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Daniel 2:1-30 (read vv.1-13) “Character in a Time of Crisis”

Intro. The title of my message this evening is, “Character in a Time of Crisis.” Indeed, we read about a crisis in the kingdom of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar had only been on the throne about a year and he had a dream. He realized it must be significant and he demanded that his wise men reveal both the dream and the interpretation to him, or else they all would be put to death and their houses destroyed. So not only was the king in a crisis situation the so were the wise men, which would have included Daniel and his three Hebrew Associates.

It was in such a time of crisis that Daniel steps on the scene. He reacted to the crisis admirably. He reveals God to the king, who alone could reveal the king’s dream and its interpretation. As it turns out, God used Daniel to reveal the unfolding redemptive plan of the history of the world all the way up to the time of the second coming of Christ. This was truly a monumental calling and privilege.

So this is the story of God’s man revealing a message in the midst of a crisis. And it takes the kind of uncompromising, godly character that Daniel had to withstand a crisis with such wisdom and composure that we read about here.

We have been going through a crisis since March of last year. The coronavirus has spread throughout the world resulting in many deaths. The economy has been adversely affected. Government and big business have become stronger and personal freedoms have been taken away. We have witnessed racial and political division unlike anything we have seen in a long time. How have you been in this time of crisis? Have you been like Daniel, who look to God by faith in prayer in the time of crisis, or have you been like responded with fear and worry? I want to challenge you to learn how to be spiritually prepared like Daniel in a time of crisis.

In our next message we will examine the last part of chapter 2, where we will learn of the meaning of the dream as it relates to God’s workings in history. But first notice from our text:

I. A TROUBLING DREAM

Chapter 2 starts off with the story of a king who had a dream that really troubled him. Now let’s consider:

A. The Description of the Dream– In v.1 we read, “Now in the second year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign, Nebuchadnezzar¹ had dreams....” All of us have dreams during our sleep. But this night Nebuchadnezzar had an unusual dream. And he perceived its significance, and it truly was. He was so troubled by his dream “that his sleep left him” (v.1b). But why did God speak to such a pagan king? Perhaps Nebuchadnezzar had received this dream from God partly because of his own desire. Daniel implies this in v.29, “As for you, O king, thoughts came to your mind while on your bed, about what would come to pass after this; and He who reveals secrets has made known to you what will be.” Cataclysmic things had already taken place: The great Assyrian kingdom had been wiped out; the Egyptians had been decimated as an empire. Israel had been

¹ He reigned 605-562 B.C.

defeated and some of their finest young men taken into captivity. The King could have been wondering, “What is going to happen to me and my kingdom?” And as he went to sleep, God gave him the answer in several dreams (note plural). It was not at all unusual in Old Testament times for God to reveal truth through dreams. In dreams God spoke to Jacob (Gen. 28:13), Joseph (Gen. 37:5-10), Abimelech (Gen. 20:3), Pharaoh (Gen. 41:1-8), and Solomon (I Kings 3:5-15). However, since Nebuchadnezzar was totally unfit a vessel for God’s revelation, the dream and its interpretation would only be told through a man like Daniel.

We read in the last of v.1 that “his spirit was so troubled that his sleep left him.” Although he had several dreams, I think it was one particular dream that gave him the greatest amount of anxiety. Though a mistranslation² of the first part of v.5 has given the impression that the king had forgotten the dream, that was probably not the case, though he could have forgotten some of the details in the dream. We usually have trouble remembering very much about our dreams. I believe what troubled him the most was that he did remember much of his dream, and he sensed its significance, but didn’t know what it meant. So by the time the morning came he was an emotional wreck and quickly sought to take action.

B. The Desire of the King to Understand the Dream – Notice what the king did:

1. He Summoned His Servants – In v.2 we read, “Then the king gave the command to call the magicians, the astrologers, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans to tell the king his dreams. So they came and stood before the king.” The hour was likely still early when the king gave the order. He gathered the brain trust of the Babylonian Empire. The king did what all of us do. He turned to the experts and intellectuals of his day, just as during the pandemic the government turned to experts like Dr. Fauci, the World Health Organization, and the CDC.

Notice whom the king called. The magicians were not the slight of hand tricksters that we think of, but they were the fortunetellers and scholars of the day. The Astrologers were very similar to those of today in one sense. They were the stargazers. They studied the heavenly bodies. But they also were monthly prognosticators, who charted the position of the stars, and made ancient horoscopes. Today’s astrology is rooted in pagan Babylonian religion, and a Christian has no business messing around with astrology. I do not care what my sign is, and I do not read the horoscopes. The sorcerers were the spiritualists and enchanters. They used herbs, charms, and various potions. They included mediums who talked with the dead. The modern parallel would be the leaders of the New Age movement. The Chaldeans were the leading group, the wisest of the wise. They were supposedly the wisest and the most knowledgeable in all the arts and sciences of Chaldea (Babylon). I suppose they were the Ph.D.s of their day. Nebuchadnezzar did not want to leave anyone out. I can just see them file in as they pant for the rich rewards that will follow as they skillfully and shrewdly answer the king’s questions and concerns.

