

“Crunch Time” (Daniel 2:1–49)

Have you ever been thrust into the spotlight at crunch time? Stop for just a moment and scan your memory bank. If you have an athletic background, have you stepped to the free-throw line in the second half with the game on the line? Have you stood at home plate in the final inning with two outs and the game tied? Have you been the soccer goalie trying to protect your goal in the waning moments with your team up by one? Perhaps your skill-set has not been your body but your mind. Have you experienced butterflies as the final contestant in a school spelling bee? Have you represented your school for the science fair and felt the pressure to win? Have you had to give a speech when running as a student body officer and struggled through the sweaty palms and pounding heart?

These are just a few “crunch time” experiences that perhaps you can relate to. Whether physical or intellectual challenges, as Christians, we recognize that we need the Lord to come through in the clutch. It’s likely, though, that many of these experiences are in the past for you. Now you probably have pressing personal challenges and concerns. Maybe you have put forth a small business bid that could make the difference between your family being fed and going hungry this month. Perhaps you have been told that if you share your faith one more time at work, you will be let go. Maybe your spouse has said if you have one more fit of anger she will leave you. These are “crunch time” experiences that most of us can relate to in one way or another. Life is filled with challenging circumstances where we find ourselves in the pressure cooker. In such times, we need courage, faith, and godly wisdom. We must also recognize that God is large and in charge. Daniel 2,¹ reminds us that: *God’s wisdom reveals life’s mysteries.*²

Act 1: The failure of the Babylonian sages to interpret Nebuchadnezzar’s dream (2:1–13). Our story begins rather innocently. Daniel writes, “**Now in the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams;³ and his spirit was troubled and his sleep left him.**”⁴ Have you ever had a night or two like King Nebe? I’m sure you have. It seems like all of our anxieties and concerns can come out at night. Am I right? If you are in any type of leadership position, it is likely that your stress level is even greater. This epitomizes Shakespeare’s line in Henry IV, “Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown.” Very often the common man sleeps like a baby, while the man at the top finds no rest.

The story picks in 2:2: “**Then the king gave orders to call in the magicians, the conjurers, the sorcerers and the Chaldeans to tell the king his dreams. So they came in and stood before the king. The king said to them, ‘I had a dream and my spirit is anxious to understand the dream.’ Then the Chaldeans spoke to the king in Aramaic: ‘O king, live forever! Tell the dream to your servants, and we will declare the interpretation.’ The king replied to the Chaldeans, ‘The command from me is firm: if you do not make known to me the dream and its interpretation, you will be torn limb from limb and your houses will be made a rubbish heap. But if you declare the dream and its interpretation, you will receive from me gifts and a reward and great honor; therefore declare to me the dream and its interpretation’**” (2:2–6). What a daunting demand! Can you imagine attempting to respond to King Nebe’s request? The sages have got to be shaking in their sandals! Apparently, Nebe had found previous interpretations of his dreams to be suspiciously general—a lot like horoscopes—specific enough to read something into them, but not so specific that they can be proved wrong. So he demands the revelation of the dream *and* its interpretation. If the sages can’t deliver, there will be permanent consequences. To be “torn limb from limb” is not a figure of speech. It means to be dismembered and then killed.⁵ Talk about a slow painful death! Furthermore, the king will shame these sages even in their deaths by turning their homes into a “rubbish heap” (“dunghill,” KJV). This is a nice way of referring to public toilets. This was an ancient Babylon version of a massive layoff and brings new meaning to “severance pay.” To Nebuchadnezzar severance literally meant physical dismemberment.⁶ This is indeed a frightening prospect!

In 2:7–13, these sages seek to preserve their lives. Daniel writes: **“They answered a second time and said, ‘Let the king tell the dream to his servants, and we will declare the interpretation.’ The king replied, ‘I know for certain that you are bargaining for time,⁷ inasmuch as you have seen that the command from me is firm, that if you do not make the dream known to me, there is only one decree for you. For you have agreed together to speak lying and corrupt words before me until the situation is changed; therefore tell me the dream, that I may know that you can declare to me its interpretation.’ The Chaldeans answered the king and said, ‘There is not a man on earth who could declare the matter for the king, inasmuch as no great king or ruler has ever asked anything like this of any magician, conjurer or Chaldean. Moreover, the thing which the king demands is difficult, and there is no one else who could declare it to the king except gods, whose dwelling place is not with mortal flesh.’ Because of this the king became indignant and very furious and gave orders to destroy all the wise men of Babylon. So the decree went forth that the wise men should be slain; and they looked for Daniel and his friends to kill them.”** The sages do everything in their power to urge King Nebe to cough up his dream. Read these phrases: “There is not a man on earth who could declare the matter for the king” (2:10), and “there is no one else who could declare it to the king except gods” (2:11). Unwittingly, these wise guys reveal that only the one true God can interpret these dreams. In sheer desperation, these sages remind us that there will be circumstances in our lives where only God can come through. Despite the desperate appeals of the sages, the king is unrelenting and refuses to acquiesce. “Is that your final answer?” he asks. “Yes,” they reply. “Fine, you’re all going to die!” King Nebe orders all his wise men put to death—a number that was at least in the hundreds, if not much higher. Providentially, the king’s executioners begin looking for Daniel and his friends. This is the first spark of tension in the story. How will the hero escape death?⁸

