

Faith, Wisdom and Prayer – Daniel 2:1-23

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, ²saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” ³When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

⁶“ ‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’ ”

⁷Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” ⁹After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.

¹⁰When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him.

Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

¹²And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. Matthew 2:1-12

When we think of this story we are amazed that the wise men, who probably lived about 1,000 miles away from Judah, knew about the coming Messiah. Israel did not seem to have a clue, and the only reason king Herod wanted to know about Jesus was to kill him. Isn't it ironic who seems to know the secrets of God. It is usually not who you think. The Magi were foreigners to Israel, yet they knew the Messiah was coming. And in today's study we are going to see a similar situation. The wise men in Daniel 2 did not have a clue, but God gave the answer to a foreigner, or we might say an exile from Judah. Why does God work this way? I think sometimes familiarity breeds blindness to the truth.

Let read Daniel 2:1-23

In the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his spirit was troubled, and his sleep left him. ²Then 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. ³And the king said to them, “I had a dream, and my spirit is troubled to know the dream.” ⁴Then the Chaldeans said to the king in Aramaic, “O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will show the interpretation.” ⁵The

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. ⁶But 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.” ⁷They answered a second time and said, “Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will show its interpretation.” ⁸The 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—⁹if 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.” ¹⁰The 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. ¹¹The 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.”

¹²Because of this the king was angry and very furious, and commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be destroyed. ¹³So the decree went out, and the wise men were about to be killed; and they sought Daniel and his companions, to kill them. ¹⁴Then 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. ¹⁵He declared to Arioch, the king’s captain, “Why is the decree of the king so urgent?” Then Arioch made the matter known to Daniel. ¹⁶And Daniel went in and requested the king to appoint him a time, that he might show the interpretation to the king.

¹⁷Then Daniel went to his house and made the matter known to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, his companions, ¹⁸and 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. ¹⁹Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision of the night. Then Daniel blessed the God of heaven. ²⁰Daniel answered and said:

“Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might.

²¹He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding;

²²he reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness,
and the light dwells with him.

²³To 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.”

Now, before we get into the meat of this chapter, I think it is important and relevant to discuss the first verse. It actually presents a difficulty. In chapter 1 we find Daniel and his friends rising after a 3-year training period in Babylon. When we get to chapter 2, it appears at first this might be after the 3-year training period, but actually it isn't. Let me explain. The first verse says it is the second year of king Nebuchadnezzar's reign. Jeremiah 25:1 tells us that Nebuchadnezzar's first year as king of Babylon corresponds to the 4th year of Jehoiakim. But Daniel went into captivity in Jehoiakim's 11th year (Jer. 52:28). What this means is Nebuchadnezzar shared the throne with his father for 7 years. After this, Nebuchadnezzar reigned solely as king. So, when the text of Daniel says the second year of his reign, it actually means the second year of his sole reign. It is also important to note that Daniel had not completed his 3-year training of study yet in chapter 2. He was likely in his 3rd year of study. This means Daniel was not apart of the wise men of Babylon yet and still a student.

So, moving on to the main text, the king of Babylon had a dream and needed his wise men to interpret the dream for him. But it becomes clear, this is no ordinary king and no ordinary dream. This was a crisis. And I think verse 29 helps clarify what is happening.

"To you, O king, as you lay in bed came thoughts of what would be after this, and he who reveals mysteries made known to you what is to be." (ESV) The NASB states it this way, "As for you, O king, while on your bed your thoughts turned to what would take place in the future".

R. J. Rushdoony notes, "Prior to sleeping, he had been deeply concerned about the future (2:29). His great empire, built on the principle of continuity and the dream of one world, might some day meet that radical discontinuity of death and destruction which had overwhelmed previous towers of Babel." (*Thy Kingdom Come: Studies in Daniel and Revelation*, 14)

So, it appears Nebuchadnezzar was contemplating the future and then God gives him a magnificent dream about the future. King Nebuchadnezzar is very troubled by the dream and wants to know the interpretation. Now, there are some commentators who say the king forgot his dream, but the text does not say that. The NASB in verse 3 says, "my spirit is anxious to understand the dream." The Hebrew word here is "yada", which means to know, perceive or understand. The wise men also ask the king twice to reveal the dream. This seems unlikely if Nebuchadnezzar had forgotten the dream. Either way, in verse 4, the wise men of Babylon tell the king they will interpret the dream, once he reveals it of course. Now, for clarification, I am using the term wise men as the text does. But the text actually lists out several kinds of characters, magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and Chaldeans. This last word likely means astrologers. So, I think in a modern context we could think of them as

astrologers. I am only pointing this out for clarification. The ancient world placed enormous weight on the study of the stars and dreams. In fact, Christopher Wright notes that the Babylonians kept dream books to help interpret dreams (*Hearing the Message of Daniel: Sustaining Faith in Today's World*, 43). This tells you how important dreams were to this culture. The wise men were trained for this type of work.

