

Daniel 2:31-45

Introduction

We left off two weeks ago in Daniel with Daniel about to tell Nebuchadnezzar the dream that he had and its interpretation. We saw that the point of this dream and its interpretation is to impart wisdom and understanding to those who believe. With that in mind we pick up again in Daniel two, verse thirty-one:

I. Daniel 2:31 — You saw, O king, and behold, a great image. This image, mighty and of exceeding brightness, stood before you, and its appearance was frightening. (Graphic, p. 10)

The first thing we need to fix in our minds is that what Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream was a single, unified image. Daniel describes it as a “great” image, a “mighty” image, an image of “exceeding brightness,” and an image whose appearance was “frightening.” It’s not that certain *parts* of this image were great, or mighty, or of exceeding brightness, but rather the *whole* image all *together*. But exactly what kind of image did Nebuchadnezzar see?

II. Daniel 2:32–33 — The head of this image was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its middle and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay.

What Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream was the image of a *man*. It’s true that this image is divided into four separate parts, but all four of the parts are essential to make the man – they’re all put together to make the man. So we assume that it wasn’t just the gold and the silver (the head and the chest and arms) that were of exceeding brightness, but the bronze and the iron and the clay, too, were of exceeding brightness. It was the *whole* image with *all of its different parts put together* that was so great and mighty.

And yet our attention is also drawn to the four *different parts* of this image – the head of fine gold, the chest and arms of silver, the middle and thighs of bronze, and the legs of iron with the feet partly of iron and partly of clay. If the metals at the top are of greater monetary value (gold and silver), then the metals at the bottom are obviously much stronger (bronze and iron). Is that supposed to tell us something? As with all symbolism, we have to be careful not to get carried away with overinterpreting the imagery. We have to be careful that we don’t turn God’s revelation into an object for “divination.” We can’t conclude that the specific metals or order of the metals has any symbolic meaning unless the text itself gives us good reason to come to this conclusion. However, there is some historical background that makes this listing of metals very interesting.

Hesiod was a Greek poet who lived about 700 BC (100 years *before* Daniel). “In his *Works and Days*... he divides history into five eras. Four are characterized by metals, in the [same] sequence [that we have here in Daniel] gold, silver, bronze and iron. Between the bronze era and the iron he inserts the era of the Greek heroes, [but] *without linking it to any metal*” (Lucas). The fact that this Greek poet has one “extra” era that’s not linked to any metal could be a sign that even in Hesiod’s day this sequence of four metals representing four eras was an already existing

scheme that he was simply modifying (cf. Lucas). Perhaps some 300-500 years *after* Daniel lived, “The idea of four ages symbolized by... four metals ([this time] gold, silver, *steel* and ‘iron mixed’)... is found [again] in two Zoroastrian texts” (Lucas). Of course, these pagan religious texts wouldn’t have been building on any tradition in Daniel, so they must have been building on some other already known tradition of dividing the history of the world into four eras, each represented by a different metal. Ovid was a Roman poet who was born about forty years before Jesus (43 BC) and just like the Greek poet Hesiod some six hundred years earlier, he also uses the four-metal scheme of gold, silver, bronze, and iron (*Metamorphoses* 1.89-162; cf. Lucas) to represent four ages of the world (but he doesn’t insert any age of Greek heros; Lucas). Could the four metals of gold, silver, bronze, and iron in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream *also* be representing four different periods of history? If so, then it would seem that God has “taken over” an idea or a concept already recognized even among pagan nations and adapted it to His own purposes.

Why is this helpful to know? In the first place, this could explain why these four metals were chosen and *why* they were placed in this order. But this also helps us to see that the number “four” may refer not *only* to four literal periods of history, but also *symbolically* to the *whole* of fallen human history. Dividing human history into four eras represented by four metals was already a known device that originated before Daniel and continued long after Daniel even among the pagans. So when God adapts this device to His own purposes, He’s doing just that – adapting a “*device*”; a device that we may be intended to interpret not *only* literally of four specific periods of human history, but also symbolically in the sense that these four periods taken *together* also represent the whole of fallen human history. Notice that one of the ways God *adapts* this four-metal/four-era imagery to His own purposes is by “assembling” the four metals (and so also the four eras?) into a single image of a single human being, and therefore also a single “era” or “age” of fallen human history *characterized* by a succession of human kingdoms that rise and fall one after the other. The symbolic significance of the number four (as a number of completeness, along with seven and ten) is also seen in other visionary passages similar to this one in Daniel (Duguid, 111).

