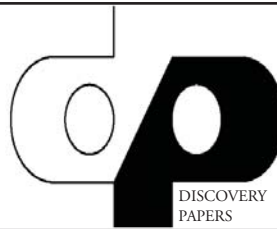


# WHEN KINGDOMS COLLIDE

SERIES: WHEN KINGDOMS COLLIDE



Catalog No. 20140907  
Daniel 1:1-2  
1st Message  
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September 7, 2014

In 1884, an English math teacher named Edwin Abbott wanted to help his students understand the complexity of multiple dimensions. He wrote a book called *Flatland*.<sup>1</sup> The main character in his story is a square who lives in a completely two-dimensional world called Flatland. There are triangles, hexagons, and circles that live in his world. He cannot conceive of any additional dimensions.

But then he is visited by a sphere who tells him of a third dimension. He tells him about a direction called “up” that is different from “north” and “south.” At first, he can’t seem to comprehend it. The sphere just looks like a circle in his world. In fact, as the sphere tries to explain that he lives in Space instead of Flatland, he is confused. Then he is angry. He wishes the stranger had never come.

Eventually, it clicks. He begins to understand. He sees the third dimension. He sees the sphere in all its glory. He knows there is something more. And he wants to tell his world about it, but he can’t. They don’t believe him. They won’t listen to him. They live in their two dimensional world without ever knowing that there is more out there.

I’ve always loved this story. It is a perfect illustration of what it means to be a Christian. In fact, Abbott was more than a math teacher. He was a theologian as well. His goal in writing *Flatland* was as much to help Christians understand the existence of God as it was to help math students understand multiple dimensions.

We live in a secular world. We live in a material world. We are told that all that exists is what can be seen and measured and verified. It’s as if we live in two dimensions.

Yet we are here this morning to profess faith that two thousand years ago a man walked the earth who was more than what was seen. Many of us here believe that this man was actually God himself. In fact, he was the one who created all that can be seen and measured and verified. Many of us have had our lives changed dramatically by this man.

It’s as if faith in Jesus reveals an extra dimension that we are sometimes dimly aware of, but often seems like an illusion or fantasy in the harshness of our material lives. How can you understand a third dimension when you’ve

lived all your life in two? How can you be sure there is something more?

When our friend the square encountered a sphere, he was distraught. It was unpleasant. It was upsetting. It is the same way when our material world comes up against the world of faith. There is a clash between the kingdom of man that we can see and measure and the kingdom of God that we believe in. If we believe in Jesus, then we live in the place where those two kingdoms collide. And it’s hard to know what to do **when kingdoms collide**.

But God helps us. In fact, for centuries, the people of God have had a resource that epitomizes this point of collision. They have had a collection of stories about one individual who lived at a time in history when this distinction between two kingdoms was especially obvious. This resource is, of course, the Book of Daniel.

Daniel was an incredible man. He lived in the intersection of these two realities. The amazing thing about him is that he ended up being very successful in the kingdom of man, but also completely faithful to the kingdom of God. He lived in that place of collision, but he lived in it well.

The book of Daniel is clearly laid out in two different sections with six chapters in each section. We’ll study it in two segments. For the next seven weeks we’ll be looking at the first half of Daniel. This part is full of stories that describe living in that intersection.

After that we’ll take a break and Scott Grant will lead us in a study of the Book of Jonah. Jonah is in some ways the antithesis of Daniel. If Daniel did most things right, Jonah did most things wrong. That can be a helpful example to us, too.

Then we’ll come back to the second half of Daniel during the Advent season. This part of the book is full of rich prophecy. It will help us remember what Advent is all about—remembering Jesus’ first coming as we wait for him to return.

This morning we’re going to look at the first two verses of Daniel and think about the book as a whole. We’re

going to learn a bit about the historical background of this book and see how it matches up to our own culture. We're going to think about the stories of Daniel and how they invite us to choose a side in this clash of kingdoms. And we'll close by thinking about the prophecies of Daniel and how they remind us that the power of the kingdom of man will not last forever.

So let's think a little more deeply about Daniel and see if he can help us navigate our lives when kingdoms collide.

## Kingdoms in Culture

We'll start out by reading the first two verses of this book. They will help us to get a picture for what is going on and the setting in which this book takes place.

