

A Message from the King

Daniel: When Kingdoms Collide

Daniel 4:1-37

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I want to start this morning's sermon by having us think about the most evil and powerful dictators of all time. Sounds like fun right? Think about the Mussolinis of the world, your Adolfs, your Kim Jong-uns and numerous others throughout history. Think of their arrogance and selfish ambition. Many of these guys had statues made in their honor.

What strikes me when I think of these people is that they thought they were on the top of the world. That nothing could touch them. That their power was certain. Now consider this. What would it take to humble a person like that? What would it take for them to acknowledge and apologize for their heinous acts and pursue righteousness? What would it take for them to stop oppressing others and start becoming a benefit to those around them?

People who have spent their whole lives gaining power. What would it take?

Because if you can just begin to imagine this sort of scenario then you are ready to receive the message from King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4.¹

What would compel Nebuchadnezzar, who is not only just like these guys we've mentioned, but even more powerful and arrogant, what would compel him to change his ways? And not only that, but then send a message out to all the land about what happened.

The letter we have in Daniel 4 is at least in part written by Nebuchadnezzar. A tyrant from the ancient city of Babylon wrote some of our Bible. Yeah. It's a remarkable story of transformation.

This morning we are going to walk through this story of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4, so if you haven't turned there yet please turn to Daniel 4. As you do just imagine that you were a ruler in some precinct of Babylon. You get to your desk and find that you have a message from the king. You probably open it first thing, and then hear these words:

Daniel 4:1-3²

*¹King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you!
²It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me.*

*³How great are his signs,
how mighty his wonders!
His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and his dominion endures from generation to generation.*

That's about the moment you spit out your tea and start checking to see if this is a fake. I mean this sort of announcement is unthinkable in a pluralistic society like Babylon. It's political suicide. And

¹ Credit goes to Andrew Jones whom I modified this intro from. Also much of this sermon is indebted to sitting under Andrew teach this passage.

² Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

while your head is spinning two questions come to mind. How did this happen, and what is it going to mean for me?

So as we go through this story together we are also going to be asking, how did God humble a man like Nebuchadnezzar (or Neb for short) and what does that mean for us? Our story this morning has three main locations that will help us track along. We'll follow Nebuchadnezzar through the palace, the roof, and the field.

THE PALACE

Our story starts out in a palace. Neb says in verse 4: "I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and prospering in my palace." His life was perfect. He was crushing it as ruler. Few rulers throughout history have had as much power and authority as him. If he knew about it, he ruled it. Even more he had two things many of us strive our whole lives to find: ease and prosperity. Life was under his control.

Then in verse 5: "I saw a dream that made me afraid. As I lay in bed the fancies and the visions of my head alarmed me." We've been here before with Neb. Sleepless nights and crazy dreams. You've got to think that there's never been a guy more in need of an Ambien than this guy. Nevertheless, he needs to find some resolution with this dream, so he sends up the bat signal to see if anyone can interpret this dream for him; and again Daniel comes in to save the day.

So Neb recounts the dream to Daniel starting in verse 10, so if you would look there let's hear this dream that is so terrifying Nebuchadnezzar:

Daniel 4:10-17

10The visions of my head as I lay in bed were these: I saw, and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. 11The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. 12Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the heavens lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it.

So far so good. In fact it's quite tranquil. Then verse 13 takes a turn.

13"I saw in the visions of my head as I lay in bed, and behold, a watcher, a holy one, came down from heaven. 14He proclaimed aloud and said thus: 'Chop down the tree and lop off its branches, strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the beasts flee from under it and the birds from its branches. 15But leave the stump of its roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze, amid the tender grass of the field. Let him be wet with the dew of heaven. Let his portion be with the beasts in the grass of the earth. 16Let his mind be changed from a man's, and let a beast's mind be given to him; and let seven periods of time pass over him. 17The sentence is by the decree of the watchers, the decision by the word of the holy ones, to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men.'"

