

Scripture Reading:

Acts 22:21 "Then [Jesus] said to me, 'Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles.' "And they listened to [Paul] until this word, and then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live!" 23 Then, as they cried out and tore off their clothes and threw dust into the air, 24 the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, and said that he should be examined under scourging, so that he might know why they shouted so against him. 25 And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who stood by, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, & uncondemned?" 26 When the centurion heard that, he went and told the commander, saying, "Take care what you do, for this man is a Roman." 27 Then the commander came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman?" He said, "Yes." 28 The commander answered, "With a large sum I obtained this citizenship." And Paul said, "But I was born a citizen."

"Paul is Protected by Rome!"

The title of my sermon is intended to cause a bit of a pause... The Jewish Apostle to the Gentiles has caused an uproar in Jerusalem and his help or protection comes from an unusual or unexpected quarter... The Roman Empire!

Much as the Prophet Habakkuk was shocked to hear that God was going to use the Babylonian Empire to discipline the nation of Israel, this should also be somewhat surprising. To help us understand all of this I want to speak this morning about the subject of narratives. *[ask the children: what is a narrative?]*

- Put simply, a narrative is the telling of a story!

There are many discussions today about narratives: From the story of one's own journey to so-called mega-narratives that attempt to explain the meaning of all things. Of course as Christians we know that the only true grand narrative is God's story of creation, fall and redemption!

It is sad, but almost comical, how the Hollywood and media elites attack what they see as the shallowness of Christians while all the time borrowing the great themes of God's magnificent story to use in their own stories! I often point people to Pastor Wilkin's work on church history because he helps us understand how God's story is the story of history and how the secular world works so hard to change that story & present their own alternative. The secular world has their work cut out for them when trying to come up with a better story, but they do try:

- The biggest problem they have is trying to explain the complexity of the universe, the wonder of man, & the question of evil without God:

The famous atheist Richard Dawkins gave it his best effort at a recent 'discussion' about the origins of man at Oxford University: He postulated that the laws of physics, working through evolution, had produced a terrific illusion of design which fooled all of humanity until the middle of the 19th century!

- THAT is quite a leap of faith!

IF you are like Mr. Dawkins and want a world without God, your mega- narrative will be very different from the story that God tells. IF you go to secular schools or follow secular media, here is basically what you are going to be told: The Greek and Roman Empires were the Golden age, where man began to evolve into a glorious intellectual state.

Sadly these important advancements were overrun by Christians and other barbarians and the world was cast into a long period of decline known as the dark ages.

After almost a thousand years, the Renaissance brought a revival of knowledge and learning and this in turn led to the Enlightenment where man found all the answers... Like that grand illusion of design!

- And of course we now live in the modern age!

A modern age that includes a great deal of despair because this mega-narrative provides no real answers to the pressing questions of life! However, we do need to understand how powerful their use of language is:

Terms like “golden age” “Renaissance” “Enlightenment” and “modern” are all a part of their mega-narrative. “Barbarians” “dark ages” “ignorance” and “old-fashioned” are the contrasting language used for what they dismiss as the ‘religious’ alternative. This is no accident and our covenant children, as well as all of us, must not only be aware of what is being done...

- BUT we must be ready & willing to share God’s story: Ready & willing to give an answer for the faith!

AND God’s grand narrative is much broader than ‘Jesus loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life,’ although that is certainly true for those who are His! Sadly at this recent forum at Oxford, the atheist, the agnostic AND the theist ALL agreed that man had evolved [*The theist was no less than the Bishop of Canterbury which should remind us why we read the Creation account on a regular basis!*]

- Thus all three ended up telling different versions of man’s story and no one presented God’s story!

None could affirm that man was made in the image of God and that our common parents had cast the human race into depravity with their rebellion. While the Bishop tried to say we could still learn some important lessons from the Book of Genesis, Mr. Dawkins rightly challenged him by saying if you don’t believe it is true, why do you keep it around!

