

## DANIEL: PROFILES IN COURAGE

### IV. “Humbled Before God”

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Daniel 4:1-8 & 24-37

TEXT: *Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue.*” (Dan 4:27).

#### INTRODUCTION

It was in a small town in Mississippi. The Presbyterian pastor received a call from a teenager whose mother was very ill. The teen asked the pastor if he could please come right away and pray with his mother. Well, this pastor was quite flattered being asked to assist in this crisis, since he knew this family and they were faithful members of the Church of Christ. In his heart he felt he could probably understand why they might want him rather than their own pastor. But, he thought he'd better ask about the request.

“Is your pastor out of town?”

“No, sir,” the boy answered. “We just don’t want him exposed to what Mother has.”

God has many ways of dealing with our pride. I believe He uses gentle reminders when He can. But, when we fail to get the message, sometimes more drastic means are needed. It is all because He loves us and knows the destructive poison pride pours into our souls. This morning, we’re going to look at a powerful example of this in the life of King Nebuchadnezzar.

Let’s take a moment to review where we are in the Book of Daniel. Its setting is one of the most difficult periods in Israel’s history. It begins with the conquest of Israel by Babylon in 605 B.C. and the deportation of the cream of the crop of youth and leaders to Babylon, 1000 miles away. Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendego are among those deported. Daniel tells the story of how they courageously lived out their faith and remained true to God in this pagan land in spite of threats and opposition. The question so many of these Jews are wrestling with in their adversity is, “Is God still in control? Does He love us?” Again and again, we see the answer clearly demonstrated. In the last sermon, we saw His deliverance of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendego in the fiery furnace. Now we’ll see God’s judgment on an unrepentant Nebuchadnezzar.

King Nebuchadnezzar was not only a great general, leading his army to world conquest, but also a great builder— perhaps the greatest builder of ancient times. So far, 49 buildings have been excavated in ancient Babylon bearing his inscription. Most of the bricks uncovered bear this inscription: “I am Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon.” Do you get a hint of a bit of ego there? He built two huge walls around the city. The outer wall was 25 feet wide. A four-horse chariot could turn around on top of it and it had 100 gates. Plus there was a moat filled with water beyond the outer wall. He dug canals

from one end of the city to another to facilitate commerce. He built 17 temples, rebuilt his father's palace, and built two more palaces in the city. One of his greatest building feats were the famous Hanging Gardens. One of the king's wives grew homesick for the mountains of her native Media, so he had a mountain built on top of his royal palace with trees and all kinds of plants. He devised an ingenious hydraulic system to lift water from the Euphrates to water these elevated gardens. The Greeks named these hanging gardens one of the seven wonders of the world. Indeed, the City of Babylon, capitol of the empire, was a remarkable place.

I rather expect it was from these hanging gardens, atop the highest building on the highest ground of the city, Nebuchadnezzar looks out over his city and his heart swells with satisfaction and pride. But, let's read how Nebuchadnezzar tells his story.

Daniel 4:1-8...

I'm going to summarize the dream and it's interpretation for you. Nebuchadnezzar saw a huge beautiful tree whose top touched the sky. From it every creature on earth was fed. Then a messenger from heaven came down and commanded the tree be cut down and it's stump bound with a band of iron and bronze. The heavenly messenger declares:

*"Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, and let him live with the animals among the plants of the earth. Let his mind be changed from that of a man and let him be given the mind of an animal, till seven times pass by for him.*

*"The decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men.'" (Dan 4:15-17).*

Daniel gives God's interpretation of the dream and tells Nebuchadnezzar the tree represents him. As we've seen before in these dreams, God chose an appropriate image, since in one of his building inscriptions, Nebuchadnezzar compares Babylon to a spreading tree. Let's resume our reading now at verse 24....

While this is a chilling story of judgement, I want us to first of all reflect on the kindness, patience, and mercy of God in revealing himself to this pagan king. God has gone to extraordinary measures to bring him to Himself.

