

Sermon Transcript  
July 17, 2011

Living for God in a Messy World

“Seek First the Kingdom of God”  
Daniel 2

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## INTRODUCTION

Citizens of Jerusalem living in Babylon. That is what Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abendego are. They are citizens of Jerusalem who were taken captive by the Babylonians; and not only were they transported to the kingdom of Babylon, they were on the fast track to grabbing all that Babylon had to offer. How will these teenage boys handle life in Babylon? Will they remember their God? Will they remember who they are? Will they live like citizens of Jerusalem or will Babylon completely change their way of life?

Jerusalem and Babylon are not just two different cities. Rather, they are also two different and competing ways of life. In Babylon, man is the center of life and the pride of man, the self-sufficiency of man, the attitude that says “I can do without God” is at the heart of Babylon. Jerusalem, on the other hand, is a completely different kind of city and represents a different way of life than Babylon. Citizens of Jerusalem are people who find that meaning in life and reality can only be realized when God is at the center of life. Citizens of Jerusalem resonate with Deuteronomy 6:4. *“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”* It is a completely different way of life than what you find in Babylon. So when a citizen of Jerusalem finds himself living in Babylon, he or she can feel the tension between these two competing cities and these two competing views of life.

But, of course, you know that tension all too well, don't you? If you are here this morning and you are a follower of Jesus, you are a citizen of Jerusalem who is living in the city of Babylon. And you know all too well how the values of Babylon can cause you to forget your God and forget that you are first and foremost a citizen of Jerusalem. Here is the good news about Daniel and his three friends. They did not forget their God and they did not forget they were citizens of Jerusalem. In fact, last week we saw that through denying themselves the king's food, they were resolving within themselves to remember that they belong first and foremost to God. So, from these young men, we can learn much about how to live for God in this messy world.

I think that is what Jesus was getting at when He preached the famous Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5-7. In this sermon, Jesus is teaching His disciples how to live as members of the kingdom of God while living in the everyday world. So when we read this morning, *“seek first the kingdom of God”* Jesus is telling us something about how to live as citizens of Jerusalem while living in Babylon. And I really think that, in Daniel 2, Daniel illustrates for us how to *“seek first the kingdom of God.”* If you want to make it as a follower of Jesus while living in Babylon, Jesus needs to come first!

## A COMMAND BORN OUT OF REAL LIFE

When Jesus gives the command to “*seek first the kingdom of God,*” He gives the command in the context of real life. It is not a command that just applies to the classroom. It is not a command that is simply theoretical. Rather, it is a command that rubs up against real life. Did you notice in our Scripture reading this morning from Matthew 6 how many times we were told not to worry or be anxious? I saw the word “*anxious*” mentioned six times in our Scripture reading this morning. In fact, the last verse of Matthew 6 reads like this: “*Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.*”

There is much in the city of Babylon that tempts us to be anxious. But Jesus says that the remedy for worry is seeking first the kingdom of God. Life is unpredictable. Life has a way of throwing curveballs at you and hitting you unexpectedly. That was true for Daniel as well. Our passage this morning begins with an event that would make anyone of us anxious. It is something that came out of left field and completely took Daniel by surprise. But that is life in Babylon. That is real life. Consider Daniel’s situation spelled out for us in the first sixteen verses of Daniel 2.

*In the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his spirit was troubled, and his sleep left him. Then the king commanded that the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans be summoned to tell the king his dreams. So they came in and stood before the king. And the king said to them, “I had a dream, and my spirit is troubled to know the dream.” Then the Chaldeans said to the king in Aramaic, “O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will show the interpretation.” The king answered and said to the Chaldeans, “The word from me is firm: if you do not make known to me the dream and its interpretation, you shall be torn limb from limb, and your houses shall be laid in ruins. But if you show the dream and its interpretation, you shall receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor. Therefore show me the dream and its interpretation.” They answered a second time and said, “Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will show its interpretation.” The king answered and said, “I know with certainty that you are trying to gain time, because you see that the word from me is firm— if you do not make the dream known to me, there is but one sentence for you. You have agreed to speak lying and corrupt words before me till the times change. Therefore tell me the dream, and I shall know that you can show me its interpretation.” The Chaldeans answered the king and said, “There is not a man on earth who can meet the king's demand, for no great and powerful king has asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or Chaldean. The thing that the king asks is difficult, and no one can show it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh.”*

