

Daniel 2:1-49

Introduction

The book of Job, in the Bible, tells the story of the sufferings of a righteous man. Most of the book records a conversation between Job and his friends as they try to make sense of what he's going through. But in the middle, there's an interlude. It's about the search for wisdom. And it asks a question. Where can wisdom be found? Where does it come from?

It begins by contrasting wisdom with silver and gold. It points out that we know where precious metals can be found. And we've become very skilled at mining them. Likewise with other commodities. Over the last few weeks, the Jackdaw gas field has been in the news, as well as the Rosebank oil field. There's a debate about whether they should be opened for drilling. But the point is that, if we want to find oil and gas, we know where to look. We know where to find them. But what about wisdom? Where can *that* be found? Where does the wisdom we need to live life well come from?

The chapter of Daniel that we're looking at this morning points us to the answer. It contains two important truths. Daniel knows them. Nebuchadnezzar learns them. And they're truths that we need to learn if we're to live wisely. Here's the first of them: There is a God who speaks. That's our first heading: there is a God who speaks.

There is a God who speaks

In verse 1, we're told this: **In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind was troubled and he could not sleep.**

We might expect Nebuchadnezzar to be the kind of man who sleeps well at night. He's the most powerful man in the world. His rule extends as far as his eyes can see, and further. He lives in luxury.

Over the summer, a friend of mine went on holiday to Corsica with his family. While they were there, a massive superyacht moored in the harbour. Out of interest, he went online to find out how much it would cost to hire. £800,000 per week. To Nebuchadnezzar, that would have been spare change. He was accustomed to living in luxury. And he had the kind of power that world leaders today can only dream of. If anyone should sleep well, surely it was him. Yet, as we join the story in chapter 2, he's having a recurring nightmare. It's keeping him awake at night. He's a religious man. And perhaps he's wondering whether the gods he worships are trying to warn him about something. So, he calls for his wise men and asks them to tell him what to make of it. 'Fine,' they say. 'Tell us the dream and we'll tell you what it means.'

'No,' says Nebuchadnezzar. 'That's not what I'm going to do. *This* is what I'm going to do. I want you to tell me what my dream was and then tell me what it means, and if you don't, I'm going to have you cut into pieces and your homes turned into piles of rubble.'

Talk about being unreasonable! Apparently, Madonna once asked for a brand-new toilet seat at every concert venue she performed in. Before appearing on a TV show, Kanye West

is said to have asked a member of staff to iron the dressing room carpet before he stepped on it. Justin Timberlake apparently asked for all doorknobs to be disinfected every two hours. I don't know whether those claims are true. But even if they are, Nebuchadnezzar's demand here surely takes top spot in the unreasonableness charts. It's on a whole different scale. And his wise men tell him as much. Look at verse 10.

The astrologers answered the king, 'There is no one on earth who can do what the king asks! No king, however great and mighty, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or astrologer. What the king asks is too difficult. No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among humans.'

That last sentence is very telling. The wise men are saying to the king, 'The gods alone can do what you're asking, and they're inaccessible to us.'

Last week I went to visit some members of the congregation. We drank coffee and had a lovely time talking. In fact, it was so enjoyable that I completely lost track of time. At one point, I noticed the screen of my phone light up. And when I checked it, I realised that I had *really* lost track of time. I had several Missed Calls. My daughters had arrived home from school and had tried to phone me. My wife, Rachel, had arrived home from work and had tried to phone me. And there weren't just Missed Calls, there were text messages too! From my daughters, 'Dad, where are you?' From my wife, 'Martin, where are you?' All they had needed was for me to answer the phone and speak to them. Then I could have told them where I was and when I'd be home. But of course, my phone was on silent. I was inaccessible to them; out of reach. And that's what the wise men are saying here of their gods. They're out of reach. There's no point asking them for answers, because they're inaccessible.

It raises the question of whether there is such a thing as revelation. Is there a God who speaks to us and reveals mysteries? Is it possible to receive revelation from outside this world? These wise men don't think so. And there are many in the world today who would agree with them. You might be one of them. As we look for answers to the kinds of questions *we're* asking, questions of meaning and purpose, the atheist says, 'There is no god, so there can't be such a thing as revelation. Don't waste your time seeking answers there.' The agnostic says, 'If there is a god, they're out of reach, and certainly don't communicate with us. If there *are* answers to our questions, we have no way of knowing them.' But Daniel knows otherwise. When the king issues the decree to have all the wise men put to death, he asks for time. Then he goes home to pray. He asks God for mercy. And when the mystery is revealed to him in a vision, he bursts out in praise.

Verse 20. He says: **'Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning. He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him. I thank and praise you, God of my ancestors; you have given me wisdom and power, you have made known to me what we asked of you, you have made known to us the dream of the king.'**

Daniel knows that there *is* a God. And not one who is out of reach, but one who speaks into our world, to give wisdom and knowledge and reveal deep and hidden things. He is the God of the Bible, who has spoken to his people throughout history, and shown himself to be reliable. He has spoken in the past through dreams and visions and prophecies. He has spoken ultimately by his Son, Jesus Christ, who came into the world to make him known. He has caused all that he has spoken to be written down and preserved. And he continues to speak to us through it today.

That's what makes the book that you've got open in front of you the most precious book in the world. Roughly 100 million copies are printed and then sold or given away every year. It contains all that we need to make sense of life and live well. It's more valuable than the most luxurious superyacht. The book of Job asks: **where can wisdom be found?... The deep says, 'It is not in me'; the sea says, 'It is not with me.' It cannot be bought with the finest gold, nor can its price be weighed out in silver.** (Job 28:12, 14-15). Yet we hold it in our hands! Surely, it would be foolish to ignore it.

