

**Daniel 2:31-49, No. 5****“Things to Come”****November 27, 2016****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

Last time we read that Nebuchadnezzar had a disturbing dream and, desperate to know what it meant, had demanded that his advisors describe the dream and then provide an interpretation. Obviously he thought that a reliable interpretation could only be guaranteed if the omen-readers could tell him the content of the dream in the first place. He had threatened them all with death if they could not meet his demands. Daniel and his friends prayed for help from the Lord and the dream and its meaning were disclosed to him in vision. But we have not yet learned what the king’s dream was or what it meant. Daniel is about to tell us.

**Text Comment**

- v.31 Daniel not only now knew the dream, he knew how it had affected Nebuchadnezzar; it terrified him.
- v.33 Now it is important for you to know that this picture of a giant statue composed of various metals representing historical ages is not unique to Daniel. There are Persian examples, though there are significant differences between those and this one, and one, still earlier, from the Greek poet Hesiod (8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) in which the same sequence of metals – gold, silver, bronze, and iron – likewise represent four eras or epochs of history. This should not surprise us. There is a great deal of this sort of accommodation to cultural forms in the Bible, whether in worship – for example, the architecture of Solomon’s temple is very similar to that of other ancient near eastern temples – or in wisdom – for example, many of the biblical proverbs can be found in Babylonian or Egyptian collections from the same period – or in prophecy – for example, the cherubim in Ezekiel’s visions are recognizable angelic figures from the iconography of the ancient near east. This accommodation to cultural forms made it easier for people of that time and place to understand and to appreciate what they were being taught. Truth was being translated into forms accessible to the audience. If the Bible had been written in our day it would have been translated into forms that were familiar to us.
- v.38 That identification must have pleased Nebuchadnezzar! He was the head and the head was made of the most precious metal.
- v.39 It has often been supposed that the four metals in the order in which they appear represent decline or degeneration: gold is more valuable than silver, which is more valuable than bronze, and so on. The problem is that the third kingdom, made of bronze, will “rule over all the earth,” which seems to suggest that it is a greater kingdom than the one before it, the kingdom that was inferior to Babylon. On the other hand, it is possible that the degeneration in splendor from gold to iron is matched by an increase in hardness from gold to iron. The splendor of man’s accomplishments do tend to degenerate at the same time that the brutality of human behavior tends to increase. [Davis, 47] We move from

the Gothic cathedral to the Experience Music Project, but also from the brutality of pre-modern warfare to Auschwitz and Hiroshima.

- v.40 Now the identification of these four kingdoms is one of the famous problems of interpretation in the book of Daniel. The same prophecy of four kingdoms succeeding one another in time appears again in more elaborate detail in chapter 7, so we can leave the problem of identifying the four kingdoms until then. Suffice it to say at this point that the options reduce primarily to two. Either the four kingdoms are Babylon, Media, Persia, and Greece or they are Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. Liberal biblical scholarship favors the first option, not least, indeed primarily because by the time they think Daniel was written – in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. – Rome was not yet on the imperial horizon of the Middle East and, of course, such scholars do not believe that predictive prophecy is possible. Evangelical Scholarship, which regards Daniel as a 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. work and so a work containing actual prophecy, typically takes the fourth kingdom to be the Roman Empire. They point out, as part of their argument, that there is not in Daniel nor was there in ancient near eastern history a separate Median empire that held a wide sway over the ancient near east. Again, we'll leave this discussion until the question reappears in chapter 7.
- v.42 We speak of a person's "feet of clay." That is our idiom for a point of weakness in an otherwise strong person, the point at which he may be attacked or the reason for which, despite appearances, he is likely to fail. [Longman, 82] The feet partly of iron and partly of clay represent a tendency to fragmentation. As one commentator puts it, "There is no 'progress' gene implanted in history's womb that ensures some sort of infallible upward movement." [Davis, 47]
- v.45 The kingdom that God shall set up – that is, a kingdom that is not created by human agency, by military conquest or political hegemony, notice the "no human hand" in v. 45 – will be everything the previous kingdoms were not. It will be *indestructible* – that is, it will not be replaced in turn by another kingdom – it will be *final* – no succeeding peoples will take it over – it will be *almighty* – that is, all other kingdoms will succumb to it – and all of this because it is *supernatural* – not a human but a divine creation. [Davis, 47-48]
- But this kingdom also appears to be "paradoxical." [Davis, 48] That is, it is first a stone – nothing very grand about a stone – but it will finally rule over all the earth. We might say that its origins are obscure and unimpressive but its destiny is triumphant and universal. As you no doubt have already seen, if the fourth kingdom is Rome it would be easy to see that this is a prophecy of the coming of this supernatural kingdom in the coming of Jesus Christ. Remember how the Gospel of Mark begins: Jesus came preaching "the kingdom of God."
- v.46 Nebuchadnezzar, like all unbelievers, worships the creature rather than the creator. Daniel has told the king that it was God who revealed the mystery, a fact that Nebuchadnezzar acknowledges in the next verse, but what is important to him is that the man who got the revelation *is working for him!* "As a good polytheist, Nebuchadnezzar was more than willing to acknowledge the power of foreign deities. He could easily

