

OCEANS RISE, EMPIRES FALL



Daniel 2:1-49

Second Message

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SERIES: ONE KING TO RULE THEM ALL

“Oceans rise, empires fall.” Some of you may recognize these words from *Hamilton*, from King George’s hilarious song, “You’ll Be Back.” The American colonies declared independence from Britain and its king, and established a different form of government: a President elected by the people for a limited term.

Many countries have followed, moving from a monarchy to a presidency. But there is a temptation for presidents to seek greater power, to behave like a monarch. They do so by establishing a political dynasty, making the presidency hereditary. The Kim dynasty in North Korea is scarcely distinguishable from a monarchy. Or presidents may remove term limits so they can stay in office, as we’ve seen recently in several countries. Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely, as Lord Acton said.

Though America ditched the king, it continues to be fascinated with royalty, especially the British Royal Family. And most young girls love dressing up as princesses.

I grew up under two long-serving monarchs who are held deeply in the affections of their people. King Bhumibol of Thailand reigned for over 70 years until he died in 2016. Queen Elizabeth will pass the 70-year mark next February. Long live the King! Long live the Queen! That has been true for these monarchs. Queen Elizabeth is still in great health and less than three years away from the record 72-year reign of Louis XIV, the Sun King. Certain monarchs acquire the accolade “the Great”: it’s Louis the Great, and Bhumibol the Great. Will it be Elizabeth the Great? I doubt it: it’s not the British way.

Why do we have kings? Kings and cities are closely associated. The Neolithic Revolution happened only 10,000 years ago. Humanity domesticated plants and animals, enabling a settled life in permanent communities. These grew into cities, some 5500 years ago in Mesopotamia. City-states emerged, each ruled by a king. But with power comes the lust for more power, to rule not only over your own people but over other people as well. And so empires emerged 4500 years ago, multiple cities ruled by one strong man. Kingship was viewed as a gift from the gods. There was a close association between a city, its god and its king. The king alone was in the image of the deity, and his reign was legitimized by the deity. Kings, especially rulers of empire, have long been tempted to view themselves as divine.

The Bible takes a dim view of all this. All humanity is in the image of God, not just the king. The first city was built by Cain (Gen 4:17) after he exiled himself from God’s presence. Here he could be master of his own domain, secure behind walls of his own making. Empire began with Nimrod, who expanded his reign from the cities of Shinar to the cities of Assyria, from southern Mesopotamia to northern Mesopotamia (Gen 10:8-12). Both city and empire arose east of Eden, and led to Babel.

I say all this to help get us into the right mindset for Daniel 2, where we read about kings and empires. This is a long chapter, so I will read only a few verses.

1. The King’s Dream (2:1-13)

In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind was troubled and he could not sleep. So the king summoned the magicians, enchanter, sorcerers and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed. (Dan 2:1-2 NIV)

Nebuchadnezzar became king of Babylon in 605 BC, but for years he had been closely involved with his father in imperial affairs. He had conquered Assyria and defeated Egypt. Now he was the undisputed ruler of the Near East. He was top dog. But he couldn’t sleep. He dreamed dreams, which caused his spirit to pound. Given the tight connection between king and deity, between Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and Marduk, the god of Babylon, it was expected that the king would receive visions and dreams from the supernatural world. But the king was not expected to know the meaning of these dreams. They required interpretation, for which he kept a team of magicians, enchanter, sorcerers and astrologers who had been educated in the magic arts. Nebuchadnezzar summoned these experts. They assembled in his presence.

“May the king live forever! Tell your servants the dream and we will interpret it.” (2:4)

They were confident of their professional abilities. Told the dream, they could provide the interpretation. But, contrary to all precedent, the king demanded not only that they tell him the interpretation of the dream, but the dream itself. Three times he asked for both the dream and its interpretation. He threatened great destruction if they failed: they would be dismembered and their houses destroyed. But if they succeeded he promised great riches and honor. They protested that no such thing had ever been requested of their profession.

“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 enchanter 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.” (2:10-11)

They were not trained for this. No human on earth could tell the king his dream. Only the gods could reveal it, and they were inaccessible. Despite their magic arts, the magicians had no access to the divine realm.

Nebuchadnezzar flew into a rage. It is a dangerous thing to arouse the ire of an absolute ruler. He decreed that they all be executed, not only the magicians but all the wise men of Babylon. Thus Daniel and his friends were unknowingly swept up into the king’s fury. How will they escape?

2. Daniel’s Intercession (2:14-23)

When Arioch, the commander of the king’s guard, arrived to take Daniel and his friends away for execution, Daniel asked what was up. He spoke “with wisdom and tact” (2:14). Again we see that

Daniel is not a prophet but a wise man, given wisdom so he can flourish in these perilous times in a foreign court. He asked the king for time.

