

Courageous Leadership at Crunch Time

A Study of Daniel 2

Characteristic of Completeness: Prayer

Big Idea: You'll get more done on your knees than on the run.

Related Scriptures: 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; Colossians 4:2;
1 Thessalonians 5:17; James 1:5; 5:16b; 1 Peter 4:7

Introduction:

- A. Today I want to talk about courageous leadership. More specifically, I want to talk about the relationship between courageous leadership and prayer. In fact, ► prayer is our Characteristic of Completeness for the week.

I might as well tell what my big idea is right up front. Here ► it is: You'll get more done on the run than on your knees. That's right; you'll get more done on the run than on your knees. If you want to shorten it up, you can just say, "more done on the run."

You see, prayer is overrated. Prayer is not all that effective; our own efforts get more done. In fact, with all due respect, prayer can simply be a waste of valuable time—time we could otherwise use to really get some things done.

We know this to be true. Why else would we have such a hard time spending time praying? If we were convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that prayer works, we'd do it more. Wouldn't we?

Go to the leadership section of any bookstore. You'll find that courageous leadership is about decisiveness and discernment and dedication and drive and determination. Nobody associates courageous leadership with prayer. Prayer is pretty much reserved for hopeless situations when you can't do anything else.

Sports confirm it. In football, what does the quarterback do when there's two seconds left in the game and he's five points behind and a winning touchdown is 50 yards away? Here's what he does. He throws up what they call a "prayer." He just throws the ball up as high and as far as he can in the hope that somebody on his team will catch it for a touchdown. They call it a "prayer" because it's the last resort. They call it a "prayer" because it rarely works.

I suggest we concede the obvious: Prayer is no substitute for action. Prayer is for the few people who have nothing left. The rest of us ought to recognize that God helps those who help themselves. If leaders get too caught up in prayer, they can become so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good.

- B. Today we're going to study an example of what I'm talking about. The example is Daniel, as described in Daniel, Chapter 2. That's the text we're going to be studying today: Daniel, Chapter 2. Daniel was a young, naïve leader who overemphasized prayer. He didn't wake up to the realization that you'll get more done on the run than on your knees. More done on the run. That's the leadership credo, especially at crunch time.
- C. Let's begin with a little background to show how crunch time developed for Daniel. This will take a few minutes.

1. Verse ► 1(a) tells us when the events took place, saying,

^{NAU} **Daniel 2:1** Now in the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar . . .

You may recall that Daniel was a Jewish teenager, captured by Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylonia and deported to Babylon to be brainwashed and trained as a Babylonian official. At that time in the “second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar,” Daniel had been in training well over a year.¹

2. We learn from Verses ► 1(b)-3 that Nebuchadnezzar had been having some troublesome dreams. They were so troublesome that he was having a difficult time sleeping. So he called in all his “wise men” in the hope that they could interpret his dreams. It says,

^{NAU} **Daniel 2:1** . . . Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; and his spirit was troubled and his sleep left him. 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. ³ The king said to them, “I had a dream and my spirit is anxious to understand the dream.”

- a. The plural, ► “dreams” in Verse 1, coupled with the singular, “dream” in Verse 3, suggests that this was a single, recurring dream.²
- b. Why was the king so ► “troubled” and sleepless and “anxious to understand the dream”? Well, ancient Babylonians considered dreams to be messages from the gods about their future.³ And we

¹ John F. Walvoord, *Daniel: The Key to Prophetic Revelation*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), 45-46.

² J. Dwight Pentecost, “Daniel,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1332; Leon J. Wood, *A Commentary on Daniel*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1973), 50.

³ Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel, The New American Commentary*, E. Ray Clendenen, ed., vol. 18, (Memphis, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 78.

will see that the dream was of a human-like figure being smashed. Thus it would be natural for Nebuchadnezzar to be worried that he was somehow about to be overthrown.

