

Sermon Given by

Tony Heywood

At the 9am Service on 18th April 2010

Daniel 2 - "Shattering dreams"

Please look down at v20 where Daniel says: **"Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his."** Where does true authority lie? It's an important question for any person to ask and depending on how we answer it will effect how we live. What we see in this chapter like last week is that when it comes to true authority, appearances can be deceptive. We know this to be true from the system of power and government in this country. Imagine the state opening of parliament. It's a magnificent occasion. The Queen processes from Buckingham Palace in her state coach down streets lined with people cheering her. She gets to the Palace of Westminster where she's escorted to the House of Lords. She's taken to the throne with a crown on her head and she addresses the members of both houses. It looks like she is the one with real power; the mighty one who decides how this country will be governed. She's the one with the crown and the fine clothes but actually real authority lies with a person looking far less smart on that day – a person in a suit the Prime Minister.

What about in Babylon all those years ago? King Nebuchadnezzar was the most powerful man in the world. He was as Daniel addresses him in v37 the **'king of kings'**. He was king of the world's superpower; the Barack Obama of his day except that his power wasn't limited by the Senate or Congress or the media.

What about God? Well God was nowhere to be seen. His people had been crushed, the temple where he dwelt destroyed and do you remember that highly symbolic act of Nebuchadnezzar back in 1:2 of taking some of the sacred objects from the temple in Jerusalem and placing them in the treasure-house of his god. The symbolism was clear "my god has defeated your God – Yahweh nil Bel one!" It looked like a crushing defeat not just for Judah but for God.

Where did authority lie? It looked, it appeared to lie with Nebuchadnezzar and his gods. So it would seem that wisdom would dictate that when you were in his country, in his city you would bow down and worship him and put him first. But we saw last week that Christians are citizens first and foremost of heaven – that's our true home, that's where we're headed. We live for the time being in Babylon, the kingdom of this world and we wait patiently for the coming of the true King, the Lord Jesus. It's a period in which God's authority is not obvious. It appears that God is losing 'market share' and common sense seems to suggest "Oh forget God - live for Babylon and all that it prizes." But Daniel 2, and in fact the whole book of Daniel, shouts at us that appearances can be very deceptive. V20 – **"Wisdom and power are his"** are God's says Daniel.

2 simple lessons from this passage. Wisdom belongs to God and is given by Him. That's the first 30 verses or so and then the second half of the chapter; Power belongs to God and is given by Him.

So first, **Wisdom belongs to God and is given by Him** Imagine Nebuchadnezzar; he's on his bed and he's in quite a state. Not normally like that – normally in his royal robes and his crown on his head – he looked almost god-like as people bowed down before him and I guess at times he believed the hype. But if so reality bites and it bites in the royal bed chamber. V1 **"In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind**

was troubled and he could not sleep.” And if any of you have suffered from insomnia you’ll know what a terrible affliction it is. Here we find the most powerful man in the world tossing and turning, bathed in sweat, troubled by this recurring dream and lacking wisdom. Suddenly he’s not looking quite so god-like after all. Why all this fuss? Well it is precisely because of who Nebuchadnezzar is that having such a dream is so significant. He is King in Babylon, and the kings were thought to be channels of the divine, the means whereby the gods communicated to the people. And the favoured means whereby such celestial texting took place was through dreams. The problem was; how could such dreams be interpreted? Well, the Babylonians were prepared for such contingencies for, over the years, they had built up a whole reference library which contained books packed with the sort of symbols which tended to be thrown up in dreams and with these you had their attendant interpretations. So if you had a dream with a green monster on the rampage, you would get out the directory and look up the dream under the heading- ‘Monster- green’ and see what it says.

