

Learning The Hard Way That God is God And We Are Not

Daniel 4:1-37

Introduction

1) C. S. Lewis calls it “the great sin” and with good reason. It is the sin that led to the fall of Satan. It is the sin that led to the fall of humanity and drove Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Of this sin Lewis said, “There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which everyone loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty themselves. I have 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 have ever heard anyone who was not a Christian accuse himself of this vice. And at the same time I have very seldom met anyone, who was not a Christian, who showed the slightest mercy to it in others. There is no fault that makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others.

The vice I am talking of is Pride or Self-Conceit: and the virtue opposite to it, in Christian morals, is called Humility....According to Christian teachers, the

essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind.” (Mere Christianity, 108-109).

2) Jonathan Edwards has much the same opinion on this great sin as Lewis. He wrote, “The first and worst cause of error that prevails in our day is spiritual pride. This is the main door by which the devil comes into the hearts of those who are zealous for the advancement of Christ. It is the chief inlet of smoke from the bottomless pit to darken the mind and mislead the judgment, and the main handle by which Satan takes hold of Christians to hinder a work of God. Until the disease is cured, medicines are applied in vain to heal all other diseases.

Pride is more difficult to discern than any other corruption because, by nature, pride is a person having too high a thought of himself. Is it any surprise, then, that a person who has too high a thought of himself is unaware of it? He thinks the opinion he has of himself has just grounds and therefore is not too high. As a result, there is no other matter in which the heart is more deceitful and unsearchable. The very nature of it is to work self-confidence and drive away any suspicion of evil respecting itself.”

(Adapted from “Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England” from *The Words of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1, 398-399)

3) Proverbs 8:13 teaches us, “The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate.” Perhaps no one in the Bible came to understand this truth better than King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Proud of his accomplishments and proud in his speech, he learned the hard way that, “Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall (Prov. 16:18).” He learned the hard way, that you can be strutting like a king one day and living like an animal the next. He learned the hard way that the “Most High God” (vs. 2, 17, 24, 25, 32, 34) is God and he and we are not.

4) God hates pride because it challenges his sovereignty and questions His will and ways (v. 37). It claims a position and power for mere mortals that rightly belongs only to “the King of heaven” (v.37). Daniel 4, through the humiliation and restoration of the most powerful man on the earth in that day, reminds us that God is in control and we are not. He is Sovereign over all and “rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will” (v. 17, 25, 32). These are words of assurance and comfort. They are also words of warning and wisdom for all of us. What God did to King Nebuchadnezzar, He can also do, and will do if necessary, to you and me. This is the last that we will see of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel. The text contains a powerful warning concerning the pitfalls for pride. It also contains, “a

powerful message for those who are fearful of or intimidated by the might of human kings and kingdoms” (Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Daniel*, 113).

I. It is good to honor our great and sovereign God for sorrow that leads to repentance 4:1-3

- Proverbs 18:12, “Before his downfall a man’s heart is proud, but humility comes before honor.”
- “Do you wish people to think well of you? Don’t speak well of yourself” (Pascal).

1) Chapter 4 begins like chapter 3 ends: with a kingly decree. It is also similar to chapter 2 with the king having a dream and needing an interpretation from Daniel because once again his magicians, enchanters, Chaldeans and astrologers cannot deliver the goods (4:7). They are as impotent in chapter 4 as they were in chapter 2.

2) However, this decree in chapter 4 is of a different piece of cloth. It is a personal testimony, a gospel tract, and a deposition before a Judge and juror wrapped up in one amazing story. Nebuchadnezzar wishes to honor the Most High God for what He did in his life as He led him, drove him, to a sorrow that led to repentance.

- 3) He begins by noting the universal, dare we say missional, nature of what he is about to share, “to all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell on the earth,” (v.1). If Nebuchadnezzar were alive today he would have called a prime time news conference for T.V. and radio. He would have taken to Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. He wanted as many people as possible to know what God did!
- 4) In language steeped in biblical terminology, perhaps an indication that Daniel assisted him in composing this global proclamation, the king begins with a hope that” Peace be multiplied to everyone!” This does not sound like the Neb of chapters 1-3 where he threatens to separate heads from bodies and throws teenagers into a fiery furnace. What changed him? God did!!! And he wants the whole world to know. “It seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me.” (v.2). Let me tell you the amazing things the amazing God has done in my life.
- 5) Verse 3 is likened to a short hymn of praise or a doxology and is bracketed by the doxology that concludes the chapter in verse 37. The words recall Psalm 145:13. Two parallel affirmations comprise the doxology:

“How great are his [God’s] signs,
how mighty his wonders!”

