

Daniel 2 - Surprising Strength

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Preacher: Will Spink

[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Wonderful, wonderful song. Man, you get a song like that, new members joining the church and being baptized, just makes you want to skip the sermon and go home, doesn't it?

It does make you want to do that, doesn't it? Yeah, me too. Turn with me though to Daniel chapter 2. It is needful for us to hear from God's Word.

Last week we began to look at what it's like for God's people to live in Babylon, to be engaged in a pluralistic culture in such a way that we maintain a singular devotion to God as His distinctive people.

Last week we saw that it was absolutely essential to have a proper perspective on what's valuable, to know that God is supremely and eternally valuable above all the treasures of the world.

[1 : 10] Today in this next scene we'll see how important it is to have a proper perspective also on strength, on strength and where it really comes from.

What happens here in chapter 2 is Daniel finds himself in another tense situation in relationship to a powerful and ungodly king. Nebuchadnezzar has a dream that troubles him.

He's bothered by it and he demands that the magicians and sorcerers of Babylon tell him not only what it means, but tell him what the dream actually was.

And his wise men and magicians, some of them come to him and say, King, we can't do that. That's not how this works. You tell us the dream and then we tell you what it means.

And Nebuchadnezzar says, if that's the way it is, all of you will be killed. He commands the execution of all the wise men in Babylon, which includes by this point Daniel and his friends.

[2 : 15] So the captain of the king's guard comes to Daniel and he comes to execute him with his sword. Daniel slows him down, calls a prayer meeting, receives the dream and the interpretation from God, praises God for that, and then heads to tell the king what he has learned.

We will come back to look more closely at the parts of the story I just ran through really quickly there. But all of that happens before we learn the dream and its meaning.

I'll read that part to you from God's word in Daniel 2, beginning in verse 31. This is Daniel speaking to Nebuchadnezzar. You saw, O king, and behold, a great image.

This image mighty and of exceeding brightness stood before you and its appearance was frightening. 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.

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.

[3 : 38] And the wind carried them away so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth. This was the dream.

Now 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.

Another kingdom inferior to you shall arise after you, and yet a third kingdom of bronze which shall rule over all the earth. 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. 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 they will mix with one another in marriage, but they will not hold together just as iron does not mix with clay.

[4 : 55] 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. Thus far God's holy word, let's pray and ask for his help in understanding it. Father, it is your word, and we come as those unfamiliar with dreams and interpretations and prophecies, but also as those very familiar with the challenges of living in a world that doesn't share our beliefs, and sometimes is hostile to our values, and approaches things different from how you have directed us.

And so we ask for your help that you would teach us what we need to know in order to live and to love and to serve where you have placed us.

[6 : 23] We believe you have placed us here and called us here. We believe by your spirit you will give us what we need for that, and so God, would you do that as we look to you. It is your word we would wish to hear this morning.

Speak to us by your spirit. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. When I was growing up, I would occasionally catch part of an episode of the World's Strongest Man competition on ESPN.

It was one of those things that I sometimes slowed down on, and one of the names I remember hearing and seeing was the name Magnus Samuelson. Magnus Samuelson is pictured here.

Quite a guy, isn't he? I mean, he actually holds the record for the most times participating in the World's Strongest Man finals of this competition. And of course, his name is Magnus, right?

Great, mighty, and he looks the part. Magnus won the World's Strongest Man competition one of those years in 1998.

[7 : 32] Pretty impressive guy, don't you think? Looks pretty strong, especially behind me. He looks pretty sharp. But even the year he won, his strength had limits.

He didn't pull that truck forever. He didn't hold that log up above his head forever. However, his strength eventually gave out.

He faced his limits. He ran out of strength. In many ways, Nebuchadnezzar was the Magnus Samuelson of his day, the world's strongest man.

He was the ruler over the glorious kingdom of Babylon, an ever-expanding kingdom at the time, full of human learning and accomplishment, featuring the hanging gardens of Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, right?

An amazing kingdom. And who's at the top? Nebuchadnezzar. He holds the lives of thousands and thousands of people in his not-so-safe hands.

[8 : 36] A very strong, very impressive guy. But what God is telling Nebuchadnezzar in this dream is that as impressive as his strength and the strength of his kingdom is, it is ultimately very limited.

