

Daniel:
Conviction in an Age of Compromise

The March of Time

Daniel 2:24-49

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The March of Time

Scripture

As we continue in our series of sermons in the book of Daniel, we come today to Daniel's interpretation of king Nebuchadnezzar's dream. It is going to require our careful attention as we work our way through the interpretation of this dream. But its message is very significant for us today.

So, with that in mind, let me read Daniel 2:24-49:

²⁴ Then Daniel went to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to execute the wise men of Babylon, and said to him, "Do not execute the wise men of Babylon. Take me to the king, and I will interpret his dream for him."

²⁵ Arioch took Daniel to the king at once and said, "I have found a man among the exiles from Judah who can tell the king what his dream means."

²⁶ The king asked Daniel (also called Belteshazzar), "Are you able to tell me what I saw in my dream and interpret it?"

²⁷ Daniel replied, "No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, ²⁸ but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come. Your dream and the visions that passed through your mind as you lay on your bed are these:

²⁹ "As you were lying there, O king, your mind turned to things to come, and the revealer of mysteries showed you what is going to happen. ³⁰ As for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because I have greater wisdom than other living men, but so that you, O king, may know the interpretation and that you may understand what went through your mind.

³¹ "You looked, O king, 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 broken to pieces at the same time 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.

³⁶ “This was the dream, and now we will interpret it to the king. ³⁷ You, O king, 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 mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold.

³⁹ “After you, another kingdom will rise, 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.

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 forever. 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 the interpretation is trustworthy.”

⁴⁶ Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor 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 administrators over the province of Babylon, while Daniel himself remained at the royal court. (Daniel 2:24-49)

Introduction

Some of you may remember the old newsreels that were shown weekly in most movie theaters many years ago. The newsreels were produced by the *Time-Life* Corporation and were called “The March of Time.” They began airing just before WW II.

The newsreel always began with exciting marching music, the voice of an enthusiastic and assured announcer, and a series of scenes from around the world—impressing the viewer with our new, modern, “fast-paced” age. The title of the series really summed it up. Time really did seem to be marching along. It was an age of progress! Even in the midst of bad news there was always a strong sense that time would eventually take care of things and that progress was inevitable.

But times have changed. After the trauma of two world wars in one generation, the nightmare of Hitler’s Germany, the wars in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq, and the attacks on 9/11, that old optimistic, progressive view of history is hard to find today. It seems to have given way to a view that sees history as just a series of unrelated and uncontrolled events. Some people are concerned that we are going to blow up our planet with a nuclear bomb. Others think we will be wiped out by global warming or perhaps by some asteroid striking planet Earth.

There are few questions as crucial in today’s world as that of the meaning of history. Theologian Hendrikus Berkhof wrote, “Our generation is becoming strangled by fear. Fear for man, for

his future, and for the direction in which we are now being driven against our will and desire. And out of this comes a cry for illumination concerning the meaning of the existence of mankind, and concerning the goal to which we are directed. It is a cry for an answer to the age-old question of the meaning of history.”

Christians ought to know the answer to the question of the meaning of history. But the truth is that most Christians today really don’t. We have not learned to view life and history from the perspective of the reign of Christ. And the tragic consequences of this secularized world view are starting to be seen in our personal lives and in our culture.

Does history really march? And if it does, to which drummer does it march?

The ancient Greeks took a cyclical view of history believing that history is not marching toward any specific goal but simply repeating itself in never-ending cycles.

The postmodernists of our day believe that history is devoid of any meaning. History is only a succession of utterly unrelated and meaningless events. Therefore, to find your way to authentic existence you must learn how to make significant decisions in a meaningless and insignificant world.

Where is the key that unlocks the true meaning of history?

Fortunately, there is an infinite, personal God who rules history and spoken to us about its meaning in the Scriptures.

In our previous study of Daniel 2 we saw that king Nebuchadnezzar had a dream one night that was so upsetting to him that he couldn’t sleep. So he demanded that his wise men interpret the dream for him. Finding them unable to do so, he ordered their execution along with all the other wise men of Babylon—including young Daniel and his three friends.

