

When Man Becomes a Beast

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[0:00] Turn with me again to Daniel chapter 4, page 740.

Heavenly Father, bring your ancient and powerful Word into the present so that it can be delivered and heard with all the freshness of a new day, with all the immediacy of a friend's embrace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The story of how someone became a Christian is called their testimony. Now, every Christian has a testimony of how they came to know Jesus Christ as Savior.

Some testimonies are dramatic. Others are more ordinary. Some tell the story of how, having lived in an immoral way, God turned their lives around. Others speak of how, from our earliest days, we were always aware that Christ was our Lord.

Many of us in my generation grew up listening to testimonies. Perhaps we should be better and more ready to give our own testimonies. The Bible's full of testimonies. The Gospels tell stories of how ordinary men and women experienced Jesus' saving grace in their lives. Lepers who were healed, demon-possessed who were cleansed, lame men walking, and so on. On three occasions in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul tells the story of how Jesus turned His life around. The Old Testament has its fair share of testimonies also, the most famous of which is the conversion of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, here in Daniel chapter 4. Up until now in the book of Daniel, we've heard much about Nebuchadnezzar. But now in chapter 4, we're hearing directly from Nebuchadnezzar in the form of a letter he writes to every citizen in the Babylonian empire. He leads, as it were, an empire-wide testimony meeting where he tells everyone in the known world the story of how he became a follower of God.

[2:31] In Daniel chapter 3, through his decree to execute everyone who would not bow down to worship his golden statue, he became the world's biggest persecutor of the faith. But in Daniel chapter 4, through his letter to all the world's peoples, nations, and languages of how God has changed his life, he has moved from being the world's greatest persecutor of the faith to being the world's greatest preacher of the faith. He wants to tell everyone what God has done for him and to proclaim in his own words in verse 3, how great are his signs, how mighty his wonders, his kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation. He wants the whole world to know what God's done for him. What's happened to him has changed his attitude to God, but also to the people in his empire. From being a tyrant, he now announces to all the peoples under his rule in verse 1, peace be multiplied to you. Peace be multiplied to you. Nebuchadnezzar's world has changed, and now, rather than bringing war, he brings peace. You know, the only way in which our world will truly be at peace is if the gospel of Christ changes the hearts of our leaders. A world at peace needs kings, presidents, and prime ministers filled with the peace of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ. And that's for what we pray and for what we work. Now, every testimony is dramatic in its own way and miraculous in its own way, but the story of Nebuchadnezzar's is world-changing. A king becomes a beast in order to become a human.

And I want us to consider the four stages of Nebuchadnezzar's conversion. A proud king, first of all, in verses 1 through 28, a proud king. A foolish king in verses 29 through 30.

A humbled king in verses 31 through 33. And a wise king in verses 34 through 37. Let me ask you, do you have a testimony to tell? A story of how God has changed your life by bringing you to Christ? First of all, then, in verses 1 to 28, we see a proud king, a proud king.

Before his conversion, Nebuchadnezzar was a proud man, and he had every reason to be so. He was king of the most powerful empire the world had ever seen. Under his reign, his empire had become even more powerful.

He rolled over the lives of tens of millions of people. He lived in a palace filled with gold. And one day, he was at ease in his house, happy and contented, verse 4, looking around at the kingdom he

thought he had made for himself. He was prospering in his palace. He had reached the top of all a man could aspire to be, rich and powerful, with millions ready to die for him. He was a proud man, filled with self-importance. He needed nothing and no one. He was a narcissist. He was self-obsessed.

[6:17] Even building a statue to which everyone was forced to bow down and worship. Now, our society is filled with people like this. Perhaps some of us at times even feel rather like this. Our problem is not our need. Our problem is our plenty. Would it ease in palaces our hard-earned wages have paid for? We have bank accounts containing more money than most people in our world could ever dream of. We can buy whatever food we want, and we can, within reason, do whatever we want.

We, spiritually speaking, like Nebuchadnezzar, are at ease in our houses and prospering in our palaces. We don't need God. And that's why the hardest people in our society to reach with the gospel aren't those who feel their need for him. Sorry. The hardest people to reach with the gospel in our society are those who don't feel their need for him because they are so prosperous and they are so contented with what they have here and now. For them, life doesn't get better than this, so why go searching for it? Well, Nebuchadnezzar wasn't searching for God, but God was searching for Nebuchadnezzar and sent him another dream. You know, God has a way of finding us out even when we're not looking for him, and he will work in whatever way he must to bring us to himself. And so, we sent the king a dream. As I lay in bed, in verse 5, the fancies and the visions of my head alarmed me.