- Zechariah 1:18–21 — And I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, four horns! And I said to the angel who talked with me, “What are these?” And he said to me, “These are the horns that have scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem.” Then the LORD showed me four craftsmen. And I said, “What are these coming to do?” He said, “These are the horns that scattered Judah, so that no one raised his head. And these have come to terrify them, to cast down the horns of the nations who lifted up their horns against the land of Judah to scatter it.”
- Zechariah 6:1–5 (cf. 2:6; Rev. 7:1) — Again I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, four chariots came out from between two mountains. And the mountains were mountains of bronze. The first chariot had red horses, the second black horses, the third white horses, and the fourth chariot dappled horses—all of them strong. Then I answered and said to the angel who talked with me, “What are these, my lord?” And the angel answered and said to me, “These are going out to the four winds of heaven, after presenting themselves before the Lord of all the earth.
- Revelation 4:6 — And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind.

□ In Revelation 6 we see four horses each with a rider bringing pestilence and plague and destruction on the earth (Rev. 6:1-8).

In light of the often symbolic significance of the number “four,” and in light of the fact that God seems to be adapting an already known “four-metal” *device*, is it possible that the number four, here, refers not *just* literally to four specific periods of history but *also* symbolically to the whole of fallen human history – from the time of Daniel until the end of this age? Is it possible that we see this especially in God’s “*assembling*” of the four separate metals into a single, unified image of a human being – an image that is “great” and “mighty” and of “exceeding brightness” and frightening appearance?

The most surprising feature of this image is its feet, composed partly of iron and partly of clay. The feet are obviously compromised and weak. And so now we have to ask ourselves an important question. If we’re right in guessing that each of the metals represents a different period of history, then are we meant to see only the *tail end of the fourth and last period of history* as being weak and brittle, or are we meant to see the feet as the foundation of the entire image so that it’s actually the entire superstructure of fallen human history that’s imperiled at its base? Or are we meant to somehow see *both*? Are you seeing the “tension” here between what may be the literal significance of each of these metals viewed in isolation from each other and the symbolic significance of *four* metals *joined together* to create this single “great” and “mighty” image of “exceeding brightness”?

If the image of the man and the material of clay have no parallels in any pagan scheme of the four metals, neither is there any parallel among the pagans with what comes next in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream.

III. Daniel 2:34–35a — As you looked, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found.

The great and mighty image that’s exceedingly bright and frightening in appearance is brought down by a comparatively small and insignificant stone cut out (as we’ll learn later) from a mountain by no human hand. What is a “stone” compared to gold, silver, bronze, and iron? What is a small stone only large enough to strike the feet compared to the awesome greatness of this mighty image? And yet all along there was a fundamental flaw in this image. The feet upon which the image stood were compromised – iron mixed with clay! So when the stone strikes the image on its feet, first the iron and clay is “broken in pieces,” and then *all the rest of the image*—the bronze middle and thighs, the silver chest and arms, and the gold head, “*all together*”—topples to the ground, also shattering in pieces—we might imagine—as it falls upon the stone. Notice especially those words “all together.” Even though the stone strikes only the feet, it’s actually the *entire image* “*all together*” that’s brought down and broken in pieces by the stone.

We can easily imagine the image *breaking in pieces* – that’s normal enough; but what actually happens next isn’t normal at all. All four of the metals became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away so that not a trace of them could be found. That’s not natural. We’re reminded of how the stone was cut out from the mountain “*by no human hand*” and so we assume that the explanation for the whole image becoming like the chaff of the summer threshing floors must somehow be found in the stone. It would seem that whatever is struck by this stone (like the feet of iron and clay) *and also* whatever falls upon this stone (like the thighs and middle and chest and arms and head) is broken to pieces and even turned to chaff that’s blown away by the wind. In other words, the reason this image fell was not really because of its weakened and compromised feet, but because of the power of the stone to shatter gold, silver, bronze, and iron – whether mixed with clay or not. The imagery, here, reminds us of verses like these in the first two chapters of Psalms:

- Psalm 2:7-9 — I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall **break them** with a rod of iron and **dash them in pieces** like a potter’s vessel.”
- Psalm 1:4 (cf. Isa. 41:15-16) — The wicked are... **like chaff that the wind drives away.**