Daniel 1:1–2—

**In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god.**

Our book starts by telling the story of Jehoiakim, king of Jerusalem losing to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.

Before we go much further, let's review where we are in Israel's history. Let's start at the beginning. In the beginning God created Adam and Eve. They had kids and populated the earth. Then the flood happened and Noah and his family started all over. Then God chose a people to represent him and his ways to the world. That started with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Then those people became slaves in Egypt for four hundred years. Then God freed them and they wandered around the desert. Then Joshua led them into the land that God had promised them. They governed themselves with judges for a while, then God gave them a king. First Saul, then David, then Solomon.

After that, Israel became two nations: the north and the south. The north was bad. Their part of the kingdom lasted around 200 hundred years and then was conquered by the Assyrians. That was Samaria. The South was mostly bad, but not always. They lasted another hundred years or so after the north, but then they were conquered by the Babylonians. That's what we read about in the first few verses of Daniel.

Jehoiakim was the son of Josiah, one of the southern kingdom's few great kings. But he made a bad mistake trying to fight Egypt and was killed. So the Egyptian ruler installed Jehoiakim as a king over Israel, but under the rule of Egypt. There's some irony here because his name—Jehoiakim—means “he whom Jehovah has established.” But Jehovah didn't establish him. The king of Egypt did.

This book describes the collision of two kingdoms. And already in the name of the defeated king of Israel, we see the underlying theme developing. Jehoiakim claims to be established by Jehovah, but in reality it was the king of Egypt. The kingdom of man seems to be stronger than the kingdom of God.

It only gets worse.

Egypt and Babylon were bitter enemies. And now that Jerusalem is aligned with Egypt, the king of Babylon—Nebuchadnezzar—comes down to take on Jehoiakim. It's not much of a fight. The city of God, which had been the center of the nation and the symbol of God's people is conquered.

This begins a pattern. Jerusalem is conquered. The foreign king puts someone in charge over the city. That person decides to rebel after a few years. And the city is conquered all over again. This happens three times in total ending in 586 BC, when Jerusalem is conquered decisively one last time. This time, the temple is destroyed, the city is ransacked and all but the poorest people are sent to live in a foreign land.

The opening verses of Daniel describe the first of those three losses that Jerusalem suffered. But everyone who read those lines would know that two more were coming. Everyone knew that this was the beginning of the end of Jerusalem. This is the how the Book of Daniel opens. The moment when everything starts to fall apart.

I'm glad that times like this are described in the Bible. I've had moments like this. It's nice to know that others have made it through them.

After losing to Babylon, God's people spent 70 years living in exile outside their land. But then they returned to Jerusalem. This began a period of around 600 years when they lived in their land, but they were ruled by someone else. The Persians, the Greeks, the Romans—it was always someone. Israel was never independent. This is what scholars call the post-exilic period—after the exile.

The Book of Daniel describes the exile, but it was written to people living after the exile. This time wasn't as

hopeless as when they were living in Babylon. But it was constantly discouraging. They lived as part of the kingdom of God, but the kingdom of man seemed to be stronger.

If you've been on the PBC website anytime lately, you may have noticed a phrase that we have started using to describe what we're all about around here. It's a simple phrase: "following Jesus in Silicon Valley." I like that phrase because it's clear and it's simple. It's not overly clever or massaged. It hasn't been run past a focus group. It's just what we've trying to do here.

This phrase describes what we're trying to do and where we are trying to do it. We want to follow Jesus. And we live in the Silicon Valley. We're trying to do what the Israelites were trying to do during the post-exilic time. We're trying to live in the kingdom of God in a place where the kingdom of man seems way more powerful.

It's not that there aren't Christians in this area. There are. And it's not that you can't believe in this area. You can. In fact, some people will even speak of the value of faith. But I think it often seems like the things of the kingdom of man are bigger and better and more powerful. Like being religious is a silly little hobby that can be a fun way to meet some people and kill some time, but can't be real and universal and glorious.

Two weekends ago I was in Mexico City with a prison ministry called Fundacion Immanuel that PBC has been working with for the past 30 years or so. I was there with four other men from our church teaching inmates who were leading house churches inside massive prisons. It was a huge privilege and an incredible experience to see people following Jesus so faithfully in a very different context.

