

The Kingdoms of Men and the Kingdom of God

In the name of Jesus our King, dear friends in Christ: Thus far in our Lenten meditations on the book of Daniel, we've seen how the Lord used the empire of Babylon to punish his rebellious people in the land of Judah by conquering them and taking a number of their nobles and leaders into captivity. We've also seen how Daniel and his three friends were chosen from among these captives to serve as eunuchs in the court of the king of Babylon. Last week, we heard how these four young men were thoroughly trained in the language, worldly wisdom, and idolatrous ways of the Babylonians in order to prepare them for their positions, and how they carefully filtered what they were being forced to learn. While it would have been very easy for them to be seduced by the splendor of that seemingly superior culture and enticed by the luxuries that were made available to them, Daniel and his companions were determined not to lose their identities as God's children. So even while immersed in a pagan world, they clung fast to God's Word and remained faithful to the Lord. And when their Babylonian education was complete and their day of testing came, they were found to be superior in wisdom and knowledge than all their contemporaries. Thus it was that they entered the king's service approved by men; but more importantly, approved and blessed by God.

As they entered the king's service, these four young men would quite naturally have been assigned what we would call entry level positions. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, likely had scores of advisors and high-ranking ministers serving in his palace. And they in turn would have had staffs and secretaries of their own. The Babylonians were running an empire, after all, the largest that had ever existed on earth. There were wars to be fought, nations to be subjected, taxes and revenues to be received, laws to be enacted and enforced, petitions to be granted or denied: the palace was a busy place. And you can imagine all the politicking and departmental rivalry going on as various advisors were always struggling to be the king's favored and most trusted men. Understand too that religion and politics were thoroughly mixed. When rendering a decision on any matter, the king would want to know which of his gods needed to be appeased or might be offended by his actions, whether the astrological signs were favorable or not, and what the other omens his priests and soothsayers claimed to be able to read told him he should do. So, to what department or positions Daniel and his friends were assigned in all this is anyone's guess; but you can be certain that they were low men on the totem pole. It's highly unlikely that they had any direct face to face contact with the king.

That, however, was about to change, for as we heard, the Lord God sent the king of Babylon a troubling dream. Somehow he knew it was no ordinary dream. It weighed heavily on him because he sensed that it was important. And it's good that we note here a parallel to the story of Joseph when he was in Egypt, and how the Pharaoh had a dream which none of his wise men could interpret. In both cases, the Lord put into the mind of a pagan king an ominous dream that could only be explained by someone gifted by the Lord's Spirit. Also in both cases, the Lord used the occasion to have one of his own raised up from obscurity to a position of high honor and authority.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. It seems that Nebuchadnezzar is no fool. Because he realizes this disturbing dream means something significant, he wants to be absolutely sure that he ends up with the correct interpretation of it. So he concocts a way to make sure he gets the right answer. He summons his advisors and enchanters – the ones who claim to have access to all kinds of supernatural knowledge – and he demands that before they tell him what the

dream means, they must first tell him what the dream was. “You claim to have magical powers and deep insight into hidden things; okay, prove it. Then I’ll know you’re telling me the truth”.

What this reveals more than anything is Nebuchadnezzar’s deep-seated mistrust of his advisors. Normally when he has a question for them, they do all their enchantments and stargazing and reading of signs and what not, and they give him an answer; but he’s surely noticed that they’re wrong just about as often as they’re right. And no doubt they always have a multitude of excuses as to why they were wrong when that happens. Of course, what they really are is a bunch of sycophantic yes-men who are better at reading the king’s moods than their star charts. I mean, how do you become one of the king’s favorite advisors? You tell him what he wants to hear, that’s how. If he looks like he’s in favor of some course of action, then it’s “Oh yes, my lord, the omens could not be better”. If it appears he’s against it, then it’s “No, great king, the stars are all out of alignment”. And if the king looks like he’s uncertain, well, then it’s “It’s difficult to tell, your Excellency; some signs are favorable and others are not. You’ll have to rely on your own unsurpassed wisdom and experience in this matter.”

