

Kingdoms Rise, Kingdoms Fall, pt. I

March 21, 2021

Daniel 2:31-49

For those who might be just joining us this morning, we are studying the book of Daniel. We are not very far along, in the middle of chapter two. This is the account of Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar's troubling dream and its interpretation. Because of the way Nebuchadnezzar set up the challenge, no one has been able or willing to give to the king the content and interpretation of the dream. And so, the king has order the killing of all of his wise men, his advisors, his connection to the gods of the spirit world. Among those condemned to die were Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

But Daniel was an interpreter of dreams, he had been gifted by God to do so. He volunteered to give the content and interpretation of the dream to the king. Then he went to his home and asked his three friends to pray that God would indeed give him the dream and interpretation. Sure enough, that night God gave him the needed information. Daniel praised God for doing so. He then went to the king to tell him the dream.

Yes, the stakes were high, failure meant death. But Daniel seems confident, his concern was over who would get the credit and he didn't want it to be him. He wanted to make sure the God of heaven received the glory for the dream. There, that brings us up to the text for today.

The text before us gives both the dream and a sketch of the interpretation of the dream. I say a sketch because even the interpretation of the dream lacks

specificity. There will be a series of kings, kingdoms, world rulers. But he doesn't give us their names. The only name we know is Nebuchadnezzar. And yes, there has been some disagreement over the ages and today concerning which historical kings and kingdoms are part of the vision. But it seems clear enough, particularly when we add to it that this stone was not cut with human hands. To me, that makes the text abundantly clear. So, here we go into the world of prophetic visions of the future. Know that this is a long passage and we will finish it up next week as well as put the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday into this context.

So, sit back and enjoy this strange dream and its interpretation by Daniel.
READ Daniel 2:31-49.

Main point: Kingdoms will come and kingdoms will go, but there will be an eternal divine kingdom which crushes them all!

In King Nebuchadnezzar's dream, there are 4 kingdoms of man. If we project it forward, there would be many after that. But the principle is still the same: kingdoms will come, kingdoms will go. But there will be a divine kingdom which will start small and become great, filling the whole earth. The Lord has spoken! I trust you can already see where we are going. It seems to me that we have a better perspective on Nebuchadnezzar's dream than even Daniel had. We know this stone, we know this King whose kingdom would start off small and become a mountain engulfing the whole earth. I think we might just be a part of that mountain! The Lord of heaven has spoken!

I. The vision of the future is kingdom of decreasing value, increasing power, and an unstable foundation that will ultimately crumble. vv. 31-35

As we go through the description of the statue, I urge you not to get hung up on trying to figure out exactly what it looks like. Instead focus on the fact that it is terrifying. Some of it is intended not to make sense. But the image that is presented is clear enough. This statue, in the form of a man, will not endure.

v.31- “You saw, O king, and behold, a great image. This image, mighty and of exceeding brightness, stood before you, and its appearance was frightening. 32 The head of this image was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its middle and thighs of bronze,

Since the statue has a head, chest, arms, abdomen, thighs, legs and feet, it is pretty clear that this is a statue of a man. Right? And that would not necessarily be terrifying. After all, in the very next chapter, Nebuchadnezzar will commission such a statue to himself. If you go to a museum or art gallery in a historical city, you can easily find such statues. We have them even in our country, I think of the Lincoln Memorial. So, that is not the problem.

Then we notice that the description starts at the top, at the head. And the head is made out of gold, brilliant shiny gold, exceeding in brightness. And since it is easily identifiable as a head, and we find out from the interpretation that Nebuchadnezzar himself is the head, perhaps we can see why this is all terrifying. He sees himself in the reflection of the gold of the statue. This is a statue of him! Again, that alone would not be terrifying, to see a statue of oneself, particularly if you consider yourself the greatest king on earth. Seeing yourself as a giant image, larger than life, shining in brilliant gold, that would be exhilarating, not terrifying for a king like Nebuchadnezzar. The problem is not at the top, but at what is below the top. This is where it gets terrifying.