It's bad news. And it's dramatic. But even more dramatic to me is Daniel's reaction to the dream. Verse 19 tells us Daniel is dismayed and alarmed. He tells the king, "My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you and its interpretation for your enemies."

Now of course Daniel may have just not wanted to deliver bad news and end up getting his head cut off for it. But I don't think that's it. Daniel clearly cares for Nebuchadnezzar. I can only imagine that Daniel has been praying day after day for the king; and so he's disturbed by what it means. And Daniel's response is indicting.

At times we can have a perverse pleasure when we see the prideful, arrogant, and wicked fall. We've all known figures who've fallen, who've been publicly humiliated, and more often than not our response has been "they got what they deserve" when it should have first been, "may God have mercy on their soul."

And so with trepidation Daniel delivers the verdict to Nebuchadnezzar.

First he says that the tree is actually him. Shocker, right? He says your fame is great and dominion vast. That's the good news.

Now the bad news: A divine lumberjack is coming to cut you down. The Most High has made a decree over the king that he will be driven from humanity to become a beast for seven periods of time, which could be seven months or seven seasons, either way, a limited amount of time, until Nebuchadnezzar "know[s] that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will" (v. 17).

Notice, the point of this whole ordeal is that Neb would know the Most High God rules over every kingdom of man. Even him.

So Daniel tries to throw him a lifeline. He gives him some counsel. Look at verse 27: "Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity."

How can Neb acknowledge that God rules? Repent and obey his instruction by breaking off sins by practicing righteousness and breaking off iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed.

Neb is given a lifeline, and we are left to ask, what will happen? Will the dream come to pass? Will Neb take the advice? What would you do? How would you respond if you were confronted with this warning?

THE ROOF

Twelve months later we find our answer as we move to a new location on the roof of the royal palace. But why twelve months? Did Neb disregard Daniel's counsel? Maybe. Or maybe like many of us he sought to change but after time that urgency dissipated, and so twelve months later we find Neb on the roof of the royal palace in Babylon.

He is at the tallest place in the city looking out over the most beautiful and fortified city the world has ever known. This was the home of the fabled Hanging Gardens, one of the Seven Wonders of the World. A maze of beautiful terraced flowers, shrubs, and waterfalls. Not only was Babylon beautiful but the walls of the city were so broad that a chariot team could fully turn around at the top.

So when Nebuchadnezzar looks out from the highest place in the city he is confronted with profound beauty and strength. Evidence of his toil and striving over the years. And Neb's response in verse 30 is little surprise. Standing on the roof he says, "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?"

And like a movie scene, you take in a sharp breath; because we can see what's coming, even if Neb can't. He's in the middle of declaring how awesome he is, and you can just imagine God in the background shaking his head. I warned you. So, God cuts in while the words were still in Nebuchadnezzar's mouth and he says this kingdom of yours that made you so full of yourself, it's departed from you at this moment.

And that dream that terrified you a year ago is now going to be a reality. You are going to lose your mind and your home. You are going to become a beast. And this isn't like Marshawn Lynch's beast mode. Neb is becoming un-human. He's going to have talons, and matted long hair. He is going to live in the field like the beast he's become. And God says he will be like this until he knows that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.

Here we have our first lesson from this story.

Pride distorts and dehumanizes.

Now, we should say first that if you're one of the oppressed in Babylon reading this story, it sounds like good news. God has power over those who oppress. He will bring them down to the dust. And it is good news. For believers oppressed throughout the world, this should provide hope. All the wicked kingdoms of man are no match for the kingdom of God.

And while this is definitely true, it would be wrong to simply cross off Nebuchadnezzar. In fact, this sort of response might itself be very prideful. As a friend of mine once told me, "Only a very proud person would look at this story and say thank goodness I am nothing like him."

And if we want to have any confidence in God's rule over kings and kingdoms we need to begin by realizing God's rule over our own lives. Because your kingdom may not be as vast as Nebuchadnezzar's but the same pride can blind you to knowing God. In Neb's statement we see two ways that pride distorts and thus blinds us to knowing God.

