

Daniel 2:1-30

Introduction

In chapter one of Daniel, we've been introduced to some of the main characters and themes of the book. We've seen in particular that the emphasis in Daniel is not really on Daniel the prophet, but rather on Daniel the man who shows us what it looks like to live life *skillfully* in exile *on the basis of* the insight that has been given him into the sovereign, saving purposes of God. So last week we saw how Daniel responded wisely and skillfully to the king's program of acculturating and absorbing him into the Chaldean way of life (name change and diet). This morning, we come to chapter two of Daniel and so also to the beginning of that first major "sandwich" that ties the two halves of this book together (see "Introduction to Daniel").

This is one of those "famous" stories in the first half of Daniel. Those of us who grew up in church Sunday School will vividly remember the imagery of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. In our Daniel outline I begin the title of this chapter like this: "Nebuchadnezzar dreams of..." and yet that's potentially misleading because *what* Nebuchadnezzar dreams (or the *content* of his dream) is not necessarily the *main* point of this chapter. The ESV Bible titles the first sixteen verses of chapter two: "Nebuchadnezzar's Dream." The irony is that in all sixteen of these verses, we're never told what Nebuchadnezzar's dream was. The ESV titles the next fourteen verses of this chapter: "God Reveals Nebuchadnezzar's Dream." But the irony, once again, is that in all fourteen of these verses we're still never told what Nebuchadnezzar's dream was. In other words, in the first *thirty* verses of this chapter (that's over half of the chapter) that I've titled "Nebuchadnezzar dreams of..." we're never actually told what Nebuchadnezzar dreams of (compare Pharaoh's dream in Gen. 41:1-8). So *why* is this? And what does this tell us? Well, first of all we can admit that this creates a lot of suspense. But it's more than that. What this very long "delay" tells us is that the actual content of the dream (which usually gets most of the attention) is not *by itself* the main point. The content of the dream *is* essential, but it's in the first thirty verses where we never actually know what the dream is that we come to see the *deeper significance and meaning* of this dream – and also of all the other dreams and visions in the rest of the book. So this morning, on a literary level we're going to build the suspense and then leave us hanging until next week. But on a theological and practical level, by God's grace we should be able to go home satisfied and full.

I. Daniel 2:1 — In the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his spirit was troubled, and his sleep left him.

The picture that's painted for us in this first verse is one that's full of irony. Nebuchadnezzar is the most powerful man in the world, the ruler of the growing and now mightiest empire in the world. His armies have just vanquished the Assyrians and completely broken the power of Egypt. We might think today of the president of the United States as the most powerful man in the world, but we know there are many checks and balances to the president's power. There were no checks or balances for Nebuchadnezzar (at least no *human* checks or balances). His word was the law; he did whatever he wanted; and there was effectively no one in all the world to truly challenge him. But still, Babylon was just a newly emerging world power and even

Nebuchadnezzar himself was not immune to “insecurity” and fear. Even Nebuchadnezzar has to sleep, and even Nebuchadnezzar has no control over the dreams that enter his sleep, and now Nebuchadnezzar has had a dream that’s troubled him so badly that we can imagine him tossing and turning in bed. The most powerful man in the world is troubled, even afraid. That’s the picture that’s so full of irony. Nebuchadnezzar is still just a man – just a human being.

We can already guess that there must have been something different about his dreams that night – something that set them apart from the usual dreams. We go on to read in verses 2-3:

II. Daniel 2:2–3 — Then the king commanded that the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans be summoned to tell the king his dreams. So they came in and stood before the king. And the king said to them, “I had a dream, and my spirit is troubled to know the dream.”

