



Don't Wait for God to Humble You

Pilgrim Living in the 21st Century

Daniel 4

David Sunday

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Heavenly Father, as we bow before Your holy Word, we pray that what we know not, You would teach us, what we have not yet, You would give us, and what we are not, You would make us until we are fully conformed to the image of Your Son Jesus. We ask now that through Your Holy Spirit You would illuminate our minds and hearts to behold Your glory in the face of Jesus Christ in Your Word. Amen.

In Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis says:

There is one vice of which no man in the world is free, which everyone in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else, and of which hardly any people except Christians ever imagine that they are guilty themselves. I've heard people admit that they are bad-tempered or that they cannot keep their heads about girls or drink, or even that they are cowards. I do not think I've ever heard anyone who was not a Christian accuse himself of this vice, and at the same time I've very seldom met anyone who was not a Christian who showed the slightest mercy to it in others. There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves—and the more we have it in ourselves, the more we dislike it in others.

I'll bet you know what Lewis is talking about. He's talking about the sin of pride. Pride is the deadliest plague of the human race, and it is God's most stubborn enemy. But it is an enemy God can conquer. We're going to see how He does that in the life of King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4.

It's a letter written by the king himself that begins and ends with praise. Let's read Daniel 4:1-3:

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

has done for me. How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation.

If you've been to church very often or read your Bible, these are words you may be familiar with in a liturgical sense. "God's Kingdom is an everlasting Kingdom. His dominion endures from generation to generation." Yet we need to realize how remarkable it is that these words were spoken by King Nebuchadnezzar. This is the same king who in Daniel 3 made a golden image of himself—90 feet high and nine feet wide—and then commanded the people of every nation and language to fall down and worship his image. When Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow down, he threw them into the fiery furnace. This mighty king also threatened to tear people limb from limb if they did not obey his orders.

But now Nebuchadnezzar is worshiping the God of Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego and Daniel. He begins this letter with praise to the true God, and he is going to end the letter with praise to the true God. In verse 37 he says, "*Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just.*"

So the questions that burn in my mind when we come to chapter four are, "What happened to King Nebuchadnezzar to bring him to this point of acknowledging and praising the sovereignty of the Most High God? How does God take an arrogant, ruthless ruler like Nebuchadnezzar and turn him into a humble, submissive worshiper?" These are momentous questions—not just historically, but for us today, because the glory of God is so preeminent that there is no room in the universe for human pride.

Isaiah 2:11 says that there is coming a day when "*the haughty looks of man shall be brought low, and the lofty pride of men shall be humbled, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day.*" So there is coming a day in the future when all human pride will be obliterated and when our God will be worshiped and acknowledged by all creatures of our God and King as the sovereign One Who alone is worthy of worship. The pride of men—my pride and your pride—shall be humbled, and the Lord alone will be exalted.

So as we look at God's dealings with Nebuchadnezzar, we will learn a weighty lesson that can help us get ready for that coming day when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess Jesus Christ as Lord, and the Lord alone will be exalted. The lesson is this: don't wait for God to humble you. It is far better to humble yourself now under the mighty hand of God, than to put yourself in a position where God has to humble you. You don't want to take that risk. God **will** humble the proud.

Sometimes we pray, “God, humble me.” That’s a scary prayer! It would be better to listen to James or Peter, who say, “Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God” (James 4:10). And this chapter is here to help us do that. It’s here to help us humble ourselves under God’s mighty hand. So let’s see how this lesson is worked out in Nebuchadnezzar’s life.

It all begins with a dream in verse four, when Nebuchadnezzar says, *“I was at ease in my house and prospering in my palace. I saw a dream that made me afraid. As I lay in bed the fancies and the visions of my head alarmed me.”* This isn’t the first time Nebuchadnezzar has had such a dream. Back in chapter two, God gave Daniel the ability to interpret another of the king’s dreams. What was that dream all about? It was a dream that reminded the king that all his glory and all his greatness came from God.

So perhaps this dream is sent by God as a terrifying reminder of everything Nebuchadnezzar has forgotten about Him. Even after all he’s seen of God’s power and glory—like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego delivered out of a fiery furnace—Nebuchadnezzar still has not humbled himself under God’s mighty hand. He doesn’t want to have to deal with Daniel’s God.

But no matter how much he ignores the true God or defies His sovereign authority, Daniel’s God just will not leave him alone. And that’s mercy, friends. It’s God’s mercy when He will not leave us alone in our pride. Ian Dukewood says, “The worst that could be happening to any of us would be for God to leave us comfortable and at ease in our pride.” It would be a terrible thing. Because Nebuchadnezzar will not humble himself, God in His mercy is about to humble him.

