

The Reign of God and Empires Daniel 1:1-21

Introduction

Daniel Gilbert, a psychology professor at Harvard, believes that the reason why Americans are smiling less and worrying more and why happiness is down and sadness is up is not because people do not have enough money, but because people are more uncertain about the future than ever before based on the *Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index*.¹ Because of this, depression in America is on the rise. Gilbert said of his findings: “An uncertain future leaves us stranded in an unhappy present with nothing to do but wait.... Our national gloom is real enough, but it isn't a matter of insufficient funds. It's a matter of insufficient certainty.”

Nebuchadnezzar had dreams that left him both uncertain and unhappy. According to Daniel, the king's spirit was troubled, and his sleep left him (v. 1). Because he was troubled, he commanded that the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and the Chaldeans (a.k.a. astrologers) help him make sense of his crazy dream. In the ancient Near East, dreams were considered one of the ways the gods communicated with humans; dreams “were thought to be shadows of the future cast in front of itself, tipping its hand to show what lay ahead.”² The magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and the Chaldeans were understood to be the experts in interpreting dreams and reading into the future; they were the equivalent of the palm readers, astrologers, mediums, psychic, and tarot card readers of our day.

Nebuchadnezzar feared what was in his future, so he called the psychics of his day to address his uncertain future just like people are doing today due to the impact COVID-19 has had on jobs and businesses. Yelp recently published an Economic Impact Report that noted that it's “Supernatural Readings” business category was up 140 percent as more and more Americans turn to tarot card readers, mediums, and psychics to find out what is in their future. One astrologer who has been in the business for over twenty years said recently: “There has never been a time like this. I think everybody wants to know if their life is going to go on, and if there's anything in the future they have to look forward to.”

When I reflect upon Daniel and the current events of our day, I am reminded of something the Reverend S. M. Lockridge said in his sermon on the Lordship of Christ about 40 years ago:

“We are forever blowing bubbles looking for ships that never come in, chasing pots of gold at the end the receding rainbows. Now when a child blows bubbles, he's not concerned about values; he's thrilled as long as the bubble lasts, and when it bursts, he simply blows another. How do you expect your ships to come in when you've sent no

¹ The Well-Being Index measures Americans' perceptions of their lives and their daily experiences through five

² Iain M. Duguid, *Reformed Expository Commentary: Daniel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing; 2008), p.19.

ships out, and you never will find that proverbial pot of gold because you try to ignore him who has the rainbow wrapped around his shoulder?

A.W. Tozer once wrote: “The gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what in his deep heart conceives God to be like.”³ The size of your God will determine the size of your problems and whether he is able to handle them.

Some time ago I quoted something that John Piper wrote in his book, *Spectacular Sins*. In light of Daniel 2 and the current events of our day, consider what Piper wrote:

The coddled Western world will sooner or later give way to great affliction. And when it does, whose vision of God will hold...? Where is the Christian mind and soul being prepared for the horrors to come? Christians in the West are weakened by wimpy worldviews. And wimpy worldviews make wimpy Christians. God is weightless in our lives. He is not terrifyingly magnificent. His sovereignty is secondary (at best) to his sensitivity.⁴

Piper suggests that the remedy to strengthen Christians is the very thing that seems to be missing. What is missing according to Piper? Listen to his answer:

What is missing is the Bible. I mean the whole Bible, with its blood and guts and sins and horrors—and all of it under the massive hand of God. The hand whose fingers flick stars into being. The hand that gives life and takes it. The hand that rules everything. Everything. What we need is to know the great things about God. Knowing great things about God will help make us ready not to collapse under cataclysmic conflict and personal catastrophe.⁵

For Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, they understood that their God was bigger than what others considered to be Nebuchadnezzar’s impossible demands.

The Problem was God-sized (vv. 1-16)

I do not feel that I need to spend a whole lot of time restating the obvious. However, I feel I need to explain a few things to help you understand why the king behaved the way he did and why he demanded the impossible from the psychics of his day. There is evidence outside of Daniel that Nebuchadnezzar was a very religious man. There is an inscription in the British Library that includes a prayer the king prayed before his coronation as king; this is what Nebuchadnezzar prayed:

To Marduk my Lord I make supplication: O eternal prince, Lord of all beings, guide in the straight path the king whom you love and whose name you have proclaimed as is pleasing to you. I am the prince, your favorite, the creature of your hand. You have created me, entrusted me with dominion over all people. According to your favor, O Lord, which you bestow on all people, cause me to love your exalted Lordship. Create in

³ A.W. Tozer, *the Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper & Row Publications, 1961), 9.

⁴ John Piper, *Spectacular Sins* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway; 2008), p. 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.13-14.

*my heart the worship of your divinity and grant whatever is pleasing to you, because you have fashioned my life.*⁶

If the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and Chaldeans could do what they claimed they could, and if they truly heard from the Babylonian gods like Marduk, then it should have been no problem for them to hear from the gods what dream the king dreamed without needing the king to tell them. The only problem is that unknown to Nebuchadnezzar was that his gods were not even alive. Listen to what the Bible says about the gods and things people worship: **“To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? An idol! A craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and casts for it silver chains. He who is too impoverished for an offering chooses wood that will not rot; he seeks out a skillful craftsman to set up an idol that will not move”** (Isaiah 40:18–20). The apostle Paul even goes as far to say that, **“what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God”** (1 Cor. 10:20).

