

Your God is Too Small

Daniel 2

6/13/21

On March 18, 2020 I sent a letter to the congregation outlining the first steps we were taking to mitigate the spread of the Coronavirus here at GPC. Those steps included shutting down public worship for a period of time and canceling most church activities. I concluded the letter with what I thought was a word of hope, reminding the congregation that “God is still in control, even when it doesn’t feel like it.” One of our members returned the letter to me, underlining that part and commenting, “If God is in control, I hate to think what things would be like if the devil was in control!” Hmmm. He does have a point, doesn’t he? Is God really in control of our world? It sure doesn’t look like it sometimes! Today’s story from Daniel 2 addresses this question.

Remember that Daniel and his three friends had been taken captive to Babylon and had been trained for service in the king’s court as his advisors. Here’s what happened next.

*In the second year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign, Nebuchadnezzar dreamed such dreams that his spirit was troubled and his sleep left him. <sup>2</sup>So the king commanded that the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans be summoned to tell the king his dreams. When they came in and stood before the king, <sup>3</sup>he said to them, “I have had such a dream that my spirit is troubled by the desire to understand it.” <sup>4</sup>The Chaldeans said to*

the king (in Aramaic), "O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will reveal the interpretation."<sup>5</sup> The king answered the Chaldeans, "This is a public decree: if you do not tell me both the dream and its interpretation, you shall be torn limb from limb, and your houses shall be laid in ruins."<sup>6</sup> But if you do tell me the dream and its interpretation, you shall receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor. Therefore tell me the dream and its interpretation."<sup>7</sup> They answered a second time, "Let the king first tell his servants the dream, then we can give its interpretation."<sup>8</sup> The king answered, "I know with certainty that you are trying to gain time, because you see I have firmly decreed:<sup>9</sup> if you do not tell me the dream, there is but one verdict for you. You have agreed to speak lying and misleading words to me until things take a turn. Therefore, tell me the dream, and I shall know that you can give me its interpretation."<sup>10</sup> The Chaldeans answered the king, "There is no one on earth who can reveal what the king demands! In fact, no king, however great and powerful, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or Chaldean."<sup>11</sup> The thing that the king is asking is too difficult, and no one can reveal it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with mortals."<sup>12</sup> Because of this the king flew into a violent rage and commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be destroyed.<sup>13</sup> The decree was issued, and the wise men were about to be executed; and they looked for Daniel and his companions, to execute them. (Daniel 2:1-13)

In the ancient near-East, dreams had great significance, seen as a way for the gods to communicate with humans, especially with rulers of the people. In this case, Nebuchadnezzar has a very troubling dream, but apparently cannot remember it! He senses that there is an important message in it, and is frustrated that he can't figure it out. So, he calls his advisors for help- magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and Chaldeans. These are people who are highly skilled in interpreting dreams, but they can't help him. He threatens them as only a tyrant can, but they are still unable to tell him the dream and its interpretation. So, the king prepares to have them all executed, including Daniel and his friends. Here's what happens next.

*<sup>14</sup>Then Daniel responded with prudence and discretion to Arioch, the king's chief executioner, who had gone out to execute the wise men of Babylon; <sup>15</sup>he asked Arioch, the royal official, "Why is the decree of the king so urgent?" Arioch then explained the matter to Daniel. <sup>16</sup>So Daniel went in and requested that the king give him time and he would tell the king the interpretation. <sup>17</sup>Then Daniel went to his home and informed his companions, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, <sup>18</sup>and told them to seek mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that Daniel and his companions with the rest of the wise men of Babylon might not perish. <sup>19</sup>Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision of the night,*

*and Daniel blessed the God of heaven. <sup>20</sup>Daniel said: "Blessed be the name of God from age to age, for wisdom and power are his. <sup>21</sup>He changes times and seasons, deposes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding. <sup>22</sup>He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and light dwells with him. <sup>23</sup>To you, O God of my ancestors, I give thanks and praise, for you have given me wisdom and power, and have now revealed to me what we asked of you, for you have revealed to us what the king ordered."* (Dan. 2:14-23)