And so Nebuchadnezzar calls in the Mystic Meg brigade v3 and asks for an interpretation. ‘Fair enough’, they say, **‘tell us the dream and we will tell you what it means.’** But then comes the sting in the tail: v5 **‘The king replied to the astrologers, ‘This is what I have firmly decided: If you do not tell me what my dream was and interpret it, I will have you cut 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 honour. So tell me the dream and interpret it for me.’** Now the astrologers are understandably thrown into a tizzy by such a demand. To read off the meaning of a dream is one thing, to read someone’s mind is another thing altogether. So here’s this powerful king and he’s limited in his wisdom. He can’t understand his dreams and nor can his advisers and civil servants – the magicians and astrologers – all of them lacked wisdom. And human knowledge is very limited. We’ve seen massive increases the last 100 years in human knowledge and science can tell you something about the future. It can predict for example when a comet will return but it can’t predict the future for our lives or for world affairs and that’s why even in a very educated nation, where people know a great deal, many still turn to the horoscopes. Part of the attraction of horoscopes is just mere amusement and yet people still take them seriously. We want to know what will happen in the future. It’s why politicians employ consultants and focus groups, it’s why businesses hire futurologists. For all our knowledge we lack wisdom. Apparently the prediction industry is worth 1.2 billion pounds in this country and yet the BT in-house futurologist was recently quoted in the Times as saying this: “Accuracy is impossible for all but the most trivial of questions.” You can have countless degrees and yet still you can’t predict the future and yet how we want to know. The result is that as a society we are massively insecure. Insecurity globally; will our planet survive? Will it be destroyed by a natural disaster, by a nuclear conflagration, by global terrorism? Insecurity personally – will I find my life’s work, my life’s partner, will both of those things satisfy me? As we get older will my health be preserved, what about my family – will they grow up ok? Will I have enough money? Will I be able to buy the house I want and so it goes on. We lack wisdom about the future and the result is that our society endures sleepless nights as it tosses and turns. If only we could control it, if only we knew what was going to happen then we’d be ok – we’d get organised, there’d be nothing to worry about. For all our knowledge we lack wisdom. God alone is the source of wisdom.

Back to the narrative and Arioch, the commander of the king’s guard is about to round up and kill all the wise men of the kingdom, which included Daniel and his mates. Daniel goes to Arioch and we’re told in v14 speaks to him with **‘wisdom and tact’**. This is a model for us when we find ourselves disagreeing with the authorities of this world. He doesn’t get all hot and bothered; he doesn’t scream and shout and say: “You’re not the real King, God is in control” - he just reacts with wisdom and tact. He’s respectful; he recognises reality, that Nebuchadnezzar does have power and authority in God’s world and very likely because of his attitude he gains a hearing before the king, v16.

There's a stay of execution. But the situation is still urgent and it's striking what Daniel does. Notice that he doesn't go straight to the library – to find those Babylonian books he'd been trained in during his studies; he doesn't dig through his old lecture notes. He goes back to his friends and they pray. V18: ***“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.”*** Time and again in the Book of Daniel we're going to see Daniel praying. It's the mark of a man or woman of God. The Babylonian mindset is that we can do it ourselves – it's what I do for me and my glory. It doesn't think of praying because prayer recognises our limitations; it acknowledges that if we're to achieve anything of value God must enable us to do it and he must therefore get the glory. Daniel prays. Only God can give us the perspective we need to make sense of life, only God can give wisdom. V19 God graciously answers the prayer: ***“During the night the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision.”*** Daniel praises God in those wonderful verses 20-23 and then goes to the king. The king asks v26 ***“Are you able to tell me what I saw in my dream and interpret it?”*** The easy and comfortable answer to that question would have just been to have said: “Yes King Neb I can interpret it for you.” But Daniel doesn't go for the easy answer – he sniffs a gospel opportunity and he grabs it with both hands and in this too he's a model for us. V27 Daniel replied: ***“No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come.”*** God alone is the source of wisdom and praise God that he has revealed his wisdom. He is not a silent God but has spoken and he's spoken supremely and revealed his wisdom supremely in his Son the Lord Jesus. It is through Jesus that we have the revelation we need to make sense of life, through him we have the perspective to know what really matters in the future. It's not whether I get this or that job or have enough savings to live in comfort and security, it's not my health – what really matters is that I live day by day for Jesus and with Jesus at my side, living as he wants me to live, making him known as best I can and knowing that he is coming again and that my future is secure in Him. That's what really matters as we consider the future. Wisdom says listen to what Jesus says and live in the light of it. Wisdom belongs to God and is given by Him.

