

Daniel 2:31-49 Getting the Message Across

Introduction

On 28 August 1963 one of the largest and certainly the most influential march in the American Civil Rights Movement took place in Washington DC. There were many speakers and speeches but Martin Luther King gave the last and most significant contribution that day. It has gone down in history as being influential in ensuring that the 1964 Civil Rights Act was passed. The speech itself is not long and worth reading on-line but it included these lines: I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification; one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. [www.usconstitution.net/dream.html]

Emperor Nebuchadnezzar could also say I have a dream, but with considerably less passion and conviction. His dream was that of a man who came close to viewing himself as a god. His dream was that of a man who believed he had everything under his control –or almost. Yet God used a powerless Jewish teenager to instruct this pagan monarch concerning his place in history and its connection to the coming kingdom of God that would outlast all the empires that were mentioned in this speech by Daniel. The lesson for the Babylonian ruler is the same one available for us all. God is on the throne and He will ensure that His will is done on earth as it is in heaven. When we repeat the words Jesus gave to His disciples as guidance for prayer we are constantly reminding ourselves of that fact. In Matthew 6:9-10 Jesus told them: *This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name, ¹⁰Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...* God's plans for His Church are a significant part of His plans for the world. From that group of 120 adults in an upper room in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost it has grown to in excess of 2.5 billion people claiming to be Jesus' followers today, but even that is only a glimpse of the future. Revelation 7:9a *After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.* Prior to His crucifixion, Jesus uttered this prophetic word recorded in John 12:32: *And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.* That is individuals from every people group, tribe and nation. Nebuchadnezzar's hopes and aspirations were ultimately to be left in ruins as his empire would one day be only history. God's kingdom will last forever with Jesus as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords at its centre.

1. The statement of the dream (Daniel 2:31-35)

(a) The position of the King (Daniel 2:31a) *your majesty looked...* Nebuchadnezzar had to be in control. He could not allow someone else to share the limelight. All his officials were kept in their place and ‘on their toes’ ready to do their master’s bidding. He trusted no-one because he well knew how the lust for power could drive many people to seize any opportunity they had even if it was for a momentary bit of glory. What about you and me? Do you have to be in control of every aspect of your life? Are you willing to trust others to handle responsibilities? Nebuchadnezzar was terrified with his dream because he was not in control of events only a possible participant in its narrative. What part did he play –if indeed his kingdom was represented in the dream? Daniel knew the truth of the matter as his words of praise to God recorded in Daniel 2:20-21 reveal: *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.* We must be honest that the less power we have in society the easier it is to accept our relative weakness. However, for the rich and influential minority who exercise the majority of the power in various countries, for them to accept the point being made here would take a lot of grace and humility. For all of us we are stewards of the resources and opportunities entrusted to us by the Lord. How will we fare when we give our account? Will we have been good stewards for God? Or will we have to admit that our priorities were not as consistent as they should have with His plans for our lives. There are times for us to stop and reflect on our lives. Too many powerful people (and many others with limited power and influence) are afraid to stop and look at their lives, because deep down they are afraid of what they might find. If only this man had taken the opportunity when God presented it to him for action; will you and I take the opportunities granted to us for worship, service and witness? I hope each one of us can say yes to that! What was it that Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream?

(b) The particular details of the drama (Daniel 2:31-35) ³¹ *Your Majesty looked, and there before you stood a large statue – an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance.* ³² *The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze,* ³³ *its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay.* ³⁴ *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.* ³⁵ *Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were all broken to pieces and became like chaff on a threshing-floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.* In the extremely impressive architectural structure of the sunken garden in front of the Beinicke Rare Book Library, Yale University, there is an abstract series of allegorical sculptures by artist Isamu Noguchi. The three sculptures a pyramid, a disc and a cube are said to represent time, the sun and its energy, and chance respectively. What is clear is that this structure is intended to convey humanity as the master of its own future in a universe that is free from any ultimate sovereign control. In some respects it is implying a God-free world or the world as humanists might wish it to be. In this respect there is little new being stated here as humanity throughout history has sought to be ‘god’ and rule this planet or parts of it without due regard for God or any other creature. The tower of Babel was a classic statement of this philosophy. Genesis 11:4 records the motivation for its erection. *Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.* Later on in the book of Daniel Nebuchadnezzar reverts to type in the erection of his own statue in order to assert his power and authority over his subjects. The irony is that a person who feels the need to express it in this way deep down is seriously insecure in his or her identity or position. Given that he was the most secure and unchallenged ruler of his dynasty, it is incredible that the most powerful man of his