Now, in verse 5 the wise men get kicked in the teeth by the king. He is definitely troubled because Nebuchadnezzar demands the wise men tell him his dream and then interpret it. And if they cannot do this, they will be torn limb from limb, and their houses will be destroyed. Now, I don't know about you, but this seems a little harsh and unreasonable. But it also reveals the culture of the ancient world. The Babylonian world was very harsh and brutal. The king is not going to let the wise men tell him lies, he is going to test their words. Now, in fairness, Nebuchadnezzar also promises gifts and rewards if the wise men can tell him the dream and its interpretation. Then the wise men ask the king a second time for him to tell them the dream.

Well, this second request seems to be the tipping point for the king because his response is very pointed. He tells the wise men he knows they are going to lie to buy time. It kind of gives you the feeling he has been through this routine before. So, again the wise men of Babylon are threatened with death. But this time Nebuchadnezzar tells them to tell him the dream and then he will know that they can interpret it. You can see here the king would not be swayed – he was going to make sure the wise men of Babylon gave him accurate answers. And really it is at this point when the king pushes back and tells his advisors how it is going to be that things go south. The irony is these men are the intellectuals of the day, they were highly trained to have all the answers, but in this case they didn't.

And in verses 10-11 we see the foolish answer of the wise men. They complain that no one can do what the king asks. They also complain no king has ever asked such a thing. But in a twist of irony, the wise men end with some wisdom by saying that only the gods can reveal the dream. In a manner of speaking this was true. But their complaint to the king was very foolish and made Nebuchadnezzar very angry. And while it is hard to understand the king's harsh decree of death, this was common in the ancient world. The interesting thing is Daniel and friends were not apart of this discussion, likely because they were still in training.

When the decree goes out to kill the wise men is when Daniel becomes aware of the situation. Now, notice in the text how Daniel responds. Does he complain like the other wise men? The text tells us he responds to Arioch with prudence and discretion. The NASB says discretion and discernment. We might use the words wisdom and tact. And you can see the stark difference in Daniel's response and that of Babylon's intellectual elites. What

does Daniel do? When he finds out what the decree is, he requests a time to show the interpretation.

Now, there are a couple of things I want to point out here. Number one, the wise men were the professionals, and in Babylon, they would be considered not just the intellectuals, but the religious leaders. These leaders are in a head-to-head confrontation with the king, and they have no answers. They complain and they lose. And then we have Daniel and his friends who are still in training and have not been consulted about the dream. Yet, all of them are about to be killed because of the foolishness of a troubled king and the religious professionals. Daniel and friends had not done anything wrong, yet were about to suffer injustice and punishment because of the religious leaders of the nation.

Have you ever experienced the blame for something you had nothing to do with. Have you experienced injustice?

In the 1300s the Black plague swept through Europe and killed about 25 million people. Pope Clement VI experienced this when 11,000 people died in the city of Avignon. Clement was a very learned man and he asked his advisors, the intellectuals of his court, to determine the cause. These experts told him the plague was caused by a conjunction of planets and stars. Clement was not impressed. He asked the papal physicians to dissect some of the bodies to discover the origin of the disease. Even though Clement was level-headed, the people were not so much. Many blamed the Jews and suggested they poisoned the water. Because of this conspiracy theory many Jews were tortured and killed. Many times the experts do not have the answers and sometimes no one else does either. But there is a God in heaven who knows all and Daniel knew exactly where to go to get the answer for the king.

Immediately after Daniel had requested time to find a solution to the king's dream, he goes home and finds his friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, and they prayed for God to have mercy. They ask God for an answer to the decree of death. And I think here is the greatest wisdom of all – when faced with a crisis, Daniel responds with wisdom and tact, then runs home to pray with his friends. Prayer is monumental in Daniel's life and why he finds solutions to Babylonian problems.

¹⁸ In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry. ¹⁹ And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" And the fig tree withered at once.

²⁰ When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither at once?"

²¹ And Jesus answered them, "Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be

taken up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. ²²And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith." Matthew 21:18-22

Do we really believe what Jesus says? Do we really believe if we pray, God will answer. The story in Daniel answers this question and can build our faith in how powerful prayer can be.

Now, verse 19 in Daniel 2 is very important. Listen to it. "Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision of the night. Then Daniel blessed the God of heaven." As soon as Daniel and his friends prayed, Daniel received the answer, the mystery was revealed. Amos 3:7 states, "For the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets."

