

# Daniel Chapter 2 — Nebuchadnezzar's Dream of the Great Image

*The Accumulated Wisdom of the World Exposed; Daniel's Prayer with His Companions; Blessing the Giver Not the Gift; God of the Heavens in the Times of the Gentiles; and the Stone Cut Without Hands*

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**Scripture Reading: Daniel 2:1–49; Genesis 15:16; Psalm 76:10; Exodus 9:16; Romans 9:17**

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*“There is a God in the heavens who revealeth secrets, and maketh known to King Nebuchadnezzar what shall be at the end of days.” (Daniel 2:28)*

*“Blessed be the name of God for ever and ever; for wisdom and might are his. And it is he that changeth times and seasons; he deposeth kings and setteth up kings.” (Daniel 2:20–21)*

## Who Is Supreme in This Story? Not Nebuchadnezzar

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The story opens with Nebuchadnezzar as an absolute monarch who can decree that all the wise men of his kingdom be killed and be obeyed instantly, without debate. It sounds as though Nebuchadnezzar is calling the shots. But the parallel to Joseph and Pharaoh corrects that impression at once. In Joseph's case, God arranged for an idolatrous Pharaoh to dream a dream and be unable to interpret it, so that a Hebrew prisoner would be brought to him and exalted to second-in-command over Egypt. In Daniel's case, the same architecture appears: an idolatrous king dreams a dream he cannot interpret, a captive is brought in, and the captive is exalted. In both cases the question is not what the king intends but what God intends. His intention at this moment — the beginning of the times of the Gentiles — was to reveal through prophecy what was coming. The king's

rashness and the wise men's failure are both instruments in God's hand. He makes the wrath of man to praise him.

Morally, the setting also echoes the condition Israel was in before it became a nation. Joseph served Pharaoh before the nation existed; now Daniel serves Nebuchadnezzar after the nation has failed and gone back into captivity under idolaters. They have been returned, in moral terms, to the position from which they were originally delivered. It is a solemn comment on Israel's history. And again, as in Egypt, God reveals dreams and raises up his servant.

### **The Accumulated Wisdom of the World Cannot Do This**

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Nebuchadnezzar's test is instructive: he asks his wise men not merely to interpret the dream but to tell him what the dream was. If they can do that, he will trust their interpretation. If they cannot, he has no reason to trust anything they say. He already suspected them of preparing lying and corrupt words, and his demand is designed to expose them. The Chaldeans' own reply is honest: there is not a man on earth that can show the king's matter, for only the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh, could know this.

The analogy to modern science is apt. Science can take something it observes and explain how it got that way; that is its proper domain. But when it must predict — when it has to say in advance what will be — it falters. The prediction before the first moon landing that there would be three feet of dust on the lunar surface, because evolutionary timelines required it, produced the famous remark from Neil Armstrong that he seemed to be sinking in about half an inch. The prediction was wrong; no one rethought the theory. Nebuchadnezzar was wiser than his wise men, and in his own way wiser than modern credulous acceptance of scientific authority: he required proof before he accepted interpretation. Yet even Nebuchadnezzar, at the end of the chapter, falls on his face before Daniel rather than before God. He acknowledges intellectually that something supernatural has

happened and that Daniel's God is the God of gods; but there is no evidence that his heart or conscience is touched.

## **Daniel Goes to His Companions: United Prayer**

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When the death decree goes out, Daniel's response is notable on two counts. First, he goes immediately to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. He was ten times wiser than all the wise men in the kingdom; the natural impulse of a man who knows himself to be far above his colleagues is not to consult them in a crisis. But Daniel goes to his three friends and asks them to pray with him. The pattern of united prayer among believers in need is one of the most natural and beautiful things in this story.

Second, when the secret is revealed to Daniel in the night vision, his response is not to rush to Arioch and say, I have the answer, take me to the king. His response is to bless the God of the heavens at length. Verses 20–23 are pure praise: wisdom and might are his; he changes times and seasons; he deposes and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise; he reveals deep and secret things; he knows what is in the darkness; light dwells with him. Daniel is thinking about the Giver, not the gift. The child who receives a bicycle and thinks only of riding it is a natural picture of how we receive answers to prayer. Daniel is the child who, upon receiving the gift, meditates on the kindness and greatness of the parent who gave it. Everything that he knows about God comes flooding out of him before he does anything practical with what he has been given.

## **God of the Heavens: The Meaning in the Times of the Gentiles**

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In verse 18, Daniel asks the God of the heavens for mercy. In verse 23, he prays to the God of my fathers. Neither address is the God of all the earth, which Abraham used when interceding for Sodom. The distinction is precise and deliberate. In Abraham's day, God was acting as the God of the earth — working

through his covenant people, fighting their battles directly, establishing his name in the land. But the glory had departed from Jerusalem. The temple was gone. Israel was in captivity. The times of the Gentiles had begun — the period during which government was committed into Gentile hands and God was no longer seen acting on earth as he had acted for Israel.

During the times of the Gentiles, God is the God of the heavens. He is not intervening visibly in the affairs of earth in the way he fought for Israel at the Red Sea or destroyed Sennacherib's army. Of course he is still the God of earth in the sense that all things are under his sovereignty; but that is not how he is seen or how he is named in this period. Daniel correctly names him in connection with his character for the moment. Scripture is precise at every point. The details are not there by accident.

Yet when Daniel praises him in verse 23, the distance implied by God of the heavens gives way to the intimacy of God of my fathers. The judicial position and the personal relationship are both real. Daniel knew God both as the sovereign ruler who had withdrawn his visible government from the earth and as the same God who had delivered Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and who was still the God of this captive remnant. That combination — awe at his majesty and confidence in his nearness — is the mark of a mature faith.

## **The Great Image: Four Kingdoms and the Stone**

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Nebuchadnezzar's image represents the course of Gentile empire from his day to the setting up of the kingdom of God. He himself is the head of gold — a king of kings to whom the God of the heavens had given kingdom, power, strength, and glory. After him came the Medo-Persian empire (silver), then Greece (bronze), then Rome (iron), and finally the divided and partly strong, partly fragile form of the Roman empire in its revived ten-kingdom state (iron mixed with clay). The clay mixed with iron but not cohering with it speaks of attempts to strengthen

political power by alliances that can never truly hold.

In the days of those kings — the ten-kingdom confederacy of the revived Roman Empire — the God of the heavens shall set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed. The stone cut without hands smites the image on its feet and the whole image becomes like chaff blown away, and the stone becomes a great mountain and fills the whole earth. The stone is cut without hands — no human agency, no political movement, no gradual evolutionary growth of Christendom into the kingdom. It is a sudden, sovereign, divine act. Christ comes, strikes the image at its base, and the whole edifice of Gentile dominion collapses at once. The kingdom that replaces it has no predecessor and no successor: it stands forever.

*Blessed be the name of God for ever and ever; for wisdom and might are his.*