It wasn’t necessarily unusual for the king to have dreams that he wanted to have interpreted. Dreams were thought to be one way that the gods would communicate with humans, which meant they could contain hidden signs and portents and omens of things to come. It was then assumed that the hidden meaning of dreams could be “divined” (discovered) by those who were specially trained and qualified in these kinds of “arts.” Apparently, there were even special manuals written by the experts to be used by experts in making sense of the various parts of a dream. And so what does Nebuchadnezzar do when he’s had his dream? He calls in the experts – “the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans.” These titles might represent different guilds with different fields of expertise, but if so, that’s not the main point here. In verse 27, instead of magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and Chaldeans, we hear of “*wise men*, enchanters, magicians, and *astrologers*.” Why does Daniel pile up all these words? Because he wants to emphasize that Nebuchadnezzar has at his disposal and has now called into his presence all the very best and all the very “wisest” that this world has to offer. The word that’s used most often to summarize all these different groups of “experts” is the Aramaic word “*hak-kim*” (wise men), which is related to the Hebrew word for “wisdom” (*hak-mah*). Over and over again in Daniel 2, in Daniel 4, and in Daniel 5 we read of all “the *wise men* of Babylon” (2:12, 13, 14, 18, 24, 27, 48; 4:6, 18; 5:7, 8, 15). These are the men who are supposed to have insight into the heart of things and be able to divine (discover) hidden mysteries so that the king can choose his ways accordingly and always succeed and prosper. And now all the wise men of Babylon are gathered in the court before the mightiest ruler and potentate in all the world ready and waiting to divine the hidden meaning of his dreams. It really is a very “impressive” picture isn’t it?

When the narrator says that the king commanded that the wise men be summoned “*to tell the king his dreams*” and that the king said to the wise men: “I had a dream, and my spirit is troubled *to know the dream*” we naturally assume that the king only wants to know the interpretation or the meaning of his dreams, not the dreams themselves. Of course, *he* already knows what the dreams are!

III. Daniel 2:4 — Then the Chaldeans said to the king in Aramaic, “O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will show the interpretation.”

Did you notice how confident these “wise men” are. They know beyond any shadow of a doubt that they’ll be able to show the king the interpretation of his dream. Why? Because they’re the experts. This is what they do; it’s what they’ve studied and trained for. They’re not worried in the slightest about the possibility of failure. That’s out of the question.

Now we live in the “enlightened,” modern western world, don’t we? We might wonder why the king has not previously been more suspicious of his wise men, but I think that betrays a bit of naïve arrogance on our part. On the one hand, I’m assuming the wise men were always sufficiently vague to avoid getting themselves into too much trouble. On the other hand, I’m assuming they functioned mainly to provide Nebuchadnezzar with peace of mind. How often are we tempted even today as Christians to see “signs” and “omens” in various happenings and circumstances and combinations of circumstances? Sometimes we’re just as superstitious as Nebuchadnezzar. How nice would it be to always have “experts” (wise and godly Christian men and women) at our beck and call who can explain the meaning of these signs and omens always in such a way as to set our minds at rest and assure us that all is well? Do you think we’d waste too much time being suspicious of our godly and wise Christian “counselors”? I don’t think that would really even be an issue for us. And so naturally enough, it was never an issue for Nebuchadnezzar – at least not until *now*.

The wise men are confident, as usual, that they *will* be able to show the king the interpretation. All the king needs to do is tell them the dream.

IV. Daniel 2:5–6 — The king answered and said to the Chaldeans, “The word from me is firm: if you do not make known to me the dream and its interpretation, you shall be torn limb from limb, and your houses shall be laid in ruins. But if you show the dream and its interpretation, you shall receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor. Therefore show me the dream and its interpretation.”

Apparently, this dream was different in some way from any other dream that the king had ever had. Maybe it was more vivid and real than even our most vivid and real dreams. At the very least, the dream itself, as we’ll see later, was so specific and so obviously symbolic that Nebuchadnezzar was convinced this dream was different and he wanted to make sure that he understood its true meaning. That’s something he’d never had to be concerned about in the past. Before, he could be satisfied with flattering words and promises of his success and wellbeing. Now, all of a sudden, he’s interested in something called the *truth*. Before, the “accuracy” and “reliability” of his wise men was never really even an issue; now suddenly *it is*.

