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Sweet and Sober Truths for Bitter Providences

One of the problems with Bible study it truly is “in part.” No matter how large a chunk of Scripture one might study, there always is a larger context which is necessary to be seen if there is to be genuine understanding. Verses sit in sections which are part of a chapter which, together with other chapters, make up a book which sits in a record of revelation which though thorough is not exhaustive. Accordingly, as Bible students how important it is that we keep in mind the larger context of the passage we are studying.

As we examine Daniel 2, it is so important that we do just that!

This book was written for people in exile! Recall, when the book was first begun Daniel was but a lad and Israel had lost a relatively “few” people to the Babylonians (605 BC). Yet in the

coming twenty years, hundreds of thousands would join them, all of whom no doubt would struggle with the same questions:

- How shall we then live?
- Our God has proven either to be weak, indifferent, uncaring, or just mean... now what?
- If the God of Israel is real, what would He have us do in exile?

In fact, the questions could be reduced to two: What are we to do? How are we to do it?

The book of Daniel was written to answer these questions! As we have seen, the first chapter serves as the foundation for the rest of the prophecy and answers the question: What are we to do? In a phrase: devote yourself to the love, honor, and service of the Lord (cf. Daniel 1:8, 17-21)! Recall God told Samuel this:

1 Samuel 2:30, "...those who honor Me I will honor, and those who despise Me will be lightly esteemed."

This theme is lived out and so paraded throughout the book of Daniel- 2:48-49; 3:30; 5:29; 6:23; 7:27; 9:3; 10:11, 12; 12:10, 12-13. From this we conclude that while the "blessing" which God lavishes upon His devout people is unpredictable, nevertheless it is real! Yet the divine calling in and through all things is our love and devotion!

So what ought we to do when our lives are turned upside down? When we are in crises? When things don't go the way we planned? Cling to God, His word, His worship, and His service! THAT IS THE POINT OF THIS BOOK! Don't question His character nor grow weary in doing well! Rather, draw near to Him in love and devotion!

Now to encourage this, in the book of Daniel God gives a variety of sweet and sober truths to feed us during times of bitter providence! This morning we are going to look at the first truth: Our God is great and rules kings and nations!

Daniel 2:1, "Now in the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; and his spirit was troubled and his sleep left him."

It is no wonder that Nebuchadnezzar was having dreams in an agitated state. Nebuchadnezzar's second year (which would have been March/April 603) was anything but peaceful. For example we know that in 604 BC Ashkelon rebelled against Babylon and so was reduced to rubble by Nebuchadnezzar. In 603 BC Nebuchadnezzar was back at it quelling conflict and rebellion in parts of his kingdom. And during this time, there was the simmering conflict with Egypt which erupted in full force in 600 BC- which meant 603 would also have witnessed the rumblings of this conflict.

So, there was much for which to be "troubled" and "anxious" (v. 3)! And then came the strange dreams which in the ancient world would have been viewed as communications from the gods. What were the gods trying to tell him? Enter Nebuchadnezzar's wise men!

Daniel 2:2-5, "Then the king gave orders to call in the magicians, the conjurers, the sorcerers and the Chaldeans [this is quite a list; the idea is that he calls anyone and everyone associated with divining the future and giving counsel- they were called...], to tell the king his dreams [IOW, it wasn't that they simply were to give an interpretation, they had to come up with the actual dream!!!] So they came in and stood before the king. And the king said to them, 'I had a dream, and my spirit is anxious to understand the dream.' Then the Chaldeans spoke to the king in Aramaic: 'O king, live forever! Tell the dream to your servants, and we will declare the interpretation.' The king answered and said to the Chaldeans, 'The command from me is firm: if you do not make known to me the dream and its interpretation, you will be torn limb from limb, and your houses will be made a rubbish heap.'"

