

Wisdom in Exile

Daniel 2:1-23

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Good morning. Welcome to Christ the King. If you are a guest or a visitor, welcome. We're glad that you're with us. My name is Penny, and I'm the senior pastor here. And it's great for us to gather after taking last week off, having to cancel last week. I do have to tell you that I think a little bit more of my Canadian-ness dies every time I have to cancel something because of snow. It's just so foreign. But it was right. It was the right decision. You know, it would have basically just been me here. So I'm glad we stayed home and we're safe, but I'm glad also that we are here this morning, that we could gather together and come to God's Word. And this morning, we're continuing in our sermon series that we began just a few weeks ago in the book of Daniel, and we're picking up where we left off in Daniel 2. So if you have a Bible, you can turn to Daniel 2. It's also found on page 737 of the Bibles in the chairs in front of you, and we project the passage on the screens.

But if you were with us a few weeks ago when we started this series, then you'll recall that Tobias, as he opened Daniel 1 to us, told us that Daniel, this book, is about God's people living in exile, right? The people of God, they're living away from home. They're under foreign rule. They're living in a place not their own. They're in Babylon, not Jerusalem. And that this story of Daniel, this story which is the historical story of God's people, it's timely for us because this is our story. See, the New Testament describes the people of God as people who have citizenship, not ultimately in the United States of America, or Canada, or some country in Europe, or Africa, or Asia, but ultimately our citizenship is in heaven. That that is where our primary and ultimate allegiance belongs. That we, as we live in this world, are exiles. We're exiles from another kingdom. This is who we are. We belong to another place. So how do we live as exiles? How do we live in Babylon, not the new Jerusalem? How do we live as God's kingdom people, surrounded by other kingdoms? Well, that's what the book of Daniel is helping us to see. And so we look at Daniel 2 this morning to see God's kingdom wisdom. And we're going to read chapter 2, verses 1 through 23. We're going to pick up with our story next week. Chapter 2 is quite long. So beginning in verse 1, follow along with me.

“In the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his spirit was troubled, and his sleep left him. Then the king commanded that the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans be summoned to tell the king his dreams. So they came in and stood before the king. And the king said to them, “I had a dream, and my spirit is troubled to know the dream.” Then the Chaldeans said to the king in Aramaic, “O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will show the interpretation.” The king answered and said to the Chaldeans, “The word from me is firm: if you do not make known to me the dream and its interpretation, you shall be torn limb from limb, and your houses shall be laid in ruins. But if you show the dream and its interpretation, you shall receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor. Therefore show me the dream and its interpretation.” They answered a second time and said, “Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will show its interpretation.” The king answered and said, “I know with certainty that you are trying to gain time, because you see that the word from me is firm— if you do not make the dream known to me, there is but one sentence for you. You have agreed to speak lying and corrupt words before me till the times change. Therefore tell me the dream, and I shall know that you can show me its

interpretation.” The Chaldeans answered the king and said, “There is not a man on earth who can meet the king’s demand, for no great and powerful king has asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or Chaldean. The thing that the king asks is difficult, and no one can show it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh.”

Because of this the king was angry and very furious, and commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be destroyed. So the decree went out, and the wise men were about to be killed; and they sought Daniel and his companions, to kill them. Then Daniel replied with prudence and discretion to Arioch, the captain of the king’s guard, who had gone out to kill the wise men of Babylon. He declared to Arioch, the king’s captain, “Why is the decree of the king so urgent?” Then Arioch made the matter known to Daniel. And Daniel went in and requested the king to appoint him a time, that he might show the interpretation to the king. Then 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, so that Daniel and his companions might not be destroyed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon. Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision of the night. Then Daniel blessed the God of heaven. Daniel answered and said:

“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 have made known to us the king’s matter.”

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord. Let me pray for us.

