



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Knowing What We Know

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Introduction to Daniel 2

Are you the type of person who remembers your dreams? Some people tend to remember many of their dreams, and others, not so much. In our own home, I tend to remember my dreams. My wife, Lauren, does not. I am not sure what that says about us, but it's simply how it is. How about you? How often do you remember what you dream about?

There are a multitude of factors that affect your ability to recall your night visions from how deeply you sleep, to how quickly you wake up, and even that glass of wine you imbibe at night before bed.

Sleep is a really important function which helps our brains catalogue and synthesize information. Some theories suggest that the process of dreaming assists with the storage of information. Often the same pathways that fired during the day are retraced during our dream-states thus aiding memory. Dreams can also be a time when the brain makes creative connections. In a dream state, the brain is not limited by waking realities, so creativity can soar. It has been suggested that this actually aids with creative problem solving. That's why throughout history, when important decisions have needed to be made, conventional wisdom has suggested to "sleep on it." Sleeping can help us think about our problems more clearly in the morning! It's also why some people place a pen and paper beside their beds at night to record the creative ideas that come during the night.

Imagine, then, that you had a dream that imparted some really important insight or wisdom to you, but when you woke up, you

couldn't remember what it was! What a frustrating loss that would be! That's what happened to the king from our biblical text today.

Our Scripture passage comes from the Old Testament book of Daniel. Here's what you need to know. After the nation of Israel was divided into a Northern Kingdom of Israel and a Southern Kingdom of Judah, God's people were more vulnerable to the surrounding nations. So, first, the Northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrian empire. Then, about 135 years later, Judah fell to the Babylonians; scores of Jews were deported from Jerusalem to Babylon, beginning what has been called the Babylonian Exile. The book of Daniel is an exilic book written about events that took place during this captivity.

Daniel opens in the wake of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon having besieged the city of Jerusalem; he was one of the Jews taken as captives to Babylon. The Babylonians first took the best and brightest of the Jews—the social elites and most influential—back into Babylon to put them through a process of enculturation. Why? So that when the next wave came, those cultural elites from Israel would be able to influence their own people to assimilate.

It may be hard to imagine Daniel's circumstances, but imagine growing up in a culture where belief in God was central to your nation's worldview, but then one day you wake up to find yourself in a nation that overtly rejects theism and all the cultural leaders, the advisors, politicians, academics and entertainers seek to stamp out religious belief. I know, it's tough to imagine, isn't it? That was Daniel's experience and Daniel and his friends were put through a process of indoctrination; they were given Babylonian names and a Babylonian liberal arts education. They were rigorously trained in the Babylonian religious practices, and as Daniel 3 will show, encouraged to worship the king as a god. Then, the best of the best of the elites who were taken and trained were then given roles to play within the advisory courts for the king. Daniel was one such individual.

According to the text, Daniel was sharp, wise, and discerning. Like Joseph from the book of Genesis, who was sold into slavery and rose

to become the second most powerful person in Egypt, Daniel was forcibly taken captive by the empire, and because of his wisdom and discernment, he rose to great heights first within the Babylonian empire and then the Medo-Persian empire to follow.

Now, in Chapter 2 of Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar had a disturbing dream. What's worse, although he knew it was a significant one, he could not remember it! So, the king called upon his royal advisors—the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and astrologers—for help, but there was a problem. While the wise men had massive dream manuals which were indexed by topic to consult to provide interpretation of dreams—archeologists have actually found some of these—there was no such manual for discerning the dreams the king could not remember! Nonetheless, the king declared to them that if the advisors could not tell him the dream and interpret it, what awaited them was certain death.

The advisors quite accurately replied, “There is no one on earth who can do what the king asks... no one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they don't live among humans.” (Daniel 2:10-11, NIV)

This only infuriated the king, so Nebuchadnezzar tyrannically decreed that all the wise men were to be put to death, which was obviously a problem for Daniel and his friends, who were the leaders of the king's advisors. The man put in charge of the task of putting the advisors to death, named Arioch, showed up on Daniel's front porch, which is where we pick up the story this evening/morning. A question to ponder as we read this text might be, “How does a person of faith live wisely in a culture that stands in contrast to faith?”

Our Scripture reading comes from the Old Testament Book of Daniel, Chapter 2, verses 14-19 and 24-30. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

When Arioch, the commander of the king's guard, had gone out to put to death the wise men of Babylon, Daniel spoke to him with wisdom and tact. ¹⁵He asked the king's officer, “Why did the king issue such a harsh

decree?" Arioch then explained the matter to Daniel. ¹⁶At this, Daniel went in to the king and asked for time, so that he might interpret the dream for him.

¹⁷Then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. ¹⁸He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that he and his friends might not be executed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon. ¹⁹During the night the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision... [*Daniel sings praises to God, verses 20-23.*]

²⁴Then 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."

²⁵Arioch 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."

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

²⁷Daniel replied, "No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, ²⁸but 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:

²⁹"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. ³⁰As 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."