*Because of this the king was angry and very furious, and commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be destroyed. So the decree went out, and the wise men were about to be killed; and they sought Daniel and his companions, to kill them. Then Daniel replied with prudence and discretion to Arioch, the captain of the king's guard, who had gone out to kill the wise men of Babylon. He declared to Arioch, the king's captain, "Why is the decree of the king so urgent?" Then Arioch made the matter known to Daniel. And Daniel went in and requested the king to appoint him a time, that he might show the interpretation to the king.*

So here is the real life test. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon has a dream. He is troubled by his dream and so he calls upon *"the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans . . . to tell the king his dreams."* Did you catch the nature of his request? He wanted them to not just interpret his dream, but he wanted them to first tell him what he dreamt and then interpret it for him. His request was humanly impossible to fulfill. And yet he was so persistent in his command that failure to comply would result in the execution of *"all the wisemen of Babylon."*

Now Daniel and his three friends were part of this exclusive and illustrious group of wisemen. But they were probably fresh out of school, maybe considered to be "junior wisemen" or "wisemen interns" at this point and they were not present when the king made this request. The first time they hear about this most challenging request is when Arioch shows up at their door to round up all the wisemen and take them to their execution. You talk about a drastic change of fortune. In Daniel 1 the future is bright. In Daniel 2, out of nowhere, Daniel learns that it is all about to end.

But that is life in Babylon, isn't it? Things happen to us in life that are completely out of our control. In some sense, we are victims of the unpredictable nature of life and the things that come out of nowhere. Tomorrow a doctor could say something to you that could change the rest of your life. Tomorrow an employer could come out of nowhere with unwelcome news. Tomorrow a storm or an accident or some untimely news could shake you to your core. Tomorrow the economy, which seems to be teetering on the edge, could take a turn for the worse and all of a sudden your future is not as certain as you once planned. Tomorrow someone whom you trusted could unexpectedly turn against you. In Daniel 1, Daniel may have seen King Nebuchadnezzar as a brilliant man of achievement, full of vision and generous to these Jewish captives. But now, in Daniel 2, he is someone who appears mistrustful, angry, arbitrary and violent.

But that is life in Babylon. That is life in the real and everyday world. How does a citizen of Jerusalem live through the unpredictable events that happen in life? We *"seek first the kingdom of God"* and Daniel is going to show us what that looks like.

## SEEK FIRST: A PERSONAL SEEKING

The first thing you will observe about what it looks like to “*seek first the kingdom of God*” is that it is a highly personal exercise. With courage, Daniel goes to the king requesting time to interpret his dream. Then what does he do? It says, in verse 17, “*Then Daniel went to his house and made the matter known to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, his companions, and told them to seek mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that Daniel and his companions might not be destroyed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon.*” This is an amazing act of faith on Daniel’s part. First he goes to the king and asks for time to interpret the dream and then he goes to his buddies and says to them, “You better get praying! I just went to the king and told him I would bring him an interpretation of the dream!”

May I dare say that “*seeking first the kingdom of God*” is as plain and practical and personal as seeking God in prayer. Let’s not get fancy here. Let’s not beat the bushes for some new and deep theological answer to what it looks like to “*seek first the kingdom of God.*” What I observe from Daniel is that “*seeking first the kingdom of God*” is nothing more than a highly personal conviction that, within the mess of life that is experienced in the city of Babylon, it is prayer that gives us strength and wisdom to respond to these things that seemingly come out of nowhere. Daniel did not hesitate to call on the God of heaven for mercy and help in his time of need.