- c. The ► four classes of advisors seem to be some specific types of “wise men” (2:13).⁴
- 1) A magician is “one possessed of occult knowledge”⁵ who is an “interpreter of dreams.”⁶
 - 2) A conjurer is a “necromancer,” someone who communicates with the dead,⁷ or someone skilled in interpreting supernatural signs in people who are ill.⁸
 - 3) A sorcerer is one who practices witchcraft,⁹ skilled in charms and incantations.¹⁰
 - 4) The term, “Chaldeans” is often used to simply describe people living in southern Babylonia,¹¹ but in this case it is used to describe a learned class of people, skilled in interpretation.¹²
3. Naturally, the wise men asked the king what his dream was. Verse ► 4 says,

^{NAU} **Daniel 2:4** 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.”

⁴ Walvoord, 47.

⁵ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon*, s.v. “חֲרָטִים,” (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), hereinafter referred to as BDB.

⁶ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, s.v. “חֲרָטִים,” (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1994-2000), hereinafter referred to as HALOT; Ernest C. Lucas, *Daniel, Apollos Old Testament Commentary*, David W. Baker and Gordon J. Wenham, eds., vol. 20, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press and Leicester, England: Apollos, 2002), 69.

⁷ BDB s.v. “אֲשָׁף.”

⁸ Lucas, 69.

⁹ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, s.v. “כַּשְׁפֵּי,” (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1980), hereinafter referred to as TWOT.

¹⁰ Lucas, 69.

¹¹ Walvoord, 48.

¹² BDB, s.v. “כַּשְׁדִּים;” Miller, 78; Wood, 50.

- a. The original language in which Daniel was written changes from Hebrew to Aramaic from here through 7:28.¹³ The phrase ► “in Aramaic” may simply be a parenthetical note marking the change in language.¹⁴

Some speculate that the change in language corresponds with a change in focus. The subject material at this point in Daniel shifts from Jews to Gentiles; Hebrew was a distinctly Jewish language; Aramaic was a language of the Gentile world.¹⁵

- b. By the way, ► ancient fragments of Babylonian dream manuals have been discovered explaining the meaning of various symbols in dreams.¹⁶ So it appears that the wise men wanted to know what the dream was so that they could look up the symbolism in their manuals.

4. But the king didn’t just fall off the turnip truck. He knew that if he relayed the details of his dream, the wise men would just conjure up some explanation. Surely he had been through this before. Perhaps he 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.

How could the king know if the interpretation was correct? He figured that if these wise men were legit, they ought to be able to come up with a description of the dream in addition to the interpretation. That way he would know they were on the up and up. And the king added some incentives. Verse ► 5 continues:

^{NAU} **Daniel 2:5** 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.⁶ 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.”

To be torn ► “limb from limb” was not just an idle threat or figure of speech. Death by dismemberment was not uncommon.¹⁷ One method was to tie

¹³ Lucas, 63.

¹⁴ Miller, 80.

¹⁵ Gleason L. Archer, Jr., “Daniel,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1985), 40; James A. Borland, Daniel, *Liberty Bible Commentary, Old Testament*, Jerry Falwell, ed., (Lynchburg, VA: The Old-Time Gospel Hour, 1982), 1630; Pentecost, 1324; Wood, 18.

¹⁶ Miller, 80.

¹⁷ Miller, 81; Walvoord, 50.

together the tops of four strong trees so that they were bowed together under great tension. Then the arms and legs of the victim would be tied to each tree such that, when the ropes holding the trees were cut, the victim would be torn apart.¹⁸

We also have archaeological evidence of houses being made into public toilets, thereby becoming ► “rubbish heaps.”¹⁹

5. The wise men understood the threat, so they politely, nervously asked again for the information they needed. Verse ► 7 says,

^{NAU} **Daniel 2:7** They answered a second time and said, “Let the king tell the dream to his servants, and we will declare the interpretation.”

6. Nebuchadnezzar responded to this in a way that suggests his dream had perhaps engendered some paranoia. He appeared to be suspicious that some of his wise men were “corrupt” and may have been part of a conspiracy to overthrow him.²⁰ Let’s pick it up in ► Verse 8:

^{NAU} **Daniel 2:8** The king replied, “I know for certain that you are bargaining for time, inasmuch as you have seen that the command from me is firm, ►⁹ 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.”