Daniel carefully approaches the king's executioner to find out what's going on. He then boldly goes before the king, promising that he will be able to tell the king his dream and its interpretation! Then he asks all his friends to pray that he'll be able to do it! And God answers their prayers, revealing the dream to Daniel, and what it meant. Daniel then offers a hymn of thanksgiving to God, and in this Psalm he professes his belief that God is in control of international affairs. "*(God) changes times and seasons, deposes kings and sets up kings,*" he says. (Dan. 2:21)

This is a profound insight. Generally, ancient people believed their gods had power over a particular region. Baal had power in Canaan. Chemosh had power in Moab. Marduk had power in Babylon. But Daniel asserts that the God of Israel has power over the whole earth! And that he

is active in human affairs everywhere. This is consistent with the beginning of the book where we read that the king of Judah fell under the power of Babylon because God allowed it. Nothing happens by chance. We'll come back to this theme a little later. But now- back to the story!

The chief executioner brought Daniel to the king. Daniel, carefully giving credit to the God of Israel, tells the king his dream and its interpretation! In the dream, the king saw a huge, imposing statue with a head made of gold, arms and chest made of silver, torso and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of clay and iron. Then a stone was cut out "not by human hands" and struck the statue on its feet and the statue fell to the ground, disintegrating into tiny pieces blown away by the wind. But the stone became a great mountain and filled the earth!

Daniel, careful to praise the king for his power, interprets the dream as follows. Each part of the statue represents a kingdom, with the golden head representing Nebuchadnezzar himself. There is debate among scholars as to what the other kingdoms are, but probably the Persians, Greeks, and Romans are involved- kingdoms that came after Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom. The stone, which represents God's kingdom, will destroy them all, and it will never be destroyed!

Fortunately, Nebuchadnezzar reacts well to Daniel's words, and begins to worship him and his God. And Daniel and his friends are

promoted to even higher positions in the king's court! That's a pretty good ending, but as we'll see next week, the coming days will bring new troubles for Daniel and his friends.

Let's reflect very briefly on this idea of God's sovereignty, a bedrock belief of Presbyterians! When we say God is sovereign, we are saying that God rules over all of his creation, actively working in human history to bring about his purposes. Ultimately a time will come when everything and everyone will be under God's perfect rule- the Kingdom of God. Christians, especially Christians who are suffering under persecution, have taken great comfort from this belief in God's sovereignty, for in the end, God and God's people will triumph. But the doctrine raises two difficult questions.

First, if God is in control of all things, why is there evil? It's like that note our church member wrote to me pointing out that it sure doesn't look like God is in control! And he's right. It often doesn't look like God is in control. Gracia and Martin Burnham were long-time missionaries in the Philippines, when they were kidnapped by terrorists in 2001 and held captive in the jungle for over a year. People all around the world were praying for their safe release. Unfortunately, Martin was shot and killed during the rescue operation. Later, when Gracia reflected on all that had happened to them, she said, "I used to have this concept of what God is like, and how life's supposed to be because of that. But in the jungle, I

learned I don't know as much about God as I thought I did. I don't have him in a theological box anymore. What I do know is that God is God- and I'm not. The world's a mess because of sin, not God. Some awful things may happen to me, but God does what is right. And he makes good out of bad situations." Her words don't answer all our questions, but they may be the best we can do with the problem of evil and God's sovereignty.

But there is a second problem with our belief in God's rule over the world. What does that do to human choice? Are we all just a bunch of puppets doing things over which we have no control? The Bible itself never teaches that. It teaches that we have genuine choices to make and are held accountable for those choices. And yet, God is in control of the whole thing! How can that be?

Here's my best answer: I don't know! But a story from pastor and author A.W. Tozer may help. An ocean liner leaves New York for Liverpool, England. Its destination has been determined by the cruise line and authorities. Nothing can change it. On board are many passengers. They are not in chains, but are free to move about and do whatever they please. They decide when to eat, sleep, play, read, talk, etc.- however they wish. But all the while, the great ship is carrying them steadily toward a predetermined destination. Freedom and sovereignty are both present here, as it is with God's sovereignty and our freedom.

Both Gracia Burnham's and A.W. Tozer's explanations are helpful, but still leave us with unanswered questions about God's sovereignty. But we must also consider the alternative. If God is not in control, is everything just up to chance, with no divine direction or assistance? That suggests that there is no ultimate meaning or purpose to life at all. That alternative explanation also leaves me with a lot of unanswered questions! Like Daniel, I choose to live with the questions I'm left with believing in a sovereign God. How about you?