Pride distorts by saying that everything I have is my own doing and for my own benefit. That I am the sole author and beneficiary of everything in my life. Pride so delights in the work of the self. To be self-determined, self-reliant. Give me the credit. Human pride stands on the roof of our lives and says see what I did.

You know there is a common trope in our culture that we should each strive to become self-made men. Pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. These phrases present the ideal that we should be self-reliant, completely independent; that we should succeed without any help.

Now I'm not talking about doing hard work—we should be about that—I'm talking about the desire and belief that you are totally independent. Not only is it a false narrative, it screams of human pride and arrogance.

Think about your own life. Were you able to control the place in history or location where you were born? Were you able to control the family in which you were born? No you weren't, and yet those two things determine so much about your life.

You see, pride promises us a counterfeit good. Pride promises us control over our own lives. But it's a promise it can't deliver. We tend to think that if it's my doing then it's under my control. And we so fear not being in control that pride comes in to deceive us; thinking that we have more control

and power than we really do. And this desire for power and control puts us at enmity with God and with one another.

This week I was thinking that a perfect litmus test for pride might be withholding praise for a work colleague in front of others. Have you ever withheld praise at work? Why? Of course praising another means that you didn't do it. But also praising another might elevate that person's status above your own. That might mean they get the promotion instead of you or if someone has to be let go it could be you instead of them. It's a desperate mark of pride and control.

Pride is also so toxic to marriage. When you always have to be right in every argument; you always have to win and control your spouse. Or when you start thinking only about what you're getting out of this relationship. How is this marriage benefiting you?

And that's the second part of pride—believing everything is for your benefit.

Nebuchadnezzar says that everything was for the glory of *his* majesty. We hear this pride when we say things like *I deserve* this or that. It's the overwhelming sense of feeling like you deserve something.

And this struggle for control and glory reminds me of the difference between the artist and a painting.³ We can spend so much our life trying to be the artist of our lives. That by our own cleverness and skill we make the world beautiful. But when we try to take control we mess with the work of art God is trying to create through us. The truth is we aren't the author or the artist, we are meant to be a beautiful work of art from the hand of the Father for the benefit of the world.

But rather than a beautiful painting pride makes into a grotesque portrait. Pride not only distorts but it dehumanizes. Nebuchadnezzar was turned into a beast so he could see on the outside what he'd become on the inside.

This humiliation shows us that when you aspire to be more than you are, you end up less than you were meant to be. You were meant to be dependent on God and a benefit to others. Nebuchadnezzar's descent into madness shows us the folly of pride: that pride makes us less than we were created to be.

So what can be done? What can we do in the face of gripping, dehumanizing pride? As we move into verse 34 we start to see how we can be free of our pride. Here in verse 34 we join Nebuchadnezzar in our last scene—a field where he's been living like an animal.

THE FIELD

In verse 34 we find that Neb has a dramatic change of heart. And it comes about in at least two ways that are lessons for us today.

God humbles the proud.

First: God humbles the proud. It's the very last line of chapter four and encapsulates the whole story. God humbles Nebuchadnezzar. The divine lumberjack does a number on his life.

³ I first heard something like this from Tim Keller though my adaptation is quite different than his.

It's a little frightening. And we should be a little scared. We should be thinking, if God could do that with Nebuchadnezzar's pride, what could he do with mine? It's the implication we should each feel from this story, and if you're not, then be careful, the ax may be at the foot of your tree.

But while this judgment was severe, it was also incredibly gracious. Neb was so gripped by pride that God had to bring him low for him to see his true dependence before God. The only way for Nebuchadnezzar to be freed from his pride was to be humbled by God, because true humility starts with God.

We have a lot of confusion about humility. We think it means having low self-esteem, lack of ambition, or down playing all our accomplishments. But true humility is none of that. It's simply receiving all of life as a gift from God to be used for others. But if this is the case then humility doesn't start with us, but starts with the ultimate giver, the one who reigns.