So how is Nebuchadnezzar to know that his experts are really doing their job? How can he know that they’re divining (discovering) for him the true meaning—the true hidden mysteries—of his dream? Well, let them “divine” not just the meaning of the dream, but even what the dream was in the first place. If they fail, they’ll be torn limb from limb (lit. “made into limbs”) and their houses laid in ruins. If they prove themselves equal to the task, they’ll receive gifts and rewards and great honor. The wise men apparently think that the king can’t be serious:

V. Daniel 2:7 — They answered a second time and said, “Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will show its interpretation.”

Notice they’re just as full of confidence this time around as they were before. They *will show* the king the interpretation because every dream can be subjected to their arts and expertise – just like the patient who lies helpless under the tools and instruments of the surgeon. But do you see what this tells us about these wise men? It tells us they’re not actually *divining* (discovering) the meaning of the dreams, but rather deciding themselves what the meaning of the dreams will be. Once again, in the past that was never really an issue. Why should it be? And they can’t understand why it should be an issue now. They *will* show the king the interpretation—let there be no doubt about that—only let the king tell them the dream.

VI. Daniel 2:8–9 — The king answered and said, “I know with certainty that you are trying to gain time, because you see that the word from me is firm— if you do not make the dream known to me, there is but one sentence for you. You have agreed to speak lying and corrupt words before me till the times change. Therefore tell me the dream, and I shall know that you can show me its interpretation.”

The irony, here, is that while the king might appear to be the one in complete control of the situation, able to brutally kill and dismember all of the men who stand before him, he’s actually completely helpless and out of control. What he really, desperately wants to know is the interpretation of his dream. And yet all the power and might in the world, and it’s beginning to look like even all the wisest counselors that his kingdom has to offer cannot avail to give him what he wants. Can the most powerful man on earth really be that “helpless”?

VII. Daniel 2:10–11 — The Chaldeans answered the king and said, “There is not a man on earth who can meet the king’s demand, for no great and powerful king has asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or Chaldean. The thing that the king asks is difficult, and no one can show it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh.”

Do you think the Chaldeans wanted to be “made into limbs”? Do you think they weren’t terrified? Do you think they thought the king wouldn’t actually follow through on his threat? They know at this moment that their lives are literally on the line and yet they can think of nothing better to say than, “That’s impossible. No great and powerful king has ever asked what you’re asking. There’s not a man on earth who can do what you want. All the professionals and all the experts in all the world gathered together couldn’t give the king an answer.” And so what we have on full display for us here with all the most famous wise men of Babylon gathered together in the court of the most powerful king in the world is the total futility of all the world’s “wisdom” and even of all the world’s “power.” Just look at the picture that we see in these verses.

There is one other thing, in particular, that’s meant to catch our attention in these verses. No one can tell the king his dream, say all the wise men of Babylon, except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh. If the dwelling of the gods is not with flesh, then where did these wise men get their wisdom? Where did these “experts” get all their training and expertise? Who wrote their

mantic books on divining the hidden mysteries of dreams? Think about it! If the dwelling of the gods is not with flesh, then how can these men be so sure of their ability to interpret the signs and omens of the supernatural world? If the dwelling of the gods is not with flesh, then all the so-called wisdom of these wise men must be entirely of their own making. Their “wisdom” originates with themselves.

VIII. Daniel 2:12 — Because of this the king was angry and very furious, and commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be destroyed.

The king holds the power of life and death for his servants, but he doesn’t hold the power to solve the mystery of his dream. Once again, his fury and his anger is nothing more than the evidence of his helplessness. And yet in the meantime, all the wise men of Babylon are to be destroyed. *All* the wise men of Babylon? To this point, we might have assumed that these things would have nothing to do with Daniel and his three companions. But what does the king mean by “*all* the wise men of Babylon”?

IX. Daniel 2:13 — So the decree went out, and the wise men were about to be killed; and they sought Daniel and his companions, to kill them.

