

Opening Minds that are Closed to God

Rich Nathan

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Strangers in a Strange Land

Daniel 2

When I was in college, along with being a History major, I also majored in Comparative Religion. As part of that Religion major, I did two survey courses of the Bible. One was on the Old Testament and the other was on the New Testament.

One of the major issues in contemporary biblical studies concerns the dating of the books that we find in the Bible. For example, when were the Gospels written? The books that we know as Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – how long after Jesus' life were they written?

It's been common in New Testament Studies to date the four Gospels after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D. The reason is because the first three Gospels contain a story in which Jesus accurately predicts the fall of Jerusalem and he describes in detail what the destruction of Jerusalem will be like. Scholars reason that because we know that no one – not even Jesus - can predict the future accurately, the chapters in the Gospels describing Jerusalem's destruction must have been written after the fact. That is, after 70 A.D. These scholars conclude that the Gospel writers put these words of prediction into Jesus' mouth, that's there is no way that he could have predicted the fall of Jerusalem because he died 40 years before its destruction.

The dating of the Gospels has been fought over for over 100 years. Many scholars prefer dates for the Gospels before 70 A.D. because they say if the leaders of the early church who wrote the Gospels were going to put words in Jesus' mouth, words that he didn't say, then why didn't they have Jesus answer the big issues facing the early church? In other words, if the Jesus that we find in the Gospels is just a creation of the early church then why didn't they have Jesus speak authoritatively to the issues that were dividing the early church?

For example, Jesus says absolutely nothing in the Gospels about whether Gentiles would have to be circumcised in order to be saved. The circumcision of Gentile men was a huge issue that threatened to divide the church in the decades following Jesus' life. Wouldn't it have been helpful if Jesus had spoken to that issue? On the other side, we have Jesus arguing with groups of people that would've been irrelevant after 70 A.D. and the destruction of the Temple, namely the Sadducees, who were part of the Temple hierarchy.

Why include all these stories about Jesus arguing with the priests if the priestly hierarchy is no longer an issue for the growing Christian Jewish movement following the Temple's destruction?

You see, very often the issue of the dating of a biblical book is not based upon evidence – internal evidence, external evidence – however, scholars say that a book had to be written much later than it appears to have been written because of the scholar's own anti-supernatural bias. The scholar takes as a given that accurate prophecy can't exist. No one can predict the future with uncanny accuracy so if the scholar finds an instance in the Bible where a future event is accurately predicted then that particular prophecy must have been written after the fact.

Last week, I began teaching the book of Daniel. This Old Testament book is treated the same way by some scholars as the Gospels are treated. It's given a very late date because, like the Gospels, the book contains predictions about what would happen in subsequent centuries. The big problem for Bible scholars is that Daniel got his predictions right. Daniel lays out in detail the history of kingdoms from the time of the Babylonians to the time of the Greeks.

Especially in Daniel 11, the Prophet Daniel gives incredibly accurate details of the complex relationships that existed in the breakup of Alexander the Great's Empire. Again, the basic objection to Daniel predicting the future doesn't come from evidence internal to the book. Scholars agree that the book of Daniel accurately describes particular customs in Babylon and in Persia dating back to the sixth century B.C. Customs that would have been forgotten 4-500 years later.

Again, dating of biblical books is often based upon the presuppositions or the worldview of the Bible scholar. If you have a worldview that precludes the possibility of God giving revelation in books that predict the future, then those books by definition have to be written after the fact.

Let me drop this down for a moment. The worldview that I'm describing today is one in which people believe they have no access to anything beyond this material universe. This worldview that not only many Bible scholars had, but many, many people in the Western world, say that the material universe is all that there is, all that there ever will be and there's nothing beyond this material universe. That worldview can be compared to spending your entire life in a windowless room. Many, many people not only in the Western world, but we're going to find also in Daniel's day spend their whole lives as it were, in a room without windows or doors. Many people today believe that you can't get light, you can't get information, from outside of this closed windowless room we inhabit called the material universe. There's nothing beyond. There's nothing above. There is no God or if there is a God, we have no access to that God at all. So, for all practical purposes, that God doesn't exist.