God spoke to Nebuchadnezzar's heart because up until now, Nebuchadnezzar's ears hadn't been listening. He hadn't listened when Daniel had interpreted his dream in Daniel 2. He hadn't listened when God had saved Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel chapter 3. Now, it's time to be more direct.

Has God been direct with you? Having ignored all the ways in which he has spoken in other methods, is God now speaking directly to you? At this stage, as we read in verse 8, Nebuchadnezzar still considered the Babylonian god Bel to be his god. However, he also knew that Daniel, whom he had named Belteshazzar, could interpret his dream for him when all his own magicians had failed. The king told Daniel his dream, the dream of a huge tree filling the earth, which under the authority of heaven was chopped down until only a stump remained in the ground. The stump becomes a man who goes mad, whose mind is changed into that of a beast, and who eats grass. That's how it's going to be for this man who, for a definite period of time, until that man acknowledges, in the words of verse 17, the Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will, and sets it over the lowliest of men.

[9:46] Now, this is the dream which terrified the king's heart, because he knew it was about him, and he knew that God was going to bring his kingdom down, and that he, God, was the Most High.

That in words we've repeatedly used, and are used in verse 26, heaven rules. Well, Daniel interprets the dream, the tree is you, O king. You have grown. You have become strong.

Your greatness has grown, and reaches to the heaven, and your dominion to the ends of the earth. Well, Daniel's given the good news, but now the bad. You shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be among the beasts of the field, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will.

The judgment was certain. However, there is a way that Nebuchadnezzar may extend his reign.

Verse 27, break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed. In other words, Nebuchadnezzar, repent, turn from evil, and do good.

That is the call of the gospel. Know that the Most High rules over the kingdoms of men. Repent, turn from evil, and do good. There are times when in the hearts of even the most self-satisfied, self-obsessed, and prosperous of human beings, when God speaks directly to the heart.

[11:32] When God stops them short and shows them, perhaps for the first time, how fragile, vulnerable, mortal, and guilty they are. Perhaps they look up into a clear night sky, and they intuitively know that there is more to life than what they have. Or they experience guilt and search for forgiveness. Or perhaps they despair and they search for hope in a meaningless world.

And God says to each one of them, acknowledge me, repent, turn from evil, and do good. You see, never has a society been as prosperous as ours, but never has a society been as empty as ours. Never has a society known more than we do, but never has a society been as ignorant as we are. Never has a society been as proud as we are. Never has a society more reason to be ashamed

than we do.

Pride comes before a fall, and for sure it did for Nebuchadnezzar, a proud man, a narcissist with a proud heart.

For all that he had given the God of Israel lip service up to this point, he was a religious devotee of one God and one God only, himself. He worshiped himself. He worshiped the God of self, just as do millions in our society, at ease in their houses and prospering in their palaces.

[13:18] So the testimony of Nebuchadnezzar begins with a proud and arrogant man who thought he needed nothing and nobody. But actually, you know, it doesn't begin there at all.

In fact, it doesn't begin with Nebuchadnezzar. It begins with God. Nebuchadnezzar was not searching for God, but God was searching for Nebuchadnezzar.

God, not the king of Babylon, moves first. And as his word has been preached this evening, not just here in Coral Road, but all over our nation, God is making the first move toward us, calling upon us all to know Jesus as our Lord and our Savior.

So we have, first of all, then, a foolish king. But then we have a proud king, rather. Then we have, secondly, a foolish king in verses 29 and 30, a foolish king. Well, he's been warned. He's going to go insane until he acknowledges the supremacy of God. It's the latest in a long series of warnings God has given to the king, but on each occasion he carries on as if nothing has happened.

Shall he do the same again? Well, a year passed on from when he'd had the dream, and God had warned him to turn to him and repent, a whole 12 months, and yet Nebuchadnezzar had not heeded God's warning. Even though God had already showed himself more powerful than any of the gods of Babylon, the king of Babylon still acted as though nothing had changed.

[15:07] Now, I don't get the impression from these verses, maybe you do, but I don't get the impression that Nebuchadnezzar had actively rejected God's warning. I just get the impression that he let the grass grow under his feet, and rather than immediately responding to God, he delayed, and in so doing, soon forgot about it. There he is, and he's walking on the roof of his palace, and he's thinking, not thinking about his need to return to God, not thinking about his need to repent of his sins, but saying to himself in his own self-obsession, he's saying, is this not great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence for the glory of my majesty? You know, if there's one thing Nebuchadnezzar didn't doubt, didn't lack, rather, it was self-doubt. He's become even prouder than he was before. He speaks about his mighty power, the glory of his majesty. Are these not descriptions reserved only for God?