Acts 2: Daniel seeks and obtains the dream’s interpretation (2:14–23). Even though Daniel’s life is on the line, he exhibits poise and composure. In 2:14–16, we read: **“Then Daniel replied with discretion and discernment to Arioch, the captain of the king’s bodyguard, who had gone forth to slay the wise men of Babylon; he said to Arioch, the king’s commander, ‘For what reason is the decree from the king so urgent?’ Then Arioch informed Daniel about the matter. So Daniel went in and requested of the king that he would give him time, in order that he might declare the interpretation to the king.”** Daniel has just learned that his head is on the chopping block, yet he is able to calmly converse with Arioch who must have been one bad dude. [Don’t you think Arioch is the perfect name for the king’s bodyguard?] The fact that Arioch took time to explain the king’s decree to Daniel suggests that Daniel is greatly respected by Arioch.⁹ Perhaps Daniel’s credibility also explains why he is able to waltz into the king’s palace and make a special request. It is easy to assume that Daniel’s request is designed to stall the king; however, this is not the case. Rather, he takes time to seek God.

Before attempting to interpret the king’s dream, Daniel seeks assistance. **“Then Daniel went to his house and informed his friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, about the matter, so that they might request compassion from the God of heaven concerning this mystery,¹⁰ so that Daniel and his friends would not be destroyed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon”** (2:17–18). In these verses we find a contrast between Daniel and the King. Nebe took his worries to bed (cf. 2:1) while Daniel took them to God. Daniel sought prayer support before he even entertained trying to interpret the king’s dream. He and his three friends specifically requested “compassion from the God.” What a great prayer! “God, we’re about to die here. Will you please have compassion on us? We desperately need You.” Daniel has friends that he can count on when crunch time hits. (In the case of Daniel and his friends, this “crunch time” is not necessarily figurative.) One of the reasons that it is so important to be involved in a local church and a small group is you have brothers and sisters to turn to for prayer in your time of crisis. When a loved one dies, when your spouse leaves you, when your child grows deathly ill, when you lose your job, you need prayer support from other believers. Do you have brothers or sisters to call upon when crunch time hits your life?

The high point of the story is 2:19 where God delivers the interpretation:¹¹ **“Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a night vision.** The tension has been alleviated; God comes through in the clutch. God loves to respond to prayers whether we are literally facing death or not. But He longs for us to cry out to Him. We must realize that any believer can have God’s wisdom in the midst of trials (Jas 1:5); however, this presupposes that the believer has been faithfully pursuing wisdom during his or her life through the Scriptures. God can take the wisdom stored away and marry it successfully with the current crisis. But God does not work in a vacuum, which accounts for the inability of some believers to wisely handle the trials that come into their lives.¹² Today, are you earnestly seeking God in His Word so that you can know Him and walk with Him in this life? Are you striving to store wisdom deep within your heart and mind so that you can draw upon it when you need it most? Sadly, many Christians only concern themselves with biblical wisdom when trials enter their lives. But this is like building a house when it is raining. It is far better to build during sunshine. In other words, preventative maintenance is far better than disaster relief. Store up wisdom now, and you will have it when you need it.

We must not skip an important phrase in 2:19b: **“Then Daniel blessed the God of heaven.”** After receiving the answer that he was waiting for, Daniel does not immediately run into the king’s presence and throw open the palace doors. Instead, he stops everything and has a praise session. Even though he is about to be dismembered and his house is about to be converted into a public port-a-potty in his honor, he takes time to thank God. Most of us act now and pray later, but Daniel prays and praises *first* and then acts. When was the last time you dropped everything and expressed gratitude to God? I challenge you to find a clean sheet of paper and begin writing down some expressions of gratitude. Center your thoughts on who God is and what He has done in your life.