Heavenly Father, we are in need of your help, in need of your wisdom, and so we ask for it. We ask that you would reveal to us the mysteries of your Word, and you would help us to see the goodness and beauty in it. And so we ask that you would be with us, that you would be with the one who preaches and all those who hear, so that what is done in these next few minutes would honor and glorify you. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

What makes living faithfully in exile so difficult is the constant pull that we feel. Right? We all experience this, the competing forces that present various pictures and visions of what life is to be like. I experienced that this summer when Cat and I spent a week in New York City, just the two of us, excuse me. We got to go, and we took the train up to New York City, and I have to tell you I love New York City. It's a wonderful place, right? There's energy and life and food and parks. I mean, it was wonderful, and we spent five days there, and we had been there before, so we explored some different parts of the city. We stayed in the Upper West Side, and we went to Zabars, and to the Central Park, and to Riverside Park, and one day we decided we were going to explore some other parts of the city, and so we headed down to Midtown, and we went to the public library there, you know, where Ghostbusters was filmed, and I have to tell you, I was a little disappointed that there's no acknowledgement of Slimer or Spangler, but we did see the Gutenberg Bible, so I guess, you know, so, but anyway, so we saw, went to the public library, and then we went to St. Patrick's Cathedral, and St. Patrick's Cathedral, if you've never been there, is this gorgeous neo-gothic cathedral built in the 1800s.

It's a Catholic cathedral with spires and steeples and stained glass windows, and it is gorgeous. I mean, I have to tell you, like, there is a lot that we disagree with the Catholic Church about, right? Theologically, doctrinally, biblically, there's a lot we disagree with, and rightfully so, but man, the Catholics, they know beauty, because that is this building. It is gorgeous. Built in the 1800s as a place of worship, a place for God's Word to be read, as a believer walking through it and seeing all the beauty and the wonder, like you can see through the theological disagreements and see the wonder, the goodness of God, the beauty of God, the truth of God. And then you come out of St. Patrick's, and you stand outside the door at the top of the stairs leading down to the street, and you look out, and you see something very different, because right across the street from St. Patrick's Cathedral is Rockefeller Center, and in front of Rockefeller Center, staring back at St. Patrick's Cathedral, is a four-story statue of Atlas, and there he is with a sphere on his shoulders, and engraved under the sphere above his arm are the symbols for Mars and Earth, for Venus and Mercury, a crescent for the moon. It's Atlas holding the universe on his shoulders. Atlas, this titan who led war against the god Zeus. There he is, standing in stark contrast to St. Patrick's.

Now, Atlas, it was constructed and put there during the Great Depression in the 1930s, and I did a little bit of research, and I found out, I discovered, that they chose Atlas and put it there because it symbolized human striving and knowledge, human resilience, and the struggle of the individual and the titans of the age, like Rockefeller. And there it stands, in stark contrast to that cathedral. Two opposing visions of the world. What holds up the universe? Where do we look for life? Where will we look for wisdom? Do we look to ourselves? Do we look to the titans of industry? Or do we look to the Lord? Now listen, you don't have to go to midtown Manhattan to get that message, because it's all around us. It's the air that we breathe. It's the water that we drink, right? That we have matured and evolved and moved beyond religious tradition and religious doctrine, and now we can rest in human wisdom. I mean, I thought that. Most of you know I became a Christian in college. Before I became a Christian, that's what I thought. Religion and notions of God, it's just foolish superstition. And so let us look to the wisdom of the world. That's the air that we breathe.

The Lacking Wisdom of Babylon

But what Daniel 2 shows us is that what we need is not the wisdom of the world. What we need is the wisdom from God. And we're hit by this need immediately in our passage, because what we see is that the wisdom of Babylon, the wisdom of this world, is lacking. It's lacking because the wisdom of Babylon is unable to answer Nebuchadnezzar's question. Right? So the king of Babylon, he's had a dream. He's had a dream. He has these sleepless nights, and he has no idea what the dream means, so he calls his dream experts. And in the ancient Near East, this was common practice. In the ancient Near East, it was common for kings to have dream specialists on the payroll. So the king would have a dream, he would have a nightmare, and he would call the specialists, they would come and give the interpretation, and then they could move on. And that's what Nebuchadnezzar does. Except there's a little twist.

You see it in verse 5? The word from me is firm. "If you do not make known to me the dream and its interpretation, you shall be torn limb from limb, and your houses shall be laid in ruins." So you hear what he's saying, right? He's saying, "I don't just want the interpretation, but so that I know you are worth your salt, dream experts, I want you to tell me what the dream is before I tell you. So you gotta tell me the dream and then the interpretation." Y'all, that's impossible, right? Like, they weren't in his room. They have no access to his mind, you

know? They didn't hear him talking in his sleep. This is impossible. And that's what the magicians and the enchanters and the sorcerers and the Chaldeans and the wise men said. In verse 10, "there is not a man on earth who can meet the king's demand. No one can show it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh." And y'all, they're right. They're right. There's no wise men in all the world who could do what is asking.