Like all other human sources of strength, his kingdom is a false source of strength and that it won't last. Daniel is clear in explaining the dream to the king how outwardly impressive the kingdom of Babylon is.

He makes it very clear. Look at verse 31 that we read earlier. It says, You saw, O king, a great image. It's a mighty one with exceeding brightness. It's frightening when you look at, and the head is of fine gold.

And as you keep reading down to the interpretation, which, by the way, how nice is it to have the dream interpreted for you? I mean, that saves us a lot of trouble and a lot of speculation. It's especially nice if you're the preacher.

So the dream comes, and Nebuchadnezzar is told, You are the head of gold. The one that's described as great and mighty and exceedingly bright. It's sparkling.

[9 : 46] It's dazzling, isn't it? This statue. And Nebuchadnezzar, you're the head. Strong and impressive. The gold on the statue is the strongest material, the most glorious, dazzling part of the statue.

Nonetheless, despite these wonderful outward appearances, it will be destroyed, right? Isn't that what we read? Not only will there be other kingdoms that take its place, but do you remember verse 35, what happens to them?

All of those kingdoms, the wind carries them away so that not a trace of them could be found. When the statue is shattered, it doesn't just break up.

It disappears. It's blown away. There's no trace. It comes to nothing. Nebuchadnezzar, you and your kingdom are being put on notice along with all the other man-made kingdoms of the world. Your strength might look good, but it won't last. This story teaches the same reality in another way. It's not only human kingdoms that are limited in their strength, but also human strengths.

[10:58] This chapter is not only about the meaning of the dream itself, but we also have this life and death situation before Daniel even gets to the interpretation of the dream, right?

The king wants to know his dream and what it means. All the wise men in the nation are failing to be wise enough to do it. Daniel, though, if you recall from last week, is just finishing up as valedictorian of Babylon Prep.

He's the guy, right? Dreams are his thing. Dreams and visions, we've been told, that's Daniel's strength, his expertise. He graduated at the top of his class in those fields.

Certainly, he will know what to do with Nebuchadnezzar's question, right? Certainly, this impressive guy, valedictorian Daniel, will craft a way out of this mess.

Listen to how Daniel responds when it comes to him. Verse 17. 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.

[12:11] And then Daniel comes to Nebuchadnezzar later. Verse 27. Daniel answered the king and said, no wise men, enchanters, magicians, or astrologers can show to the king the mystery.

The king has asked, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he's made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be. But as for me, the wisest guy you've got, this mystery's revealed to me, not because of any wisdom I have more than anyone else alive, but in order that the interpretation may be made known to the king.

Here was one of Daniel's strengths, but he knew he wasn't strong enough or wise enough to handle it on his own. We have such a warped sense of strength, don't we?

We are such capable people here in general at Southwood. Very strong. Most of the people in the world would look and say, y'all are successful, capable, strong, self-made men and women, able to handle life and lots of things that would come at you.

And here's the problem. Every one of us has the natural tendency to live in our own strength for our own kingdom. We do.

[13:30] Every one of us, especially those of us who are capable and successful. You want to tell me my strength is limited? I'll train longer. I'll work harder.

I'll plan better. And I'll jump over the next hurdle. Just wait and see. Listen, Babylon is child's play. Around here, we're working on ruling solar systems, right?

We can handle it. And in that strength, we live for our own kingdoms. It can be an actual nation focused on man's strength.

Or it can be a self-made family or company or whatever else you think your strength can control. The kingdom of will, for example, to tell you what it looks like in my life, that I'm often seeking to build in my strength, consists of an always pleasant wife with three always obedient kids in an always moral country, leading an always growing church that is always delighted when sermons run over 40 minutes.

It's a fictional kingdom, but it's nice to dream. These are things I think I can control, right? Things that I know I so naturally and consistently live for.

[14:58] How do I know that? It's because I see how I respond when I don't get those things. When those things don't go the way I desire. The emotions of anger or anxiety or fear.

The responses of ratcheting down, working harder, this will happen, or just yelling louder, you will be that way. Maybe that's happened in your kingdom before.

