

From Mystery to Revelation



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Dan. 2:1–16, Acts 17:28, Dan. 2:17–49, Psalm 138, John 15:5, Deut. 32:4, 1 Pet. 2:4.*

Memory Text: “Daniel answered and said: ‘Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might’ ” (*Daniel 2:20, ESV*).

In the waters around Greenland are icebergs of many sizes. Sometimes the small ice floes move in one direction while their massive counterparts flow in another. What happens is that surface winds drive the little ones, whereas the huge masses of ice are carried along by deep ocean currents. When we consider the rise and fall of nations throughout history, it is similar to accounting for the surface winds and ocean currents. The winds represent everything changeable and unpredictable, just like human will. But operating simultaneously with these gusts and gales is another force, even more powerful and very similar to the ocean currents. It is the sure movement of God's wise and sovereign purposes. As Ellen G. White said, “Like the stars in the vast circuit of their appointed path, God's purposes know no haste and no delay.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 32. Although the rise and fall of nations, ideologies, and political parties seem to happen at the discretion of human whim alone, Daniel 2 shows that it is the God of heaven who actually moves human history to its grand finale.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 18.

The Immanence of God

Read Daniel 2:1–16. What crisis do the Hebrews face because of the dream that the Lord gives to the king?

Dreams were taken very seriously in the ancient world. When a dream seemed foreboding, it often indicated an impending disaster. Thus, it is understandable why Nebuchadnezzar becomes so anxious about a dream that, to make things even more ominous, he can no longer remember. Babylonian experts believed that the gods could reveal the interpretation of dreams, but in the case of this dream in Daniel, there is nothing that the experts can do because the king has forgotten the dream. If the content of the dream were conveyed to them, they would come up with an interpretation to please the king. But in this unprecedented situation, when the dream experts are unable to tell the king what his dream is about, they are forced to admit that “there is no other who can tell it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh” (*Dan. 2:11, NKJV*).

Overwhelmed with frustration, the king commands that all the wise men of Babylon be killed. Such an atrocity was not unknown in the ancient world. Historical sources attest that, because of a conspiracy, Darius I had all the magi executed, and Xerxes put to death the engineers who had built a bridge that collapsed. When Nebuchadnezzar issues his decree, Daniel and his companions have just finished their training and been admitted into the circle of the king’s experts. For this reason, the death decree issued by the king applies to them, as well. In fact, the original language suggests that the killing starts immediately, and Daniel and his friends will be executed next. But Daniel, with “counsel and wisdom” (*Dan. 2:14*), approaches Arioch, the man in charge of carrying out the executions. Eventually Daniel requests time from the king himself in order to solve the mystery of the dream. Interestingly, although the king has accused the magicians of trying to buy “time,” he promptly grants the “time” Daniel requests. Daniel certainly agrees with the magicians that no human being can solve such a mystery, but the prophet also knows of a God who can reveal both the content and the interpretation of the dream.

Theologians talk about the “immanence” of God, that though distinct from the creation, God can still be so close to it. What does the fact that He gives King Nebuchadnezzar a dream teach us about just how immanent God can be to us? (See also Acts 17:28.)

The Prayer

Daniel immediately grabs his three friends for a prayer session, explaining that they will be executed if God does not reveal the dream. Whenever we face a big problem, we also should recognize that our God is great enough to resolve even the most unsolvable challenges.

Read Daniel 2:17–23. What are the two kinds of prayers prayed here?

Two types of prayer are mentioned in this chapter. The first is a petition prayer in which Daniel asks God to reveal the content of the dream and its interpretation (*Dan. 2:17–19*). The words of this prayer are not given, but we are told that Daniel and his friends “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” (*Dan. 2:18, NKJV*). As they pray, God answers their petition and reveals the content and interpretation of the king’s dream. We can rest assured that whenever we seek “mercies from the God of heaven” our prayers will be heard, as well, even if not in such a dramatic manner as we see here, because the God of Daniel is our God too.

