

God and His Kingdom

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[0 : 00] How about I pray for us and then we'll get into it. Let's pray. Gracious Father, we do thank you for your word to us and we thank you that you continue to speak through your word and that what you have to say is still very much relevant for us today.

And so we pray, Father, that you would give us ears to hear and minds to understand and more than that, hearts that would seek to live in light of your word. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, have you ever heard of the expression fear of the unknown? Fear of the unknown, yep. It's when you're facing something in the future and you don't know what's going to happen. And not knowing means uncertainty, which often breeds fear. I brought something along today actually to show you because I remember this fear of the unknown on my very first day of school. And believe it or not, I have actually got my school bag from my very first day of school. Look at that. My name on it from my mum. It's still going. They don't make them like this anymore, do they? [1 : 03] They don't last. In fact, on the next slide, this is me on my first day of school. I've actually had my shirt tucked in.

It was very exciting. Hair combed, everything. Now, I was smiling because my mum forced me to smile for the photo. But on the inside, I was dying. Apparently, mum says that I was really hard to get out of the car because I was scared.

I had this fear that... Thanks, that's enough. You can take that one now. I had this fear of the unknown. And years and years later, when Michelle and I were married and our son Tim went for his first day of school, that fear of the unknown came back.

Would he make any friends? Would he do well at school? Or would he become one of those kids that every teacher dreaded? He's not that today. I think he's here. You're not that today. And so even for parents, the first day of school, there's this fear of the unknown.

In fact, I saw this picture on the next slide of one mum who's... I don't know who's struggling more, the son or the mum. And we can feel this fear of the unknown in different situations, can't we?

[2 : 11] Whether it's not knowing what will happen to your own life, whether it's your work or your health or what you will do. Or whether it's not knowing what will happen to your loved one's lives, whether it's your children or grandchildren or parents or grandparents.

But it can also happen to us as Christians, where we don't know what will happen to us in our own country. Because things are changing towards Christians, aren't they?

Well, today's chapter reveals some knowledge or some truths so that we might not fear the unknown, but live in light of the known.

But it starts with Nebuchadnezzar's fear of the unknown, which for him was a troubling dream. So point one in your outline, verse one in your Bible. In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams.

His mind was troubled and he could not sleep. So the king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed. When they came in and stood before the king, he said to them, I've had a dream that troubles me and I want to know what it means.

[3 : 17] Then the astrologers answered the king, may the king live forever. Tell your servants the dream and we will interpret it. Do you see Nebuchadnezzar's fear of the unknown here?

He has a dream and he does not know the meaning. And so he's losing sleep over it. It troubles him. Now, we may not care if we don't understand our dreams, like the one where you're falling. Have you ever had that dream where you're falling? We kind of have it, wake up and then get over it and move on. But in ancient times, the culture said that God spoke to you through dreams. And that's why Nebuchadnezzar had so many wise men, magicians, astrologers and so on. In fact, these wise men would often have dream books that would explain what certain things.

Oh, you dreamt of a bird? Well, let me tell you, bird means this and so on. In fact, on the next slide is an example of a dream book. It's Egyptian in the British Museum.

[4 : 17] And so here God uses this culture of the day to speak to Nebuchadnezzar through a dream, like he does to others in the Bible, actually. But it's not clear for Nebuchadnezzar.

You see, God has arranged it so that Nebuchadnezzar will need Daniel to explain it. Why? Well, so that Nebuchadnezzar might know it's not any old God talking to him, but that it's Daniel's God, our God.

But at this point, Nebuchadnezzar is desperate to know the meaning of his dream so that he'll no longer be afraid. But instead, he can take control. You see, if he knows what the gods are saying to him, he can get prepared.

He can take control. He can keep ruling well. And so not knowing this dream means not being in control. And for the ruler of the known world back then, this was very troubling.

It was also troubling for the wise men as well, but for a different reason. Have a look at verse 5. The king replied to the astrologers, this is what I firmly decided.

[5 : 18] If you do not tell me what my dream was and interpret it, I will have to cut you into pieces and your houses turned into piles of rubble. But if you tell me the dream and explain it, you will receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor.

So tell me the dream and interpret it for me. Once more, they replied, we'll let the king tell his servants the dream first and then we'll interpret it. But then the king answered, I am certain that you're trying to gain time because you realize that this is what I firmly decided.

If you do not tell me the dream as well, well, there's only one penalty for you. In the past, you've conspired to tell me misleading and wicked things, hoping the situation will change.

And so now tell me the dream first and then I'll know that you can interpret it for me as well.

Nebuchadnezzar is not dumb, is he?

He's quite clever. And in the past, he feels like he's being led down the garden path by his wise men. And so he comes up with a clever plan. Now, you tell me what I dreamt first and then I'll trust your interpretation second.

