

You know, if I were a school teacher and someone handed me the passage we had read out for us today, I would totally give them an F. "Blatant plagiarism," I'd write in the marking notes. "Entirely unoriginal. Daniel should try writing his own work instead of copying off others in the class." I mean, just look at it. You should still have it open, so you can. This is how it goes: the king of an Ancient Near Eastern country has a dream which disturbs him greatly. He seeks answers to the interpretation of this dream, but no-one seems to be able to tell him what it means. That is, until a certain man, a foreigner in that country and a worshipper of Yahweh, comes to the king and interprets his dream for him. The king is amazed and impressed, and rewards the man with a high rank. That's right, it's the story of Joseph all over again.

But there is a twist here: what we've got in Daniel reaches deeper and further than simply the story of the people of God. It addresses issues that we still wrestle with today, about how to deal with faceless power, how to deal with fear of the future, and how to deal with being comfortable. So not only is it important to read because it's in the Bible, but we can really learn some valuable lessons, and the key here is perspective.

So let's have a look at Nebuchadnezzar's dream, which really forms the core of our passage here. As I just mentioned, he has a dream which he thinks is really important. It's more than just a "I had cheese before bed" dream or a "I was sleeping on a funny angle" sort of dream. He knows that this was a message dream trying to tell him something very important, so he gathers together all sorts of different wise people and seers to try and interpret it for him. See, dreams were very important to the Babylonians as a source of understanding the present and the future, so much so that they had compiled huge dream interpretation manuals that were so detailed and comprehensive that you really did need to be an expert to be able to navigate through them.

And that would be fine. If you knew what the dream was. But Nebuchadnezzar is very evasive. It could be that he had forgotten the dream, but in any case he thought this dream was so important that he had to get the right interpretation, not something his experts had cooked up on the spot or that they had come up with among themselves. He wasn't really in the mood to hear something like, "May the king live forever! Your dream has revealed a mystical meaning that, um, all the dream experts will get a pay raise." But they're right in what they say in verse 10. It is impossible. It is totally unreasonable.

But, of course, not if you're God. Nothing is hidden from God, even the subject of an unremembered dream. Especially as it's God who made it in the first place. It's simply the supreme power of God at work, which is a theme that's going to come up again and again through this chapter. It underlies this whole interaction between Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel. Have a look at the little psalm that Daniel sings in 20 to 23: "Praise be to the name of God forever and ever / Wisdom and power are his... I thank and praise you, God of my ancestors / You have given me wisdom and power." Yes, Nebuchadnezzar has "dominion and power and might and glory", as we read in verse 37, but this is not the same power that God has. This is not the same power that God reveals through his servant, Daniel. God reaches out into Nebuchadnezzar's dream to show him what power really means, what the world is really like, the spiritual reality that he needs to recognise. At first the dream starts out quite comfortably for Nebuchadnezzar. He is the golden head. But then everything deteriorates. The kingdoms that come after him grow less and less majestic and more and more tough and nasty. And here's the kicker: it crashes the mighty mountain of God's kingdom, obliterating all of them in one foul swoop. This kingdom of God isn't a natural progression of history, it's a catastrophe that shatters it. God's kingdom isn't a lifeless statue but a living rock, an eternal kingdom ruled by an eternal God. This is real power.

I now interrupt this sermon for a special broadcast, a warning has been issued about reading apocalyptic literature like Daniel. Now, the word “apocalyptic” literally means "unveiling", an unveiling of the future and of spiritual truths concerning God's plan for his people, which ultimately means God's victory and the defeat of evil. But it's a kind of writing that tends to use very mysterious language. It's all very general about the events it describes. But that's kind of the point. Its message is about the certainty of God's final victory, so it urges the reader to put their trust in God even though times are tough. Reading apocalyptic asks for faith: put your faith in God, and leave the unfolding of the future to him.

But we don't like that. We want to *know*. Life is confusing and frustrating enough without mysteries to make it more confusing and frustrating. But if we can figure out the future, then we can plan our lives, we can plan contingencies, we can have control over the future. So we try and figure out the strange language we read. We try and see if there's a code, something we can recognise. We want our dreams interpreted. You may have seen this diagram or something much like it, equating the different parts of the statue with different kingdoms. We can kind of get away with this because chapter 2 is a parallel with chapter 7, where different beasts are equated to different civilisations by Daniel himself. But to do this exercise of trying to figure out what everything represents is frankly to miss the point.