Daniel 2:14-19, 24-30

May God grant us understanding of these words.

Interpretation

You biblical scholars among us will note that we did not actually read about the dream that Nebuchadnezzar had that distressed him so much and resulted in the crisis for Daniel. In that regard you may be feeling in the dark just like Nebuchadnezzar, but rest assured, I'll close with a glimpse into that dream and what it means.

First, let's spend a few minutes thinking about this passage. Daniel models what Colossians 4 suggests to those living in a world where religious faith stands in contrast. Colossians 4 reads, "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace..." Perhaps there are a few lessons we can discern from this text as to how Daniel lived this out. First, here is a working definition for wisdom.

Wisdom is a gift from God which God freely gives to those who seek Him. Wisdom is found in discerning **what we know, what we don't know, and what we can't know.**

In sum, here's what Daniel knew: Daniel rightly knew that God alone was the source of wisdom. Moreover, Daniel knew what he didn't know. He humbly knew he did not have all the answers. Finally, Daniel knew that he couldn't possibly know everything! He recognized that every one of us has limits to what we can know, but God does not! So what he knew, what he didn't know, and what he couldn't know all directed him to God. And God did not let him down. Ultimately, the wisdom that God gave to Daniel caused him to be respected in the eyes of the king. In so doing, he models for us how to wisely live in a world that stands in contrast to the faith and come out the other side respected by the culture.

Knowing What We Know — The Beginning of Wisdom

As Christians, we need to know what we know: Only God has the wisdom that we need to navigate the complexity of our culture. The scriptures tell us that fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10). Any journey toward wisdom necessarily begins with God.

So Daniel started with what he knew. Daniel knew God is sovereign and wise, so when groping in the dark for a solution to a complex problem, he took to his knees and asked that the Lord reveal the mystery of Nebuchadnezzar's dream to him, and he even rallied the community of faith, his friends Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Note that it was not his last resort, but rather his first impulse.

Though I joked earlier that it is tough to imagine a culture that has rejected any conception of God, the reality is that many of us can easily relate to Daniel who woke up in a culture that rejected his religious faith. While there are faithful Christians in each of these sectors, today the world of politics, education, entertainment, and media are largely driven by those who stand in contrast to Christianity. So we too must ponder how to live in a culture which is decidedly post-Christian. What we learn from Daniel, is that our first role is to take to prayer for the world that God loves and to ask for wisdom from God that might enable us to garner respect even among those who stand in contrast to God. And James 1:5 says that God grants wisdom to those who ask without showing partiality. Now, if this is the truth, as Christians, our concern for the world must result in our taking to our knees and seeking the wisdom God can provide, which the world desperately needs.

Tactical Tact

Secondly, Daniel also knew that in order for him to have any influence on the outcome of the decree, he needed to use what I'm calling "tactical tact."

Verse 14 says he spoke to Arioch "with wisdom and tact." Notice how Daniel did this. Arioch says, "So, Daniel, uh, the king decreed that I have to kill you..." Daniel replies, "Oh, that's interesting. Tell me, why did the king issue such a harsh decree?" Instead of losing his mind at the notion that he might lose his own life, he calmly began in a state of inquiry. This is a lost art. I wonder how many conversations around the Thanksgiving table went awry because tactical tact was not used in conversation.

We used to take ski trips with my family. One day, I recall getting in from the slopes and some conversation ensued. I can't recall the circumstances of the conversation in particular—who was talking or what they were talking about—but I recall one of the family members made some sort of outlandish remark, the kind that sucked all the oxygen out of the room and silenced everyone. There was a pregnant pause, until finally my cousin broke the silence saying, "Hmmm... how did you acquire this information?" The tone was just right, genuinely interested, somewhat humorous, and the room burst out in laughter, the tension was released, and for the rest of the trip, that became the oft-repeated inside joke. Sometimes, a tactful question can break through a conversation and turn the whole thing.

Frankly, Daniel had to deal with an unstable person; when the king was anxious, all the kingdom was anxious with him. This would never happen today, but just imagine that there is someone in your life—a person who when they are anxious, the whole HOA community is anxious with them, for example. Or, perhaps there is a conversation you have not been able to have with a loved one because you both know that you so sharply disagree? Is it possible to use some tactical tact with a spirit of inquiry just might turn the tide in that relationship? Practice it with me. "Oh, that's interesting. Tell me why you think that."

So, Daniel starts with what he knows, he's certain that God is the source of all wisdom so he goes to the Lord in prayer and he knows that he's only going to get anywhere by using tactical tact.

Knowing What We Don't Know

Next, Daniel demonstrates wisdom by discerning what he doesn't know. Some of what he doesn't know he tactfully solicited from Arioch. He didn't know why the king had issued the decree. But he also didn't know the contents of the dream the king had had.