Read Daniel’s amazing prayer of praise in 2:20–23: **“Let the name of God be blessed forever and ever, for wisdom and power belong to Him. It is He who changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings;¹³ He gives wisdom to wise men and knowledge to men of understanding. It is He who reveals the profound and hidden things; He knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with Him. To You, O God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise, for You have given me wisdom and power; even now You have made known to me what we requested of You, for You have made known to us the king’s matter.”** Daniel highlights two aspects of God’s character that play a pivotal role in this chapter, and indeed throughout the book: (1) God is powerful and (2) God is wise. These emphases are explicit in 2:20 and 23. If God is truly powerful and wise, we can trust Him in the midst of any and every circumstance in our lives. Daniel’s response should cause all of us to examine our hearts to see where our own focus should have been: on the Blessor or on the blessings, on the Lord of the work or on the work, on the God who answers prayer or on the answer? When we fail to put our confidence in God, it’s easy to lose our focus. Our perspective becomes blurred, and we see the trees rather than the forest. Yet, Daniel’s focus stayed clear during a time of life-and-death pressure. His heart was locked in on his God, and God enabled him to perform rather than to wilt under pressure.¹⁴

Act 3: Daniel witnesses to the God who reveals mysteries (2:24–28a). After spending some time praising the one true God, Daniel is ready to approach King Nebe. **“Therefore, Daniel went in to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to destroy the wise men of Babylon; he went and spoke to him as follows: ‘Do not destroy the wise men of Babylon! Take me into the king’s presence, and I will declare the interpretation to the king.’ Then Arioch hurriedly brought Daniel into the king’s presence and spoke to him as follows: ‘I have found a man¹⁵ among the exiles from Judah who can make the interpretation known to the king!’ The king 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 answered before the king and said, ‘As for the mystery about which the king has inquired, neither wise men, conjurers, magicians *nor* diviners are able to declare *it* to the king. However, there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will take place in the latter days.’”**

Daniel discredits King Neb and his Babylonian gods.¹⁶ In effect he was saying, “Hey Neb, your whole belief system is bogus and impotent to help you in this situation. But there is a God in heaven who can help!” From a human perspective, this politically incorrect statement doesn’t seem like a wise move. Most people would say, “Don’t badmouth your boss’ religion, especially when he is in a bad mood.” Yet, Daniel is a courageous teenager. He’s not about to back down from anyone. In our day and age, we need to dare to be like Daniel. It’s easy to be so respectful and courteous that we never open up our mouths about our faith. Now don’t get me wrong, there is a time for meekly honoring our authorities and earning credibility, but there’s also a time to let others know where we stand. Let me ask you some potentially convicting questions: Would your co-workers be surprised that you attend church? Have your family, friends, and co-workers ever observed you reading your Bible? Do your neighbors know that you believe Jesus Christ is the only way to God? To have an impact like Daniel, we must have some spiritual spine.

The theme of Daniel is: God is large and in charge. This theme is articulated in 2:28a: **“However, there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries.”** Do you think there are no answers to your problems? There is a God in heaven. Do you think your present dilemma is hopeless? There is a God in heaven. Do you think you have a burden so heavy it cannot be lifted? There is a God in heaven who will answer your prayers. There is a God in heaven who will meet your financial needs. There is a God in heaven before whom you can bring our wayward children. There is a God in heaven who will save us and deliver us from sin. There is a God in heaven.¹⁷

Act 4: Daniel recounts the dream (2:28b–35). Daniel showcases God’s supernatural power and wisdom by recounting the king’s dream, something that the sages acknowledged no man could do (cf. 2:10–11). **“This was your dream and the visions in your mind *while on your bed*. As for you, O king, *while on your bed* your thoughts turned to what would take place in the future; and He who reveals mysteries has made known to you what will take place. But as for me, this mystery has not been revealed to me for any wisdom residing in me more than *in any other living man*, but for the purpose of making the interpretation known to the king, and that you may understand the thoughts of your mind. You, O king, were looking and behold, there was a single great statue; that statue, which was large and of extraordinary splendor, was standing in front of you, and its appearance was awesome. The head of that statue *was made of fine gold*, its breast and its arms of silver, its belly and its thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. You continued looking until a stone was cut out without hands, and it struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and crushed them. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were crushed all at the same time and became like chaff from the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away so that not a trace of them was found. But the stone that struck the statue became a great mountain and filled the whole earth”** (2:28b–35). At this point, Daniel has stumbled into a position of credibility and power. He has just successfully recounted Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. No doubt the king is impressed. Daniel can now interpret the king’s dream anyway he wants. Neb will never know the difference. Thus, in order to save his skin and the skins of his friends, Daniel must pull the punch and sanitize the interpretation of the dream. But no . . . not Daniel! In 2:36–45, he holds nothing back and lays out every unsettling detail. He explains that the head of the statue represents Nebuchadnezzar. He then proceeds to explain that the succeeding materials from top to bottom represent succeeding kingdoms of the earth. He then goes so far as to inform the king that the four kingdom mentioned (including Neb’s) will one day be smashed by a coming kingdom.¹⁸ Can you say, YIKES?!” Daniel has made his boss look bad. He has put Nebuchadnezzar in an impossible situation. What is this bloodthirsty and arrogant king supposed to say at the Babylon press conference? “Well, it looks like we have an interpretation. No god we Babylonians have ever worshipped came through on this one. But a Jewish kid—one of the teenagers we captured a while ago in Jerusalem—he got it right. And he says that our gods are helpless, and that my kingdom is going to be smashed to tiny bits and blown away by another kingdom bigger and better than mine.” Why couldn’t Daniel have been a bit vaguer? “You, oh king, are the great golden head. You will be smashing.”¹⁹