But sometimes we look around and we think we've done a pretty decent job building our kingdoms. I'm just like Nebuchadnezzar in this passage, thinking I can build a strong and glorious kingdom where I'll be safe and secure, supported by my own remarkable strengths, gifts, abilities, wisdom.

And God's putting me on notice this morning as He does Nebuchadnezzar that all the kingdoms of man will be wiped away, will come to nothing.

There may be days that I'm impressive to myself how well I've built my little kingdom, how in control of it I am, how things seem to go my way.

[16:12] And God says, it's false. You've been tricked. It'll be gone in an instant. It'll disappear. You know, there's another tendency I have besides living in my own strength for my own kingdom.

And that's a tendency to despair at the end of my own strength. When my strength runs out to give up entirely, it would seem reasonable for God's people at this point in exile, wouldn't it?

They're far away from the promised land, looking around, and from all appearances, God is absent. Babylon is strong. There's really no hope.

Put yourself in Daniel's shoes. He made it through training, right? I mean, that was nice. He might not have been expected to survive that long, but now the captain of the king's guard is at his door with a sword and orders to execute him and his friends.

Certainly, it would be right to give up at this point. Hope is lost. At the very least, Daniel, give up on God. He's obviously not coming through for you.

[17:23] Following him is not paying off. Go to your strengths. You know this stuff. Come up with a new plan. Then, right? At least try to figure your own way out of this mess.

Where have you said to yourself or to a friend, I just can't do it anymore? Maybe it's a piece of that kingdom you've been seeking to build that seems to have no hope.

I've tried everything I know to do and this marriage is hopeless. I'm done with it. Or perhaps because that marriage did fall apart, that this family or this life I have with God is over.

He's never come through and I just can't wait for him anymore. Maybe it's a crisis with a child. I was such a godly parent and I did everything I was supposed to do and God never showed up and did his part.

I give up. Perhaps it's a professional crisis. I tried to live for God in the workplace and now I'm fired and I got a bad review. There's nowhere for me to go.

[18:38] If this is how God treats his children who seek to honor him, then I'm done. Get me out. Have you been in one of those low places where the strength you've been living on is just gone?

There's nothing left. You don't even have the heart to hope God could come through anymore. That's how it feels sometimes, isn't it?

There doesn't seem to be any evidence that he's there and I'm tired of hoping he'll show up. Here's where God wants to surprise our very capable, self-reliant hearts with the true source of strength.

And I know that part of your being very capable people is that you already know the true source of strength, don't you? You're so well educated. You've been to church before.

You know the true source of strength. I'm not confused about that. I do know that we all like to live in our own strength, that I'm not the only one who struggles in my own strength to build my own kingdom.

[19:45] So maybe we're missing something. Perhaps one reason we're missing it is that the true source of strength appears at first unimpressive.

This right here is 91-year-old Svend Steensgaard. That's Svend. Svend, just before this picture was taken, walked about 10 steps across the room.

Not only does Svend Steensgaard not sound quite like Magnus Samuelsson, if you had seen Svend walking across the room twice in 10 steps, you would have leaned forward to catch him from falling down.

It appeared he could hardly keep himself up. Not particularly impressive at first. But 91-year-old Svend Steensgaard, while outwardly unimpressive, is actually quite strong.

Svend, at 91 years old, deadlifts about 300 pounds. That's way beyond my limits.

[20:49] Okay, just to clarify, that's a lot. Svend is a strong guy. Outwardly unimpressive, perhaps, but amazing strength in a place you didn't expect to find it.

God shows us the source of true strength again in this passage, both in the events taking place and in the dream itself.

First, notice the divine strength that Daniel appeals to in his crisis. Even the pagan magicians know this situation is beyond human strength.

And in verse 11, they say, King, the thing you're asking is difficult. No one can show it to the king except the gods whose dwelling is not with flesh. Daniel's not pretending to be wiser than they are.

He agrees. Daniel goes, they come to him for an answer, and he gets his friends and says, Seek mercy from the God of heaven. That's the only place that an answer could come from.

[21 : 48] Here's what I mean by being unimpressive. The armies of the nation of Babylon are coming to kill you. And Daniel's response is, Hey, could we hold on a sec?

I need to have a prayer meeting. There will be four of us in attendance at the prayer meeting before you decide to kill us. That doesn't make a lot of sense, right?