There was good reason why Nebuchadnezzar asked the magicians, enchanters, and sorcerers to interpret his dreams; there was a track record of them getting some things right. However, remember, what God creates and calls good, Satan counterfeits to keep you from God. Although the gods these people worshiped were not real, the demons behind each of their idols were real. Think about how psychics are sometimes able to describe a person’s circumstances without ever meeting that person. How is it that some psychics are pretty good at describing the potential outcome of a person’s life? Demons have been around for thousands of years and have had the privilege of observing the affairs and actions of humans long enough to predict how a person will act. Satan and his demons are powerful, very smart, and strategic in all that they do. They are real. What Satan and Demons cannot do is see the future or shape the future; only God is able to do that. Satan can only make educated guesses when it comes to our future.

When Nebuchadnezzar demanded that his magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and astrologers to interpret his dream without ever telling them what it was, he put the demons who empowered them in an impossible dilemma to do what only God can do. The one thing that the magicians, enchanters, the sorcerers, and astrologers were right about was their inability to do what the king demanded; they said to the king: **“There is not a man on earth who can meet the king’s demand...”** (v. 10). The demotion that all who worked for the king would receive, that included Daniel and his companions, was a violent and horrible death for both them and their household. Daniel and his companions were faced with a God-sized problem that only God could fix.

Their Prayer was God-shaped (vv. 17-18)

What was Daniel’s response to the king’s threat to tear limb from limb? He told his friends what the king demanded and threatened, and then he asked them to, **“seek mercy from the God of heaven.”** The only one who could tell the king what was in the mind of the king and the dreams he dreamt was the God of heaven. Daniel and his friends prayed in light of who God is, not who they thought God was. Martin Luther said of prayer: **“To pray well is the better half of study.”**

Over and over again, as you read the Bible, you will see that we are invited to pray. Here are four of the dozens of reasons given for why we should pray:

“The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.” (Psalm 145:18)

⁶ <https://bystander.homestead.com/Nebuchadnezzar>

“And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.” (1 John 5:14)

“...do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” (Philippians 4:6)

“...if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” (2 Chronicles 7:14)

Daniel and his friends prayed because they understood that God was bigger than their circumstances. What did God do? He answered the prayer of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; we are told in verse 19 that, **“the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision of the night”** (v. 19).

Daniel’s Response was God-centered (vv. 19-30)

What was their response to God answering their prayer? We see their response through Daniel’s praise. Notice that what Daniel says of God would have still been true had God decided not to answer Daniel’s prayer:

Daniel answered and said: “Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; he reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him. To 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.”
(Daniel 2:20–23)

There are six facts about God that are true of him unlike the idols and demons the king and the Babylonians worshiped. Here is what Daniel and his friends knew about God that motivated them to pray instead of panic:

Only God is wise.

Only God is powerful.

Only God is unchanging, but he does change times and seasons.

Only God is sovereign, therefore he alone removes and empowers kings.

Only God is able to reveal a future that he has already written.

Only God knows all things and sees all things, therefore it is he alone who reveals mysteries, sees what is hidden, and lights up the darkness.

After God revealed to Daniel Nebuchadnezzar's dream, he requested an appointment with the king. Upon seeing Daniel, the king asked, "**Are you able to make known to me the dream that I have seen and its interpretation**" (v. 26)? Daniel answered the king by giving him a theology lesson: "**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, 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...'**" (vv. 27–28).

Conclusion

Daniel's answer to the king was counter cultural. Why was Daniel's answer counter cultural? Because Satan is the great counterfeiter and Babylon is one of his best counterfeits. What the king thought he had by way of power, wealth, and the wisdom of his magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and astrologers was a cheap counterfeit of only what God could provide.

The wisdom of our day. The power of politicians and kings. The belief that you are the captain of your own ship and the master of your fate. The illusion of power. The ideology that you can create your own identity. The worship of self over the God who created all things. All of it is meant to rob and destroy the joy you were created and born to know in and only through the God whose image you mirror.

The only way to know and experience the joy you were created for and born to know is through the climatic display of God's wisdom and power through the birth, the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul describes this as, "The word of the cross."

"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart'" (1 Corinthians 1:18–19).

There is coming a day when God will destroy the spirit of Babylon and will subject all nations to his judgment. This is something God revealed through Nebuchadnezzar's dream that we will look at next week. The message and point of the king's dream is found in verse 44, "**And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever...**" (Daniel 2:44).

The spirit of Babylon is a counterfeit of the kingdom of God. Jesus is the wisdom and power of God who will reign as the King of kings and Lord of lords. To follow Jesus and to be associated with his Kingdom is to live counter cultural, but it is also the only way to have your sins forgiven and the only way to experience the joy God made you for.