

Daniel 2:46-3:12

Introduction

We left off in Daniel with Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Remember the image composed of four different metals – gold, silver, bronze, and iron? Taken each by itself each metal represents a successive world empire. Nebuchadnezzar was the head of gold and represented the Babylonian empire. After the Babylonian empire would come the Persian empire (the chest and arms of silver), then the Greek empire (the middle and thighs of bronze), and then the Roman empire (the legs of iron and the feet partly of iron and partly of clay). But if we take these four metals all together what we have is a picture of the whole history of the fallen kingdom of man. In other words, it's not just the fourth kingdom (the Roman empire) that's compromised and weak with the feet composed partly of iron and partly of clay; it's the entire image that's compromised at its base. The Babylonians *fell* to the Persians, the Persians *fell* to the Greeks, the Greeks *fell* to the Romans, and in the end it's this entire kingdom of man, represented by these four world empires that falls before the kingdom that God sets up – the “kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall [it] be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever” (2:44).

What we have here is a whole philosophy of history. The failed kingdom of man is followed in time by the indestructible and everlasting kingdom of God. It's in truly seeing and understanding this that we learn wisdom. So the question is: Have we understood the vision? Have we really gained wisdom? In light of this mystery that God has revealed, how should we be living today? Those are the questions we left off with last time. Now, in our text this morning, we'll begin exploring the answers to these questions. We begin in chapter two, verses 46-47:

I. Daniel 2:46–47 — Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell upon his face and paid homage to Daniel, and commanded that an offering and incense be offered up to him. The king answered and said to Daniel, “Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery.”

Sometimes we can get hung up over the fact that Daniel apparently *accepts* the homage that the king pays him and the offering and incense that the king offers up to him. Shouldn't Daniel have been more like Barnabas and Paul when they were at Lystra and the priest of Zeus wanted to offer sacrifice to them along with the crowds? Barnabas and Paul both tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd trying to stop what was happening (Acts 14:13-15). So why don't we see Daniel doing the same thing here?

First of all, in Acts the crowds were saying of Barnabas and Paul: “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” (Acts 14:11). But Nebuchadnezzar is honoring Daniel not as a god in the likeness of men, but rather as a representative of the God who Nebuchadnezzar confesses is “God of gods” and “Lord of kings.” Daniel has already been very clear that “no wise men, enchanters, magicians, or astrologers [could] show to the king the mystery that the king [had] asked” (2:27) and that the mystery had been revealed to him not because of any wisdom that he had more than all the living (2:30). So why does the king make an offering and offer up incense

to Daniel? Because this is the only way the king knows to make an offering and offer up incense to Daniel's God. He can't do it in the temple at Jerusalem (which he himself has destroyed and is in any case too far away); he can't do it in any of the Babylonian temples that are devoted to the worship of other gods; and of course he can't conceive of doing it at just any random spot. This isn't the time for Daniel to be instructing the king in the illegitimate form of his worship. For one thing, Daniel probably knows that the king's heart hasn't really been changed in the first place. So what would be the point?

If Daniel was embarrassed of this part of the story, he could easily have left it out; instead, he purposefully includes it because of the encouraging message it should send to all God's people. Here's the king who destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and who carried off the vessels of the house of God and placed them in the treasury of his own god now bowing down to Daniel, an exiled Jew. Here's the most powerful man in the world – the “head of gold” (2:38)! – bowing down and paying homage to Daniel, an exiled Jew. So what we have here is a vivid—even a graphic—picture of that final triumph of the kingdom that God sets up. It's an *enactment* of that final vindication of all God's people – of all those who *belong to* that *coming* kingdom that will never be destroyed. No doubt, Daniel was well aware of these words from Isaiah:

- [Isaiah 45:14](#) — Thus says the LORD: “The wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush, and the Sabeans, men of stature, shall come over to you and be yours; they shall follow you; they shall come over in chains and bow down to you. They will plead with you, saying: ‘Surely God is in you, and there is no other, no god besides him.’”
- [Isaiah 49:23](#) — Kings shall be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers. With their faces to the ground they shall bow down to you, and lick the dust of your feet. Then you will know that I am the LORD; those who wait for me shall not be put to shame.
- [Isaiah 60:14](#) — The sons of those who afflicted you shall come bending low to you, and all who despised you shall bow down at your feet; they shall call you the City of the LORD, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel.

In Revelation chapter three, Jesus promised the church in Philadelphia:

- [Revelation 3:9](#) — Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you.

What does it *mean* when Nebuchadnezzar bows down before Daniel, an exiled Jew? It's a picture in advance of the final triumph of God's kingdom and the final vindication of God's people when every knee will 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 (Phil. 2:10-11). Can you really imagine that day? Is that the day that we're longing for and living for by faith?

