

The fall and rise of Nebuchadnezzar

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Date: 07 June 2020

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[0 : 00] Daniel 4, verses 19-37 Daniel interprets the dream. Then Daniel, also called Belteshazzar, was greatly perplexed for a time, and his thoughts terrified him.

So the king said, Belteshazzar, do not let the dream or its meaning alarm you. Belteshazzar answered, My lord, if only the dream applied to your enemies and its meaning to your adversaries. The tree you saw, which grew large and strong, with its top touching the sky, visible to the whole earth, with its beautiful leaves and abundant fruit, providing food for all, giving shelter to the wild animals, and having nesting places in its branches for the birds.

Your majesty, you are that tree. You have become great and strong. Your greatness has grown until it reaches the sky, and your dominion extends to distant parts of the earth.

Your majesty saw a holy one, a messenger, coming down from heaven and saying, Cut down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump, bound with iron and bronze, in the grass of the field, while its roots remain in the ground.

[1 : 09] Let him be drenched until the dew of the heaven. Let him live with the wild animals until seven times pass by for him. This is the interpretation, your majesty, and this is the decree of the Most High, as issued by against my lord, the king.

You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals. You will eat grass like the ox and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes. The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that heaven rules. Therefore, your majesty, be pleased to accept my advice.

Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your weakness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue. The dream is fulfilled.

All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, he said, Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?

[2 : 27] Even as the words were on his lips, a voice came from heaven, This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar. Your royal authority has been taken away from you. You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals.

You will eat grass like the ox. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes.

Immediately, what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like the ox. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claw of a bird.

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

His dominion is an eternal dominion. His kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth.

[3 : 34] No one can hold back his hand or say to him, What have you done? At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honour and splendour were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom.

My advisors and nobles sought me out, out and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exult 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. Daniel, chapter 4. We'll see pride before a fall and we'll see God's power that shows mercy.

Daniel, chapter 4 is really interesting because it really stands as a personal testimony to God's glory and mercy that comes from King Nebuchadnezzar. Now, imagine waking up tomorrow and you got your morning newspaper and you found there was an open letter in there.

In fact, every national newspaper was carrying the same open letter and a news conference had been called and an exclusive interview was about to be given and it was from our Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, who wanted our nation and the nations of the world to know that he was praising God for being humbled, praising God because now he could see that heaven rules.

[5 : 04] He was speaking to us about in this crisis, understanding the need to trust in God as the one who is truly in control, calling himself and others to seek for God's power and mercy.

Imagine if that happened in our nation. It would cause shockwaves, wouldn't it? But this happened in Babylon. In Daniel, chapter 4 and verses 1 and 2, we discover that this whole chapter is an open letter that is being taken by heralds all around the kingdom of Babylon to the nations and peoples of every language who live in all the earth.

This is what Nebuchadnezzar says, It's my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me. He's proclaiming with gladness God's eternal rule and kingdom.

We hear Nebuchadnezzar's confession that the true king, as it were, chopped him down to size. He can say, That was for my good.

That was so I could discover the mercy of God. So it's a remarkable chapter in the Bible. And we're going to think about some lessons that we can draw from it. But first, let's think about Nebuchadnezzar's testimony of his rise, his fall and his rise again.

[6 : 35] So his story begins in verse 4 with his contentment. He is, after all, the most powerful man in the world in his day, head of the most powerful empire of his day, one who was used to luxury and wealth and fame and glory.

But just as we have previously seen him have a dream that troubles him, so in verse 5 he tells us, I had a dream that made me afraid.

This dream becomes in his mind a nightmare. And his response is the same as before. He goes to his experts, those dream readers, to see what they can do.

And they offer no help at all. And again, he then realises it's the time to call Daniel, to call Belteshazzar. And Daniel is better because Daniel worships the true God with the level of understanding Nebuchadnezzar has.

He says, finally, Daniel came into my presence and I told him, my dream, the spirit of the holy gods is in him. And Nebuchadnezzar then tells Daniel the dream.

