

DANIEL – SECOND CHOICE

WHO'S IN CHARGE?

Today's talk is the story of contrast. Daniel chapter 2 shows a wonderful contrast of how we can be in a first-choice world and a second-choice world: the contrast shown in the different lives of Daniel and King Nebuchadnezzar and how they handle their contrasting worlds.

King Nebuchadnezzar lives in a first-choice world.

² In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind was troubled and he could not sleep. ² So the king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed. When they came in and stood before the king, ³ he said to them, 'I have had a dream that troubles me and I want to know what it means.'

⁴ Then the astrologers answered the king, 'May the king live for ever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will interpret it.'

⁵ The king replied to the astrologers, 'This is what I have firmly decided: if you do not tell me what my dream was and interpret it, I will have you cut into pieces and your houses turned into piles of rubble. ⁶ But if you tell me the dream and explain it, you will receive from me gifts and rewards and great honour. So, tell me the dream and interpret it for me.'

⁷ Once more they replied, 'Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will interpret it.'

⁸ Then the king answered, 'I am certain that you are trying to gain time, because you realise that this is what I have firmly decided: ⁹ if you do not tell me the dream, there is only one penalty for you. You have conspired to tell me misleading and wicked things, hoping the situation will change. So then, tell me the dream, and I will know that you can interpret it for me.'

¹⁰ The astrologers answered the king, 'There is no one on earth who can do what the king asks! No king, however great and mighty, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or astrologer. ¹¹ What

the king asks is too difficult. No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among humans.'

¹²This made the king so angry and furious that he ordered the execution of all the wise men of Babylon. ¹³So the decree was issued to put the wise men to death, and men were sent to look for Daniel and his friends to put them to death. (Daniel 2 v 1-13)

Reading this we might say that King Nebuchadnezzar is living in his first-choice world. Why do I say that? When we read of King Nebuchadnezzar here, he is the most powerful king in the known world at the time. Babylon is one of the most powerful nations in the known world at the time and its influence, power and size are still growing. The empire of Babylon is the largest kingdom in the known world. As the king of Babylon, king Nebuchadnezzar could have everything he wanted. There was nothing that he didn't have and that he couldn't get. His words were others commands. And he is still, at this time, a young man. At a young age king Nebuchadnezzar had power, influence, material possessions and control of his life. He can do whatever he wants. There is simply nothing that he cannot afford to buy. There is no-one who has authority over him. He alone makes the rules. What he decrees cannot be questioned, challenged or undone. He is absolutely in control of his life and his destiny.

Isn't that what we all want? Don't we all, really, honestly, want to be in control of our life, our destiny?

King Nebuchadnezzar's mistake, though, is that he thinks he's God... but, as we are about to see, he is not God! Right now, at this point in his life, king Nebuchadnezzar is living in a first-choice world.

There is a fantasy that some people believe. The fantasy goes like this: In my first-choice world, I will be happy.

Author Viv Thomas explains this fantasy this way:

In this fantasy my peace and joy are dependant on getting my first choice. If I get what I want I will be truly happy and content. Anything which appears to me to be second best will not do, for it will not give me the joy I think I need and thus make it impossible for me to live my life as I think I should be able to live it. ¹

¹ Thomas, V., "Second Choice," Paternoster Press 2000 page 9-10

King Nebuchadnezzar is living in his first-choice world where he has everything he could possibly want and you'd think he'd be happy ... right?

I'm wondering is this a fantasy that you believe? – If I get what I want, I will be happy and content? Honestly, we'd probably never admit to believing this fantasy, but, what about that house you still think will make the difference? Or maybe that job; or that relationship; or that operation; or retirement; or early retirement or...? What do you want?

King Nebuchadnezzar should be happy. And yet, in chapter 2 v 1 it tells us that in the second year of his reign, he cannot sleep! To believe that if we get our first-choice world we will be happy is a fantasy. King Nebuchadnezzar is not happy. He is troubled and he cannot sleep.

Some of us know what that's like, don't we? Some of us know what it is to be troubled and not be able to sleep. Not being able to sleep is associated with worry, stress anxiety, nervousness and pain.

Truth is friends, getting all you want does not make you happy and content. Truth is, king Nebuchadnezzar is worried because he is not in control. He is having dreams that unnerve him because he can neither remember them or understand them.

Another fantasy some people believe is that in their first-choice world they will be secure.² They believe that if they get what they want they will be able to live with minimal risk. They believe that they are the ones who know best what they need to make life work and be safe, satisfied and enjoy a long life, because things are under their control. Second-choice worlds by contrast are risky, unpredictable and undesirable.

King Nebuchadnezzar, in his first-choice world, is neither happy nor secure. His mistake? He thinks he is God and the world revolves around him, and that requires him to be in control of everything.

Maybe, sometimes we make the same mistake.