incorporate Yahweh into his pantheon and give him the credit due him at the moment.”  
[Longman, 83]

The key point, however, and one that would be obvious to any ancient near eastern reader of this narrative, is that the most powerful man in the world was now prostrate before an exiled Jew! [Lucas, 77; Longman, 84] Even the king of Babylon must confess that Yahweh is unlike any of the other gods the Babylonians worshipped. Nebuchadnezzar confesses Yahweh as the “God of gods” in the next verse, which, of course, doesn’t mean that he became a monotheist. But it does mean he could tell the difference between what Daniel’s God could do and the powers of the “gods” he worshipped. Marduk had never done anything like this!

- v.47 It has sometimes been asked why Nebuchadnezzar seemed so pleased with the interpretation of the dream when what it clearly predicted was the end of his empire. But human nature being what it is, he took it to be good news for him personally. It was, Daniel said to the king, “*after you*” that the next kingdom would appear. If you remember, even a good man like Hezekiah, Judah’s king, responded to the news that Babylon would conquer Judah and end his dynasty in much the same way. He thought, “Well, at least nothing bad will happen in my lifetime.” [2 Kgs. 20:19; Lucas, 76] Selfish, yes, but hardly an inexplicable response.

It is an easy mistake, too often made by readers of Daniel, to become so fascinated with the details of the prophecies found in the book that they miss the point of those prophecies. We want to know the identity of the four kingdoms, later we’ll want to know precisely when the fifth kingdom was supposed to be established, and so on. All of that is important in its own way to be sure. But for the original readers of Daniel, the precise nature of the unfolding future of the political order of their world was not the lesson to be carried away from Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. How, after all, does it help me to know that several centuries from now the world will be ruled by a different political power than the one that rules it today? Think about it. If the Greeks were going to rule the middle east several hundred years later, what possible difference would that make to Daniel, living in Babylon in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.? And, for that matter, what difference would it make to us who live some 2,000 years later?

Well the answer is this: what the dream teaches us, what it taught Daniel and what it ought to have taught Nebuchadnezzar, is that history is under the control of God, it unfolds not according to our plan but according to his, and that in all that happens Yahweh has in view the ultimate triumph of *his* kingdom. Whether one found himself living in the days of Babylon’s ascendancy, or Persia’s, or Greece’s, or Rome’s, *this* is the key piece of knowledge: that God is overseeing human history to bring it to *his* intended consummation. In other words, in what happens in the world, whatever happens, from Babylon’s fall to Mr. Trump’s election, we have to do with God! Now, to be sure, that same truth is taught on the level of the individual life as well. With regard to your own life as a believer, God is superintending events in your life so as to bring his purposes to pass and to bring you safely to heaven. As Paul famously put it:

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”

Or as the psalmist put it long before:

“...in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.” [139:16]

But here that truth is revealed in regard to the landscape of world history, the rise and fall of nations, and the consummation of all things at the end of history. But whether we are talking about the seashore or the individual grains of sand, the Bible’s message is the same. God is orchestrating events, God is in control of the passage of time, and God is working out his purpose in the life of mankind. As the Apostle Paul said of God in Ephesians 1:11: he “works *all things* according to the counsel of his will.”