[6 : 22] And if you don't, then you lose your lives. So you see, this dream was troubling, not just for Nebuchadnezzar because he wanted to know what it meant so he could rule, but it's troubling for the wise men because they could lose their lives.

Yet it's also troubling for all people because there is a limit to human wisdom. See verse 10? You see what they say?

No one has this kind of wisdom, king. In other words, there is a limit to human wisdom. And this is beyond humanity's limit.

What's more, they say only the gods have such knowledge. But then they add, we have no access to them. They don't walk amongst us. And yet, Nebuchadnezzar is still desperate to know.

So that he'll no longer have fear of the unknown, but he'll have knowledge to take power, to take control. And so he spits the dummy, actually. Verse 12.

[7 : 46] This made the king so angry and furious that he ordered the execution of all the wise men of Babylon. So the decree was issued to put the wise men to death. And men were sent to look for Daniel and his friends to put them to death.

The king is so furious, he goes from ordering the execution of the wise men who were unlucky enough to turn up to the royal court that day, from just those guys to all the wise men in his kingdom, including Daniel and his three friends, because they were now in the king's service.

Now this is an overreaction, isn't it? In fact, in verse 15, Daniel makes the same point. He says, why is the king being so harsh? But this is the kind of thing people do when they're desperate, isn't it?

One parent I heard of was so sick of their kids fighting and desperate to see their kids get along, that this is what he did on the next slide. He got one t-shirt, put both kids in it, and wrote on it, our get along shirt.

His action showed how desperate he was. Well, in a much more serious way, Nebuchadnezzar's action shows how desperate he is.

[9 : 04] He wants to know, so he doesn't have to fear, but can take control. And so in verse 16, Daniel asks for some time to get the dream and its meaning. And then he gets the interpretation from God.

So we're at point two, the interpretation of the dream, and verse 17. Daniel returned to his house after asking permission for some time and explained the matter to his friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery so that he and his friends might not be executed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon. And during the night, the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision.

Notice here the contrast again between Daniel and the wise men. The wise men say they have no access to their gods, but Daniel knows he has access to his God, our God.

And so he prays. And he asks God to reveal the dream and its meaning to him so that they might be saved. And God answers in verse 19. He gives Daniel a vision, shows him both the dream and its meaning.

[10:14] And in response, Daniel praises God. You see that verse 20, Daniel said, Let praise be to the name of God forever and ever. Wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons.

He deposes kings and raises up others. Daniel has seen this dream and its meaning, and now he praises God for being the ruler, the one who has wisdom and power, the one who changes times and seasons, the one who deposes kings and raises them up.

We haven't heard the dream yet, or its interpretation, so we're going to leave that part of God's character, his ruling part that Daniel praises him for aside. But look at the second thing that Daniel praises God for.

Top of the next page. Daniel continues and says, God gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning. He reveals deep and hidden things.

He knows what lies in the darkness and light dwells with him. I thank and praise you, God of my ancestors. You have given me wisdom and power. You have made known to me what we ask of you.

[11:22] You have made known to us the dream of the king. Do you see what characteristic of God that Daniel praises him for? It's that God gives wisdom.

It's that God makes known mysteries that people might be saved and live wisely. You see, here is a contrast again between Daniel and the wise men and with their gods.

Wise men know access to the gods and receive nothing from them. No inside information, no wisdom to live wisely to be saved. And yet, on the other hand, Daniel does have access to his God, our God, who does reveal things, who does give wisdom to his people so that we might know how to live wisely and be saved.

And he gives us wisdom every time we read his word. This. Because it points us to Jesus and how we can be saved, not from the execution of a crazy king, but from sin.

But it also gives us wisdom to know how to live wisely in this world. In fact, even society sees that God's wisdom works.

[12:41] I mean, people in society will talk about the golden rule, for example, without even knowing where it comes from. But it's God's wisdom to us. Helps us live. Of course, God doesn't promise to give us every bit of wisdom or knowledge, like who will win the footy premiership or masterchef, or more seriously, how long a loved one might live.

If he told us everything, then we wouldn't learn to trust him, would we? Our faith wouldn't grow, would it? Yet he does tell us everything we need to know to be saved and to live wisely in this world.

For God is a God who gives wisdom, who reveals things to his people. And it's this part of God's character that Daniel continues to highlight when he's brought before the king. So we'll pick it up at verse 26.

Daniel's brought before the king. And the king asks Daniel in verse 26, Are you able to tell me what I saw in my dream and interpret it? Daniel replied, But no wise man, enchanter, magician, or diviner, can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about.

But, getting the contrast, there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. And he has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in the days to come.

[14:01] Your dream and the visions that pass through your mind as you were lying in your bed are these. As your majesty was lying there, your mind turned to things to come. And notice what Daniel calls God. And the revealer of mysteries showed you what is going to happen.