Lesson

In Daniel 2:24-49 God has given us a survey of history. I shall use the following outline to examine the dream:

1. The Dream Revealed (2:24-30),
2. The Dream Described (2:31-35), and
3. The Dream Interpreted (2:36-49).

I. The Dream Revealed (2:24-30)

So, let us look at the dream revealed.

Daniel and his friends began to pray that God would reveal the mystery of this dream to them. And God answered that prayer by revealing to Daniel both the king's dream and its interpretation—thereby giving us an amazing revelation into the meaning of history.

The king asked Daniel (also called Belteshazzar), “Are you able to tell me what I saw in my dream and interpret it?”

Daniel replied, “No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come. Your dream and the visions that passed through your mind as you lay on your bed are these:

“As you were lying there, O king, your mind turned to things to come, and the revealer of mysteries showed you what is going to happen. As for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because I have greater wisdom than other living men, but so that you, O king, may know the interpretation and that you may understand what went through your mind” (2:26-30).

II. The Dream Described (2:31-35)

Next, Daniel described the dream to king Nebuchadnezzar.

Beginning in verse 31 Daniel stands before the king and tells him what he had dreamed: **“You looked, O king, and there before you stood a large statue—an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance.”**

This statue Nebuchadnezzar saw was so awesome that Daniel describes it as **“enormous”** and **“dazzling”**—words that denote a sense of blaze or a halo of light around it.

To the king’s utter amazement, Daniel then begins to tell him a detailed description of what the statue looked like: **“The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay”** (2:32-33). Notice how these successive metals deteriorate in value as you work your way down from head to toes. It starts with **gold** and ends with **clay**.

At this point what had been a still picture becomes a moving picture! Notice what happens. Daniel then tells the king, **“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. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were broken to pieces at the same time 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”** (2:34-35).

No wonder Nebuchadnezzar couldn’t sleep! What did it all mean? And how does this speak to the meaning of history?

III. The Dream Interpreted (2:36-49)

Finally, Daniel interpreted the dream for king Nebuchadnezzar.

In verse 36 Daniel says, **“This was the dream, and now we will interpret it to the king.”**

A. The Four Great Kingdoms of History (2:37-43)

Then in verses 37-43 Daniel says that the four different parts of the statue represent four successive world empires or kingdoms.

1. The First Kingdom Is Babylon (2:37-38)

The first kingdom is Babylon.

Daniel says in verses 37-38, **“You, O king, are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; in your hands he has placed mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold.”**

Babylon had always been great but, during Nebuchadnezzar’s reign, it had risen to heights of previously unmatched magnificence. Babylon was the first major world kingdom.

2. The Second Kingdom Is Medo-Persia (2:39a)

The second kingdom is Medo-Persia.

In verse 39a, **“After you, another kingdom will rise, inferior to yours.”** In parallel imagery later in Daniel 8:20 we learn that this is Medo-Persian Empire.

The Babylonian kingdom was conquered by the Medes and the Persians about 60 years after Daniel gave this interpretation of the dream (in about 539 BC.) This second kingdom was never as strong as Babylon had been in its days of glory.

3. The Third Kingdom Is Greece (2:39b)

The third kingdom is Greece.

In verse 39b, **“Next, a third kingdom, one of bronze, will rule over the whole earth.”** We learn in chapter 8:21 that the third kingdom “represents the kingdom of Greece.”

Two hundred years after the Medes and Persians, the Greeks conquered the world under the leadership of Alexander the Great.

4. The Fourth Kingdom Is Rome (2:40-43)

And the fourth kingdom is Rome.

Verse 40 says, **“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.”** No one ruled with a fist of iron like Rome in her early years. Rome crushed and broke all preceding empires.

But verses 41-43 tell us that because of division and internal weakness, described here as clay mixed with iron, even that mighty Roman empire would eventually deteriorate and grow weak: **“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. As the toes were partly iron and partly clay, so this kingdom will be partly strong and partly brittle. 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.”**

B. The Fifth Great Kingdom of History (2:44-45)

But, there is a fifth great kingdom of history too.

After outlining these four great epochs of human history, Daniel then describes what is the most important part of this dream. You see, as great as all these human kingdoms are, none of them takes center stage in the dream of Nebuchadnezzar. There is a fifth kingdom Daniel describes in a class all by itself.