Second, **Power belongs to God and is given by Him** v31 to the end. Daniel begins to tell the king his dream. The statue, he says, v31ff represents human power and it looks so impressive this statue. We're told v31 that it was awesome in appearance just as the kingdoms and empires of this world look so imposing and magnificent, so immovable. But remember what we learnt from the state opening of parliament that appearances can be deceptive. Then comes the interpretation v36f and Daniel explains that the different parts of the statue represent successive human empires and Nebuchadnezzar and his empire is the first, the head of gold. He was very powerful, the king of kings and yet his authority was derived. There was and is a higher throne. God is the ultimate Ruler and every earthly power is a derived power. Some of these authorities are very powerful like King Nebuchadnezzar but they are a derived power. Chairman Mao once said: “Every communist must understand that political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.” He's wrong. Ultimately it's not from the bullet nor is it from the ballet box that ultimate power comes – good for us to remember that as election fever hits us – ultimately power comes from God. Human power is derived – it comes from God and more than that it is finite – it will come to an end. The Babylonian Empire – the head of gold would, 70 years later, come to an end. The chest and arms of silver was most likely representative of the Empire of the Medes and the Persians. That would be the world super power for a while but it too wouldn't last, it'd be conquered by the Greek Empire of Alexander the Great represented by the belly and thighs of bronze. That was a mighty empire – v39 it ruled over the whole known earth but then another power would rise up the Roman Empire v40 strong as iron. A lot of ink has been spilt working out which empire is represented by each metal. I've given my view but we can't know for sure and ultimately it doesn't matter. We miss the point if we try and get a chronology of history from the details because it's not giving us a chronology of history but a theology of history.

The point is that all human empires, however powerful, will fall. The British Empire faded, the Third Reich was crushed, the Soviet Union fell. American global dominance won't last forever – it too will, one day, maybe in 50 years, maybe in 500 years, fall or fade away. What will replace it – maybe a Chinese Empire, maybe a coalition of Muslim States, we don't know. But what we do know for sure is that no human power will last. Appearances can be very deceptive. The Babylonian Empire looked indestructible – it must have been impossible to contemplate that it would fall and yet in 70 years it did. What about God – his power looked so insignificant; the temple was destroyed the temple artefacts taken off to Babylon. I imagine that the people of God endured quite a lot of taunting and mockery from the Babylonians and today there are many who laugh at the thought that there is one God who's revealed himself supremely in his Son Jesus Christ. People laugh – they say: "Do you really believe that nonsense. You say God rules, you say Jesus is Lord but it doesn't look like he's reigning in this country does it? I mean people in the past didn't know any better but we live in a scientific age so how can you believe such nonsense." When you face that mockery, it can be pretty disheartening but don't despair. Remember, appearances can be deceptive. In amidst all the kingdoms of the world, there's another kingdom, God's kingdom. It begins in a very unimpressive way, v34 ***"While you were 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."*** A rock is a very unimpressive material compared to all the gleaming metals of human powers and yet it smashes them to smithereens. And in contrast to all human kingdoms this kingdom is all conquering and everlasting. V44 ***"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 for ever."***

History is not random. It's not the product of impersonal political and economic forces – history is His story. If you have a glance down at v46-47 Nebuchadnezzar was beginning to grasp this. He's not converted at this point – chapter 3 will make that pretty clear but he's beginning to understand that power belongs to God. And if he could see that then, how much more should we acknowledge it now. What was prophesied in the OT is now proclaimed since the coming of Jesus. The Kingdom of God began in very humble circumstances. Very few people stopped to watch as a baby was born in a manger in a stable. Few listened as the King said: "The Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the good news." Very few understood the significance of the Cross.

In the major histories of the world it barely gets a mention and yet the Cross and the resurrection are together the great turning point in history. The resurrection confirms the fact that God's Kingdom is an everlasting kingdom. The future is not in doubt, we need not worry, it belongs to Jesus Christ. Wisdom and power are His. They belong to Him and are given by Him.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)