Notice that the emphasis in these verses has been on the *whole* image. “The iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, *all together* were broken in pieces [by the stone], and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried *them* away, so that not a trace of *them* could be found.” On the one hand, we may guess that the *individual* metals taken in isolation from one another represent *specific* historical periods. On the other hand, it certainly seems likely that this image composed of four metals and shaped in the likeness of a man is a symbolic representation of the whole of fallen human history – of the whole kingdom of man which is characterized not just by four kingdoms but rather by a long succession of individual kingdoms that rise and fall one after the other from the time of its beginning all the way to the time of its end. In other words, the image taken as a whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

The great and mighty image of exceeding brightness and frightening appearance has been completely annihilated so that not even a trace of the gold, the silver, the bronze, or the iron and clay can be found. But what about the stone cut from the mountain by no human hand? What about the stone that struck the feet of this image so that the rest of the image also fell upon the stone and was broken to pieces? We read in the last part of verse 35:

IV. Daniel 2:35b — But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.

Compared to the image that stood on feet of iron mixed with clay, this mountain is the very picture of permanency – of something that can never be moved or toppled. The image that first appeared so great and so mighty is dwarfed by this great mountain that fills the whole earth. For anyone familiar with the earlier prophets in Israel (as Daniel certainly was) this imagery reminds us right away of certain passages from Isaiah describing the coming kingdom of God’s Messiah.

- Isaiah 2:2 (cf. Mic. 4:1) — It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it.
- Isaiah 11:9 (cf. 6:3) — They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

We're not told how quickly the stone turns into a great mountain or how long it takes for the stone to grow and fill the whole earth. For that matter, we're not even told how "long" it took for the image to fall to the ground and become like chaff and blow away on the wind. What we do know is this: The stone *eventually grew* into a mountain and now fills the whole earth while not even a trace of that once great and mighty image remains to be found.

V. Daniel 2:36–38 — This was the dream. Now [says Daniel] we will tell the king its interpretation. You, O king, the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, and the might, and the glory, and into whose hand he has given, wherever they dwell, the children of man, the beasts of the field, and the birds of the heavens, making you rule over them all—you are the head of gold.

So far everything is crystal clear. The head of gold is Nebuchadnezzar (and by extension, the kingdom of Babylon over which he rules). But if Nebuchadnezzar is the head of gold, the things Daniel says about this head of gold could also be said of the chest and arms of silver, the middle and thighs of bronze and the legs and feet of iron. Nebuchadnezzar is the one into whose hand has been given, wherever they dwell, "the children of man, the beasts of the field, and the birds of the heavens" so that he "rule[s] over them all." Does this language sound familiar? We read in Genesis chapter one:

- Genesis 1:26 — Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over **the birds of the heavens** and over the livestock and over all the earth and over **every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.**"

Nebuchadnezzar embodies this rule that God gave to man before the fall; and yet now Nebuchadnezzar is exercising this rule as a fallen sinner in rebellion against God. The head of gold is Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian empire, and yet Daniel means for us to see the head of gold as more than this; Nebuchadnezzar represents a "kingdom" that's far bigger than himself – the kingdom of man; the kingdom of fallen, sinful man; **the kingdom that's even more fully represented for us by the gold, and silver, and bronze, and iron, and clay all put together in the single likeness of a man.**

Just knowing that Nebuchadnezzar is the head of gold is not wisdom. Wisdom is understanding what the head of gold represents—what the image itself represents. And wisdom is understanding that in spite of what the head of gold represents, it's still the "God of heaven" who has "*given*" to Nebuchadnezzar "the kingdom, the power, and the might, and the glory... *making* [him] rule over... all."

Now Daniel continues:

VI. Daniel 2:39 — Another kingdom inferior to you shall arise after you, and yet a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over all the earth.

Daniel never attaches any meaning to the gold, or the silver, or the bronze metals, and so neither should we. We might think of silver being inferior to gold, but Daniel never mentions the silver in his interpretation. Daniel does mention bronze, which we might think of as inferior to silver, and yet he never says that the third kingdom is inferior to the second one. Once again, we have to be careful of over-interpretation. We have to be careful not to turn God's revelation into an object of divination. And once again, knowing the actual historical name of the kingdoms that arose after Nebuchadnezzar's is not wisdom – and the *point* of Daniel is to teach us true *wisdom*. We must never lose sight of this as we move through the book of Daniel. How sad, then, when we become so consumed with deciphering “codes” that in a sense we become fools.