But now something happens that may surprise us. We read in verses 48-49:

II. [Daniel 2:48-49](#) — Then the king gave Daniel high honors and many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of

Babylon. Daniel made a request of the king, and he appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego over the affairs of the province of Babylon. But Daniel remained at the king's court. We know that Babylon is destined to be destroyed by the kingdom of God – the very kingdom to which Daniel and his three companions ultimately belong. But here's Daniel himself serving in the court of the king of Babylon (the "head of gold") and requesting that his three companions be appointed by the king of Babylon over the affairs of the province of Babylon. How are we supposed to make sense of this? Are they compromising their true allegiance to the kingdom that will one day crush Babylon and make it like the chaff of the summer threshing floors? Can we feel that there's a tension here? If we can't, that may be a sign that we haven't yet fully grasped the meaning and interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. If we don't feel any tension here, that may be a sign that we haven't yet learned wisdom. Wisdom means that we're living in that tension between our true *belonging* to the eternal kingdom that *God* sets up and our living still in this world among the nations of our exile.

We don't like living in "tension" do we? So there are some who would resolve this tension by focusing mainly on the fact that this is where God has us now and so we should throw ourselves into the living of life here – which always leads to worldliness and compromise. There are others who would resolve this tension by focusing mainly on the fact that we belong to the eternal kingdom of God and so we should withdraw from the world and isolate ourselves while we wait for that kingdom to come and crush all the kingdoms of this world. Both of these views have a certain "logic" to them – it's just that neither of them is biblical. What we have here is that famous distinction that Jesus described as living in the world and even being sent into the world but not being of the world (Jn. 17:14-18). If we don't feel a tension here of all places (living "in" but not "of"), don't you think it's likely that we're not truly living wisely? Listen to what the Lord said through the prophet Jeremiah:

□ Jeremiah 29:4–7 — Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

How do we seek the welfare of the nations where we live in exile? In America, we have the freedom to fight for legislation that reflects God's moral law and that ultimately promotes the welfare of America and therefore the welfare of the church. Just because America isn't the kingdom of God and will never be the kingdom of God doesn't mean we shouldn't fight for legislation that respects the sanctity of life or that defines marriage as the union of one man and one woman or even legislation respecting marijuana, or prison reform, etc. In America, Christians can run for public office. This is a legitimate pursuit. In America, I would suggest that seeking the welfare of the nation where we live in exile requires that we vote faithfully and conscientiously in every single election (whether primary or general; whether local, state, or federal) as an expression of our Christian duty. I would suggest that seeking the welfare of the nation where we live in exile means voting for an evil simply because we believe it's the lesser of two evils. We could never justify doing this in the context of the church (voting for an elder as

the lesser of two evils), but as citizens of this nation where we live in exile – a nation that we know is ultimately destined to be destroyed and replaced by the kingdom that God sets up – I would suggest that this voting for the lesser of two evils is acceptable and perhaps even an expression of our Christian duty.

Of course, we're also called to work, and make a living (1 Thess. 4:11-12; 2 Thess. 3:10; Eph. 4:28), and provide for our families (1 Tim. 5:8) and responsibly prepare for the future and all of this very much involves living "in" this world. The Bible says that we should always be mindful of walking "properly" *before outsiders* (1 Thess. 4:11-12; Col. 4:5; 1 Pet. 2:12) and that we should seek to do good to everyone – including unbelievers (Gal. 6:10). The Bible commands us to "honor the emperor" (2 Pet. 2:17) and to be subject to the governing authorities, which includes conscientiously paying our taxes (2 Pet. 2:13-14; Rom. 13:1-7; Mat. 22:21). God specifically told the exiles to *pray* to the Lord on behalf of the cities where they lived. In the New Testament, Paul urges that "supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way" (1 Tim. 2:1-2). Connected with these prayers should also be our faithful *witness* to the truth about God's kingdom and the salvation that's only found in Jesus (1 Tim. 2:1-7).

All of these things clearly require that we have a thoroughgoing engagement with the world where we're living in exile – even with this world that's destined to be destroyed by that eternal kingdom to which we all belong. Can you feel, again, the inherent tension here? We're living in this world; we're called to a thoroughgoing engagement with this world; and yet the reality that the kingdom we belong to is not the kingdom of this world is a constant warning that our "engagement" must never be confused with compromise. Living in this world must never be the same thing as being of this world. And so we go on to read in chapter three:

III. Daniel 3:1 — King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its breadth six cubits. He set it up on the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon.

