

## **Getting a Real Education** **Daniel 2:1-49**

Human knowledge expands at an amazing rate. When I was in primary school, I had grandiose dreams of cataloguing vast amounts of information. I compiled lists of all sorts of things – animals, birds, rocks, shells, rivers, mountains, countries, train stations. I'd add to the lists as I made more discoveries. My knowledge expanded. But really, I had no idea.

- No idea of the amount of information out there.
- No idea of the inability of my mind to contain it all.
- No idea that I wasn't in the same league as the real knowledge gurus.

Since then I've learnt.

- I've learnt I can't hope to know everything – my finite brain can't hold it all.
- I've learnt I'm not up there with the experts – many people are far cleverer and far wiser and far better at accumulating human knowledge than I am.

When Julia Gillard faces some crisis, I don't expect her to turn to me. She has a whole host of far more qualified gurus and advisers and counsellors and consultants.

It's easy to feel intimidated by that. Who is it who has the real knowledge that shapes our world and determines our world and keeps it going and expanding and progressing?

- Those innovating technology?
- Those making medical breakthroughs?
- Those creating wealth?
- Those manipulating markets?
- Those developing philosophy?

We live in modern-day Babylon. Remember last week: Babylon represents humanity making a name for itself

without reference to God. It's humanity establishing a great culture independent from God. It's humanity defining itself and making a name for itself apart from God. It's a totally man-centred worldview. And that's what our secularist Australian culture's like.

Where do God's people fit in that foreign culture? Should we feel overwhelmed by it? Should we feel puny and insignificant? Should we feel ignorant? Should we bow to its superior knowledge and wisdom? Should we grovel before its great academic achievements and superb technological control?

### **The God who Reveals**

Daniel 2 opens with the world's most powerful man in trouble. He's at the height of his power and prosperity. He commands a vast empire. And yet he's troubled. And what troubles him is a dream. So he convenes a national summit. He calls all his trained advisers together – all his magicians and enchanters and sorcerers and astrologers. He tells them the agenda for this summit.

*I have had a dream that troubles me and I want to know what it means.*

Perhaps not quite the agenda we're used to today – but Nebuchadnezzar didn't have to face re-election.

It doesn't faze these guys. This is the sort of stuff for which they were trained. Verse 4:

*O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will interpret it.*

They had catalogues of dreams. They had methods for determining omens. They had charts for comparison. They'd been through all this stuff when they graduated with first-class honours from Babylon's finest university.

Tell us the dream, we'll put it through our academic grid and out will pop the right answer.

Nebuchadnezzar doesn't buy it. Anyone can invent a plausible explanation for a dream. In fact, because it's a dream, the explanation doesn't even have to be that plausible. Just get the bits of the dream, turn them into symbols, find a way the symbols relate to each other and then turn that into a message. And, when you're dealing with a powerful king who can have you executed if he's not pleased, it's usually good to make the message say something nice. Nebuchadnezzar has a test to get round that. He insists on them telling him the dream first. If they can manage that, he'll have more confidence in their ability to correctly interpret.

The advisers again ask Nebuchadnezzar to tell them the dream. Nebuchadnezzar tells them they're just trying to buy time. Then the advisers make this astute comment. Verse 10:

*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.*

Their great education isn't up to the task. Some things are just beyond our ability to work out through study and logic and deduction.

Indeed, all the really important things in life are like that.

- Who is God?
- What's God like?
- What's the purpose of life?

- Where's life headed?

The really big questions can't be worked out by human learning. We only get right answers if God reveals them.

Anyway, Nebuchadnezzar's not particularly impressed with their answer. He feels he's not getting his money's worth from these highly-educated public servants. So he orders their execution – which won't leave him with too many advisers in the future.

At this point, we're reintroduced to Daniel. He asks for time – and gets it. He goes home and organises a prayer meeting with his mates. Together, they ask God to reveal the mystery.

- They, too, know they can't work it out.
- They, too, know it can only come from God.

But they know God's quite capable of revealing it and, unlike the other so-called wise men, they know God does have dealings with humans.

God reveals the matter to Daniel in a dream and Daniel praises God. Verse 20:

*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.*

It drives it home again and again. Daniel doesn't work this out by himself. His own knowledge and wisdom, as

great as that is, is inadequate. He can't devise some computer program to spit out the answer. This comes solely from God.

And, in case you haven't got it yet, Daniel tells us again when he stands before Nebuchadnezzar. Verse 27:

*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.*

I think the text drives this home again and again because we find it too easy to forget it. The secularism of our age has an attraction to it. It lulls us into a false sense of security.

- We've developed the cure to so many diseases.
- We've increased life-expectancy.
- We've devised amazing technologies.
- We've invented machines to do so many tasks.
- We've conceived myriad entertainments.
- We've protected ourselves from famine.
- We've built up an incredible standard of living.