Pretty soon the king becomes paranoid. He makes impossible demands on his wise men. He threatens them with death if they can't do what he asks. He is paranoid, because in truth, he has a vision that is no bigger than himself. It is, in truth, fantasy to believe that in a first-choice world we will be happy and content and secure.

² Thomas, V., *Ibid*, page 10

I'm wondering: How do you live? What do you choose to believe? John Ortberg says that patient acceptance of frustration is crucial to living well. So, how are you doing right now?

Daniel is living in his second-choice world. Here in chapter 2 he is confronted with the fury of the king and Daniel has to find a way to respond. We are told that he does this with wisdom and tact in verse 14. Daniel needed to know what was behind the king's decree, so he asked the 'why' question. This is not the 'why me?' question. Daniel wants to understand the situation, which is crucial in knowing how to respond.

The 'why me?' question is much more about self-absorption. I'm wondering, in a second-choice world, how good are you at asking the 'why' question? Truth is, making an instant response when confronted with a difficult and challenging situation or set of circumstances, is not always helpful. I'm still learning that, particularly when I feel threatened. A wise choice is to seek understanding of what's really going on, and that might be particularly true as we live in this second-choice world of Covid-19.

Daniel's wisdom is in asking the 'why' question. We can learn to be wise, because wisdom is to do with character. So, how are you doing in your second-choice world?

What Daniel does next is critical:

¹⁷ Then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. ¹⁸ He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that he and his friends might not be executed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon. ¹⁹ During the night the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision. Then Daniel praised the God of heaven. (Daniel 2 v 17-19)

Having wisely bought some time, Daniel goes home to pray, but he doesn't do it alone – he gathers his friends together to pray. They are in a crisis, but they are in it together. That remind you of anything right now? Friends, we can pray together. I realise that's happening in lots of ways, and I encourage you to find ways to keep doing it. I encourage you to join the daily prayer meeting at 7.30am – just click on the button on the website!

Daniel's friends are God's gift to him, as you are to the community we call CBC. Flourishing in a second-choice world requires us to develop a community that knows how to pray.

Phillips Brooks of 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' fame said: "Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance, it is laying hold of God's willingness." Which is what we are about to see in the life of Daniel

Perhaps the most significant contrast between king Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel, was that the king's world revolved around himself, while Daniel's world revolved around God. So, Daniel and his friends pray to God. And I'll bet they prayed, for their very lives depended on it! God, in his grace and mercy, reveals both the dream and its meaning to Daniel. When Daniel later goes to the king and is asked if he can tell the king the dream and its meaning, he says "No!" He also replies: "But there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries!" (v28)

But God! I may be in my second-choice world, but there is a God in heaven... And that makes all the difference! It did for Daniel, and it can for us.

We would do well to notice what Daniel did when God revealed the dream and its meaning. Verse 19 tells us he praised God, and if you read verses 20-23 you can read what he prayed.

"Praise be the name of God for ever and ever." (v20) Daniel has a big vision of God: "ever and ever" – that is eternal. This is important for us to grasp in the midst of our second-choice worlds. God is simply not bound in the same way we are! What is a threat to Daniel, is no threat to the eternal God.

Understanding this truth has the power to reframe second-choice worlds.

Daniel praised God's wisdom and power (verse 21 & 22) God understands fully and has the power to do whatever he wants. Daniel is living in a second-choice world, but God can still operate here in his mighty strength. Daniel knows that God is in control of the times and seasons: he is the Lord of the time, and the times in between. Although Daniel cannot see everything, he understands there is a bigger and better story at work.

And that even the darkness is not so dark to God (v 20) There is no darkness, mystery, riddle or relationship, or task that God cannot perceive or respond to adequately. And that includes our second-choice worlds.

What an extraordinary vision of God. It is a vision that enables him to live well in his second-choice world. And it is all the more remarkable because of when Daniel prayed this prayer. He prayed this prayer before he goes to the king to tell him the dream and its meaning. The point? When he prays his prayer of praise, he has no idea of what the outcome of his meeting with the king will

be. He will tell the king that God, is in fact in control, that the king himself is not God, and that one day a kingdom far greater than all the kingdoms of the earth will reign. That's not necessarily good news for a king who believes the world revolves around himself!

And here maybe is the challenge. What vision of God do we hold in our hearts and minds? How much do we have a big enough vision of God, to hold onto the truth that, whatever it really means, God is the one who is in control, not us. That he can see into the darkness, that even in second-choice worlds he can still operate in his wisdom and power, and that we don't need to know that everything will turn out for us to be able to trust him in our second-choice world.

King Nebuchadnezzar was living in his first-choice world, where he was at the centre and where he was in control...yet he could not sleep for his mind was troubled. Daniel was living in a second-choice world, facing an impossible challenge, but with a big vision of God. Quite a contrast.

Friends, in your second-choice world, who's in charge? How will you choose to live?

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