



Sermon Transcript

March 29, 2020

God's One Story of Redemption

Seek First the Kingdom of God

Daniel 2:36-45

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on March 29, 2020 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Daniel 2:36-45

³⁶ “This was the dream. Now we will tell the king its interpretation. ³⁷ You, O king, the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, and the might, and the glory, ³⁸ and into whose hand he has given, wherever they dwell, the children of man, the beasts of the field, and the birds of the heavens, making you rule over them all—you are the head of gold. ³⁹ Another kingdom inferior to you shall arise after you, and yet a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over all the earth. ⁴⁰ And there shall be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron, because iron breaks to pieces and shatters all things. And like iron that crushes, it shall break and crush all these. ⁴¹ And as you saw the feet and toes, partly of potter’s clay and partly of iron, it shall be a divided kingdom, but some of the firmness of iron shall be in it, just as you saw iron mixed with the soft clay. ⁴² And as the toes of the feet were partly iron and partly clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly brittle. ⁴³ As you saw the iron mixed with soft clay, so they will mix with one another in marriage, but they will not hold together, just as iron does not mix with clay.

⁴⁴ And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever. ⁴⁵ Just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. A great God has made know to the king what shall be after this. The dream is certain and its interpretation sure.”

Introduction

“It was the best of times . . . It was the worst of times.” Of course, this is the opening line of Charles Dickens’ famous novel *A Tale of Two Cities*. Here is how the rest of the opening paragraph reads. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.”

In this opening paragraph, you are immediately introduced to the tension of this novel. The tale that is being told by Dickens may take place in two different cities; London and Paris; but the real tension of the novel is the tension we all feel as we live our lives. It is the tension between love and hate, good and evil, right and wrong . . . God and self.

It is somewhat reminiscent of another book that was written close to 1500 years prior to Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*. This book was written by an important figure in church history. His name was St. Augustine. The book he wrote was titled *The City of God*. He began writing it in 413 AD, three years after the city of Rome had been captured by the Vandals. Rome had been called the Eternal City for a reason. No one ever thought that this glorious city, a tribute to human achievement and power, and the Roman Empire for that matter, would ever fall. But it did.

It is out of this context that St. Augustine writes his book *The City of God*. In this book, he too tells a “tale of two cities.” He writes of the tension that exists between the “city of God” and what he calls the “city of man.” These two “cities” represent competing values, or as Augustine would say, they represent “competing loves.” The “city of man” represents the love of self, even to the contempt of God and the “city of God” represents the love of God, even to the contempt of self.² We all know the reality of this tension. These two loves are competing for our hearts: the love of God and the love of self.

This morning, we are going to be in the book of Daniel, and in the very first verse of this book we encounter two opposing cities: Jerusalem and Babylon. Just like London and Paris, these two cities were real cities that existed in real time. But throughout Scripture, these two cities also represent two competing ways of life. Babylon is symbolic for the pride of man that stretches from the tower of Babel in Genesis 11 to the final act of judgment in Revelation 18. Here we read, “*Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!*” The message of Revelation 18 is that the empire of man, Augustine’s “city of man” and the pride of man, will someday, like Rome in Augustine’s day be brought low.

At the same time, Jerusalem is symbolic for the “city of God” and the citizens of this city are those who find that meaning in life and reality can only be realized and experienced when God is at the center of life. And this is the “true Eternal city” - this is the city that knows no end. In Revelation 21:10 we read, *“And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.”*

Two cities . . . Two ways of life . . . The “city of man” and the “city of God.” So when you open up the book of Daniel we are confronted with the reality that the people of Judah—citizens of Jerusalem—are now living in exile. Last week we saw how the prophet Ezekiel was exiled to Babylon. This morning we are in Daniel and he too has been exiled to Babylon. In fact, Daniel was one of the first captives brought to Babylon. He, along with his three friends—Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego—were part of the first wave of exiles to enter Babylon.

On one hand, they are citizens of the “kingdom of heaven” but at the same time they are living in the “city of man.” And you know all too well how the values of “Babylon” can cause you to forget your God and forget that you are first and foremost a citizen of Jerusalem. Here is the good news about Daniel and his three friends. They did not forget their God and they did not forget that they were citizens of Jerusalem. They resolved to remember that they belong first and foremost to God. It is possible to live as a citizen of heaven while living in the city of man.