I expected to come back in awe of these people who were following Jesus in such a difficult environment. But that isn't what struck me. I saw a lot of their challenges and their struggles. But I wasn't overwhelmed by how difficult it seemed to follow Jesus in a Mexican prison. I was overwhelmed with how difficult it is to follow Jesus here.

We live in a place where if you believe in the kingdom of God, it can easily fade into the background behind all the activity and technology and accomplishment and success.

How do we live in a place like this? How do we hold onto the kingdom of God in a place like this? That's where the Book of Daniel comes in. The stories and the prophecies of this book give us perspective. And if we are going to follow Jesus today in Silicon Valley, we need perspective.

I've already mentioned that we're going to be studying the Book of Daniel in two big sections. The first six chapters contain six stories of the people of God facing a conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man. The next six chapters contain a prophecy that Daniel received of the time when the kingdom of God will eventually prevail and the kingdom of man will be drawn up into it.

Six chapters of stories. Six chapters of prophecies.

Each of these sections helps us in different ways. The stories offer us examples of how to stay faithful to the kingdom of God. The prophecies remind us that the kingdom of God will ultimately prevail.

The stories and the prophecies of Daniel change our perspective when the kingdom of God seems to be fading into the background.

## Choose your kingdom

Each of the six stories describes characters making important decisions. They are living in that moment when kingdoms are colliding and they are being forced to make a decision. There are several things that we are going to see as we study these stories.

First, they are honest that both kingdoms are very real. One of the biggest mistakes that we can make is to forget about either one of these kingdoms. Obviously, if you're trying to follow Jesus, you can't forget about the kingdom of God. God can seem real on Sunday morning, but fade away as soon as Monday comes. We can't forget about the kingdom of God.

But there's another mistake that we don't talk about as much. We also can't forget about the kingdom of man. Sometimes on Sunday we forget about what life is like on Monday. Sometimes people pretend that the world we live in doesn't affect us, that it doesn't matter. But it *does* matter and it *does* affect us. The kingdom of man is real. The kingdom of man is powerful.

So these stories are honest that both kingdoms are real. They also point out that you have to live in both of them. Daniel and his friends occupied significant positions of influence in an earthly kingdom. They serve the king faithfully. They help to administer a very powerful kingdom. They fill out status reports and deliver presentations to the board and help to decide whether Babylon should diversify their workforce or leverage their market share on corn to expand into soy. They work in the kingdom of man. They do it well. And they are very successful at it.

In the past, there have been Christian movements that have attempted to escape the world. Monastic and separatist movements where people have sought to rid themselves of the dirtiness of this world so that they can be more fully invested in the kingdom of God. In modern times, people try to do the same thing: surround themselves with a Christian culture so that they don't really have to live in the kingdom of man.

But that doesn't work. We are part of the kingdom of man because we are in it. We can't escape it. That's impossible. That's not how it works. Growing in our relationship with God doesn't mean that the world means less and less to us. It doesn't mean that we disengage from the cares of this life and start to reflect on heavenly matters all the time.

First, both kingdoms are real. Second, we have to live in both kingdoms. And finally, there are moments when we have to choose between these kingdoms. The kingdoms will collide and they will force a choice.

When I was young, I used to read books called *Choose Your Own Adventure* books. They were really popular. You would read one page and it would say something like, "you walk into a room and see a fire-breathing dragon standing over a trap door. What do you want to do? If you try to kill the dragon, turn to page 63. If you turn around and run away, turn to page 34." Then you'd turn to that page and the story would continue with another decision point.

These are the kinds of choices that we have to make when we live in two kingdoms. Daniel tells of moments when a decision has to be made. The characters have to choose which kingdom is their primary kingdom. When it comes down to it, which kingdom will they choose to live in? The powerful kingdom of man or the fading kingdom of God?

Those are the kinds of moments that we face when we try to follow Jesus in Silicon Valley. Moments when it is not possible to satisfy both of these kingdoms. Moments when a choice had to be made. When one kingdom has to be chosen above the other.