The main point here is don’t wait for God to humble you. After all the magicians, enchanters and astrologers cannot interpret the dream for Nebuchadnezzar, finally Daniel comes on the scene in Daniel 4:8. Nebuchadnezzar says, *“He who was named Belteshazzar after the name of my god...”* He’s reminding us of how he gave a new identity to Daniel and his friends back in chapter one as part of a social engineering program intended to make them think like Babylonians.

Nebuchadnezzar recognizes however that in Daniel *“is the spirit of the holy gods.”* There’s something unusual about this man. Nebuchadnezzar tells Daniel his dream. He describes in verses 9-12 a vision of this great tree in the midst of the earth whose height was great. Verse 11, *“The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. Its 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.”*

Then Nebuchadnezzar repeats to Daniel the cryptic words that so terrified him in his dream.

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. ¹⁴ He 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. ¹⁵ But 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. ¹⁶ Let 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. ¹⁷ The sentence is by the decree of the watchers, the decision by the word of the holy ones, to the end [here's the whole purpose of the dream] 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."

God rules over all the kingdoms of this earth. God will give the kingdoms of men to whomever He wills, and God is going to one day set over all the kingdoms of men the lowliest of men. The most humble Man Who ever lived will one day rule all the kingdoms of this earth—King of Kings and Lord of Lords. That's the dream.

When Nebuchadnezzar saw this dream, he was afraid and he wanted Daniel to tell him what it meant. I'm sure Nebuchadnezzar was thinking, "Do I really want to know what this dream means—because I think I do know." And Daniel himself is terrified by the dream. Look at verse 19: "Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, was dismayed for a while." The NIV says, "*He was greatly perplexed for a time, and his thoughts terrified him.*"

You see, Daniel has a certain care and concern for this proud and ruthless king. Even though the king has not been a friend to God's people—he likes to tear them apart and throw them in fiery furnaces—we see that Daniel still honors and desires what is best for this king. He says to the king in verse 19, "*My lord.*" He shows him respect.

It convicts me of the way I can sometimes speak of our nation's leaders. Do we speak of those in authority over us with respect? Do we desire their prosperity? Can we say of our President, congress and governor that we who are the people of their land pray for their blessing? Daniel says to the king, "*My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you and its interpretation for your enemies!*" It's a picture of how God's people love even their enemies.

Then Daniel proceeds to interpret the dream. In verses 20-21 he describes the enormous tree the king saw in his dream, a tree...

...which grew and became strong, so that its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth, whose leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in which was food for all, under which beasts of the field found shade, and in whose branches the birds of the heavens lived.

Then in verse 22, Daniel looks at Nebuchadnezzar and says, “You, O king, are that tree. You’re the tree. You’ve become great and strong. Your greatness has grown until it reaches the sky. Your dominion extends to distant parts of the earth.” And then beginning in verse 24, Daniel makes the cryptic message of this dream crystal clear:

This is the interpretation, O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king, that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will. And as it was commanded to leave the stump of the roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be confirmed for you from the time that you know that Heaven rules.

“You need to know this, king. You need to know Who’s in charge of you. Heaven rules.”

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.

Even now, God is showing mercy to this king. He’s calling him to repent. He’s saying, “This judgment that’s about to come doesn’t necessarily need to happen—if you would but humble yourself, O king.” In fact, 12 months will pass. God is giving him time to repent.

You know, God in His mercy has many ways of saying to us, “Will you humble yourself right now? Will you acknowledge Who God is and that you are not Him? Will you give praise to the Lord and cast your cares on Him and love others and realize you don’t need to be preeminent? Will you humble yourself?”

Sometimes God does that in our lives by allowing us to see another person who falls in a bad way. We see them suffering the consequences of their sins. Do you know what God is saying to us whenever we see someone else fall? He’s saying, “Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Do not think you’re above this. Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God.”

When God spoke to Nebuchadnezzar, He told him something He was going to give him 12 months to apply. There are messages we’ve heard from the Word of God that we haven’t quite

taken to heart yet. God is saying, "I'm still giving you time to respond to what I've said to you. Will you humble yourself? Will you turn from your sinful ways? Will you acknowledge that I am your God and walk in obedience to Me?"

Pride has that blinding effect, doesn't it? When pride gets a hold on our hearts, it can get such a grip on us that we become impervious to the pleadings of God's mercy. We don't listen. May we be aware of the blinding force of pride in our lives. As Proverbs 16:18 says, "*Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.*" And Nebuchadnezzar's fall is about to happen. Verse 28:

All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar. At the end of twelve months he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, and the king answered and said, "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?"