Act 5: Daniel interprets the dream (2:36–45). The interpretation of the dream is as follows: **“This was the dream; now we will tell its interpretation before the king. You, O king, are the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, the strength and the glory; and wherever the sons of men dwell, or the beasts of the field, or the birds of the sky, He has given them into your hand and has caused you to rule over them all. You are the head of gold. After you there will arise another kingdom inferior to you, then another third kingdom of bronze, which will rule over all the earth. Then there will be a fourth kingdom as strong as iron; inasmuch as iron crushes and shatters all things, so, like iron that breaks in pieces, it will crush and break all these in pieces. In that you saw the feet and toes, partly of potter’s clay and partly of iron, it will be a divided kingdom; but it will have in it the toughness of iron, inasmuch as you saw the iron mixed with common clay. As the toes of the feet were partly of iron and partly of pottery, so some of the kingdom will be strong and part of it will be brittle. And in that you saw the iron mixed with common clay, they will combine with one another in the seed of men; but they will not adhere to one another, even as iron does not combine with pottery. In the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever. Inasmuch as you saw that a stone was cut out of the mountain without hands and that it crushed the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold, the great God has made known to the king what will take place in the future; so the dream is true and its interpretation is trustworthy.”** We will discuss the details of this dream further in ch. 7, but for now it should suffice to say this: Essentially, God is warning Nebuchadnezzar against pride and preoccupation with his own kingdom or with earthly kingdoms in general. Gentile kingdoms will, in the end, be done away with and their glory will be forgotten. The “king” who should gain our attention and our worship is the Messiah. He will, at His coming, put down earthly kings and kingdoms and establish His eternal kingdom. Nebuchadnezzar should set his mind not on earthly things, but on heavenly things.

6. Nebuchadnezzar honors Daniel and his God (2:46–49). Chapter 2 concludes in a most unlikely fashion. **“Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell on his face and did homage²⁰ to Daniel, and gave orders to present to him an offering and fragrant incense. The king answered Daniel and said, ‘Surely your God is a God of gods and a Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, since you have been able to reveal this mystery.’ Then the king promoted Daniel and gave him many great gifts, and he made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon. And Daniel made request of the king, and he appointed Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego over the administration of the province of Babylon, while Daniel was at the king’s court.”** The response of Nebuchadnezzar is truly amazing! The great king gives glory to the greatest King—the one true God and King. Imagine Saddam Hussein, falling prostrate before a Jewish Christian, acknowledging the God of Israel as the only true God. This is nearly unthinkable, and Nebuchadnezzar is far greater in power and reputation than Hussein. In the Old Testament no other pagan king is mentioned more frequently than Nebuchadnezzar. He was the man in his day and age. Yet, God’s sovereignty causes him to be awed by Daniel and his God. As a result, Nebuchadnezzar gives Daniel many gifts, just as he promised the wise men, if they would but tell him his dream and its meaning (see 2:6). Along with the gifts, Daniel receives a promotion. He is made ruler of the entire province of Babylon and placed in charge of all the wise men of Babylon. Here was something for the wise men of Babylon to ponder. Their gods had nearly gotten them killed. Daniel’s God had saved their lives.²¹

Teens, college students, businessmen and women, be true to the Lord! Live for Jesus! Let them laugh at you and make fun of you if they wish. You keep being true to the God of heaven and one of these days the scoffers will have to acknowledge that you are God’s man or woman. We must bear in mind *God’s wisdom reveals life’s mysteries*. He alone can see us through humanly impossible predicaments. He alone will be exalted in the midst of our circumstances.