Now for most Christians, even poorly taught Christians, this is not, by itself, a controversial point, however often we may forget the truth of it. When they are ill or have suffered some disappointment, Christians have learned from their Bible that they are to look to God as the one who has ordered their affairs. It is his will that such things should happen in our lives. True enough, there have always been some Christian theologians who want to quibble, who are unwilling to face the force of the Bible’s plain-speaking, but most Christians know better. God is in control.

But when it comes to confessing this truth without qualification, to take with full seriousness the extent to which that divine control is exercised over every dimension of human life and down to its smallest details, even the ordinary believer can blanch. There are certain areas of life he or she wants to carve out so that they, at least they, are not immediately under divine control. For example, we do not want *our sins* to be under divine control. We fear that if we say that even our sinful thoughts and actions are under God’s control we would be tainting him with our own moral failures and would be making God responsible for our sins. And perhaps most of the time we tend to think, wittingly or unwittingly, that the smaller things of life are too insignificant for God to bother with: what clothes I wear, what I eat for breakfast, and so on.

But, of course, not only does the Bible teach, and teach emphatically and repeatedly, that the divine sovereignty is absolute, admits of no qualifications, extends even to the sinful thoughts and actions of human beings – as a pastor of mine used to say, God uses sin sinlessly – even to the most minute details of a person’s life, the fact is human history is a seamless garment and every thread is ultimately connected to every other. There can be no divine sovereignty over the nations and over the progress of history until there is an absolute sovereignty, a control that is without exception or qualification. You have heard the adage:

“For want of a nail, the shoe was lost; for want of the shoe, the horse was lost; for want of the horse, the rider was lost; for want of the rider, the battle was lost; for want of the battle, the war was lost.”

The point is that even the smallest detail of an individual human being’s life has a place in the ultimate issue of history. I read the other day something that I had not known before. Thomas Cranmer, the author of the *Book of Common Prayer*, an immensely influential instrument of

Christian worship and western Christian culture, as a young man had studied at Oxford. While there he so impressed the Oxford scholarly community that they granted him a fellowship, that is, a permanent position in the University. But he married and so had to resign that fellowship which was in those days open only to candidates for the priesthood, and such candidates had to be celibate. But his first wife, Joan, died in childbirth, as did the baby. After the death of his wife and child Oxford offered to return his fellowship. That led in turn to his being ordained as a priest. In other words, if Joan had lived, Cranmer would never have been ordained and could never have played the epoch making role he played in the reformation of Christian worship in the English speaking world. [Jacobs, *The Book of Common Prayer*, 39-40] No one, of course, knew that at the time. No one thought to offer him his fellowship once again *in order that he might write the Book of Common Prayer*, indeed, had they known that was what he was going to do that body of men would never have ordained him to the priesthood, *but that is in fact what they did and that was the unintended effect of what they did*. The fact is, every single thing in human life is that way. Everything, every outcome, every experience, every development small or great, is connected to and dependent upon thousands upon thousands of other things that came before and equally is the cause of untold thousands of things that come after.

Consider this for a few moments. The dream forecast the succession of four great empires. But what was required for those empires to rise and fall? Think of it. Millions upon millions of events both small and great. Some babies died and some lived to become great men and emperors. And so it was for every soldier in every empire's army. Some children died young but others survived, ensuring that the right man would reach adulthood at the right time, for every one of those empires required a particular man or set of men to come into being. The experiences that formed each man had to be as they were. Droughts, famines, earthquakes, bumper harvests, plagues, wars, assassinations, all of that had to be as it was. And in the case of each life that was taken up into this imperial history, thousands upon thousands of factors conspired to make that life what it came to be. And God was overseeing, controlling it all, so much so that every nail on every shoe on every horse under every rider in every battle and every war contributed its part to the victory or to the defeat.

That is why the Bible is so absolute in its proclamation of an absolute divine sovereignty. There cannot exist anything in this universe – not a single rogue molecule – that stands outside of God's control and is not contributing to the fulfillment of his plan. Now that belief in an absolute sovereignty, to be sure, is, as a rule, not accepted by most human beings. They do not like the idea that God is in such absolute control of everything. Cicero, the famous Roman statesman and philosopher, wrote:

“For gold, land, and all the blessings of life we have to return thanks to God; but no one ever returned thanks to God for virtue.”