Application: Now Nebuchadnezzar did what many people still do today. People still go to fortunetellers, futurists, palmists, tea-leaf readers, crystal gazers, and the horoscope astrologers, trying to get a hedge on tomorrow apart from God, who holds the future and knows the end from the beginning (Isa. 46:10). Don’t join such people.

2. He Presented His Problem – In v.3 the king said, “I have had a dream, and my spirit is anxious to know the dream.” The king explains that he had had an unusual dream which he believes to have some far-reaching significance. They could do pretty well if they were told a dream to work on, but they were in for a surprise. When he says here “my spirit was troubled to

² A faulty translation of this verse gives the impression that the king had forgotten his dream. In the margin, the American Standard Version of 1901 translates “The thing is gone from me” as, “The word is gone forth from me.”

know the dream”, he does not just want to know the meaning of the dream, but first to demand that they reveal to him the *content* of the dream! So we not only read about a dream, but also:

C. The Dilemma Imposed by the Dream – The king’s problem became their problem, and the king was about to make it worse than they expected. But first notice:

1. The Confidence of the Chaldeans – Their confidence is expressed in v.4, “Then the Chaldeans spoke to the king in Aramaic, “O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will give the interpretation.”³ The Chaldeans began with standard court etiquette, similar to “Long live the King.” They expressed great confidence also in v.7 of their ability to interpret the dream, if the king will only tell them the contents. These advisers to the King believed that dreams were very important, so they devised a dream-reading system. They had massive libraries that contained dream manuals. They could go to a dream manual, look up the elements of your dream, and tell you what it meant. Most people were gullible enough to believe them!

But the king did not want to play by their rules. After all, he was king. So notice:

2. The Challenge by the King – He says in vv.5-6, “My decision is firm: if you do not make known the dream to me, and its interpretation, you shall be cut in pieces, and your houses shall be made an ash heap. However, if you tell the dream and its interpretation, you shall receive from me gifts, rewards, and great honor. Therefore tell me the dream and its interpretation.” Nebuchadnezzar is saying to these men, “I will not change my mind about this judgment I am pronouncing. Don’t beg me to tell you the dream.” The king was desperate to know or understand the dream. So here he gives them two choices: Tell the king both the dream and its interpretation and receive great reward, or you will be cut into pieces, and your house made into a refuse heap. After I have you executed your family will have no place to live! Boy, what a choice! I’m sure they were thinking, “How about a 3rd choice!” Nebuchadnezzar was really putting them on the spot.

Application: Here we can see how tyrannical and unreasonable a powerful king can be. Such a consequence was not unusual in that day. This shows the danger of giving a head of state too much power.

3. The Cynicism of the King – Look at vv.8-9, “The king answered and said, ‘I know for certain that you would gain time, because you see that my decision is firm: if you do not make known the dream to me, there is only one decree for you! For you have agreed to speak lying and corrupt words before me till the time has changed. Therefore tell me the dream, and I shall know that you can give me its interpretation.’” The King really reveals here his lack of confidence in the wise men of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar may have thought the whole group was made up of charlatans. He probably knew of past predictions they had made that never came to pass, and this was his chance to expose them. “You claim to be so smart, having access to supernatural information. If that is true, then tell me the dream and its interpretation.” He is now putting them to a real test. His reasoning at this point is very logical: If they can tell him his dream, then it is reasonable to conclude that their interpretation is genuine.

Notice also back in v.8, “I know for certain that you would gain time.” He charged them with buying time, and agreeing upon lying words. And he was not going to give them much time, for he knew what they were thinking. “Let’s tell the king whatever we have to tell him to buy some

³ Evidently this verse begins a section which involves the courts of Babylon, because the text from here through 7:28 was written in Aramaic, a common language at that time in the courts. The significance of this change is quite remarkable: God is now speaking to the world, not just to His nation. God has taken the scepter out of the line of David, and He has put it in Gentile hands. It will stay there until the day He takes the scepter back.

time. After a while, this whole thing will blow over and the king will forget about it.” That is how we sometimes deal with a crisis. We just do nothing and hope the problem will go away.

D. The Deficiency of the King’s Servants – Notice what the Chaldeans say in vv.10-11, “There is not a man on earth who can tell the king’s matter; therefore no king, lord, or ruler has ever asked such things of any magician, astrologer, or Chaldean. It is a difficult thing that the king requests, and there is no other who can tell it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh.” Here they claimed that the king was asking them to do the impossible. For once they speak the truth. They recognize that the supernatural is the only source from which such information could be available. The problem was that they had claimed to have access to the gods. Consequently, they had lost their credibility. I really feel that God was involved in this to reveal the impotence and deception of Babylonian wisdom. God chose to use this man against his own system.

