Westlake Church Lausanne

The Courage to Speak Truth to Power
Daniel 2:1-28a

I think it would be fair to say that in our day, atheism and secularism have become much more militant than they used to be and, as a result, Christianity is being pushed out of the public square and into the private sphere. But how would you describe the difference between atheism and theism – belief in God? It's pretty simple, isn't it? One doesn't believe in God, and the other does. And yet their differences, and implications, go much deeper than that. You see, atheism views the universe as a closed system: there's no input, or knowledge, or power for change outside.

But it's just such a world-view that Daniel chapter 2 challenges, and when you see that, you can find the courage to speak out, and speak truth to power, and do that graciously and humbly, even when you feel threatened.

A Restless Heart

Look at v1, 'In the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar.' So Nebuchadnezzar is about 30 years old, and the most powerful man in the world. He's *the* leader of the world's superpower. And yet, he's restless, or at least his heart is. Verse 1 again, 'Nebuchadnezzar had dreams, his spirit was troubled, and his sleep left him.' It's ironic isn't it? A man who controls armies and nations, cannot control his own sleep. He can quiten his enemies, but he cannot quieten his own heart.

Why? Because he's had a dream, and a king's dreams were felt to have significance for his rule, and the nation. And he probably suspects that this dream is not good news, that his rule might be at risk. And he's haunted by it. So, despite all his power, despite all his accomplishments, underneath, Nebuchadnezzar is insecure. This dream has left him feeling threatened, and when you realise that your future, or that of your loved ones, is out of your hands, it can be deeply unsettling, can't it. And so, despite everything he possessed, the one thing he didn't possess was peace.[1]

And sadly, so often the same is true today, isn't it. You see, despite having more stuff than ever, it seems that rates of depression are rising. Which means our consumer culture has not made us more happy. So it's not just the seeming meaningless of life that can gnaw away at us, so too can the emptiness, the failure, of success. Because even success on the scale of Nebuchadnezzar's fails to give you that inner security and peace you're looking for.

But for Nebuchadnezzar, it's this dream that has robbed him of peace. You see, history tells us that Nebuchadnezzar was a deeply religious man. And for him dreams were the way the gods spoke to you. But if, as some commentators have suggested, Nebuchadnezzar cannot properly remember the dream, increased how ominous the dream was, because it meant the gods were angry with you.

[1] Ferguson 46

But even if he does remember the dream, what if you can't work out what the dream means? Because then, far from your religion being a help to you, it just adds to the disquiet of your heart. You know that this is a matter of life and death, you know you need to appease the gods, or God, but you don't know how to do it. And so Nebuchadnezzar is caught in the trap of religion.

So, he needs help: v2, 'Then the king commanded that the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans be summoned to tell the king his dreams.' Now these men are the religious gurus, the political advisors of the day. And to interpret the king's dreams was what he paid their salaries for. And they had volume after volume of dream books that enabled them to interpret dreams. All they need is to hear the contents of the dream and then they can go away and consult their text books. They just need the data to work on: v4, "O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will show the interpretation."

But the king doesn't want to do that, does he? He wants *them* to tell *him* what the dream was. And the most likely reason for that is that if this dream is bad news, he has zero desire to start a rumour that his time might be up, or his grip on power might be slipping. After all, there are plenty of ambitious young men waiting in the wings.

So he insists they tell him the dream. And first he threatens them with the stick, v5, "you shall be torn limb from limb, and your houses shall be laid in ruins." Then he offers them a carrot, the world: v6, "you shall receive from me gifts and rewards and great honour." But when they ask a second time, all offers are gone and it's just stick![2]

But look how they respond: v10-11: "There is not a man on earth who can meet the king's demand… the thing that the king asks is difficult, and no one can show it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh." Now, just look at that, and ask yourself: what kind of world do they live in? What do they believe in? Firstly, they believe in the power of human reason to understand a problem and provide answers, don't they. They just need the relevant and available data, then they can analyse it and give their expert opinion. Secondly, the Babylonian gods were the basic forces of nature, or sin, deified. So, their gods were part and parcel of creation, not outside it. That's what they believe in. What they don't believe in is divine, or as theologians call it, *special* revelation. 'That's impossible', they say. 'The gods never communicate like this. It's a closed universe, Nebuchadnezzar, there's no word, there's no revelation, there's no knowledge available to us from outside. That doesn't happen! There is no other source of knowledge, Nebuchadnezzar, other than what we can hear, touch, see, smell. There is no way of us knowing the dream unless you tell us.'