But he doesn't care, right? It doesn't faze him. He tells him, "well, you gotta do it. And if you don't do it, in my anger and fury, you're all gonna die." Including Daniel and his friends, right? They too are sentenced to death. Because Daniel and his friends, they can't invoke their Jewish background. They can't say, "whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on a second. We're not the wise men. We're Jews," right? They can't say that. Because they've been educated and schooled in the ways of Babylon. And so, they're now included as the wise men. And so, they too are sentenced to death. And this is where we see the wise men of God differing from the wise men of Babylon. Because the wise men of God, they know the great wisdom of God. You see, our story continues. Daniel gets word that their lives are threatened because of Nebuchadnezzar's overreaction.

So, we ask for more time, right? He goes to Nebuchadnezzar and he doesn't ask like the wise men of Babylon. He doesn't say, "share your dream with us." He just says, "give me more time and then I'll give you what you need." And Nebuchadnezzar grants the request. So, what we see is Daniel is leveraging his influence. Do you see that? Daniel doesn't flee. Like when he gets the declaration that they're going to be sentenced to death, Daniel doesn't go to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and say, "hey, let's grab our bags, grab some food, our clothes. We got to get out of Dodge. Like, let's run." That's not what he does. Instead, Daniel knows where he has been placed. He has been placed in Nebuchadnezzar's sphere of influence. And he leans into where God has put him. And he does so for the sake of blessing.

Now, y'all, before moving on, I think this invites a question. It invites a question. You see, Daniel is leveraging his place of influence to bring blessing. And it invites the question, "well, where has God put me? And where has he put you? Where are our spheres of influence? And am I using that for blessing?" Now, listen, that doesn't mean you have to be in the halls of power. In fact, adventurers say none of us are in the halls of power. But we still have influence. God has placed us in a position where we can actually bring blessing. So where is that? Maybe it's in your schools as a student or as a teacher. Maybe it's in your place of work. Maybe it's with your neighbors in your neighborhoods. Maybe it's even just with your family. The places you frequent, wherever it might be. I don't know where that is for you, but God has placed us in a particular place at a particular time around particular people. And are we leaning into that? Are we leveraging our influence for blessing?

That's what Daniel does. He has access to the king. And so he asks the king for more time and Nebuchadnezzar grants it. And so what does Daniel do? Well, now let's think about the things he could have done. Right? If you remember from a couple weeks ago, Tobias mentioned that Daniel had been educated in the ways of Babylon. And so he knew their customs, their literature, their history and science, and he knew their ways. So he could have employed those things, right? Maybe read the tea leaves. Maybe look to the stars. Maybe they'll tell me the dream, right? He could have tried those. But that's not what Daniel does. You see, Daniel understood the difference between the ways of the world and the ways of God. The ways of the kingdom of Babylon and the ways of the kingdom of the Lord.

The Great Wisdom of God

And so Daniel uses his place of influence to get time, but then he relies on the Lord. You see that? He goes home and he says to his friends in verse 18, “he told them to seek mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery.” He sought the wisdom of God. You see, y'all, Daniel understood what the Chaldeans did. That only God could reveal this to him. And Daniel knew what the Chaldeans didn't. Who God is. You see, Daniel knew that his God is the God of heaven. The God of the Bible who is able to do the impossible to reveal even this dream. That's what Daniel knew about God, but he also understood something else about God. He also realized that though Nebuchadnezzar is the king of Babylon, and though Nebuchadnezzar is the one who sentenced him to death, God was the true king who could bring death and preserve life. Because do you notice what they asked for? He told his friends in verse 18 to ask for the mercy from God. He didn't ask for Nebuchadnezzar to be merciful. He asked for the mercy from God. Because Daniel understood that we live and die not by the hand of the king, but by the hand of the Lord. That God is the true king.