I think that is what Jesus is getting in the Sermon on the Mount. In this sermon he is teaching his disciples—his followers—people like you and me who follow Jesus—he was teaching them what life looks like in the kingdom of God. It is a kingdom that has already come in the person of Jesus. It is a kingdom that is already here, though someday it will be here in full. But nonetheless, you will see as we begin our journey through the New Testament in a couple of weeks, Jesus clearly announced to the world, *“the kingdom of God is at hand.”* And so what does Jesus tell us about living as “citizens of Jerusalem while living in Babylon?” Very simply, Jesus says that when it comes to these two competing kingdoms, these two competing loves, *“seek first the kingdom of God.”* In other words, the key to living as exiles—which we are—is to make Jesus your priority. *Seek first the kingdom of God.* This morning I want us to learn some very practical lessons of what it looks like to *seek first the kingdom of God* by what we observe about Daniel in Daniel 2. You will see this morning that putting Jesus first is a very **personal** thing. It is also a **principled** seeking that transcends your circumstances. And finally, it is something that we are **passionate** about because it has to do with Jesus.

A Personal Seeking

When Jesus gives the command to *seek first the kingdom of God* he gives the command in the context of real life. It is not just a command that is merely theoretical. Rather, it is a command that rubs up against real life. This is the passage in Matthew 6 where Jesus tells us several times to not be anxious. And yet, there is much in the “city of Babylon” that tempts us to be anxious. If there is anything we can relate to right now, it is that life is unpredictable. Life has a way of throwing curveballs at you. But that was true for Daniel as well. Daniel 2 begins with an event that would make anyone anxious. It completely took Daniel by surprise. But that is life in Babylon. That is real life.

Let me tell you what happened to Daniel. King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream. He was deeply troubled by his dream and so he summoned *the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans.*” When he summoned them, he didn’t want them to just interpret his dream. Instead, he wanted them to first tell him what he dreamt and then interpret it. He wanted to be sure that they weren’t just telling him what he wanted to hear. This request was humanly impossible. And yet the king was so persistent in his command that failure to comply would result in the execution of *all the wisemen.*

Daniel and his three friends were part of this exclusive and illustrious group of wisemen. In the first wave of exiles taken from Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar took the cream of the crop and he put them in a program that accelerated their ability to rise to the top. If they played their cards right, even though they were living in exile, they could do well for themselves. For whatever reason, they were not summoned to the king when he had called all the wisemen together. Perhaps, they were still in the three year training program, “wisemen interns” and so they don’t find out what is going on until Arioch shows up at their door to round them up and take them to their execution. You talk about something coming out of leftfield!

But that is life in Babylon, isn’t it? Things happen that are completely out of your control. Tomorrow a doctor could say something that changes the rest of your life. Tomorrow an employer could come to you with unwelcome news. Tomorrow a storm or an accident could shake you to your core. Tomorrow the economy could take a dramatic turn for the worse and all of a sudden your future plans are uncertain or how you will make it day to day is even in question. Tomorrow someone you trusted could turn against you. Tomorrow a virus could cripple a state, a nation and the world. Not tomorrow . . . today! But how does a citizen of Jerusalem live through the unpredictable events that happen in real life? For starters, in a very personal way, *se seek first the kingdom of God.*

The first thing Daniel did in response to this news was a highly personal thing. He summoned his three companions and *told them to seek mercy from the God of heaven*. He turns to his fellow “citizens of Jerusalem” - his spiritual brothers, and says to them, “You better get praying! I just asked the king for time to interpret his dream.”

May I dare say that *seeking first the kingdom of God* is as plain and personal as seeking God in prayer. There is no need to get fancy here. There is no need to beat the bushes for some new thing. What I observe from Daniel is that *seeking first the kingdom of God* is nothing more than the personal conviction that it is prayer that gives strength to us when life in Babylon surprises us. Daniel did not hesitate to call on the God of heaven for help in his time of need. Prayer was a consistent way of life for Daniel.

God says in Psalm 50:15, “*Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you.*” Psalm 55:22 adds, “*Cast your burden on the LORD and he will sustain you.*” Paul says in Philippians 4:6-7, “*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*” James 5:13 instructs us, “*Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.*”

This is how citizens of Jerusalem live in the city of Babylon. We turn to God in prayer. J. C. Ryle said it this way. “The only way to be really happy in such a world as this, is to be ever casting all your cares on God. It is trying to carry their own burdens which so often makes believers sad. If they will tell their troubles to God, he will enable them to bear them as easily as Samson did the gates of Gaza. If they are resolved to keep them to themselves, they will find one day the very grasshopper is a burden.”³

Do you know what we are confessing when we *seek first the kingdom of God* through the very personal act of prayer? We are confessing that God hears our prayers. Through our prayers, we are confessing that God is at work in Babylon whether we see it or not. I believe God is at work right now. Do you? Through prayer, we are expressing that we need God, that we are dependent on God. And finally, through prayer we express our trust in God. He knows the end from the beginning.

God answered their prayers. He revealed to Daniel the interpretation of the dream and he went to the king and said, “*No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or astrologers can show to the king the mystery that the king has asked, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days.*” Citizens of Jerusalem know that there is a God in heaven and so we turn to God in prayer.

