

“A VISION FOR THE FUTURE”

Daniel 2:31-35 ¹

It happened once upon a time that a successful businessman had an appointment with a wealthy industrialist at the industrialist's home. The businessman arrived a bit early at the gate and was ushered into the drawing room of a large, exquisitely appointed mansion to wait until the appointed hour, since the family was still having dinner.

The businessman had not expected such grandeur. He had had a very busy day and was showing the wear and tear of it. He wished he had cleaned up a bit.

As the businessman pondered these things the industrialist's young son wandered in from the dining room. The lad examined the guest for a moment and then commented, “My daddy says you're a millionaire, that you're a 'self-made man'”

The businessman attempted a modest countenance and replied, “I suppose you could say that, my boy.”

Then the lad, looking him over once more, asked, “Well, what did you make yourself like *that* for?”

What did you make yourself like *that* for? Now there's a question, isn't it?

I had an experience rather like that myself, once. During my college years, I ran away from God's call in my life, and I became a profane person in that bargain. During my last semester, as I was preparing for my oral exams in my major, I was up late studying in the science building and got up to stretch a bit. It was dark outside, and the lighted room caused the window to become as a mirror. When I looked out the window, my eyes met their reflection, and God allowed me to see the person I had become . . . and I shuddered.

Have you ever wondered about how a person constructs a “Self”? Well, I'll tell you.

The way we construct the Self that we are, the person that we are, the soul we see in the mirror, is by making choices and commitments, by making promises and by keeping them. Professor Lewis Smedes wrote,

“What a marvelous thing a promise is! When a person makes a promise, she reaches out into an unpredictable future and makes one thing predictable: she will be there even when being there costs her more than she wants to pay. When a person makes a promise, he stretches himself out into circumstances that no one can control and controls at least one thing: he will be there no matter what the circumstances turn out to be. With one simple word of promise, a person creates an island of certainty in a sea of uncertainty.

“When a person makes a promise, she stakes a claim on her personal freedom and power. When you make a promise, you take a hand in creating your own future.”²

Now some of you are wondering what in the world today's text has to do with what I've said so far, and you are right to wonder. Just for good measure, here's that text once more:

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on March 22, 2020. This is a revision of the first sermon I ever preached. It was delivered at my home church, the Beecher Hills Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, on April 28, 1968, just before I graduated from high school.

² Lewis Smedes, “The Power of Promises,” in *A Chorus of Witnesses*, edited by Long and Plantinga (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

*You looked, O king, and behold, there before you stood a huge statue— an enormous and dazzling image, whose appearance was awesome. The head of that statue was of pure **gold**, its breast and its arms of **silver**, its belly and its thighs of **bronze**, its legs of **iron**, and its feet partly iron and partly **clay**. While you were watching, a stone was cut out, but not by hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were crushed together, and became like chaff from summer threshing-floors that the wind blows away. Not a trace of them could be found. Then the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth (Daniel 2:31-35).*

Nebuchadnezzar's dream, understood in context, had to do with a succession of political empires; and part of the essence of the dream had to do with the decreasing worthiness of those empires, from gold to silver, to bronze, to iron and finally to clay. This morning I want to take the idea of varying degrees of worth and value and apply it to our efforts to construct our Selves, because we can do that work with varying degrees of success as we relate our lives to what God is doing in the world.

Paul made a somewhat similar comparison when he wrote to the Corinthian church,

According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and another builds on it. But let each consider carefully how he builds on it. For no one can lay any other foundation than what is already laid — which is Yeshua the Messiah.

Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear. For the Day will show it, because it is to be revealed by fire; and the fire itself will test each one's work— what sort it is. If anyone's work built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss— he himself will be saved, but as through fire (1 Corinthians 3:10-15).

I'm going to change metaphors a little bit now and think about Self-construction using the idea of "windows" rather than "building materials," but the basic ideas are the same. I don't know how it happens, but I notice that the inside surfaces of my car windows gradually get so dirty that they just have to be cleaned, whether I want to do it or not. The accretions of daily life somehow glob themselves onto window glass, and they do it very effectively.

I want to think with you briefly about three kinds of windows as they relate to Self-construction: windows that look **UP**; windows that look **IN**; and windows that look **OUT**. And after we've thought about *Self-construction*, and "*window cleaning*," we'll think briefly about *Self-investment*. As we build a Self that is pleasing to God, what do we then do with our Selves?

Our first window, the one that looks **UP**, might be called our "**SkyLight**." This is the window that has to do with our personal relationship with God. One of the key principles of the well-known study guide, *Experiencing God*,³ is that "**God desires a continuing love relationship with you that is real and personal.**" This is a restatement of what Jesus identified as the Great Commandment: "*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength*" (Mark 12:29-30).

The Bible tells us that "*God is Light; in him there is no darkness at all. . . . If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, [God's] Son, purifies us from all sin*" (1 John 1:5-7).

³ Henry Blackaby, *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God*, revised and expanded (LifeWay, 2008).

To say this another way, God's Light is *SonLight*, and God's SonLight works a lot like the light from our sun—both lights are freely available to all, and if we're going to avoid that light, we have to do so intentionally. If we're going to keep our SkyLight clean, then we're going to have to continually choose to let God love us through Jesus, in the Spirit, so we can be “purified from all sin.”

Well, time moves along. Our second “light” is our “**EyeLight**.” This is the window that looks **IN**, inward, into our own spirits, and this is the view at which I shuddered in that long-ago moment in the science building.