Proud and foolish Nebuchadnezzar playing with fire. He's sinning not in ignorance. He's sinning against knowledge. He knows what God has promised to do, but he acts as if nothing has changed at all.

A year has passed, and the king has not changed one little bit. He is even prouder than he was before. God's warnings have gone unheeded. Perhaps before, he could have claimed ignorance, but not now, because he knows what he needs to do. He just doesn't do it. He knows he needs to acknowledge the supremacy of God and repent of his sins, but he delays, and then he forgets.

You know, over the years, 23 years now I've been the minister, I've met many people to whom God has spoken through a sermon, through life events, or through a friend sharing the gospel with them. They did not immediately reject God's voice, but they sat on it. They heard the good news of the gospel. Jesus called to repent and believe, but rather than respond there and then, they delayed, and before long they forgot all about it. Foolish people. They didn't listen when God was speaking to them. Imagine the scenario. You visit the doctor, and she tells you that unless you stop smoking, drinking, drinking, and eating too much, you'll be dead within a year. And you're shocked when you leave the doctor's surgery, but when you get home and turn on the telly, you begin to relax.

[18:04] You begin to forget the doctor's warning. Rather than changing your lifestyle, you drink even more. You smoke even more. You eat even more. Within a few months, your body begins to break down, and in the space of a year, you're on a life support machine. How foolish that you did not heed the warnings of the doctor and change your life. How foolish we are to neglect and ignore the call of the gospel, to sit on it. How crazy it is to forget the most important message you'll ever hear.

Nebuchadnezzar was a fool with his manic self-obsession and self-assessment of mighty power, glory, and majesty. Sure, you were not as foolish as he. Surely not.

Third, Nebuchadnezzar would tell you with his own mouth he was a humbled king, a humbled king in verses 31 through 33, because when the year passed, God did what he said. Nebuchadnezzar

went mad.

In verse 33, we read, He was driven from among men and ate grass like an ox. His body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hair grew as long as eagle's feathers, and his nails were like bird's claws.

Here he is displaying all the symptoms of utter insanity. The king of Babylon became like an ox, an eagle, and a bird. People are so afraid of him that they drove him out from among them.

[19 : 43] Until recently, he'd been standing on the roof of his palace and saying to himself, is this not great Babylon, which I built by my mighty power as a royal residence for the glory of my majesty? And now here he is, and he's crawling on the ground like a beast.

If ever a man was humbled, it was Nebuchadnezzar. He was emptied of his humanity. Did not the same happen to Saul of Tarsus, a man blinded and emptied of his self-importance on the Damascus road when Jesus met with him? In my youth, when I listened to testimonies, I was often struck by just how low down many people went before they were ready to hear the word of the gospel.

Unconscious in the gutter, filled with enough drink to sink an elephant, ready to do away with themselves, maybe even having made preparations for it, completely emptied of their self-importance, and for the first time in their lives realizing that they were sinners in need of a Savior, Savior, and that Jesus Christ and him alone was that Savior.

How low does God have to bring down a man before he'll acknowledge that Jesus is the only Savior of sinners? He humbled Nebuchadnezzar. How will he humble us if we should continue delaying? Someone once said that before God calls a man, he crushes a man, and that God calls the crushed. James, the brother of Jesus, writes these words, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

[21 : 28] What God did to Nebuchadnezzar may seem to be very cruel, but in a deeper sense, it was very merciful. Earlier I spoke of people to whom God had spoken but who resisted that call, and many of them, in my experience, sadly never again heard the call of God and remained unconverted.

They'd had their opportunity, but now it was too late. Some of them are already dead. The mercy of God and the testimony of Nebuchadnezzar is that God did not give up on him. It was irresistible grace. Although the king had rejected God time and again, God kept speaking.

He showed him, as St. Augustine said of this great passage, he showed him a severe mercy, a severe mercy. He had whispered before, but now he shouts through this humbling experience. And I'm sure at the time, Nebuchadnezzar was deeply disturbed by what he was enduring. He was eating grass. He was becoming a beast. But afterward, when his sanity was restored and he was converted, he would have looked back and thanked God for this severe mercy.

The most powerful man in the world was humbled by God. In our world, it would be the equivalent of Donald Trump being driven insane by God in order to bring him to faith and repentance.