In response to God’s answering their petition, Daniel and his friends burst into a prayer of thanksgiving and praise. They praise God for being the source of wisdom and for being in control of nature and political history. There is an important lesson we can learn here. As we pray and plead with God for so many things, how often do we praise and thank Him for answering our prayers? The experience of Jesus with the 10 lepers provides an apt illustration of human ingratitude. Out of 10 who are healed, only one comes back “to give glory to God” (*Luke 17:18*). Daniel’s response not only reminds us of the importance of thanksgiving and praise but also reveals the character of the God we pray to. When we pray to Him, we can trust Him to do what is in our best interest, and thus we should always praise and thank Him.

Read Psalm 138. What can you take away from this prayer of thanksgiving that can help you learn to be thankful to God, regardless of your circumstances?

The Image: Part 1

Daniel 2:24–30. What does Daniel say here that’s so important for us always to remember? (See also *John 15:5*.)

In response to prayer, God reveals the content of the dream and its interpretation. And Daniel does not hesitate to tell the king that the solution for the mystery comes from the “God in heaven.” Also, prior to reporting the content of the dream and its interpretation, Daniel mentions the unexpressed thoughts and concerns of the king as the latter lay sleepless in bed. This circumstantial information further emphasizes the credibility of the message, because such information known only to the king must have come to Daniel through a supernatural power. But as Daniel proceeds to report the content of the dream, he risks triggering another crisis, because the dream is not necessarily good news for Nebuchadnezzar.

Read Daniel 2:31–49. What does the dream say is the fate of Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom?

The dream consists of a majestic image with its head “of fine 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 clay” (*Dan. 2:32, 33, NKJV*). Eventually a stone “struck the image on its feet” (*Dan. 2:34, NKJV*), and the whole structure was destroyed and scattered like chaff on the wind. Daniel explains that the different metals represent successive kingdoms that will replace one another throughout the course of history. For Nebuchadnezzar, the message is clear: Babylonia, with all its might and glory, will pass away and be replaced by another kingdom, which will be followed by others until a kingdom of a completely different nature will replace them all: God’s eternal kingdom, which will last forever.

Look at how fleeting and temporary all human things are. What should this fact teach us about the great hope we have in Jesus, and in Jesus alone (*see John 6:54, 2 Cor. 4:18*)?

The Image: Part 2

Read again the dream and its interpretation (*Dan. 2:31–49*). What does this teach us about God’s foreknowledge of world history?

The prophecy conveyed by Nebuchadnezzar’s dream provides a general prophetic outline and functions as the yardstick with which to approach the more detailed prophecies of Daniel 7, 8, and 11. Also, Daniel 2 is not a conditional prophecy. It is an apocalyptic prophecy: a definitive prediction of what God foresaw and actually would bring to pass in the future.

1. *The head of gold* represents Babylon (626–539 B.C.). Indeed, no other metal could better represent the power and wealth of the Babylonian Empire than gold. The Bible calls it “the golden city” (*Isa. 14:4*) and “a golden cup in the LORD’s hand” (*Jer. 51:7; compare with Rev. 18:16*). The ancient historian Herodotus reports that an abundance of gold embellished the city.

2. *The chest and arms of silver* stand for Media-Persia (539–331 B.C.). As silver is valued less than gold, the Medo-Persian Empire never attained the splendor of the Babylonian. In addition, silver also was a fitting symbol for the Persians because they used silver in their taxation system.

3. *The belly and thighs of bronze* symbolize Greece (331–168 B.C.). Ezekiel 27:13 portrays the Greeks as bartering bronze vessels. Greek soldiers were noted for their bronze armor. Their helmets, shields, and battle-axes consisted of brass. Herodotus tells us that Psammetichus I of Egypt saw in invading Greek pirates the fulfillment of an oracle that foretold “men of bronze coming from the sea.”

4. *The legs of iron* aptly represent Rome (168 B.C.–A.D. 476). As Daniel explained, the iron represented the crushing power of the Roman Empire, which lasted longer than any of the previous kingdoms. Iron was a perfect metal to represent the empire.

5. *The feet partly of iron and partly of clay* represent a divided Europe (A.D. 476–second coming of Christ). The mixture of iron with clay provides a fitting picture of what happened after the disintegration of the Roman Empire. Although many attempts have been made to unify Europe, ranging from marriage alliances between royal houses to the present European Union, division and disunity have prevailed and, according to this prophecy, will remain so until God establishes the eternal kingdom.