Now, I want to take a moment here and talk about faith. It took enormous faith for Daniel to go to the king and ask for time. He had to have the confidence that God would reveal the mystery. Daniel had to have enormous faith in his God. What about you? When is the last time God required a lot of faith from you? Did you have confidence in him to provide an answer? Do you possess that confidence now? If you ask God for faith, he will provide it, I guarantee.

In Arnold Dallimore's biography of Charles Spurgeon, he tells a story about when Spurgeon wanted to do more for the city. The Church prayed about what to do and the means to do it. A few days later Spurgeon received a letter offering 20,000 pounds for educating orphans. In addition, multiple people offered to fund the project with very generous donations. There was also a time later on when Spurgeon was speaking with another pastor, Dr. Brock, and he declared his confidence that God would provide for the orphanage. When Spurgeon and Dr. Brock were speaking a telegram arrived announcing a 1,000 pound donation (*Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 126-27). Prayer is very powerful and we should always have confidence in God in what he wants to do. Yahweh gave king Nebuchadnezzar the dream and he provided only one person who would be able to give its meaning. The professional religious leaders failed and God raised up Daniel to give the king the message.

Now, after Daniel receives the answer to the mystery in a vision, he prays a prayer of thanksgiving and praise to God. And this additional prayer is very significant. Daniel blesses the name of God. He gives credit to Yahweh for his wisdom. Then in verse 21 Daniel says God changes times and seasons, setting up and removing kings. What does this statement communicate? The theme of the book of Daniel – the sovereignty of God. And what does that mean? Well, simply stated it means God is the supreme ruler of the universe. He is in control of all events and people, and there is no limit to his dominion. King Nebuchadnezzar wanted to be in control, he ruled the known world. But it is God who is showing his absolute rule and reign. Nebuchadnezzar was going to learn it would be God's

will, and God's way, not his. God gave him a beautiful picture of the future, but did not give the interpretation. Acknowledging God's sovereignty involves humility in accepting his rule over our lives. And that includes kings and those in very high positions of authority.

You may remember from history the War of 1812. During this war, on August 24, 1814, the British burned the city of Washington. Government officials, including President James Madison and First Lady Dolley Madison, had to flee the city. Ironically the next day a storm put out the fires, but a tornado ripped through the city destroying private residences. While this event may not have been a deciding victory for the British, it did demonstrate the ruling class was not in charge – God was! We don't often see these kinds of events in history, but when we do we are reminded that God is in charge, not kings or political leaders. God installs leaders and he also removes them.

Now, if we continue in the text, the writer tells us about how God gives wisdom and knowledge, how he reveals deep and hidden things. God had revealed a great mystery to Daniel, and the revelation was only given to him. This essentially made Daniel a savior to all the wise men, saving them from the king's harsh decree.

So, what exactly is God doing? First of all, he is telling the king who is in charge. Second, he is pushing down the pagan religious leaders and elevating Daniel. This is very purposeful and instructive. God's purpose in doing this is to reveal who God is to the king and to Babylon. The more influence Daniel and his friends have, the more of the true God the Babylonians were going to get. If you step back and look at chapters 1-6 of Daniel, it is a series of crises. The first four chapters deal exclusively with king Nebuchadnezzar. And in each crisis God continues to reveal himself to this pagan king. God is sending his ambassadors to reveal his character, dominion and salvation to the Gentiles. It is a picture of what Jesus will do in the New Testament. He first comes to the Jews, then to the Gentiles. All of us, no matter our background have a chance to accept Jesus as Lord and King.

As we look back at verses 1-23 of Daniel 2 there are 3 main ideas.

- 1) God's sovereignty – the king wanted to know what would happen in the future, what would become of his kingdom. God revealed the future to him, but in a mystery. So Nebuchadnezzar had to seek out help. The king thought he was in charge, but God was directing his heart. Proverbs 21:1-2 says, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will. Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the heart." I think the sovereignty of God is the hardest teaching to accept for those who are in authority. The idea of an Almighty God controlling events seems authoritarian. But God is righteous and just, his rule

and reign is perfect. The hardest part for all of us is that we want what we want, and learning to submit to God is difficult. But God will have his way, and his way is best. Nebuchadnezzar was going to learn in this chapter and the following chapters that his way was wrong and he must submit to the highest authority in heaven. And really this is true for all of us. We all must submit. We either do it now willingly or later unwillingly. Philippians 2:9-11 states, "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." God is sovereign, his rule and reign is supreme. We all must submit to his authority, kings included. To put that in a modern context, this includes presidents, governors, senators, business leaders, financial leaders, and the list goes on, it includes everyone. And this is the theme of Daniel, God directs world events and the hearts of kings.