It would be like if you were a kid and your mum or dad said to you, "Clean up your room or else," and you said, "Or else what? Exactly what sort of punishment are talking about here? Will I not be allowed on the computer? Will I have to sit in the corner? And how long will it be for? Will it be 10 minutes, half an hour, a week?" That's not the point. The point is, clean your room.

To do this sort of definitive labelling robs us of the message of the passage. This image of the statue isn't a code to be figured out, it's saying to the people of God that, yeah, governments come and go. Some are magnificent, some are horribly brutal, and you can find yourself living under any of these. But trust God. He's got it all under control. And one day the kingdom you live under will be his. This is a message of hope and faith for believers from all generations, not just from the past, which is what this diagram can lead us to think. The Jews under the Romans saw theirs as the age of the clay feet, as did those living under Macedonian rule. And whoever it was who came up with this picture sees this current time the same way. For all of us, we need to hear and know that God still, always holds ultimate power, and that the future, just as the present, is under his mighty control.

When we look at all the terrible things going on in the world, we are tempted to just give up in despair. We hear about wars in Ukraine, persecution in Iraq, children kidnapped in Nigeria. We hear about our own country turning away refugees, denying services to the poor and marginalised, and it seems to us that we are living in the time of clay feet where brutality and instability reigns. We are tempted to have a this world perspective, and we lose heart and worry.

But that's when Daniel 2 is so useful. If you do find yourself in that position, depressed at the state of affairs in the world or overcome by fear at the prospect of what the future might hold, ask, "Is God still in control?" Well, is he? You can look back at Daniel for a hint if you like. Of course he is. Daniel reminds us not only that God is with us in the midst of our trials - and we'll hear more about that next week - but also that this world we see around us, where everything seems to go wrong, is not the full picture. The real world, our spiritual reality says this time will end. This broken, horrible world is not our world, but God's kingdom, the one that will certainly come, is our world.

But in that lies the other challenge. This isn't our world. I wonder if sometimes we do find it hard to have that eternal perspective because we're so fully invested in our life in the here and now. I remember when I was younger driving in a car full of Christian friends to a CYC youth convention, and the conversation turned to apocalyptic stuff like what we read here. And one of my friends said this: "I do want Jesus to come back, but not just yet. I'd like to get married and have a family first, you know. I don't want to miss out on any of that." I'm sure you can see the problem in my friend's way of thinking. It was a matter of being content in the here and now.

What Daniel's dream interpretation should also do is undermine any confidence we might have in this world. It should compel us to courageous, confident service like Daniel. It should break that defeatist attitude that says it's too hard and the problems are too big. And it should also silence that voice inside our heads that says I don't need to serve God because I'm just fine thank you very much.

So think seriously for a second. How do you feel when you read something like Daniel 2? Do you feel a little bit uncomfortable or a little bit resistant when you see that you will lose this world and everything in it? Do you think, "Yes, but"? Yes, but I want to see my kids or grandkids grow up. Yes, but I want to enjoy the stuff I've got now. Yes, but I've got so much to look forward to. Yes, but, yes, but, yes, but. "But" is a very dangerous word in a relationship. I agree with you, but. That's fine, but. I love you, but. Really means I don't agree with you, that's not fine, love is not part of this situation.

Our grip on this world means we can end up like Nebuchadnezzar at the end of this chapter. He hasn't heard Daniel's miraculous interpretation of a dream and thought, "Wow, I'm totally going to turn my life around and put the one true God first in my life." He's just added God to the rest of the gods he worships. At the top of the pile, sure, but he honours God simply because God did a thing for him. God was a something to solve his problems when he couldn't do it himself. Is that how we treat God?

Daniel demands of us the proper perspective. Do we have a perspective that's centred on the here and now, or do we see the reality that God is in charge and that his kingdom is coming? Do we see him as one of many conveniences to make our lives easier, or does he actually rule our lives? Do we want to be in control, or do we trust and follow God, even when times are good? We have to get back to basics and get our perspective right. Loving God with all our decision-making, all our being, all our abilities must stem from this basic understand of how the universe works, that God is in control, that God holds all the power. How we deal with that truth is what's going to shape the rest of our lives. Look seriously at where your loyalties lie, what kingdom you want to live in, because I tell you, none of this is going to last. All you will have left is God, if you have God.