The Stone

Read Daniel 2:34, 35, 44, 45. What do these verses teach us about the ultimate fate of our world?

The focus of the dream is on what will happen in the “latter days” (*Dan. 2:28*). As powerful and rich as they may have been, the metal (and clay) kingdoms are nothing but a prelude to the establishment of the stone kingdom. Whereas to some extent metals and clay can be products of human manufacture, the stone in the dream comes untouched by human hands. In other words, although each of the previous kingdoms eventually comes to an end, the kingdom represented by the stone will last forever. The metaphor of the rock, then, often symbolizes God (*for example, Deut. 32:4, 1 Sam. 2:2, Ps. 18:31*), and the stone likewise may be a representation of the Messiah (*Ps. 118:22; 1 Pet. 2:4, 7*). Thus, nothing is more appropriate than the figure of a stone to symbolize the establishment of God’s eternal kingdom.

Some argue that the stone kingdom was established during Jesus’ earthly ministry, and that the propagation of the gospel stands as an indication that the kingdom of God has taken over the entire world. Yet, the stone kingdom comes into existence only after the four main kingdoms have fallen and human history has reached the time of the divided kingdoms, represented by the feet and toes of the image. This fact rules out the fulfillment during the first century, because Jesus’ earthly ministry took place during the dominion of Rome, the fourth kingdom.

But the stone gives way to a mountain. That is, “the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth” (*Dan. 2:35, NKJV*). A mountain such as this evokes Mount Zion, the place where the temple stood, the concrete representation of God’s earthly kingdom in the Old Testament times. Interestingly, the stone cut from the mountain becomes a mountain itself. This mountain, which according to the text is already in existence, most likely points to the heavenly Zion, the heavenly sanctuary, whence Christ will come to establish His eternal kingdom. And in the Jerusalem that will come down from heaven (*Rev. 21:1–22:5*), this kingdom will find its ultimate fulfillment.

Daniel 2 has been correct on all the kingdoms so far. Why, then, is it so logical and wise to trust its prophecy about the coming of the final kingdom, God’s eternal one? Why is it so irrational *not* to believe the prophecy?

Further Thought: It is instructive to note that the image of Daniel 2 is made of gold and silver, which are metals related to economic power. The image also is made of bronze and iron, which were used for tools and weapons, and of pottery, which was used in the ancient world for literary and domestic purposes. Thus, the image provides a vivid portrayal of humanity and its accomplishments. Most appropriately, the distinct anatomical parts of the image convey the succession of world kingdoms and the final disunity that will prevail in the last days of human history. The stone, however, is distinctly depicted as something not made with “human hands” (*Dan. 2:45, NIV*), a powerful reminder of the supernatural end that will come to this temporary world and all its human accomplishments.

Although “to the unaided human eye, human history may appear to be a chaotic interplay of forces and counterforces . . . Daniel assures us that behind all of this stands God, looking down upon it and moving within it to achieve what He sees best.”—William H. Shea, *Daniel: A Reader’s Guide* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2005), p. 98.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 How good to know that amid all the chaos and suffering of this world, God is ultimately in control and will bring everything to a glorious end. Until then, what is our role in seeking to do all the good that we can to help alleviate the suffering that exists in this fallen world?
- 2 How do we explain Daniel and the captives working so closely with and apparently loyally to a pagan leader who has done so much damage to Daniel’s own people?
- 3 As we saw, some have argued that the stone cut out without hands refers to the spreading of the gospel to the world. That can’t be right for a number of reasons, including what Daniel 2:35 says, which is that the stone will crush the previous nations and that “the wind carried them away so that no trace of them was found” (*NKJV*). That did not happen after the Cross. Furthermore, some attempts to identify the stone kingdom with the church fail to note that the stone kingdom replaces all other forms of human dominion. It is a kingdom that encompasses the whole world. Therefore, only Jesus’ second coming can set in motion the process portrayed as the climax of this prophetic dream. Why, then, is the second coming of Jesus the only sensible interpretation of what the stone does in the end of days?

