

Life By His Grace, For His Glory

Frederick Douglass was an African-American who lived in the 19th century and managed to escape his slave-masters and went on to become a key in the abolition of slavery in America. He delivered a speech in which he coined a term we now use frequently – *the self-made man*. He said, “Self-made men [...] are the men who owe little or nothing to birth, relationship, friendly surroundings; to wealth inherited or to early approved means of education; who are what they are, without the aid of any of the favoring conditions by which other men usually rise in the world and achieve great result.”

The self-made man has become something of an ideal to us today. The person who makes it on sheer talent and hard work, and then glories in his achievements. That way of life is really one of two ways to live. There are two ways to live. To live by your own power, for your own glory, or to live by God's grace for God's glory. Both ways are attempts to gain maximum satisfaction and fulfilment out of life. One is a life that goes on what it can see and do. All this faith and prayer stuff is for the birds. I will pull myself up by my own intelligence, planning, manoeuvring and independent thinking. When I get to the top, it will be thanks to no one but me. I will enjoy the fruits of having made it, and made it on my own steam. The other life goes on this thing called faith. It says, I need to work hard, but life is more than my working for myself. I am made for God. Therefore, I am ultimately dependent on God and I express that in many ways. Whatever joy, success, promotion, prosperity I enjoy I attribute to God's goodness.

Daniel was a man who, we would say, got to the top of his game. He was promoted about as high as he could go, enjoyed success, and all that goes with it. But Daniel, although gifted with several natural gifts, was not a self-made man. Daniel approached life in a way that is completely wrong according to all the motivational speakers, all the self-help books, all the success seminars, all the life coaches. Instead of believing in himself and then loving himself, Daniel trusted in someone else and lived for someone else. And yet he lived a far more successful, satisfied life by worldly standards, than most people will ever approach. What was his secret?

We see his secret illustrated in Daniel chapter 2. This chapter is a very long chapter, and a chapter that almost has two separate main points. The first main point is another account of Daniel, how he responded to a crisis, where he placed his trust, and what the results were. The second main point has to do with the dream Nebuchadnezzar had. Because of its complexity, we'll look at the meaning of the dream next week, and focus on the story today. As we study this, we'll see a problem that produced a crisis, how Daniel responded, and how God responded.

I. The Problem

Daniel 2:1 *2:1 Now in the second year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; and his spirit was so troubled that his sleep left him.*

In his second year (which corresponded to the end or just after the end of Daniel's three-year training), Nebuchadnezzar, the greatest king Babylon ever saw, and perhaps the greatest Gentile king who has ever lived, dreamed dreams. He probably had this one re-occurring dream. This dream was so graphic, so clear, and so haunting, that he could no longer sleep. The thought of the dream no doubt went with him everywhere he went. It became something of an obsession for him.

II. The Proposal

Daniel 2:2 *Then the king gave the command to call the magicians, the astrologers, the sorcerers, and the*

Chaldeans to tell the king his dreams. So they came and stood before the king.

Nebuchadnezzar turns to the supposed experts in this realm: the magicians, the sorcerers, the Chaldeans – a class of wise men. These were the ones that Daniel and his friends were being trained to be part of, but bear in mind, they would have been junior wise men, newly-graduated wise men, and would not have been called to the court. The senior, seasoned, experienced magicians, those who had served Nebuchadnezzar's father, Nabopolassar, would have been present.

Once they had arrived, Nebuchadnezzar made his demand.

Daniel 2:3 *And the king said to them, "I have had a dream, and my spirit is anxious to know the dream."*

Nebuchadnezzar did not make a mistake with his words. He wanted these wise men to tell him what he had dreamed. Of course, they took him to be a young, inexperienced, rookie king who didn't quite know how dream interpretation worked. So they politely replied:

Daniel 2:4 ⁴ *Then the Chaldeans spoke to the king in Aramaic, "O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will give the interpretation."*

We're happy to help, O King. Just tell us the dream, and we'll get to work on interpreting it.