[2] Greidanus, 72.

So, not only can Nebuchadnezzar's religion not restore peace to his heart, neither can their materialistic, rationalistic, we might even say, atheistic world-view help him. Their closed system of cause and effect gives them no means of speaking a genuine word of peace to a troubled heart. Because atheism never can. A world-view that refuses to believe that there might be a God who intervenes or reveals himself in ways, *other* than by natural laws, can never bring us the word we need from outside. It can never answer the questions that unsettle our hearts. So, ultimately, neither pagan religion, nor scientific materialism, can answer our inner restlessness.

Only a God who speaks into our world can do that. Only a God whose dwelling is with flesh, can do that. And the apostle John opens his gospel by saying that what the wise men said was impossible happened supremely in the coming of Jesus, 'And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us' (John 1:14). You see that restlessness, that hauntedness, that sense of insecurity and fear, the disappointment of success, can only ultimately be answered by Christ – who tells you you are loved and secure in him – not because you have made the grade that religion sets for you – but because he has. He's the word from outside our trouble hearts need.

But Nebuchadnezzar has no such inner peace. And when you're not at peace in yourself, you inevitably find yourself at war with others, don't you. You feel threatened and you find yourself threatening others. Verse 12, 'Because of this the king was angry and very furious, and commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be destroyed.' And Babylon, ancient or modern, can be a brutal place: come up with the results, or else. And on the outside there is all the glamour of being close to power, but on the inside, there's fear. It's why God's grace is so liberating – because it's not performance based.

But Daniel is also a wise man, so with one erratic royal decree, Daniel's life is under threat: v13, 'So the decree went out, and the wise men were about to be killed; and they sought Daniel and his companions, to kill them.' He's about to fall victim to a string of events over which he has no control, and that are none of his fault. He is about to be crushed by a system and world-view totally alien to his own. Now, how would you respond in such a situation?

A Courageous Faith in A God who Speaks

I'm sure you've heard the saying, 'if you can keep your head when all around are losing theirs, you clearly don't understand the seriousness of the situation!' Well, Daniel does understand, but he still manages to keep his head. He and his friends are about to be executed, so what does he do? He goes and finds the chief executioner! So firstly, Daniel doesn't hide. However dangerous it was, however opposed Babylon is to all he believes in, Daniel has not been cowed into quiet submission. But neither is he angry or spitting fire. After all, did you notice how he speaks to Arioch, the captain of the guard? Verse 14, 'Then Daniel replied with

prudence and discretion.' So Arioch comes for Daniel and friends, and Daniel manages to talk him down. Which means that Daniel is a man people listen to, but it also means he's a good listener. He's not a bulldozer. He doesn't needlessly antagonise. He's not a hot-head. There's a poise about him, even as he stands under the shadow of the gallows. And what he does next gives us a clue why.

He asks for an appointment with the king, v16, 'and requested the king to appoint him a time, that he might show the interpretation to the king.' Now, does Daniel have the answer Nebuchadnezzar is looking for? No! But does he think he will get it? Yes! So this man has a courageous faith, doesn't he? He has the rock solid assurance of someone who trusts his Heavenly Father, and trusts him to speak. And he's not stalling for time, is he? He believes God can do this. He knows, as he tells Nebuchadnezzar in v28, that 'there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries.' He doesn't buy into their world-view of a closed system. And when you're surrounded by a culture that says otherwise, that takes courage; especially when it comes to confrontation; especially when your position, or life, is at risk.

Now, think about your own setting, and just consider: where are those areas where you need courage? Maybe it's raising teenage kids, or facing illness, or confronting a colleague, or breaking some pattern of sin, or maybe like Daniel, it's about speaking truth to those in a position of power over you. Where can you and I find the inner poise, the inner confidence that Daniel has?