That is, God may control the weather; he may control health and sickness, but the moral life of man stands apart and is not subject to God's control. In other words, the most important, the most definitive, the most creative dimension of our lives belongs to us and to us alone! As an indication of how far from the teaching of Scripture second temple Judaism had moved, the Judaism of Jesus' day and Paul's day, we have this from the *Midrash Rabbah*, Jewish commentaries of the time on various books of the Bible.

“Neither evil nor good comes from God; both are the results of our deeds.”

And this:

“All is in the hands of God except the fear of God.” [Cited in Warfield, “Predestination,” *Bibl. and Theol. Studies*, 294-295]

In other words, there are whole areas of human life, important areas, areas that determine a person’s eternal destiny, that lie outside of God’s control. How that can be, no one ever explains; how God can be in control of history in general, but not in control of some of the most important factors that shape that history.

Even some unquestionably great Christian theologians are tempted to confess God’s sovereign rule without making that rule quite as absolute as the Bible does. I remember reading in Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae*, for example, that to confess the divine rule of God over the history of the world didn’t mean that we had to believe that God had determined the exact number of gnats that would exist at any time. But, of course, gnats are part of human life, they affect us, they make us do things differently than we would do were there no gnats to contend with. Who could say how life might have turned out differently for a person, or for that matter, an entire people, had there been more or less gnats in the world?

Lest we miss the point, the Bible addresses that very sort of question, not, to be sure, with respect to gnats, but with respect to other features of human life that we might judge too insignificant for God to care about or to exercise his control over. Take for example the number of hairs on your head. Jesus said that God has determined that number, even though, whether we had one hair less or one more we would neither know nor care to know. Or, take another of the Lord’s examples: the falling of little birds from trees. There are, as you know, billions of birds in the United States at any moment. Have you ever thought about that? It is estimated that there are some 10 billion birds in the USA in the spring and perhaps 20 billion in the fall. That number comports well with the estimate that there are between 200 and 400 billion birds in the world – 7 billion human beings but perhaps as many as 400 billion birds. But, of course, birds have a much shorter life-span than humans. The more common birds live between two and five years, though some birds live much longer. But with 10 to 20 billion birds in our country we ought to be seeing dead birds everywhere all the time. But we don’t. Their carcasses are immediately scarfed up by scavengers and so we do not walk, as we might have expected to walk, on a carpet of dead birds. But, said the Lord, every death of a little bird occurs according to the will of our heavenly Father. Every sparrow that falls dead from a tree in some forest, or is caught and killed by some cat, without the knowledge of any human being, lost its life by the will of God. That is what Jesus said. If we struggle to understand how God could possibly superintend so many details, such infinitesimally small events in the life of the world, so many at the same time, we simply have no conception of how big God is, how infinite his knowledge and his power, and so how absolute his control over the world he has made. You realize, don’t you, that the Bible’s teaching of God’s sovereignty *is supposed to boggle your mind!*

To be sure, birds and cats act as they will. Human beings even more so. We are free creatures; we do what we please. We are responsible for the choices we make. Nebuchadnezzar was and we are. How to reconcile that fact of human freedom with God's absolute dominion the Bible never explains. It simply confesses both an absolute divine sovereignty and an absolute human accountability.

Remember how it was that those four kingdoms came to pass, one after the other. Individuals were born and then raised in such a way that would lead them to act as they did. Any number of influences conspired to shape them into the people they became. Alexander the Great certainly might well have remained in Macedonia his entire life had circumstances and his own personality and character not led him to desire conquest. But God raised up Alexander to spread his empire to the east. I've recently finished a scintillating biography of Augustus, the first emperor of Rome. It is full of the features of any biography. Augustus was sickly for many years, but he never died as so many members of his family did. He outlived his sons. He was wounded in battle, received the sort of wound that might so well have caused infection and taken his life as it did in the case of so many others, but he survived his wounds. Unlike so many great men in the world of that day, he managed to live a long life. He was not assassinated, as his uncle Julius Caesar had been, though such a thing was desired by some powerful men from time to time during his life and he also came into the Senate without bodyguards. It is hard to imagine the Roman Empire taking the course it did apart from the personal history of Augustus. And we could say the same about all four of the empires whose rise and fall are predicted in this chapter. And, we mustn't forget the way in which those risings and fallings swept into their maw multitudes of ordinary folk whose lives were profoundly altered by the imperial designs of a few great men, by the wars that they conducted, by their conquest of foreign peoples, by their subjugation of their enemies, and so on. Suffering for multitudes, prosperity for a comparative few, death and despair for great numbers of folk is the back story of the sketch of ancient near eastern history we are given in Daniel 2.