And that's what Daniel's pointing to in verse 21 when he speaks of God as the one who “removes kings and sets up kings.” You see, Daniel understands, he knows that as high and powerful as the authorities of this world are, God is more powerful and higher still. And we see this throughout scripture. I mean, just two other places in the New Testament. In John 19. In John 19, Jesus is before Pilate, this man who could sentence him to death or let him go free. And Jesus says to him, “you would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given to you from above.” Or in Romans 13, the apostle Paul writes that there is no authority except from God, and those who exist have been instituted by God. You see, what Daniel knew is what the Bible teaches. That even when powers and rulers and authorities of this world appear to reign unfettered, that God has not abdicated his throne. That God is wisely ruling over this world.

Now, we may not see all the ways, we may not understand them, but we're not called to understand them. We're not called to know all the ways, but we are called to believe that God is reigning and ruling even today. And so Daniel and his friends pray. And they look to God and they find what they know to be true. That God is merciful. Because God shows his mercy by revealing the dream. And so, having the dream revealed to him, what does Daniel do? He runs to Nebuchadnezzar, right? Break down the gallows, put the sword of judgment away. “I've got your interpretation.” No, that's not what he did, right? That's what we would have done, right? That's what I would have done. Like, “I've got to save my neck. Let's go.” But Daniel stops.

And instead of running to Nebuchadnezzar, he does that in next week's sermon. We'll get there. He stops and gives thanks. In verses 20 through 23, Daniel answered and said, “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 made known to me what we asked of you. For you have made known to us the king's matter.” Y'all would be easy to run to the rest of the story, to hear the vision, to see Nebuchadnezzar's response. But don't run past this song.

No, because it is right that Daniel would stop and give thanks and praise. And we need to be reminded of that. Because how quickly do we move on after we've asked God for something, right? Like, we go to the Lord in prayer. We ask him for wisdom. We ask him for discernment. We ask him to lead us in what we're supposed to do. And he does. He reveals it to us. And so what do we do? Well, we go to the next thing, right? Well, actually, God, I've got some more on my list, right? That's what we do. I mean, that's maybe it's not. Maybe it's just me. You know, maybe y'all don't do that. You don't struggle. No, you do too, right? We run on to the next thing. And we want to move on.

But Daniel's right to stop and praise God, to give him thanks. And so should we. But Daniel's praise, his song, isn't just giving thanks. It's not rejoicing. But this song also speaks of who God is, right? He says that God is the one who rules over kings, as I already mentioned. But three times he speaks of God's wisdom. Verse 20, "to whom belong wisdom and might." Verse 21, "he gives wisdom to the wise." And why is Daniel wise? Because God gives him wisdom. Which is made explicit in verse 23, "for you have given me wisdom and might." You see, what Daniel knows and what he sings about is what we heard in our New Testament reading, that the foolishness of God is wiser than man. Now listen, Paul's not saying God is foolish, right? That's not what Paul's saying there. What he's saying is that even in God's acts, in those things that he does that to our eyes, to the world, might be perceived as foolish, even that is wiser than the wisdom of man. In other words, all the wisdom of Babylon, and all the wisdom of the Chaldeans, and all the wisdom of 21st century humanity, pales in comparison to the wisdom of God. That's what Daniel knew.

That's what Paul was talking about, that God shames the wise of the world with true wisdom. And y'all, we know this. We know this, not because it's been revealed to us in a dream or an interpretation, but we know this because we have seen his wisdom in the person of Jesus. The wise men of Babylon said that God was the one who had to reveal to him, and God doesn't dwell in the flesh. But we know better, don't we? Y'all, that's foolishness. We know better because we know that Jesus, the second person in the Trinity, God incarnate, took on flesh. And he dwelt among us, and he lived, and he died, and he rose again, and in the cross, that thing that is foolishness to the world, we see is the wisdom of God. Because the cross shows that God has authority over death and life, over sin and the grave, over every power in this world. You see, the cross shows us what Daniel beheld, the great wisdom of God. And so, friends, as we live as exiles, as we live surrounded by kingdoms, not of the Lord, but kingdoms of this world, when we are pulled by the wisdom and power and ways of the world, instead of turning to that, we turn and we rest. We lean upon and we cling to the wisdom of God. Amen. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank you that you have revealed your wisdom to us. We thank you that we behold it in Jesus, in the cross. And we do pray, Father, that you would turn our eyes towards him, that we would fix our gaze on Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith, who went to the cross. Foolishness to the world, but wisdom to those who believe. Fix our eyes on him, and let us cling to the wisdom that comes from you. And we pray all this in Christ's name, and God's people said together, amen.