- He simply asked the Bishop, why trust some old nomads when you can learn from much wiser men today?

Thus, sadly, at the end of this very ‘intellectual discussion,’ before many intelligent people, they had given nor found any real answers to the question of man’s significance, the problem of evil or found any real purpose for man.

- This is the reason there is so much despair in the midst of our material plenty today...
Though few give it much thought.

The secular story is told over and over in so many ways that it is soon like the water that fish swim in, never pondering that they are wet.

- But how does this relate to Paul and his troubles there in Jerusalem?

As we think about his interaction with the Roman officials up to this point and those that will follow over the next few chapters we do see how the Romans are in many ways protecting the Apostle Paul. He would have been killed by this mob or later assassins who take a serious vow to murder him even while in Roman custody.

- Paul is protected by Rome even as he is imprisoned by them!

We have considered the coming destruction of Jerusalem which Paul and the other church leaders of that time were well aware of because it is what Jesus said would happen!

- I also believe that there was a growing understanding by Paul and the other church leaders that the days of the Roman Empire were numbered as well.

This might well have been even more unbelievable for them then trying to imagine the destruction of Jerusalem.

It is not much of an exaggeration to say that Rome ran the world at this point of history...

There are many who even speculate that this is why Jesus came at this particular time when there was a common language as well as Roman security and Roman roads which allowed the Gospel to spread around the known world.

- What we can know is that Roman rule was not a surprise to God!

It was part of His story, and certainly in quite a different way from how Rome is seen in the world's story. Let's take a moment to consider how our God viewed this 'golden age.' Since God is the master story teller, it should not surprise us that He provides a very powerful & memorable picture of this time. It comes from a chapter in the Book of Daniel that we mention often here at Church of the King!

- For the sake of our maturing covenant children I want to take a moment to review it in some detail.

In Daniel chapter two we find the empires of Greece and Rome, as well as the earlier Babylonian and Persian empires: These were NOT a surprise to God! Rather they were there by His design, and served in part to both discipline and protect His people!

- They were used by God to bring history to its climax with the coming of Jesus!

The coming of Jesus brought forth, not a dark age, but the age of Christendom that laid the foundation for much of the liberty and prosperity we enjoy today & will in the end lead to the earth being filled with the Kingdom of Jesus! So to understand this we go to Daniel chapter two, where in the second year of King Nebuchadnezzar's reign, he is greatly disturbed by a dream.

- The King calls his wise men before him & brings them a challenge that is a GOOD example of how we should confront our modern 'wise men' like Richard Dawkins!

Daniel 2:3 "And the king said to them, "I have had a dream, and my spirit is anxious to know the dream." 4 Then the Chaldeans spoke to the king in Aramaic, "O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will give the interpretation." 5 The king answered and said to the Chaldeans, "My decision is firm: if you do not make known the dream to me, and its interpretation, you shall be cut in pieces, and your houses shall be made an ash heap. 6 However, if you tell the dream & its interpretation, you shall receive from me gifts, rewards, and great honor." 10 The Chaldeans answered the king, and said, "There is not a man on earth who can tell the king's matter; therefore no king, lord, or ruler has ever asked such things of any magician, astrologer, or Chaldean. 11 It is a difficult thing that the king requests, and there is no other who can tell it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh."

- These wise men had the same dilemma as those gathered at Oxford: The tough questions need input from God to answer and they refuse to let Him into the discussion!
- Here Daniel appeals to God, who gives him both the dream AND the interpretation and thus...
- Daniel gives God all the glory:

19 "Then the secret was revealed to Daniel in a night vision. So Daniel blessed the God of heaven. 20 Daniel answered and said: "Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, For wisdom and might are His. 21 And He changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and raises up kings; He gives wisdom to the wise & knowledge to those who have understanding. 22 He reveals deep and secret things; He knows what is in the darkness, And light dwells with Him. 23 "I thank You and praise You, O God of my fathers; 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 demand."