Notice the unique nature of this kingdom. In verse 44 we are told that this kingdom will be God’s creation: **“In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom.”** It is an indestructible kingdom: **“that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people.”** It is also an all-victorious kingdom: **“It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.”**

When will this kingdom of God come? In verse 44a Daniel tells us the kingdom of God will come **“in the time of those kings.”** Although many today would like to project these kings

into our future, the most obvious and natural antecedent of **“those kings”** in verse 44 is undoubtedly those kings and kingdoms just referred to in the preceding verses, i.e. verses 36-43.

Here is where our view of history begins to be shaped: The establishment of God’s kingdom in history is running on a parallel track to the rise and fall of all the kingdoms of this world. Although God’s kingdom may be unnoticed by the leaders of history, it is still present and growing right along side the rise and fall of all the kingdoms of man.

And verse 45 tells us that one day all the kingdoms of the world will be shattered against this kingdom that God establishes. In verse 45 **“the rock cut out of the mountain, but not by human hands”** is a symbol of this supernatural kingdom of God. Here we see that this rock will break **“the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces.”** In other words, the kingdom of God will ultimately shatter all the kingdoms of this world.

The rise and fall of empires and emperors is not ultimately military or financial or political but rather spiritual. The rise and fall of the great kingdoms are not accidents of history, but the providential outworking of a sovereign God on kingdoms that have turned from his ways.

If you look back again at verse 34, Daniel seems to be describing a rather decisive moment during the time of the fourth kingdom when the kingdom of God will break into human history with great power. Verse 34 tells us **“the rock struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay.”**

You see, this **rock** in the dream represents Christ who is the king this fifth kingdom. He is the stone that crushes all the kingdoms of this world because he is the stone that the builders rejected which became the chief cornerstone (cf. Acts 4:11).

The Bible tells us that the focal point of human history is the cross of Jesus Christ. When Christ’s blood was shed on the cross, the Bible teaches that was it for human history. Instead of being a humiliating defeat for the kingdom of God, it was our king’s greatest victory!

The Bible teaches that it was on the cross that Jesus delivered that fatal blow to our enemies of Satan, Sin, Death and Hell. These enemies have now been conquered for us through Jesus death and resurrection.

Everything that has transpired since the cross has flowed out of that triumphant work that Jesus accomplished there. And when Jesus comes again it will merely be the conclusion of that which has already been accomplished by what he did on the cross.

Conclusion

When Daniel and his friends heard this message they found new hope and confidence in spite of all their problems.

This message is also meant to encourage you by reminding you that although at times your life may appear to be a confusing collage of unconnected events—it is in reality, a vital part of the unfolding of a Divine Plan.

But the good news is that the fifth kingdom, the kingdom of God, has already come! And when Jesus returns, what is now hidden will be made manifest to the entire world. And all the kingdoms of man will be shattered against this one magnificent kingdom of God.

We are told in God's word that this kingdom, of which we are now citizens, will ultimately triumph! Whatever other elements of this dream may fascinate you, do not allow anything to obscure this one central fact: And that is that God's kingdom will eventually triumph! Amen.

Mission Statement

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and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Our gracious, sovereign God, we pause to thank you for including us in your plan for the ages. We have no reason for pride. It is with a deep sense of humility that we acknowledge that we are citizens in your kingdom, children in your family, simply because of what Jesus has done for us in his life, death, and resurrection.

For those here today who have still not received Christ into their lives, I pray, O God, that you would cause them even now to come to you.

O Lord God, we all long for that day when all things will be made new, when the veil of heaven will be torn back and you, Lord Jesus, will be revealed to all as the king of Kings and lord of Lords, when all wrongs will be made right, and when all pain and sorrow and grief will be taken from us. But until that day, teach us how to draw strength from these truths we have learned today so that in the meantime we might acknowledge your Lordship in every area of our lives.

All of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

In John Bunyan's classic work, *Pilgrim's Progress*, the main character, Christian, came to understand the full meaning of his identity as a citizen of heaven. He learned to see himself as a pilgrim merely passing through this land on the way to a much better place. And in that knowledge his entire life was changed and found great encouragement as he faced the many trials of life. I charge you to live as a citizen of heaven, and as you do may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.