I believe that modern advisers are just as ineffective. So much of the advice regarding approaches to the pandemic were based on *opinions* of government-connected scientists rather than actually scientific studies. One example is mandating wearing of masks even outdoors. They are telling people who have had covid to get the vaccine, even though they already have immunity! So don’t turn to the wisdom of the world to solve your problems. Don’t turn to false religious leaders. Turn to God and His Word. Turn to men and women of God who know God, who know His Word and are endowed with godly wisdom (Jas. 1:5).

E. The Decree to Reveal the Dream – When the King realized that these guys were a bunch of phonies, notice what happened in vv.12-13, “For this reason the king was angry and very furious, and gave a command to destroy all the wise men of Babylon. So the decree went out, and they began killing the wise men; and they sought Daniel and his companions, to kill them.” If he couldn’t trust them to tell him the truth now, then he was sure that all the things they had been telling him in the past were probably phony too. Furthermore, he was upset because they had criticized him (vv.10-12). So he orders that all the so-called wise men be slain!

By the way, this is an expression of the stupidity of anger. The more emotional a person is, the less reasonable a person is. Anger never knows any limits. It indiscriminately smashes everybody who gets in front of it. He ordered the death of not only the wise men standing in front of him, but all the others as well! Unfortunately, it would seem, this death decree included Daniel and his Jewish friends. However, since they were considered apprentices, they were probably not included in the group that stood before the King. He illustrates how much we need constitutional law. “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

So we read in our text about a troubling dream. Next we read about:

II. THE UNFORGETTABLE DANIEL

God had perfectly set up the situation for Daniel. The wise men were forced to admit that only a god could reveal the content of the king’s dream. At the point of human impossibility is exactly where God wanted His man, Daniel, to move into the situation, to reveal who the true God really is. And the same principle holds true today. There are times when God will place us in a crisis situation, for He wants us to recognize our need for Him, and trust Him to do those things that only He can do. In so doing God will be glorified and revealed to a lost world.

I believe that there are certain principles and character qualities that make you useful to God in a time of crisis. And the true test of character is not how you act, but how you *react*. When things are going well, many people can act virtuously. But under pressure, our true selves can become manifest, whether good or bad. This is brought out in 1 Cor. 11:19 which says, “There must be divisions among you, that they who are approved may be made manifest among you.” Indeed, in our text of Scripture, Daniel’s character comes shining through. In the midst of this crisis, Daniel demonstrated five character traits that we should seek to have in our own life.

A. Composure - Everybody was frazzled, from the king on down. They were all in turmoil except Daniel. Notice that it was Arioch, captain of the King’s guard, who came to see him. The root meaning of “captain” here means “to slay.” Arioch served as the king’s chief executioner. He and his men were like the KGB of that day. Yet, Daniel never panicked, because he had this amazing confidence in God. Instead, he was calm and composed even though his life was on the line. This is brought out in v.14, “Then with counsel and wisdom Daniel answered Arioch, the captain of the king’s guard, who had gone out to kill the wise men of Babylon.” As this verse indicates in the original language, he spoke appropriately and reasonably. People live and act in the moment of crisis as they have prepared themselves through previous experiences.

How is your composure in a time of crisis? Do you stay calm by faith in God, or do you panic and fall apart? Have you reacted to the pandemic with fear and worry, or with a calm trust in God? You need Daniel’s character to have such composure!

B. Courage – We read in v.16, “So Daniel went in and asked the king to give him time, that he might tell the king the interpretation.” Apparently, Arioch had arranged an audience with the King. Isn’t that amazing? Instead of killing Daniel, he gave Daniel a pass to see the king. I’m sure God made this come to pass. Just picture Daniel, a young Hebrew, still taking his three years of training, coming before Nebuchadnezzar, who was in a rage and wanted all the wise men executed. I am amazed at the courage Daniel had. Though he was risking an immediate death sentence, he boldly walked up nose to nose with the powerful Nebuchadnezzar, because he knew God was on his side.

Now where did Daniel get that kind of courage? It came from two sources. *First*, he had a good understanding of the nature and purpose of his God. He knew that *God* was on the throne. Now even though we have no indication that God had already told him that He would reveal the dream, Daniel was nevertheless confident that God would reveal it because he believed that God would not let him down at this moment, as was the case in chapter 1. *Secondly*, Daniel’s courage came from a great faith. He did not know what the king had dreamed. But he trusted God to reveal it to him.

David had the courage to fight the giant, because he knew and had faith that his God was greater than any giant! Even so, God was greater than Nebuchadnezzar.