Notice the humility of Daniel in acknowledging what he does not know. When Arioch introduces Daniel to Nebuchadnezzar as the

one who will solve all the problems, Daniel quickly acknowledges what he does not know. In verse 30, he says, I'm here **not** because I have greater wisdom than anyone else alive. In other words, he is confident that he does not know everything, but that doesn't mean he cannot speak into the situation, because God can help him understand. As Christians, we need to be willing to determine what we do not know.

Ideological Overconfidence

One of the curses of humanity is that we tend to have **ideological overconfidence** because we don't know what we don't know. This leads to blind spots. It's true not only of religious people; it's true of all ideologues.

Until about 1915, the scientific community operated under the conviction that the universe was eternal. Candidly, what undergirded this conviction was an overt rejection of a creator God. For a portion of the scientific community, any concept of a God—who is, by nature, beyond the natural world and therefore unverifiable by scientific processes—was met with doubt. And for similar reasons, the scientific community also resisted the idea of a finite universe. If there was a universe that had no beginning (and conceivably no end), then Genesis had to be wrong, and we had no use for God.

The supposition went like this: Given an infinite amount of time and a nearly boundless universe, with nearly an infinite number of planets, something infinitesimally improbable—such as the development of biological life from no life—was at least conceivably possible. It was like the Infinite Monkey Theorem—are you familiar with this? It's a mathematical theorem that suggests that if you had an infinite number of monkeys sitting at typewriters in an infinitely large room for an infinite amount of time, it is possible and even perhaps inevitable that one will eventually type a completed work of William Shakespeare in all its vast complexity without error. It's a ridiculous thought experiment—one that would silence a room, until someone asked, "How did you acquire this information?"—but one that is

nonetheless mathematically possible. In a similar way, the scientific community until 1915 resisted the idea that the universe had a definite beginning, because it would mean that it was at least possible for life to begin without God.

Then in 1915, a brilliant German mathematician wrote a paper based on his calculations which seemed to indicate that the universe was expanding—or perhaps contracting, he wasn't sure. If this was the case, then it seemed likely that some sort of explosion happened and there was a time before the universe existed. If that were the case, the probability of life's development without a creator was torpedoed. The mathematician's name was Albert Einstein. At first, even Einstein resisted the natural outcome of his thought. However, over the next several decades, Einstein's math would be proved out, and the scientific community would be forced to admit that the universe had a beginning. And with this concession, the scientific community has been edging closer and closer to the conviction that there was some intelligent design to the universe. One such scientist, Robert Jastrow, wrote this:

[The discovery of a definite cosmic beginning] is an exceedingly strange development, unexpected by all but the theologians. They have always accepted the word of the Bible: In the beginning God created heaven and earth... It is unexpected because science had such extraordinary success in tying the chain of cause and effect backward in time. For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries.

Wisdom is about knowing what we don't know, which is sometimes challenging for the ideologically overconfident. This is where humility comes in. We must be humble enough to know what we don't know. And, candidly, there are things that we **can never know**. Both this humility and the reality of our own limitations ought to draw us back to God. This is what happened to the Babylonian wise men as

well as Daniel. Remember, they said, “There is no one on earth who can do what the king asks... no one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they don’t live among humans.” (Daniel 2:10-11, NIV) Exactly. So let’s return to the dream.

The Forgotten Dream

Daniel’s wise response in a culture that stood in contrast to Daniel’s faith, gifted by God, was required initially because of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, which we have not yet explored.

Nebuchadnezzar had dreamt about a statue with a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, and legs and feet of iron mixed with clay. Daniel reveals the dream which God revealed to him and explains to the king that his dream occurred because the king was concerned for the future as he drifted off to sleep. Through it God showed the king what would come in the form of four successive kingdoms. Daniel revealed that the head of gold represented Babylon. Christian history has further interpreted Daniel’s interpretation of the chest and arms of silver as being Persia, the bronze thighs the kingdom of the Greeks, and the mixed kingdom of iron and clay the Romans.

To conclude the dream, Nebuchadnezzar saw the hand of God carve out of the mountain a rock, which Daniel reveals represented an everlasting kingdom set up by God. Centuries later, a child was born in an obscure town called Bethlehem during the reign of Caesar Augustus. He would grow up to proclaim that the Kingdom of God had come. As Christians, we know that this rock is the very wisdom of God, which we anticipate during the season of Advent, which took on flesh and lived among us—even Jesus Christ, our Lord. Jesus preached about a kingdom not of this world, but the kingdom of God, which would know no end. It’s this which is proclaimed in the Gospel of Luke 1:30-33.

“Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God.

³¹You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³²He will be great and will be called the Son of

the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

In Christ, the promised kingdom has come. The message of Daniel is ultimately this: that amidst a kingdom that sought to stamp out the culture and true worship of God, God remained sovereign. And as Daniel learned to live faithfully in Babylon, so, too, did Christians learn to live faithfully in Roman times as they sought the wisdom of God through prayer, and lived tactfully and humbly. In doing so, they paid witness to God and changed the world forever.

When we remember that God is the source of true wisdom, when we pray for our world, when we tactfully and wisely engage with our world in humility, we, too, can present a positive witness to this world. ■