Does this "image of gold" remind you of the image in Nebuchadnezzar's dream? In that image, Nebuchadnezzar himself was the head of "gold," but now Nebuchadnezzar has constructed an image that's composed *entirely* of gold (or gold-plated) from head to toe – a massive image of gold 90 feet tall (probably including a pedestal) and 9 feet wide. This probably isn't an image of Nebuchadnezzar, but an image representing one of his gods (cf. 3:12, 14, 18, 28), and yet it's still a symbol of Nebuchadnezzar's own rule and authority – of the power and might of the kingdom of Babylon.

Can you see what Nebuchadnezzar's doing? He's claiming a kingdom that has no weakness, a kingdom that's followed by no other, a kingdom that's challenged by no one – not even by the God of heaven. You say: "What happened to Nebuchadnezzar's confession and worship in chapter two?" Here's a reminder and a warning to us that we can say and do things, but not truly mean them (2:46-47). We can understand things, but not *really* understand them (2:45).

“Nebuchadnezzar had experienced religious conviction without spiritual conversion... His sinful heart had been shaken, not renewed. The truth was that instead of having a new heart, he had the same old heart, now a little more hardened.” (Ferguson)

“As a traveler, in his way meeting with a violent storm of thunder and rain, immediately turns out of his way to some house or tree for his shelter, but yet this causes him not to give over his journey—so soon as the storm is over he returns to his way and progress again: so it is with man in bondage to sin. They are in a course of pursuing their lusts; the law meets with them in a storm of thunder and lightning from heaven, terrifies and hinders them in their way. This turns them for a season out of their course; they will run to prayer or amendment of life, for some shelter from the storm of wrath which is feared coming upon their consciences. But is their course stopped? Are there principles altered? Not at all; so soon as the storm is over, [so] that they begin to wear out that sense and the terror that was upon them, they return to their former course in the service of sin again.” (Owen; quoted in Ferguson)

May God mercifully keep each one of us from this same tragedy in our own lives.

Daniel said in chapter two:

- Daniel 2:44 — In the days of those kings the God of heaven will **set up [qum]** a kingdom that shall never be destroyed... It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall **stand [qum]** forever.

But now we see King Nebuchadnezzar making a massive image of gold and “**setting it up [qum]**” on the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. Eight more times in this chapter we’re going to hear about “the image that *Nebuchadnezzar* had **set up [qum]**” (3:2, 3, 5, 7, 12, 14, 18). Why do you think Daniel keeps repeating this phrase over and over again? Because he wants us to see “the image that *Nebuchadnezzar* sets up” (representing the might of his own kingdom) as that which is diametrically opposed to the eternal kingdom that God “sets up.” On the one hand, we’re called to a thoroughgoing engagement with the world in which we live; on the other hand, we’re called to see that there’s a sense in which this world in which we live and that coming kingdom to which we belong are diametrically opposed to each other and have nothing whatsoever in common with each other (cf. 2 Cor. 6:14-16).

- 2 Corinthians 6:14–16 — What partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols?

Truly living “in” the world must never be the same thing as being “of” this world. One of the signs that we’ve really grasped this is that we’ve learned what it is to feel and struggle with this tension in the practical living of our lives. We go on to read in verses 2-3:

IV. Daniel 3:2–3 — Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent to gather the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the

provinces to come to the dedication of **the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up**.

Then the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces gathered for the dedication of **the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up**. *And they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up*.

Are you seeing in every way how terrible and how very wrong this picture is? Is there something about this picture that's deeply disturbing to us? Daniel repeats twice in a row this elaborate list of all the officials of the provinces (the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates) all gathered for the dedication of this image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. And then he concludes: "And they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up."

It's a picture of the kingdom of man set up in opposition to the rule of God. It's the kingdom of man pursuing its own way and doing its own thing without any regard at all for the kingdom of God. These officials are from all the different provinces of the empire and so what we have here are people from all the nations and languages of the world gathered in this one place for the dedication of Nebuchadnezzar's image. It's a dramatic scene – but it's also fundamentally twisted and depraved. Can you see that already? Can you *see* what's *so wrong* with this picture?

Now that the officials are all gathered, we go on to read in verses 4-7:

V. Daniel 3:4-7 — And the herald proclaimed aloud, "You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace."

Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Did you notice another elaborate "list"? Just a moment ago it was a list of all the various officials (the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces), and now this time it's a list of all the various musical instruments (horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music). There's a sense of overawing power in this dedication that tells us it would be foolish not to conform – not to go with the flow, not to do what everyone else is doing. I think that's the point not only of the elaborate lists, but also of the word for word repetition. In verse two, Nebuchadnezzar sent to gather the officials (long list) for the dedication of the image that he had set up; in verse three the officials (long list repeated) gathered for the dedication of the image that he had set up. In verses 4-5, Nebuchadnezzar commands the peoples, nations, and languages to fall down and worship the golden image when they hear the sound of the music (long list); in verse seven all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden image when they heard the sound of the music (long list repeated). Even if this isn't a true unity (notice the threat of the "burning fiery furnace"), there's obviously a certain uniformity here isn't there? Everyone's

doing it. Everyone's doing the same thing. Everyone's bowing down to the image that Nebuchadnezzar set up.