Daniel returned home, explained the situation to his three friends, and urged them to pray: “to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery” (2:18). Daniel agreed with the magicians that no one on earth could reveal both the dream and the meaning; only the gods could do so. The magicians thought the gods were inaccessible since they don’t live among humans, but Daniel and his friends knew they had access to God, not the god of Babylon but the God of heaven. They were in Babylon, far from Jerusalem, far from the temple, the house of prayer. Besides, that house of prayer had by now become a den of rebels. But they knew that, far from home, they could still pray to God. His eye, ear and heart were still open to them wherever they prayed. God is not confined to a building, the temple. The imminent destruction of the temple would not mean that he is defeated. He is larger than a temple, a city, a land, even the whole earth.

The Lord heard their prayer and that night the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision. This is the turning point of the chapter. Daniel responded with a beautiful hymn of praise:

**“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.”**
(2:20-23)

“Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever.” This praise lies at the center of the chapter, and expresses two key ideas that are central to this chapter and to the whole book.

God reveals mysteries, things that are deeply hidden to normal human understanding. Wisdom and power belong to God, but he gives wisdom to the wise, and has now given wisdom and power to Daniel specifically. Wisdom so that he might interpret dreams, and power so that he might stand in the presence of the king even though he is a lowly exile without power.

Secondly, God, in his wisdom and power, “deposes kings and raises up others.” Kingdoms may rise, kingdoms may fall. Nebuchadnezzar has defeated all other powers and now reigns supreme, but his kingdom is not secure. He needs to learn this lesson. All kings and empires need to learn this lesson: God deposes kings and raises up others.

3. Daniel Before Nebuchadnezzar (2:24-49)

Daniel returned to Arioch, requested an audience with the king, and was immediately ushered into his presence. The anxious king asked, “Can you tell me the dream and its interpretation?” Daniel answered:

“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:

“As Your Majesty was lying there, 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 anyone else alive, but so that Your Majesty may know the interpretation and that you may understand what went through your mind.” (2:27-30)

A mystery is hidden to human understanding. Therefore, no human being, no matter how skilled in the magic arts, can perceive it. No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can peer into such matters, let alone understand them. But there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. In a dream he has shown Nebuchadnezzar what will happen, and he wants him to understand. Therefore he has revealed both the dream and its meaning to Daniel. God wants Nebuchadnezzar, at the beginning of his glorious reign, to know about the future, and specifically about the fate of his own kingdom, indeed of all human kingdoms.

3.1 The Dream (2:31-35)

Daniel first tells the dream. The king’s dream contains just two items: a statue and a stone.

“Your Majesty looked, and there before you stood a large statue—an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance.”
(2:31)

How large the statue we’re not told. Narendra Modi, India’s prime minister, recently unveiled a 600-foot tall bronze statue. It’s not of himself, but it’s a statue that does advance his own agenda. In the Roman Empire, large statues of certain emperors were installed in temples as part of the imperial cult.

This statue was composite, made from different materials: a head of gold, an upper torso of silver, lower torso of bronze, legs of iron, and feet partly of iron, partly of baked clay.

The second item was a stone:

“While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands.” (2:34)

This stone struck the statue on its composite feet and shattered every part of the statue into such small pieces that the wind blew it all away. No trace of the statue was left. But the stone grew into a huge mountain and filled the whole earth. The mighty statue was ephemeral. But the small stone grew into something universal and eternal.

3.2 Interpretation (2:36-45)

Daniel moves from dream to interpretation, beginning with the statue. Nebuchadnezzar, “the king of kings,” is the head of gold. Let him think that he has attained greatness by his own superior power, Daniel informs him that it is God’s gift:

“The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory... he has made you ruler.” (2:37-38)

Nebuchadnezzar is not supreme. God has granted dominion, but he can also take it away. God deposes kings, and he raises up others. Nebuchadnezzar’s kingship will not be eternal. After him will arise three more kingdoms or kingships. The second will be inferior, the third will be universal, and the fourth will be tremendously strong

and brutal, but fragile because divided.

What are these kingdoms? Can we identify them, especially the fourth kingdom with its divided toes? Much has been written about the identity of this four-part statue, but this has not produced unanimity.

There are three major views. The first two views assume four kingdoms, or, better, four empires, and assume that Nebuchadnezzar, clearly identified as the head of gold, represents the whole Babylonian empire. In the first view the four empires are Babylon, Media, Persia, and Greece, that is the Hellenistic empires of Alexander the Great and his successors. In the second view the four empires are Babylon, a joint Media-Persia, Greece, and Rome. The third view assumes individual kings rather than kingdoms, in the sequence Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Darius the Mede and Cyrus the Persian. These are the four kings of Daniel 1–6.