But Nebuchadnezzar had not made a mistake. He did not like to be patronized or to be treated like he had made a mistake with his words.

Daniel 2:5-6 ⁵ *The king answered and said to the Chaldeans, "My decision is firm: if you do not make known the dream to me, and its interpretation, you shall be cut in pieces, and your houses shall be made an ash heap. ⁶ "However, if you tell the dream and its interpretation, you shall receive from me gifts, rewards, and great honor. Therefore tell me the dream and its interpretation."*

This is no game to Nebuchadnezzar. He is possessed with understanding this dream. He has a sense that it has massive significance, and he is not about to play games with men who can invent interpretations out of thin air. It's possible that Nebuchadnezzar had always been a bit sceptical of some of these magicians and wise men. He was a brilliant man, Nebuchadnezzar, and one can imagine him in his younger days watching with something of a sneer on his face while the magicians did their hocus pocus in the court of his father. Perhaps he had noticed how the astrologers and prognosticators always managed to fit later circumstances into their original prophecies. Entire books had been written on dream interpretation, and he no doubt knew that if he told them the dream, they would have had some explanation for its meaning. But how would he know if it was the real explanation?

Well, it seems that this was how his mind worked. If a dream like this has come from the gods, and these men claim to be religious experts who understand and work with the gods, then the same power which gave me the dream can give them the dream and its meaning. If they really have power to explain supernaturally given dreams, it's not too much to ask that they use that same power to find out the dream itself. If they can do that, he will be good to them. If they can't, he will tear them apart, limb by limb and turn their houses into rubbish dumps.

At this point, the wise men pretend that Nebuchadnezzar doesn't know what he's talking about. They pretend he doesn't understand the rules of dream interpretation, and carry on as if they haven't heard what he's just said.

Daniel 2:7 ⁷ *They answered again and said, "Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will give its*

interpretation."

Nebuchadnezzar is not going to be fooled.

Daniel 2:8-9 *The king answered and said, "I know for certain that you would gain time, because you see that my decision is firm: ⁹ "if you do not make known the dream to me, there is only one decree for you! For you have agreed to speak lying and corrupt words before me till the time has changed. Therefore tell me the dream, and I shall know that you can give me its interpretation."*

The king sees through them. He says – you are just stalling for time. You are pretending not to understand what I have said. You are deceivers and liars. If you can tell me what I've dreamed, then I know you can tell me what it means.

Well, the wise men are now going to call a foul.

Daniel 2:10-11 ¹⁰ *The Chaldeans answered the king, and said, "There is not a man on earth who can tell the king's matter; therefore no king, lord, or ruler has ever asked such things of any magician, astrologer, or Chaldean. ¹¹ "It is a difficult thing that the king requests, and there is no other who can tell it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh."*

Basically, they say, this is unfair. No way! No one has ever asked this of us, and no one on earth can do this. You're breaking all the rules and colouring outside the lines, king. You want the impossible, you want a miracle.

The great irony is that they say, "It is a difficult thing that the king requests, and there is no other who can tell it to the king except the gods." But didn't they claim to be in special contact with the gods? Wasn't that their profession? Nebuchadnezzar is like the annoying child at the magic show who keeps giving away the magician's secrets. He's pulled the black velvet covering, and exposed the emptiness of their whole profession. These are supposedly god-experts, who cannot seem to hear the will of the gods. And in that case, why keep them around? Why have these guys in the royal payroll, eating up provisions from the royal palace, if they are all smoke and mirrors?

III. The Punishment

Daniel 2:12-13 ¹² *For this reason the king was angry and very furious, and gave a command to destroy all the wise men of Babylon. ¹³ So the decree went out, and they began killing the wise men; and they sought Daniel and his companions, to kill them.*

There's some question over whether the text should read, 'and they began killing them' or 'and they were about to begin killing them', but either way, this is a frightening day. Babylon is going to be filled with the sounds of screaming wives, as men are hauled out of homes, children crying as their father is dragged out by men with swords. Either there will be a big public execution, or else the horror of men slain in their homes, or in the palace.