It has been suggested by some that Nebuchadnezzar couldn't remember his dream and hence the command. Yet this doesn't comport with the obvious suspicion that Nebuchadnezzar had toward these wise men (cf. v. 9) nor the clarifying statement at the end of v. 3. Truly! Nebuchadnezzar didn't trust them and for good reason. In the Babylonian culture a science of dream interpretation had arisen (ancient books on dream interpretation have been discovered in archaeological digs). No doubt the wise men referenced here would have operated according to the rules laid down by this pseudo-science. The only condition was that they first needed to hear the dream! Yet Nebuchadnezzar obviously had lived long enough to have watched the wise men of his kingdom give rather questionable dream-interpretations to his father. This no doubt left a bad taste in his mouth such that he looked with suspicion upon these wise men.

Accordingly, if they truly were in contact with the gods, then they most certainly should be able NOT only to interpret dreams, BUT also to declare them! And that is what Nebuchadnezzar expected which led to a troubled people.

Daniel 2:7-9, "They answered a second time and said, 'Let the king tell the dream to his servants, and we will declare the interpretation.' [though unskilled as prophets- they were false- nevertheless they were quite skilled at political manipulation! In their mind, if they could just stall, the mood of the king might change! Yet Nebuchadnezzar saw right through it...] The king answered and said, 'I know for certain that you are bargaining for time, inasmuch as you have seen that the command from me is firm, that if you do not make the dream known to me, there is only one decree for you. For you have agreed together to speak lying and corrupt words before me until the situation is changed; therefore tell me the dream, that I may know that you can declare to me its interpretation.'"

The king wasn't going to budge! Talk about a problem! Yet I understand it! Let me give you a sampling of how wise men and seers worked in the ancient world when it came to omens and dreams; it comes from the time of Julius Caesar.

When Julius Caesar began his campaign in Africa, he ordered his seers to read the entrails of

the sacrificial animals to determine if God was on his side. So do you know what his seers did? They kept sacrificing animals until they found one in which a favorable omen could be discerned! See, if they gave a bad interpretation or declared a dark omen concerning something the king really wanted, they could lose their head. So they sacrificed and sacrificed until a positive result came!

So, is it no wonder why Nebuchadnezzar had a problem with his wise men? I've always wondered why more kings in the ancient world didn't raise objection as Nebuchadnezzar did here. And so, when Nebuchadnezzar laid down the gauntlet, the seers' response is rather understandable.

Daniel 2:10-11, "The Chaldeans answered the king and said, 'There is not a man on earth who could declare the matter for the king, inasmuch as no great king or ruler has ever asked anything like this of any magician, conjurer or Chaldean. Moreover, the thing which the king demands is difficult, and there is no one else who could declare it to the king except gods, whose dwelling place is not with mortal flesh.'"

Talk about a loaded statement! In one response these seers BOTH confessed that they were false prophets AND provided a platform for the Lord to manifest His glory in a way that no earthly manipulation or military engagement could. That brings us to a threatened people.

Daniel 2:12-13, "Because of this the king became indignant and very furious, and gave orders to destroy all the wise men of Babylon. So the decree went forth that the wise men should be slain; and they looked for Daniel and his friends to kill them."

What a pickle! No doubt the killing had begun and God's people, specifically Daniel, Azariah, Hananiah, and Mishael were threatened. The only thing that could stop the killing/threat would be if a real God intervened! God in His providence orchestrated events to give maximum glory to Himself and demonstrate not only to Nebuchadnezzar but, more importantly, to His watching people that there remained a God on the throne of the universe!

Yet, before we get to that, we behold once again a KEY ELEMENT to God's people's survival in exile: faith and devotion.