7. But the wise men knew they couldn’t come up with an accurate description of the dream, so they tried to explain that nobody could do such a thing. Continuing at ► Verse 10:

^{NAU} **Daniel 2:10** 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. ►¹¹ 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.”

8. This did not sit well with the king. So he issued a decree to kill all the wise men of Babylon. Daniel was considered one of the wise men. Verses ► 12 and 13 explain it.

¹⁸ Archer, 41.

¹⁹ Miller, 81.

²⁰ Miller, 82.

^{NAU} **Daniel 2:12** Because of this the king became indignant and very furious and gave orders to destroy all the wise men of Babylon.¹³ So the decree went forth that the wise men should be slain; and they looked for Daniel and his friends to kill *them*.

This was an ancient Babylonian version of a massive lay-off. Only instead of calling the employees in and saying something like, “I’m afraid I’m going to have to let you go,” Nebuchadnezzar was saying, “I’m afraid I’m going to have to dismember you and make your houses road-side rest stops.” The term, “severance” meant something entirely different back then.

This is what leadership gurus call crunch time—a time that calls for courageous leadership. What did Daniel do?

- I. At first, Daniel’s response was textbook. Like any good leader at crunch time, Daniel identified the problem. You know what they say: A problem defined is half solved. Verses ► 14 and 15 say,

^{NAU} **Daniel 2:14** 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;¹⁵ 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.

- A. The term, ► “discretion” describes the product or result of good counsel.²¹ Apparently, Daniel had been taught, presumably by his parents, to be wise in dealing with people. Maybe he had read some leadership books.
- B. The term, ► “discernment” literally means “taste” and refers to the appropriateness and suitability of a response.²² Like any good leader, Daniel had good people skills. At least occasionally.
- II. Then Daniel took another prudent leadership step: He bought some time. He got the deadline extended through his skills of negotiation. Verse ► 16 says,

^{NAU} **Daniel 2:16** 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.

How much time? We’re not told, but later in Verse 19, we’re told that Daniel had a night vision; therefore, it seems he was given at least over night.

- III. Daniel ► started out so well, defining the problem, negotiating more time. Then he must have cracked under the pressure of crunch time. It’s understandable. He was just a teenager. You

²¹ Wood, 56.

²² Wood, 56.

see, Daniel panicked. We know this because he then mobilized his friends to pray, asking God for help. Verses ► 17 and 18 say,

^{NAU} **Daniel 2:17** Then Daniel went to his house and informed his friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, about the matter,¹⁸ so that they might request compassion from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that Daniel and his friends would not be destroyed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon.

This move does not make sense. It was definitely a lapse in leadership. Remember the leadership credo: more done on the run. Daniel should have run.

- A. Back in Chapter 1, we learned that Daniel had found favor with the guys who were overseeing him. Evidently, he had done some networking. This would have been the time to call in his favors and run for his life. With what little time he had available, the best use of that time would have been to put the greatest distance possible between himself and the threat of death.
- B. What were the odds that, through prayer, God was going to reveal the mystery of the dream to Daniel? Come on. This was poor risk management.
- C. And why take the time to mobilize friends to pray? Is God a politician? Does He think to Himself, “If I hear from one of my constituents, I’m not going to pay attention; but if I hear from four, I better do something”? That’s bad theology. Mobilizing friends to pray was a waste of more precious time.
- D. Besides, if you’re a leader, mobilizing followers to pray violates a cardinal rule of leadership: As a leader, you never let other people know that you don’t have the answers, especially at crunch time. It’s really bad for morale. Never let ’em see you sweat. If you don’t have the answers, you’re supposed to pretend like you do, and keep running. Like they say: Fake it ’til you make it. More done on the run.

Let’s face it. Daniel choked.

- IV. But apparently Daniel got lucky. Sometimes the hail-Mary-prayer pass works. In spite of Daniel’s lapse in leadership, God had mercy on him and revealed Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. Verse ► 19 says,

^{NAU} **Daniel 2:19** Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a night vision. . . .