A Principled Seeking

So here is Daniel, standing before King Nebuchadnezzar, ready to rehearse for the king the details of his dream. This is what the king saw in his dream. He saw a large statue. The head of this statue was made of gold, the chest was silver, the waist and thighs were of bronze and the legs were made of iron, with the feet were a mixture of iron and clay. Then the king saw a stone that *was cut out by no human hand* and it struck the statue at the feet and the entire statue crumbled to the point that all that was left were pieces small enough to be blown away by the wind. Then the stone that destroyed the image became a great mountain, and that mountain filled the entire earth. This was the dream King Nebuchadnezzar had, and he must have been sitting on the edge of his seat as Daniel was about to tell him the meaning behind this vision.

Before we listen in on the interpretation of the king's dream, it would be good to recognize the overall theme of the book of Daniel. It is readily recognized that the book of Daniel is about God's sovereignty over history. The constant testimony of this book is that God sets up kings and he removes kings. In our chapter this morning, after receiving the revelation of the dream and its meaning, Daniel worshiped God by saying "*He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings.*" A similar word of praise for God is offered in Daniel 4:35 where it says that God *does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, 'What have you done?'*"

And so as we think about *seeking first the kingdom of God* as citizens of Jerusalem who live in Babylon there is a very principled seeking of God that rests in knowing that God is sovereign and in control. Daniel begins to interpret the dream for the king and he says "*You, O king, the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, and the might, and the glory, and into whose hand he has given, wherever they dwell, the children of man, the beasts of the field, and the birds of the heavens, making you rule over them all—you are the head of gold.*" Not only is King Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon identified as the head of gold, but it clearly stated that anything Nebuchadnezzar had is only given to him by the sovereign grace of God.

I would like to pause here and say that this is a good thing to keep in mind as we live in this current crisis—the coronavirus. God is in control. There was an interesting article in the *Wall Street Journal* on Friday written by Robert Nicholson. The title of the article caught my attention: *A Coronavirus Great Awakening?* The question posed in the article was whether or not the worldwide pandemic will cause people to turn from themselves to God—from the city of man to the city of God. Major

catastrophes of the past have at times ushered in a spiritual renewal. For example, Nicholson notes that after World War II nearly three quarters of Americans were members of a house of worship. In wondering what kind of impact this pandemic will have in our “Babylon” he observes how our twenty-first century world is not used to living with this kind of challenge other generations faced. He writes, “We now float through an anomalous world of air conditioning, 911 call centers, and pocket-size computers containing nearly the sum of human knowledge.” The result, he said is that we think we are in control of our own fate and “God has become irrelevant.” So he talks about how suffering can bring about a profound understanding of human destiny and how great struggles in life bring about great clarity in how to live. And then he concludes with this statement: “Will Americans, shaken by the reality of a risky universe, rediscover the God who proclaimed himself sovereign over every catastrophe?”⁴ That is the message of Daniel 2. God is in control!

Daniel goes on to explain the rest of the statue. Each remaining section of the statue represents another kingdom that will succeed Babylon. In verse 39, Daniel goes on to say, *“Another kingdom inferior to you shall arise after you, and yet a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over all the earth. And there shall be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron, because iron breaks to pieces and shatters all things. And like iron that crushes, it shall break and crush all these. And as you saw the feet and toes, partly of potter’s clay and partly of iron, it shall be a divided kingdom, but some of the firmness of iron shall be in it, just as you saw iron mixed with the soft clay. And as the toes of the feet were partly iron and partly clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly brittle. As you saw the iron mixed with soft clay, so they will mix with one another in marriage, but they will not hold together, just as iron does not mix with clay.”* After the Babylonians, came the Persians. They were followed by the Greeks and Alexander the Great. Then came the Romans, the iron and clay.

Human empires come and go, but God is from everlasting to everlasting. Man returns to the dust, but God is from everlasting to everlasting. Therefore, the citizen of Jerusalem is able to express a quiet trust in God when it seems like things are falling down. It is not just a trust in what God is doing globally. But it also a principled trust in what God is doing in your life. David writes in Psalm 139, *“I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. . . My frame was not hidden from you when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written everyone of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them.”* Find rest and comfort that God is in control and turn to him.

A Passionate Seeking

There is one more thing you must see from this dream that helps us understand what it means to *seek first the kingdom of God*. It really is the climax of the dream. If you remember, as Nebuchadnezzar was looking at this awesome statue, it says he saw, “*a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone the struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.*” What is that stone that came and struck down the statue? Daniel tells us in verse 44 the meaning behind the stone.

He begins by saying. “*And in the days of those kings.*” What kings? He is talking about the empire represented by the iron legs, he is talking about the Roman Empire. It is during the reign of the Roman Empire that this rock will strike the statue representing the kingdom of man. He goes on to say of this rock, “*the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever. Just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. A great God has made know to the king what shall be after this. The dream is certain and its interpretation sure.*” In other words, this will come to pass.

