

Daniel: Living by Faith in the Real World Kingdom Dreams

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This morning we begin a series of four messages on the book of Daniel. This book describes incidents that took place 600 years before Jesus. These events take place in the land of Babylonia. Although this book takes place in a land and time far removed from ours, the message of the book has tremendous relevance for us today. How do we live out our faith in the real world? How do live in a world that is increasing hostile to the Christian faith? Over the next few weeks we will see how the message of Daniel can help us to live a more authentic faith today.

Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylonia, had a dream one night. The dream troubled him. He challenged the wise men of Babylon to tell him what he dreamed and then interpret it. They, of course, were unable to tell him what he had dreamed. Nebuchadnezzar ordered them all to be killed. He considered them frauds if they could not reveal his dream. Daniel prayed and asked God to tell him the dream. God revealed the dream to Daniel. Let's look at his description of the dream:

Daniel 2:31-35

"You looked, O king, and there before you stood a large statue--an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. ³²The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, ³³its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. ³⁴While 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. ³⁵Then 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.

Before we look at the meaning of this dream, I want us to look at the historical context in which these events take place. The Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar conquered what was left of Israel—the territory of Judah. He did not wish to destroy the people he conquered. He preferred to assimilate them into Babylonian culture—to make them good Babylonians. If he could assimilate them, they would be less likely to rebel. He had a brilliant strategy. He would take the professional people, the government leaders and the most promising young men from the conquered territories and bring them to the capital of Babylon. There they would see the greatness, wealth and glory of Babylon. They would be indoctrinated in the culture and beliefs of Babylon. When they were fully assimilated they

would be sent back to their homeland to indoctrinate the common people. The way to keep the enemy from rebelling was to make the enemy into Babylonians.

Daniel was one of the promising young men selected to come to the palace and be trained in the ways of Babylon. Daniel was Jewish and believed there was only one God. Babylonia was a pagan nation believing there many gods. Nebuchadnezzar considered himself to be one of those gods. To be assimilated meant that you would worship Nebuchadnezzar as a god. This was a dilemma for the Jewish people. Some of the religious leaders warned the Jewish people to remain separate from Babylonians and to refuse to cooperate in any way with their captors. They encouraged the Jewish people to pray against the nation of Babylon and call for God's judgment to fall on them. Some of the Jews believed "if you can't lick 'em, join 'em." They became fully assimilated into Babylonian beliefs and culture. It looked like the Jewish people had only two options: separate or assimilate. We see in Daniel there is another way to live in the real world.

As we read the story of Daniel, we notice that he had two names. His Hebrew name, Daniel, means "God is my judge." He was also given a Babylonian name by the chief assimilator, Belteshazzar, which means "Protector of the king." One part of the assimilation strategy was to give Babylonian names to conquered people. A new name meant a new identity as a citizen of Babylon. Because he is referred to by two names, Daniel showed that there was another alternative to separation or assimilation. He did not abandon his Jewish name, but he did not refuse his Babylonian name. This is one of the principles Daniel teaches us about how to live in the real world.

Daniel sought to live by God's principles spoken through Jeremiah about how to live during this period of exile among an enemy nation. Listen to what God says through the prophet Jeremiah:

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: ⁵"Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Marry and have sons and daughters; ...Increase in number there; do not decrease. ⁷Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

What a contrast to those who urged separation and prayers for the destruction of the city of Babylon. God says settle down, build homes and seek the prosperity of the city. God gives a different perspective. First of all notice he says "I carried you into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon." The Jewish people thought their enemies the Babylonians carried them off. But God says that he is the one who carried them into exile. It is part of his plan for them to lose power and independence. They had turned their backs on God and forgotten him. God desired to turn their hearts back toward him and refocus them upon his plans. He would use their time in exile to do this. They would learn how to serve him even in the midst of adversity.

God says to the people: "you have another option other than separation or assimilation—increase in number." What does that mean? It means bring others to experience a relationship with God. Rather than separate or become one of them, invite them to experience the love and power of the Creator God. In order to impact the city, you will need to be engaged in the life of the city, not withdrawn from it. Live in the city, among the people, but live distinctively as people of God. Jeremiah called the people to love God and the city.

How could they do that? He told them to pray for the city and to seek the peace or "shalom" of the city. "Shalom" means more than just peace. It means to seek the entire well being of the city—emotionally, spiritually and economically. God does not want them to go in and become antagonists of the city. He wants them to participate in the life of the city and have a positive influence for good. They are to help make it safe and contribute to its

success. Pray for the blessing of the city rather than the destruction of the city. Don't become like the city, but impact the city for God. Nebuchadnezzar had a strategy for assimilation of the enemy. God had a strategy to engage and win over the enemy.

Daniel engaged the city and maintained his identity as a man of one God. He bore two names—one Hebrew and one Babylonian. He went through the indoctrination process. You can read about it in chapter one. But he lived according to the principles of God's word. He became one of the advisors to the king. Daniel studied the culture and beliefs of Babylon. He mastered the material and even passed an examination by the king. But he also remained faithful to God. Assimilate, separate or engage? God's strategy is for believers to engage the culture and city wherever they are.

We live in an era that is now called the Post-Christian era. Up until about 50 years ago, there was a Christian consensus of values in our nation. Today that is no longer the case. Recently the cover story in Newsweek magazine proclaimed: "The Decline and Fall of Christian America." The number of persons identifying themselves as Christians fell 12 percentage points in the last two decades. Our society is becoming increasingly antagonistic to the values of the Christian faith and those who believe them. Recently the University of Maryland allowed the showing of a hard core pornographic movie on campus citing freedom of speech. The same week it voted to ban prayer from its commencement exercises. Why wouldn't the same argument for free speech apply to prayer that applies to pornography?