[7 : 57] And before Daniel begins to explain and interpret the dream, we discover something really significant about Daniel. It's Daniel's turn to be afraid.

Then Daniel was greatly perplexed for a time and his thoughts terrified him. My Lord, if only the dream applied to your enemies and its meaning to your adversaries.

What do we discover about Daniel? We discover someone who respects and who cares for King Nebuchadnezzar. And that's remarkable. Just last week in Daniel chapter 3, we discovered this same Nebuchadnezzar tries to roast Daniel's three friends in a fire for refusing to bow down to his gold image.

Daniel is one of the exiles taken from Judah. And a letter came via Jeremiah to the exiles.

And in Jeremiah 29, the exiles are told to seek the welfare, seek the peace and prosperity of the city in which you are now living in exile.

[9 : 07] And Daniel is an incredible model of that integrity and care in his workplace and for his master. But then he delivers the meaning of the dream, which contains in it a warning message from God.

So Nebuchadnezzar had dreamed of a tree that was massive, that filled the earth, a tree that was providing shelter for birds and animals, a tree that was providing food for all.

Daniel says to him, verse 22, your majesty, you are that tree. Here is Nebuchadnezzar, a king at the height of his powers, a king with great influence through his vast empire.

That picture of a tree with almost cosmic dimensions, again is a great reminder of Genesis 11 and the Tower of Babel.

That towering construction, which was on the one hand a great testimony to human achievement, but it was also a testament to overreaching pride, to self-glory.

[10:28] And we will see that at the height of Nebuchadnezzar's power, he falls into that trap as well. And so there is this warning that just as Nebuchadnezzar is that great tree, so God is going to function as divine lumberjack.

That he will be cut down. The picture there is that the tree will be cut, the stump will be left, and an iron band will be placed around it to protect it, so it won't be removed.

And Daniel says to him, that tree represents the king. The king who will be cut down and won't be restored until he recognises that heaven rules.

Daniel tells him that not only will he be cut down, he'll also, his mind will be changed, so he'll become like an animal. And he would be driven away, verse 25, until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms of the earth.

And his kingdom would only be restored in verse 26 when he acknowledged that heaven rules. And Daniel is encouraging Nebuchadnezzar to change his perspective, to beware of pride, and also to repent of the injustice that he has been guilty of.

[12:06] So in verse 27, therefore your master, 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 when God gives a warning of future judgment, there is mercy in that, a chance to repent.

And so Daniel calls the king to repentance. But Nebuchadnezzar continues with his testimony, and in verses 28 to 33, we see what happens 12 months later, his dream becomes reality.

The way this open letter is presented, it switches from Nebuchadnezzar speaking, saying, I now move to the third person. It's as if King Nebuchadnezzar, because of his illness, he needs someone else to testify to what had been happening.

Now, what was the trigger to this illness? 12 months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, he said, is this not the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?

It's very symbolic. Here is Nebuchadnezzar on the roof of his great palace, and he's looking down in his pride. Look at what I built for my power and for my glory.

[13:29] He has completely lost perspective. He has forgotten human dependence on God as creator and sustainer and king. He has no sense that the right to rule comes from God, that there is an obligation to give honour and glory to God.

So we see there is an instant fall. The judgment comes just as was promised, and verse 33, immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled.

He was driven away from people and ate grass like an ox from majesty the descent into madness. He was brought low by God. Maybe you have heard those personal testimony stories of someone brought low by God, of God finding people, as it were, in the gutter or finding them in their lowest point.

Two for me really stand out. Once there was a church camp down in London, and on the Sunday evening, we went to a local church, and they happened to have a guest giving their testimony and having an interview, and it was Jonathan Aitken, a former Conservative MP who was convicted and sent to prison for perjury.

[14:55] And during the process of that, he became a Christian, a follower of Jesus. He wrote, I say, a really helpful little book on the Psalms, but he spoke about God meeting him in that lowest point of his life.

