

THRIVING in BABYLON

A STUDY OF DANIEL

SERMON TITLE: "Wisdom that Moves the World"
SCRIPTURE: Daniel 2.1-49

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Sometimes life feels like it's all about survival. Sometimes it feels like all we can do is keep our head above water. This is true for everyone, but especially for followers of Jesus. As Christians, we are exiles, and that means that survival is doubly difficult. But God has not merely called us to survive; he has called us to thrive. And the place that God called us to thrive is in Babylon - the place of our exile. With this in view, the book of Daniel is a perfect picture for us of what it looks like to be faithful in a foreign land that isn't our home. Daniel doesn't merely survive in Babylon. Rather, with God's help, he thrives there. What would it look like for us to do the same here in Greenville?

Ammon Hennacy writes,

"Love without courage and wisdom is sentimentality, as with the ordinary church member. Courage without love and wisdom is foolishness, as with the ordinary soldier. Wisdom without love and courage is cowardice, as with the ordinary intellectual. But the one who has love, courage, and wisdom moves the world."

We have and will talk about the love and courage parts of this, but what about wisdom? What does it look like to have this kind of wisdom? This, of course, requires thinking about how we define wisdom. Many imagine that wisdom is some grandfatherly man sitting on his porch, telling stories that end with great one-liners. But confining wisdom to old age implies that when you finally get wisdom, you don't have the energy to live it out. And then there's the poem: "The road to wisdom, well it's plain, and simple to express; err and err and err again, and less and less and less." Again, this is partially true, but this kind of thinking imprisons wisdom as the result of failure. Should we learn from mistakes? Absolutely. But that can't be the primary way to define wisdom.

So, what is true wisdom? Where does it come from? And how do we get it? As followers of Jesus, we are exiles; so what is it supposed to look like when we pursue and embody wisdom in a space that is hostile to our faith? Or in the language of Ammon Hennacy, What does it look like to have wisdom that moves the world?

Enter Daniel 2.

The evil King Nebuchadnezzar has an intense dream one night and wakes up terrified. He calls for his Babylonian wise men to tell him what his dream means, but they all say that what he's asking is impossible. Nebuchadnezzar threatens them with their lives if they don't interpret his dream. But Daniel gets wind of this, and *volunteers* to interpret! Not only does he seem to be sacrificing his own life, but he wants to make sure that the Babylonian magicians don't lose theirs.

After Daniel talks to his friends and prays to God, God reveals the meaning of the dream to Daniel to tell Nebuchadnezzar. It seems like he's in the clear. But not so fast. The meaning of the dream is that Nebuchadnezzar (the most powerful man in the world!) and his kingdom will crumble apart. This is scary. The king could've ended Daniel's life right there. However, mysteriously, Nebuchadnezzar knows that Daniel is right, and appoints Daniel as chief wise man over all the other wise men in Babylon.

We can learn so much about wisdom from this story. Daniel's wisdom was peace-loving because he wanted mercy for his enemies instead of justice (2:24). Daniel's wisdom was more communal than individual because he processed all of this with his friends (2:17-20). His wisdom was risky or maybe even foolish to those watching from a distance. But more than all of these, Daniel wants us to know that...

True wisdom is a divine gift.

This is how Daniel begins his prayer in 2:20, that wisdom purely belongs to God. It doesn't come by just getting old. It doesn't come by just learning from your mistakes. It's a divine attribute that God shares with his people. It doesn't come naturally to us, but it does to God. Daniel even says in verse 30 that his dream interpretation is not because he's smarter or wiser than anybody else, but only because his God is "the only wise God" (Romans 16:27). Daniel knows that life as an exile is full of tension and fragility, and that divine help is always needed, and that divine help is wisdom.

Additionally...

Wisdom that moves the world challenges power by serving it.

This can feel a little scandalous, but think about it: Daniel is the servant; Nebuchadnezzar is the power. Daniel knows that Nebuchadnezzar's power isn't ultimate and that it should be seen as such. That's even the point of the dream. Daniel doesn't run in the royal court yelling "Your day is coming, king!" Rather, he subversively critiques the king's power by serving him.

How should this look in our own lives? Well, think about all the people in charge of you – your parents, your teachers, your coach, your manager, your supervisor, your elected officials. It looks like you finding ways to care for them and serve them *long before* you find points of disagreement with them. Wisdom that challenges power by serving it seeks to love people before it seeks to correct them. This is the kind of wisdom behind Jesus' adage, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). This is the kind of wisdom that slowly carves a path, and leaves a bread-crumbs trail for others to see that God is lovingly just, righteously merciful, and wisely powerful. That's how it moves the world.

The place where this wisdom is most clearly seen is in Jesus. He is not an equation, but a relationship. He is wisdom incarnate. He is John 1:14, "And the Wisdom became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth." The wisdom of Jesus is balanced, poised, sacrificial, peace-bringing, and humble. In it, he was exiled for us on the cross. And at the cross, Jesus challenges the power of death by serving himself up to it, bringing life to all who would trust him. Jesus loves his enemies by dying for them. Death is what our sin deserved, but he took it for us. And to the power structures of the world, this makes zero sense! This is why the Apostle Paul says that the cross is foolishness to the world, but to those who believe, it's the saving wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1). Following Jesus, depending on Jesus, obeying Jesus – this is how to get wisdom that will move the world. "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously to all when you ask in faith" (James 1).

For Discussion

Have someone read Daniel 2

1. How would you feel if you were Daniel at the different points in this story?
2. Who is someone you know lives with the kind of wisdom we're describing?
3. In what way is wisdom a balancing act? What are the pitfalls on either side of "the wisdom tightrope"?
4. In what areas of your life do you most need practical wisdom right now?
5. How is Jesus the perfect place for us to see wisdom in the flesh?
6. Personally, what's your biggest takeaway from this message/passage?