

Introduction

We've been looking at the life of Daniel in LG all semester long. When we first meet Daniel in chapter 1, we meet him as a college freshman at Babylon U. At the end of chapter 1, Daniel has just graduated *summa cum laude* and landed a cabinet position in Nebuchadnezzar's "White House."

Daniel was salt and light in college. Now we will watch him and his friends be salt and light in the workplace. Today's passage highlights a few things I want to discuss with you tonight. I've grouped those topics under four headings, and I've decided to start all of those headings or points with the letter "p." (I hope that's helpful and not cheesy.) What I want to do tonight is consider 1) the purpose of government; 2) the problem with government; 3) the promise of God's government; and finally, 4) proximate justice here and now.

Those are our four points: Purpose. Problem. Promise. Proximate justice. Let's start with our first point—i.e., the purpose of government...

1. The Purpose of Government

Government is a good thing. Government was part of God's good world *in the beginning*. In the beginning, "the earth was without form and void"—in Hebrew, it was *tohu* and *bohu*. The earth lacked order; it was devoid of content; it was dark and chaotic. But God appears on the scene; His spirit hovers over the face of the watery deep; and He gets to work creating order out of chaos, creating spaces and filling them, creating kingdoms and kings and queens to rule over them. In sum, in the beginning, God creates good government.

Day One: God said "Let there be light, and there was light." Day Two: "Let there be sea and sky," and it was so. Day Three: "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered into one place, and the dry land appear," and again it was so. Days 1-3: God is at work creating what you could call kingdoms. Days 4, 5, and 6, God is at work creating kings and queens to rule over their respective spaces. Day 4: God creates the greater light (sun) and lesser light (moon) to rule over the light (day) and darkness (night). Day 5: God creates birds and fish to rule over the sky and seas. Day 6: God creates land creatures of all kinds—livestock and creeping things, and beast of the earth and...before the day ends...human beings, creatures uniquely made in the image of God. The world was *tohu* and *bohu*—formless and void. Now, by the end of this divine workweek, it is structured, ordered, and teeming with life. There are governors; there is government; life on planet Earth is very good.

Where do human beings fit in this beautiful picture? We are, as the Bible mentions, created on the sixth day with the other land animals. We are connected to them; joined with them; if something is born on the same day, we call it a "twin." You could say we are *kin with creation*. But we are not just kin with creation—we are also created to be *kings for creation*.

Genesis 1:26 reads: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.'" We were made to rule over every square inch of creation—over the environment but also over economics, education, medicine, politics, art, culture, and so on. But—and this is important—when we rule, we rule always and everywhere as God's *image-bearers*. That means our ruler-ship is clearly stipulated. We are to love this world and care for it in the same way that God loves and cares for it. Dominion, therefore, is not domination or exploitation but servant leadership instead.

Government is supposed to be good. Its purpose is to bring order out of chaos and lend structure and organization to life so that things can be taken care of and loved well. That is what government is there for. But if that is why government exists, anyone alive can tell you that something has gone horribly wrong. This brings us to point #2: the problem with our government.

2. The Problem with Government

What is wrong with our government? Some of you will say, "The problem with our government is that Trump is in the White House." Or, "Republicans are in control of Congress." Or, "Democrats spend too much money and are out of touch with the common man." What these answers imply is that "if we got our guy or our girl in office, everything would change. Everything would be better." But you know that's not true. Our problem is bigger and runs deeper than our partisan divide. The problem with our government is *sin*. This very little word is a very major concept that raises a whole lot of questions starting with, "What exactly is *sin*?" From a Biblical standpoint, sin is both transgression as well as falling short. It is crossing the line. It is ignoring God's good design. It is giving our Maker the middle finger and doing things our own way. In his book devoted to the topic, Cornelius Plantinga describes sin as "a spoiler of creation" and "vandalism of shalom." Shalom, as we've discussed in the past, is a rich Biblical concept. Shalom is often translated peace, but it means much more than that. Shalom is the webbing together of all life in justice, satisfaction,

and delight. It is the way things are supposed to be. Shalom is what happens when we go with the grain of the universe. Sin, however, is going against the grain. Sin spoils shalom, and sin results in splinters—for you, for me, and for every other living thing on this planet.

