

No Other Gods (7): The Gods of Power

(Daniel 4:24-30)

I. Introduction

- A. “*Politics makes strange bedfellows.*” That’s never truer than when in bed with religion.
1. All through history, politics has used religion to consolidate and enforce its power
 - a. The first “*Christian nation*” was when Constantine has his famous vision of a cross
 - b. “*Under this sign conqueror.*” So he legalized Christianity in his “*Edict of Milan*”
 - 1) Wasn’t long before he made use of the Christian faith to consolidate his power
 - 2) Christianity was a bit warped by its brush with Roman power— it always is.
 2. Of course, we think “*Christian nation*” was something reserved for here in America.
 - a. After all, American was settled by Pilgrims who came seeking religious freedom.
 - b. But their “religious freedom” seemed like something less than free once they got it
 - c. Like Constantine, Pilgrims fused religion with politics in the Massachusetts colony
 - 1) Man was arrested when he let four Quakers come into his house out of rain
 - 2) Quakers seen heretics! *The four Quakers were later hanged by powers that be*
- B. There is a fundamental difference between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of men
1. Jesus said that the kingdoms of man always operate on the basis power (**Matt 20:25**)
 - a. Those that are great in the kingdom of men exercise authority, control and power
 - b. They will use whatever tool they can to exert power, and that even includes religion
 2. By contrast, the kingdom of God is about becoming a servant/slave (**Matt 20:26-27**)
 - a. It’s not throwing off the chains of servitude— but claiming that mantle for God
 - b. That language was never appropriated in the speeches of Patrick Henry, was it?
- C. As we continue our look at *No Other Gods*, we come today to the God of Power
1. Looking at history and at the news reminds us of Lord Acton’s famous decree—
Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men
 - a. What always happens historically when politics and religion become combined?
 - 1) What happens is that one uses the other to gain and to abuse power. Always.
 - 2) What happens is Holy Roman Empire. Spanish inquisition. Taliban. ISIS.
 - b. I don’t think we should feel better when political leaders suddenly “get religion”
 - c. Politics/religions is like manure/ice cream; one isn’t improved, other is ruined
 2. Tonight’s small group is testimony of one who knows about power—Chuck Colson
 3. Today’s sermon focuses on one who also knows about power—Nebuchadnezzar.

II. The Gods of Power: Nebuchadnezzar's First Dream

- A. No one had more power than Nebuchadnezzar, emperor of the Neo-Babylonia empire
1. His empire had replaced Assyria as the dominant power on earth—and it had no rival
 - a. Egypt tried to unite with the remnant of Assyria— crushed at Carchemish (605 BC)
 - b. For the remainder of his life, Nebuchadnezzar was the unquestioned king of world
 2. Shakespeare, “*Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.*” True of Nebuchadnezzar
 - a. Nebuchadnezzar was unnerved by a dream; he must know meaning (**Dan 2:3**)
 - 1) He calls in his magi for an interpretation—but he doesn't tell them the dream
 - 2) Like a double-blind study; if they are smart enough to know what it means...
 - b. Daniel tell Nebuchadnezzar what he dreamed—giant image he saw (**Dan 2:31-33**)
 3. The actual action of the dream takes place in three distinct stages (**Dan 2:34-35**)
 - a. **First**, a rock is cut out without human hands and smashes the image and its parts
 - b. **Second**, a wind blows all of the pieces away so there's no traces of them left behind
 - c. **Third**, the rock that had destroyed the image becomes a mountain that fill the earth
- B. Daniel hasn't pulled out any rabbits from hat; the king already knew what dream was
1. What Daniel needs to do is tell him about the meaning—and he does (**Dan 2:37-38**)
 - a. In this series of world empires, Babylon is represented by the head of gold
 - b. This is the only part Nebuchadnezzar cares about—part about his power and glory
“*In your hands he [God] has placed all mankind and the beasts of the field...*”
 - 1) God had made Nebuchadnezzar “*ruler over them all.*” Got Daniel a big raise!
 - 2) Daniel goes into some detail on the other kingdoms, but he does not name them
 - a) Sure, we know he is talking about Medio-Persia, Greece (Alexander) and Rome
 - b) How? There were 3 world empires than came after Babylon. Narrows it down
 2. **Point**: God was going to do something “*in the time of those kings*” (**Dan 2:44-45**)
 - a. Last of the kingdoms would be Rome, and that's when God would make his move
 - b. These world empires would disappear, but God's kingdom would fill the earth
 3. This dream is a contrast between the kingdoms of God and the kingdoms of man
 - a. The kingdoms of men were placed in hands of men— all was in Nebuchadnezzar's
 - b. But the rock was cut out without human hands—that is something totally different
 - 1) Kingdom of God isn't a part of man's kingdoms—no tool to be used by men
 - 2) It stands apart from all human kingdoms— they're all dust to be blown away
 - 3) The kingdom of God becomes a great mountain that will fill the earth forever