Have you ever talked with someone whose eyes glaze over or whose head tilts when you tell them that you pray or that you'll pray for them? Even worse, if you told that person that you received an answer to your prayers? Have you ever been in an environment where it would be unthinkable that you believe that through prayer God would heal a person or that God speaks to you so that he gives divine guidance through visions or dreams? Yes. We have a name for that, it's called mental illness. It's called psychosis. We live in a windowless room. No one has access to some person beyond the room. There is no light coming into the room from any windows or doors. And if you say that you have access, that there is light coming in, you are either crazy or dangerous or both. Again, I ask, have you ever been in an environment where you knew that claims of supernatural intervention would be met by at best pitying looks and a pat on the hand, "Dear, Dear, calm down. You must be under a lot of stress."

Last week I began a series from the book of Daniel. Daniel is the story of four friends who were born in the little country of Judah in the Middle East and who lived 2,600 years ago. As teenagers, Daniel and his three friends were taken captive by King Nebuchadnezzar and were transported to his capital city of Babylon along with many other Jews who lived in the Jewish nation of Judah and in Jerusalem, its capital.

Daniel and his fellow Jews found themselves "Strangers in a Strange Land" and nothing was stranger than the fact that the experts in Babylon, the intelligentsia, the elite opinion was that there is no access to God or the gods. If God is there, he is silent. This created a great conflict for Daniel in Babylonian society because Daniel believed in a God who spoke. Daniel believed that the universe wasn't closed. How did Daniel succeed in opening the closed worlds and the closed minds of the experts and of the King?

That's what I want to talk about today in a message I've titled, "Opening Minds that are Closed to God". Let's Pray.

Let me share with you the story of Daniel 2. Daniel and his friends were early in their careers in Babylon. They were top of their class at Babylon University. Now, post-graduation, they were in entry level positions. Then something very dramatic took place that may have resulted in their deaths. To push ahead to the end of the story, instead of being executed Daniel and his friends were promoted to corner offices and their careers skyrocketed. They were able to prosper in Babylon even while they were faithful to God.

Here's the story: Nebuchadnezzar had a troubling dream. Here's what we read

Daniel 2:1-3

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."

Like any ancient person in the East, Nebuchadnezzar took his dreams very seriously and he employed experts, the elite of his day, to interpret the dreams for him. He gathered together the think tank, the best and the brightest professors from Harvard, Yale and, of course, The Ohio State University. The educated elite. He said, "Gentleman, I had a troubling dream and I want to know what it means."

The elite said, "Go ahead, tell your servants the dream and we'll interpret it for you." These elite, like the elite today, believed in the power of the human mind to interpret economic and political, psychological data. "Tell us the dream and we'll tell you what it meant."

But this time, Nebuchadnezzar throws the elite a curve ball. He says, "Oh, no, no. I will not tell you the dream. I'm not going to give you any data to work with. I expect you to tell me what I dreamed and then interpret it."

After engaging in a diplomatic dance with Nebuchadnezzar, the experts were finally forced to concede that they couldn't tell him what he dreamed.

Here's what we read,

Daniel 2:10-11

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."

I want to reread with you verse 11

Daniel 2:11

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."

Let me describe for you the philosophy of the intellectual elite, Nebuchadnezzar's think tank, are operating from.

The Philosophy described

Nebuchadnezzar's elite held to a philosophy that is very common in the West today and particularly in university settings. They were saying that if the gods exist, we have no access to them. We have no access to information from them, no ability to communicate with them. No access to their power. The universe we live in is a windowless room. No light comes in from outside.

Life in a windowless – that philosophy is called Naturalism. It means that the natural universe, the universe of matter and energy contains the only things that are real.

Many church goers would say, "No, I don't believe that. I don't believe that the only thing that exists is matter and energy. I believe in God. I believe in the supernatural." But I would suggest to you that this naturalistic mindset, this perspective of living in a windowless room, has deeply impacted many of us who consider ourselves followers of Christ so much so that we theoretically believe in a God who exists and we theoretically believe in a God who speaks, but for all practical purposes we live like the Babylonian elite who said in verse 11

Daniel 2:11

No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among humans.

We theoretically believe that our God does live among men and women. But for all intents and purposes, we don't really expect to hear from God. We don't really expect God to intervene when we pray. Many folks would fall over dead if someone they prayed for actually got healed or if God actually spoke to them through a dream or a vision or a prophecy. We don't really expect to have windows in the room and light coming in from outside. We don't really expect closed minds to suddenly open up.

Let me apply this philosophy of Naturalism – spending your life in a windowless room - to three phenomenon that we find here in this text.

