuchadnezzar. Last week, Queen Elizabeth celebrated her sapphire jubilee, 65 years on the throne. No British monarch has ever done that before. But that's nothing compared to Jesus. As Helmut Thielicke, the German theologian wrote, 'When the drama of history is over, Jesus Christ will stand alone on the stage. All the great figures of history ... will realize that they have been but actors in a drama produced by another.' It's why Jesus is a much better hope than any earthly power.

You see, one of the dangers of living in Babylon is that you behave, you exercise power, like a Babylonian, to make a name for yourself. Or when in Rome, you do as the Romans do, and you use power to push others down. But if your faith is to thrive in exile, if you're to speak counter-culturally, and seek the welfare of the city, our human love of power and control, our self-absorbed selfishness, has got to be broken. Like this statue, it's got to be shattered. And it's Christ who can do it.

Just ask yourself, who does Jesus exercise power for? The powerful use it to advance themselves, or their family, or those around them. But Christ exercised his power in giving up power. He became weak, to make the weak strong. He became sin to make the sinful righteous. He became poor to make the poor rich. Christ uses his power for those who have no power. He uses it for us. And when we see that, we will give up our desire for power and control to him, and use any power or influence he gives us for the good of others, not for ourselves.

But, in closing, look how Nebuchadnezzar responds. Firstly, he worships God, v47, "Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries." And as this pagan king bows before Daniel this Jewish wise man, do you see the wonderful irony? Because 600 years later Babylonian wise men will travel to Jerusalem to bow before the one true Jewish King at his birth. But for now, this man knows that there is a God in heaven - a God who knows his innermost thoughts. And when you experience that, it is profoundly humbling, even unnerving. I remember as a student, standing in church one Sunday morning, going through the motions of singing the songs, but feeling miserable in my sin, wrestling with whether or not I should do what I knew I had to do and

² Helm 41

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break off a sin, when a lady who was standing behind me tapped me on the shoulder and said, 'Martin, I think the Lord has given me this verse for you.' It was from John 14:15, where Jesus says, 'If you love me, you will obey my commandments.' It was as if there was nowhere to hide, with this realisation that nothing was hidden from God's sight, that he knew the secrets of my heart. But as well as being unnerving, it was the thing that gave me the courage to do the thing I needed to do but was dreading doing. So knowing that God sees it all, can help us do the right thing; and use power rightly.

And what does Nebuchadnezzar do? He promotes Daniel. Verse 48, 'Then the king gave Daniel high honours and many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon.' And what does Daniel do? He takes the job! Yet again, he doesn't withdraw. And he uses that position to appoint good people.

So for Daniel's first readers, this dream would have steeled their resolve, to keep serving, but not compromise. It should do the same for us. To stay faithful, whatever the pressure of the powers we live under. But it also tells us that you don't need to fear that things will inevitably go pear shaped if you are faithful. Daniel gets promoted, and so do his friends. And you might too. And if you are, just remember, it's God who's put you there.