Keeping our EyeLight window clean requires self-awareness born of honest looking and listening within. My dad often quoted this line from Edgar Guest's poem, *Myself*: “I have to live with myself and so I want to be fit for myself to know.”⁴

In this computer age, we're familiar with the acronym, GIGO: “garbage in, garbage out.” That's what Jesus was talking about when He said, “*A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For **the mouth speaks what the heart is full of***” (Luke 6:45).

What we ingest into our minds and into our spirits determines the kind of person we will be. That's why it matters what we watch, what we read, what we click, what we listen to, and who we hang with. When the prophet Daniel and his friends refused to eat the king's rich food, they reminded us that there are no small choices (Daniel 1:8-17). Keep your EyeLight clean.

Our third “light,” our third “window,” is our “**CareLight**.” This window looks **OUT** on the world and on other people. It has to do especially with our *relationships*.

In these virus-filled days, we're being reminded in many ways about the crucial importance of our relationships. We need to remember Rick Warren's reminder that “**The best use of life is LOVE. The best expression of love is TIME. And the best time to love is NOW.**”

We need to remind ourselves that people around us are probably anxious and worried, just as we are. We need to take creative steps to deal with our own cabin fever, so that we can live moment by moment in accordance with Paul's instruction to “*Don't let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth, but **only what is helpful for building others up**, according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen*” (Ephesians 4:29).

Well, I could go on and on, but let me move on from Self-Construction and from Life's Windows to **Self-Investment**. Once we've had some success in Self-Construction, once our windows that look UP, IN, and OUT are in reasonable shape, what then? In these days in which our financial investments are tanking big time, we can be encouraged by remembering that there are some investments that never lose value.

You'll remember that Jesus told us, “*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For **where your treasure is, there your heart will be also***” (Matthew 6:19-21).

Here are three investments you can rely on: (1) invest your **giftedness**; (2) invest your **faithfulness**; and (3) invest your **witness**.

⁴ Edgar Guest, “Myself,” http://www.yourdaily-poem.com/listpoem.jsp?poem_id=855

Giftedness. The first thing we do with our Selves is to offer our gifts and abilities to God for God's use and purposes. Many Scriptures could be mentioned. Here are two:

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10).

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:4-7).

To paraphrase Mr. Rogers, God has made you Special, and God's purpose is for you to use your special gifts to build up the Body of Christ. Every one of us needs to be using our gifts to build up the church each and every week.

Faithfulness. The second investment to which I urge you is to walk faithfully with God each and every day. Peter put it this way:

*Make every effort to add to your **faith** goodness; and to **goodness**, knowledge; and to **knowledge**, self-control; and to **self-control**, perseverance; and to **perseverance**, godliness; and to **godliness**, mutual affection; and to **mutual affection**, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, **they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ** (2 Peter 1:5-8).*

One of my favorite illustrations of faithfulness took place in 1983, shortly after the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut. I've told it to you before, but I like it. After that attack, General Paul Kelley, Commandant of the Marine Corps, visited some of the wounded in a military hospital in Frankfurt, Germany. One of these survivors was Corporal Jeffery Lee Nashton. Nashton had been severely wounded, and he had so many tubes running in and out of his body that he looked more like a machine than a man.

As General Kelley approached his bed, Nashton struggled to motion for a piece of paper and a pen. He wrote a brief note and handed it to his Commandant. Corporal Nashton had written only two words: "*Semper Fidelis*," the Latin motto of the Marine Corps. The words mean "**Always faithful**."⁵ That's a picture of what faithfulness looks like. *Can God depend on you?*

Witness. Finally, and perhaps *especially*, given the moment in which we live, we need to invest our Selves in witness for Jesus. The Easter season is one of the moments when persons who don't know Jesus are most curious about Him. Add to that the financial crisis and the virus pandemic, and people's normal sense of invincibility is taking a huge hit. And by the time we get to Holy Week, people will be stir crazy from being in the house for so long. We need to be in prayer that God will give us opportunities to share the Gospel!

I'm in the midst of an adventure of that very sort. I was having a software problem while working on Holy Week sermons, and I got into an exchange with a tech support representative. When we finished things up, the tech person, whose name is Alice, asked me if I am a Christian. Perhaps she got that idea from the tag line on my email.

Turns out that Alice lives in—are you ready?—Wuhan, China. She is not a follower of Jesus, but she is very curious, and thinks she might like to be. So she and I are in an ongoing email conversation about who Jesus is and why that matters. Please pray for Alice!

⁵ James Dobson and Gary Bauer, *Children at Risk* (Waco: Word, 1990), pp. 187-188.

I'm reminded of the story of an older woman from the States who was on a tour of England. When they got to Westminster Abbey, the guide pointed out the names and tombs of the royal and the famous, concluding by noting that "This is the most famous pulpit in the world."

When the guide asked if there were any questions, this little woman raised her hand and asked, "That's all very nice, I'm sure; but **has anybody been saved here lately?**" That's the Real Question, isn't it?

My friends, there are many, many choices before us, but here are some of the more important. Remembering Nebuchadnezzar's vision of the great statue . . .

- Are you substituting the clay of "success" for the gold of faithfulness?
- Are you substituting the iron of "financial security" for the gold of Christian community?
- Are you substituting the brass of "church attendance" for the gold of real obedience?
- What kind of Self are you constructing, my friend?
And what are you doing with your Self?

May God help us to build well!