We’ve already learned in chapter one that God had given these four youths learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and that Daniel, in particular, had understanding in all visions and dreams (1:17). So we’ve already been prepared to think that Daniel might be able to provide the answer to the king’s riddle. But now, without even being given the chance, Daniel and his companions are to be executed immediately. Can you imagine being perhaps seventeen years old (or any age at all!) and having the king’s executioners show up at your door? How do you think you would have responded?

X. Daniel 2:14–16 — Then Daniel replied with prudence and discretion to Arioch, the captain of the king’s guard, who had gone out to kill the wise men of Babylon. He declared to Arioch, the king’s captain, “Why is the decree of the king so urgent?” Then Arioch made the matter known to Daniel. And Daniel went in and requested the king to appoint him a time, that he might show the interpretation to the king.

There are lots of ways that Daniel could have responded, most of them being the result of any one of the following: panic, frustration, indignation, despair. Instead, Daniel replied with prudence and discretion: “Why is the decree of the king so urgent?” And then, when he’s told, Daniel very tactfully requests that the *king appoint him* a time, that he might show the interpretation – and of course the dream itself – to the king.

The book of Proverbs talks often about those who have “good sense,” or a good understanding (*tob se-kef*; Prov. 12:8; 13:15; 16:22). The meaning here isn’t just an inborn, natural “good sense,” but a good sense that’s ultimately the result of the fear of the Lord and trust in Him. What Daniel’s “prudence” and “discretion” really brings us back to again is the ability to live life skillfully, and ultimately *righteously* in the fear of the Lord. That’s the kind of wisdom we saw last week in chapter one and now also here in Daniel’s reply to Arioch and request to the king.

That's the "kind" of wisdom we see in the book of Proverbs. But there's *another* "kind" of wisdom, and that's the kind that's being especially emphasized here in Daniel chapter two – the wisdom of being able to understand mysteries; the wisdom of having insight into the hidden interpretations of dreams and visions. I speak of two different "kinds" of wisdom because there are really important differences between them, but we're also going to see that these two "kinds" of wisdom are very, very closely connected together.

XI. Daniel 2:17–18 — Then Daniel went to his house and made the matter known to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, his companions, and told them to seek mercy from the God of heaven **concerning this mystery**, so that Daniel and his companions might not be destroyed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon.

The "mystery," here, isn't just *what* the dream *is*, but also the *interpretation* of the dream. In other words, Daniel's not just seeking mercy from the God of heaven to know the dream – after which Daniel can take care of the rest. Daniel's seeking mercy from the God of heaven in order that he might know even the interpretation of the dream. Neither does Daniel assume that his own prayers hold any special powers to guarantee that God will be merciful. Instead, he enlists his three companions to pray along with him and to humbly beseech God for mercy. There aren't any "experts" or trained "professionals" here, are there? Not even anything close! There aren't any mantic books on the interpretations of dreams. There's no thought at all of being able to "*divine*"—or discover—the meaning of anything. All we have here is four exiled youths seeking mercy from the God of heaven concerning this *mystery*. It's a vastly different picture—isn't it?—from the one we saw just a moment ago when the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans were all gathered together in the court of the most powerful king and potentate in the world. And that's really the main point. That's really what were meant to see. If the result of that first scene was total futility, then the result of this second scene is "wisdom and might." We read in the first half of verse 19:

XII. Daniel 2:19 — Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision of the night.

And that's all. That's all we get. We want to know what the mystery was, don't we? And we want to know *now* – right away. But even for the next eleven verses we're still never told; and that's as far as we'll get this morning. There's a reason for this. It's because the main emphasis here is not on the details of the interpretation. In fact, that never will be the main emphasis. The main emphasis here is on the God who alone possesses all wisdom and therefore the God who alone can reveal mysteries and make us wise. Notice the kind of wisdom we're talking about here. It's not the wisdom of living skillfully (at least not specifically), but rather the wisdom that understands "deep and hidden things." And so we go on to read:

XIII. Daniel 2:19–23 — Then Daniel blessed the God of heaven. Daniel answered and said: "**Blessed be the name of God [Yahweh] 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 [men are wise because God has given them wisdom] and knowledge to those who have understanding [men have understanding because God has given them knowledge]; *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 MADE KNOWN TO 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."