But then I also think of the story of a Chinese student in Glasgow who was found by an elderly Christian couple on the street in tears one day, distress and fear.

Everything seemed to be going wrong. And they welcomed her in, and they established friendship and shared the gospel.

And she came to faith from that lowest point. God showed mercy and God showed salvation. So imagine what's going on here.

Imagine we're the first people to hear this letter being proclaimed by a herald. Here is the emperor, most powerful man in the world, openly sharing of his fall into insanity and acknowledging God and his mercy.

[16:04] Restoration will come for him. And we find out why. Verse 34, at the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes towards heaven and my sanity was restored.

His perspective changed. Joyce Baldwin says, insanity begins with a realistic self-appraisal. Nebuchadnezzar has been humbled by almighty God.

No longer is he standing over and above everyone. Now he's humbled because he recognises his place before God. He has a new understanding of God.

God's dominion is an eternal dominion. His kingdom endures from generation to generation. God is the true king. His kingdom is extensive.

It is eternal. There is no rise or fall with God the king. He understands the folly of claiming godlike status in his pride.

[17:12] In verse 35, he says, all the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven. No one can hold back his hand or say to him, what have you done?

God's will cannot be stopped. God is ultimate authority. And for Nebuchadnezzar, he can see that this dream of his being cut down to size, of his shift into insanity, it became reality.

But Nebuchadnezzar also came to understand something else. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the king of heaven. Why? Because everything he does is right and all his ways are just.

And those who walk in pride, he's able to humble. God uses his almighty power in order to show mercy in this case, to humble proud Nebuchadnezzar so he'd be in a place to recognise and acknowledge and praise God.

So that's his testimony. Begins by praising God, tells his story, finishes by praising God for humbling him and showing him mercy.

[18:30] It's a remarkable chapter of the Bible. And as we think about learning from Nebuchadnezzar's testimony, we realise there's so much going on in this chapter, there's so much we could talk about.

One thing we certainly need to talk about is that Nebuchadnezzar and his story gives us a clear warning against pride. It's the first sin, the sin that we see in the Garden of Eden.

That desire of Adam and Eve to be God-like, to overreach, to overstep the boundaries and reaching out for the forbidden fruit. Pride was the great sin of the Tower of Babel.

Let's get together and let's construct this great tower that will be for our glory, glory without God. Now, among the hanging gardens of Babylon, we see that same pride coming out.

I've done this. This is all my work and this is for my glory. It's a sin that we all battle with and that we all need to deal with.

[19:41] The Nebuchadnezzar story helps us to see that pride involves having a wrong perspective. There he is on the roof and he's looking down. And pride involves looking down on others.

I am better than, I know more than, or pride also looks sideways in comparing. Doing better than that person, at least I'm not as bad as that one over there, forgetting to look up.

Pride dismisses God to place the God of self on the throne of our lives. It is the first sin.

It is a great sin because it fails to give God his place because we want that place. What we need is that perspective change.

The one that looks up to heaven. To recognise that we were made to worship, to enjoy God, to live in relationship with him, to live under him, to live with humble dependence upon him.

[20:53] So for each one of us, we need to be checking our point of view. What's the perspective with which we live life, with which we go into our days? Are we looking to assert self as number one?

Or can we gladly say heaven rules? Another thing we see from Nebuchadnezzar's testimony is that suffering can be redemptive.

That God in his mighty power and wisdom can use suffering for good. Discomfort. Extreme trials can be means of spiritual growth and lasting change.

And that's one of the great hopes and prayers of the church for this phase of life. We had another five days of prayer and we spent a lot of time asking that God would use this time as a means of drawing the people of God closer to himself in independent trust and worship but also drawing others in a sense of need and despair and hopelessness to come to God and to find answers and

to find life and to find joy and salvation.