God says, in Psalm 50:15, “*Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you and you shall glorify me.*” Psalm 55:22 adds, “*Cast your burden on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved.*” Paul says, in Philippians 4:6-7, “*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* James tell us, in James 5:13, “*Is anyone among your suffering? Let him pray.*”

This is how citizens of Jerusalem live in the city of Babylon. We are a people of prayer. We turn to God in prayer. J. C. Ryle said it this way. “The only way to be really happy in such a world as this, is to be ever casting all our cares on God. It is trying to carry their own burdens which so often makes believers sad. If they will tell their troubles to God, he will enable them to bear them as easily as Samson did the gates of Gaza. If they are resolved to keep them to themselves, they will find one day the very grasshopper is a burden.”<sup>1</sup>

Upon turning to God in prayer, we learn, in verse 19, that God answered their prayers. We read, “*Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision of the night. Then Daniel*

*blessed the God of heaven. Daniel answered and said: "Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; he reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him. To you, O God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise, for you have given me wisdom and might, and have now made known to me what we asked of you, for you have made known to us the king's matter."*

Do you know what we are confessing when we "*seek first the kingdom of God*" through prayer? We are confessing an underlying confidence that God hears our prayer. We are confessing that God is at work in Babylon, even in the midst of the mess. We are confessing that we are dependent upon God's power and God's wisdom in this life. And finally, we are expressing our absolute trust in God and we are demonstrating to this world the fundamental difference between the citizen of Jerusalem and the citizen of Babylon. Our trust is in the living God. Isaiah 31:1 says it this way. "*Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the LORD.*" Not so the citizens of Jerusalem. We look to God and we consult the Lord. That is exactly how a citizen of Jerusalem lives in Babylon.

And so we pick up the story in verse 24, "*Therefore Daniel went in to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to destroy the wise men of Babylon. He went and said thus to him: "Do not destroy the wise men of Babylon; bring me in before the king, and I will show the king the interpretation."* Then Arioch brought in Daniel before the king in haste and said thus to him: "*I have found among the exiles from Judah a man who will make known to the king the interpretation.*" The king declared to Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, "*Are you able to make known to me the dream that I have seen and its interpretation?"* Daniel answered the king and said, "*No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or astrologers can show to the king the mystery that the king has asked, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days. Your dream and the visions of your head as you lay in bed are these: To you, O king, as you lay in bed came thoughts of what would be after this, and he who reveals mysteries made known to you what is to be. But as for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because of any wisdom that I have more than all the living, but in order that the interpretation may be made known to the king, and that you may know the thoughts of your mind.*"

I love how Daniel is quick to give glory to God for the interpretation of the dream. "*Seek first the kingdom of God.*" Take this command personally. While living here in Babylon, express your confidence in God by never ceasing to turn to God in prayer.

## SEEK FIRST: A PRINCIPLED SEEKING

So here is Daniel standing before King Nebuchadnezzar, ready to rehearse for the king the details of his dream. I wonder what thoughts are running through Nebuchadnezzar's mind as Daniel is describing, in detail, what the king dreamt just a few nights prior. Jumping ahead all the way to verse 46, after Daniel was finished with the interpretation, we read, "*Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell upon his face and paid homage to Daniel.*" To say he was impressed would be an understatement.

Here is the dream. Starting in verse 31 we read, "*You saw, O king, and behold, a great image. This image, mighty and of exceeding brightness, stood before you, and its appearance was frightening. The head of this image was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its middle and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. As you looked, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.*"

This is what the king saw in his dream. He saw a large statue; and it must have been an awesome sight because it was described as being "*frightening.*" The head of this statue was made of gold, the chest was silver, the waist and thighs were of bronze and the legs were made of iron, while the feet were a mixture of iron and clay. Then the king saw a stone that "*was cut out by no human hand*" and it struck the statue at the feet and the entire statue crumbled to the point that all that was left were pieces small enough to be blown away by the wind. Then the stone that destroyed the image became a great mountain, and that mountain filled the entire earth. That was the dream King Nebuchadnezzar had; and he must have been sitting on the edge of his seat as Daniel was about ready to reveal the meaning behind this vision.

Before we look at the interpretation of this dream, I think it would be good for us to recognize the overall theme of the book of Daniel. It is readily recognized that the book of Daniel is about God's sovereignty over history and the empires of the world. It is clearly stated in this book that God is the One who sets up kings and removes kings as He pleases. We saw this very truth last week, at the beginning of Daniel 1, where we discovered that it was God Himself who gave Judah into the hand of Babylon. In our chapter this morning, after receiving the revelation of the dream, Daniel worships God by saying "*He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings.*" It is also said of God, in Daniel 4:35, "*all inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,*

*and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, 'What have you done?'*" Given the fact that the sovereignty of God is the theme of the book of Daniel, it should not surprise you that it is the main message of the king's dream in Daniel 2. So Daniel says, in verse 36, *"This was the dream. Now we will tell the king its interpretation."*

Daniel begins by telling Nebuchadnezzar that he is the head of gold. He says, in verse 37, *"You, O king, the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, and the might, and the glory, and into whose hand he has given, wherever they dwell, the children of man, the beasts of the field, and the birds of the heavens, making you rule over them all—you are the head of gold."* Not only is King Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon identified as the head of gold, but it is clearly stated that anything Babylon or Nebuchadnezzar had or achieved is only given to them by the sovereign grace of God.