When the kingdom of God seems to be fading into the background, we must choose our kingdom. **Choose your kingdom.**

After Joshua led the Israelites into the Promised Land, they were faced with two kingdoms. The kingdom of the people around them and the kingdom of God. Joshua invited them to make a choice. He gathered all the people together before he was to die and said in Joshua 24:15,

*if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.*

Sometimes we face dramatic moments when the conflict is clear and forces a huge choice. I know of salespeople being asked to pay for prostitutes for their clients. Finance executives asking people to lie about company performance to investors. Engineers asked to intentionally cut corners on production. Consultants instructed to falsify hours to charge their clients.

Sometimes there are dramatic moments. These are the kinds of moments that Daniel describes. But in my experience, those kinds of choices are rare. It's much more common that we face smaller decisions full of nuance and subtlety. But they are still opportunities to choose a kingdom.

Times when we have to choose how to treat a coworker or a client. Times when we have to choose how much time and energy to give our employers in light of the other obligations in our lives. Times when we have to figure out whether our identity is really all wrapped up in what we accomplish at work.

When we face these moments, we have to choose which kingdom interprets the other. Which kingdom becomes that filter through which we see the world.

Remember the square in the story of Flatland? He meets a sphere, but to him that sphere just looks like a circle. Later, when he tries to explain the third dimension to others, all they can see are flat shapes. That's what happens when the kingdom of man interprets the kingdom of God.

God just looks like a fantasy. Like wishful thinking for something that doesn't really exist. Being a Christian might be OK if it makes you feel good. It might help you meet some nice people. But that's all it is.

But then the square manages to see the third dimension. And he realizes that a sphere is more than a circle. There's a whole other reality that he couldn't see before. Two dimensions become three. Black and white becomes color. His bland existence becomes seasoned with new tastes.

When the kingdom of God is your filter, you see the world differently. You see people trying to pull it all together, but desperately in need of reconciliation with the God who created them. You see all the hurt and confusion behind the money and the success. You recognize the



brokenness of the world but see the possibility for real redemption and healing.

What about you? Does the kingdom of God seem to be fading into the distance? Or maybe you're not sure what you think about all this faith stuff. That's OK.

But there will come moments when we have to choose a kingdom. What choices are you facing? Which kingdom are you allowing to interpret the other?

The kingdom of man and the kingdom of God are both very real. We have to live in both of them. But there are times when these kingdoms will come into conflict and we will have to choose our kingdom. The stories of Daniel tell us to choose when the kingdom of God seems to be fading.

## God will choose his kingdom

The prophecies in the last half of the book tell us why we must make the choice. And we want to be sure that we make the right choice. The prophecies tell us that at the end of the age, God will choose his kingdom. **God will choose his kingdom.**

Have you ever heard a cat fight? I remember the first time I heard cats fighting outside my bedroom at night. It was a terrible, hideous sound. I thought people were torturing each other. I didn't know whether to call 911 or hide in the closet.

That's what kingdoms are like. They don't like to share power. Two rival kingdoms can't last forever living alongside each other. Eventually, they are going to fight. One will win. And one will lose.

That is the subtext throughout the stories of Daniel. It's as if the stories are describing little tremors when the kingdoms collide and scrape against each other. But we all know that the big one is coming. One massive earthquake that will only leave one kingdom standing in the end. The prophecies describe that climax. They are angry, chaotic, and violent scenes because kingdoms don't give up their power easily.

In Flatland, as the square tries to tell people about the existence of the third dimension, there is more and more resistance to his message. At first people are confused. Then they are annoyed. Finally, they are angry. Eventually, the shapes in charge—the circles—make a law against talking about the third dimension. And the square is thrown into jail.

Kingdoms like to hold on to their power. They fight to keep things the way they are. If there is a new message that threatens the status quo, they will do everything they can do to stop it.

It's not as if God wants to conquer people. The kingdom of God is about restoring people to the life that the creator intended for them. But those with power and success in the current kingdom are going to resist any kind of change.

Anyone with power has to constantly protect themselves against losing that power. They have to be constantly diligent because things in the kingdom of man are always changing. The kingdoms of our world are constantly rising and falling. Power never lasts very long. The most insecure place to be is at the top, because it means you have the most to lose.