Well, it comes with this unshakeable faith in a God who speaks. Whether it's the difficulties and trials we face in life, or the challenges we may face of speaking truth to power, there is this courage that comes when you know that God has spoken, and still speaks through his word, there is a source of wisdom and truth and peace for troubled hearts from outside the system, and that he has supremely come and dwelt with man in the Lord Jesus.

And here we see Daniel speaking the truth to those in power over him, and you and I can do the same when you know that the 'power' you are speaking to is not *the* power; that the dominant friend in your group of friends is not the one with control over you; that your boss is not your boss; that the government is not the ultimate government. That's what Daniel knew. It's why when he does get the answer, he prays in v20: 'Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might.' Not just wisdom – but might. Not just the answer – but the power as well. It's why he prays, in v21, 'He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings.' You see, Daniel could speak truth to the king, because he knew who the real king was. And he knew that it was only God who could ultimately give the king what he was looking for. He knew that everywhere else the king looked for inner security and peace would fail him. Only God and his word could do it.

And when you know that, you can have a self-assurance that comes from outside you – a self-assurance that's rooted in God rather than based on your abilities or lack of them – that means you can speak the truth, with grace, even under threat.

But Daniel still has to get the answer.

The Fellowship of the Cross

Now recently we finished watching *The Lord of the Rings* films. And one of their delights is the camaraderie among the fellowship of the ring. You've got men and elves and dwarves and hobbits united in the cause.

Well, look what happens here. Because under threat Daniel does two things. And the first thing he does is he goes to his friends: v17: 'Then Daniel went to his house and made the matter known to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, his companions.' And the same thing happens in the New Testament, when the apostles Peter and John are threatened by the council. When they're released, what's the first thing they do? Go skiing? Sit down with Netflix? Acts 4:23, 'When they were released, *they went to their friends* and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them.' In other words, they go to the community of God's people. Now, the danger for you and me is that when we're stressed, or under pressure, we withdraw, we stop coming. But in this crisis moment, Daniel knows he needs his mates. He knows he needs God's people. He knows he's not sufficient for this on his own. So, he's not a lone ranger. He's a man in community.

And if our faith is to survive the pressure of Babylon we must be as well. To survive in exile you need friends. Friends who will encourage you and challenge you. Friends who will pray for you and with you. But more than simply surviving in exile, if you are to speak truth to power and challenge the surrounding culture and world view, you need to be grounded in community, or else the power will corrupt you, and the culture consume you.

So what you and I need is the fellowship, not of the ring, but of the cross – the fellowship that comes from knowing that Christ is the one who gathers us. That he's the centre, he's the one we gather around. And his force of attraction is greater than the force of everything else that would push us apart. And to recognise that we can't do life in our own strength is the exact opposite of our individualistic, atomised, I-can-do-life-on-my-own, culture.

And yet, in going to his friends, it's not so much that Daniel knows he needs them as he much as he knows that they all need God. Because what's the second thing he does under threat? Interestingly, it's not work out how to flee the city, is it? Instead he gets them to pray: v18, Daniel 'told them to seek mercy from the God of heaven.' And sometimes, isn't that the last thing we do under pressure? We argue, we organise, we plan, we stress. But Daniel prayed. And Daniel is able to

speak truth to power – because he trusts God, not himself. So whilst he may be self-assured, he is not self-reliant.[3]

So here they are, four young men, four tiny cogs in the massive machine of empire, and they dare to believe that God will hear them. And that faith, and their belief that the naturalism of the Babylonian world-view was bankrupt, was vindicated when, v19, 'The mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision of the night.'

When Victory Comes

Now you know from experience that when life gets hard, or you face difficulties, it can reveal something of our character, can't it? But the truth is so do victories and promotions and successes. Proverbs 27:21 says, 'The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and a man is tested by his praise.' So how does Daniel respond when he succeeds where every other wise man has failed?

Verse 19, 'then Daniel blessed the God of heaven.' And in verses 20-23 he speaks out this incredibly beautiful hymn of praise to God – the God who reveals himself. And he sees God as the one who is directing history and that, ultimately, the world, and our lives, cannot be understood apart from him.