As for me, this mystery has been revealed to me. Not because I am greater wisdom than anyone else alive, but so that your majesty may know the interpretation and that you may understand what went through your mind.

Notice again how Daniel emphasizes this characteristic of God who reveals mysteries, who gives wisdom to his people. And so, the question is, well, what is this mystery?

What's this dream? I mean, we've been talking about it for almost over half a chapter now. What is it? Well, we didn't hear the dream in our reading because it's a long chapter. And I could try and summarize it for you now.

But I always want you to see for yourselves from God's word because God's word is much more important than my word. So, we're just going to do the thing and I'm going to read it to you.

[15:06] You're going to read a large section, so follow along. And you'll see the dream and its interpretation. Verse 31. Your majesty looked and there before you stood a large statue, an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance.

The head of the statue was made of pure gold. Its chest and arms were of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, and its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay.

While you're watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them.

Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were all broken to pieces and became like chaff on the threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue grew. It became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth. This was the dream.

[16:05] And now we will interpret it to the king. So, verse 37. Your majesty, you are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory. In your hands he has placed all mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds in the sky.

Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them. All. You are that head of gold. After you, another kingdom will arise, inferior to yours.

Next, a third kingdom, one of bronze, will rule over the whole earth. Finally, there will be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron, for iron breaks and smashes everything. And as iron breaks things to pieces, so it will crush and break all the others.

Just as you saw that the feet and toes were partly of baked clay and partly of iron, so will this be a divided kingdom as well. Yet it will have some of the strength of iron in it, even as you saw iron mixed with clay.

As the toes were partly iron and partly clay, so this kingdom also will be partly strong and partly brittle. And just as you saw the iron mixed with clay, so the people will be a mixture and will not remain united any more than the iron mixes with clay.

[17:17] Then notice verse 44. In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people.

It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, not by human hands.

A rock that broke iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces. The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and its interpretation is trustworthy.

Now just so you can visualize all that, because it's quite a big section, I've got a next slide with a picture. Here's the statue on the left-hand side. So you've got the head of gold, you've got the chest and arms of silver, the belly and thighs of bronze, then the legs of iron with the mixture of iron and clay down the bottom.

And clearly the text tells us that the head of gold represents Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon. And the next three big kingdoms in history were the Persians, the Greeks under Alexander the Great, and the Romans.

[18:30] And so they're probably the kingdoms represented in the rest of the statue. And I've got it there on the right-hand side of the picture. Although there is some debate.

What is clear though is that no kingdom will last forever except one. All kingdoms will become like chaff or dust to be blown away from the face of the earth.

But in contrast to all those worldly kingdoms, God's kingdom will last forever. And this kingdom will start small like a rock cut from a mountain, not by human hands but by God's own hand.

And this kingdom will smash the other kingdoms in judgment, but it will itself grow into a mountain, verse 35, until it fills the whole earth. In other words, God's kingdom will start small with one man actually, but it will grow and triumph over all other kingdoms and one day fill all the earth and never end.

And of course the rock, as I've intimated there on the slide, represents Jesus Christ. Sent by God, born not by human hands, so to speak, but as we heard in our second reading, by the Holy Spirit. [19 : 43] And Jesus grew up to die on a cross to take the punishment for our sins so that we could be forgiven and freely enter his kingdom. And what's more, Jesus was raised from the dead.

Again, not by human hands. People can't do that. And this kingdom that started with just him has grown and grown and grown in history as people put their trust in him and are joined or united to him.

And so Peter puts it like this on the next slide from 1 Peter chapter 2. He says, As you come to Jesus, the living stone, rejected by humans, but chosen by God and precious to him.

Notice, you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood or kingdom, if you like, as it says in the original Exodus where it's taken from.

See, as Christ, as we put our faith in Christ, we are joined to him and this rock grows into a kingdom, you see. And we also heard from our second reading that this kingdom of Christ will never end while every other kingdom of this world will.

[20 : 53] And have we not seen this in our own history? I mean, where is the great Babylonian empire today? Well, it's all contained in one room.

Room 55 of the British Museum. That's it. And the country in which it once stood is Iraq. Yet sadly, look at that country today.

Or where is the Persian empire today? Well, it also is in one room. This time, room 52 of the British Museum. Whereas the Greek empire today, it once covered and extended over the whole known world.

Athens was the center of wisdom and philosophy with people like Aristotle and mathematicians like Pythagoras. You know, he's the triangle guy with Pythagoras theorem. But now, look at Greece. It's shrunk. It's nothing like what it used to be. Its economy is in disarray. They're struggling to pay back their debt. And unemployment is rife.

[21 : 54] And on it goes. It's happened even to kingdoms in the last 90 years or so. I mean, people once sang Rural Britannia. As England ruled, almost 25% of the world's population in 1924.

It's extraordinary. The British empire is the largest empire the world has ever seen. And now? Well, not so much. See, these kingdoms that seemed invincible in history did not last.