Some of you are very interested in this, having studied Daniel. But for others your eyes are glazed over, lost in this ancient history. So what do I think? All three views are held by people I respect. My current thinking is to reject all three because I disagree with the premise of hardwiring the four parts of this statue in Daniel 2 to specific empires or kings.

Though the four-part statue signifies four reigns, whether kingdoms or kingdoms, it is all one statue. It is the same thing manifest in different forms. It is human empire in autonomy from God. The statue has four parts because four is the number of universality. It is the nature of human empires to think themselves all-powerful and eternal. Empires come and empires go, but in God's sight it's all the same thing: the empire of humanity.

Daniel identifies Nebuchadnezzar as the head of gold. This is the one identification of which we can be sure, because it is in the text itself. But his is by no means the first empire. There had been empires for two millennia already. These empires steadily got bigger and bigger. The northern kingdom of Israel was taken by the Assyrian Empire. But Assyria was conquered by the Babylonian Empire. Babylon had a larger appetite and tried to conquer Egypt as well, but failed. The Persian Empire conquered Babylon and Egypt and what is today Turkey. Still its appetite was not satisfied and it made a failed attempt to conquer Greece, a long way from Persia. Next, Alexander the Great burst out of Macedonia, rapidly conquered the entire Persian Empire, and kept going far to the east, all the way to the Indus River. The Roman Empire was larger still.

The third element of the statue “will rule over the whole earth.” But hardwiring this to Persia or Greece misses the point that it is in the nature of empire to seek to rule over the whole earth. Such appetite for universal rule is intrinsic to empire. Empire is never satisfied. From the fifteenth century on, European nations sought to build truly global empires, aided by advances in shipping. Finally, the map was colored mostly red and the sun never set on the British Empire, the largest empire in history.

As empires expanded they brought under their umbrella a vast array of different peoples. This feature of empire is attributed to the fourth part of the statue. But, again, it is not limited to one specific empire, whether Greece or Rome. This attitude goes back at least as far as the Persian Empire. One myth of empire is that such rule over diverse peoples beyond the heartland is a beneficial rule, that the distant peoples are fortunate and blessed to be brought into the dominion of the glorious empire. But the conquered people don't necessarily see it this way!

Human empire strives for universal rule and inclusion of all

peoples under its rule. This is intrinsic to empire, not just characteristic of a particular empire. But human empire cannot achieve this. It cannot truly unite the peoples of the world. In the Bible's telling, humanity gathered together at Babel to prevent spreading out across the earth. It sought unity and common purpose in building a tower to heaven. But God has scattered the peoples. How can the scattered peoples of the world be brought together? Not in human empire.

Human empires get stronger over time. But the feet and toes of the statue are of incompatible materials, iron and baked clay. The base on which the statue of human empire stands is fragile and liable to collapse. Human empires are not stable, no matter how strong and invincible they might seem. Human history shows this again and again. So that's the statue: not four specific human empires, but human empire in general.

Next the stone. While human empire is growing, God is at work: “the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed” (2:44). God's empire is a quite different empire. It is not a human creation: the stone is cut out without human hands. The stone both destroys the fragile statue that is human empire, and itself grows to fill the earth as God's empire. It destroys human empire but is itself indestructible. It terminates human empire but is itself eternal. Empires rise, empires fall, but God's empire will endure. God deposes kings, and he raises up others.

4. Elevation of Daniel (2:46-49)

In response to Daniel's interpretation, Nebuchadnezzar prostrated himself before him, an ironic image for Jews living under the tyranny of his reign. He acknowledged Daniel's God:

“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.”
(2:47)

What is the mystery? That God deposes kings and he raises up others, that all human empires will fall, and that he will bring in his eternal empire.

The king elevated Daniel to high office, over Babylon, the most important province in the land, and over all the wise men. He approved Daniel's request that his three friends be appointed his assistants. These promotions, both of Daniel and of his three friends, will generate jealousy and hostility among the magicians that will cause problems for these faithful Jews in later chapters, as we shall see.

God gave Nebuchadnezzar a dream, and Daniel told him both the dream and its interpretation, which God had revealed to him. Nebuchadnezzar needed to learn important truths about his own limitation and God's supremacy. But this chapter has a wider audience than just Nebuchadnezzar. The Book of Daniel gives encouragement to a captive people seeking to flourish in a foreign land. It gave hope to the Jews who were exiled far from their land, living under a succession of ever-mightier empires: Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome and beyond.

