

Two kings. And another king

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[0 : 00] King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations and languages that dwell in all the earth.

Peace be multiplied to you. It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me. How great are the signs, how mighty his wonders.

His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom and his dominion endures from generation to generation. I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and prospering in my palace.

I saw a dream that made me afraid. As I lay in bed, the fancies and the visions of my head alarmed me. So I made a decree that all the wise men of Babylon should be brought before me, that they might make known to me the interpretation of the dream.

Then the magicians, the enchanters, the Chaldeans and the astrologers came in. And I told them the dream, but they could not make known to me its interpretation.

[1 : 10] At last, Daniel came before me. He was named Belteshazzar after the name of my God, and in whom is the spirit of the holy gods.

And I told him the dream, saying, O Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, because I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you, and that no mystery is too difficult for you, tell me the visions of my dream that I saw and their interpretation.

The visions of my head as I lay in bed were these. I saw, and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to the heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth.

Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field find shade under it, and the birds of the heavens lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it.

I saw in the visions of my head as I lay in bed, and behold, a watcher, a holy one, came down from heaven. He proclaimed aloud and said thus, Chop down the tree and lop off its branches.

[2 : 25] 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. The sentence is by the decree of the watchers, the decision by the word of the holy ones, to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will, and sets it over the lowliest of men.

This dream I, King Nebuchadnezzar, saw, and you, O Belteshazzar, tell me the interpretation, because all the wise men in my kingdom are not able to make known to me the interpretation.

But you are able, for the spirit of the holy gods is in you. Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, was dismayed for a while, and his thoughts alarmed him.

[3 : 42] The king answered and said, Belteshazzar, let not the dream or the interpretation alarm you. Belteshazzar answered and said, My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you, and its interpretation for your enemies.

The tree that you saw, which grew and became strong, so that its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth, whose leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in which was food for all, under which beasts of the field found shade, and whose branches the birds of the heaven lived.

It is you, O king, who have grown and become strong. Your greatness has grown and reaches to heaven, and your dominion to the ends of the earth.

And because the king saw a watcher, a holy one, coming down from heaven and saying, Chop down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump of its roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron

and bronze, in the tender grass of the field, and let him be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beast of the field, till seven periods of time pass over him.

This is the interpretation, O king. It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my Lord the king, that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beast of the field.

[5 : 06] You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will.

And as it was commanded to leave the stump of the roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be confirmed for you, from that time that you know that the heaven rules. Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you.

Break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity.

All this came upon king Nebuchadnezzar. At the end of twelve months, he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon. And the king answered and said, Is not this great Babylon which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence, and for the glory of my majesty?

While the words were still in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven. O king Nebuchadnezzar, To you it is spoken, The kingdom has departed from you, and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field, and you shall be made to eat grass like an ox.

[6 : 34] And seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will. Immediately, the word was fulfilled against Nebuchadnezzar.

He was driven from among men, and ate grass like an ox, and 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.

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, and praised and honoured him who lives forever.

For his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth.

And none can stay his hand or say to him, What have you done? At the same time, my reason returned to me, and for the glory of my kingdom, my majesty and splendour returned to me.

[7 : 48] My counsellors and my lords sought me, and I was established in my kingdom, and still more greatness was added to me. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, for all his works are right, and his ways are just, and those who walk in pride, he is able to humble.

I was reading this week about the most common words in popular songs of the last hundred years, as you do. Apparently, in the 1990s and the 2000s, the most common word in popular songs was, you.

In the 2010s, the most common word in popular songs is, me. You can trace it back further. In the 1960s, the most common words are, baby twist and twisting.

And in the 1940s, the most common words are, polka, serenade, boogie and blue. But the significant thing, I thought, was the shift from you to me.

Isn't that indicative? Junaid Ahmed is 22. He takes around 200 selfies a day. He says he realises how negative social media can be, and claims he doesn't take it too seriously.

[9 : 13] Years ago, I never used to look like this, he said. I used to be quite natural, but I just think with the obsession with social media, I need to upgrade myself.

So I've had my teeth veneered, chin filler, cheek filler, jawline filler, lip filler, Botox under the eyes, and on the head, tattooed eyebrows, and fat freezing. Haven't we all?

Listen to this advice in a book that was written 30 years ago for the hard-pressed executive. Repeat out loud these powerful affirmations. I can do great things.

I have great possibilities deep inside me. You'll feel like a braggart, but read them out, and then repeat them again, and louder. Try this prayer three times every morning.

