

The king's dream of kingdoms * Daniel 2

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As you probably know by now, I'm a bit of a history nerd and there's a question within the study of history that I find really interesting - is world history determined by the action of a few brilliant people – a few 'great men' or are we simply carried along by larger socio-political forces?

A lot of us probably grew up with teachers who held to the 'Great man theory' of history – that's the idea that world events are driven by unique individuals, a cut above the rest, who by virtue of their own ability shift the course of world history. Think Charlemagne; think Napoleon; think Washington and Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela. These people have had an enormous impact on the course of world history and so the argument goes that these people – uniquely these people – drove the flow of human events.

Recently though, a lot of scholars have begun to question that view of history and to point out that there are always larger socio-political realities at work at any given time. And had the so-called 'great men' never existed, the outcome would have been the same, because of these socio-political forces. So, in a world without Mandela or MLK, the same things would have happened; it would just have been a different person riding the tidal wave of world events. I.e., there was enough momentum going against racism and apartheid that things would have changed whether MLK or Mandela ever existed. That's a more 'social' or 'environmental' view of history.

What do you think? Would WWII have gone the same without Churchill and DeGaulle and FDR? Would we have handled COVID the same if Tommy Douglas had never existed? Are we driven ahead by the aspirations of a few great men or are we carried along by forces greater than any one person?

I'd like to suggest to you that there is actually one more option – and we find that option in Daniel chapter 2. Daniel chapter 2 tells us that we are not moved along by the whims of powerful people or the happenstance of impersonal forces, but world history is moved by the purposes of a good and compassionate God. Let's go together to Daniel chapter 2, Daniel 2, starting in verse 1 and I'll show you what I mean. So remember – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel – that's a big block a bit past the middle and then you hit Daniel. So Daniel, chapter 2.

Daniel chapter 2 starts in the middle of the night. King Nebuchadnezzar, the great king of Babylon, has been up for hours, tossing and turning because he's had a dream that's totally unsettled him. You know that kind of dream where you wake up and think – was that real? It felt real. And it freaked him out. He's tried reading a book, he's tried drinking some warm milk, he's tried counting camels but he just can't get to sleep because he just can't stop thinking, worrying, about what this dream could mean.

So in the morning, first thing in the morning, the king summoned all of his wise men* - magicians and enchanters and sorcerers and astrologers – to help him to figure out what this dream meant (and just a quick aside – these are the kind of guys that visited Bethlehem when Jesus was born – these are the 'wise men.') So these wise men got the call from the palace, threw on their robes and headed into the king's presence to apply everything they knew about interpreting dreams.

So they came into the presence of the king and said – verse 4 - "O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will interpret it."

5 The king replied to the astrologers, "This is what I have firmly decided: 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.

6 But if you tell me the dream and explain it, you will receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor. So tell me the dream and interpret it for me."

The astrologers and magicians I think must have thought 'there's no way he just said what I think he said' because they repeated their opening words once again -

7 Once more they replied, "Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will interpret it."

8 Then the king answered, "I am certain that you are trying to gain time, because you realize that this is what I have firmly decided:

9 If you do not tell me the dream, there is just one penalty for you. You have conspired to tell me misleading and wicked things, hoping the situation will change. So then, tell me the dream, and I will know that you can interpret it for me."

Now let's talk about this. Why is Nebuchadnezzar acting like this? Does Nebuchadnezzar remember the dream? There are some scholars who say 'no.' He has legitimately forgotten what he dreamed; all he remembers is how it frightened him and now he's trying to get the wise men to tell him what it was that he had dreamed.

That's possible, but I think that Nebuchadnezzar DOES remember the dream. I mean, he seems pretty shook up for a guy who's 'forgotten' his dream. But verse 9 I think tells us that he *knows* the dream and that this is a test. Verse 9 – 'you have conspired to tell me wicked and misleading things, hoping the situation will change.' I didn't mention this earlier but look at verse 1. This is only the second year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign. He is still consolidating power. He had an expansionist policy that many disagreed with and so I think he's trying to suss out who's with him and who's against him. And remember, Nebuchadnezzar was not democratically elected; he took the throne by force. And the next two kings after him were assassinated while in office. So I think Nebuchadnezzar has two goals here – 1. Figure out the dream and 2. Figure out if his wise men can be trusted. So he says – tell me the dream and its interpretation – if you get it right – riches. If you get it wrong – ruin. Classic carrot and stick motivation.

But the astrologers realize that that's practically impossible – verses 10 and 11 – "What the king asks is too difficult... There is not a man on earth who can do what the king asks!" (How's that for dramatic foreshadowing?).

But this just made Nebuchadnezzar all the more furious and he ordered ALL of the wise men in Babylon put to death.

