

Daniel 2:1-30 The Moment of Truth

Introduction

Dan Quayle, the Vice-President to former U.S. President George Bush, in his autobiography *Standing Firm* wrote concerning the 'defining moments' of a Presidency or an election campaign. These he argued were turning points in American history. However, these special kinds of moments are easily recalled in Scottish history whenever anyone mentions, for example, 'Robert the Bruce and Bannockburn 1314' or 'The Act of Union of 1707'. On a smaller stage in a local community or in a family context there are also special events that are talked about for years to come because of their significance. In the court of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon his much feared majesty decided that it was time for a moment of truth for the so-called 'wise men' in his government and civil service. How real were their claims to expertise? How capable were they of truly working out the significance of events or discerning the meaning of dreams? Were they simply making repeated lucky guesses or was there a genuine gifting for the work for which they had been employed? It is most likely that the ranks of these employees had swelled over the years with the Emperor increasingly sceptical that he was getting value for money from their advice to him. In any case he certainly had nothing to lose. He could have fun watching them experience blind panic, but he might possibly learn something important about their characters and conduct through how they responded to such intense pressure. The circumstances were entirely of his creation. The four young Jews were at risk every bit as much as those many years their senior who had been employed by the Emperor for a long time. Yet what was most important was that God was in control behind the scenes. The obstacle created on this occasion would become an opportunity for God to work in many people's lives. The same principle applies today. All kinds of circumstances will be experienced by each one of us at different times in our lives, but how we react to these events is at least as important as the vast majority of the events themselves. At such times when we too face a 'moment of truth' we can learn so much about ourselves as well as what we may learn about other people.

There were four categories of wise men that were represented at Nebuchadnezzar's special meeting. First *the magicians*: these were religious priests who could determine things from the bodies of sacrificed animals. They were similar in some respects to the pagan Druid priests at the time of the Roman invasion of Britain two millennia ago, who made all kind of decisions about the future based on their examination of human remains of sacrificial victims. The second category was the *enchanters*. Their origins were as snake charmers but they had moved up the professional ladder performing conjuring tricks with words and information. The third category was the *sorcerers*. Here there were occult connections. Whatever concerns Daniel and his friends had about the other categories of wise men, they would be particularly heightened by the presence of a category of officials whose approach to their work was based on practises banned in the Jewish Bible. In instructions given at the time of the revelation of the Ten Commandments, Exodus 22:18 stated: *Do not allow a sorceress to live*. The fourth category was the *Chaldeans*. This was a religious group not an ethnic one. They were apparently particularly influential in Babylon and specialised in interpreting dreams. They had produced some lengthy works containing their principles, which in essence suggested that past dreams were the key to the interpretation of present dreams. If you need to look over the records of the past before informing the Emperor of your opinion there is little chance of a quick response. In effect Nebuchadnezzar calls their bluff and asks all four groups with their different claimed skills to show which approach worked best under the test circumstances he had devised. It is very possible that Daniel and his friends had hardly

started work after possibly completing their studies when this incident took place. More likely, that they were only part way through their studies in Babylon. As very junior employees at best it was no surprise that they had not been invited to the palace meeting. However, soon enough Daniel and his friends would have an opportunity to talk with Nebuchadnezzar. The challenge both then and now was this: Will I be faithful to God in what He has entrusted me to do just now, rather than waiting for what might or might not appear 'round the corner'? We all have our hopes and aspirations, but are we willing to leave them with God and focus wholeheartedly on the tasks He has put across our pathway at the present time. Someone who is not dedicated and faithful in the little things will be unable to be trusted with greater responsibilities. Yet the opposite is decidedly true here. These very young men were recognised by God as His devoted servants. They would soon be given an opportunity to exercise great influence in significant roles in Babylon.