While I don't want to tie the statue down to four specific empires, I'm sure that Jews living under the tyranny of the Seleucid Empire in the early second century BC saw that empire as the fourth empire of the statue. Antiochus IV Epiphanes attempted cultural genocide against the Jews as he sought to unite his vast empire under the umbrella of Hellenism. But his empire fell. Likewise, I'm sure that Jews in the first century AD saw the Roman Empire as the fourth

empire, strong and brutal.

To these Jews, living in exile under foreign domination, what was the rock? It was God, frequently described in Israel's Scriptures as a Rock. The Book of Daniel, and this vision in chapter 2, helped the Jews hold on to their conviction that God, their Rock, would prevail over all human kingdoms and would bring his people home. He would send the Messiah who would conquer all enemy empires, restore the people, and establish an everlasting kingdom, in fulfillment of his promises and covenant with David.

They held on to the vision expressed in our Scripture reading, Psalm 72, written of Solomon. That the king would endure as long as the sun and the moon; that he would rule from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Centuries later, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, announcing a son:

“The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.” (Luke 1:32-33)

His kingdom will never end. But Jesus was crucified by the Romans using the brutal punishment they reserved for those who dared resist Rome's rule, who dared resist empire. Here was the fourth empire at work, strong as iron, breaking and smashing all other power.

But therein lay its undoing. Now in the grave was one, the only one, on whom death had no claim. The only faithful human. God vindicated him in resurrection. The risen Jesus ascended into heaven, entering into God's glorious presence, where God has enthroned him as king, and given him the name above every name. God has poured out his Spirit, inviting all to come to Jesus, receive forgiveness, and enter into his kingdom. The risen, exalted and glorified Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords. His is an eternal kingdom that cannot be destroyed. It is a universal kingdom, for all peoples are invited to enter in and find unity. It is the one place where scattered humanity can truly be brought together as one. It is a benevolent kingdom in which humans can truly flourish. But it requires giving up all human pretensions to empire, beginning with self.

Christ Jesus is the stone. “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (1 Pet 2:7, quoting Ps 118:22). Those whose lives are built on him will find him to be a sure foundation, a true cornerstone, a solid base for life. But to those who oppose him, he will be “A stone that causes people to stumble, and a rock that makes them fall” (1 Pet 2:8, quoting Isa 8:14). A stumbling stone: the Greek word is *skandalon*. All humanity is faced with a choice: to embrace Jesus as cornerstone of our lives, or resist him as a scandal. It is a scandal that God's eternal, universal empire should be founded on one who renounced power and position, who gave up himself even unto death at the hands of human empire. It is a scandal that we should have to give up ourselves to enter his kingdom. But in so do-

ing we find our true selves, our true flourishing.

Our women will be studying Revelation, starting in September. The book is “The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place” (1:1). What must happen? The answer is very similar to that given here in Daniel 2. In the middle of the book the cry goes up:

**“The kingdom of the world has become
the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah,
and he will reign for ever and ever.” (Rev 11:15)**

That's what must happen: a transfer from human empire to God's glorious empire in Christ. Therefore, two other things must happen. Babylon, the world city, the world empire, must fall, accompanied by the cry, “It is done!” (Rev 16:17). And New Jerusalem, the heavenly city, will descend so that God and his people dwell together, also accompanied by the cry, “It is done!” (Rev 21:6).

The apostle Paul was convinced that this transfer from human empire to God's empire had already begun in Christ. He was confident that the Roman empire would eventually fall, even though it kept growing for nearly another century. And he was confident that the kingdom of God in Christ would grow and become universal.

God deposes kings and raises up others. In this central message, Daniel 2 contains both warning and hope. A warning to those who build empires that God deposes kings. Sadly, too often even Christians have built empires, exalting self in pursuit of power, position and influence. All empire builders, however that practice be disguised, are warned that God deposes kings.

But also hope and encouragement. God has raised up his eternal kingdom in the risen and exalted Lord Jesus. There is hope for those who are suffering under human empire. There is hope and encouragement for the persecuted church, for which we pray each week, as we follow the Open Doors World Watch List. This week we pray for Mauritania. There is hope for those who have been hurt by power, by empire. Jesus renounced power. He suffered at the hands of empire. He cares for the weak, the broken-hearted, the lost and forgotten. He is able have compassion for those who hurt. This is the opposite of human empire where it is the strong, the powerful, the connected who succeed.

Isaac Watts took Psalm 72, the psalm about Solomon, and rewrote it in light of Christ Jesus, the greater than Solomon:

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun,
Does his successive journeys run,
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.

Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

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