THE VISION OF THE ROCK

Daniel 2:1-49
Key Verse 2:35

“Then the iron, the clay, 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.”

Last week, we studied Daniel’s decision of faith not to defile himself before God by eating only vegetables and drinking only water, instead of enjoying fine food and wine from king Nebuchadnezzar’s table. Daniel’s resolution was a historical event, because it enabled him to grow as a servant of God even while remaining in service to the king of Babylon. We learned that a decision of faith to grow in the holiness of God is most pleasing to God. But we must remember that no one can grow in the holiness of God unless we submit to God’s sovereign will and purpose for our lives. Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me.” (Lk 9:23). May God bless each of us to seek the holiness of God earnestly, denying ourselves! In today’s passage, Daniel begins his life of service to king Nebuchadnezzar. Especially, Daniel helps the ambitious, young king to understand the flow of human history under the sovereignty of God. The flow of human history is always promising at first, then ending in great disappointment and eventual destruction. But the flow of God’s history, from small beginnings, leads to final and total victory. May God bless us today to understand that the final victory belongs only to those who seek God first in every situation!

I. Nebuchadnezzar’s dream

First, “Tell me my dream” (1-13). As we studied last time, Nebuchadnezzar became king of the growing Babylonian empire in the year he first subdued Jerusalem and brought back Daniel and his friends to be trained for service in his palace. Nebuchadnezzar was an incredibly ambitious young man who obviously felt that he had some
higher calling or purpose in life as a conqueror and uniter of peoples. In his audacity he would challenge and completely defeat the Egyptian empire, and also conquer the Phoenician empire at Tyre. In his conceit, nothing was impossible for him, and no goal beyond his reach. He was a true leader, and he expected his men to do anything for him.

But now, he was no longer merely a commander. He was king, and his responsibilities as king went far beyond the next battle or the next conquest. As we saw last week, Nebuchadnezzar had the sense that he must build his empire by concentrating in his service the very best of the intellectuals and wise men, gathering them from throughout his entire reign. But intellectuals and wise men are very different from military commanders and soldiers! By nature, they are men of debate, cunning and even deceit. Most of all, they require freedom to think and to say what most people would not and should not dare to say. Such people are very suspicious to military men. Evidently, Nebuchadnezzar was not at all confident in what his wise men told him (9). This was a burden to Nebuchadnezzar. Especially, Nebuchadnezzar needed wisdom and advice as he began to be haunted by dreams in his second year. Look at verse 1. “In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind was troubled and he could not sleep.” As Nebuchadnezzar grappled with the problems of building an empire that would last for the ages, God began to give him dreams that shook his confidence and troubled his heart.

Look at verses 2-3. “So the king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed. When they came in before the king, he said to them, ‘I have had a dream that troubles me and I want to know what it means.’ The astrologers spoke up. “O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will interpret it.” But the king’s mistrust of the astrologers became evident. Look at verse 5. “The king replied to the astrologers, ‘This is what I have firmly decided: If you do not tell me what my dream was and interpret it, I will have you cut into pieces and your houses turned into piles of rubble. But if you tell me the dream and explain it, you will receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor. So tell me the dream and interpret it for me.” The wise men couldn’t believe their
ears. They hoped they had misheard the king’s pronouncement. They said, ‘Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will interpret it.’

Look at verses 8 and 9. “Then the king answered, ‘I am certain you are trying to gain time because you realize that this is what I have firmly decided: If you do not tell me the dream, there is just one penalty for you. You have conspired to tell me misleading and wicked things, hoping that the situation will change. So then, tell me the dream, and I will know that you can interpret it for me.’” The more determined and foolish the king became to resolve his suspicions about the usefulness of his wise men, the more desperate and foolish the wise men became in their effort to defend themselves. Look at verses 10 and 11. “The astrologers answered the king, ‘There is not a man 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 men.’” This infuriated the king because it made him look stupid and it revealed the proud and rebellious minds of these wise men. Indeed, the king was young and foolish. But the wise men had to show wisdom and tact in dealing with a man of such strong personality. In his anger, the king decided to put all the wise men of Babylon to death. It was an extreme decision. But Nebuchadnezzar was determined to find those wise men who could understand him and his needs and serve him accordingly. In short, Nebuchadnezzar wanted to find a wise man who could be his shepherd.