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Daniel 2:20*

Study Focus: *Daniel 2, Isa. 41:26, Isa. 46:8–10.*

Introduction: The prophecy of Daniel 2 offers a panoramic view of history from the time of the Babylonian Empire to the end of the ages. But this most important prophetic dream was not given to Daniel or some other prophet; rather, it was given to a pagan king. God acts in strange ways sometimes! God not only interacts with, and rules over, the epic scenes of world history, but He also cares about the personal challenges and experiences of His children.

Lesson Themes:

- 1. The Occasion of the Dream.** God gave the dream to Nebuchadnezzar not long after he ascended to the throne of Babylon. During that time the king was fighting to consolidate his power.
- 2. The Significance of the Dream.** Through the dream's imagery, God revealed to the king that all kingdoms of the world eventually would disappear and give way to God's eternal kingdom.
- 3. The Scope of the Dream.** The dream discloses the broad sweep of history from the Babylonian Empire to the end of the ages. It shows God as the sovereign ruler over all world powers.

Life Application: A significant aspect of the dream is the assurance that we can entrust our lives to God. God is the true source of wisdom and power. He answered the prayer of Daniel and revealed the content and the interpretation of the dream to the prophet. Let us worship and serve this God with confidence.

Part II: Commentary

1. The Occasion of the Dream

Nebuchadnezzar had the dream during the second year of his reign (603 B.C.). This occurrence creates a chronological difficulty that we must address here. From Daniel 1, we learned that Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah during the first year of his reign. At that time, he brought Daniel

and his companions to Babylon. We also learn that the four Judean captives undertook a training program that lasted three years. Daniel 2 says that Nebuchadnezzar established Daniel as “ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and chief administrator over all the wise men of Babylon” (*Dan. 2:48, NKJV*). At first glance, it appears that in the second year of Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel had already finished his three-year training that began in the first year of that king. The best solution is to take the “first year” mentioned in Daniel 1 as the “accession year” of Nebuchadnezzar as shown in the table below:

Daniel’s Training	Nebuchadnezzar’s Reign
First year of captivity in Babylon	Accession year (invasion of Judah)
Second year	First regnal year
Third year	Second regnal year (the dream)

This chart helps us to see that Nebuchadnezzar’s first year as king was counted as his accession year, which corresponds to Daniel’s first year of captivity. At this time, Nebuchadnezzar had just ascended to the throne of Babylon. It was a critical time for the new king. As usually was the case, the new ruler had to consolidate his power, making sure no rival stood in his way and vassal kings remained under control. After all, it was during such transitions of power that rebellions and uprisings were more likely to occur. So, during his second year, Nebuchadnezzar was involved in several military campaigns to consolidate his power.

Under such circumstances, no wonder he was disturbed by the dream. Dreams could portend disasters, conspiracy, and ultimately the death of the king. Moreover, the Babylonians devoted sustained attention to dreams. They compiled a large collection of books that laid out the precise methods for the interpretation of dreams. The Babylonians also assembled a body of experts in dream interpretation. As one commentator notes, “In the ancient Near East, the diviners were the academic and religious leaders of the day. As Berossus’s *History of Babylonia* relates, Mesopotamians believed that the gods had gifted people with knowledge, but they did not give them all knowledge. Divine knowledge remained inaccessible, except through encoded messages that required the expertise of diviners. If the account of Enmeduranki can be taken seriously, Mesopotamians believed that diviners were only able to decode messages because the gods gave them the interpretations.” —Wendy Widder, *Daniel*, *Story of God Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), vol. 20, p. 47.

However, in the present circumstances no expert could decode the

dream, because the king could not remember it. But if the Babylonian experts could relate to the king what the dream was, he would know that he could trust their interpretation. So, frustrated with the Babylonian experts' inability to tell him what his dream was, the king ordered all of them to be killed.

2. The Significance of the Dream

The dream of the statue made of different metals indicated the sequence of world empires, beginning with Babylon and culminating with the establishment of God's eternal kingdom. The metals decrease in value and increase in strength from top to bottom (except for the feet), which may indicate the degradation of each successive empire. As Ellen G. White explained:

Babylon, shattered and broken at last, passed away because in prosperity its rulers had regarded themselves as independent of God, and had ascribed the glory of their kingdom to human achievement. The Medo-Persian realm was visited by the wrath of Heaven because in it God's law had been trampled underfoot. The fear of the Lord had found no place in the hearts of the vast majority of the people. Wickedness, blasphemy, and corruption prevailed. The kingdoms that followed were even more base and corrupt; and these sank lower and still lower in the scale of moral worth.—*Prophets and Kings*, pp. 501, 502.