These were the words that sealed his downfall. Someone has called these "the most apt description of secular humanism in all of literature." What is it about these words that brought God's hand of discipline on Nebuchadnezzar? Notice all the personal pronouns, and the prepositions "by" and "for." As he looks out at this great kingdom—and Babylon was spectacularly great—he sees those hanging gardens that were among the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, and his heart swells with pride. "I have built all of this by my mighty power. I've built it for the glory of my majesty!" By my power, for my glory—this is the heartbeat of pride in the human heart.

What he's saying is, "Oh, how I love to think of myself. I'm the reason for all of this. I'm the root of all of this. I'm the ruler of all of this. When I look out at everything I've accomplished, I love to think about how my intelligence and my initiative and my power caused all this greatness. It's all mine. I did it my way." This is what Nebuchadnezzar is saying. Pride loves to glory in being independent, self-determining and self-sufficient. He says, "This great city is for the glory of my majesty. I deserve all the fame of it. I'm worthy of great praise."

This is the essence of pride. We love to delight in the sufficiency of ourselves rather than in the sufficiency and greatness of our God. We find joy in exalting ourselves rather than finding our supreme pleasure in exalting our God Who made us and Who redeems us. And friends, it is impossible to live up on that pedestal of pride and be praising God at the same time. You just can't do it.

This is a binary choice for all of humanity. Either you will praise yourself, or you will praise God. Either you will humble yourself and praise God, or you will walk in pride and be unable to worship the God Who made you. So if we are to be worshipers of God, we've got to

come down off that pedestal of human pride. We must either humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, or perhaps in His severe mercy God might bring us down from that pedestal Himself. He can humble us—but you don't want to wait for Him to do that, do you? You don't want to take that risk. It's a mercy when He does humble people. It's an even greater mercy when He works in your heart to humble yourself.

I love how John Piper puts it: “God bends our stiff necks and pushes our face to the ground because that's where the streams of mercy flow.” Isn't that a great picture? “I'm going to take that stiff neck and put that face down to the ground,” why? “Because the streams of mercy are flowing down there. That's where you're going to find My grace,” God says. “That's where you're going to be refreshed by My mercy. It's when you humble yourself that you find the streams of mercy.”

Look at verse 31. This is just great. We can imagine this king pounding his chest, glorying in himself—and while the words were still in his mouth, there falls a voice from heaven. God says, “I am sick of this, Nebuchadnezzar. Speech is over, Nebuchadnezzar. I'm interrupting you now. You're going to see Who's in charge.” The voice comes from heaven and Nebuchadnezzar is probably scared to death when he hears this voice.

“O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you, and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. And you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.”

Immediately the word was fulfilled against Nebuchadnezzar. He was driven from among men and ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair grew as long as eagles' feathers, and his nails were like birds' claws.

You can Google a picture of Nebuchadnezzar in his insanity and see an artist's rendering of a man who looks like a beast, with his hair all the way down to the ground, with claws and feathers. It's a picture of insanity. Because, friends, that's pride. Pride is insane. We are a moment, a vapor. God is eternal. God alone is worthy of praise and glory and honor. Pride is a perverse lust, and the more it rages in the human heart, it knows no restraint, no bounds. And the only remedy for pride is praise—praise to the living God.

There are lots of things you can do to fight pride in your life. You can read chapters in Scripture like this one, looking at the examples of men whom God has humbled. You can go through the Psalms and see the glory of God on display in them. You can regularly lift up your

heart in worship to the God Who is revealed there. You can look at the lessons you learn from the falls of other people, considering the consequences they faced for their pride, and you can let that humble you as well.

But the greatest remedy for pride is praise. Oh, how it takes a lot of trouble for some of us to get there. Nebuchadnezzar becomes like a beast of the field—was it for seven years? Seven seasons? We don't know. But what we do know is God resists the proud. He mocks proud mockers but gives grace to the humble, Proverbs 3:34 says. And for a long time God mocked the mocker Nebuchadnezzar, and that's what turned him to praise.

Look at verse 34: "*At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven.*" Isn't that beautiful? "*I lifted my eyes to heaven.*" Pride never looks up. Pride looks within. It says, "I am great. My glory. My majesty." Pride looks to the side and sees other people, and you compare yourself with them. Pride looks down on others from its pedestal. But pride never looks up to the Most High God and worships Him.