They've either been blown away like chaff or dust, or they've shrunk to become like dust compared to their former glory.

And in contrast to those kingdoms, the kingdom of God continues to grow around the world. Despite attempts to wipe it out by people like Emperor Nero back in the early Christian days, or Pol Pot, or Stalin, or more recently ISIS.

And even China is changing their rules about Christianity and making it harder for Christians to meet and pulling down churches and so on. In fact, Christianity is still the largest religion in the world today.

[22 : 58] 2.2 billion in 2010. Why is this happening? Why do other kingdoms fall and Christianity continues to grow? Well, because our God still rules.

That's what Nebuchadnezzar now acknowledges. You see verse 46? Verse 46. Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor and ordered that an offering and incense be presented to him.

The king said to Daniel, Surely your God is the God of gods and Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries. For you were able to reveal this mystery.

Remember back when Daniel saw the dream, back in verse 19, he praised God as being the ruler, the one who has wisdom and power, who sets times and seasons and raises up and deposes kings.

Well, having seen Daniel's God in action, Nebuchadnezzar now says the same thing, that Daniel's God, our God, is the God.

[23 : 58] He not only reveals, but he also rules. And what is revealed is that his kingdom will never end because he always rules to ensure it doesn't.

Now, we can be part of this triumphant kingdom if we trust in Christ. And so I guess the first question for us this morning is, as it always be really, do you trust in Christ?

That's where it starts. Or do you belong to a different kingdom, not the kingdom of Christ, but the kingdom, a kingdom of this world, whose time is actually limited and who will sadly be crushed by the rock of Christ on judgment day, when Christ must judge the world.

So do you trust in Jesus? Are you part of his kingdom? For us who do trust in Christ, who are part of his kingdom, and then the message from Daniel 2 is the same message as it was for God's people back then.

As I said last week, this world is like our foreign land. It opposes our beliefs, our values, our God. And just as God's people back then would have looked around their foreign land at their secular kings and kingdoms and feared for their future, so too can we.

[25 : 19] Just March this year, the UK Telegraph said in an article that Muslims will outgrow Christians by 2017. It seems Islam's kingdom might outgrow God's.

What's more, our own recent census showed less people in Australia calling themselves Christians. I'm sure you've heard about that in the media. While persecution towards us, even here in Melbourne, is growing.

Take the government ABC, for example. Andrew Bolt, who some people love, some people not so much love, he said in a post three days ago that he said, the ABC seems to be out to get Christians. And the most recent example, we seem to have moved on from marriage equality stuff to domestic violence now. And one journalist has brought to attention from the ABC and linked domestic violence with evangelical Christianity because of the Bible's teaching about male headship. Now, I've listened to several reports and it's hard to get exactly what's going on, but the journalist has certainly said that those who attend evangelical churches sporadically are more likely to commit domestic violence, and I can't remember the percentage.

[26 : 42] But what is, and Julia did say this, but it hasn't been pushed by the media. She also admitted, though, that those who go to an evangelical church regularly, that is those who actually believe the Bible and seek to live it out, are the least likely, out of all society, non-religious and religious, to commit domestic violence.

And yet, what's the thing that's the headline? Domestic violence, evangelical church. And so, with the growth of Muslims, the apparent decline of Christians, and the increase of persecution, we might well wonder about our future, even here in Australia, and fear.

Yet, the message of Daniel 2 is, don't fear. For God has revealed to us that the secular kings and kingdoms of this world including our own government, with its ABC, will not last forever.

But God's kingdom will. For God still rules. He proved he still rules to Nebuchadnezzar by revealing this dream. He's proved it to us by revealing his kingdom in Christ.

For we have evidence of Christ's life, even his miracles, even his resurrection we have evidence for. What's more, despite attempts to stop Christianity growing, it's continued to grow ever since Christ came.

[28 : 10] All this is evidence that God still rules. Muslims may outgrow us by 2070. But even if they do, don't fear. For kingdoms rise and kingdoms fall.

Even religious ones. But we've seen it all before. God's kingdom, however, will last forever. And on the last day, Christ the rock will be forced to crush those other kingdoms in judgment, to put this world right.

Oh, sure, we may be in for a tough time until that day. But that's life in a foreign land. Yet whatever happens, we need not fear the unknown.

Because we now know that our God still rules. And that his kingdom, our kingdom, will triumph. Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we do thank you for this reminder this morning that you are a God who still works in history, who still rules.

That you're a great God and that you will ensure that your kingdom will triumph. And so despite what we see in the world around us, despite the uncertainty that we may feel, and even the fear that we might sense creeping in, we pray, Heavenly Father, that you'd help us not to fear, but to keep trusting.

[29 : 31] For we know that you still rule, and that your kingdom, our kingdom, will triumph. And Father, we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.