He’s heard this too many times, and now he suspects that they’re nothing but a lot of highly paid conmen; which is pretty much the truth. To be fair, some of them probably actually believe in their mumbo-jumbo methods of divining hidden mysteries; but I’ve got to believe that many of them do not. It’s just an act. Either way, when they hear the king’s demand, they begin to panic. “What you’re asking is not reasonable. No king has ever asked such a thing.” (Good thing for them, huh?) But Nebuchadnezzar won’t be moved. “I’ve made up my mind. If you don’t tell me the dream *and* its interpretation, I’m having the lot of you pulled apart limb by limb and your houses turned into ruins. (Actually, a better translation is that their homes will be converted into public outhouses. The point is that their families will be thrown out and made homeless.) The king also promises that great rewards will be heaped on anyone who can reveal to him the dream and its message. But his advisors protest that what he’s asking can’t be done. “Only the gods could do such a thing, and they don’t live with men.” That’s what they think, anyway.

True to his word, king Nebuchadnezzar issues the decree to round up all the wise men in his kingdom. He intends to have them slaughtered – probably as a group. So imagine yourself at the palace quarters of Daniel. He’s finished with work for the day, maybe getting ready for bed, when suddenly there’s urgent knocking on the door. When he goes to answer it, he finds armed guards have come to arrest him and that a sentence of death has already been passed. He has no idea why. When he gets the opportunity to ask the captain of the guard what’s going on, he gets the whole story. “Okay, then” he says, “Get me on the king’s calendar tomorrow. I will tell the king his dream and interpret it for him.” It’s a good indication of just how urgently the king wants to have this done for him that Daniel is allowed to return to his home for the evening. It’s the only hope the king has heard that he might get the answer he seeks.

So Daniel returns to his quarters and gathers his friends whom we can safely assume were also released at Daniel’s request. Together they pray to the Lord God of heaven to reveal the mystery. And their prayer is answered—while Daniel is asleep no less. It seems that so confident is he that he’d get an answer that after having prayed and turned the matter over to the Lord, he was able to go to sleep in peace. Now, that’s faith – the kind we all should have.

It’s worth noting that Daniel gives all credit and praise to God for giving him the dream and its interpretation, while the captain of the guard gives himself credit for finding Daniel in the hope of earning for himself the praise of the king. It puts into stark contrast the way of the world and the way of God’s children. And now Daniel stands before the king and confesses that he

isn't wiser or better than anyone else; but that he is a servant of the one true and living God of heaven, who was responsible for sending Nebuchadnezzar the dream, and who has now revealed both the dream and its meaning to Daniel.

The dream itself is fairly simple. It begins with a massive statue of man; its head is of gold, its chest and arms of silver, its midsection of bronze, and its legs of iron. Its feet are a mixture of iron and clay. As the viewer considers the towering image, he watches as a stone is cut out without human hands. It is swiftly hurled at the statue and strikes it at the feet. The whole thing comes crashing down and turns to dust, which the wind blows away. And then the stone begins to grow. It becomes a mountain that fills the entire earth.

This is the dream, and two things are worth mentioning here: first, there's the inherent instability of the image. The heaviest and most costly metals are on top. They get less dense, less precious, and yet stronger as you go down; but at the narrowest point, the ankles, you begin to run into a mixture of iron and clay, which would be quite weak. It seems that a stiff Iowa breeze would knock it down. The other thing is this: imagine what's going on in the king's mind as Daniel describes the dream. He's got to be astounded: "Yeah ... *yeah!* That's it! That's exactly what I saw." It not only impresses him, it also whets his appetite for hearing the explanation, because now he knows he's going to get a truthful answer.

Having related the king's dream, Daniel launches into its explanation. The Lord God has given the king a vision of things to come. The image is a timeline of the future, which describes a succession of kingdoms. The uppermost – the head of gold – represents the empire of Babylon over which Nebuchadnezzar now rules. His kingdom will one day be replaced by an inferior kingdom, which like silver will be less glorious but stronger. And so it goes descending through two more kingdoms: those of bronze and iron. The last kingdom will be the strongest of all, shattering the others with the strength of iron. But then, in the time of that kingdom, the Lord God himself will set up a kingdom which, like a stone, will start small and seemingly insignificant; but then it will grow and become a mountain that fills the earth. That kingdom will last forever.