The Philosophy applied

The first application that I want to make is to

To the fragility of life

Look with me at verse 1 again

Daniel 2:1

In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind was troubled and he could not sleep.

When you think about it, people have to ask: What is it that could have troubled King Nebuchadnezzar so much that he called all of his experts, all the elite together, to discuss it? The fact is, almost no one in history has ever been in a more secure position than King Nebuchadnezzar who was the absolute ruler of an enormous Kingdom. His word was law. Every single person, from the least to the greatest, was at his beck and call.

King Nebuchadnezzar had the power of life and death. If he didn't like his food, he could execute his cook as easily as you could kill a mosquito. With all of his economic power and all of his political power and all of his military power, you might ask what could possibly trouble this man so that he could not sleep? What power could reach under his defenses and opened him up to the possibility that there was a God in Heaven before whom he would have to give an account?

Here's the deal. If there is a God like the one described in the Bible, if that God really exists and if the universe is the way that Christians say that it is, it's a universe with windows. We don't spend our lives in a closed off room. No matter what we say or what we believe we can't prevent the life of God from reaching us. Any thought can be thought, but not every thought can be lived. No one can ultimately defend themselves from the reality of God. So God reaches under Nebuchadnezzar's well-constructed defenses. To extend the metaphor, God pokes a hole with his pinkie into Nebuchadnezzar's windowless room by giving him a troubling dream.

What was the dream? Here's what we read

Daniel 2:31-35

³¹ "Your Majesty looked, and there before you stood a large statue—an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. ³² The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, ³³ its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. ³⁴ While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. ³⁵ Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were all broken to pieces and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.

What Nebuchadnezzar experienced in his dream was what one theologian called

"The shock of possible non-being"

The sudden experience of no matter how rich or powerful or young or healthy we are, we are finite. We will one day not exist. We will all die. Human life is fragile. For some of you, this Father's Day is a sad time because your dad has passed away. Some of you

have lost mothers, others children. Brothers. Sisters. Friends. How do we deal with what that theologian called, “The shock of possible non-being”? How do we deal with the troubling reality that all of life – including our own life - is incredibly fragile?

Do you remember that at the start of the Iraq war President Bush used to talk about WMD, Weapons of Mass Destruction? I think that many of us today have our own WMD, to deal with the anxiety that we feel in the face of death. Our WMD are Weapons of Mass Distraction. We just try not to think about it. We turn our backs to the window and we busy ourselves with a new TV series on Netflix and gardening and hobbies, fantasy football, video games and shopping. That’s how those who live in a windowless room deal with the fragility of our lives.

Christians who know God don’t have to live this way, but many of us do – afraid of dying, afraid of the future – listen to me now. I want you to hear this – many Christians see God behind them. Yes, I believe in what God did in the past, particularly on the cross. And some Christians even see God in the present. I am aware of God’s activity in my life right now. But few Christians see God ahead of them – in their future. That’s what only a few Christians have real hope. If you are a follower of Christ you never need to fear anything. God is not only behind you and by your side, God is ahead of you, come what may.

Let me apply this philosophy of Naturalism

To dreams

You know, 2,600 years after the experts in Babylon said: we don’t have any real insight regarding dreams. Experts today confess that they are in the same position. We still don’t know what dreams mean. Beginning with Freud, he said that dreams were ways that people worked out their unconscious fears or taboo thoughts that were too terrible. Then in the 1970s, there was a new theory of dreams that was essentially that dreams are meaningless, just random firings of your nerves. Now, as a result of brain studies, folks think there is some kind of connection between our dreams and our emotions. But still we don’t fully understand the cause of dreams and we certainly don’t understand how to interpret them. Dream dictionaries that pretend to interpret your dreams are not worth the paper they’re printed on. Most experts dismiss those things.

What if we lived in a room with windows? What if there really was a God and he wasn’t silent? What if our God spoke?

Here’s what we read in the book of Job

Job 33:14-15

For God does speak—now one way, now another—
though no one perceives it.

¹⁵ In a dream, in a vision of the night,
when deep sleep falls on people
as they slumber in their beds,

The Bible doesn't suggest that every dream of ours comes from God, but the God who is there really does speak and one way that he speaks is through dreams.

