

## **“The Humbling of the Proud”**

**Daniel 4:1-37**

**February 28, 2016**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

Someone asked me a couple of weeks ago if I thought we would see Nebuchadnezzar in heaven. I told him to wait until the fourth chapter of Daniel to find out. I notice that this chapter is mostly in the first person. What we have here is Nebuchadnezzar’s testimony of God’s work in his life, and he describes it in terms of pride and humility. We can see that in the concluding verse of the chapter: **“those who walk in pride he is able to humble.”** That is exactly the way the Bible speaks of coming to God for salvation. We must repent of our pride, humble ourselves and come empty-handed to God. So my answer to the question is, “Yes, I think we will see Nebuchadnezzar in heaven.” The Bible doesn’t teach that good people go to heaven while bad people go to hell. We read verses in the Bible like Romans 4:5 where Paul writes that God justifies the ungodly. The Bible teaches that it is the proud who go to hell and the humble to heaven. Pride shuts God out of our lives while humility flings the door wide open to his glorious and joyful presence.

Is your view of life the same as that of this chapter, seeing pride as our big problem? Let me give you a test by asking you a question. If someone says to you, “God has really blessed me?” what do you normally think they mean? Most of us would conclude that God has blessed them financially or perhaps given them a promotion at work. This chapter, consistent with the rest of the Bible, teaches something else. The blessing of God takes the form of humility. Such things as riches, accomplishments and fame become curses if not mixed with humility. We can see this clearly in Nebuchadnezzar’s testimony. He begins by reporting how he made it to the top. **“I...was at ease in my house and prospering in my palace”** (v. 4). He had achieved all his goals. He was the most powerful man in the most powerful kingdom of the earth. But he wasn’t blessed, and he wouldn’t be until he could be delivered from the boastful heart that said, “Look at me and how great I am,” and learn to say instead, “Only God is great.”

So I want to ask you again. Have you come to see that your big problem is pride? Until you see it this way, you will invariably bring harm into your life. I understand that in early 19<sup>th</sup> century London there was an outbreak of cholera. The thinking at that time was that cholera was caused by bad smells. So one of the ways they sought to address it was to begin installing indoor plumbing to remove quickly the sewage from homes instead of letting it sit around and stink. The raw sewage was taken through a series of pipes to the Thames River where it was dumped untreated. They actually measured their progress in fighting cholera by how much sewage was dumped into the river.

The more sewage, the more effective they were being. The problem, of course, was that their drinking water came from that river. By misidentifying the real problem, they were making things worse. Until we see pride as our central problem, we will do the same. So let's look at this testimony to see how God humbles the proud, including each one of us.

## I. **Pride – Descent into Insanity**

After Nebuchadnezzar had made it to the top and was at ease and prospering, a dark cloud appeared on the horizon in the form of a troubling dream. It had happened once before in his life many decades prior to this, and now it happens again. The dream made him afraid, though there was no obvious reason for him to be afraid. He was both the richest and the most powerful man in the world. The dream was of a giant tree that was both beautiful and fruitful, providing both sustenance and refuge for many. But then something spoils it all. The voice of an angel from heaven, called a “watcher” in our text, speaks a word of proclamation that the tree be chopped down. Then the metaphor changes from a tree to a man, and the man becomes like a beast, sleeping outdoors and eating grass. The angel says that this sad condition will last for **“seven periods of time”** (v.16), understood by most to mean seven years. The angel even states the purpose of this event, **“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”** (v. 17). When none of Nebuchadnezzar's wise men can interpret the dream, he once again calls in Daniel, who tells him that he is the tree and he is the man who will become insane and beastlike.

Daniel then appeals to Nebuchadnezzar to repent so that this tragedy might not befall him. Perhaps he was moved somewhat by Daniel's counsel, but not enough actually to repent. The tragedy indicated by the dream didn't happen immediately. God waited twelve months before doing so. Perhaps he was giving Nebuchadnezzar time to avoid this painful experience through his repentance. But as often happens, if we don't repent when God's Spirit first brings conviction of sin, such repentance becomes less likely with the passing of time.

The events foretold in the dream happened all at once. From the roof of his palace, Nebuchadnezzar one day looked out on the city he had built and was overcome with a wave of pride. **“Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty”** (v. 30)? His boast included some truth. Nebuchadnezzar was noted as a builder, and the city he had built contained two of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, the Hanging Gardens and the city walls. Archaeologists have found the remains of this wall and estimate it to be over eight kilometers in length. According to the ancient historian Herodotus, it had enough space on

its top to allow a four horse chariot to turn around. The pride of Nebuchadnezzar was not seen in noting the greatness of these structures, but in taking credit for it without acknowledging God. He took credit for the building of this great city and even believed that its purpose was to highlight his own greatness. He reminds me here of the roofer who steps back to admire his work, only to fall to the ground. The God who is able to humble the proud intervenes at that moment to humble proud Nebuchadnezzar. He humbles him with a form of insanity. Nebuchadnezzar begins to act like an animal, which is an appropriate judgment for his pride. It is insane to be proud. People who are insane don't live in reality, and living as if we, and not God, are the center is not living in reality. It is insane.

It is easy to see pride in others, but not so easy to see it in ourselves. Does this story give us any help in seeing our own pride? Daniel's counsel to Nebuchadnezzar to repent of his sins is helpful in this by identifying a common result of pride. Daniel counsels repentance from his **"iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed"** (v. 27). Here's what that tells us about spotting pride in our lives. Pride uses people in our lives rather than loving people. In his pride, Nebuchadnezzar viewed everyone in his realm as existing for his purpose. They existed for him and not the other way around. How does that apply to us? None of us have a realm as extensive as Nebuchadnezzar's, but all of us have people who are a regular part of our lives. Do you view those people as existing for you, or the other way around? John Gottman is a psychologist who is famous for his studies on marriage. He has found that there is one trait in a marriage that serves as an accurate predictor of divorce. Marriages have a very hard time surviving this feature. You probably won't be able to guess what it is. It's contempt. But where does contempt come from? Contempt settles in to a relationship when you think the other person exists for you and then conclude that they are letting you down. It is pride that leads you to think your spouse, or anyone else, exists for you. You are not the center. Only God is. Until we learn that, we will destroy all that is precious in life.