This brings the main character of the story to light – Daniel. Daniel is part of those whose head is on the chopping-block. He wasn't there during the exchange between Nebuchadnezzar and the wise men, but he is implicated. Everyone who belongs to this profession is to be exterminated. Babylon was about to become the world's first secular state, and these Hebrew boys are about to die. After all their commitments to God, after their lack of compromise, they're just going to be rounded up and killed.

IV. The Petition

Daniel 2:14-16 ¹⁴ Then with counsel and wisdom Daniel answered Arioch, the captain of the king's guard, who had gone out to kill the wise men of Babylon; ¹⁵ he answered and said to Arioch the king's captain, "Why is the decree from the king so urgent?" Then Arioch made the decision known to Daniel. ¹⁶ So Daniel went in and asked the king to give him time, that he might tell the king the interpretation.

Arioch arrives at Daniel's door. Arioch is not there to help Daniel escape. He is there to kill Daniel. He does what he is told to do, otherwise *he* gets killed. And what might Daniel's responses have been when he saw this fully armed man with his contingent of soldiers at his door? He could have screamed in terror. He could have tried to run and hide. He could have said some last biting and sarcastic remark, and cursed them in Hebrew. Instead, the Bible says that Daniel answered with counsel and wisdom. He spoke with discretion and discernment. He was not overcome by fear, but controlled by wisdom.

That ought to make us stop for a moment. What does the Bible say is the beginning of wisdom? The fear of the LORD. When others were fearing man, what fear was controlling Daniel? That reverent love for God, a complete truth in Him and a desire for His glory gave him enough presence of mind to ask Arioch a disarming question – Why is the king's decree so urgent, so hasty? Why this harsh and sudden sentence? Arioch tells him and Daniel asks Arioch to ask the king for more time.

Amazingly, he gets it. Perhaps because Daniel was not playing with words. Everyone now knew what Nebuchadnezzar wanted, and Daniel claimed he could provide that. Perhaps Daniel's performance recorded in chapter 1 bought him some time. For whatever reason, the execution order was put on hold.

Daniel then sought the solution.

V. The Prayers

Daniel 2:17-18 Then Daniel went to his house, and made the decision known to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, his companions, ¹⁸ that they might 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.

Daniel enlists prayer. He goes to those men who had already shown themselves to be utterly committed to living for God, and he asks them to pray. They are to seek mercies from the God of heaven. I think it's implied that Daniel also prayed.

This is all or nothing. Nebuchadnezzar isn't going to give Daniel a week. More than likely, he has one day. If Daniel doesn't get a dream this night, giving the vision and its meaning, then they are dead men. And we might want to ask, if there was that much pressure on you, would you sleep? How would you sleep? But evidently, Daniel did sleep.

And this is the first of the two secrets to Daniel's life. Daniel was utterly dependent upon God's grace. Daniel was a man who unashamedly said, without Him, I can do nothing. He lived life in a dependent posture. You see this throughout the book.

Daniel 6:10 ¹⁰ Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days.

Daniel 9:3 ³ Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes.

Daniel's reflex action was to turn to God. He had learned to cry out to God.

Daniel 10:12 ¹² Then he said to me, "Do not fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand, and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard; and I have come because of your words

VI. The Praise

Daniel 2:19-23 Then the secret was revealed to Daniel in a night vision. So Daniel blessed the God of heaven. ²⁰ Daniel answered and said: "Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, For wisdom and might are His. ²¹ And He changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and raises up kings; He gives wisdom to the wise And knowledge to those who have understanding. ²² He reveals deep and secret things; He knows what is in the darkness, And light dwells with Him. ²³ "I thank You and praise You, O God of my fathers; You have given me wisdom and might, And have now made known to me what we asked of You, For You have made known to us the king's demand."