Next Sunday, we conclude our journey through the Old Testament. We are using the acronym CASKET EMPTY to tell the story of the Bible. CASKET stands for the Old Testament: Creation, Abraham, Sinai, Kings, EXILE, Temple. Obviously, we are in the part of the Old Testament story where the people of Israel have been removed from the land and they are living in exile. This raises a lot of questions. When God chose Abraham he promised that through his seed he would bless the nations. When Israel was gathered at Mt. Sinai they were called to be a “kingdom of priests” to bring God’s blessing to the nations. But instead, they became more like the nations around them. And so here they are now, in exile. This is what prompted Ezekiel to ask in our passage last week, Ezekiel 11, “*Will you make a full end of the remnant of Israel?*” And furthermore, what will happen to God’s plan to restore this broken world?

Our passage this morning reminds us that God is going to do what he said he would do and it gives us a taste of what we will see in the New Testament. The rock that

strikes the statue is Jesus. The mountain that covers the earth is the kingdom of God. In fact, the arrival of the kingdom of God represents the most dominant theme of Jesus's entire ministry and it is the focus of our message this morning, *seek first the kingdom of God*. Carol Kaminski draws the connection between Jesus and Daniel when she reminds us what Jesus said when he stood on trial and the high priest asked Jesus is he was *the Christ, the Son of God*. Jesus responds by quoting from Daniel 7:13, "*You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven.*"

Have you ever noticed how often Jesus is referred to as "the rock?" We read in Scripture, "*The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.*" We read, "*See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trust will never be dismayed.*" We read, "*On this rock I will be my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.*" We read, "*As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men, but in the sight of God chosen and precious.*" He is the Rock of Ages and his kingdom of salvation and peace have no end. Someday, his kingdom will cover the earth.

It began with the coming of Jesus to this world when "*a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.*" It was under Pontus Pilate, the Roman official, that Jesus was crucified. Three days later he rose from the dead, proclaiming to us that Satan has been defeated and the age of the kingdom of God had been inaugurated. In the book of Acts, we see the kingdom of God begin to spread throughout the Roman Empire; and today the kingdom of God can be found all over the world where people confess Jesus to be Lord. That mountain is growing! But there is coming a day with this kingdom will cover every square inch of this world and all things will be made new.

That is the message of this dream to King Nebuchadnezzar. Through this dream we learn that to *seek first the kingdom of God* is to have a passion for Jesus. That is how we live as citizens of Jerusalem in the city of Babylon. We are passionate worshipers of Jesus. He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords and his kingdom has no end. And through our witness we pray that the kingdom of God would spread in the hearts of those who live in Babylon—just like it did in the heart of King Nebuchadnezzar who could not deny the truth and he *fell upon his face and said . . . Truly, you God is God of gods and Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery.*" May that be the impact of our worship and passion for Jesus. May others find the love of God and respond in joyful worship.

Conclusion

As citizens of Jerusalem living in the city of Babylon may we *seek first the kingdom of God*. In a **personal** way, turn to God in prayer in your time of need. In a **principle** way, rest in knowing that God is in control. In a **passionate** way, worship Jesus with all of your heart for his kingdom of peace and forgiveness is an eternal kingdom. That is why we will line the streets with worshipers next week and cry out, *Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Our God saves!*

¹SparkNotes Editors. (2005). SparkNote on Saint Augustine (A.D. 354–430). Retrieved June 20, 2011, from <http://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/augustine/>

²Augustine, *The City of God, in a Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 2, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 282-282

³J.C. Ryle *A Call to Prayer* (Laurel, MS: Audobon Press, 1996) 145

⁴Robert Nicholson *A Coronavirus Great Awakening?* www.wsj.com March 26, 2020

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COMMUNITY
GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What was your coronavirus “quarantine” like this past week? What blessing did you enjoy and what challenge did you encounter?
2. Are you aware of any needs as a result of the virus that you would like to bring to the attention of the group? Do you have a need that you want the group to know about?

Diving Into The Word

3. Read Daniel 2:1-30. Take time as a group to describe what is happening here. Then discuss what you learn about God in this passage? Describe how Daniel models a life of prayer in this passage. Take some time to ponder his prayer in verse 20-23. What do you learn about prayer from his prayer?
4. Read Daniel 2:31-45. What was Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and what did it mean? What do you learn about God from his dream? What do you learn about man from his dream? How does it make you feel knowing that God is in control? Why?
5. Read Matthew 6:25-34. What does it look like for you to *seek first the kingdom of God*?
 - How does prayer help you with your anxious thoughts?
 - Where in your life do you need to rest in the sovereignty of God?
 - Share what you would like to do to keep a spirit of worship this coming week.

Taking It Home

6. What is one thing you are taking from your study?
7. Who can you tell?