generation in the Middle East and North Africa could feel so threatened and vulnerable in his mind. It is a fresh reminder to us to ask the source of our security and identity. Am I secure in my identity as a Christian in Jesus Christ? Or am I looking for something else to add to that position? The sad reality about life in the Western world today is that most people have never had more things, better food, nicer homes, more consumer goods within the home to make life easier or more enjoyable, together with social media and other forms of communications to link up with people across the planet but the level of personal happiness and contentment is much lower than it was a generation or two ago when people had far less of these things. To be fair the relentless pressure from the advertising industry has raised expectations to unrealistic levels for the vast majority of us so that a significant proportion of people live their lives through celebrities whose every step is both reported and followed through various forms of media. On the surface it looks a million miles away from life in ancient Babylon, but going beyond the veneer of change humanity is no different from that era to today. This is part of the reason why Christians and people of other faiths are watched more closely than other people because many people whose paths we cross week by week are looking for that sense of purpose and identity which they have been lacking. What many media commentators just now are failing to grasp sufficiently about the current crisis over Islamic militancy is that many of the bombers / terrorists are converts to Islam who encountered it in prison or when in a vulnerable and troubled state in the wider society.

What did Nebuchadnezzar see? He saw a statue very similar to others in shape or form in his own capital city. Although very few have survived archaeologists have been convinced from other evidence that similar structures were not uncommon at that time. On the surface it looked a magnificent creation composed of gold, silver, bronze and iron. It appeared to be an imposing feature on the landscape. Nebuchadnezzar naturally assumed that it was his kingdom that had this degree of prominence. In that observation he was substantially correct, but the dream progressed to the emergence of a rock that was not created by human hands that would outlast the kingdom or kingdoms that came before it. The scene described in Daniel 2:35 at its conclusion would have been terrifying to such a dictator. *Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were all broken to pieces and became like chaff on a threshing-floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.* What kind of kingdom based on a mysterious rock would begin in one place and spread throughout the earth? It was a kingdom (Daniel 2:34) whose origins owed nothing ultimately to human hands. As Christians reading this account it is quite obvious to us what is being hinted at here but at the time was considerably less clear. Are we building our lives on something that will last forever or on things that will soon be swept away? Each of these great kingdoms of Babylon, Medo-Persian, Greek and Roman seemed to be invincible at the time just as the Islamic advance appears to be at the present day, but the Rock on which the Church is built will triumph and rule over all. Are we demonstrating in our daily lives the significance of this revelation or do we convey the same sentiments as others around us?

2. **The significance of the dream** (Daniel 2:36-49)

(a) **To Nebuchadnezzar** (Daniel 2:36-43) ³⁶ *'This was the dream, and now we will interpret it to the king. ³⁷ Your Majesty, you are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; ³⁸ in your hands He has placed all mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds in the sky. Wherever they live, He has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold. ³⁹ After you, another kingdom will arise, inferior to yours. Next, a third kingdom, one of bronze, will rule over the whole earth. ⁴⁰ Finally, there will be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron – for iron breaks and smashes everything – and as iron breaks things to pieces, so it will crush and break all the*