Daniel receives the vision in a dream. And what does a dependent, humble heart do when it receives grace? Daniel blesses God. Daniel offers a short hymn of praise of God's sovereignty. It's God prerogative to set kings up and take them down, to decide what time period we are now in. It's God's prerogative to keep secrets or to reveal them. Daniel is clear: they did not twist God's arm, they did not bribe Him, God was not obliged to do this. God is sovereign, but God is good. Remember the two themes of this book – God is great enough to rule all of human history, God is good enough to protect His faithful people. Here it has happened again, and Daniel acknowledges that.

So armed with this knowledge, Daniel goes off.

VII. The Promise

Daniel 2:24-26 Therefore Daniel went to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to destroy the wise men of Babylon. He went and said thus to him: "Do not destroy the wise men of Babylon; take me before the king, and I will tell the king the interpretation." ²⁵ Then Arioch quickly brought Daniel before the king, and said thus to him, "I have found a man of the captives of Judah, who will make known to the king the interpretation." ²⁶ The king answered and said to Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, "Are you able to make known to me the dream which I have seen, and its interpretation?"

Daniel gets hold of Arioch, and tells him he has the answer. Arioch brings Daniel before Nebuchadnezzar, but you can't help feeling that he's trying to take the credit for the whole thing. And now Nebuchadnezzar probably leans forward with a piercing gaze and demands of Daniel – Can you give me these two things – the dream, and its interpretation?

Just stop and think what Daniel had at his disposal. He had the whole dream and its interpretation in his mind. He has *up here* the key to his own success, promotion and fabulous wealth. He has the chance to leapfrog over the backs of men a good forty or fifty years older than him. He has the chance to go to the top. No one can steal these ideas from him. No one can claim he stole it from them. He has absolutely no rivals at this point. Sure, Daniel knows that God alone gave him these secrets. But how will anyone else know? How would the Babylonians know? How would Nebuchadnezzar know if he gave the dream, took all the credit and confessed his sin later?

Daniel's reply is nothing short of amazing.

VIII. The Profession

Daniel 2:27-30 Daniel answered in the presence of the king, and said, "The secret which the king has

demanded, the wise men, the astrologers, the magicians, and the soothsayers cannot declare to the king. ²⁸ "But there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days. Your dream, and the visions of your head upon your bed, were these: ²⁹ "As for you, O king, thoughts came to your mind while on your bed, about what would come to pass after this; and He who reveals secrets has made known to you what will be. ³⁰ "But as for me, this secret has not been revealed to me because I have more wisdom than anyone living, but for our sakes who make known the interpretation to the king, and that you may know the thoughts of your heart.

In saying that, Daniel is admitting, there is nothing in the training you have given me here in Babylon that will provide the answer. What I do now, I do not do as one of the graduates of your university of Babylon. Not the best of the best of your astrologers and magicians and soothsayers could answer this. I am not doing this because I am the best of your wise men.

Instead, the answer is that there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets. Again in verse 29b – He who reveals secrets has made known to you what will be. Who or what is the source of this knowledge? The God of heaven. He is the sole source of this dream. All credit must go to Him.

And then, look at verse 30. As for me, this secret has not been revealed to me because I have more wisdom than anyone living. It is not something in me that has made this happen. Instead there are two reasons. First, it is for our sakes who make the interpretation known, i.e. God is graciously protecting us, and second, so that you may know what it is you have been dreaming. Daniel is saying, I am a tool, a vessel. I am the tool through which I and my companions will be protected, and I am the vessel through which you will find out the meaning of these visions.

God created the world out of nothing, and so long as we are nothing, He can make something out of us. - Martin Luther. What has Daniel just shown? Soli deo gloria – to God alone be the glory. I am no glory thief, says Daniel. There is Arioch, jostling to the front for recognition, pretending to have done it all in his own strength. There is Daniel, completely dependent, giving all the glory to God.