1. The challenge to the wise men (Daniel 2:1-13)

(a) The King's distress (Daniel 2:1-3) *In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind was troubled and he could not sleep.² 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,³ he said to them, 'I have had a dream that troubles me and I want to know what it means.'* A Babylonian religious saying now preserved on an inscription in Berlin Museum stated: 'If a man cannot remember the dream he saw (it means) his (personal) god is angry with him'. Why was this all powerful Emperor so worked up about his broken sleep? After all it can happen to any of us. It is possible that the court records give us a clue. In 604BC his army had invaded the Philistine territory in the area today around the Gaza strip. They had focussed their efforts on the prominent city of Ashkelon and had besieged it but its strong defences had rendered their efforts null and void in that first year. It was frankly an embarrassment because if a small nation could do this then it might encourage larger ones to revolt! A reluctant Emperor ordered extra reinforcement siege towers and heavy field equipment to be taken to the site. Serious amounts of money and time that had not been budgeted for were required for this operation. It was 603BC before all this machinery was in place at Ashkelon. In the days long before military transport planes and low-loader lorries moving this kind of equipment was painfully slow and difficult. No-wonder the king was concerned. In addition, communications took weeks not seconds for a phone connection or some form of electronic message. It is so ironic that the most powerful man in the whole region felt so anxious. No-one had less reason to worry but his security was grounded in his mythical invincibility. The so-far fruitless siege of Ashkelon was a challenge to it. The challenge comes back to us –in what or in who is my security? In what or in who is my identity based? These are difficult questions to answer, but in our increasing superficial Western society too often people's identity is overwhelmingly in their occupation. What happens to such a person if they lose their job? What about the sports-person who suffers a career threatening injury or the promising young athlete who is told they don't quite make the grade for a professional career. As Christians our anchor, our security needs to be firmly grounded in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is right to value our work, our outside interests, but they do not define who we are, though hopefully they can bring a sense of purpose and satisfaction to us. To whom do we turn in a crisis? I would like to think that within our families and church families we can be there for one another to assist with practical tasks. I praise God for the instances I know of where this has been the case when different individuals have been there to support others within our church family. For Nebuchadnezzar the wise men, the people who supposedly had contact with the gods and who could discern the future, were

now being asked to reassure the king concerning his future through the interpretation of a particularly powerful dream.

(b) **The King's demand** (Daniel 2:4-9)⁴ *Then the astrologers answered the king, 'May the king live for ever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will interpret it.'* ⁵ *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. ⁶ 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.'* ⁷ *Once more they replied, 'Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will interpret it.'* ⁸ *Then the king answered, 'I am certain that you are trying to gain time, because you realise that this is what I have firmly decided: ⁹ if you do not tell me the dream, there is only one penalty for you. You have conspired to tell me misleading and wicked things, hoping the situation will change. So then, tell me the dream, and I will know that you can interpret it for me.'* At first the officials would have assumed it was an ordinary day in the office. The notice to appear at the palace would have raised no alarm bells. Possibly the comprehensive guest list of those summoned might have been noted as unusual, but again in and of itself was no cause for alarm. If I understand the scenario correctly the normal pattern would have been for a dream to be reported to them. The details would have been written down very carefully and then they would all have gone away to work out what response they ought to give to the Emperor in due course. However, on this occasion the level of punishment or reward for a successful outcome –or otherwise- had been raised to a critical level. Put yourself in their shoes hearing these words: *'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. ⁶ 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* (Daniel 2:5-6). They would have been less than human not to imagine the hangman's noose or sword or the implications for their families rather than the potential pay rise on offer. We must congratulate Nebuchadnezzar for the clarity of his official communications. It is clear from the exchanges that followed that panic was beginning to set in amongst these officials. They had never before been asked to find a dream and then give its interpretation! Their faith and their professional identity were on the line. It has been of real concern over the last decade, to read in the reports from Christian Concern, the Christian Institute and other agencies of the increasing number of Christian professionals whose careers have been placed in jeopardy because of secular views being imposed in their place of work that contradicted Christian convictions. All of us as Christians have bottom lines of integrity that we must not cross. The issue is always what will I do should that day come to pass? It is not unique for people of faith. It can happen for everyone, but if a person has no clear faith or principled convictions it must be close to impossible not to capitulate in the face of every demand placed upon them. In the good years we must invest in our spiritual lives with the resources that will equip us to stand when the biggest tests of our convictions come upon us.