others.⁴¹ *Just as you saw that the feet and toes were partly of baked clay and partly of iron, so this will be a divided kingdom; yet it will have some of the strength of iron in it, even as you saw iron mixed with clay.*⁴² *As the toes were partly iron and partly clay, so this kingdom will be partly strong and partly brittle.*⁴³ *And just as you saw the iron mixed with baked clay, so the people will be a mixture and will not remain united, any more than iron mixes with clay.* The message Daniel reported to Nebuchadnezzar must have seemed quite reassuring to him. There was a reaffirmation of the greatness of his Babylonian kingdom and his place within it as the most stable and enduring of these kingdoms. Yet it is possible as some commentators have suggested that he feared that the rapid expansion of the empire was too quick and that there would be insufficient resources to fight the battles in places like Ashkelon. Had he ‘bitten odd more than he could chew’? This was a legitimate question. At the beginning of World War One Britain had the world’s most powerful empire; At its end they had defeated with the help of some friends the second most powerful one – that of Germany. However, in terms of both people-power and material means the country was exhausted at the end of it. Citizens of Empire countries had been required to contribute so much to the cause that inevitably questions of independence would arise. Half a century later the vast majority of the empire was gone and its pale shadow entity the Commonwealth has taken its place. From the perspective of human rights and democratic freedoms we must be delighted with this turn of events. There is no doubt that the ‘Nebuchadnezzars’ of this world would take a very different view on such developments. The challenge comes to each one of us whose kingdom are we seeking to build or with which we are identified? It was the question that indirectly Pontus Pilate asked Jesus in his exchanges at the trial before His crucifixion. In John 19:10-11 it states: ⁰ *‘Do you refuse to speak to me?’ Pilate said. ‘Don’t you realise I have power either to free you or to crucify you?’*¹¹ *Jesus answered, ‘You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.’* The dream focuses on empires not individuals and this unstable structure that looks at first glance so powerful is in reality awaiting the time of its decay and destruction. In human terms these empires lasted for centuries. The perspective here is God’s eternal one. For generations of humanity it will feel very different in the midst of this recorded history. This is why it is so important to see God’s bigger picture and not lose sight of it and be discouraged by what we see around us at any particular moment in time.

Yet Daniel’s language is very clear in declaring the sovereignty of God in history. In Daniel 2:37-38 he said: *Your Majesty, you are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory;*³⁸ *in your hands He has placed all mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds in the sky. Wherever they live, He has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold.* We must be more careful in how we interpret all the twists and turns of historical events in the news as we are not directly inspired by God in the same way as Daniel was here. However, the principle that God ultimately directs the affairs of history must be as true today as it was more than 2,500 years ago because God has not changed. Therefore, the message that Nebuchadnezzar and other secular rulers need to grasp is that they are not invincible or infallible –which deep down most of them know all too well – their power is not just dependent on winning elections, it is in God’s hands. The reigns of even the greatest rulers come to an end. When as ordinary citizens and Christians read such a narrative it seems far removed from our own circumstances. However, the principle is unchanged –am I building my life on something that will last forever or am I working for things that will come and go? Am I controlled more by the priorities of the urgent and the people or things that ‘shout’ loudest in my direction, rather than the initiatives that are much more substantial and will last at least for longer? In every workplace there are new initiatives, new ways of working which are all portrayed as ‘the’ way to go forward and many will express their enthusiasm for the new way of working. But the sign of getting on in years is being able to recall one, two or

three or more of these new ways of working. Within a decade some new bright idea will be sold as a better way and work will begin again to phase in the latest strategic plan. As followers of Jesus we can take a step back and put the present into God's bigger picture.

(b) **The centrality of God's kingdom** (Daniel 2:44-45) ⁴⁴ *'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.'* ⁴⁵ *This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands – a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces. 'The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and its interpretation is trustworthy.'* The Roman Empire was the most enduring of these kingdoms but even it would fade from memory. Augustine would write his famous work the *City of God* to explain how its demise could fit into God's bigger perspective. Notice when this kingdom begins: *'In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed ...'* (Daniel 2:44). It may seem small insignificant and of little impact at the time. But didn't Jesus in his stories about the Kingdom of God refer to it in this way? Matthew 13:31-33: ¹ *He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a **mustard seed**, which a man took and planted in his field. ² Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.'* ³³ *He told them still another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is **like yeast** that a woman took and mixed into about thirty kilograms of flour until it worked all through the dough.'* The impact of a mustard seed or a small quantity of yeast will be virtually invisible most of the time, but that does not minimize its effectiveness. Don't let the evil one discourage you into thinking that your contribution in mission or ministry is not needed –it is vital that all of us do what we can. Don't think that your kind words or deeds or your persistence in prayer is of next to no impact. For a few people it may be of major significance at key times in their lives –far more than we ever realise. The Church of Jesus Christ is currently on the margins of society in many places, and over the next generation –if Jesus' return is delayed that long- it will be so across almost all of society if current trends continue. However, our calling is to be faithful to seize the opportunities we have to live out our faith like the yeast in the flour in Jesus' story so that people around us can see someone for whom God's kingdom is central in their thinking and way of living.