And you know who had just graduated as Babylonian wise men, head of the class? Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. Guards came looking for them and yet, v. 14, Daniel responded with wisdom and tact. And again, I think this is God giving Daniel favour in the eyes of the guard, because instead of just whacking their heads off, he stops to explain to them the situation with the dream.

Well, Daniel asked for more time, and got it, and immediately went to talk with Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. (And notice, verse 17, the narrator is using their Hebrew names here). And together, they began to pray that God would intervene to spare their lives (and those of the other wise men) from the whims of this tyrannical man.

And verse 19 – 19 During the night the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision. Then Daniel praised the God of heaven

20 and said: "Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his.

21 He changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them. [**Remember that**]. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning.

22 He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him.

23 I thank and praise you, O God of my fathers: You have given me wisdom and power, you have made known to me what we asked of you, you have made known to us the dream of the king."

So Daniel went in to the presence of the king and the king asked – verse 26 - "Are you able to tell me what I saw in my dream and interpret it?" [And this next part is key] –

27 Daniel replied, "No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, 28 but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries...

The wise men were right. There is not a man on earth who could reveal the dream. But there is a GOD in Heaven who can. And... verse 28 continues -

He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come. [**Underline that** this is a vision of what is to come]. Your dream and the visions that passed through your mind as you lay on your bed are these – verse 31 –

31 "You looked, O king, and there before you stood a large statue--an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance.

32 The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze,

33 its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay.

34 While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them.

35 Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were broken to pieces at the same time 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.

So here's the dream. Nebuchadnezzar sees a statue, head of gold, chest of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, feet of iron and clay and then a rock is cut out by supernatural means, and crushes the statue to bits. The statue is GONE but the rock becomes a mountain that fills the whole earth. That's quite the dream.

So Daniel's got part 1 – that's the mysterious dream; part 2 – what does it mean? Verse 37 -

37 You, O king, are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; [remember verse 21 – God sets up kings and deposes them?]

38 in your hands he has placed mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold.

That, I'll bet, made Nebuchadnezzar feel pretty good– the dream didn't mean that another king or a coalition of nations was coming to destroy him – HE was the head of the statue and a golden one at that! Can't get much better than that. But Daniel continues –

39 "After you, another kingdom will rise, inferior to yours. Next, a third kingdom, one of bronze, will rule over the whole earth.

40 Finally, there will be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron--for iron breaks and smashes everything--and as iron breaks things to pieces, so it will crush and break all the others.

41 Just as you saw that the feet and toes were partly of baked clay and partly of iron, so this will be a divided kingdom; yet it will have some of the strength of iron in it, even as you saw iron mixed with clay.

42 As the toes were partly iron and partly clay, so this kingdom will be partly strong and partly brittle.

43 And just as you saw the iron mixed with baked clay, so the people will be a mixture and will not remain united, any more than iron mixes with clay.

So the various metals represent various kingdoms, each one coming after Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom, but what about the rock? Verse 44 -

44 "In the time of those kings [iron and clay], the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. [The silver kingdom inherits the gold, the bronze takes what's left of the silver – not gonna happen with this final kingdom]. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.

45 This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands--a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces.

That rock represents a kingdom, established by God, that will grow to fill the whole world and never be destroyed.

"The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. [Remember v. 28? This is what is to come]. The dream is true and the interpretation is trustworthy."

46 Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor... [saying] "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery." I mean, Daniel's just told him a dream that the only the king should know – he's in awe of Daniel and his God. And so the king made Daniel ruler over the entire province and head of the wise men in the country and at Daniel's request, he made Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego administrators of the province of Babylon, while Daniel himself remained at the royal court (Daniel 2:1 NIV).

Now I've heard sermons in the past that will say the main point here is that God is the great revealer of mysteries and that Daniel was right to give God credit for all that He did. There's no way Daniel would have known what the king dream; God gave him that insight and verse 30, Daniel says 'God alone has revealed this mystery to me; it's not anything to do with me; it's just that God has made this thing known.' Daniel was absolutely right to do so. That's absolutely the right attitude to have – a humility that honours God for all the things that God does that God alone can do.

I think though that there's more. This passage is not just about Nebuchadnezzar's mysterious dream; this passage is ultimately about God's eternal kingdom.

See, Nebuchadnezzar's dream was not just about hypotheticals; his dream was about things that would happen in world history. Remember, twice over, it says that this is what will happen in days to come.

And happen it did.

You can actually map the dream directly onto world history. Babylon was the first empire in the dream, the head of gold. Nebuchadnezzar and his successors ruled for a while, but then along came another empire. Persia - the silver chest. Persia swallowed up Babylon like a hungry lion. But then not long after that, the bronze kingdom came along – the Greeks under Alexander the Great conquered Persia and spread themselves across the face of the earth. The Greek kingdom looked like it would last forever. But not to be, because along came then the iron. Rome. Conquered Greece. Conquered Macedon. Conquered Israel. If you were anywhere near the Mediterranean at that point in history, you belonged to Rome.