(c) **The King's decree** (Daniel 2:10-13) ¹⁰ *The astrologers answered the king, 'There is no one on earth who can do what the king asks! No king, however great and mighty, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or astrologer. ¹¹ What the king asks is too difficult. No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among humans.'* ¹² *This made the king so angry and furious that he ordered the execution of all the wise men of Babylon. ¹³ 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.* Nebuchadnezzar's worse fears were realised. These men were as fallible as him and had no guaranteed connection to the gods –or the living God. Their honesty was commendable, but on the surface it appeared that a full-blown crisis was about to erupt. It is possible that an angry monarch ordered the arrest and execution of a vague number of people. In such a context it was not the wisest step for his military officials to ask for clarification as to how

many wise men to execute. It would have been the easiest thing in the world for their names to be added to the list of those scheduled for elimination! However, verse thirteen draws our attention to the serious nature of this event. *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.* It was not their fault. They had not said or done anything wrong, but they were at risk just like everyone else in that setting. In every generation the innocent do suffer with the guilty in famines or floods; in times of war or other disasters. In the Western world we are too focussed on individualism and seeing things in personal terms. Sometimes a collective interpretation of things that have happened is much more accurate. You may not have contributed anything good or bad to the scenario that saw you rewarded or witnessed you facing a time of trial or heartache. How should we respond in these situations? The next section of Daniel chapter two shows their response.

2. The conduct of a wise man (Daniel 2:14-23)

(a) Daniel's plan (Daniel 2:14-16) ¹⁴ *When Arioch, the commander of the king's guard, had gone out to put to death the wise men of Babylon, Daniel spoke to him with wisdom and tact.* ¹⁵ *He asked the king's officer, 'Why did the king issue such a harsh decree?'* Arioch then explained the matter to Daniel. ¹⁶ *At this, Daniel went in to the king and asked for time, so that he might interpret the dream for him.* It is a fact that people watch what we do as Christians in all kind of life situations. Everyone can cope with a modest level of success or life going on in a routine way. It is what happens when things go wrong; when a crisis erupts or a tragedy strikes –or maybe severe pressure to select from some possible choices when the way forward may not be clear. It is them that others want to see if our faith makes a difference for us. It may be that we can come up sometimes with eloquent and persuasive words to communicate our faith to someone in a manner that convinces them; more likely they will be significantly influenced by how we react in these pressured kinds of situations. It was in these settings that Daniel in particular, but also his friends to a lesser degree, shone as an exemplary figure. It is important to note that he had not sought the opportunity. The door was opened for him. Daniel was simply available to God to use as He chose. This is exactly the same for us. It may be a stranger at the bus stop or a neighbour on the street or whoever? But God will give each of us opportunities over time to demonstrate our principles in practise. In some of those contexts this witness will be a key pointer on the road to that person coming to faith in Christ. The question we need to answer is this: are we praying: 'Lord I'm available! Please give me opportunities to be a witness for you by my actions or my words today.' Availability is the key. If we have prayed sincerely and nothing obvious has come up then no problem because there will be plenty of days when our calling is simply to do the ordinary things of daily life as well as we can. God is glorified in you and me when we do the simple things efficiently and appropriately. The spectacular and extraordinary are the exceptional cases as they were over the years in Bible times as well. Even for famous individuals like Elijah or Elisha the vast majority of their lives involved their faithfulness to God in the ordinary affairs of life. The miracles they performed took up only a tiny proportion of their lives. We must keep things in perspective. Nebuchadnezzar would have admired the humble courage and bold witness of Daniel making this reasonable request. What did he plan to do?

(b) Daniel's prayer (Daniel 2:17-23) (i) Their faith stretched (Daniel 2:17-18) ¹⁷ *Then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.* ¹⁸ *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.* This is no different from our times of corporate prayer. We too must come on the basis on God's grace

and mercy bringing our praises and thanksgiving to God as well as our intercessions. This issue or actual crisis naturally varies from person to person and from one context to another. However, the response God desires from His children does not change. He wants us to seek His face and to desire His invention for the glory of His name. As early as Acts 4:24-31 Luke records this pattern in the prayer and praises of the Early Church. Affirming the greatness of God and His attributes allows our problem to be seen in perspective. It enables us to retain or regain our confidence in Almighty God. It also contextualises the position of wicked people in the world who are not as powerful as they might appear to us. The problems we face are not insurmountable, because our God reigns! Some times we need to be reminded of that. Do you need to hear that today? (ii) **Their faith rewarded** (Daniel 2:19-23)¹⁹ *During the night the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision. Then Daniel praised the God of heaven²⁰ and said: 'Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his.²¹ He changes times and seasons; He deposes kings and raises up others. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning.²² He reveals deep and hidden things; He knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with Him.²³ I thank and praise You, God of my ancestors: You have given me wisdom and power, You have made known to me what we asked of You, You have made known to us the dream of the king.'* Sometimes God answers our prayers extremely quickly; on occasions taking us by surprise! However, there are many other times- the clear majority of times- when it takes longer. It is not a question of our age. The 1859 Ulster revival began with a secret teenagers' prayer meeting seeking more of God, initiated without the presence of older Christians. The late 1940s Lewis revival was attributed in the first instance to the earnest prayers of two elderly ladies. There may be earnest prayers for revival or other matters that appear to go unheard with nothing outward to show for it, but we pray because God has ordained to include His people in His purposes through our prayers. No significant Christian venture in history has been accomplished without people who have committed themselves to pray for its success. Throughout the Bible God's people have sought the prayers of their peers. Our generation today is no different we need it just as much as in former days. Paul, for example in II Thessalonians 3:1-2 wrote to these young Christians: *As for other matters, brothers and sisters, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured, just as it was with you.² And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not everyone has faith.* Our Lord Himself took His disciples to pray with Him on occasions (for example, Mark 14:32-42) reminding us that we need not only to pray for ourselves but equally for fellow believers as well.