An Act of Faith and Devotion

Daniel 2:14-17, "Then Daniel replied with discretion and discernment to Arioch, the captain of the king's bodyguard, who had gone forth to slay the wise men of Babylon [IOW, Daniel, though still a lad, understood what was going on and addressed the issue with divinely imparted prudence]; he answered and said to Arioch, the king's commander, 'For what reason is the decree from the king so urgent?' [Obviously Daniel and his friends were not part of the earlier interaction between Nebuchadnezzar and his wise men; they were still in training as this was the second year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign] Then Arioch informed Daniel about the matter. So Daniel went in and requested of the king that he would give him time, in order that he might declare the interpretation to the king."

Family of God, you must see that once again we have before us an amazing act of faith and devotion! It has been argued that Daniel's request for a special diet in Daniel 1 was done *in private*; so it really wasn't that difficult of a request. Well that has changed! Daniel has entered upon the largest stage the ancient world knew at the time with the highest stakes imaginable; death if he should fail! With this in mind, notice his heart; notice how he lived in exile and by implication how we ought to live in ours!

Daniel 2:17-18, "Then Daniel went to his house and informed his friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, about the matter, in order that they might request compassion from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that Daniel and his friends might not be destroyed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon."

What did Daniel do when his life was on the line? He gathered a support team and they got on their knees and prayed! You must see, having already been biased by Daniel 1, that this is a huge act of faith and devotion on the part of Daniel! This is how God would have His people to live in the bitter providences of life!

Daniel didn't run around crazed by what weighed in the balance! He didn't resort to manipulation... politics... the agency of man (like the false prophets of Babylon). Rather, he first and foremost went to God as he did when he first got to Babylon (cf. Daniel 1)! And brothers and sisters, this is what we must do as well! As strangers and aliens in exile on this earth, we must learn that our strength is in Christ; which means faith, devotion, love, fellowship, and worship ought to be major themes in our lives! This truly is the path to blessing.

A Blessing of the Lord

Daniel 2:19, "Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a night vision..."

Wow! God gave Daniel NOT simply the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, BUT the dream itself! Remember, according to all the other wise men of the nation:

Daniel 2:10-11, "There is not a man on earth who could declare the matter for the king... and there is no one else who could declare it to the king except gods, whose dwelling place is not with mortal flesh."

In other words, to know the dream of the king would require a person to ascend to the Mount of the gods and there dwell with the deity long enough to get the revelation! Now we know that Daniel didn't ascend a mountain in the hopes of communing with a god. So what did happen and remember, God's people are watching and, from this, learning how to live through the bitterness of exile? God condescended to Daniel, met him right where he was, and gave him that which he needed in order to serve Him!

You must see, this hasn't changed! Today if you will seek the Lord in and through all things, you

will NOT ascend up into the heavens. NO! You will discover that He has condescended to you such that in and through all things God is near to you! He is always with us- “even to the end of the age!” (Matthew 28:20b) This led to another blessing on the part of Daniel toward God, God’s majesty was proclaimed.

God Majesty Proclaimed

Daniel 2:19b, “...Then Daniel blessed the God of heaven.”

God not only blessed Daniel’s devotion, Daniel’s devotion resulted in praising the King! Did you get that? Just as sin breeds sin, so service leads to greater service which in this case was worship/praise! With his life on the line, Daniel sang praise to God! We are going to look at this in more detail in just a moment; for now, notice that the dream is declared and interpreted.

The Dream Declared and Interpreted

Daniel 2:24-38, “Therefore, Daniel went in to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to destroy the wise men of Babylon; he went and spoke to him as follows: ‘Do not destroy the wise men of Babylon! Take me into the king’s presence, and I will declare the interpretation to the king.’ Then Arioch hurriedly brought Daniel into the king’s presence and spoke to him as follows: ‘I have found a man among the exiles from Judah who can make the interpretation known to the king!’ [Arioch is a crafty politician; the language here indicates that he was endeavoring to take credit for Daniel- “I have found a man...”] The king answered and said to Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, ‘Are you able to make known to me the dream which I have seen AND its interpretation?’ [The language reflects a level of incredulity, “Really? You think you can do what I’ve asked?! O.K., let’s see!”] Daniel answered before the king and said, ‘As for the mystery about which the king has inquired, neither wise men, conjurers, magicians, nor diviners are able to declare it to the king. However, there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will take place in the latter days. This was your dream and the visions in your mind while on your bed.”