We need to keep reminding ourselves that what looks so substantial and permanent today like the Berlin Wall may come crashing down more easily than we ever imagined. Notice Daniel's words in Daniel 2:35: *Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were all broken to pieces and **became like chaff on a threshing-floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace.** But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.* Last year I read a book on Middle-eastern history in the century prior to the rise of Islam. It was filled with unfamiliar names and in the case of the eastern Persian empire of an empire whose story I was unfamiliar with as well. From a position of great power it collapsed from within allowing the emergent Arab forces and their new religion to capture vast expanses of territory, like IS has done in northern Syria and Iraq last year. It had almost disappeared without trace. Daniel's words here clearly echo those of Psalm One where the position of the people who seek to live God's way is contrasted with those who seek to live without reference to God. *Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, ² but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on His law day and night. ³ That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither – whatever they do prospers. ⁴ Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. ⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. ⁶ For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.* By contrast in the coming

kingdom of God listen to what God says in Psalm 2:8-9 as a promise to His coming messiah: *Ask me and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. ⁹You will break them with a rod of iron; you will dash them to pieces like pottery.* How does Daniel describe God's coming kingdom? Daniel 2:44 reminds us it will be indestructible and never superseded. Other kingdoms both before and after its launch will rise and fall. It will *bring them to an end*. It will also be a universal kingdom that *filled the whole earth* (Daniel 2:35). Who is the Rock on which it is built? Jesus is the rock, the foundation of God's kingdom. He is sovereign in this kingdom (John 5:22). Peter in Acts 4:10-12, in a context of the healing of a lame man was asked in whose name this action took place. He made this declaration: *it is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.* ¹¹ **Jesus is “the stone** you builders rejected which has **become the cornerstone.**” ¹² *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.* When we have grasped this truth the words of Hebrews 12:28 are significant: *Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe...* Either while we are here alive on earth or at a later time a day will surely come when this declaration will be heard across this planet. *The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Messiah, and He will reign for ever and ever* (Revelation 11:15). Do you look forward to that day? There are some memorable words spoken by Scottish Reformer Andrew Melville to Stuart Monarch James VI of Scotland and I of England that make this point so clearly. ‘Sir, we will always humbly reverence your majesty in public; but since we have this occasion to be with your Majesty in private... we must discharge our duty, or else be traitors both to Christ and you. Therefore, Sir, at diverse times I have told you, so now again I must tell you. There are two kings and two kingdoms in Scotland. There is King James, the Lord of the Commonwealth, and there is Christ Jesus, the King of the Church, whose subject James the Sixth is, of whose kingdom he is not a king, not a lord, nor a head... We will yield to you your place, and give you all due obedience, but again I say, You are not the head of the church; you cannot give us that eternal life that we seek for even in this world, and you cannot deprive us of it.’ [Sinclair Ferguson, *Daniel*, p.66] The same words updated to refer to the Prime Minister and First Minister and their respective governments in London and Edinburgh are equally true today. Will you and I be as bold and courageous where required in our generation?

(c) **To Daniel and his friends** (Daniel 2:46-49) ⁴⁶ *Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honour and ordered that an offering and incense be presented to him.* ⁴⁷ *The king said to Daniel, ‘Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery.’* ⁴⁸ *Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men.* ⁴⁹ *Moreover, at Daniel’s request the king appointed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego chief ministers over the province of Babylon, while Daniel himself remained at the royal court.* On this occasion these men of God were recognised and honoured by the earthly powers. But as later events will show in the book the opposite verdict on their principles could lead to a Lion’s Den or a Fiery Furnace. Fame and fortune are very fickle commodities and certainly not things we should be seeking. God was here through his servant Daniel getting His message across to the Emperor. The question was this: would he, will you and I keep this message concerning God’s kingdom central to our hopes, dreams, plans and aspiration in the coming days. I trust we will, for Jesus’ sake Amen.