So Daniel boldly desired of the king that he would give him some time, for he needed to seek God in prayer on this matter. Earlier, the King had refused to grant any time to the wise men, but here he does so to Daniel. Perhaps a clue to the reason is found in 1:19-20. He had come to know of the kind of man Daniel was.

Another character trait that Daniel exemplified was:

C. Communion in Prayer - Daniel was a man of prayer. The secret of his power is to be found in his life of prayer. So notice:

1. The Request for Prayer Support – Daniel gathered his believing friends together for a prayer meeting! We read in vv.17-18, “Then Daniel went to his house, and made the decision known to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, his companions, that they might seek mercies from the God of heaven concerning this secret, so that Daniel and his companions might not perish with the rest of the wise men of Babylon.” When Daniel went back to tell his friends that he had been granted time to determine the dream and its interpretation, they immediately turned to God in prayer. Daniel’s confidence was in God, not in any dream manuals or his own “psychic powers.” God’s very special servants are people of prayer who are greatly dependent on Him. What a fine picture: four young men, probably still in their teens, bowed in prayer before God. I often hear, “I do not need to go to prayer meeting. Cannot I pray alone? ...” But there is another kind of prayer. There is fellowship in prayer. [Apply to National Day of Prayer]

As we learn from the rest of the book of Daniel, this was not the first time these young men sought God in prayer. I believe that prayer was already a regular part of their lives. Certainly they had an incentive to pray here; their lives were at stake! (v.18b). But I must share a principle here. If you want to have confidence in prayer during a time of crisis, be sure that you are regular in prayer *before* the crisis. And when the crisis came, prayer was not a last resort, but was one of the first things that Daniel did. I tell you, you never get to the place in your Christian life where you do not need prayer any longer. The effectiveness of your prayers in a time of crisis is in proportion to the faithfulness of your prayers prior to the crisis.

What do you do in a time of crisis? Do you pray with faith, or do you fret with fear and worry? Phil. 4:6 says, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.”

So the 4 men evidently went to bed, waiting on an answer from God. The answer did come. Note with me:

2. The Answer to His Prayer – In v.19 we read, “Then the secret was revealed to Daniel in a night vision.” I would think that the way God revealed this to Daniel was to give him the same dream He gave to Nebuchadnezzar. Yes, God answers prayer, and let us believe that He is still answering prayer today!

Another character quality that Daniel exemplified was:

D. Compassion – In v.24 we read, “Therefore Daniel went to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to destroy the wise men of Babylon. He went and said thus to him: ‘Do not destroy the wise men of Babylon; take me before the king, and I will tell the king the interpretation.’” Now in control of the whole situation, Daniel went back to Arioch to make sure that the executioner didn’t go through with his assignment. That was the first thing he did. He was not so occupied with his own importance that he did not think of others. I think that Daniel was motivated to say this by the compassion he had for them. He knew they were lost in idolatry and were consequently doomed to hell. He didn’t want them to die. He wanted them to have time to receive his witness of the true God. May God give us compassionate hearts for the lost! Indeed, we should be like God, who according to 2 Peter 3:9 is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.”

E. Humility - Note vv.27-28, “Daniel answered in the presence of the king, and said, “The secret which the king has demanded, the wise men, the astrologers, the magicians, and the soothsayers cannot declare to the king. But there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days....” In spite of all his gifts,

handsomeness, brilliance, and spiritual maturity, Daniel was still humble. Note that Daniel began by making clear to the king to whom the credit for his insight was due. He did not have the ability to reveal the dream and its interpretation but God did. So Daniel remained humble, because he always remembered that God is the source of all good things. The Corinthians had a problem with pride, so Paul asked them in 1 Cor. 4:7, “And what do you have that you did not receive?” So in effect, Daniel said, “I can’t take any credit for this. I’m not better than anybody else. God is the revealer of secrets. He has merely used me for His own purposes.” What a heart of humility! He was said to be 10 times wiser than others, so if anybody had anything to be proud about, Daniel did.

The more God has blessed you with talent, good looks, intellect, and success, the more you need to follow Daniel’s example of humility.

What a contrast we see with Arioch. He wanted to take credit for finding Daniel and bringing him before the king. He said in v.25, “I have found a man of the captives of Judah, who will make known to the king the interpretation.” He had little to do with this, and had nothing to do with the fact that Daniel would soon reveal the king’s dream. He was probably hoping for honor and reward from the king.

Conclusion: Daniel was an incredibly rare kind of man and that’s exactly why God used him the way He did. It is no wonder that when Ezekiel recited three righteous men of history, he put Daniel in the middle even though Daniel was a contemporary (Ez. 14:14, 20; cf. 28:3). May God help us to have strong Christian character in times of crisis.

Sources: W. A. Criswell, *Expository Sermons on the Book of Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976); John MacArthur, Jr., *An Uncompromising Life* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1983); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 2 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Leon Wood, *A Commentary on Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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