Second, Daniel’s prayer (14-23). Guards were sent out to round up all the wise men to put them to death. Arioch, the commander of the king’s guard, found Daniel and told him the news. Daniel did not react emotionally. He asked Arioch with wisdom and tact, “Why did the king issue such a harsh decree?” Daniel’s wisdom and tact were employed again when Daniel went to see the king and asked for more time, so that he could interpret the king’s dream. What is amazing is that the king granted his request. Why didn’t the astrologers and other wise men ask for time? How could Nebuchadnezzar’s rage be subdued enough to grant Daniel’s request? The other wise men were men of self-confidence and human pride. They wore fancy robes and tall hats
to emphasize their superior abilities and clever minds. They knew what they could do. But the king's demand was beyond their abilities. They became helpless and began to defend themselves, ultimately insulting the king and sealing their fate. They were like Philip, Jesus’ disciple. Once, Jesus took his disciples to the far shore of the sea of Galilee to listen in private to their experiences from their evangelistic journeys. But a huge crowd of people brazenly interrupted their meeting, and insisted that Jesus teach them. When Jesus saw the crowd, he had compassion on them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd. But Jesus knew that his disciples were angry with the crowds for stealing their time with Jesus alone. So Jesus tested his disciples, asking, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” Jesus wanted his disciples to know his heart to feed the crowd, and his mind to care for them as the sheep of his pasture. But Philip, who could calculate well enough, immediately determined that it would be impossible for the disciples to buy enough bread for each one in the crowd to have a bite! His calculation was absolutely correct; but Philip failed the test, for he failed to understand Jesus’ heart for the crowd. Philip had no faith to do that which Jesus required that he in fact do. Likewise, when the wise men heard the king’s decision, they despaired.

After Philip’s resounding failure, another of Jesus’ disciples spoke up. He was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. Andrew knew how big the crowd was. Still, Andrew didn’t give up. He looked around and found a small boy with a lunch of five loaves of bread and two small fish. He brought them to Jesus, saying, “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish. But how far will they go among so many?” Andrew was helpless to feed the crowd. Nevertheless, Andrew came to Jesus in prayer and asked that Jesus make what Andrew had enough to feed all 5000 people. Then Jesus took the loaves and the fish, blessed them, and made them enough for everyone to eat and be satisfied. Like Andrew, Daniel faced an impossible task of reading the king’s mind. Like Andrew, Daniel found hope in the God of heaven. Because Daniel had hope in God, he could have hope to satisfy the king. So he asked for time, and the king granted his request.
After seeing the king, Daniel hurried home and urged his friends to pray for God's help and mercy. They were indeed desperate. But they didn't look here and there for help. In the crisis situation, they turned 100% to God for help in prayer. They prayed and prayed and prayed and prayed. Then, amazingly, they fell asleep. It means that, after prayer, they weren't afraid of Nebuchadnezzar's decree. They had peace and confidence in God like little children who trust their parents absolutely. This reminds us of 1 Peter 5:7, “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” Then God revealed to Daniel in a vision the content of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Daniel woke up and told his friends. It was great news! But Daniel didn't immediately run to tell Arioch or the king what he had seen. Daniel first praised the God of heaven who answered them in their need. Look at verse 20b-23. “Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them. 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, O God of my fathers: 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.”

Humanly, it is impossible to satisfy the demands and needs of sinsick human beings. If we remain as we are, we cannot but misunderstand and offend one another. Instead, we must learn from Daniel the power of prayer that makes it possible to understand and serve even the most difficult person, in order to shepherd him in God.

II. The Revealer of mysteries

First, “There is a God in heaven” (24-30). Daniel went to Arioch, and Arioch took Daniel to Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar was happy to think that he might have found a man of special ability who could read his mind. Daniel could have calculated that he had a lot to gain by using the revelation God gave him for his own glory. But Daniel was not willing to feed the king’s inflated view of himself or what he might expect from other human beings. Daniel told the king clearly, “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
the days to come.” (27b-28a). Here we see how Daniel shepherds the
still young king, Nebuchadnezzar, and helps him to have a right view of
wisdom and truth. When it comes to courage or valor and human
obedience, the king had the right to demand and even scare it out of
his troops. But truth and wisdom do not come from men. They come
from God, the revealer of mysteries. God knows the truth. God makes
the truth known to those men whom he has chosen, and who humble
themselves enough to see and to listen. Therefore, it was not
reasonable or helpful even for the king to threaten his wise men with
demolition and dismemberment every time he wanted to understand
some difficult issue. Instead, he must turn to God. It was God himself
who desired to help Nebuchadnezzar know and understand the truth
by giving him his dream. Look at verse 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.” Daniel
understood Nebuchadnezzar very well. Daniel saw that
Nebuchadnezzar was in fact a truth-seeker who was not content to
listen to interpretations that revealed only the cleverness of the
interpreter. And Daniel understood that God himself honored this
quality in Nebuchadnezzar, and was pleased to make known to him the
future for the sake of raising him up as his servant. Daniel did not see
himself as the answer to Nebuchadnezzar’s needs. Daniel saw himself
as the one who was sent to help Nebuchadnezzar enter God’s service
for the sake of carrying out God’s world salvation purpose. Truly,
Daniel was a good shepherd for king Nebuchadnezzar.