We are, as I said, kin with creation as well as kings for creation. That is the way things are supposed to be; that is the natural order of things. Sin inverts this relationship. Sin turns everything upside down. Instead of me for you, it is now you for me. We no longer serve creation; creation is there to serve us. (Note that all kings who forget that they are kin become tyrants.) Dominion becomes domination. Order gives way to chaos. And government—which was designed to be a train or channel of God’s goodness—becomes a train wreck.

This is what Daniel steps into when Daniel graduates college: a train wreck. He finds himself working in a world (and for a government) that is incredibly dysfunctional. (You will too!) Nebuchadnezzar is Daniel’s boss. He is also the leader of the not-so-free world. Things are not all right. As we read through Daniel 2 tonight, you were probably thinking to yourself, “This is a long passage...and this guy Nebby is insane.” Seriously! What is wrong with him? Neb has a dream, and he tells the people working under him: “Not only do you need to tell me WHAT I dreamed, you need to tell me WHAT it means... *or else I will kill you.*” That is no okay. The king is issuing these crazy executive orders. He is neurotic, anxious, and troubled in spirit (v. 3). He is paranoid, accusing the people around him of lying and corruption and collusion (vv. 8-9). And he is violent. Look at verse 12: “Because of this the king was angry and very furious, and commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be destroyed.” There is a government/chain of command. This man sits at the top of it.

In the story of King Midas, everything Midas touches turns to gold. Sinners (people like you and me) have a similar condition except it is the opposite: instead of turning things into gold, we turn them into rust. When we sin—i.e., when we ignore God’s good design; when our primary concern is getting ahead and being number one; when we look only to our interests and ignore the needs of others; when we say (as Trump did at his inauguration), that “from this day forward, a new vision will govern our land. From this day forward, it’s going to be only America first”; when we do all this—we are going against the grain of the universe. We get splinters, and we get splintered government.

This is the gist of Nebuchadnezzar's dream and its interpretation. V. 37: "You, O king, the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, and the might, and the glory, and into whose hand he has given, wherever they dwell, the children of man, the beasts of the field, and the birds of the heavens, making you rule over them all—you are the head of gold." (Cf. Gen. 1:26-28) BUT...v. 39: "another kingdom inferior to you shall arise after you." And a third and fourth and fifth after it. And so on, and so forth.

All empires rise and fall. The Babylonian empire, the Persian Empire, the Greek Empire, the Roman Empire...the American empire. They rise and fall because they have a cancer called sin, and you cannot fight cancer with cancer. The one thing America is right about is this: we need an outsider to fix our politics. Not Donald Trump. We need God Himself. In v. 11, you have a bunch of helpless government officials saying very much the same thing: "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." They realize their government situation is screwed up. The only thing that is going to resolve it is if an outsider steps in to fix it.

This brings us to point #3: the promise of God's government.

3. The Promise of God's Government

In his dream, Nebuchadnezzar sees a giant statue with a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, middle and thighs of bronze, legs of iron and feet of iron and clay. But—seemingly out of nowhere—a stone (not cut by human hands) topples the corrupted image of man, and a heavenly mountain (i.e., a heavenly kingdom) will grow in its place. Simply put: God is going to get involved. He is going to reestablish his kingdom here on earth, a kingdom that will start off small but will grow nevertheless; a kingdom that shall never be destroyed; a kingdom that will last forever. "This dream is certain, and its interpretation is sure," Daniel says. In other words, you can bank on this.

We spent a lot of time last semester talking about the kingdom of God. Imagine a world where, instead of going against the grain, we all turned around and went with the grain; a world with no more war, injustice, poverty; a world where everything wrong was made right. That vision (the KOG) is central to Jesus' mission. In the gospel of Mark, the very first words we hear out of Jesus' mouth are this: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." IOW, I am the stone of Daniel 2. I am the stone, sent from heaven, to set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed.