There are a few truly evangelical scholars who believe that the second, inferior kingdom is the kingdom of the Medes while the third kingdom of bronze is the kingdom of the Persians (cf. Lucas; Walton). The majority of evangelical scholars believe that the second, inferior kingdom is the *combined* kingdom of the Medes and Persians (the Medo-Persian empire) while the third kingdom of bronze is the kingdom of the Greeks (the Greek empire). This second view is the one that I will hold unless and until I'm convinced otherwise by the text. Daniel himself never identifies the names of these two kingdoms, and *if* he does do this in chapter eight his vision in chapter eight doesn't come until more than fifty years after chapter two. The key to *understanding* this vision does not lie in knowing which kingdom goes with which metal. In any case, Daniel quickly speeds past the second and third kingdoms of silver and bronze so he can come to the fourth.

VII. Daniel 2:40 — And there shall be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron, because iron breaks to pieces and shatters all things. And like iron that crushes, it shall break and crush all these.

A minority of evangelicals hold that this fourth kingdom follows Babylon, Media, and Persia and is therefore the kingdom of Greece. The majority evangelical view says that this fourth kingdom follows Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece and is therefore the kingdom of Rome.

On the one hand, I believe that the fourth kingdom refers specifically to the Roman empire. However, in the bigger picture we have to remember that the “*fourth*” kingdom is also the “*last*” kingdom, and therefore it's also representing something bigger than itself. As the legs and feet of that great and mighty image in the likeness of a man, this fourth kingdom represents the “*climax*” and the final end of the whole kingdom of fallen man. We see this especially in the next three verses.

VIII. Daniel 2:41–43 — And as you saw the feet and toes, partly of potter's clay and partly of iron, it shall be a divided kingdom, but some of the firmness of iron shall be in it, just as you saw iron mixed with the soft clay. And as the toes of the feet were partly iron and partly clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly brittle. As you saw the iron mixed with soft clay, so the seed of man will intermingle, but they will not hold together, just as iron does not mix with clay.

The fourth kingdom will be strong as iron in the sense that it breaks to “pieces and shatters all things,” but on the other hand it will also be weak and brittle in the sense that it can’t truly unite all of humanity under one royal scepter. The Aramaic says literally that “the seed of man will intermingle” (cf. Lucas). On the one hand, this could refer to attempts at uniting the kingdom through various marriage alliances (cf. ESV; NRSV; NLT). In Daniel chapter eleven, the same attempts were made by the divided kingdom of the Greeks (11:6; 11:17). So if this is the Roman empire, these failed attempts at unifying obviously aren’t unique to the Romans – they’d already been tried before. On the other hand, the point of these words may just be a general reference to how different peoples are mixed with one another in any world empire. The New English Translation translates like this:

- Daniel 2:43 (NET; cf. NIV; HCSB; NCV) — And in that you saw iron mixed with... clay, so people will be mixed with one another without adhering to one another, just as iron does not mix with clay.

Once again, there may be some sense in which this was especially a problem for the fourth kingdom, but there’s also a sense in which it was a problem common to them all. It wasn’t just the fourth kingdom that was weak and brittle; in the end, so were all the others, because each one fell to the kingdom that came after *and*—as we’ve already guessed and as we’re about to see clearly—*each one individually* is actually crushed and broken to pieces *by the stone*. One inherent weakness of *every* world empire is the inability to unite all the peoples under its rule into a single, unified whole. I think here of the tower of Babel when God confused and divided the languages of men and dispersed them over the face of all the earth (Gen. 11:1-9). The kingdom of man fails, in the end, not least because no matter how hard it tries it can never truly unite all peoples into one. But now Daniel goes on to conclude in verses 44-45:

IX. Daniel 2:44–45 — 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, just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that **it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold**. A great God has made known to the king what shall be after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation sure.”

There’s no emphasis here on the fourth kingdom specifically, or on the stone striking the feet in particular. When will God set up His kingdom? “In the days of [all] those kings.” Which kingdom will the kingdom of God break in pieces? “All these kingdoms.” Which metal will the stone break in pieces? Not just the iron mixed with clay, but “the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold.” It’s the stone that crushes *all* of these.

Did you notice how the clay seems to be “out of order”? The clay is separated from the iron and placed in between the bronze and the silver. I believe that’s because the point of this vision is not so much a detailed historical sequence (though we do have that here at one level), but rather the bigger picture of this single image representing in the four metals that it’s composed of the whole history of the fallen kingdom of man – from the “present” in Daniel’s day all the way until

its final end. In that day all these kingdoms together will be broken in pieces and brought to an end, and the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people [that will come after]... [instead] it shall stand forever.” It’s in seeing and understanding *this* that we learn wisdom.