### **GOD'S KINDNESS**

Remember in chapter two, God reveals to Nebuchadnezzar a panorama of the future with the kingdoms that will follow his kingdom. God reveals himself to him as "The Most High God." Only the one in charge of the future can predict the future with unerring accuracy. In chapter three, we see the head of gold in the dream of the future from the previous chapter literally go to Nebuchadnezzar's head, and he has a 90 foot gold statue erected with a command for everyone to fall down and worship it when certain

music was played. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendego refuse to worship the idol and are thrown into a fiery furnace. They are supernaturally kept from harm by an angel or Jesus himself, the fourth man in the furnace. Now the king declares no one can say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendego.

Here we have two spectacular proofs of the sovereignty of the God of Israel. But Nebuchadnezzar just doesn't "get it." He remains a polytheist. Perhaps he has elevated this God above others, as "the Most High God." But at best, it is a "both-and" situation. The Creator of the universe has done everything He can to speak Nebuchadnezzar's language, to reveal himself to him. Yet, Nebuchadnezzar has not really given up his old ways or his old gods. He's just added one more to his pantheon.

Lest the king miss the message of judgement, Daniel gives this bold invitation:

*Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue." (Dan 4:27).*

It reminds me of what Paul says in Rom 2:4

*Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?*

And, in Eph. 2:4, Paul refers to God who "is rich in mercy." But this story is a startling reminder that when kindness, patience, and mercy do not bring us to God, He loves us enough to use drastic measures to bring us to salvation— tough love.

I expect most of us this morning can affirm God's goodness, kindness and grace toward us. Unfortunately, often the blessings don't seem to turn our hearts as much toward God as trouble does. As I look at my own spiritual life, it is clear that adversity has often been more useful in turning my heart toward God than the times of blessing.

Why is that? I believe it is because of our basic human nature which is twisted by pride. When the blessings come, we somehow feel deep inside that maybe we deserve all this. Perhaps the pride is best revealed by the complaining we do when things don't go "our way." We are, for the most part, self-centered, self-absorbed, full of ourselves— which constitutes pride.

Mark Buchanan writes insightfully,

"Pride grows in most soils, most climates. There are few conditions under which it can't survive, even thrive. But there is one soil that usually withers pride. It's brokenness.

'Blessed are the poor in spirit,' Jesus said.

'A broken and contrite heart,' David said, 'you do not despise.'

... Here is a curious thing: Brokenness— a broken heart, a broken spirit— molds our character closer to the heart of God than anything else. To experience defeat, disappointment, loss— the raw ingredients of brokenness— moves us closer to being like God than victory and gain and fulfillment ever can."

## THE FRUIT OF PRIDE

God still gives Nebuchadnezzar a full year to come to a place of worshipping God. Finally, God has waited long enough– “Times up!” It is time for some drastic action. Nebuchadnezzar surveys his city from his roof top gardens and says,

"Is not this the great Babylon **I have built** as the royal residence, by **my mighty power** and for **the glory of my majesty**?" (Dan 4:30).

While the words are still on his lips, God speaks from heaven in an audible voice and carries out his sentence.

“I” and “my” are the focal words of Nebuchadnezzar. “Mighty power” and “glory of my majesty” sound like phrases God fearing people use in worship of God. Indeed, it seems all the blessings heaped upon Nebuchadnezzar, which should have produced humility toward God, have gone to seed and swelled into pride. It all gets short-circuited in Nebuchadnezzar’s ego so that he somehow feels he is the source of it all.

It sounds like the recently deposed leader of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, who ruled over a part of what was the ancient Babylon. The statues, murals, pictures of him plastered everywhere over the country along with his shameless luxury palaces all point to pride, while his subjects languished in poverty. Every government official was required to read his 19-volume official biography.

If we are stuck on ourselves and make ourselves the center, we answer only to ourselves. We then make our own rules regarding morality and behavior. Daniel’s call to Nebuchadnezzar to

*Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue.*" (Dan 4:27),

is an effort to break through the tough shell of pride and open him up to his responsibility toward God and other people– not just with words, but by actions.