- We need to see that this is true not just with a single dream that is revealed but applies to all the great questions of life!
- The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord and those who reject Him are left as fools.

Daniel is taken to the King who wants to know if he has the answers:

- In telling the dream and its interpretation, Daniel shows how God uses these great empires AND clearly where the world is going in our time as well!
- But first, Daniel again gives God all the credit and glory!

27 "Daniel answered in the presence of the king, and said, "The secret which the king has demanded, the wise men, the astrologers, the magicians, and the soothsayers cannot declare to the king. 28 But there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days. Your dream, and the visions of your head upon your bed, were these:

29 As for you, O king, thoughts came to your mind while on your bed, about what would come to pass after this; and He who reveals secrets has made known to you what will be. [*God is revealing real history!*]

30 But as for me, this secret has not been revealed to me because I have more wisdom than anyone living, but for our sakes who make known the interpretation to the king, and that you may know the thoughts of your heart. [*encourage the kids to listen carefully*]

31 "You, O king, were watching; and behold, a great image! This great image, whose splendor was excellent, stood before you; and its form was awesome. [*Now THERE is a proper use of that word!*]

32 This image's head was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, 33 its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron & partly of clay. 34 You watched while a stone was cut out without hands, which struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. 35 Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold were crushed together, and became like chaff from the summer threshing floors; the wind carried them away so that no trace of them was found. And the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth. 36 "This is the dream. Now we will tell the interpretation of it before the king. 37 You, O king, are a king of kings. For the God of heaven has given you a kingdom, power, strength, and glory; 38 and wherever the children of men dwell, or the beasts of the field and the birds of the heaven, He has given them into your hand, and has made you ruler over them all—you are this head of gold. [*real history!*] 39 But after you shall arise another kingdom inferior to yours; [*Persians*] then another, a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over all the earth [*Alexander the Great & the Greek Empire*]. 40 And the fourth kingdom shall be as strong as iron, inasmuch as iron breaks in pieces and shatters everything; and like iron that crushes, that kingdom will break in pieces and crush all the others. [*An apt description of the great Roman Caesars & Rome's so-called 'golden age' which was an age of war and cruelty*] 41 Whereas you saw the feet and toes, partly of potter's clay and partly of iron, the kingdom shall be divided; yet the strength of the iron shall be in it, just as you saw the iron mixed with ceramic clay. 42 And as the toes of the feet were partly of iron and partly of clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly fragile. 43 As you saw iron mixed with ceramic clay, they will mingle with the seed of men; but they will not adhere to one another, just as iron does not mix with clay."

- We considered the turmoil in the Roman Empire of that day a few weeks ago when we talked about the coming destruction of Jerusalem...
- Again we should see that Daniel's interpretation is right on the mark.

44 "And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever."

- Does this sound like a coming age of darkness?
- Does this sound like the 'golden age' was lost until it could be found again in the Renaissance?
[*mention the discussion of the cathedrals v. roman ruins*]

- Daniel assures the King that God has revealed true truth to Him, including real history, just as He has today in His Word for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear!

45 “Inasmuch as you saw that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold--the great God has made known to the king what will come to pass after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation is sure.” 46 “Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell on his face, prostrate before Daniel, and commanded that they should present an offering and incense to him. 47 The king answered Daniel, and said, “Truly your God is the God of gods, the Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets, since you could reveal this secret.”

- God has given Daniel an unbelievable opportunity and the King has an unbelievable response!
[fell on his face]

We also know that it was not yet the final conversion of the King!

- Perhaps this is how the Church is handling this passage as well!
- We have talked often about the Book of Acts being the story of how the Spirit is filling the earth with the Kingdom of Jesus.
- We must learn to embrace this in the same way that Daniel challenged the King: “The dream is certain, and its interpretation is sure.”

The Apostle Paul embraced this truth and thus he did not fear to be in the hands of the Romans!