III. Nebuchadnezzar's Second Dream

- A. Problem wasn't that Nebuchadnezzar didn't listen; problem was he listened too well!
1. At least he listened to the part where God had placed the whole world in his hand
 - a. There was no limit or challenge to his power or to his reach—he was like a God
 - b. That part went to his head. He started trusting in his power and in his strength
 2. Nebuchadnezzar would have been served well to have anticipated a Roman tradition
 - a. Roman generals led their vanquished foes in a parade before the adoring throngs
 - b. As the adoring masses shouted their name, a slave would whisper in general's ear *Look behind you! Remember that you are but a man! Remember that you will die!*
 - 1) That's what Nebuchadnezzar needed to hear; he wasn't a god, he was just a guy
 - 2) He got carried away trusting in his own power and strength (**Dan 4:29-30**)
 3. Rewind the story back 12 months. Nebuchadnezzar had a second strange dream
 - a. In his dream, a large tree was cut down to a stump and bound with iron and bronze
 - 1) Once again Nebuchadnezzar sends for Daniel for interpret the dream for him
 - 2) This dream would not work out so well for the great king (**Dan 4:25-26**)
 - b. Daniel is now the slave whispering in the king's ear, *"Remember you are a man!"*
 - c. Nebuchadnezzar is invested in this view of himself—his power, glory, might
 4. It took Nebuchadnezzar 7 years to learn what we sang—no other gods (**Dan 4:34-35**)
- B. What's the point? No one made us king of the world, right? OK, that's the first point
1. Second, we're pretty invested in another story. It's called *"American exceptionalism"*
 - a. America is the greatest, most powerful, most special country ever on earth, right?
 - b. Many of us cannot conceive of any other self-image—American is just difference
 - 1) *"The land of the free and the home of the brave."* *"God shed his grace on thee"*
 - 2) Those aren't lines from a song; we see ourselves as different from all others
 2. Most of us can't think in terms of American being just one country among many.
 - a. President Obama was attacked as a globalist and worst because he said in 2009: *I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.*
 - b. Sure, those guys love their country an all, but America is fundamentally different *"To deny American exceptionalism is to deny the heart and soul of this nation"*
 - c. We can't just love our country; we have to believe that it's fundamentally the best
 - d. President Trump was elected to do what? *"Make America great again."*

- C. Facts mess up good story! *US News World Report* best of lists: schools, hospital, jobs
1. Also does countries. They add up all the facts, we're the #7 greatest country on earth
 - a. Switzerland, then Canada, Britain, Germany, Japan, Sweden. Just beat Australia
 - b. You understand our #7 ranking when you see where we are in some other thing
 - 1) We #18 in quality of life. We're #24 in growing economy (*started our big*)
 - 2) We are # 7 in education, #16 in opportunities for women (*barely beat Japan*)
 - 3) We are #19 in best country to raise kids and #25 for best countries to retire in
 - 4) We're #3 in cultural influence. (*All those Duck Dynasty & Kardashian re-runs*)
 2. There was only one category where the United States was clearly #1—POWER.
 - a. Russia and China can fight for #2; you don't win a silver medal—you lose gold!
 - b. When it comes to projecting and using power, then we are the unquestioned best
 - 1) We're #19 best at best places to raise kids and #25 for best places to retire
 - 2) If we're to keep our vision of “*American exceptionalism*”— got to be power
 - 3) We've got to trust in the same things as old Nebuchadnezzar (**Dan 4:30**)

IV. Conclusion

- A. In the last 37 years, I've never preached politics. Not start now! What I'm NOT saying
1. Not saying not to love the country, serve country, be proud country, support troops
 2. What I am saying is this idea of “*American Exceptionalism*” is an idol, a false god
 - a. We can't BOTH put America first AND put God first. Just do the math!
 - 1) Sound so familiar to hear Jesus say, “*You can't serve both God and Money*”
 - 2) But what if he replaces “*Money*” with “*America*,” would that make it less true?
 - b. I must love/obey my country the **same way** my brother/sisters in Ukraine love theirs
 - 1) We both must love and obey God over any allegiance to our country or origin
 - 2) That means America can't come first. Our first identity must be as Christians
- B. There is a fundamental difference between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of men
1. Jesus said the rulers of the Gentiles rule by power. Then he said, “No so with you”
 - a. What makes America great is power, the ability to project power to kill its enemies
 - b. We follow a king who died on a cross for enemies, and who invites us to do same
 2. There is fundamental difference there, isn't there? Which one will we put first?
 3. Which one will we trust? “*Some trust in chariots...*” (**Psalm 20:7**)