Some think that Daniel went to sleep and the night vision was a dream.²³ Others think that Daniel and his friends prayed into the night and that Daniel received the vision while still awake, on the thinking that it would have been too hard to sleep under threat of death.²⁴

²³ Borland, 1632; Wood, 59.

²⁴ Miller, 85-86.

- V. In any case, Daniel had been given the description and interpretation of the dream.

What would you do if you had just been handed the key that would probably save you and all your friends from dismemberment? I'll tell you what: I would run as fast as I could to the king. More done on the run. I wouldn't dally. I wouldn't want any more time to pass—time in which Nebuchadnezzar might get impatient and change his mind about granting more time. Lives were on the line here. Like they say: Time is money. Only back then, time was unity—as in keeping Daniel's body in one piece. Daniel needed to run.

But, no. Inexplicably, Daniel did not run. He still seemed to be immobilized by some kind of heavenly-minded funk. This was poor time management. He took precious time to craft a prayerful song of thanksgiving to the Lord. His house was about to be converted into a public port-a-potty in his memory and he was carefully choosing words to give thanks to God! Say what? The Lord knew His heart; he didn't need to do that. Verse ► 19 and following:

^{NAU} **Daniel 2:19** . . . Then Daniel blessed the God of heaven; ²⁰ Daniel said,
 ► “Let the name of God be blessed forever and ever,
 For wisdom and power belong to Him.
 ► ²¹ It is He who changes the times and the epochs;
 He removes kings and establishes kings;
 He gives wisdom to wise men
 And knowledge to men of understanding.
 ► ²² It is He who reveals the profound and hidden things;
 He knows what is in the darkness,
 And the light dwells with Him.
 ► ²³ 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.”

Boy, Daniel was lucky he didn't get dismembered in the middle of this ditty. What a dangerous waste of time in a crisis situation like this!

- VI. Finally, ► we see that Daniel approached the executioner, telling him to call off the killing because he's got the dream and its interpretation.²⁵
- A. Daniel was escorted before the king. And you would think that Daniel would cut right to the chase. Don't mess around. Bottom-line it. Just tell him the dream and give the interpretation.

But, no. Daniel said some things that make me cringe. Beginning in ► Verse 26:

²⁵ Notice in Verse 25 that even Arioch seems to be convinced that Daniel will give the correct interpretation (Archer, 44).

^{NAU} **Daniel 2:26** 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?” ►²⁷ 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.”²⁸ However, there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries . . .”

Think about this. Daniel was actually discrediting Babylonian paganism.²⁶ In effect, he was saying, “Hey Neb, you’re whole belief system is bogus and completely impotent to help you in this situation. But there is a God in heaven who can help.”

What was he thinking? Talk about politically incorrect! You don’t bad-mouth the boss’s religion, especially when he’s in a really bad mood. This is no time for evangelism. It’s time to kiss up. There’s bacon to be saved.

- B. Besides, wouldn’t this have been the time to be the hero? I mean, if there was ever a time to distinguish himself, to empower his leadership, to bolster his position, to enhance his reputation, it was right then. He had the right information at the right time. No one else did. No one. He had the perfect corner on the market. This was the time to show the boss what you’ve got. Run and gun. Strut your stuff. Dance in the end zone. Renegotiate your contract.

But, no. In Verse ► 30, Daniel says,

^{NAU} **Daniel 2:30** . . . “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 . . .”

You don’t put that kind of stuff on your resume. What a missed opportunity. My man, sell yourself while the market is up!

- C. And then in ► Verses 31 to 35, Daniel described the dream—a dream about a great statue.

^{NAU} **Daniel 2:31** “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.

Most people don’t know this, but at this point in our text, perhaps because Daniel was still a teenager, some ancient manuscripts ► insert the word, “dude.”²⁷

► ^{NAU} **Daniel 2:32** The head of that statue *was made* of fine gold, its breast and its arms of silver, its belly and its thighs of bronze,³³ its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. ►³⁴ You continued looking until a stone

²⁶ Miller, 89.