Even if the fourth kingdom was the kingdom of the Greeks, we would still have to remember that this “*fourth*” kingdom represents or symbolizes something bigger than itself. As the legs and feet of that great and mighty image of exceeding brightness and frightening appearance, it represents the final end of the kingdom of fallen and sinful man. It would then be in light of this symbolic meaning of the fourth kingdom and of the image as a whole that we see God setting up His eternal kingdom “in the days of those [four] kings” (the Babylonians, the Medes, the Persians, and the Greeks). However, if the fourth kingdom is the kingdom of Rome (as I believe it is), then we can also see in a more literal sense how it was in the days of the Roman Empire that the God of heaven began setting up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed when He sent His only Son, Jesus, into this world.

Conclusion

Remember what the angel said to Mary:

- Luke 1:31–33 — And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, **and of his kingdom there will be no end.**”

Remember the message that Jesus preached:

- Matthew 4:17 (cf. 12:28) — “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Remember what Jesus spoke with His disciples about for forty days after His resurrection and before He left them and ascended into heaven:

- Acts 1:3 — He appear[ed] to them during forty days... speaking about the kingdom of God.

Remember the message that the Apostles and evangelists preached in the book of Acts.

- Acts 8:12 (cf. Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 4:20; Col. 1:13) — Philip... preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ.
- Acts 28:31 (cf. 19:8; 20:25; 28:23) — [Paul] proclaim[ed] the kingdom of God and [taught] about the Lord Jesus Christ.

And remember what Jesus said in Luke chapter twenty:

- Luke 20:17–18 — “What then is this that is written: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone’? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”

Jesus purposefully echoes the words of Daniel so that we will see them being fulfilled even today in Him – the stone cut out from the mountain by no human hand. And now even today that stone is growing, destined to become a mountain that fills the whole earth. Remember Jesus’ words to the apostles:

- Acts 1:8 — You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you [the power of the kingdom], and you will be my witnesses [the King’s witnesses] in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, **and to the end of the earth.**

The Apostle Paul speaks of how the word of the truth, the gospel, has come to the Colossians, “as indeed **in the whole world** it is bearing fruit and increasing” (Col. 1:5–6; cf. 1:23; Rom. 16:25-27).

If the weakness of every human world empire is its inability to truly unite different nations and peoples as one then how amazing should it be for us to read words like this:

- Colossians 3:11 (cf. Gal. 3:28) — Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.
- 1 Corinthians 12:13 — For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

The eternal kingdom that God sets up is accomplishing what the kingdom of fallen man never could – it’s uniting under one royal scepter a “people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9; cf. Isa. 2:2; 11:9).

The time of the “*already*” and the “*not yet*” that we’re living in now was a hidden mystery in the Old Testament. Today we understand that the stone’s growth into a mountain that fills the whole earth takes place gradually over a period of at least 2000 years (cf. Mat. 13:31-32). Today we understand that though in one sense the stone has already struck the image so that even now “whoever does not believe is *condemned already*” (Jn. 3:18), yet the final fall of “the four kingdoms” of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome still awaits the second coming of Christ. In that day, the eternal kingdom that God sets up “shall break in pieces *all these kingdoms* [the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold] and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever.”

Brothers and sisters, have we *understood* the vision? Are we really gaining wisdom? In light of this mystery that God has revealed, how should we then live *today*? We’re going to come back and explore the answer to this question next week, but for right now, I want to conclude with this quotation:

“Which kingdom are we building? Are we pouring ourselves into the pursuit of the power and the glory of this world’s kingdoms, a power and glory that must inevitably decay and

topple into obscurity? Or are we instead pouring ourselves into the pursuit of God's kingdom, the only kingdom that will truly last? What is more, are we measuring our success by the fickle standards of present appearances, or do we have our eyes fixed on ultimate things? It is easy to become discouraged in our pursuit of God's kingdom if we measure things by the present. The church here on earth often seems powerless and weak, beset by problems. Our own lives too may [seem to] evidence little progress in holiness. Yet the answer to that temptation to despair is to fix your eyes on the glorious promises of God and trust that [he *is* building] his kingdom, both in our own lives and in this world. No one and nothing can prevent him from accomplishing his purposes, for the final chapter of history has already been written" (Duguid).