More than 25 years ago, I had a series of dreams one evening. I dreamed that I was up front preaching in the Vineyard and I looked out and I was preaching to a multi-racial church. At the time, Vineyard Columbus was almost entirely white Anglos. But in my dream, I was preaching to a multi-racial church. I woke up and I thought about what I had dreamed. I fell back asleep and had the dream a second time. I was at the Vineyard and I was preaching at a multi-racial church. I woke up and then fell back asleep and had the dream a third time. When I woke up the third time, I felt the presence of God in the room. I felt like the Lord was saying to me, "That is your future reality. That's what I'm going to do." So, over the next decade, I prayed over that dream. "Lord, bring to pass what you said." Then beginning 15 years ago, the Lord began to bring it to pass.

Do you think God speaks? We hear so much about Radical Islamic philosophy these day – as well we should. But one of the completely unreported stories coming out of the Islamic world today is the fact that millions of Muslims have turned to Jesus Christ for salvation in the last 16 years. One of the chief ways that Muslims are opening up to Christ is through dreams.

For example, we have a young Iraqi man in our congregation. He began his search for Christ in Iraq. He was from an Orthodox Sunni background. One of the main precipitators that put him on the road to finding Christ was Jesus appeared to him in a dream. You see, the God who is there is not silent. If God really exists, he has everything available at his fingertips to open a closed person. God even has access to people at night in their dreams.

I want to call your attention to an extraordinary book by a missionary named David Garrison. It's titled *A Wind in the House of Islam*. The book is the result of years of research involving traveling over 250,000 miles to conduct interviews with more than 1,000 people around the Muslim world. What Dave Garrison found is that since 9/11 in 2001, more Muslims have come to Christ – from Indonesia to West Africa – more Muslims have come to Christ in the last 15 years than in the 14 centuries before that combined. Dave Garrison identifies 69 Muslim movements to Christ. He defines a movement as involving more than 1,000 Muslims who turned to Christ or the planting of more than 100 churches among Muslims.

By the way, we have an every other week prayer meeting for Muslims and those who are working with Muslims.

In the midst of all the craziness in this world, the Kingdom of God is breaking in.

Let me apply the philosophy of Naturalism to just one more thing.

To evil

Nebuchadnezzar had a dream. In the dream he saw a giant statue of a man that had a head of gold, the chest and arms were of silver, the torso was bronze, the legs iron, and its feet were iron with baked clay. The interpretation of the dream given by God is that Nebuchadnezzar was seeing world history in advance. A succession of kingdoms, beginning with his own, gave way then successively to the Empires of Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome. There's debate about whether the last kingdom was Greece or Rome, but I want to point to something else beyond the political succession of kingdoms.

We shouldn't miss that the statue is a statue of a man and the man has a head of gold and feet of clay. By the way, it's this text that gives rise to the expression that every human being has feet of clay. We all have a fatal flaw, a fatal weakness that can cause us to topple over.

This statue shows us the incredible contradiction of being human. There is a glory in every person. We have a head of gold, of glory, that is given to no other living thing. We are made in the image of God. But we glorious creatures are all tottering around on feet of clay. How do we understand what's wrong with the world?

Just last Sunday, there was a horrific terrorist attack in Orlando on a gay nightclub by a man who apparently swore allegiance to ISIS. 49 young adults were murdered. 53 were terribly wounded. All week long the news has trotted out experts, the elite, to try to interpret for the rest of us why this man decided to murder so many people. All their explanations have been from within a windowless room.

A reporter from the New York Times analyzed court records from over 300 cases of people charged with jihadist terrorism since 9/11 in the United States. These cases range from relatively small cases, like sending sums of money to foreign terrorist organizations, to serious cases like murder and bombings. This reporter in many cases interviewed the terrorists' family and friends. Some cases, he interviewed the terrorists themselves.

We've been hearing all week that the person that committed these murders must have been mentally ill. Whether that's true in his particular case, I don't know. Only 10% of the jihadist terrorists had mental health problems. Most of the jihadists were not particularly observant Muslims. They were womanizers. They were drunkards. They attached themselves to something as an excuse to kill, but a high percentage of them didn't seem particularly committed to Islam at all. The experts say that maybe it was a hate crime motivated by anti-gay animus. And that may be true! But what I found fascinating was that in all the discussion this week in the news regarding this terrorist's motivations, was that no one mentioned the word "sin". No one said, "You know what's going on here bottom line, there is a fatal flaw in every human heart. A twistedness. A depravity. If that twistedness or depravity is fed, if we open ourselves up to evil and to hatred, we human beings are capable of horrible things. In a windowless universe we have lost the capacity to speak in moral terms about evil. We use therapeutic terms like mental illness. Or sociological terms like hate crimes. Or political terms like radical Islamic jihadism.