Hearing all this, the astonished king falls on his face in homage to Daniel and begins to treat him as if he were a god. And please understand: Nebuchadnezzar is not a man accustomed to bowing before anyone. That he assumes a posture of reverence to Daniel is remarkable. But even more remarkable are his words, "Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings." This is against all he has believed up until now. Up to this point he has called his own god, Bel, the greatest of the gods. He's assumed that the reason he's become the ruler of the civilized world is precisely because Bel is the ruler of the gods of the nations he's conquered. Now he denies this. He can't yet escape his polytheistic way of thinking; but at least he confesses the truth that the Lord God of Israel is superior to all the other gods he believes to exist. And recognizing the gifts the Lord has given to Daniel, the king promotes him to prime minister and makes him the chief of all his wise men. Daniel, in turn, uses his new influence to ensure that his friends receive positions as governors over some of the provinces of Babylon.

And so ends this chapter of the book of Daniel on a very high note. The lives of these four young Jewish men have been radically altered. Their stories which began with defeat, suffering, and humiliation have come (for the time being, at least) to honor and exultation. And what we've seen throughout is the Lord's amazing providential care for his faithful ones. We discover that all along the Lord had a plan to bring good from the evil that befell them, and that he was intervening all along the way – what with their being taken captive, their selection to be

trained to serve the king, the wisdom and insight he gave them, the dream he gave to the king, the king's insistence to find its interpretation, and finally the revelation of the dream and its meaning to Daniel – in all this the Lord was at work to put Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the positions he wanted them to be. In the process he also caused his own name to be glorified by his faithful people, and he began to plant the seed of true faith in others.

And there are lessons for us to learn in the story of these four young men. First, that theirs is not an isolated or unique case of the Lord acting on his people's behalf. No, this is the way the Lord works in all of our lives. The wise men of Babylon said that the gods don't live with men. That isn't the way the God of Holy Scripture reveals himself. He shows himself to be a very "hands on" kind of guy. He is present and active in our lives. Whoever you are and whatever circumstances you find yourself, you can be sure that, as a faithful child of God, the Lord is behind the scenes controlling and guiding events to work in your ultimate favor. Sometimes this is more apparent than at other times; but it's happening whether you see it or not—in all things: the good as well as the bad.

Second, some churches teach that Christians cannot engage in politics, run for offices, that they shouldn't vote or work for the government. That's just wrong. These accounts prove that people faithful to the Lord can work in government and leadership positions, and for employers and rulers who are not believers. What the Lord wants is that we conduct ourselves as his children in whatever place he puts us or allows us to serve. And doing so, we will provide a faithful witness to him.

Third and last, what the text for this evening suggests we do is to sit back and take in a wider view. It's not just that the Lord is operating in our lives on an individual basis; but that his hand is guiding the warp and woof of all world history. That's what the dream of the multi-metal image shows us. Henry Ford, the car maker, once famously quipped that history is just one damn thing after another. The implication being that it's all just a meaningless series of events without rhyme or reason. Not so according to the Scriptures. What we see is that the Lord has a plan and purpose in all things, the big as well as the small. It is he who raises nations and causes them to fall. And with the hindsight of history, we now know how what Daniel described in the vision played out. The great empires of men, which have all now turned to dust, were in succession that of the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and then finally the Romans – the kingdom of iron. It was in the days of that last kingdom that the Lord himself formed the stone not cut by human hands – the same stone the builders rejected, which has now become the head of the corner: the Lord Jesus Christ. He's the one who put an end to the fleeting empires that glorify man – which, like the image of the dream, might look good at the top; but they are rotten with sin at the base. That's why they must eventually fall and come to nothing. Christ has established a different kind of kingdom, one like a mountain infinitely more stable, based not on the glory of man, but on the humiliation, suffering, and death of God. I speak, of course, of the Church of Jesus Christ. That's God's kingdom that fills the earth. It consists of all people of every nation, tribe, and race who live by faith in the forgiveness of sins earned by Jesus on the cross. This kingdom will endure forever, and so will all of its citizens.

This is comforting news for us as we live in an age of kingdoms of iron and clay. Some nations are weak and others are strong. And over the years the balance of power shifts and changes. But in whatever kind of earthly kingdom we live in, we are at the same time citizens of the eternal kingdom through faith in Jesus. Therefore we place our trust not in princes or politics; but in the Son of God who lived for us, who died for us, and who now lives and reigns to all eternity. Blessed be his name forever and ever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!