“The time is fulfilled. All of the ancient promises are coming true. Turn around. Turn towards me. And believe this gospel—believe this good news.”

Those that do believe this gospel, and those that have turned toward Jesus have discovered this: the kingdom of God is here, but it is not here in its fullness. In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus inaugurated something—a stone toppling an image, a mountain starting to grow—but the work of Christ is not yet consummated, it is not yet complete. Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again. When he does, he will bring heaven to earth with him. The two (heaven and earth) will become one.

Another prophet named Micah describes the return of the Lord in these terms: “It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills, and peoples shall flow to it, and many nations shall come, and say: ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths....He shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide for strong nations far away; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks...and they will learn war no more.”

One of my favorite scenes in *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* is when Aslan returns to Narnia. For the longest time, Narnia has been held captive in the icy grips of the White Witch. Under her cold and corrupted government, it is always winter, never Christmas. But rumors abound that Aslan, the great Lion, is returning. And then the rumors are rumors no more, because it is true. Aslan is back. Everywhere he goes—under every giant paw print—the snow begins to melt, the flowers begin to blossom, and springtime erupts into song. Christ has come. Christ has risen. Christ will come again. And when he does, he will bring good government—God’s government—with him forever.

This brings me to our final point. We’ve talked about the purpose of government; we’ve talked about its problems; and we’ve talked about the promise of God’s (coming) government. In closing, I want to talk about what it means to live in the in-between times—i.e., living in between Christ’s first coming and Christ’s second coming—also known as the now-not-yet kingdom of God. I’m calling this last point “Proximate Justice,” and that language comes from an essay a friend and mentor of mine wrote called, “Making Peace with Proximate Justice.” I’ve printed several copies of that essay and have brought them here with me tonight; feel free to grab one before you head home....

4. Proximate Justice Here and Now

In this essay Garber writes, "There is not a week in my life when I do not think about the tensions of the now-but-not-yet nature of the Kingdom, where Jesus has made all things new, and yet where we still do not see that reality completely incarnate in history. I have to make peace with proximate justice, even as I ache for hope and history to finally and fully rhyme."

What is "proximate justice?" As Garber explains, "proximate justice means some justice now, some mercy now, all the while realizing that it will only be in the new heaven and new earth that we will find *all* our longings finally fulfilled, and *all* of God's demands finally met."

Proximate justice is rooted in the conviction that healing is not only possible—it is promised. We won't experience it all now, but we can begin to experience some of it. Francis Schaeffer called this substantial healing. It is substantial because the healing we experience now is tangible and real (you could say, it has substance). It is substantial in another sense, as well. Something substantial is significant; it is worth noting; it is not everything, but it is not nothing, either. It is substantial. It is proximate. It is a sign or a foretaste of what is to come.

NT Wright offers us this famous illustration. Imagine that a lost Shakespeare play is somehow discovered. Although the play originally had five acts, only four of those acts have been found. We have the first three and fifth; the fourth is missing. Wright says the play could go on. If the actors immersed themselves in the culture and language of Shakespeare, and if they really studied the parts of the play they'd been given—i.e., if they understood where it began and where it was going—then they could improvise the fourth act and bring the play toward the conclusion that its author has provided in the final act.

We are living in Act IV as it were—in between Act III and Act V. In the beginning, there was good government (I). Sin broke into the world and broke it and us (II). But God has come (III) and will come again to set it to rights (V). Knowing this story—where you've come from, where you are going—is critical to knowing how to live life well in Act IV. How to improvise and play your part well. Let your life be a foretaste of what is going to come. Percy called this being "signposts in a strange land." Jesus called it being "salt and light." Being in the world, not of it. A counter culture for the common good. Different for goodness' sake. Adding hope, adding flavor. Preventing against rot and decay. And being an agent of redemption and substantial healing in this world. *Let's pray.*