Nebuchadnezzar’s sentence, is carried out where he is given the mind of an animal for 7 years or until 7 times pass. It could mean 7 seasons or another unit of time. That hairy, naked body with fingernails like the claws of a bird, eating grass forms a gruesome picture. But, it strikes me, this is an acted out parable of what happens when we refuse to acknowledge our Creator and our lives curve in on themselves in pride. We are little more than animals. It is the soul part of us that makes us human and above the animals. If we ignore that part, in fact smother it under our bloated egos, we become animal-like in our behavior and lives. We just follow our passions and desires in a narrow world of self. In fact, Paul uses that argument powerfully in Rom. 1:20-32. Turn with me to that....

Do you realize that annually we spend more on pornography in this country than the income from all the professional sports combined? In the latest *Christianity Today*,

Phillip Yancey writes about a physician friend of his, David, who spent two months in a remote African nation, where he had been serving the people.

“The airplane on which he traveled home was showing current movies, and after two months away from all media, he found them jarring. Each movie centered on sexual intercourse, as though this were the only significant topic in the world, whereas David has just been dealing with weighty matters— disease, poverty, hunger, religion, death— while relating to colleagues in a way that had nothing to do with sexual intercourse. When the plane stopped for refueling at the Brussels airport, David saw rows of magazines for sale featuring women’s breasts in various stages of exposure. That too, seemed odd, for he had been working in an area where women commonly uncovered their breasts in public, not for sexual arousal but to feed their children. *Welcome back to Western civilization*, he thought to himself.”

What is wrong with us? As Paul says, because of our refusal to worship our Creator, God gave us over to shameful lusts, acting and living like animals.

## SALVATION

God’s sentence for Nebuchadnezzar brings about the needed change.

*At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever.*

*His dominion is an eternal dominion;*

*his kingdom endures from generation to generation. ( Dan 4:34).*

And the chapter concludes with,

*Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. **And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.** (Dan 4:37)*

There is nothing like sickness or other forms of adversity to humble us and turn our hearts back to God. For those who have been carefully managing their lives, disease or disaster that is beyond their control stops pride in its tracks. Suffering is often the route God uses to produce the brokenness we need as an antidote to pride. When trouble comes your way, don’t waste it. Use it to effectively root out our pride and independence, and drive us deeper into God.

True humility is not squashing ourselves down and thinking nothing of ourselves so we become doormats or dishrags. Humility comes from magnifying God, making Him bigger than ourselves— transferring our self-confidence to God-confidence. Nebuchadnezzar becomes a picture of worship as he says I *raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored*. This is what we do in worship. In worship, two things happen that cultivate humility.

We **ascribe worth (“worth-ship”)** to God. Meditating on, praising, exalting Him makes Him bigger than our plans, our lives and our pettiness. The creation

around us helps (as Paul affirms in what we just read from Romans 1). Standing among the gigantic mountains, by the ocean, beneath the starry sky or examining an intricate rose, the bigness and greatness of our Creator moves us to lift up our eyes. We become smaller; He becomes greater. We stand in wonder at His love and grace toward us.

Worship is also **allegiance-pledging**. We place ourselves under His care, control, and direction. He is Lord, which means we are not. There can only be one Lord. This again solves our “me-centeredness” pride. It is the beginning of living and doing as our Master taught.

That’s why what we do here every Sunday is so important. And, of course, we need more than our formal worship times. Every day we need to begin with a devotional time of prayer, praise, and submitting ourselves to God’s Word. Through the day we need to continue to bring our hearts back to worship in little brief prayers and praises. Then, and only then, will we begin to truly live as God intended.

## **CONCLUSION**

This is an amazing and sobering story. It causes me to stand in renewed awe and reverence before God. He loves us, and tries to draw us to Himself with blessing and kindness. But, He will also use harsher means if necessary to bring us to Himself. Just like any good earthly parent, He does everything He can to keep us from destroying ourselves in animal-like self-absorption.

How have you responded to all His blessings and kindness? Has it led you to repentance? When adversity comes, have you let it drive you to God, breaking your inner person so it can be made into His image?

As we close, let’s join with all our hearts in worship with that wonderful hymn I think Nebuchadnezzar could sing with us, “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise.”