We've achieved so much. We've built this great civilisation: human knowledge; human ingenuity; human cleverness; human wisdom. It looks so magnificent. Amidst the increasing change and progress, there's a real sense of security and permanence. It's the march of human progress – onward and upward. And it's all done without God.

Even as God's people, we're tempted to be impressed. The great human minds of the 21<sup>st</sup> century keep it all going. They keep on top of things. They keep us going

forward. They're the great gurus. They've made this world what it is. We should submit to their superior knowledge and wisdom.

But something's missing. Maybe these guys don't have any troubling dreams at night. Maybe they're content with a life of luxury and material comfort. But can they give us the answer to the important questions?

- Who is God?
- What's God like?
- What's the purpose of life?

Can they apply their great human minds to the vast quantities of knowledge they've accumulated and work out the answers to these basic questions? No. Only God can reveal that stuff. But, unlike the Babylonian advisers, they're not clever enough to realise that. Rejecting the revelation God gives us, they pontificate various alternatives and present them as the assured results of scholarly opinion.

- It's like a man blind from birth trying to describe a sunset.
- It's like a man deaf from birth trying to describe a symphony.

Our modern advisers convince people that blindness and deafness is an advantage – it's a desirable state. And then they distract us with hundreds of trinkets. They say this is what life's about. This should be your goal. This is worth spending all your effort and time and money on. Be satisfied with this. As Paul says in Romans 1:

*Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.*

So, why should we feel intimidated by it? Why should we feel threatened by their great learning? Why should we bow and scrape to their merely human opinions – to their unsatisfactory guesses? It's God who reveals the real mysteries of life – the important stuff. How could it be any other way? As God's people, we have a wisdom available to us far greater than that demonstrated by God-denying academics. How is it wise to ignore your Creator? And how is it wise to follow blindly the pronouncements of those who do – or envy their lifestyles?

We must continue to humbly affirm our Christian heritage. God has revealed the important stuff in His word. As Paul reminds the Corinthians:

- Not many of them were wise by human standards.
- Not many of them enjoyed human wealth.
- Few of them were the world's power brokers.

But, in His wisdom, God chose the apparent foolishness of the cross to display His plan of salvation. No great human philosopher saw that one coming. Nor will they discover it by their own ingenuity and cleverness. It comes because the God in heaven chooses to reveal it. Join with Daniel in praising Him that He has made these things known.

### **The God who Rules**

And so we come to what God revealed to Daniel – the king's dream and its interpretation. Verse 31:

*You looked, O king, and there before you stood a large statue – an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and*

*partly of baked clay. 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 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.*

The statue in itself isn't unusual. Presumably it's a human form. Kings in the ancient world were known to erect statues of themselves. Such things are not unknown in modern times. Remember the pictures on our news in 2003 of the statue of Saddam Hussein being pulled down.

What is unusual is a statue made of different substances like this. You could imagine a sculptor using different substances for artistic decoration – maybe for clothing, or to highlight facial features – but to have different substances piled one on top of the other seems somewhat peculiar.

- Gold and silver indicate something valuable – something majestic and precious.
- Bronze and iron indicate something strong and hard.
- Clay indicates weakness. It doesn't belong with these other elements.

We probably tend to think of things going from greater to lesser as you move down the statue, but more likely it's just expressing a variety of splendour and strength and impressiveness and doing it in a way that divides the statue into different sections.

The dream's focus then shifts to a rock. This rock too is unusual. It's cut out, but not by human hands.

- Cut out of what?
- Cut out how?

And it smashes into the statue and completely destroys it – pulverises all that precious and strong metal into little bits that are simply blown away by the wind. And then the rock grows – not something we expect rocks to do. What happens in dreams doesn't always conform to reality. But what's it all mean?

Fortunately, we're told. The God who revealed the dream to Daniel – indeed, the God who gave this dream to Nebuchadnezzar in the first place – also reveals the interpretation to Daniel. Verse 37:

*You, O king, 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 mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Wherever they live, He has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold.*

*After you, another kingdom will rise, inferior to yours. Next, a third kingdom, one of bronze, will rule over the whole earth. Finally, there will be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron – for iron breaks and smashes everything – and as iron breaks things to pieces, so it will crush and break all the others. Just as you saw that the feet and toes were partly of baked clay and partly of iron, so this will be a divided kingdom; yet it will have some of the strength of iron in it, even as you saw iron mixed with clay. As the toes were partly iron and partly clay, so this kingdom will be partly strong and partly brittle. And just as you saw the iron mixed with baked clay, so the people will be a mixture and will*

*not remain united, any more than iron mixes with clay. In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands – a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces.*

That's the interpretation. Scholars argue back and forth, trying to identify the exact kingdoms or kings meant – for the word translated *kingdom* refers to a range of things from individual kings to complete empires.