Nebuchadnezzar hasn't said that the people can't go on worshipping their own gods; he's only commanded that his gods be the gods they all worship in common. His goal here isn't to force people to change religions or to deny their religious "convictions." He's only seeking to make sure that his empire is unified and strong and that all the peoples, nations, and languages under his rule will pledge their allegiance to him and to his kingdom. And, really, what's to stop them? Given the fact that they have no conviction against worshipping multiple gods, and given the fact that they're still free to worship their own gods, and given the fact that Nebuchadnezzar *is* their overlord, and given the threat of the burning fiery furnace, why should they not pledge their allegiance to Babylon by falling down and worshipping the image that Nebuchadnezzar has set up? It would be foolish not to conform. Everyone's doing it.

It's against this backdrop of universal conformity and uniformity that the next verses almost jump off the page at us.

VI. Daniel 3:8–12 — Therefore at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and maliciously accused the Jews. They declared to King Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, live forever! You, O king, have made a decree, that every man who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, shall fall down and worship the golden image. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into a burning fiery furnace. There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men, O king, pay no attention to you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

Into this peaceful, harmonious picture of universal conformity all of a sudden we have introduced this discordant note of three men who refuse to conform – three Jews who refuse to serve Nebuchadnezzar's gods or worship the golden image that he has set up. Why can't they just go along with the flow? Why can't they bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's image *and* still go on worshipping their own God – just like everyone else? After all, they are living in exile *in Babylon* and they have been appointed over the affairs of the province *of Babylon* (at the request of Daniel!).

What we need to see here is that the worship of a nation's gods was very intimately tied together with the living of all of life. You didn't have religion in one compartment and then politics and work and entertainment, and recreation and the rest of life in another compartment. Religion and the worship of the national deities permeated every part of life. So you can imagine that it was inconceivable to Nebuchadnezzar that anyone who refused to worship his gods could also be trusted in the social or political life of his empire. Never mind the fact that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had been trustworthy and reliable public servants up until this point, the fact that they won't bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's gods even under direct orders *must* be automatic proof of sedition and treason. How could it not be? Apion was an Egyptian who lived during the time of Jesus. The Roman historian Josephus (who also lived at the same time) reports that Apion asked this question: "If the Jews be citizens of Alexandria, why do they not worship the

same gods as the Alexandrians?” (quoted in Lucas) Can you see the tension, here, for Apion? And can you see at the same time the tension for the Jews? Can you see the tension from Nebuchadnezzar’s perspective? And can you see at the same time the tension for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego? By not bowing down to Nebuchadnezzar’s image, they’re saying far more than just, “We won’t bow down to your image.” They’re also saying, “We can’t live life like you live life; we can’t share the same values that you hold; **we can’t treat this kingdom of Babylon as though it were ultimate and eternal and God’s kingdom were not.**” By refusing to bow down to the image that Nebuchadnezzar set up they were saying in so many words, “We can be in the world and even have a thoroughgoing engagement with the world, but we cannot be of the world. *Why?* Because we’re looking for that kingdom before which all other kingdoms will ultimately fall – including even yours, O Nebuchadnezzar; including even the kingdom of Babylon.”

Conclusion

We’ll come back next week to see what happens with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, but for right now we can just ask ourselves this question: Have I learned by experience that tension between living “in” the world and even being sent into the world, but not being “of” the world? This is a tension that won’t ever go away until “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ” (Rev. 11:15). So therefore if we’re not wrestling and struggling with this tension, might this be a sign that we still need to learn wisdom?

Sometimes we can be guilty of withdrawing *from* the world and compromising *with* the world at the very same time. So what are the ways that we’ve withdrawn from a thoroughgoing engagement with this world in which we live and into which Jesus Himself has sent us? And at the same time, what are the ways that we’ve conformed and compromised by bowing down to the values and ideals of this world in our hearts? What are the ways that we’re living in this world *as if* it were ultimate and eternal and God’s kingdom were not? Are we lovers of pleasure, lovers of money, lovers of stuff, lovers of entertainment, lovers of knowledge, lovers of position and prestige, lovers of relationships? Even as we seek to live in this world, are we willing to be despised and hated as “non-conformists” when we refuse to bow down along with everyone else? Is all of our life ultimately even a willingness to die for the sake of our place in that kingdom that endures forever?

I think of the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans twelve:

- Romans 12:1–2 — I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

And then there are the words of the Apostle John:

- 1 John 2:15–17 — Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the

flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.