But then look what happens: v24, 'Therefore Daniel went in to Arioch… and said thus to him: "Do not destroy the wise men of Babylon; bring me in before the king, and I will show the king the interpretation."' So among all the things that Daniel does, what doesn't he do? Daniel doesn't stab the knife into others. He could have engineered things in such a way that these magicians all got the chop. After all, he knows they're charlatans, doesn't he. He knows they're pagan idolaters and that their world-view was totally opposed to his. So he could strike a blow here for truth, couldn't he? Plus, they were senior to him – so here was a golden opportunity to clear the competition out of the way. He could clear his way to the top, and we need truth loving believers at the top, don't we?

But Daniel doesn't! Instead he intervenes in such a way to save them. And to speak truth to power you have to have a magnaminous spirit toward your enemies. To be someone whose voice is heard, when it is saying things people don't want to hear, you have to genuinely care for those who don't want to hear it.

But how can you do that? How can you love your enemies like that? When you know that Christ loved you and died for you when you were his enemy. When it sinks in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. You see, Daniel risks death for these men, but Christ experienced death for us. And when we know

[3] Helm 33

that Christ did not take us out, but was taken out for us, then we won't want to take others out.

And that is true tolerance. True tolerance is not tolerating people you agree with. True tolerance is for those you fundamentally disagree with. Political correctness says you cannot say anything that upsets someone else – but that is not tolerance. And as Christians we can and must strongly disagree with others. But you don't need to take them out, or shout them down, or silence them. And the reason you don't need to do that is because you are rock solid secure in your own identity in Christ. You know he loves you, and died for you, you know that he's been raised from the dead, and reigns as king, and you know how everything is going to end; so you're not insecure and that means you don't need to stab anyone in the back, or shout them down. And truth, and right doctrine, and right living matter. Daniel believed that too. But that doesn't mean he wanted people who thought differently destroyed or their careers finished.

But then look at how Daniel interacts with the king, and ask yourself, what marks him here? And it's humility, isn't it? He steadfastly refuses to take the credit himself. He knows where the answer came from. But he doesn't just know that in the privacy of his own heart, but then claim the glory in public. He wants the king to be quite clear: v27-28, 'Daniel answered the king and said, "No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or astrologers can show the king the mystery that the king has asked, but there is a God in heaven.'

You see, Daniel knows that God will not share his glory with another. And if our faith is to endure and thrive in an increasingly pagan culture, and if we are to speak truth to power, we must resist joining the rest of the culture in wanting to draw attention to ourselves, because that is the way of Babylon: let us make a name for ourselves (Gen 11:4).

You see, did you notice the difference between Arioch and Daniel? Arioch takes Daniel to the king and says, v25, 'I have found among the exiles from Judah a man who will make known to the king the interpretation.' Do you see what he's doing? *'I have found.'* I want some of the credit here, and he subtly puts Daniel down – one of the exiles, a defeated Jew. Now why do we do that? Why do we want to promote ourselves, and get the credit, and put others down? Maybe because we don't trust God to promote us? Or maybe because we are insecure and need the approval and applause of others? But Daniel stands in the king's presence, and makes absolutely no mention of himself, even when the king invites him to, and instead deflects the glory to God. So Daniel is both humble and courageous. And we need that combination.

You see, whilst Daniel is humble, he is also clear, and decisive, isn't he. He is prepared to speak the truth, clearly and plainly, that it is his God, not Marduk, Nebuchadnezzar's god, who is God, and who can settle his restless heart.

And just as Daniel was willing to speak God's word to the king, we must be willing to do the same to the world. That just as God placed Daniel in Babylon, so he has placed us where we are to speak his word to a restless, troubled world. And Daniel brings wisdom to the king. But as Paul says in Colossians 2:3, in Christ 'are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.' And that's the truth the world needs to hear. But to do so when there's pressure not to, or when there are threats, like Daniel, requires courage and humility. And the gospel of Christ gives you both. It humbles you, because you know you are so sinful Christ had to die for you. But it also gives you courage because you know Christ loves you so much he did die for you, and rose again and now reigns as the one true king over every other king. And that's why you can speak the truth to power, and do so, not in arrogance, but in love.