No God is like this God in what He does. And, no God is like this God in what He has. I did not see it before but I do now!

“His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and

His dominion endures from generation to generation.

My worldview and spiritual perspective has been turned on its head, upside down. Because of God’s work in my life, bringing great sorrow that led to repentance, I have a new theological perspective. A new worldview.

Indeed, I am a new man. C. S. Lewis once more provides a really good insight, “A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you” (*Mere Christianity*, III). Nebuchadnezzar had been looking down, but he was now looking up and he glorifies the God he sees.

II. It is good when our great and sovereign God troubles our heart in order to get our attention 4:4-18

- Psalm 10:4, “in his pride the wicked does not seek [God]; in all his thoughts there is no room for God.”
- “If you plan to build a tall house of virtues, you must first lay deep foundations of humility” (Augustine)

1) Nebuchadnezzar begins his story in verse 4 by recounting the second troubling dream that he received from God (the first was in chapter 2). It

notes that life was good, that he “was at ease in my house and prospering in my palace.” Though we cannot be certain, it was probably late in his reign (605 – 562 B.C.), maybe between 575-563 B.C. He was successfully secure and enjoying a well-deserved time of rest and relaxation as he saw it.

However, God hit him right between the eyes with a personal crisis with “a dream that made me afraid” (v. 5). In fact as he lay in his bed he says “the fancies (*HCSB*, “images”) and the visions of my head alarmed me (*NIV*, “terrified”). This dream was another nightmare to which the king would have attached futuristic significance. So, as he had done previously (2:2-3) he called his pagan wise men to interpret the dream (v.6). And, like the fool who keeps doing the same thing over and over expecting different results, his scholarly guild again cannot deliver, “they could not make known to me its interpretation” (v.7). So once more he goes to where he should have started. He calls on his “go to” guy Daniel, also named “Belteshazzar...in whom is the spirit of the holy gods” (or “Spirit of the holy God”) (v. 8-9). He also identifies Daniel as the “chief of the magicians” (then why not go to him first?!) telling him that “no mystery is too difficult for you” (v.9).

2) Nebuchadnezzar then tells Daniel his dream in verses 10-17 with a second request for its interpretation in verse 18. Let’s give a brief summary with a few comments along the way.

Nebuchadnezzar saw as incredibly large, strong tree that, like the tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1-9, reached into the heavens and “was visible to the whole earth” (v. 10-11). It also had beautiful leaves and fruit to feed everybody. Animals found shade under it, the birds lived in its branches and everyone “was fed from it” (v. 12). If this tree represents the king, and it does, what a testimony and witness to his greatness and glory. However, tragedy is on the way.

In his visions while dreaming in bed, an angel “came down from heaven,” here described as “a watcher, a holy one” (v. 13). Interestingly the word “watcher” occurs only in Daniel 4 (vs. 13, 17, 23) in the Old Testament. His message is ominous, “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. 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. 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.’” Verse 17 is the key that unlocks the purpose of the chapter and the interpretation of the dream. The sentence of judgment on the tree is “by the word of the holy ones [watchers] to the end,” for this purpose,

“ 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 man.” As Bryan Chapell reminds us, “Talent, brains, and opportunity mean nothing apart from God’s provision” (*The Gospel According to Daniel*, 75). I suspect Nebuchadnezzar had a strong inkling as to the meaning of his visions. Still, he pleads with Daniel to provide the interpretation because, affirming what he knows to be true for the 3rd time (vs. 8, 9, 18), “the spirit of the holy gods is in you” (4:18). The king did not need a “yes man.” He needed a “truth man.” The head of state needed a man of faith to speak truth into life and Daniel was such a man. Would that we would boldly and humbly walk in his steps!

III. It is good when our great and sovereign God exposes our sin and calls us to righteousness 4:19-27

- Proverbs 16:5, “The Lord detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished.”
- “Nothing will make us so tender to the faults of others, as, by self-examination, thoroughly to know our own” (Fénelon).

1) Daniel, the man of God, is now dismayed and alarmed (*NIV*, “perplexed and terrified”, v. 19). I do not think he feared for his life. I think he feared for what might happen to Nebuchadnezzar. I think Daniel genuinely cared for

the king. They had spent many years together and he had a genuine affection for him. However compassion does not get in the way of conviction (and commission) for the man of God. They can and should complement each other. Nebuchadnezzar, interestingly, seeks to comfort Daniel saying, “Belteshazzar, let not the dream or the interpretation alarm you.” Daniel responds saying he wished the dream was not about Nebuchadnezzar, but “for those who hate you and its interpretation for your enemies.” However, Daniel must as Ephesians 4:15 says, “speak the truth in love.” He does not stutter or stammer, but gives it to the king straight up. Like Moses before Pharaoh, Elijah before Ahab and the prophets of Baal, John the Baptist before Herod, and Jesus before Pilate, Daniel tells Nebuchadnezzar not what he wants to hear, but what he needs to hear. We can summarize Daniel’s interpretation in straight forward and simple propositions:

- 1) You, O King, are the great tree and it symbolizes your greatness (vs. 20-22).
- 2) You are the tree chopped down with only a stump remaining (vs. 23).
- 3) You will live like an animal outdoors in the fields until “seven periods (7 years or symbolic of the perfect time to do the trick) of time pass over” (vs. 23-25).