Scripture References

Daniel 2:1–49

Psalm 34:15; 145:18

Proverbs 15:8, 29

Matthew 7:7–11

Luke 11:11–13

Romans 12:10–12

Philippians 4:6–7

Study Questions

1. How does God use the responses of the Chaldeans to heighten the suspense of this chapter and to glorify Himself (Dan 2:1–13; especially 10–11)? Why is the world so prone to rely upon human wisdom? When am I most tempted to do the same? How can I strive to depend instead upon the Lord? Read Ecclesiastes 9:13–10:20; 1 Corinthians 1:18–2:5; and James 3:13–18.
2. Do I fervently seek God for His wisdom and direction in my personal life and circumstances (Dan 2:16–19a)? If not, who am I most prone to turn to (e.g., myself, friends, family, mentors, pastors)? How can I discipline myself to seek God *first*? What might this look like in my personal life and ministry? Who can hold me accountable to fervently pursuing God?
3. Do I frequently take time out of my schedule to give God praise (Dan 2:19–23)? Pope Gregory the Great said, “Almost everything said of God is unworthy, for the very reason that it is capable of being said.” How am I presently stretching myself to grow in my worship? What personal worship goal can I seek to achieve this year? How will attaining this goal improve my spiritual life?
4. How can I cultivate humility like Daniel (Dan 2:27–30)? If a fifteen year-old boy is capable of this kind of humility under pressure, what about me? Read Isaiah 66:2; James 4:6–10; and 1 Peter 5:5–6. How can I apply these verses directly to the circumstances of my life? Who is the most humble person I know? How can I learn from this person’s life?
5. Why does God enjoy “turning the tables” so much (Dan 2:46–49)? What does this say about God’s character and nature? How is God’s sovereignty seen in this closing episode? What bearing does this revelation about God have on my life? How can I learn to trust God in the trials of life? Who can I look for to support me through these challenging seasons?

Notes

¹ Daniel 2 is presented in six acts. See Ernest C. Lucas, *Daniel*. Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity; Leicester: UK: Apollos, 2002), 67. Longman, *Daniel*, 75 proposes four acts: (1) the king and his advisors (2:1 – 13); (2) God’s revealing of the mystery to Daniel (2:14 – 23); (3) the dream and its interpretation (2:24 – 45); and (4) the king’s response (2:46 – 49).

² This has been adapted and revised from Tremper Longman III, *Daniel*. The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 73.

³ Ancient Babylonians considered dreams to be messages from the gods about their future. Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*. The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 78.

⁴ Lucas, *Daniel*, 67: Dan 2:1 serves as an introduction to both the opening act and the narrative of the whole.

⁵ Miller, *Daniel*, 81.

⁶ Bob Kerrey, “Courageous Leadership at Crunch Time” (Daniel 2): www.moonvalleybible.org/sermons.php.

⁷ It’s amazing how many of the sayings we have in our language come from the Bible (“you’re just trying to buy time!”)

⁸ Lucas, *Daniel*, 67.

⁹ Benware notes that it is also possible that Arioch himself thought the decree was an overreaction on the part of the king. Paul Benware, *Daniel’s Prophecy of Things to Come* (Clifton, TX: Scofield Ministries, 2007), 53.

¹⁰ The word “mystery” (*raz*) is used eight times in this chapter.

¹¹ Lucas, *Daniel*, 67.

¹² Benware, *Daniel’s Prophecy of Things to Come*, 53.

¹³ God is sovereign over the political leaders of our world. Don’t get angry; instead pray (1 Tim 2:1–2).

¹⁴ Bill Crowder, *Daniel: Spiritual Living in a Secular Culture* (Grand Rapids: Radio Bible Class, 2006), 14.

¹⁵ “I have found a man” (Dan 2:25) isn’t exactly the truth, because it was Daniel who found Arioch; but Daniel wasn’t the kind of person who worried about who got the credit so long as God got the glory.

¹⁶ Miller, *Daniel*, 89.

¹⁷ John Phillips and Jerry Vines, *Exploring the Book of Daniel: An Expository Commentary* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1990), 41.

¹⁸ We will be studying this imagery in detail in Daniel 7.

¹⁹ Kerrey, “Courageous Leadership at Crunch Time.”

²⁰ The Greek OT translates this Aramaic verb with the Greek word translated in the NT as worshiped (*proskuneo*). But I don’t think Nebuchadnezzar is truly worshipping Daniel or at least that Daniel does not perceive it as “worship,” for he is the same young man who did not seek credit for the dream interpretation (Dan 2:29–30). And although he did have access to the book of Acts, he clearly knew the principle that a believer was not to accept worship from another human being (Acts 10:25–26; cf. 14:14–15).

²¹ Deffinbaugh, “The Dream Which Nearly Became a Nightmare.”