Before we get to the dream itself, what an important statement for the people of God to hear as they entered into exile. Their God was not dead, indifferent, or asleep! He was and remains actively and intimately involved in ALL the things of life! *Oh how we need ever and always to remember this!!!! We are never alone! God is always with us! The question is: will you trust*

Him?! Now as to the dream, rather than reading the text, notice the graphic. Nebuchadnezzar saw a large statue which frightened him- comprised of four different substances and a stone which would destroy the image.

- Its Head was gold.
- Its Chest and Arms were made of silver.
- Its Belly and Thigh, bronze.
- Its Legs were made of iron and its Feet iron/clay.

And then a stone was cut without hands and flung at the statue. The statue was obliterated! And the stone became a great mountain and filled the whole earth! What did all of this mean? That brings us to the interpretation of the dream.

The Dream Interpreted

Daniel 2:36-38, "This was the dream; now we shall tell its interpretation before the king. You, O king, are the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, the strength, and the glory; and wherever the sons of men dwell, or the beasts of the field, or the birds of the sky, He has given them into your hand and has caused you to rule over them all. You are the head of gold."

So we are talking here about five kingdoms:

- The first being Babylon.
- The second being the Medo-Persian empire.
- The third being Greece.
- The fourth being Rome.

But then we read of an uncut stone, another kingdom, which would be flung at these kingdoms with disastrous/glorious results depending on your perspective!

Daniel 2:44, "And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever."

Again, God's people are watching. This is a people who just witnessed the destruction of their kingdom, the loss of their lives, and the unsettling of their world! They are a people who might now be tempted to believe that their God was weak, inactive, uncaring, or mean! Yet what does their very active and powerful God reveal here? God is planning the destruction of ALL world kingdoms and the ultimate establishing of a Kingdom which will never fail or be subject to decay! And because this God is eternal, this plan likewise must have been eternal which means the life that was lost in the exile was a life God never intended them to live! Daniel is going to return to this kingdom again and again but for now understand, the fifth Kingdom



referenced here is nothing less than the Messianic Reign of Christ of which we are apart!

The Glory of God Realized and Proclaimed

Daniel 2:46-47, "Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell on his face and did homage to Daniel,¹ and gave orders to present to him an offering and fragrant incense. The king answered Daniel and said, 'Surely your God is a God of gods and a Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, since you have been able to reveal this mystery.'"

Recall that the occasion of this dream found Nebuchadnezzar threatened by various and sundry rebellions in and outside of his kingdom. Accordingly, this chapter began with this world-monarch agitated and so in a foul mood (cf. vv. 1-3)! Now you'd think after hearing about the demise of the kingdom he was laboring so diligently to establish that the messenger would be condemned! But get this: what God manifested here about himself trumped all earthly burdens such that a pagan, wicked man is left speechless. How much more God's people? How much more ought we?

You must see that Daniel wrote this prophecy to encourage the people of God as their world was turned upside down! Normally in the ancient world when a nation conquered another nation, the icons which represented the defeated people's god were placed in a temple before the victorious nation's god (as we saw in Daniel 1:2)! This was to symbolize that the victorious nation's god was most powerful! Yet out of the gate, what does God do here? He has the victorious king profess and proclaim that Yahweh is the King of kings and Lord of lords; that in the end, His Kingdom is going to triumph!!

Do you understand what that meant? The soon arriving exiles would be greeted with this incredible message: "Your God is a God of gods and a Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries!" Truly, God has placed this sign above the door that leads to every bitter providence in life! And so, in spite of their horrible situation, Israel's God remained on the throne of the universe and God's People were assured that in the end they would be victorious! Daniel himself couldn't have been clearer.