Below the golden head (that probably looks a lot like Nebuchadnezzar) is a chest and arms of silver. Okay, it is not gold, but it is precious. It might not shine like gold, but it is still precious. The problem is, “What does this mean?” “Why are the arms and chest not gold like the head?”

Then we notice that below this is a mid-section and upper legs made out of bronze. Now it is getting more disturbing. Bronze is not nearly so precious as gold, or even silver. Yes, it was an advancement when it was first formulated, but if you offered me a thousand pounds of gold or a thousand pounds of bronze, I know which I would choose. Yes, bronze is strong, but it is not precious! And again, what is it doing on a statue of me???

33 its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay.

The fourth and bottom portion of the statue is this indescribable mixture of clay and iron. I cannot even conceive of such a thing. The two do not mix. The iron would be very strong, but very brittle. You don't shape it, you melt it and pour it into molds, you cast iron. It is very strong, but relatively cheap. Even today, iron is a cheap metal. And then you have the fact that it is mixed with clay. Clay is not even a metal. It is basically worthless. It is not precious, not strong, not even able to withstand wind or rain, let alone stand up to someone trying to damage the statue. You don't make statues out of clay. You might make the model for the statue out of clay, or the mold perhaps, but not the statue. So, the bottom of this statue is some sort of mixture of iron and clay. But remember, the top of the statue looks like you. What does this mean?

34 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 we have this strange image of a stone. For the first time, there is action in the vision. Somehow, but not in some ordinary way, a stone was cut out, perhaps from a mountain or quarry? And the stone struck the statue at the bottom of the statue and the whole thing fell down. The statue is now laying on the ground. And then we have the really terrifying part in v. 35.

35 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; 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.

Not only did the stone cause the statue to topple, but it actually beat on the clay, the iron, the bronze, the silver and the gold until it was crushed like powder, able to be driven by the wind like chaff. In fact, the wind caused it all to blow away and there was no trace of the statue left.

And yet, the stone itself increases in size, becomes a whole mountain, a mountain that increases in size to that of the whole earth. So, at the end of the scene there is no statue and in its place is a stone formed mountain that encompasses the whole earth and all traces of the statue are gone.

Can you see why this might be terrifying, when the statue looks like you? If this is a message from the gods, what does it mean? That is the task for Daniel.

II. The future for the kingdoms of earth is increasingly dim, but the future for the kingdom of God is increasingly bright. vv. 36-45

The vision gave an interpretive perspective on the future, past Nebuchadnezzar's life and the kingdom he ruled. The future was not bright for him, but it was even worse for the one who would conquer him, and even worse for the one who would conquer that one. But at the same time, there would at some point come a power that wasn't human in nature, wasn't made by man that would increase and become dominant, engulfing the whole earth. That is what the future looks like.

36 "This was the dream. Now we will tell the king its interpretation.

Notice Daniel uses the plural "we" here. Again, he deflects credit from himself and places it squarely on the God of heaven who has made known to him the dream. The God who sent the dream gets the credit.

37 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, 38 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.

I'm pretty sure this would have been received as great news by Nebuchadnezzar, but not necessarily unexpected news as well. As I have suggested, it seems likely to me that the statue would have resembled Nebuchadnezzar. Notice the stacking up of terms telling of his importance, power, and glory. He is the king of kings, with power, might, glory, dominion. All will be subject to him. This is heady stuff! And yet, we also see that behind all of the vastness of his kingdom is a God who has brought it about. Sure enough, it is this same "God of heaven," the revealer of the dream, the God of Daniel. So, Nebuchadnezzar is as

great as he might think he is, but that is only because the God who knows the future has made it all happen.

Can you see how this fits into the overall theme of the book? Yes, king Nebuchadnezzar is all that. He is the ruler over all. His kingdom spreads in every direction. You would think that he is superior, his culture is superior, his gods are superior. But there, you would be mistaken. The truth is that he is this king of kings with all the power because the God of heaven has put him there. The God of his slaves is actually the God who has made all of it happen. He is superior to all, even if it doesn't seem so on the surface. That is the message of the dream, that is the message of the book. The future will show who is really superior.