3. **The confidant of a wise man** (Daniel 2:24-30)

(a) **The source of the message** (Daniel 2:24-28)²⁴ *Then Daniel went to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to execute the wise men of Babylon, and said to him, 'Do not execute the wise men of Babylon. Take me to the king, and I will interpret his dream for him.'*²⁵ *Arioch took Daniel to the king at once and said, 'I have found a man among the exiles from Judah who can tell the king what his dream means.'*²⁶ *The king asked Daniel (also called Belteshazzar), 'Are you able to tell me what I saw in my dream and interpret it?'*²⁷ *Daniel replied, 'No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about,²⁸ but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come. Your dream and the visions that passed through your mind as you were lying in bed are these: I'm sure the relief and delight at Daniel's good news was shared around the palace community. Arioch and his fellow soldiers would have been reluctant to execute so many people especially decent young men who had absolutely no prior connection to anything that had gone on at the top levels of Babylonian society. When in time they found out even the four categories of wise men would have had some measure of delight –but in their case their pleasure would have been in*

limited supply. If this Daniel keeps this up we will all be out of a job! This was a bittersweet moment for them. How do we handle other people's success? Can we be genuinely happy for them even when at times it appears that it may be at our or other people's expense? Avoiding the sin of jealousy requires great vigilance at times. It takes security in our own identity to be able to truly applaud others for their attainments. It is actually remarkable that jealousy at Daniel's successes only overflowed in the royal palace decades later when he was an old man. If this is correct –and not simply unrecorded in Scripture – then it is a remarkable tribute to Daniel's humility in not wanting to hog the limelight. It is most remarkable that his feet appear to have remained firmly on the ground throughout the years of his remarkable service in exile in Babylon. The secret of his success was his personal walk with God which is hinted at later in the book of Daniel. The recipe for spiritual success hasn't changed – are we investing in time with the Lord each day?

It would have taken Nebuchadnezzar by surprise to get an answer so quickly to his request. But even more remarkably that the one who provided the answer was not claiming the credit in his presence, especially when such a great material reward was on offer. We remember Daniel 2:6 which stated: *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.* Elisha's servant Gehazi may have wanted to get rich at the expense of Naaman the Syrian when the Syrian general had rejoiced over the answering of his prayers for healing from Leprosy (II Kings 5:20-27). But the judgement of God fell on Gehazi for claiming a reward that was due to God alone. Daniel is abundantly clear that God alone deserves the credit for revealing this mystery. *Daniel replied, 'No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about,²⁸ but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries (Daniel 2:27-28a).* The material reward that day would stay in the royal treasury because God did not need it! May we never claim credit that is due to God alone.

(b) **The status of the messenger** (Daniel 2:29-30)²⁹ *'As Your Majesty was lying there, your mind turned to things to come, and the revealer of mysteries showed you what is going to happen.³⁰ As for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because I have 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.* Here was a person God could trust with blessings. It didn't go to his head. I suspect many more Christians can handle adversity better than prosperity – in terms of its impact on our relationship with God. How many of us are as earnest and consistent in our prayer life when all is going well compared to times of real struggles? An honest answer here may reveal in part why God has rationed the measure of successes we have experienced. He must get all the glory. His servant or messenger is simply an ambassador representing Him. May God help us be the best ambassadors we can be for Him in the coming days, Amen.