At the end of his insanity—and this was the beginning of his return to sanity—Nebuchadnezzar lifted his eyes to heaven, "*and my reason returned to me.*" In other words, "I got my wits back. I got my insight, my reason returned to me when I did this:

*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;
all 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?"*

Praise God that these are the last recorded words of King Nebuchadnezzar in Scripture, and they're an acknowledgement of the glory of the true and living God, an acknowledgement that he realizes he is in his proper place now. He's a mere man under the sovereignty of God. And with this the story of Nebuchadnezzar ends in Scripture—with him telling us, "There's only one King Who is worthy of glory and praise, and I am not He." Sometimes I think it's good for us to just look in the mirror in the morning and say, "I am not the Christ," reminding ourselves of Who is and who is not worthy of glory and praise.

This passage has brought comfort to God's people from generation to generation. I hear there's a pretty big debate going on tomorrow night in our country. Isn't it good to remember that God gives the kingdoms of this world to whomever He wishes? Isn't it good to remember

that the Most High God is sovereign over President Obama? He has access to Barack Obama's heart, just like He has access to our hearts and He had access to Nebuchadnezzar's heart.

Isn't it good to remember that the Most High God is sovereign over Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, and that God will give the government of our nation to whom He wishes? Yes, we have responsibility in this, but we know, "This is my Father's world; I can rest me in that thought." I don't need to lose any sleep over what's going to happen in the next couple of months. There's comfort here.

But there's also conviction, isn't there? We don't have Babylonian kingly power, most of us, but we can make the most petty little things our personal kingdom projects, can't we? I think Paul Tripp says something about that. "It doesn't take months for us to wake up in the morning and to think of me, me, me, me, me. But takes grace for us to wake up in the morning and to think of You, You, You, You, You. You are worthy." You are worthy.

God wants us to know that here in humility is sanity. Look at verse 36:

At the same time my reason returned to me, and for the glory of my kingdom, my majesty and splendor returned to me. My counselors and my lords sought me, and I was established in my kingdom, and still more greatness was added to me. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just.

And here's the lesson: "And those who walk in pride he is able to humble." Take that to heart. Maybe pride in your life doesn't look like standing on the rooftop of a palace. Maybe pride looks like the reverse: shrinking back from serving others, from loving others, because you feel like, "I'm not good enough, and I might fail." So instead of reaching out and trusting God and loving others, you do what I have often done in my pride: hold back from serving because of fear of failure. And what is that? It's not humility. It's a subtle, deceptive, ugly form of self-protection—of pride. It's not wanting to risk having other people view you as a failure, wanting everyone to think you're successful, not wanting to go through the painful process of learning to "boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

It's easy to talk about dying to self. It's a lot harder to do it and to care only for the praise of God. We see here a mere man who made himself out to be God, and we see what God did with him. What a contrast to the one Man Who is God and how He came into our world. Though He was in very nature God, He made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, becoming obedient even to the point of death on a cross. And therefore God has highly exalted Him.

Why does Paul write that in Philippians 2? Because he wants our attitude to be the same as that of Christ Jesus—an attitude of humility. When we see Jesus clearly, what should we do? “Pour contempt on all my pride.” God is able to humble those who walk in pride. How much better, though, to gladly heed this word of Scripture: “Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God, and He will lift you up” (1 Peter 5:6).

Let's close in prayer.

Heavenly Father, too often we go through our days thinking of all the things we're concerned about, all the people we want to think well of us, all the things we need to do to maintain our kingdoms of self-promotion—and it's sin, Lord. We confess to You that we think far too much of ourselves and far too little of You. We thank You for Your mercy to us in Christ, that He came into our world and thought only of Your glory and of our good. He made Himself nothing for us.

O God, by the power of Your Holy Spirit, may we learn to walk more in that path of self-humbling, so that Your love can flow through us to others and Your glory can be seen in us. Lord, we love Your church, and we thank You for one another. We're praying for all who are grieving today—for the Stern and the Beatty families. We thank you for them, Lord.

We also thank you for the Campbell family, for Dan and Susie and Joey, for their faithfulness and continuing to trust You during this very painful year. As we remember them during this weekend of the anniversary of their daughter's entering into Your presence, we pray that you would comfort them and give them Your peace.

In all these things, Lord, lift our gaze more and more to You, and from our hearts receive the offering of praise You are so worthy of. How great You are, our God. You are worthy. Amen.

New Covenant Bible Church

4N780 Randall Road, St. Charles, IL 60175

(630) 584-2611 ♦ www.newcbc.org

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