## **II. Humility – the Return of Sanity**

There were three characters in this story who had a hand in bringing the king to a place of humility. They were Daniel, God and Nebuchadnezzar himself. Let's consider first Daniel's role. I see Daniel doing three things, and they are the same three things God calls us to do with those we care for who need to repent of their pride. The first thing Daniel did was to have the courage to tell Nebuchadnezzar the truth about his dream, even though it was an unpleasant truth. This dream was different than the one reported in chapter 2 in that Nebuchadnezzar told the content and only asked his wise men for the interpretation. Curiously, though the interpretation seems obvious, they were unable to make it known. I think they knew the interpretation but were afraid

to tell the king the truth because it was a hard truth. But Daniel was not afraid to tell the truth, no matter how hard it was. If we want to be used of God to lead our friends to repentance from their pride, we must be willing to do the same. Daniel wasn't rude about this. He didn't pester Nebuchadnezzar with this truth day after day, but was faithful when the opportunity presented itself.

Second, Daniel loved the king. You can see that in his longing that the tragic interpretation of the dream apply to someone else. **“May the dream be for those who hate you and its interpretation for your enemies!”** (v. 19). Let me remind you that this was a king who had thrown Daniel's friends into the furnace, who was responsible for the destruction of his beloved country and of Daniel's exile, and who had resisted for decades Daniel's efforts to bring him to a knowledge of the true God. It was Daniel's love that helped keep the door open for a continued relationship with him that eventually led to his conversion.

Though it's not explicitly stated in our text, I think we can safely assume that Daniel prayed for Nebuchadnezzar. We are going to see in a couple of chapters that it was Daniel's practice to pray three times a day (6:10). I think it's almost certain that this pagan king was included regularly in Daniel's prayers. God heard every one of those prayers, even though it took between thirty and forty years before Nebuchadnezzar came to faith. An important application of this is not to give up on praying for the salvation of those you love, no matter how long it may be taking. Bryan Chapell tells about a colleague who had a great-aunt who had died. Her heart had been hardened by a lifetime of selfish and careless living. Whenever someone tried to share the gospel with her, she either scoffed or flew into a rage. Since none of her immediate family knew the Lord, hers seemed to be a hopeless case. After she died, the family gathered at her house to divide her personal belongings. On her bookshelf, someone discovered a box with some Christian books in it. Since no one else present had any interest in religion, they gave the entire box to Bryan Chapell's friend. He took the books home, but they smelled so strongly of stale tobacco smoke and a stuffy house that he just took them straight to his attic without looking in the box. A few months later, he was in the attic for something else and happened to see the box of books from his great aunt. He decided to investigate the box's contents. The first book he pulled out was a devotional guide that was very sound. As he took the other books out, he was surprised that they were all theologically and biblically solid. While thumbing through a commentary on Ephesians in this collection, he came upon a handwritten letter pressed between the pages. The letter was written by his aunt late in her life and addressed to God. In it, she confessed her sins to God and claimed Jesus Christ as her Savior.

The primary role in Nebuchadnezzar's humbling belonged to God. At one level, Nebuchadnezzar was the last person on the planet you would expect to go

to heaven. His worship was all wrong, being focused on idols. His social ethics were an assault upon the character of God because he oppressed the poor and used them for his purposes. And he claimed for himself the glory that belonged only to God. What's more, he was a Gentile, growing up without the benefit of God's revelation to his people, the Jews. But God set out to reach him, and God will stop at nothing when he decides to bring someone to himself. Doing so in Nebuchadnezzar's case would require a great deal from God. He first of all had to make himself appear to be weak in allowing the Babylonians to defeat his people. He then had to be patient with Nebuchadnezzar, not just for a few days or weeks, and not even for a few years, but for several decades. He was patient even though Nebuchadnezzar had the benefit of seeing miracles, receiving God's revelation to him through his dreams and Daniel's interpretation of those dreams, and then finally the direct word of Daniel urging him to repent. All these things he turned down. But God is relentless in bringing his mercy to us, and he never gives up. Sometimes Christians have a hard time believing that God can forgive their sins. Nebuchadnezzar teaches us, among other things, that no one is beyond the reach of God's grace. God comes to us now in Jesus, willing to be weak in order to reclaim us for himself.

Finally, Nebuchadnezzar himself had a role in his humbling. The climactic event in his life, the one that will result in our seeing Nebuchadnezzar in heaven, was very simple when it finally happened. **“At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High”** (v. 34). The significant thing about this is that Nebuchadnezzar's turning to God came at a time when he had nothing. He did so when he was in the field eating grass, more beastlike than human. That's the only way we can come to God. As Augustus Toplady writes in our closing hymn today, “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling; naked, come to thee for dress; helpless, look to thee for grace; foul, I to the Fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die.” Nebuchadnezzar had witnessed amazing miracles from God. He had had God's word brought to him through Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. These things had an effect upon him. He once issued a decree that anyone who spoke against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego should be torn limb from limb. It's a good thing God wasn't like him, because Nebuchadnezzar repeatedly spoke against God by claiming credit for himself for the things that were gifts from God. But the day finally came when he simply turned to God with empty hands. It no longer mattered that he had been the richest, most powerful man in the world. He was now a sinner in need of God's grace. That is the way we must all come.