Here's how Daniel has said it three times in our chapter: Know that the Most High reigns over all mankind and gives it to whom he will. But in order to know God, God had to break the power of pride that had a death grip on Neb's heart.

Do you remember the part in the book, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, when Eustace turns into a dragon? Eustace, because of his pride and greed, ends up turned into the animal he had been acting like all along. When he finally meets Aslan, the Christ-figure of Narnia, Eustace tries to claw off his dragon skin but he can't do it. Aslan has to do it. Eustace says that the first tear he made was so deep I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I'd ever felt. But at the same time, it was his deepest joy to be free of it.⁴

In a similar way, only God can break the bonds of pride that keep us from knowing him. God may do this in your life. You may have already experienced it. But he may have done it in the lives of others as an example for us. Remember this is a letter to everyone describing Neb's humiliation so that all might be able to know the Most High God reigns.

And what these first listeners didn't know, we know more fully. And it's the ultimate cure for our pride. That the Most High God humbled himself, becoming a human hung on a tree. He paid for our sins and he freed us from pride. And he was exalted, so that all the world may know the king of the universe. The Most High God.

This vision of the crucified and risen Jesus is itself the cure for the overwhelming pride of our heart. And our only response is to humble ourselves before our King Jesus.

The humble live under God's reign.

And so we come to the next lesson from our passage. Not only does God humble the proud, but we each respond by humbling ourselves under God's reign. This life of humility has at least two characteristics: praise and obedience.

In verse 34 Nebuchadnezzar is a new man. And whereas pride dehumanizes, humility makes him fully human—in right relationship before God.

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*

Instead of eyes looking out at his work, his eyes are looking toward heaven. Instead of pride on his lips he has a heart of praise. He says:

Daniel 4:34-35

34... and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever,

*for his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;
35all the 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?"*

The humble—those who know that God reigns—don't praise themselves but give praise God, for though we are accounted as nothing he lavishes us with his grace.

The humble also obey the God who reigns.

When you compare Neb's prideful statement in verse 30 to verse 36 there is a remarkable transformation. Rather than his position and power being for *his* own glory, in verse 36 he now sees his own majesty and splendor as something for the benefit of *the kingdom*.

This recalls Daniel's earlier counsel in verse 27, that he would practice righteousness and show mercy to the oppressed. Neb now seems to be obeying that command as he uses his position for the benefit of the kingdom.

The humble live under God's reign by stewarding their power, possessions, and influence for the benefit of others. Wealth and influence aren't wrong. Ambition isn't evil. The main question is who it's for. If it's for your own glory and benefit—which you'll definitely be tempted by—then pride might have you in its hold. But if your power, possessions, and influence are for building others up then you might be responding in humility to the God who reigns.

Our letter ends with Neb's resolution: "Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble" (v. 37).

Remember our imaginary precinct captain in Babylon? After you finish this letter how do you respond? You see this message isn't so much a message from the king of Babylon as it is a message from the King of heaven. Because God didn't just want Neb to know him, but as is said in verse 17 the purpose is for all the living to know this God.

And so this letter isn't simply an accounting of what happened it's an appeal to you and me that we would know this God who reigns; and live like it.

That God's mighty act in humbling Neb might also humble us, showing us the dangerous end of pride and showing us that God truly is the ruler of all mankind. Over your hopes in yourself. Over your hope in any political rule. It invites us to respond like Nebuchadnezzar, and humble ourselves to live under God's reign in praise and obedience. That to us, all of life would be a gift from God that we steward for others.

This letter to the nations is a testimony “that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men.”

Prayer:

Father in heaven, as we heard in this letter we also proclaim: How great are your signs, how mighty are your wonders! Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures from generation to generation. For those of us tired of pride’s grip. Tired of being out for ourselves grasping for a control we’ll never find - would you break the bonds of pride and help us to walk in humility before you. In Christ I pray, Amen.