39 Another kingdom inferior to you shall arise after you, and yet a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over all the earth.

The next two sections of the statue represent kingdoms which will come after the king. That in itself is a powerful message. King Nebuchadnezzar might be the king of kings of his day, but his day will someday come to an end. Since it has already been mentioned in chapter I, we know that the Medes, under Cyrus will rule after Nebuchadnezzar as well as the Persians, like Xerxes in the book of Esther. Those two, the Medes and the Persians are the silver portion. And after that come the Greeks, as epitomized by Alexander the Great. Each of these will be the big dog of their day, ruling the whole earth. But notice that they are going down. Now, it's always possible to take word pictures too far, and this is not saying that the Greek empire under Alexander the Great was inferior to the Babylonian empire under Nebuchadnezzar. Instead, it is making the point that each king thinks of himself as the greatest of all time, only to be conquered by another king. The truth is that the days of each kingdom are always going downhill. As great as they are (or once were), there will come another vying for

that spot. As great as the Babylonian kingdom was under Nebuchadnezzar, it lasted less than 100 years. And then as great as the Medes and Persians were, their kingdom lasted less than 200 years.

And then as great as the Greek empire was, it lasted less than 200 years only to be conquered by the Romans. And as great as the Roman empire was under the successions of the Caesars, it was caput by the year 337 AD, about 400-500 years. If you were to go today to any one of these seats of government, you would see nothing but ruins, a few pillars still standing, a monument or two and a bunch of foundations uncovered by excavation. None of these great kingdoms lasted.

Are you getting the point? And again, if we were to project into the future from the Romans, what would we find? There were times when the French were dominant, the English were dominant, the Spaniards were dominant, the Germans were dominant, the Russians were dominant, the Japanese, the Chinese, the Americans were dominant (oops, sorry!). But all will eventually get weaker and weaker until another aspiring empire conquers and sets itself up as the kings of kings. That is the history, that will be the future of human kingdoms. They all go downhill until conquered by someone else. Next, it's the iron and clay kingdom, the period of the Romans.

40 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. 41 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. 42 And as the toes of the feet were partly iron and partly clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly brittle. 43 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.

This kingdom will be strong, but divided, too spread out perhaps. The people of this kingdom will mix with others and further weaken the kingdom. They will not hold together.

But then, during this fourth kingdom of iron and clay an interesting thing happens.

44 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, 45 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

During the days of the iron kingdom, the Roman kingdom, there will be established a kingdom of God's design, not a human kingdom. It shall NEVER be destroyed. It shall NEVER be conquered by another kingdom. It shall prevail over ALL of these other kingdoms. In the end, it will crush all other kingdoms. IT SHALL STAND FOREVER! This kingdom will grow, and grow, and grow while the kingdoms of earth go through a succession of kingdoms.

This kingdom will start out as one rock, one stone, and grow in mass into a great mountain, a mountain that will continue to grow and grow until it encompasses the whole earth. This is the Kingdom of God!

Can you see how this puts some of the teachings and events in Jesus' life into a different context? Jesus' most common topic was this Kingdom, what it was like, who would be in it, the values and priorities of this kingdom. He Himself is the Cornerstone, the stone the builders rejected according to Matthew 21. The fact that He is the Christ is the Petra, the little stone (truth) upon which the whole Church would be built according to Matthew 16. Yes, it will start out small as the parable of the mustard seed teaches in Luke 13. Its best days are always ahead, not behind! He will rule over this kingdom until His Father places every kingdom under His feet. Are you getting the picture? This is where we will pick up next week, which just so happens to be Palm Sunday! HmMMM. . .

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

- 1) We will not put our hopes in this or any earthly kingdom.
- 2) We will see ourselves as part of another kingdom, designed, established and led by our Lord Jesus.
- 3) We will have an optimistic view of the future of the Kingdom of God.