Second, The enormous statue (31-43). The dream of Nebuchadnezzar
had two significant features: an enormous and dazzling statue, and a
rock that smashed the statue and became a mountain filling the whole
earth. The statue had five components, gold, silver, bronze, iron and
clay. Each of the components represented a different kingdom on
earth, starting from Nebuchadnezzar’s, which was the head of gold.
The others may be the Medeo-Persian Empire, the Greek and the
Roman empires (both West and East). The materials indicated a
growing strength, but at the expense of value and purity. In short, from
the brilliant beginning of Nebuchadnezzar and his world empire, others would arise to follow, less brilliant, but more and more able to cause suffering and woe. But human strength, bereft of purity and holiness, becomes very brittle indeed. The last component of the statue was a mixture of iron and baked clay in its feet. Such a statue was indeed dazzling and awesome. But its construction in fact made no sense. The heaviest and purest material was used at the top in the beginning, while the cheapest and least reliable material was used at the foundation, last of all. Such a structure is doomed to tumble.

In this statue, we can find an analogy not only with human civilization after Nebuchadnezzar, but in all human history. From time to time, human beings or human societies receive some blessing or favor from God, such as an idea or noble trait. As a result such people or nations are able to advance themselves well beyond their rivals, and achieve predominance in the world. But human beings do not know how to make what was given them by God to grow. Instead, the pure principle or spirit that was given to them becomes corrupted by human desires, laziness, greed and idolatry. It is well documented that most if not all family businesses collapse after three generations, because the good qualities of the grandfather are lost by the time the grandson is ready to take over. This applies to Nebuchadnezzar’s own kingdom as well, for it was his (probably) grandson, Belshazzar, who was too busy partying to pay attention to the enemy at his gates. Then, everything that was built falls to the ground and is lost. This is the human condition. We have been given a good beginning. But we, in our sinful nature, are incapable of taking that good beginning and turning it into an even better ending. Instead, all human activity and building is destined one day to fall. Nebuchadnezzar had the spirit and zeal to create a vast and powerful empire that served as the basis for many great empires after him. But it was not going to last forever, because it would be corrupted by sinful human nature, until at last it would fall. We admire the founding fathers of the US, who recognized this fact of human nature, and built in to our constitution checks and balances to keep the forces of corruption at bay. But even the greatest care cannot remove such an influence. One day, even the US will not be able to stand. The kingdoms of the world and world civilization are dazzling edifices. But we must know that at the base they are brittle.
They cannot stand the test of time. Nebuchadnezzar really needed to know this.

Third, The rock becomes a mountain (44-45). Look at verses 34-35. “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 the threshing floor at summer time. 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.” The rock that made the statue stumble was not awesome or dazzling in appearance. But the rock had power and strength enough to destroy the human structure, and to become a huge mountain that filled the whole earth. Its strongest part was its base, so that it could support an entire mountain. Daniel identified this rock with the kingdom of God’s people. It would never be destroyed. It could never be lost. It started small and humble, from the baby Jesus in the manger, but it has the power to grow and grow until it will fill the entire earth. It will endure forever. The kingdoms of this world cannot stand, because they ultimately are standing on sinful human nature. But the kingdom of God's people does not depend on our ability or wisdom; the kingdom of God’s people rests on the wisdom and power of God found in Jesus Christ and in his word in the Bible. The kingdom of God's people is the kingdom of truth (John 18:37). Only the kingdom founded on the truth of God can stand the test of time. Only the kingdom of God is mankind's true hope. Nebuchadnezzar was dazzled by his own ability and by his people's energy and hunger. But everything he built would fall. His people were destined to fail. He needed to repent and put his trust in God alone, who is the Lord of kings and God of gods (47). In God, we can all be like Daniel, shepherds for his flock and men and women of truth. In God, we can have a hope to be changed and made holy until we can see and enter the kingdom of God.

Fourth, Nebuchadnezzar humbled (46-49). Daniel revealed that his God was the God who reveals mysteries. Nebuchadnezzar was awestruck. So he bowed down low before Daniel and praised the God of Daniel. Daniel received everything he might have hoped for and more, both for
him and his friends. Most importantly, Daniel proved that he was a good shepherd who could help Nebuchadnezzar know the truth and grow in a relationship with God. But Nebuchadnezzar was not an easy sheep. Daniel would have to shepherd him his whole lifetime. But Daniel was always thankful that Nebuchadnezzar indeed struggled to know the truth, and humbled himself before the truth. May God give us the patience of Daniel to shepherd difficult sheep like Nebuchadnezzar. May God bless us to know the truth about human beings, and put our hope in Jesus, the rock of our salvation and the cornerstone for the kingdom of God!