- Some think it a succession of Babylonian kings that comes to an end when Cyrus finishes the Babylonian Empire and sends the Jews back to Jerusalem.
- Some think it a succession of empires but then disagree over which particular empires are meant.
- Some link it with chapter 7 and bring in details from the interpretation of that dream. But those details aren't in this chapter and there are differences between the two dreams.

I don't think you need worry too much about specific identifications to get the meaning of this dream.

Certainly, Nebuchadnezzar's identified as the head of gold. His rule's described in terms of Genesis 1 – the dominion or rule God gave Adam at the beginning of human history. While humans threw off God's authority, it doesn't mean God abdicated. It's still His world. He gives authority. He raises up kings. And so,

- God's the one who gave humans rule over the beasts of the field and the birds of the air.

- God's the one who gives kings like Nebuchadnezzar their extensive kingdoms.

Nebuchadnezzar may be proud of his military achievements and many conquests. He may boast of his architectural wonders and economic prosperity. He may think this magnificent, independent, advanced civilisation the triumph of his own abilities. And in a very real sense, it was. Yet, it's from God. If God had not given it to him, he wouldn't have it.

Moreover, it won't last. The nature of human authorities – of empires – is that they look so impressive. They have great power and influence and magnificence. They look secure and stable and as if they'll last forever. But they don't. They come and go.

- Babylon was replaced by Persia.
- Persia was replaced by Greece.
- Greece was replaced by Rome.

Where are these empires today? Gone. They no longer rule. They're just the stuff of history. They looked so powerful. They looked so permanent. They looked as if they'd control world history forever. But they don't.

And the more modern empires are no different.

- Where's the British Empire today?
- Where are the other great colonial powers?
- What of the great Soviet Bloc?

They've gone. They had their day. It will be no different with secular humanism. It's having its day – but it won't last forever. It too will be replaced by another empire. That's what human power and rule is like. It looks very impressive for a time. It may do great good or great evil or something in between. None of them last – and most of them collapse from within. Their strength is mixed

with clay. They have their inbuilt weaknesses because that's the nature of human rule independent of God. So we shouldn't pay too much attention to them. Don't treat them as if they're the final word. Don't treat them as if they're invincible or eternal. Don't treat them as God – or as rivalling God.

The important thing in this dream is the rock. It smashes the statue. It pulverises it to dust. It destroys human authorities. It establishes a different kingdom – one that covers the whole earth and one that will never end. It won't be like the fleeting efforts of human emperors. It will be indestructible and irreplaceable. The important thing isn't the impressive statue – nor what it represents. The important thing is God's kingdom.

And so it should come as no surprise when God did this a few centuries later. The eternal Son of God became man – born of a woman, but conceived by God's Spirit. He lived among us as One who always submitted to His Father's authority. And through His death He opened the way for us to enter God's eternal kingdom. When He stood before Pilate, Jesus said (John 18:36-37):

*My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, My servants would fight to prevent My arrest by the Jews. But now My kingdom is from another place. ... You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to Me.*

In raising Jesus from the dead, God declared Him the eternal King in His kingdom. And now, through the preaching of the gospel – the preaching of the message about Jesus – we see that kingdom spreading throughout

the entire earth.

- Jesus will not pass on His rule to another.
- Jesus will destroy all other earthly kingdoms.
- Jesus will reign forever.

### **Who is Wise?**

And so, who are the truly wise? Should I be worried that Julia Gillard doesn't turn to me in a crisis? Should I feel intimidated by the intellectual giants of our God-defying culture? Should I feel threatened by the continual put-downs in the media – the constant innuendo that Christians lack real intelligence? Should I be impressed by the great God-defying civilisation established by secular humanism? Should I give it my allegiance? Should I follow its dictates?

No. For, like Daniel, God's revealed true wisdom to us. It's a wisdom that far surpasses the puny attempts of our secular world – for its source is beyond this world. It's a wisdom that enables us to see everything in proper perspective – for it deals with the issues of God and eternity and the purpose of life. We're not to be intimidated or threatened or left feeling second-rate. We know the end.

- At its very best – at the height of all its splendour and impressiveness and strength and greatness – this world has feet of clay.
- At its very best – at the height of its cleverness and knowledge and technological achievement – this world still defies God.

Why would I be intimidated by that?

God showed Nebuchadnezzar this in a dream. He didn't understand it. God revealed it to Daniel in a vision. He explained it to Nebuchadnezzar and recorded it for us.

But it's made far clearer in Jesus. He's the rock. He's the eternal King. He's exalted over all. He's the One who really counts. Are you living in modern-day Babylon in accordance with that wisdom?