Can we really be so obsessed any longer with finding out the details of the interpretation? Yes, the interpretation matters, but it matters only in so far as it makes us wise – wise like Daniel to truly know and understand mysteries.

What are these mysteries? We're not talking about the esoteric foolishness of the mystery religions where the spiritually elite are supposedly initiated into higher and higher levels of secret knowledge. What we're talking about are the sovereign, saving, redeeming purposes and plans of God in history. "He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings." And why does He do these things? Always, finally, for the sake of the revelation of *His glory* in the *salvation* of His people. Because it's God who plans and accomplishes these things, therefore only He knows what is (for us) in the darkness, and therefore *the light* dwells only with Him. Therefore, He alone can *give light to us* and *reveal* the deep and hidden things. Therefore, He alone can give to us wisdom so that we may be wise, and knowledge so that we may have understanding. *He alone* can *reveal* to us His sovereign, saving, redeeming plans and purposes for His people and for His world. And this is what He has done.

The emphasis here is not on the *details* of charts and timelines. That's *not* wisdom. The emphasis here is on the God who holds history—past, present, and future—in His hands and who has revealed to us what He has purposed to accomplish in Christ – so that in understanding this great mystery we might be made truly wise. Notice how Daniel's prayer begins: "Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, **to whom belong wisdom and might**" (cf. Job 12:13; Isa. 11:2; Jer. 9:23; 10:12; 51:15; 1 Cor. 1:17, 24; 2:4-5; Rev. 5:12; 7:12). And notice how it ends: "To you, O God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise, **for you have made known to me wisdom and might.**" Understanding the fine details of end times charts and timelines is not "wisdom and might." *Understanding* that all history is moving towards the end that God has ordained for the salvation of His people in Jesus Christ and for the glory of His name—now that *is* "wisdom and might" – wisdom and might that "belongs" only to the Lord, but that He has now "revealed" and "made known" to us. And so now we're prepared for the conclusion of this very long "introduction."

XIV. Daniel 2:24–30 — Therefore Daniel went in to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to destroy the wise men of Babylon. He went and said thus to him: "Do not destroy the wise men of Babylon; bring me in before the king, and I will show the king the interpretation." Then Arioch brought in Daniel before the king in haste and said thus to him: "I have found among the exiles from Judah a man who will make known to the king the interpretation." The king declared to Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, "Are you able to make known to me the dream that I have seen and its interpretation?" 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: To you, O king, as you lay in bed came thoughts of what would be after

this, and **he who reveals mysteries made known to you what is to be**. But as for me, **this mystery has been revealed to me, not because of any wisdom that I have more than all the living**, but in order that the interpretation may be made known to the king, and that you may know the thoughts of your mind.

And we still haven't been told what the dream *is*. That's because before these mysteries can truly be understood, it must also be truly understood that no man could ever discover them on his own. Before these deep and hidden things can truly be known, it must also be known that there is only one God who can reveal these deep and hidden things because there is only one God who declares the end from the beginning, from ancient times things not yet done, saying, "My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose" (Isa. 46:10). The point is not ultimately the mystery, but the God who reveals mysteries so that we might be "wise."

Conclusion

There are two different kinds of wisdom in the book of Daniel. There's the wisdom of living life skillfully in the fear of the Lord (that's the wisdom that we also see in the book of Proverbs), and there's also the wisdom of understanding hidden mysteries. But these two different "kinds" of wisdom are very closely connected together. The book of Daniel shows us what it looks like to live life *skillfully* in exile on the basis of the *insight* that has been given us into the sovereign, saving purposes of God.

Have you been made wise unto salvation – a salvation that's both "already" and "not yet" (cf. 2 Tim. 3:15)? Are we daily rejoicing and even "boasting" in the gift of this "wisdom"?

- 1 Corinthians 1:26–31 — For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."
- Colossians 2:1–3 (cf. 1 Cor. 2:6-13; Eph. 3:7-10) — For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden [and now also revealed and made known to us] all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.