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The Upside-Down Kingdom: Upside-Down Powers Daniel 2

Well, Pastor Mark is in Paris now, and I'm sure he's enjoying himself high-fiving mimes and parachuting off of the Eiffel Tower or whatever you do in Paris. But while Dad's away the kids will play, so we're having a lot of fun ourselves going through the book of Daniel for our series this month. We're talking about the upside-down Kingdom, how Daniel and his friends showed us that they never really became citizens of Babylon, they were always part of a different kingdom, an upside-down one. Last week, Ellis kicked us off with upside-down blessings, the things God uses for our good that we just wouldn't think to be the case... like vegetables. This week, I want to talk about upside-down power. But to do that, we have to talk about dreams.

Is anybody here a dreamer? I'm not talking about a dreamer like Kermit the Frog dreams, ("the lovers, the dreamers and meeeee"), I'm talking about do you remember the dreams you have at night? I rarely do. And when I do remember them they tend to be the strangest dreams ever. My dreams are usually off their rocker. I dream stuff like, I'm fighting sharks underwater. That's not a nightmare by the way, that's a fun dream! One of my favorite dreams from my childhood was one where I was with my uncles and we were in trenches, shooting at blimps with cannons. We were having a blast.

Now the funny thing about dreams is that we want to assign meaning to them. We wake up from a dream and we usually ask, what on earth did that mean? In fact, you can go online and find dream dictionaries to interpret your dreams.

There's a scripture that says there is nothing new under the sun, and despite the fact that they're on the internet now, dream dictionaries are nothing new. In fact, archaeologists have uncovered manuals for interpreting dreams from 4,000 years ago. These dream manuals were used by the same sorcerers, astrologers, and magicians that Daniel was working with in the passage we are going to read today. These guys thought they had dreams figured out, you tell them what the dream was and they'd give you an interpretation. And they were just as bad at that then as they are now.

But we're going to read about a dream that is far different than any dreams we might have had. This was a dream that God had given King Nebuchadnezzar—

remember King Neb from last week?—and it was a dream about power. Let's read more about this dream.

Daniel 2: 1-16

In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind was troubled and he could not sleep. So the king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed. When they came in and stood before the king, he said to them, "I have had a dream that troubles me and I want to know what it means."

Then the astrologers answered the king, "May the king live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will interpret it."

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."

Once more they replied, "Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will interpret it."

Then the king answered, "I am certain that 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 only one penalty for you. You have conspired to tell me misleading and wicked things, hoping the situation will change. So then, tell me the dream, and I will know that you can interpret it for me."

The astrologers answered the king, "There is no one 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 humans."

This made the king so angry and furious that he ordered the execution of all the wise men of Babylon. So the decree was issued to put the wise men to death, and men were sent to look for Daniel and his friends to put them to death.

This is the word of the Lord. [Thanks be to God.]

The first thing I want you to see from this passage was that King Nebby thought that this dream was about him. He thought that he had all the power. This explains why he was so angry with his astrologers and magicians. We'll get to exactly what the dream was in a minute, but just imagine for now that King Nebby thought that this dream was a warning that someone was going to assassinate him. And imagine that he really believes that these magicians and astrologers know what the dream actually is. Then when they say they can't tell him the dream, he believes that they

are plotting to assassinate him. Why else won't they tell him the dream? They are in on the plot! So King Neb is saying, "Tell me the dream and I will know you are on my side."

What it comes down to is this. King Neb thinks he has the power. And he's going to ensure he keeps it. He thinks the dream is a warning that someone is trying to take away his power, and his first suspect are the magicians and astrologers. He will eliminate any threat to his power, at any cost, and poor Daniel and his friends are caught in the middle of this mad grasp for power.

But Daniel must have been one smooth talker because he manages to get the king to delay his execution. He goes back to his pals. Can you remember what their names are? Mishael, Hananiah, Azariah. No? Shadrach, Mischach, and Abednego? Well that's confusing. Which is it? They got renamed... kind of like Prince, and the Artist Formerly Known as Prince. Anyway, he goes back to his friends and says, guys we have to pray. Plead for mercy from the God of heaven! So they do, and Daniel gets a vision in the night with the answer to his prayers. That's cool!

But listen to this little praise song that Daniel sings in v.20. It's important.

"Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever;
wisdom and power are his.
(Not Nebuchadnezzar's!)
He changes times and seasons;
(Not Nebuchadnezzar!)
he deposes kings and raises up others.
(Not Nebuchadnezzar, or anybody else for that matter)

You see, King Neb had thought that he had the power. He had thought the dream was about him. But Daniel saw otherwise, he saw what the reality was. He saw that God is the one who really has the power. Now help me out here. Who thinks they have all the power? (King Nebuchadnezzar!) Who really has all the power? (God!)

Now what if Daniel and his friends had really thought that King Neb had all the power? Well, they'd probably have been executed! But they knew that God had the power, so they pleaded with him and prayed, and it turns out that God does have the power! God is the one who changes the seasons, who deposes kings, and wisdom and power is his.

But we still don't know the dream yet, so how does God use his power? Let's find out.

Daniel goes to Arioch and says, "Hold up, don't kill everybody!" And then Arioch goes to the king and says, "Yo, king, found somebody to interpret your dream."