- 2) Kings and religious elites do not have the answer. Nebuchadnezzar has the dream, but not the interpretation. The wise men of Babylon don't have either. Only Daniel was given the dream and its interpretation. And he was still in his 3-year Babylonian training. Jeremiah 8:9 says, "The wise men shall be put to shame; they shall be dismayed and taken; behold, they have rejected the word of the Lord, so what wisdom is in them?" I Corinthians 1:25-29 states, "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God." Then in I Corinthians 2:6-7 Paul writes, "Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory." God chose to hide the meaning of the dream to everyone except Daniel. God's purpose is to reveal himself, but not through worldly or corrupt means. Daniel received the revelation because he prayed, because he was righteous, but also because that is what God decided to do. God's ways are higher and better than ours. He chose to do what would bring the best results. We must be careful not to believe we can achieve greatness or wisdom if we do certain things. We humbly walk before God and he opens the doors that do the most good. I would not look to kings and religious elites for answers. Look to

God – he will reveal the answers we need, and many times this revelation comes from unexpected places.

- 3) Responding to crisis with faith, wisdom and prayer. I think one of the key ideas in this passage is how to respond to a crisis. The wise men of Babylon responded poorly. They kept asking the king for something he was not going to give them. Then, they complained saying it was impossible what the king was asking. When we see Daniel's response – it is very simple. A single question is asked to understand the situation and then he asks the king for a time to give the interpretation. Daniel's response was wise, but also full of faith. There was no guarantee he would be able to deliver the interpretation. But he responded in faith. Proverbs 14:35 tells us, "A servant who deals wisely has the king's favor, but his wrath falls on one who acts shamefully." Proverbs 16:13-16 says, "Righteous lips are the delight of a king, and he loves him who speaks what is right. A king's wrath is a messenger of death, and a wise man will appease it. In the light of a king's face there is life, and his favor is like the clouds that bring the spring rain. How much better to get wisdom than gold! To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver."

Now, after Daniel responds to the king's decree, he calls a prayer meeting. He tells his friends and they pray and ask God for mercy. You really cannot overestimate prayer – it is so important to the Christian. After Daniel prays he receives the answer in a vision. What about you? When is the last time you faced a crisis – did you respond in faith, in wisdom, in prayer. Prayer is no doubt the single greatest predictor of success. When we read of the great revivals of old, often they began with fervent prayer. We cannot succeed with God without talking to him. We must pray, especially in a crisis. Daniel and all the wise men are facing death. This is when you pray. Pray! Pray! Pray! This will bring answers. You may remember Gabriel's response to Daniel in Daniel chapter 9. This is what the text says: "While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my plea before the Lord my God for the holy hill of my God, while I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the first, came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice. He made me understand, speaking with me and saying, "O Daniel, I have now come out to give you insight and understanding. At the beginning of your pleas for mercy a word went out, and I have come to tell it to you, for you are greatly loved. Therefore consider the word and understand the vision. (vs. 20-23)

Have you ever faced an impossible situation? What did you do? Let's read Matthew 14:15-21.

Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy

food for themselves.” ¹⁶ But Jesus said, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” ¹⁷ They said to him, “We have only five loaves here and two fish.” ¹⁸ And he said, “Bring them here to me.” ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

It was an impossible situation to feed all those people. But what does Jesus say? “Bring them here to me.” (vs. 18) If we bring our impossible situations and circumstances to God, he will answer. It may not always turn out the way we want or think it should, but God will answer. How did God turn around the situation for Daniel – by answering his prayers for mercy. God gave the answer to the dream. What is the best way, and God’s way, to respond in a crisis – in faith, wisdom and prayer. What are you facing today? Are you in a seemingly impossible circumstance? Do you need God’s help? Respond in faith, speak with wisdom, and pray to God. He will provide an answer.

In 374 the people of Milan were divided over who should be the next bishop. There was no agreement whatsoever. The Roman governor, Ambrose, intervened and called the people to order. He calmly advised the people to elect a new bishop peacefully. Before Ambrose could do anything else, the crowd wanted Ambrose to be the new bishop. Ambrose tried in vain to stop them. He told them he was not trained for ministry, and had not even been baptized. Ironically, Ambrose was unanimously elected bishop of Milan. And even though Ambrose tried to avoid becoming bishop, even writing to the Emperor in protest, he was eventually baptized and ordained bishop. God bringing this about would affect someone else you have heard of – St. Augustine. Augustine was not close to God for many years in the first part of his life. His mother, Monica, prayed for years that he would come to Christ. As it turned out, when Augustine was 30 years old, he moved to Milan to become an instructor. In Milan, Augustine heard Ambrose preach and started reading his Bible. He eventually came to Christ and became one of the most influential Church Fathers in history. But do not forget Augustine’s mother who prayed for years for him to come to Christ. When all seems lost and the situation is impossible – respond with faith, wisdom and prayer. God will answer. Never give up because your prayers may produce an Ambrose or Augustine, or they might save a nation who desperately needs Jesus.