Daniel 2:20a, "Daniel answered and said, 'Let the name of God be blessed forever and ever...'" -

Most of you know that the word for "name" in the Hebrew does NOT simply denote a sound used to reference a thing. The word for "name" denotes a thing's character or attributes. Accordingly we read of David's conviction in God's name.

Psalm 20:7, "Some boast in chariots, and some in horses; but we will boast in the name of the LORD, our God."

David's ground of confidence (the idea behind "boasting") was NOT the sound of God's title, BUT God's character! THAT IS THE IDEA! Accordingly, the message Daniel wanted his nation to

understand was that regardless of their circumstances, they must ever and always praise and glorify their God because of who He is!

And who is he? What is the emphasis in this chapter? Daniel continued:

Daniel 2:20b-22, "...for wisdom and power belong to Him. And it is He who changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings; He gives wisdom to wise men, and knowledge to men of understanding. It is He who reveals the profound and hidden things; He knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with Him."

On what basis did Daniel say this here? God had just revealed Nebuchadnezzar's dream AND its interpretation in which Daniel was privy to this glorious truth.

Daniel 2:44, "And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever."

Family of God, if ever you find yourself feeling defeated, hopeless, tired and worn out, give yourself to this truth: we are part of a Kingdom which will crush this world and with it Satan's kingdom, and then renew it unto a paradise!

From this we see the point of this chapter and so this sweet truth as we anticipate bitter providences: God is GREAT! His Kingdom is an everlasting Kingdom which in the end will destroy all the kingdoms of this earth! This has been the confidence and hope of God's people throughout redemptive history. It was Paul's glory and joy:

Philippians 3:20-21, "...our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself."

This is the same hope what drove men and women in their lives of faith and sacrifice:

Hebrews 11:14, "Those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own."

It was this truth that encouraged many of the puritans as they suffered greatly at the hands of kings and armies! When James VI of Scotland (James I of England) abused his power and so hurt Christ's people, Andrew Melville said this directly to the king- which incidentally placed him in the Tower of London for four years, "There are two kings and two kingdoms in Scotland. There is King James, the Lord of the Commonwealth, and there is Christ Jesus, the King of the Church, whose subject James the Sixth is, and of whose kingdom he is not a king, nor a Lord, nor a head." (Krebs, 1832)

This was the confidence and conviction of Daniel! With this ever before him, what only could Daniel do; and what is it that we should do? Praise the Lord.

Daniel 2:23a, "To Thee, O God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise..."

Did you get that?

- He praised God even though the service of the Lord.
- Brought Daniel in chains to Babylon- and this after witnessing the death and destruction of many in Jerusalem.
- Forced Daniel to make the difficult choice early on as to whom he would serve (Daniel 1).
- Threatened Daniel's life for doing absolutely nothing wrong!
- Would keep God's people in chains for 70 more years!

So what ought God's people to do when they find themselves in a Bitter Providence? They must:

- Strive to be faithful to their Lord.
- Draw near to Him.
- Love Him... serve Him... honor Him!

That's the point of Daniel 1! What is there to encourage them to this end? The knowledge that God is a Great God who Rules Kings and Nations! That means, even in our valley, God remains on the throne ever and always bringing about His purpose and will!

Bibliography

Krebs, T. R. (1832, July 30). *The Autobiography and Diary of Mr. James Melville*, . Retrieved from Archive.org:
http://archive.org/stream/autobiographydia00melv/autobiographydia00melv_djvu.txt

End Note(s)

¹ It would have been surprising if a writer of the Maccabean period had chosen to include this questionable act, or had allowed it to stand if he found it in his sources, considering that the struggle in 165 BC was against Antiochus Epiphanes, with his claims to be 'God manifest'. In such a situation it would have been unthinkable to give encouragement to the thought that any human being could receive worship.

VISIT US WHEN IN Broomfield, COLORADO

Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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About the Preacher

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