I believe, I believe, I believe. This kind of prayer really flushes the negatives out of the brain. Now repeat, I can, I can, I can.

[10:15] Well, it's appeal is obvious. It would be great, wouldn't it, to have all those negatives flushed out of our brains. So all you need to do is stand naked in front of the mirror, and look at yourself, and say, I love you.

There have always been stories, haven't there, of people who are desperate for up-building, and reassurance. Narcissus. Narcissus. He was one in ancient mythology, who loved nobody, till he saw his own reflection in the water.

And then he fell in love with that. The king in Daniel chapter four, Nebuchadnezzar, he's another, isn't he? Must be people with names beginning with the letter N.

Here he is, full of himself, a proud man, as Narcissus was, of course, a vicious tyrant, and yet plagued, as we'll see, with the most disturbing dreams, that I guess reveal his private self-doubt. The need that he had to pull himself up by his own shoelaces. Look down to verse 29, and see what he says, as he walks around the roof of his palace.

[11:32] Verse 29, and he says to himself in verse 30, is not this the great Babylon, which I've built by my mighty powers of royal residence, for the glory of my majesty?

It's the kind of thing a president might tweet, isn't it? And there's another king as well, King Belshazzar, in Daniel chapter five, who's somebody else who's full of himself.

And that king drinks away his insecurities, masking his insecurity with an act of bravado. My ambitious task today is to look at these two stories, that cover two chapters of Daniel, both chapter four and chapter five.

Chapter four we've had read, and chapter five we're going to look at as well. Nebuchadnezzar is one king, Belshazzar is the second king. But actually I think these are one story of two kings. And for both of these kings, their position has gone to their head. And both kings, in their own way, are fronting up to this God. There is a direct encounter between them and the king of heaven.

[12:44] And I think by putting these two chapters together, the writer is asking us to compare and contrast. Look at these two kings. Look at what God does with them.

Look at how God deals with them. What is going on in these two kings, in this one story? So let's look first at chapter four.

You'll see on the back of the service sheet, there's an outline of the two kings and the third king that we're going to consider. The first king then, chapter four, the humbling of proud king Nebuchadnezzar.

This tyrant who is desperate to have his self-esteem stroked, hears voices. And we're left in no doubt that the voice that he hears is God.

He hears a voice three times. The first voice comes in the dream. And the dream is of this massive tree. And then a messenger comes in verse 13.

[13:49] And in this dream, he says, verse 14, cut down this huge tree. And we're told in verse 17 that this voice, this message, comes straight from God.

It is God who is warning Nebuchadnezzar, my verdict to you, oh great and mighty tree, is cut it down. Then there is a second voice.

And this voice is the voice of Daniel who arrives in verse 19 to explain the dream. But he brings the same message. In verse 24, he says, this too is the decree of the Most High.

God is warning you, Nebuchadnezzar, strong and mighty tree, that he will cut you down to size. And then the third voice is in verse 31, a voice that falls from heaven.

After he's ignored the voice of the dream, after he's ignored the voice of Daniel, both of which are the voices of God, the third voice he hears in verse 31 is directly from heaven saying, this is what I will do.

[15:09] Do you see that the king of heaven, which is the name that this chapter gives to God, he warns, and again he warns, and again he warns, that he will cut Nebuchadnezzar down.

He will humble, proud King Nebuchadnezzar. As God warns us, not normally through dreams or voices from heaven, but by words, just the same, by his word, God speaks to warn every proud person on this earth.

My in-laws live in Eastbourne, and when, we've spent many holidays in Eastbourne, and when our children were younger, I can remember many walks on the cliff, and our children wandering off the path to have a look over the edge at the lighthouse, it was not unloving of us to shout, be careful, come away from the edge, if you go too close, you will fall over, and die.

When you know there is danger ahead, it's a very loving thing to warn, and that is exactly what God does to proud Nebuchadnezzar. He warns him of his judgment, he warns him that this proud king will be cut down to size, the king of heaven warns that he will judge, and cut down the self-made man.

That, I think, is the message of chapter 4. For all human beings are held accountable to God. We're not told when we will be held to account.

[16:54] Nebuchadnezzar wasn't told when he will be cut down to size, but he was told that he would be. We are told that we will be held to account, that every knee must bow, well, everybody, anybody arrogantly enthroning themselves will have to move aside.

What happens to proud king Nebuchadnezzar? Well, we're 12 months on, verse 29. He ignores the warning, and the most awful thing happens to him.