Not real impressive. Seriously, Daniel, you're the valedictorian of the wise men. Come up with a real plan, right? What? And Daniel says, Oh, yes, that's right. A real plan.

Huddle up. Here's the plan. Seek mercy from the God of heaven. Hmm. To our warped sense of strength, this makes no sense.

We chuckle. And we're people who've sat in church, and we know that praying is supposed to be a good thing, but seriously, the captain of the king's guard is at the door with a sword.

[22 : 57] Well, after God comes through and reveals the dream and its meaning to Daniel, Daniel prays again, and here we get in his prayer the heart of what this passage teaches us about God.

This is a beautiful prayer. Daniel says, Blessed be the name of God 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 and knowledge to those who have understanding. 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 given me wisdom and might and have now made known to me what we asked of you, for you've made known to us the king's matter.

Be so encouraged by this, by who God is. The point of the prayer is that God has true strength and wisdom. Notice all the particular ways this can comfort us as Daniel gets specific.

[24 : 01] It is God who removes and sets up kings. He's in charge of the nations, right? Including ours. He makes those who trust him wise.

He will direct you in difficult situations when you look to him. He even knows what is in the darkness. The things you can't understand and don't know that are going on.

When life makes no sense to you, he gets that too. He's in control of it. But it's not just that God's strength is the one we should trust instead of human strengths.

It's also true that only a divine kingdom will stand forever. Back to the king's dream. In the midst of these impressive metals that are making up this statue, enter a rock.

A stone cut out by no human hand that strikes the statue and breaks the whole thing into pieces. End of verse 35.

[25 : 07] But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth. And in the days of those kings, the ones who've built their human kingdoms, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed.

Nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It'll break into pieces all these kingdoms and it will stand forever just like that stone cut from the mountain by no human hand grew and stood forever. A small piece of rock whose origin is what really mattered. That it was not man-made, but divine. Not from a human hand.

The kingdom that destroys the others will not be passed to another group of people. It will be divine and will last. And the little stone will become a great mountain and the mountain will expand to fill the entire earth.

Of the increase of His government and of peace, there will be no end. Unlimited strength. Incredible might. An unending kingdom.

[26 : 17] The stone, of course, is Jesus who after the Babylonian Empire, the head of gold, the Medo-Persian Empire that comes next, the Greek Empire under Alexander the Great, and then in the midst of the Roman Empire where the iron and clay down at the legs and feet, in the midst of that Roman Empire, Jesus shows up in an unimpressive manner, doesn't He?

Outwardly, very unimpressive, little beauty or majesty that would attract us to Him, Isaiah tells us. With a ragtag group of fishermen and other Jews in the midst of the mighty Roman Empire and in the midst of apparent weakness, He displays immeasurable strength that changed the world forever.

In Luke 20, Jesus refers to Himself as that stone that crushes those on whom it falls. The unimpressive stone that hits the clay feet of the impressive statue and causes human kingdoms to crumble.

In a passage discussing the cross of Jesus, Paul explains, 1 Corinthians 1, the surprising strength of God. That Jesus, the one seemingly weak and hung on a cross, is actually the power of God and the wisdom of God.

1 Corinthians 1, 25, the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

[27 : 58] Jesus, in many ways, the weakness of God, the cross is foolishness. Jesus, Jesus first is stronger than man's strength in crushing human kingdoms and then becomes a mountain that in its magnificence and might fills the entire earth with His kingdom that never ends.

So what? So what for us? Listen, so we too find our true strength in our own weakness.

as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12, admitting our own weakness turns us to Christ's strength. The power of God rests on me so that when I am weak, then I am strong.

That's just the way our Heavenly Father is. He loves to be strong for His people. So not only is He immeasurably strong, which is nice to know theoretically, but God's unlimited strength is especially for weak people like me.

Kids, you can write that down in your bulletin. It's not just kids that Jesus loves me is for, that we are weak but He is strong.

[29 : 17] That's for all of us who know ourselves as little, who are weak so that He is strong.

That's the point of the gospel, isn't it? None of us very capable adults is any more capable of working our way to God, of standing for God before pagan rulers, of having faith when faced with persecution.

