

Daniel 2 Learning vs Revelation

Albert Einstein is widely regarded as one of the greatest geniuses of the 20th century. This master of mathematics and science once said, 'My religion consists of a humble admiration of the illimitable superior spirit who reveals himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble mind.'

'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, all who follow His commands have good understanding' writes the Psalmist. Famously wise King Solomon echoes that in the opening paragraph of his book of Proverbs, 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but immoral fools despise wisdom and discipline.' (Proverbs 1 v 7) He repeats the idea in Proverbs 15 v 33 : 'The fear of the Lord teaches a man wisdom, humility comes before honour.'

600 years BC Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar has set to educating some captives from Judah to serve in his administration but the king is in for some unexpected educating himself! In his dream and its interpretation by young Israeli prophet Daniel, this pagan monarch has his vision and understanding of things expanded phenomenally.

Last time we were asking would God still look after His people when they were outnumbered in a foreign place and culture. Today we discover He not only looks after us but wants to powerfully use us to influence for good the community and culture in which we find ourselves.

In our reading today we see a contrast between human learning and knowledge which is by nature limited but often leads to disastrous pride, and divine revelation which at source is infinite and, when shared with human beings, leads to wisdom, humility and the experience of saving grace and blessing!

Nebuchadnezzar was an absolute ruler, his word was instant law and ancient Babylon had no human rights. It was a precarious existence serving the king. Please him and you would be richly rewarded but anger him and you were history. And the king was by no means gullible. Anyone could make up a plausible theory to fit the data provided. Tell us your dream and we'll soon think up a pleasing interpretation for your majesty. But to guess the details he had revealed to no one? That would take some real superpowers!

Witness the limitation of human knowledge and ingenuity as the best educated experts of the day have to admit they don't know the answer. Their so called gods don't appear to 'live among men.' For all the 1000 pagan temples in Babylon not one of their idols seems interested or fit to help.

Now education in its various disciplines is a great thing and we should be grateful for it. And some people are gifted with seriously clever minds. But human beings should always be careful to acknowledge God, the ultimate source of all knowledge or we risk earning for ourselves the description used by the 1st century Apostle Paul which actually fits 21st century attitudes rather well – ‘Although they claimed to be wise they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images...’ (Romans 1 v 22-23)

In Daniel 2 Nebuchadnezzar realises the limits of his panel of experts, the university and the school of thought that trained them. Impressive image, but disappointingly little substance. Then he is overwhelmed as one of the humble captives from the tiny far off state of Judah, assisted by his three student friends in prayer is enabled by a truly higher Power to know the detail of the dream and explain its significance.

It's worth noting that Daniel was not puffed up with pride from this revelation. He carefully gives the glory to God and is respectful to the king and considerate towards the panel of experts whose lives are in danger. Wisdom given by God should make us humble.

This proud ancient king hits the learning curve as he begins to realise there is a God in heaven, a higher source of knowledge and authority, One Who can reveal mysteries, a *real* God worthy of all reverence. It's a beginning. There'll be more lessons over the next few chapters but the light is beginning to dawn that earthly thrones and powers and abilities are given us by a Higher Authority Who knows and holds the future in His hands. Even kings will have to give account to God!

These themes are borne out as Daniel is enabled by God to accurately describe the succession of empires that will dominate the following centuries. The king's dream of a statue made up of various materials vividly describes what we know to have been true of Babylon, Media/Persia, Greece and Rome. And history records how during the reign of the Caesars the Church of Jesus Christ came into being.

God revealed to this pagan king a rock which would become a cornerstone for a divine kingdom of generous grace that would fill the whole earth. The picture of a cornerstone was familiar to Daniel from Hebrew prophets like Isaiah and the idea would later be developed in the New Testament by Jesus, Peter and Paul. Nebuchadnezzar wouldn't know that but he recognized what he had seen in his dream as the Almighty revealed and Daniel described it.

A Bible passage like this should boost our confidence in the inspiration of Scripture. How could Daniel have known these things centuries before they happened? God was revealing the future and His sovereign authority over it. Human empires will rise and have their day. Some will last longer than others, all will have some strengths and weaknesses. Those which operate in pride the Almighty is well able to humble!

Only God's kingdom lasts for ever. The one set up by Christ the Living Cornerstone and we haven't seen the last of Him in this Old Testament book of Daniel!

How reassuring this is for God's people in every place and time! It's easy to become discouraged by the nominalism and apathy of some church members or intimidated by the voices of this world, militant in their demands to overturn God's commands. It would be easy to think that like Babylon our 'golden age' is passing and we'll soon lie in ruins like Greece or Rome.

Yet while there is ebb and flow, while the outward church can decline in one area the Spirit causes it to burst into new life and thrive elsewhere. Witness the exponential growth of Christianity in countries like China where against a background of state atheism and repression an increasing number of party officials are now believers working in situations similar to Daniel and his friends.

It takes an Almighty hand, an infinitely higher Source outside of this world to build something that is 'forever.' If we want to be part of forever we would be wise to begin *now*, today by humbling ourselves and acknowledging Him as Lord.

We must not audaciously demand that God bless our human empires large or small. Rather we need to submit to serve in His!

Amen