Daniel had integrity. Daniel knew that the same God who gave him the dream and its meaning would protect him and lead him as He saw fit. He knew the truth of Psalm 75:

Psalm 75:6-7 ⁶ *For promotion cometh neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south. ⁷ But God is the judge: he putteth down one, and setteth up another.*

It really reminds us of one greater than Daniel.

Philippians 2:5-8 *Make your own attitude that of Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be used for His own advantage. ⁷ Instead He emptied Himself by assuming the form of a slave, taking on the likeness of men. And when He had come as a man in His external form, ⁸ He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death-- even to death on a cross. (HCSB)*

IX. The Prophecy

Now Daniel begins to recount the vision. Patiently and in detail, he describes exactly what Nebuchadnezzar saw. A large statue, with a head of gold, and chest of silver, and belly and thighs of bronze, and legs of iron, and then a stone comes and demolishes the whole image. And the stone becomes a mountain.

Can you picture Nebuchadnezzar's face as Daniel told him exactly what he had dreamed? How would you look at someone who recounted to you the very dream that had taken place in your brain, as if he was reading your mind or pulling it out? Nebuchadnezzar's expression probably went from

sceptical, to surprised, to riveted, to absolutely astonished. I can see him leaning forward from his throne listening to Daniel's every word.

And then Daniel begins to explain what Nebuchadnezzar himself couldn't figure out. He was the first kingdom, which would be followed by three more human kingdoms, and then the fifth one would be the kingdom of God – the same God who gave the dream in the first place. By the time Daniel is finished, Nebuchadnezzar must be just about falling off the front edge of the throne with his mouth unconsciously open.

Daniel ends his description the way he began – giving the praise and honour to God.

V45 - the great God has made known to the king what will come to pass after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation is sure."

What can we expect for such a display of power? From a human, pagan point of view, Daniel must seem like he is from another world. Daniel has been at pains to say he is not the source, but a pagan king is going to treat Daniel like he is a representative of the gods.

X. The Promotion

Daniel 2:45-49 ⁴⁶ Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell on his face, prostrate before Daniel, and commanded that they should present an offering and incense to him. ⁴⁷ The king answered Daniel, and said, "Truly your God is the God of gods, the Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets, since you could reveal this secret." ⁴⁸ Then the king promoted Daniel and gave him many great gifts; and he made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and chief administrator over all the wise men of Babylon. ⁴⁹ Also Daniel petitioned the king, and he set Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego over the affairs of the province of Babylon; but Daniel sat in the gate of the king.

The king pays personal homage to Daniel, and makes him both the administrator of the province of Babylon, and the chief of all the wise men. Since he had just saved all their necks, I doubt they would resent him. Daniel gets those who joined him in praying into similar positions. But notice Nebuchadnezzar's testimony to God: Truly your God is the God of gods, the Lord of kings. This doesn't mean he has embraced Daniel's God as the only God; it just means he has added Him to the gods he worships, or perhaps given Him an honoured status amongst those gods.

The natural law of the universe is what goes up must come down. But the spiritual law of the universe is, what goes down must come up.

Like the one greater than Daniel:

Philippians 2:9-11 For this reason God also highly exalted Him and gave Him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow-- of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth-- ¹¹ and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Matthew 23:12 ¹² "And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

James 4:6 But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble."

James 4:10 ¹⁰ Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.

Daniel is a living testimony to what happens to a life that depends totally on God, and gives all the glory to God. It's a life of prayer, and a life of praise. It's a life that says all things are of him, and

through him, and to him, to him be glory forever.

You can live by guts and grit, or you can live by grace for His glory. One approach results in a castle of sand that will be washed away by the waves of time. The other results in eternal rewards. Two ways to live. Only one way ultimately works.