He KNEW that their divided kingdom would soon join the others in the dust bin of history and that the Kingdom of Jesus would now fill the earth!

- Was it hard for him to believe at times?
- I am sure that I it was!

In fact, in a few weeks we will see how Jesus comes to Paul at night and personally assures him that he is going to be OK!

- It is easy to let the circumstances that we see around us to muddle the vision that God has given us.
- Sadly, we live in a nation where the Christians often lead the way in the school of pessimism.

Such should not be the case and we can do better by trusting the promises that God has given...

AND remembering the important lesson that Asaph teaches us in Psalm 73: He begins where many are today: “Truly God is good to Israel, To such as are pure in heart. 2 But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; My steps had nearly slipped.”

- Asaph knew the promises of God sounded good and that God loved His people...
- But the circumstances around him were just overwhelming...

3 “For I was envious of the boastful, When I saw the prosperity of the wicked. 4 For there are no pangs in their death, But their strength is firm. 5 They are not in trouble as other men, Nor are they plagued like other men. 6 Therefore pride serves as their necklace; Violence covers them like a garment. *[think Planned Parenthood]* 7 Their eyes bulge with abundance; They have more than heart could wish. 8 They scoff and speak wickedly concerning oppression; They speak loftily.

- You do not have to watch, hear or read much of the news today without knowing EXACTLY how Asaph felt!

9 “They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walks through the earth. 10 Therefore his people return here, And waters of a full cup are drained by them. 11 And they say, "How does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?" 12 Behold, these are the ungodly, Who are always at ease; They increase in riches [*think Bill Gates, Warren Buffett Mitt Romney*].

- It appears to Asaph that the secular story is the story that is winning *and maybe to us as well* ☹
- God’s truth and God’s people seem to be completely overrun and those who reject God are the ones who prosper!

16 “When I thought how to understand this, It was too painful for me-- 17 Until I went into the sanctuary of God; Then I understood their end.”

- Asaph enters the sanctuary, as we do in worship and our study of God’s Word & he is reminded about whose story is really being told:
- [*tell about my optimism in the political realm*]

18 “Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction.

19 Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment!” They are utterly consumed with terrors.”

- Asaph concludes this Psalm by reflecting on how foolish he had been, a foolishness that we will share IF we do not remember whose story is really being told!

21 “Thus my heart was grieved, And I was vexed in my mind. 22 I was so foolish and ignorant; I was like a beast before You. 23 Nevertheless I am continually with You; You hold me by my right hand. 24 You will guide me with Your counsel, And afterward receive me to glory. 25 Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You. 26 My flesh and my heart fail; But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. 27 For indeed, those who are far from You shall perish; You have destroyed all those who desert You for harlotry. 28 But it is good for me to draw near to God; I have put my trust in the Lord God, That I may declare all Your works.”

- We are to know God’s story and we are to tell God’s story!

Our hymn of response this morning is one that has quickly become one of my personal favorites: *God Moves in a Mysterious Way...*

- Something that the Apostle Paul would often have pondered during his ministry
- And especially in these final years of Roman captivity.

I think the hymn writer has captured how we should reflect upon the truth of Daniel’s interpretation of the King’s dream and how we will see it work out in history: “Deep in unfathomable mines of never failing skill, He treasures up His bright designs and works His sovereign will!”

- Let us arise to boldly sing this hymn of faith, and pray that God will also make ALL these things plain to us!

Communion Meditation:

Exodus 12: “ 21 Then Moses called for all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Pick out and take lambs for yourselves according to your families, and kill the Passover lamb. 22 And you shall take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and strike the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood that is in the basin. And none of you shall go out of the door of his house until morning. 23 For the Lord will pass through to strike the Egyptians; and when He sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the Lord will pass over the door and not allow the destroyer to come into your houses to strike you. 24 And you shall observe this thing as an ordinance for you and your sons forever.