See, it's vital that we admit our weakness in the hardest times. At the times it seems most dangerous to acknowledge weakness. When we're tempted as Daniel must have been to think the solution here is to assert our strength, then especially we must cry to God for mercy.

When Daniel opts to admit his need and cry for mercy, God answers and it gives Daniel the opportunity to point others to God's strength as he does in verse 30 with Nebuchadnezzar.

Because he's willing to admit that he's not stronger or wiser than any other man, he's able to say there's a God in heaven who is and he gets to testify to the world's strongest man that there's someone stronger than he is.

[30 : 35] Y'all, when we pretend that we are the strong ones, our friends and neighbors are offered the hope merely of being more like us. When we admit we are weak, our friends and neighbors are offered the comfort of us being like them and the hope of one strong enough for all of us.

Isn't that so much better? Isn't that what we've been called to point people to one strong enough for all of us to depend on? Here's the rub for us.

Do we actually practically believe this? Really, ask yourself. I've told you very little new this morning and you may nod your head today but honestly will you bow your head and cry out to God tomorrow the next time you're in a tight spot?

We really struggle here, don't we? I know I do. This week I really wanted to preach a good sermon and I had a little bit smaller window of time than usual for a variety of reasons so I thought to myself, you know, I kind of have a general idea of what the sermon's about.

It's about our weakness and God's strength and the value of prayer so I know exactly how to get this sermon ready. This is one of the things I do. I do sermons.

[32 : 04] I did what? Cracked the study Bible, spread out the commentaries, dove in, got to work fast. Right there in the middle of it I get to Daniel turning to God in prayer and I think that's important I should tell people to do that.

I'm going to prepare skillfully and efficiently to tell everyone to rely on God. Stop depending on their own strength and trust God. That's what I'm going to do. That happened.

It's not just a sermon illustration. I was reading about Daniel turning immediately to prayer but I sure wasn't. I more naturally trust my own human strengths.

I give lip service to prayer but often my lips don't actually pray. I decided this week that probably if a pastor forgets that when it's staring him in the face and he's writing a sermon about it I suspect life gets going fast and engineers forget when they're hard pressed at work.

I suspect moms forget when their family seems to be falling apart. I suspect Christians forget when their friends are hurting and they're more comfortable offering human solutions to them than a divine savior.

[33 : 27] We're quicker to give advice than admit we need to cry out for help and we know the one who's strong to save. Haven't you been there? Don't you feel that in your own heart?

In a pluralistic culture that preaches independence you could easily be like every other voice around. That's the world we live in. You can do it. I'm going to encourage you.

You're strong enough. God's people should be marked distinctively by our dependence and prayer. Here's the reality we have to face today.

We are God's children. We have a direct line to the one who rules over the kingdoms of the world, who removes and sets up kings and we don't pray.

We fret and read political analysis instead. We talk about passionately wanting God's kingdom to advance in the world and wanting to be a part of that ourselves, but we're so self-reliant that we don't pray.

[34 : 32] We don't pray to the one who has promised to turn a small stone into a mountain that fills the whole earth. We must repent this morning of our warped sense of strength, that we would turn to ourselves before turning to God.

Where are you longing this morning to see God's kingdom come, but it feels hopeless or unreasonable? Get four weak, desperate people pleading to a strong God.

Cry out to Him and watch what He does. Do you believe that's who He is or does that still sound silly? Are you willing this morning to lay hold of Him and say, I believe He's like that, that He delights to show Himself to be strong for you and to make His kingdom into that massive mountain that you can stand firm on.

May we hope in no other kingdom and no other strength than the one that will fill the earth forever. Let's pray. Father, we confess that we like the feeling a lot more of thinking we can handle it.

For a while at least it makes us feel better. We confess we're quick to give up on You and to think there's a better shot with our own methods than with crying out to You.

[36 : 10] We think we could fix something and You probably wouldn't care to. Father, give us eyes to see how strong You are, how magnificent Your kingdom is, to know the love of a Father that is strong for us, who delights to care for His children.

children, and as we see You like that, might we indeed cry out to You more often. Might our hearts become increasingly dependent on You. Do that work in our hearts, not just for our sakes, not just so we'll be better people, but so that Your kingdom will be made great, and many will know of the greatness of Your name.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.