- 4) All of this will happen to teach you a very valuable lesson: that you learn “that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom He will” (v. 25).
- 5) When you come to your spiritual sense, you will get your kingdom back (v. 26).
- 6) God is a gracious and loving God who is quick to forgive and show mercy. So a) listen to my counsel, b) stop your sinning and start doing the right thing and c) stop your wicked injustices and show mercy to the oppressed (v. 27). If you do, God may be kind and “there may be a lengthening of your prosperity.” I appreciate David Helm’s insights at this point on these particular verses,

“We must be willing to share the bad news with people that they are out of sorts with God, even as our heart breaks for them while saying it. We must be willing to tell others that God is not pleased with this pride—the human tendency to push him aside, and think that we are the measure of all things. We must be willing to say why God works against us—so that we might one day know that he rules, and not us. Finally, we must be ready to call for repentance and offer hope.

Daniel did all of that. And then the text stops. We are not told what the king said on that day. In fact, the verses that follow take the reader into the future, to at least one year later, and then seven periods of time beyond. Clearly, God didn't feel any need for us to know how this private witness was received. He wanted us simply to see that it was given....Daniel didn't shirk from speaking God's word into the life of the most powerful man in the world. In doing so, he has provided us with an example of the backbone needed to be faithful when our opportunity comes. And come it will, for God is in the business of revealing himself to prominent, powerful people." (*Daniel for You*, 78).

IV. It is good that our great and sovereign God humbles us when we are arrogant and prideful 4:28-33

- Isaiah 2:17, says "And the haughtiness of man shall be humbled, and the lofty pride of men shall be brought low, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day."
- "Do not desire to be the principal man in the church. Be lowly. Be humble. The best man in the church is the man who is willing to be a doormat for all to wipe their boots on, the brother who does not mind what happened to him at all, so long as God is glorified." (Spurgeon)

- 1) Nebuchadnezzar pays the price for his “I” and “my” perspective in verse 30. “At the end of twelve months” (v.29), after Daniel interpreted his dream and called the king to repentance and mercy (v. 27), “all this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar” (v. 28). The hammer of God’s judgment came down and it came down with a vengeance. Bob Fyall notes, “Nebuchadnezzar is like Adam and Eve who when confronted with another tree, instead of becoming gods, were banished from Eden” (*Daniel: A Tale of Two Cities*, 70).
- 2) Nebuchadnezzar had forgotten who is the “Most High” and who had given him his great kingdom. He has forgotten or chose to ignore Daniel’s warning and call to repentance. “Walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon” (this was not the only palace he had!), he began to brag and boast about who he was and what he had done. “Is not this great Babylon, which *I* have built by *my* mighty power as royal residence for the glory of *my* majesty?” (v. 30). I did all this and I deserve all the praise. I am the smartest. I am the strongest. I am the wisest. I am the man! Those who have accomplished great things need to daily remind themselves that they have nothing that God in grace has not given them. We were born where He decides. We are the person He made us. The things we have he gave us. “He gives to

whom he will” (vs. 17, 23). Nebuchadnezzar had forgotten this basic, fundamental truth of life, and now he will be reminded the hard way.

3) While the King was still crowing about his own greatness, “while the words were still in his mouth, there fell a voice from heaven” (v.31).

A divine thunderclap came down from heaven with a message of severe judgment and sentencing. The Most High who rules the kingdoms of men declares the following:

1) The kingdom is taken from you (v.31).

2) You will be driven away from humanity (v.32).

3) You will live with animals, act like an animal and eat like an animal (v.32).

4) This will last as long as it takes (“seven periods of time,” possibly years but also possibly a perfect amount of time symbolized by the number 7), “until you know that the Most High God rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will” (v.32).

4) “Immediately the word [of the Most High God] was fulfilled against Nebuchadnezzar” (v.33). He was struck by a behavioral disorder called boanthropy where “one imagines oneself a cow or bull and acts accordingly” (Davis, BST, 59). It is also referred to as lycanthropy

where a person believes he or she is an animal and behaves like an animal. The one who saw himself as superman became subman. The one who thought he was super-human became sub-human.