I live in Mountain View, the headquarters of Google the Great. It's incredible to travel around the world and realize how that company has affected almost all of the earth. Google really is a kingdom. But Google wasn't around twenty years ago. And it might not be around in twenty years. It might not be around next year. This is the way of the world—kingdoms rise and fall and go to war, merge, and replace each other.

The unique thing about the prophecies at the end of Daniel is that they describe a time when all of that will stop. They describe a cataclysmic battle after which all fighting and conflict will cease: the war to end all wars. And at the end of it, they describe an eternal kingdom: one kingdom that will absorb all others, a kingdom that will last forever.

This is an incredibly important prediction for the future for two reasons. First, it is what we want. Everywhere we look, kingdoms are rising and falling. But the desire that lives deep within us is to be part of something long-lasting. We want the 49ers to have another dynasty, not just another championship. We want our companies to bring in the next technological revolution, not just the gadget of the year. We want our children to live long, successful lives, not just get an "A" on their next test.

Deep within all of us drums the desire for permanence—for something that lasts.

Second, it is where history is headed. It may look like our team can't pull off a comeback. It may look like the kingdom of man has replaced religion with personal fulfillment. It may look like God is outdated or irrelevant or weird or socially awkward. But we are told the end of the story. That is incredibly helpful

knowledge—to know that God comes out on top, that his kingdom eventually prevails.

It is precisely these two things—our deep desire for permanence, and the promise of God’s eventual victory—that help us to make the decisions that we must make when we face moments of collision between the two kingdoms that we live in.

Because Daniel teaches us that eventually God’s kingdom will win, we are able to choose his kingdom confidently in moments of conflict. We choose the kingdom of God because it is the right choice. Understood correctly, the Book of Daniel makes it clear that it is the only choice.

Because when the dust settles, it is the kingdom of God that will be left standing.

There may be moments now where we have to choose our kingdom, but at the end of the age, God will choose his kingdom. Let’s hope that we choose the one that he will choose.

## Conclusion

It is difficult to live in the kingdom of God, to have faith in Jesus in this world of distractions and temptations and false promises and hold fast to the word of God. The Book of Daniel helps us to know how to live in the kingdom of God when the kingdom of man seems stronger because it was written to a people trying to do the same thing.

The stories of Daniel show us that we can choose the kingdom of God. It’s possible to be faithful even in the most difficult of circumstances—even at the greatest risk. Others before us have chosen the kingdom of God, and we have the same opportunities and possibilities that they had. It can be done.

The prophecies of Daniel show us that it is the right choice, that no matter how promising the wares of this world are, they are temporary. That even if it looks like modern society has rendered God irrelevant, that’s not how the story will end. Even if God is confusing or hard to understand or mysterious, eventually all things will be made clear and his kingdom will be fully revealed and fully realized.

Edwin Abbott’s book *Flatland* ends with the square sitting in prison seven years after his initial attempt to tell

others about Space. He has only one visitor, his brother. He says of his brother,

*My brother is one of the best of Squares, just, sensible, cheerful, and not without fraternal affection.*

But for all his efforts his brother does not believe.

*He was present when the Sphere manifested himself in the Council Chamber; he saw the Sphere’s changing sections; he heard the explanation of the phenomena then given to the Circles ... Yet—I take shame to be forced to confess it—my brother has not yet grasped the nature of the Third Dimension, and frankly avows his disbelief in the existence of a Sphere.*

This is the world that we live in. Many have heard of God. They may have even experienced some of him. Yet many do not grasp the nature of the kingdom of God and they do not believe that Jesus is who he says he is.

The Book of Daniel helps us to live in this world, but it also serves as a witness to the reality of God’s kingdom. Because when we live faithfully in the kingdom of God, we proclaim it to be real to a world which denies it. When we live with our eyes opened, we make it possible for others to open their eyes, as well.

Even when the kingdom of God seems to be fading, we can choose to live in it because it is the only source of life and peace and hope and permanence. *Especially* when the kingdom of God seems to be fading, we must make that choice. For our sakes and the sake of the people around us.

Every day we face choices. Ultimately, God will make a final choice. May we choose well and wisely how to follow Jesus in Silicon Valley.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Edwin A. Abbott, *Flatland* (Seely & Co, United Kingdom, 1884) 153-154.