His delusions, I suppose you could say, was that he was more than human. He built his empire up, and so God gives him delusions that he's less than human.

He gets driven out from among men. He lives like an animal for seven periods of time. I don't know whether that's seven years, but a substantial period of time.

Verse 33. There he is, driven from among men. He 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.

[18:15] The king of heaven humbles the proud until he comes to acknowledge that God is sovereign over his kingdom.

mighty though he was, he was humbled to acknowledge the mightier might of the king of heaven.

Second story, the humbling of proud king Belshazzar in chapter 5. We've moved some years later, and this is now Nebuchadnezzar's son who is on the throne.

But not there for much longer. If you look at the very end of the chapter, end of chapter 5, you'll see how differently this story will end, not with a man driven out until he acknowledges the might of the king of heaven.

Whereas Nebuchadnezzar did humble himself before God and had his kingdom restored to him, in chapter 5, Belshazzar had an encounter with the same king of heaven and ignored him, and verse 30 is the result.

[19:26] Belshazzar was killed, and another king became king, and another empire was established. He is humbled against his will, and God brings his whole kingdom to its knees.

And that verse at the end sort of hangs over the story of chapter 5 all the way through like the sword of Damocles suspended above the kingdom. This threat from the Persian army is there all the way through the chapter.

The entire Babylonian dynasty which his father Nebuchadnezzar has established is about to end. The Persian army is camped outside. So what does Belshazzar do together?

To do? He gets all his cronies together and he says let's eat and drink and be merry for tomorrow we die. Just look out your window. Isn't it obvious? So the feast in chapter 5 is like a game of let's pretend.

Belshazzar sets about rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic because the writing is on the wall for him. Literally in chapter 5.

[20:40] Because Belshazzar in verse 5 watches as a hand writes a terrifying message on the wall. This time the warning from the king of heaven is not spoken in a voice but written on a message.

Perhaps only Belshazzar could see the hand and the writing but Nebuchadnezzar's wife in other words Belshazzar's mother is still around.

And in verse 10 she recognizes what is going on. It's a vision just like her husband had. When you see a king looking like this as alarmed going as white as a sheet she's got long experience from her husband of what this means.

And she says do you know what you need? Do you need Daniel to come and tell you what's going on? Which is obvious all the way through the book of Daniel that what the great and mighty need what anybody needs if you want to understand what on earth is going on in the world is to turn to God's people who know this stuff.

That's why we have bishops in the house of lords isn't it? So that the great and mighty of our land can turn to God's people and say explain to me what's going on in the world. That I think is the point of bishops in the house of lords.

[22 : 04] But here is the message in verse 26. These words are written on the wall and it is another message of God's judgment on a proud Babylonian king.

God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end. You've been weighed in the balances. Your kingdom is divided and handed over. Again, just as in chapter 4 God is humbling those who walk in pride.

But we have to go back to the start of chapter 5 to see why, to see what it was that Belshazzar was doing wrong. Why it is that the humbling of Belshazzar takes a different turn from the humbling of Nebuchadnezzar.

Why the bell tolls for Belshazzar in the way that it didn't for Nebuchadnezzar. And if Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 4 was desperate to have his ego stroked, is not this great Babylon which I've built up.

Belshazzar was defiant. And what he is doing in this feast as the Persian army are besieging the city, what he is doing there is deliberate contempt for the faith of his father Nebuchadnezzar.

[23 : 28] I don't know whether you noticed this chapter 4 was read out but it is, the whole chapter is an edict. It is written to be read out, pronounced in public. A public declaration from King Nebuchadnezzar to tell everybody about his newfound faith, how it is that he has come to put his trust in the King of Heaven, how he now praises and honours him.

So now look at chapter 5 verses 3 and 4 because as Belshazzar calls his cronies in for a drink, a drinking party.

Verse 3 they bring in the golden vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God in Jerusalem and the king and his lords and his wives and his concubines drank from them.

They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver bronze iron wooden stone. These goblets you see come from Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar took them to Babylon right back at the beginning of the story in chapter one where he ransacked Israel's city and he stole these holy symbols of Israel's worship of God and Nebuchadnezzar just put them in the loft and stored them away.

How do you think Nebuchadnezzar with his newfound faith at the end of chapter four would have thought as Belshazzar in chapter five says bring out those glasses.

[25 : 01] After he came to realize that the king of heaven rules on earth I can't think he would want to use those goblets as ordinary wine glasses anymore would he? But Belshazzar does.