That is a good thing to remember when you read the newspaper and read of a Washington D.C. that seems dysfunctional at best and unable, at times, to work together for the good of the Country. God is still in control. It is good to be reminded of this when European economies seem to be on the brink of collapse, and when Middle Eastern countries continue to be a source of concern when it comes to unrest. God is still in control. God has not lost control of this world. God is accomplishing His purpose and *"none can stay his hand."* That is not just true when it comes to the vast empires of the world. Did we not read earlier that God's sovereign care extends *"to the birds of the air . . . and to the lilies of the field?"* Therefore, the implication is that His sovereign care extends to you as well. So do not be anxious, we are told, rather *"seek first the kingdom of God."* For you know, *"that for those who love God, all things work together for the good."* See, *"seeking first the kingdom of God"* is a matter of principle, because in it we acknowledge that God is ultimately sovereign and in control. With that knowledge comes a trust and a resting and a settled feeling as we live here in the unpredictable city of Babylon. God is in control.

Daniel goes on to explain the rest of the statue. Each remaining section of the statue represents another kingdom that will succeed Babylon. In other words, this great empire of Babylon will not remain forever. So we read, in verse 39, *"Another kingdom inferior to you shall arise after you, and yet a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over all the earth. And there shall be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron, because iron breaks to pieces and shatters all things. And like iron that crushes, it shall break and crush all these. And as you saw the feet and toes, partly of potter's clay and partly of iron, it shall be a divided kingdom, but some of the firmness of iron shall be in it, just as you saw iron mixed with the soft clay. And as the toes of the feet were partly iron and partly clay, so*

*the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly brittle. As you saw the iron mixed with soft clay, so they will mix with one another in marriage, but they will not hold together, just as iron does not mix with clay.*” After the Babylonians, during Daniel’s lifetime, came the Persians. The Persians were followed by the Greeks and Alexander the Great. Then came the Romans, represented with the iron and the clay.

Empires come and go, but God is from everlasting to everlasting. Man returns to the dust, but God is from everlasting to everlasting. Therefore, the citizen of Jerusalem is able to express a quiet trust in God when it seems like things are falling down all around us. Citizens of Jerusalem have put their trust and their hope in a God who is in control of this world and is working out His purposes for His glory and for our good. David says, in Psalm 139, *“I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them.”* Citizen of Jerusalem, *“seek first the kingdom of God”* and find rest and comfort in the thought that God is in control of all things, including your life. God is at work in your life right now and *none can stay his hand.*” So trust in God while living in Babylon.

#### **SEEK FIRST: A PASSIONATE THING**

There is one more thing you must see from this dream that helps us understand what it means to *“seek first the kingdom of God.”* It is really the climax of the dream. If you remember, as Nebuchadnezzar was looking at this awesome statue, it says he saw *“a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.”* What is that stone that came and struck down the statue? Daniel tells us in verse 44 the meaning behind the stone.

He begins by saying, *“And in the days of those kings.”* What kings? He is talking about the empire represented by the iron legs, he is talking about the Roman Empire. It is during the reign of the Roman Empire that this rock will strike the statue representing the kingdom of man. He goes on to say of this rock, *“the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever, just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and*

*that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. A great God has made known to the king what shall be after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation sure."*

The rock that strikes the statue is Jesus. The mountain that covers the earth is the kingdom of God. This past Tuesday, at our Summer Bible Study, we put together the story of the Bible. We noted that the summary statement for the Bible is as follows. If someone were to ask you to summarize the Bible in one sentence, this is what you could say. The Bible tells us the story of how God has appointed Jesus Christ to be the saving ruler of God's kingdom. We noted on Tuesday that we tend to have a much smaller view of the gospel than what we find in the Bible. We tend to think the gospel is all about us and our salvation. Rather, the gospel is about Jesus Christ and the establishment of God's kingdom on earth. Our salvation is simply a bi-product of the gospel. See, the good news is that God's kingdom will someday cover the earth. God will restore this fallen world.