As the interpretation makes clear, each kingdom would come to an end and be replaced by a successive power until the stone would smash the statue and fill the earth. But despite its impressive majesty and strength, that statue could not stand for long. After all, it stood or rested on feet made of an unreliable and inconsistent mixture of clay and iron.

In the dream, God showed a picture familiar to the king. Huge images were well-known in the ancient world, but they usually represented gods. In addition, the use of metals to represent different historical epochs also was known for at least a century or so prior to Nebuchadnezzar, such as with Hesiod (c. 700 B.C.). So, it appears that the Lord used some imagery with which the king already was familiar in order to convey a message totally unknown to him. In this regard, we should note that one aspect of the dream must have been completely new to Nebuchadnezzar because it is not attested to anywhere else outside the Bible. It is the rock that smashes the statue and becomes a mountain that fills the earth.

Rock and mountain evoke passages elsewhere in the Bible that depict the temple mount raised above the hills (*Isa. 2:2, 3*). Isaiah 11:9 refers to God's holy mountain, the earth, as filled with the knowledge of the Lord. In Isaiah 6:3 the whole earth is filled with His glory. And throughout the Psalms, a favorite name for God is "the rock" or "my rock" (*Ps. 18:2*,

31, 46; Ps. 19:14; Ps. 28:1; Ps. 31:2, 3; Ps. 42:9; Ps. 62:2, 6, 7; Ps. 71:3; Ps. 78:35; Ps. 89:26; Ps. 92:15; Ps. 94:22; Ps. 95:1; Ps. 144:1). Nebuchadnezzar may not have understood all the implications of the rock imagery in his dream, but anyone versed in the Scriptures would have associated the rock with God's eternal rule.

3. The Scope of the Dream

First, the dream discloses the broad sweep of history from the Babylonian Empire to the end of the ages. It was given to a pagan king to indicate that the King of kings is the ultimate ruler of every human kingdom. Indeed, by means of the dream and the subsequent interpretation of it by Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar received a crash course on the philosophy of history.

Second, the interpretation of the dream was revealed by God to Daniel. The Babylonians, despite all their training and "scholarly publications" on dream interpretation, proved themselves unable to access the only source of knowledge capable of solving that mystery.

Third, as we contemplate the statue as a representation of the world empires and systems of power, we have the impression that much of what the statue represents still stands. However, as we look at the statue as a representation of the sequence of world empires, we realize we are living at the time of the end. But regardless of the chronology of the final events, we can live with the assurance that the stone is coming!

Fourth, the dream must be understood in connection with the prayer of Daniel. Daniel's prayer is the focal point of this chapter and gives the most important theological statement about God's wisdom and power (*Dan. 2:20-22*).

Part III: Life Application

1. **Has God ever communicated something to you in a dream? When you have a night dream, how do you tend to explain it? Do you see it as a result of anxiety, psychological disturbance, normal brain processes, or as a message from God? How can you know when a dream comes from God?**

2. **God revealed the dream to Nebuchadnezzar with imagery that was familiar to him in order to reveal the unknown. What can you learn from this method of teaching, as you explain the gospel to others?**

3. This week's lesson may foster some self-examination. Ask your class members to reflect on the following questions.

- How could I enter into the same kind of calm confidence that I see in Daniel as he presented his case to God? Do I share the sense of mission that I see in Daniel and his companions as they fulfilled their responsibilities in the political life of Babylon?

- Could I trust God in any circumstances of my personal life? Do I recognize that I need His power and wisdom to solve my problems big and small? Give reasons for your answers.

- What kind of challenges am I currently facing that require the God-given wisdom that helped Daniel to interpret the king's dream? Do I trust that God can grant me the same kind of wisdom? Why, or why not?

- In what ways does the message conveyed by the dream help me live my Christian life with hope?