I was the preacher at the funeral service of my sister, Bronwyn, who died of cancer at the age of 49 in 1996. And in my sermon I made an emphasis of the fact that what we all took to be a tragedy – such an early death of such an able and much loved woman – was in fact the will of God. God took my sister's life and took it in the way in which she died, the painful death of a cancer patient suffering as much from the two years of treatment – never likely to save her life anyway – as from the disease itself. My point was, of course, that unless this was God's will, we could take no comfort in the midst of our sadness.

One person objected to the sermon. Knowing my sister and witnessing her suffering as she had, it seemed to her highly objectionable to associate God with such meaningless misery. What conceivable purpose could have been served by putting her through a bone marrow transplant – a procedure that required, among other things, every filling in her mouth to be replaced – a transplant that, when all was suffered that had to be suffered, didn't do an ounce of good? What could God be accomplishing in all the nausea and the vomiting and unending hours of wretchedness? And to be sure, I can't answer any of those questions. The ways of God are a great deep and there is so little that we will ever be able to understand. The Bible says that repeatedly.

However, consider the alternative. If the suffering and death of one of his own children is *not* the heavenly Father's will, then we must surrender the Bible's view of God and of history and of faith altogether. If all our days were ordered for us before there was a one of them does not include the days that hurt the most, the days that test our faith most severely, the days we wish never were, then what on earth does that text mean and what comfort can it bring, as it surely brought comfort to the author of Psalm 139. It is a statement, very like the famous one in Romans 8:28 – “all things work together for the good of those who love God” – designed precisely to address *the suffering, the unhappy days* of a believer's life. The assertion of God's sovereignty almost universally in the Bible is in the context of the suffering and the disappointment, even the despair of God's people. It is precisely the comfort of this absolute sovereignty of God that is the point! It is precisely to give us hope that our sorrows and our troubles are not meaningless and have a good purpose – however inscrutable that purpose may be – that we are taught that God maintains absolute control over the events that occur in this world, all of them without exception. *Daniel 2 was intended to provide for succeeding generations of God's people precisely this hope.* They might find themselves being ground under the pitiless turning wheels of the world's great powers but over and above all of that stood their heavenly Father taking care of their eternal future. Above it all was his purpose to build and preserve *his kingdom* until it came at last to its consummation and final victory.

Daniel 2 is simply one more of a great many demonstrations in Holy Scripture that God's people are not forgotten in this world of pain and sorrow and loss. That the world is not, as it can so often seem, out of control. That the misfortunes that overtake us are not simply bad luck. These Jews had lost their homes, many of their relatives had already died or would soon die in the Babylonian conquest of Judah. They had been forcibly removed from the land they loved, from their homes, from their families, and taken to live and work at the behest of their conquerors in a strange land. What the dream given to Nebuchadnezzar and interpreted by Daniel taught them and teaches us in that their sadness, their misery, their sense of desolation – and ours likewise when those times come – was not pointless. It had a purpose. God was working out in his ineffable but absolutely sovereign way his plan for the world and for his people.

Nebuchadnezzar was amazed, but he failed to grasp the real lesson of his dream. There is a God who rules over all. To that God we must submit our lives. Resistance is futile because we cannot escape his rule. Terrible news for the rebel, but wonderful news for the child of God. At every moment, in every circumstance of life, we are in our heavenly Father's hand. Think about the host of small circumstances that made up your day today. Even the most inscrutable events in our lives, the most terrible, the hardest to bear, it has all come to us through the fingers of one who loves us with an everlasting love.

To face the trials of life is terribly difficult; but not so difficult, not so painful, not nearly so despairing as it would be, must be to face them without the knowledge that someone who loves us is actually in control of all this, has ordered all of it for us, and that for our good and the good of the world. The life of the world is not a crapsheet. Human history is a story with a divinely written plot. Its every act and scene have been written long beforehand and are being directed by a God who holds every actor in the palm of his hand.