Now we come to the vision itself. I'm going to need some help here, so are there any kids here who think they can help me?

[Kids help act out vision]
Read passage.

v.31

"Your Majesty looked, 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 all broken to pieces 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.

"This was the dream, and now we will interpret it to the king. Your Majesty, you 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 all mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds in the sky. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold.

"After you, another kingdom will arise, inferior to yours. Next, a third kingdom, one of bronze, will rule over the whole earth.

[And he talks about the fourth kingdom as a divided kingdom and brittle kingdom.]

"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."

What does the vision mean? Daniel gives an interpretation to the king and he tells him, "You are the gold head." Then another kingdom will come after him that is weaker, the silver chest. A third kingdom, the bronze kingdom, and finally a fourth kingdom, iron that smashes and breaks everything, but mixed with clay. Now the traditional understanding of this is that the gold head is the Babylonian kingdom, the silver kingdom is the Medes and Persians who took over Babylon immediately afterwards. Then the bronze kingdom is the Greeks, who ruled over the whole earth. Then finally, the Romans who definitely were the smashing, breaking type. And that's pretty cool, because it means that King Neb really did receive a vision of the future.

But you know what, I'm not as interested in the statue as I am this rock that was not cut from human hands. Think about this. Would you use a rock to crush iron? Does it really work that way? Doesn't it work the opposite way? Don't you make a pickaxe out of iron and use that to break up rock? You kids who play minecraft, do you use rock to make your pickaxe? Not if you can help it. You use iron, and gold, right? But in Neb's vision, it's the humble rock that breaks up these kingdoms. What, or who, is the rock?

I will give you some clues. Who is the stone of stumbling, the rock of offense? Who is the stone which his people rejected which became the chief cornerstone? Who is the king who comes humble, riding on a donkey? It's Jesus Christ! Jesus is the rock cut out without human hands. The vision wasn't really about the big fancy statue. It was really about this strange rock that breaks everything up. And we'll talk more about Jesus in a minute.

But what about this mountain that the rock becomes... What do you think that is? The mountain is the Kingdom of God. When Jesus came 2,000 years ago, he established a new kingdom on earth, an upside down kingdom. And he is the embodiment that the upside-down kingdom comes through upside-down power. Jesus, the king who comes humbly, sought out ordinary people, 12 men who were fishermen and tax collectors. And believe it or not, we've already seen Daniel's vision play out. And it's still playing out. Every time someone decides to seek Jesus as their king, the mountain grows. And it is filling the whole earth. Ordinary people just like you and me, with a humble king, part of a kingdom which has endured beyond any empires. The Upside-down kingdom coming through upside-down power.

Jesus himself says something about the ordinary, upside-down power of his kingdom. In Luke 17:20, the Pharisee's ask Jesus when the Kingdom of God will come. Listen to what he tells them.

'...he answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.'" The kingdom of God is in the midst of us! And it's not this golden, silver, flashy statue. But it is an enduring mountain.

This all may seem pretty obvious. Someone thinks they have the power. God really has all the power. But as obvious as this may seem we miss it all the time. The funny thing about this story, is even if you're familiar with it you often remember more about the statue than anything. Many people forget this bit about the stone cut out not from human hands, and the mountain that grows in it's place. And it's true, we tend to stare at the gleaming statue, the things and people who seem to have power in our day-to-day lives, and forget that the real point of the vision is the rock and the mountain, Jesus and the kingdom of God.

Our eyes get fixed on the people in our world who seem to have power. Politicians. Bosses. Pastors. These are the people we think make things happen. Who can blame us? It sure looks like the people with power make things happen. But King Neb's vision gives us a glimpse of the trajectory of human history, and with that glimpse we get a look at the true nature of reality, that God is the one who makes things happen.

There are a lot of things happening around the world. Ebola, ISIS, Gaza, Ukraine, hurricanes, you name it, plenty to make us feel anxious about where we are going. We have become concerned about the state of our country, even rightly so. But some of us need to turn off the news and pick up a Bible. The vision that King Neb saw shows that we should not put our hope in America. I love my country, but if we put our hope in any kingdom but God's kingdom, we will be sorely disappointed. World history bears that out. King Neb's vision bears that out.

So we pray as Jesus taught us to pray. Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. We recognize that the upside-down kingdom comes through upside-down power. The irony is that where we think the Kingdom should be, it is less and less. And where it should not be, we see it more and more. So in America and Europe, we see the church being marginalized more and more. But in the rest of the world, the Kingdom is exploding, and in places we think it should not. In China, in Iran, more and more are becoming citizens of the kingdom of God. The mountain that endures is growing.

And that should give us hope. It means that God wins. And we win, if we're citizens of his kingdom. So don't fix your eyes on the powers of this world, fix your eyes on the upside-down power of the kingdom.

Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.

- DIG DEEPER

1. What do you think was the most important point in the sermon? Why is it important?
2. What other reflections do you have about the sermon by Pastor Larry?
3. How do you think the sermon applies to us as a congregation?
4. What is it that God wants you to do as a result of hearing this sermon? Where has God truly blessed you, and how is he calling you to bless others?