But how about moral and spiritual terms? Here's a man who turned his back to the window. He turned away from the light! He opened himself up to darkness. He allowed his heart to be filled with hate and rage.

The Philosophy battled

How do we battle the philosophy of the windowless room? How do we communicate to somebody whose mind and heart is closed off to the possibility that there is a God and he is not silent?

Flannery O'Connor, the Roman Catholic short story writer, once said, "You have to push as hard as the age that pushes against you."

Christians have to push back. We have to fight. We need to push back intellectually.

Pushing back intellectually

I haven't the time to talk through all of the ways that we might debunk those who claim that the material universe is all that there is. Let me just suggest one approach. There's an atheistic philosopher named A.J. Ayer. He taught at Oxford University for many years and he was a proponent of a philosophy called logical positivism that was popular in the 1960s and 1970s. Logical positivism held that the only thing that could be verified as true is that which could be tested by the five senses. You can't take anything to be true or real if I can't see it or taste it or touch it or smell it or hear it. So, Professor Ayer would say that your claim that there is a God is nonsense. You can't see him or taste him or hear him and so on. The trouble with Prof. Ayer's principle that he wouldn't

believe anything he couldn't see or hear or touch or smell or taste is that the principle itself can't be tested by the five senses.

Prof. Ayer later admitted that he had been radically inconsistent in buying this philosophy of logical positivism because he couldn't prove this philosophy with the five senses. It was just something that he seized upon. He put his faith in this philosophy because it made sense in his windowless room.

One approach intellectually is to take people's claimed philosophies seriously and say, "let's follow your line of reasoning." Come alongside someone and walk them out to the end of the branch of their particular philosophy and often you'll find that it doesn't take much for them to fall off their claimed philosophy. It can't hold their weight.

There's something else more positive than this. If the universe is not a windowless, if the universe is as the Bible describes it – a room with huge windows and open doors where God and angels and spirits are constantly interacting with this world, the universe is as the Bible describes it then we can't help but experience the light. At some point, we're going to bump into God.

My irreligious mother told me a story on her last visit that I hadn't heard before. She a Jewish woman with almost no religious consciousness. She spent most of her life in a very secular environment in New York. She told me that when I was born she had pneumonia, I had heard that before. One evening, she was lying in the hospital bed and couldn't breathe. She didn't have the strength to call the nurse. She felt herself dying. Suddenly, she felt like she was outside of her body and there was a tremendous light shining at her. The light was so bright and it was coming toward her. She said to me, "Do you think that could have been God?" God exists and we're going to bump into him all over the place. Everyone you ever meet – no matter how closed they are – can't help but bump into God!

In my life, friends, God used a 19-year old woman named Marlene to punch holes in my windowless room. I was safely ensconced in a closed universe when I went to college. It was unthinkable to me that there was a God and even more unthinkable that that God would speak or that we could relate to him. Then I met Marlene. You see, Marlene had the ability to push back spiritually.

Pushing back spiritually

Marlene had things available to her that opened up my closed mind and my closed heart.

The first thing that Marlene had available to her was prayer. She knew she had access to God. And that God had access to me. From the time she met me, she began daily to

pray for me. She prayed that God would open up my heart. She prayed that God would break through to me. One way that God answered Marlene's prayer was that God empowered Marlene to show me himself. Through Marlene I began to experience God's goodness. There was a power at work in Marlene, it was goodness.

Through Marlene I began to experience the power of forgiveness. I met a person who was the most forgiving person I had ever met. She was the nicest person I ever met. I account for Marlene's goodness or Marlene's forgiveness.

In my dorm room one evening, when I was by myself, God revealed himself to me. It was like Marlene had been punching little windows in my closed off room and then suddenly God took a wall out. The light came streaming in. I felt God's presence. I couldn't patch the holes quick enough to keep him out.

No matter how closed off someone seems to be to God, because God is there and he is not silent, no one can keep God away forever no matter how many diversions they occupy their lives with. The light continues to stream in. Pray for them. Never give up on praying for someone. Bear witness and God will use you to open closed minds and closed hearts.

Let's pray.

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