Have you even noticed how often Jesus is referred to as "the rock"? We read in Scripture, *"The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone."* We read, *"See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed."* We read, *"On this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."* We read, *"As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men, but in the sight of God chosen and precious."* He is the Rock of Ages and His kingdom is a kingdom of salvation and peace and it has no end. Someday, it shall cover the earth.

It began with the coming of Jesus to this world when *"a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered."* It was under Pontus Pilate, the Roman official, that Jesus was crucified. Three days later he rose from the dead, proclaiming to us that Satan has been defeated and the age of the kingdom of God had been inaugurated. In the book of Acts, we see the kingdom of God begin to spread throughout the entire Roman Empire; and today the kingdom of God can be found all over the world where people confess Jesus to be Lord. But there is coming a day when this kingdom will cover every square inch of this world and all things will be made new. That will take place when this Jesus returns again.

That is the message of this dream that King Nebuchadnezzar had. Through this dream we learn that to *"seek first the kingdom of God"* is to have a passion for Jesus. That is how we live as citizens of Jerusalem in the city of Babylon. We are worshipers of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords and His kingdom has no end.

*“Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell upon his face and paid homage to Daniel, and commanded that an offering and incense be offered up to him. The king answered and said to Daniel, “Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery.” Then the king gave Daniel high honors and many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon. Daniel made a request of the king, and he appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego over the affairs of the province of Babylon. But Daniel remained at the king's court.”*

## CONCLUSION

*“Seek first the kingdom of God.”* It is a personal thing as we turn to God in prayer. It is a principled thing that acknowledges God is in control. It is a passionate thing that results in the worship of Jesus Christ above all things.

I close this morning with a prayer that I found this week that acknowledges the hope we have in the coming kingdom of God. It is based on Romans 16:20, *“The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.”*

Gracious Father, the encouragement and hope given in this one verse simply cannot be measured or overstated, for evil seems to be prevailing everywhere we look. According to Your Word, however, things are not as they appear. You tell us we will live to see the day of Jesus’ triumph over evil played out under *our very feet*. Even as Satan’s head was crushed by the Prince of Peace on the cross, You, the God of peace, will crush Satan under *our* feet as well! We *will* share in the victory and spoils of Jesus.

Though at times it feels like we are being walked on by a gloating devil, it is *he* who is actually getting ready to know our dancing feet on his head. And according to your promise, this glorious day will happen “soon”! Lord, our weary yet joyful cry is, “Make soon, *real* soon!” We can hardly wait.

Wickedness will be eradicated; dastardliness will be destroyed; dark subterfuge will be entirely sabotaged; all iniquity and inequity will be sent packing; every violation of shalom will be undone; systemic violence and personal violations will never happen again; abuse will be abused; terror will be terminated; all evil will be eliminated forever!

Jesus, never let us forget that the reason You came into this world was to destroy him who holds the power of death (that is, the devil) and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death (Hebrews 2:14-15). You

came to destroy the devil and *all* his works (1 John 3:8). You wondrously fulfilled the first gospel promise: indeed, Your “bruised heel” on the cross secured the “crushed head” of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). Our foe is defeated and waiting to be utterly destroyed. His present flurry of fury is actually a sign he knows his time is short. Lord, our weary yet joyful cry is, “Make short, *real* short!”

O God of peace, grant us a peace that passes all understanding when the battle rages most fiercely and the schemes of Satan seem to be winning the day. O triumphant Lord Jesus, we boldly ask not just for surviving grace, but for *thriving* grace, until the Day You return to finish making all things new. O God, the Holy Spirit, we trust You for all the power we will need to live as servants of the gospel of the kingdom. So very Amen we pray, in Jesus’ magnificent and triumphant name.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>J.C. Ryle *A Call to Prayer* (Laurel, MS: Audobon Press, 1996) 15

<sup>2</sup>Scotty Smith, “A Prayer of Assured Triumph and Great Hope <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/scottysmith/2011/07/14/a-prayer-of-assured-triumph-and-great-hope/>