[23 : 01] Perhaps this is one thing we can do for our great leaders, is it not? To pray that God would humble them and show them severe mercy in order to bring them to himself. Heaven rules, not earth, and Jesus Christ is the King of kings and Lord of lords. In many testimonies, perhaps yours also, you hear about how low God brought a person in order to bring them to their spiritual senses.

But as with Nebuchadnezzar, God never humbles a person in anger. He humbles them in love, because sometimes the cure for the disease of our foolishness and self-obsession needs to be that extreme. And the message for us this evening is this, don't wait for God to humble you in the way He did Nebuchadnezzar. Don't delay. Rather, respond to His gracious call to love and faith now.

So, we have a proud king, a foolish king, a humbled king, and finally we have a wise king.

A wise king. Listen to what Nebuchadnezzar said of himself as he walked on the roof of his palace in verse 30. He said, Is this not great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty? Having built a statue to himself and forced everyone to bow down and worship, he was so very proud, so self-obsessed, the definition of hubris. But listen to him in verse 34 after his humbling experience. At the end of the days, I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven.

My reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored him. No longer is Nebuchadnezzar full of himself. You see, he's now full of God.

During his humbling, he became a beast, eating grass, looking downwards. But now, you see, he lifts up his eyes. It's such evocative language. It's beautiful language. His whole life up until that point had been spent looking downwards at the earth, at his own greatness and glory.

[25 : 40] But now it's all changed. His eyes are now lifted up to heaven, and his reason returns for him because he sees the glory of God instead. And for the first time in his life, he acknowledges the supremacy of God, not just over him, but over the whole world. All the inhabitants of the world are accounted as nothing. He does according to his will among the host of heavens and inhabitants of the earth, and none can stay his hand or say to him, what have you done?

What Nebuchadnezzar had previously ascribed to himself, power, glory, and majesty, he now ascribes to God. And this change in life is summarized in verse 37, again in the most wonderful language.

Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, the most powerful man in the world, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven.

The King of Babylon no longer wants to talk about himself, he wants to talk about God. He doesn't want to praise himself anymore, he wants to praise God and attribute to him praise, glory, majesty, and honor. This proud, self-obsessed man, the King of the world, having been humbled, now praises and extols and honors the King of heaven. And as he bows before the sovereign grace and power of God, the glory of his kingdom, his majesty and his splendor, they return to him.

You know, up to this point in life, Nebuchadnezzar thought he had everything. But now he's come to know God, he has even more. And as we close, this is perhaps what those self-important and self-made people in our city need to hear. They think they have everything, but without Jesus they have nothing.

[27 : 47] If only they knew that with Jesus they could have so much more, more than they could ever imagine. Who cares about creature comforts, Ferraris, fine houses, great holidays, when through Christ you can have things that money cannot buy, forgiveness, meaning, joy, hope, eternal life. God gave Nebuchadnezzar far more than ever God took from Nebuchadnezzar. Listen to any testimony from a Christian and they will tell you that God has given them far more than he ever took from them. In fact, the things God took from them were things of no value at all, guilt, shame, hopelessness, fear.

What have we to lose this evening by humbling ourselves before God's mighty hand? One thing's for sure, we will never humble ourselves more than Jesus humbled himself by dying on a cross for us. We will lose only what we need to lose and gain more than we could ever deserve. Our prayer for the great leaders of our world is that God would do for them what he did for Nebuchadnezzar, that they would be proclaiming not their own greatness, but that of the living Christ.

And our great prayer for the self-made men and women of Glasgow is that they too would repent of their foolishness and pride and turn to the God who alone is the most high and worthy of praise and honor.

I wonder whether you're willing to do that this evening, turn away from pride and foolishness, to humble yourself so that you can learn the wisdom of trusting and knowing Christ.

So that this time next week, you stand here before us all and give your testimony of how God, in his love and wisdom, came searching for you and found you in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[30 : 04] Let us pray. We worship you, O God, the God of Nebuchadnezzar, for what you did all those thousands of years ago in the land of Babylon, working in power in the mind and the heart of this most powerful man to bring him to his senses. You made him a beast of the earth, looking downwards and looking downwards in the world. And we pray for you, O God of God, in the world.

Lord, we thank you that you changed his heart so that he lifted up his eyes and saw you on the throne as the most high God. Once again, we pray for the leaders of our world that you would lift their eyes from looking downwards at their own petty tin pot glory and see you, the sovereign God, seated in eternal glory and power and Christ at your right hand.

Lord, we pray for ourselves this evening that as we hear your call to trust and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, every one of us would do so. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.