But in the time of the Romans, the rock appeared, just as the dream said it would. The rock crashed into the Roman empire and began spreading across the face of the earth. The great leaders of history – gone and forgotten – you know Julius Caesar and Caesar Augustus, but what about Marius and Sulla, Camillus and Corvus – they are giants in Roman history! –blown away like dust. But the rock remains. His kingdom spread throughout the whole earth.

And the rock is Jesus.

Look at verse 44 - 44 "In the time of those kings [the Romans], the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever" (Dan 2:44 NIV).

When was Jesus born? Luke 2 - In the time of Caesar Augustus (In the time of the kings of Rome). What was Jesus born to be? The King who would reign on His father's throne forever and ever; His kingdom will not end.ⁱ (That was what the angel said to Mary).

Jesus is the Rock cut out, not by human hands, which smashes the aspirations of prideful men and grows to fill the entire earth. His Kingdom will not be left to another one like the others in the statue - Babylon was swallowed up by Persia, which was itself gobbled up by Greece, which was itself swallowed up by Rome and then Rome split into a million pieces, but God's kingdom will stand forever.

And that is the key point to take away from this passage. The powers that be will not always be but God will reign forever.

Nations rise and fall, rulers come and go, but God's gracious kingdom will last forever.

John Goldingay puts it like this – "The shape of history is under God's control and the coming of God's kingdom is certain."ⁱⁱ

Now let's stop for a minute to think about what this means for us.

Great man theory would say that the course of history is directed by charismatic and extraordinary people; social historians would say that we are driven more by impersonal forces, but Daniel 2 shows us that it is God who is in control. As Daniel prayed (around verse 20) - there is a God who changes times and seasons; who sets up kings and deposes them, who gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning, who dwells in moral purity – in light. Human history, the course of our lives, unfold according to His good and perfect will.

That means then that we are not defined by the imperfect plans of short sided people; we are not carried along by the random happenstance of impersonal forces – our destinies are determined by a wise and benevolent God.

Rulers will come and go. Ideologies will rise and fall. But God rules over them all, working for good in every time and place.

Maybe you don't like the way that Doug Ford is handling COVID-19. You know what? He won't last forever and he's not ultimately in charge anyways. God is and He's working for good. Maybe you're feeling alarmed by the gradual dechristianization of society. That's not going to last forever. Only God's kingdom will last and because of Jesus, we are citizens of that Kingdom. We can have hope knowing that our good and sovereign God is ushering us into His eternal Kingdom that cannot be shaken. The powers that be will not always be but God will reign forever.

To conclude, I want to spend a few minutes thinking about how this would have sounded to Daniel and his friends in exile. You know, sometimes, we're in such a hurry to think about what a Bible passage means for us that we forget to think about how it would have struck the people who first heard it. So how did this sound to Daniel and his friends? How did this sound to the very first people who read the book of Daniel?

Well, let's get into their heads a little. They were in exile, or, in the case of those who first read it, they were just out of exile. Either way, they were minorities, living in a foreign land. They had no social power, no clout in and of themselves. They were probably feeling depressed and discouraged, knowing that they were in many ways at the mercy of the powers that be. But then, this dream. The powers that be will not always be, but God's Kingdom will last forever.

That's adrenaline for the soul – the reminder that it's not always going to be this way. That this too shall pass. And that in God's sovereignty, God's children will arrive in God's eternal Kingdom and God is leading them all the way. May that knowledge give you the same confidence, hope and strength that it gave to Daniel and his friends.ⁱⁱⁱ

The powers that be will not always be, but God's Kingdom will last forever.

ⁱ 31 *You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end"* (Luke 1:31-33).

ⁱⁱ John Goldingay, *Daniel* (Word Biblical Commentary), 62.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is a paraphrase and amplification of Sinclair Ferguson's comments in *Daniel* (Mastering the Old Testament), 65-66: "If we understand these verses against that background [of oppression and minority], Daniel and his friends were receiving a message that would give them strength, hope and confidence in the dark days that were still to come; a message that has had the same effect on God's children in every age. This message has two elements: 1. The people of God already belong to His eternal kingdom. They have come to Him and sought entrance by faith into His Kingdom. He has received them and they are His... and 2. God's eternal kingdom will ultimately triumph. Whatever other elements of this chapter may fascinate us, we must allow nothing to obscure this – God's kingdom will triumph... This has often been the great hope that has encouraged the people of God in times of physical trials and in spiritual darkness."