That's why I'm so thrilled that you're here with us this morning as we open the Bible together. It's why it's so important that those of us who are Christians get into the habit of reading the Bible for ourselves at home, from the youngest to the oldest. And it's why we long to open the Bible with you, if you wouldn't yet call yourself a Christian. I'd love to speak with you about doing that. And I'd love to invite you along to a course we're running soon, called Christianity Explored, which will give you the opportunity to find out what it's all about. Please do ask me about it after the service.

There is a God who speaks, who gives wisdom and knowledge. The obvious implication is that we need to listen to what he says. But that isn't the only truth this passage contains. As Daniel explains the dream, Nebuchadnezzar discovers another truth; that there is a God who governs history. That's our second heading: there is a God who governs history.

There is a God who governs history

Daniel asks to be taken to the king, and straight away he wants the king to know where the interpretation has come from. Look at verse 26.

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

Deniel 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 were lying in bed are these:'

And then he describes Nebuchadnezzar's dream of a large statue made of gold, silver and bronze, with legs of iron and feet partly of iron and partly of clay. I was tempted to ask Robert to make a Lego model for us, which I'm sure he would have loved, and might have

been helpful. But I'm not sure that would have been the best use of his time, so I spared him the trouble.

We're not told many details about the statue, but what we *are* told is that these four metals represent four kingdoms. And from our vantage point it's easy to identify them. The first is Babylonia. The second is the Medo-Persian kingdom that came after it. That was followed by the Greeks under Alexander the Great. And the legs of iron and feet of clay is the Roman Empire that came after him.

This is all good news for Nebuchadnezzar. The dream had been troubling him. He'd been losing sleep over it. But the good news is that there is no imminent threat to his kingdom. It *will* be replaced. But not in *his* time. He can sleep easily. No wonder he falls at Daniel's feet in verse 46 and proclaims, **'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.'** You can almost hear the relief in his voice!

But that's not the only thing he's learnt. He's also learnt that for all his wealth and military might, he isn't the one in control. God is. At least, that's what he should have learnt, if he reflected on Daniel's words in verse 37. He says: **'Your Majesty, you 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 all mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds in the sky.'**

No doubt, Nebuchadnezzar was chuffed to bits to be described as the head of gold and to rule over such an impressive kingdom. But Daniel was also making clear where his kingdom had come from. It had come from God. As he said in verse 21, it is God who **changes times and seasons, he deposes kings and raises up others.**

History is in *his* hands. It isn't just the result of cause and effect. It's governed.

What a comfort that knowledge must have been to Daniel and the rest of the exiles, as they started life in Babylon as a conquered people, far from their home in Jerusalem. There was no need to panic. There was no need to despair. God was in control.

History is in *his* hands. And it isn't just going round in circles. It's heading somewhere. These four kingdoms would be replaced by another kingdom.

In verse 34, Daniel describes it as **a rock that was cut out, but not by human hands.**

In verse 37, he says it will become **a huge mountain and fill the whole earth.**

And see how he describes this kingdom in verse 44.

It's a permanent kingdom, **that will never be destroyed.**

It's an invincible kingdom, that will not **be left to another people.**

It's a victorious kingdom, that **will crush** all other kingdoms **and bring them to an end.**

It's an eternal kingdom, that **will itself endure for ever.**

Ultimately, it will triumph over the whole world, despite the apparent weakness and insignificance of its beginnings: just a stone.

To Daniel and the other exiles, the meaning of this stone would have been a mystery. But if you were with us two weeks ago, when we were looking at 1 Peter, you'll remember that the New Testament has a lot to say about this stone. It turns out that it's a cornerstone and a stone that will cause people to stumble. This stone is Jesus. This kingdom is *his* kingdom. It's not like worldly kingdoms. It's a kingdom of love and grace and life. It has been growing throughout history. The decisive moment came at the height of the Roman Empire, when, on a hill outside Jerusalem, Jesus died on a cross and, on the third day, rose again. Since then, it has spread throughout the world. And one day, when Jesus returns, it will crush all other kingdoms and bring them to an end,

God deposes kings and raises up others, and he has made Jesus King forever through his death and resurrection. He will never vacate his throne. Other kingdoms will come and go. Despite their splendour, the empires of the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans have all been and gone. The superpowers of our own day will all one day pass. But his kingdom is an eternal kingdom that will endure forever.

Conclusion

How you and I relate to this kingdom is therefore of the utmost importance. Of course, we can dismiss it and spend our lives pursuing things that will one day pass. That's to follow the wisdom of the world. The world says that meaning and purpose are to be found by pursuing pleasure, and possessions, and power, and popularity. We *can* live for those things. We can live for them at school, and at work, and at home. But one day we'll find that we're left with nothing. Everything we've spent our lives working for will be lost.

Or we can devote ourselves to the one thing that will last forever. As we live today as exiles in the world, longing for our true home in heaven, there's no need to panic. We might face hostility from those around us. We might feel increasingly as though our faith in the God of the Bible is no longer welcome. But there's no need to despair. God is in control. History is in his hands. And one day his kingdom, the kingdom of his Son, Jesus Christ, will triumph over the whole world. This is where true wisdom is to be found. It's in devoting ourselves to him and giving our best to his kingdom.

The wisdom of the world or the wisdom that comes from God. Which will you choose?

Let's pray.

Loving Father, we praise you, because you are a God who speaks and reveals mysteries. Please help us to pay attention to all that you have to say to us in your word, the Bible. Please help us to look forward with confidence to the future you have in store for us, in the kingdom of your Son. And as we go about our daily lives, please help us to give our best to his kingdom, as we wait for his return. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.