Some Christians are so discouraged by the direction of our nation that they advocate separation. They see our society as pagan and withdraw. They only go to church activities. They only read Christian books. They only listen to Christian music. They hang out only with Christian friends. On the other hand, there are some Christians who have been assimilated by the non-Christian society. They are fully indoctrinated by its standards of sex outside of

marriage, acceptance of alternate lifestyles and pursuit of material things as sources of happiness. Have you separated yourself? Have you been assimilated? Or are you living like Daniel? Are you living for God while engaging the society and impacting it for God? Do you join in activities with non-Christian friends to build relationships with them and help them experience the love of God? Do you pray for the well being of your non-Christian friends? Do you read and study the beliefs of the Post-Christian era? Do you understand the mind set of our modern world so that you can communicate respectfully with those who believe differently from you? Daniel shows us another way to live in the real world—engage the world for God.

We see another principle in the interpretation of the king's dream. Nebuchadnezzar sees in his dream a dazzling statue of gold, silver, bronze, iron and clay. Daniel tells the king that he is the head of gold. After him will come inferior kingdoms of silver, bronze, iron and iron mixed with clay. Many commentators speculate about which nations these represent. Are they ancient nations or nations that will come near the end of time? To spend time speculating on which nations are represented is to miss the point of the dream. The meaning of the dream is relevant for any time in history.

Nebuchadnezzar is troubled by the dream. He wants his wise men to interpret the dream, but he refuses to tell them what the dream is. In order to be sure they have real insight, he wants them to be able to tell him the dream. Daniel prays and receives from God a revelation of the dream. He goes to Nebuchadnezzar and says: "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." (Daniel 2:27-28) Because Daniel is one of the king's advisors he has access to the king. When he speaks to the king, he informs him that his knowledge was not gained from his Babylonian studies of interpreting dreams, but comes from his God.

Who is this dazzling figure with feet of clay? It is Nebuchadnezzar. He has desired to build a dazzling statue of himself and in the next chapter he will do so. The statue would symbolize what Nebuchadnezzar wanted to make of himself. He wants to be the greatest king of all time. He became king to make a name for himself. And he succeeded. At the time he was the most powerful person on earth. History places him among the top 20 most powerful people who have ever lived. But he has this dream. In spite of all he has attained and all the power he displays, he has feet of clay. His foundation is fragile. A stone can knock the whole thing down.

Nebuchadnezzar's story is our story. We all want to make something of ourselves. Some people have grand dreams. Some aspire to being billionaires by the time they are 30. Some want to win "American Idol." Some want to be President of the USA. Others have more moderate dreams, but the core of our dreams is the same. We all want to make for ourselves a place of security, success and admiration. We want the world to notice us. Some do it by their appearance. When they enter a room they want to look so good that they will turn heads. Others want to do it through displaying their knowledge—dazzling a group with their brilliance. Others want to do it by displaying what they have so others will envy them. Pastors get caught up in this. I sometimes struggle with the need to build a successful church so I will be admired.

But beneath all the dazzle of what we are seeking to build for ourselves, there is a lurking fear. We walk on feet of clay. Everything we are building rests on a fragile foundation. No matter how successful we are in the eyes of our peers, we know we are vulnerable. At any moment our weaknesses can surface and our success will crumble. Herod, king of Judea, when Jesus was born was one of the most powerful and wealthy men who ever lived. He built magnificent palaces and even rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem into a glorious structure. He made a name for himself with the Jewish people and the Roman

aristocracy. Yet he spent a fortune building fortresses—like the one at Masada—for protection from his enemies. He killed his wife and his sons. Why? Because in spite of all his accomplishments he lived in fear. He knew he had feet of clay. We all do.

When we build our lives on anything other than God, we have a foundation that we know will eventually crumble. We live constantly haunted by anxiety and fear. If we build our lives on popularity, we live in fear of falling out of favor with the in-crowd. If we build our lives on the pursuit of money, we live in constant fear of losing it. If we build our lives on our appearance, we live in fear of the mirror. We know the foundation of our lives is fragile. A stone will come along and destroy us. Daniel shows us that to live in the real world, we need a foundation for our lives that is not built by self-effort. If our lives are built on the foundation of our own efforts, then our lives are gold-plated. If we build our lives on the foundation of our relationship with God and our worth in his eyes, then we have a foundation built upon pure gold that will last forever. Everyone is building somebody's kingdom. Either we are building our own kingdom or we are building God's kingdom. Which are you building?

What is the meaning of the rock striking the statue? The rock is the kingdom of God. It will cause all the false kingdoms to crumble. It will expose the weakness of the foundation, but for our good. It will tear down the false kingdoms so we can turn and find the real kingdom that will last forever. It is a rock not cut with human hands. The real kingdom is built by God's work. The small rock grows into a mountain that fills the earth. Jesus said the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. It starts small, but it grows into something great. Our lives only matter when we join with God in the work of building his kingdom. It is built by his power at work in us.

Whose kingdom are you building? Who are you working for? Are you a banker, a teacher, a farmer, a salesman—for yourself or for God? When you ask, "How can I serve God through my work?", then you begin to live in the Kingdom of God. When you ask, "How

can I serve God in my community?”, then you begin to live in the Kingdom of God. You begin to influence others and help them come to know and experience God’s love.

Have you separated yourself from the real world? Have you been assimilated by the real world? Or are you engaging the real world for the Kingdom of God?