²⁷ Not really.

was cut out without hands, and it struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and crushed them. ►³⁵ 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.”

- D. At that point, Daniel had fortunately stumbled into a position of credibility and power. He had just successfully recounted Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. No doubt the king was impressed. At that point, Daniel could have relayed the interpretation of the dream any way he wanted. Nebuchadnezzar wouldn’t have known the difference.

Of course the primary goal here would have been for Daniel to save himself and all his friends. Such salvation seemed to be in his grasp, as long as he didn’t say something needlessly offensive to the king. He would need to sanitize the interpretation of any details that might threaten or incriminate the king. It’s called operating on a need-to-know basis. It’s a matter of wise information management.

But, no. ► According to Verses 36 through 45, Daniel explained every unsettling detail. That the head of the statue represents Nebuchadnezzar. That, from top to bottom, the succeeding materials represent succeeding kingdoms on earth. And that all of the kingdoms, including Nebuchadnezzar’s, will one day be ► smashed by a coming kingdom.²⁸

I’ll bet that went down well. Think about the pickle Daniel had gotten himself into now. He just painted himself into a corner. Daniel has got to think with some political shrewdness, here. Daniel has just made it incredibly difficult for Nebuchadnezzar to let him off without looking bad. You never make the boss look bad.

What would the king say at the press conference? “Well, it looks like we have an interpretation. No god we Babylonians have ever worshiped came through on this one. But a Jewish kid—one of the teenagers we captured a while ago from Jerusalem—he got it right. And he says that our gods are impotent, and that my kingdom is going to be smashed to tiny bits and blown away by a kingdom bigger and better than mine.” You can almost hear the stifled snickers.

Talk about snatching defeat from the jaws of victory! Why couldn’t Daniel have made the interpretation a little nicer, a little more ambiguous? Just put a little spin on it, like, “You, O king, are the great golden head. You will be smashing.” Or maybe, “Your legacy will have a great impact.”

But, no. Daniel acted like he had a death wish. He mindlessly relayed every detail of the vision revealed to him as he prayed. Instead of picking through the prayer

²⁸ We’ll be studying the interpretation of the image in more detail when we get to Chapter 7.

experience to select the things that would give him an advantage, it's as if Daniel just sort of surrendered himself to all of it.

Let that be a lesson for us. This is what can happen when you're so heavenly minded that you're no earthly good. This all goes back to being fixated on prayer when you ought be running. Remember, you'll get more done on the run than on your knees.

- VII. I know we didn't quite finish Chapter 2 this morning. I was really busy last week. My dog was sick. My back hurt. And you know—run, run, run. I didn't get through my to-do list or my sermon preparation, much less have time to pray. But I did get quite a bit done. I was able to work through most of Chapter 2. And I think we've gained some valuable insights today. Don't you?

(Pause)

Well, we still have a few minutes left. Maybe we could just read the rest of Chapter 2. There can't be a whole lot there. It's just four verses. Given all of Daniel's leadership blunders, it can't be good. He hasn't got a prayer. From ► Verse 46:

^{NAU} **Daniel 2:46** Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell on his face and did homage to Daniel, and gave orders to present to him an offering and fragrant incense. ►⁴⁷ 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." ►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 prefect over all the wise men of Babylon. ►⁴⁹ 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.

(Long pause)

Well, ► that sort of changes things. You know a lot of that stuff I said before? Never mind.

In leadership, it's good to remain open so that you can adapt quickly to new information. It appears that my big idea needs to be edited for greater clarity. Let's just change around a few words in ► the big idea: You'll get more done on your knees than on the run. That fits the text better. You'll get more done on your knees than on the run.

I feel the need to get on my knees right now. Please feel free to join me.

Father, forgive me for living as if I can get more done on the run than on my knees. I've been living backwards. I've been trusting too much in my own wisdom and effort. I'm going to spend more time on my knees, where You can really get some things done through me. Amen.