But suffering can only be redemptive if we lift our eyes to heaven. Only if we look to God for mercy. [22 : 23] Only when we see the limits of ourselves and those idols those things that we typically look to for identity and security and purpose and hope only if we see the end of them if we come to an end of ourselves and we look up to God for mercy only then can suffering have that redemptive purpose.

We see in the story of Nebuchadnezzar that God is both powerful and God is merciful and that God is able from this personal crisis to do spiritual good.

Leading Nebuchadnezzar to move away from a place where he basically insists that he is a God to his people where he's now telling the peoples here's the God you need to praise and worship because he is the true king and his kingdom is the one that lasts.

The God who cuts down is the same God who graciously restores. So there is an invitation to each one of us as we are maybe at different stages of trying to pick up the pieces and trying to get back to some kind of normality.

Will God be the centre of that new normal? Will he be the one we place our hope in? Will we allow him to use this suffering in our life to achieve something of spiritual and lasting good as we look away from ourselves and as we look up to heaven as we cry out from the depths to God for mercy as we read in Psalm 130 and we also see and we've already mentioned it in the story of Nebuchadnezzar that God's mercy is powerful.

[24 : 22] I wonder if you ever find yourself discouraged thinking about people that you care about family members friends colleagues wondering will that person ever change?

Can they change? Can God work in that person's heart? Maybe tempted to give up praying? Well let Nebuchadnezzar be a reminder of just how powerful God's mercy is.

Somebody who set himself up as a God, somebody who's willing to kill those who were worshipping God, is now praising God. God, our God, loves sinners and he loves to save sinners and he surprises with grace for his glory.

This is also a reminder to us to pray for our leaders. Those leaders are appointed by God, they deserve our respect and as the Bible says they also deserve our prayers.

pray believing that God can change them, that God can save them, that God can use them for his good purposes. In this current crisis can God save people from the depths of despair and fear?

[25 : 46] He did it for Nebuchadnezzar and he can certainly still do it today. maybe he will restore you today. Maybe you are powerfully aware of your need and you know also that you have not been setting your eyes towards heaven.

Well, maybe this is the day that you would understand your sin and your need, you'd see the goodness and glory and the love of God in sending Jesus, that you would raise your eyes to heaven to see Jesus, your Saviour, the one who longs to save you, that you'd recognise his rule, that you would trust in him and that you would know that restoring.

So we see this wonderful and surprising testimony from King Nebuchadnezzar. But as always, I want us to close thinking about the story of God's true and ultimate king who is Jesus.

Picture Jesus, the one who doesn't just survey one kingdom. He looks over the whole world as its creator and sustainer.

But there is no pride in Jesus, no hanging on to his position of glory in heaven. In humility, Jesus becomes one of us. He enters in. The Son of God becomes a man.

[27 : 08] And this wasn't a forced humility. He chose a path of humble obedience that led him into suffering, that led him to death on a cross.

Why that path? Why that journey? Because Jesus is taking the place of proud, rebel sinners like us. He is dying in our place for our sins, for us as we build our own little empire, pursuing our glory, where we leave no room for God.

Jesus comes to die for that sin and so many more so that we might be forgiven, so that by looking to Jesus, now the King in heaven, to come to him is to be restored.

Here is the cure for pride to look to Jesus, our humble, self-giving Saviour, and we are called to walk in his steps.

Nebuchadnezzar was a king, pictured as a tree who was cut down and restored. Jesus, in his stories and in his teaching, used that picture of a tree to speak about his kingdom, the true kingdom of God, the kingdom that begins as small as a mustard seed with just a few, but then grows to

become the biggest of all the trees and the birds nest in its branches.

[28 : 38] Jesus uses this picture of the kingdom of God to say that it's a growing kingdom. It would become a global kingdom and we praise God that that's true and that through this pandemic the church still continues to grow, that we can come to King Jesus and find shelter in our sorrow, in our sadness, in our fear.

We can come to him and find life and life in all its fullness. So let's come to him. Let's heed the testimony of Nebuchadnezzar and come to our powerful God to find mercy.
Let's see.