- He lived with animals not men
- He ate grass like an ox not food like a man
- He lived and slept in the field not the home and bed of a man
- He had fingers and toenails like the claws of a bird and not those of a human.

Sinclair Ferguson is spot on when he says, “The one who refused to honor God’s glory loses his own glory. Refusing to share what he has with the poor, he becomes poorer than the poor. He becomes outwardly what his heart has been spiritually and inwardly-bestial” (Ferguson, 93). Do you hear the words of Galatians 6:7 whispering in your ears, “Do not be deceived! God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.”

V. It is good to praise our great and sovereign God because He always does what is right 4:34-37

- James 4:6, 10 “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourself before the Lord and he will exalt you.”

- “Jesus came into the world to convert people from God-like dependence on self to child-like dependence on God. And then he died to pay the penalty for our pride and to show us the way to humility and to send all our boasting toward God and not toward ourselves.” (John Piper, “Believing God on Election Day,” 11-6-88)

1) Psalm 121:1-2 says, “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” I do not know if Nebuchadnezzar knew these verses or not. What I do know is he not only looked up to the hills, he lifted his eyes up to heaven (v. 34). Looking down to the ground like an animal, he turned and looked up to God in heaven and was restored to being a man made in the image of the God he had come to know as Savior. Yes, I believe Nebuchadnezzar was genuinely converted and saved, and that he entered into a life changing relationship with the One True and Living God, the One he acknowledges now personally as “the Most High.” The king’s reason returned to him and he immediately did what any right thinking person does: he worshipped his God. He “praised and honored him who lives forever,” whose dominion is everlasting and whose Kingdom goes on forever (v. 34-35).

- 2) In the midst of this song of praise, Nebuchadnezzar gets quite theological in verse 35. In comparison to the Sovereign God whose dominion is everlasting and whose kingdom endures forever, humans are not much: “all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing”. The Most High God does what he wills in heaven above and He does the same on earth below. You cannot stop this God and you should not question this God. I hear Job saying “amen” in the background.
- 3) Nebuchadnezzar got back his mind and he also got back his kingdom (v.36). In fact God not only set him back on the throne, “more greatness was added.” Did Nebuchadnezzar claim credit for the increase of his kingdom? Not this time. Verse 37 reads, “Now, I Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven.” This is the only time the phrase “king of heaven” appears in the Old Testament. And why does this king on earth praise and extol and honor the King who is in heaven? Three reasons are given: 1) all his works are right; 2) his ways are just; and 3) those who walk in pride he is able to humble. These are Nebuchadnezzar’s last words. He is dead. He is long gone. However, the King of heaven, the Most High

God, He is still on his throne and He is still sovereign over the universe.

Conclusion: How does our text point to Christ?

Daniel 4 gives us glimpses of the Lord Jesus in several ways. First, it reminds us to remember who is God and who is not, who is King and who is not. Nebuchadnezzar as great as he was, was only a finite and temporal king with a small “k”. However, there is one who is coming whom the Ancient of Days will give a dominion and kingdom that will be “an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away and ...shall not be destroyed.” In this kingdom “all peoples, nations, and languages will serve him” (Dan. 7:13-14). This is God’s King with a capital “K!” This is God’s Lord with a capital “L.” This is the King who will rule the nations because, “On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.” (Rev. 19:15-16). Second, we see Christ in striking contrast with Nebuchadnezzar. As Tremper Longman says, “how could those of us who read the New Testament fail to think of Christ in the light of Nebuchadnezzar’s pride and shame?” (Daniel, NIVAC, 125). Consider the following categories in the light of Philippians 2:6-11.

Nebuchadnezzar	Christ
A mere man	Eternal God

Sinful	Sinless
Merciless	Merciful
Glorified himself	Humbled himself
Aspired to sovereignty	Aspired to be a servant
Exalted himself and was humbled by God	Humbled Himself and was exalted by God

Third, God gives his kingdom “to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of me” (4:17). An ancient Hebrew reading this verse could easily have thought, “God did this in our past. Will he do it again in our future?” Is there a prophetic impulse in verse 17? Sidney Greidanus notes, “In Israel’s history God set over his kingdom the young David, bypassing his older brothers; he chose the younger Solomon over Adonijah. Isaiah prophesied about God’s chosen Servant, “He was despised and rejected by others” (53:3), but God allotted him “a portion with the great” (53:12)....Jesus born in a stable, poor, despised, crucified, but claiming after his resurrection that God had given to him “all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18).” (*Preaching Christ from Daniel*, 128).

Yes, God had done it before. And yes, God did it again!