He brings them out of the loft unpacks them out of their boxes puts them on the table fills them with wine and toasts his pagan god. It's a deliberate act isn't it to say you know dad's god

Nebuchadnezzar's god the one that he came to acknowledge was mighty I don't think he's anybody he's a nobody Belshazzar is utterly contemptuous look what Daniel says to him in verse 22 chapter 6 verse 22 sorry chapter 5 verse 22 you his son Belshazzar have not humbled your heart though you knew all this story about Nebuchadnezzar you've lifted up yourself against the lord of heaven and the vessels of his house have been brought in before you and your wives and your lords and your wives and your concubines have drunk wine from them and you've praised the gods of silver and gold of bronze iron wooden stone which don't see or hear or know but the god in whose hand is your breath and whose are all your ways you have not honoured and that is why god's warning is verses 26 27 and 28 and the judgment falls as the dynasty falls in verse 30 now what these two stories have in common is a question will these two mighty men these two great kings these two emperors of huge super powers will they recognise the greater authority of the king of heaven will they recognise who they are in relation to god will they be wise in recent years with all the celebrations of our queen's long reign who was it that put her on the throne why did she become queen well of course she became queen because her father died but more significant than that she became queen because god put her on the throne the prayer the church of England prays for the queen is for her knowing whose authority she hath namely god's authority he put her there and that is what god is teaching Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar that the foreigners god the foreigners weak seeming god the god that you ridiculed when you went into their land and dragged Israel out he is the one who gave you authority because actually these two chapters tell one story not of two kings but of three the third sovereign is actually the king of heaven and the message of these two chapters is be wise before the king of heaven look what Nebuchadnezzar comes to realize in chapter 4 verse 34 I bless the most high and praised and omit him who lives forever for his dominion is an everlasting dominion and his kingdom endures from generation to generation all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth and none can stay his hand or say to him

what have you done this is the truth about the god of heaven but here

I think is the problem of these chapters isn't it what kind of a god is this what kind of a god does this kind of thing to people in Shakespeare's King Lear faced with a similar psychotic illness one character says as flies to wanton boys are we to the gods they kill us for their sport naughty little school boys girls you won't know this about boys but naughty little school boys delight in pulling a wing off a blue bottle and watching it fly around in circles and then one leg and another leg just to watch the fly in its agony be unable to take off or land or do anything useful is that what god is like here like a wanton boy and a fly playing with nebuchadnezzar vindictively scaring belshazzar half to death just for the fun of it you know you call it humbling but actually it's humiliating isn't it pushing them into submission nebuchadnezzar concludes in verse 35 all the peoples here counts as nothing is that how god sees us really as nothing i think the first thing to say is that what god did in daniel chapter 4 and chapter 5 are one offs that these things happened but the fact that they happened here like this is not necessarily a model for always and everywhere but it is saying that god will humble the proud patiently with repeated warnings but he will do it either now or ultimately finally in the judgment of which he warns the phrase at the end of chapter 4 is right at the heart of the two stories look down to chapter 4 verse 37 those who walk in pride he the king of heaven is able to humble for we do not rule heaven and we do not rule earth it's not all about me me me and god is making that point not just for the benefit of his people but for the benefit of the whole world it does not all revolve around you in the early 16th century a

Polish mathematician formulated a radical theory and everything changed after Copernicus demonstrated that the sun was at the center of the solar system and earth and we humans similarly lead a Copernican revolution to recognize what has always been the case and always will be the case namely we are not at the center of the universe I may try to put myself on the throne I may try to run my own life my own way without God but the sun is at the center of the universe God has put his son on the throne to rule forever he is the living ruler of the world and not me and the king of heaven humbles the proud sometimes gently sometimes painfully sometimes over years sometimes at a stroke sometimes in the now sometimes later but always graciously for he wants us to know what is what he wants us to know him as the king of heaven that he is and

[33 : 20] I want to suggest that the big message of Daniel and these two chapters right at the middle of the book make this point clear I think the big message is since this is who God is and since you have been allowed to see his rule over Nebuchadnezzar over Belshazzar since God gives Daniel a glimpse behind the curtain and given him understanding of how things are and since God through Daniel writing this book down has given us understanding us too a glimpse behind the curtain of what is what since we know all this we should live logically there's an appropriate way to live if this is true there's a fitting way to organize yourself there is a logical response to this you wouldn't back the people who want to rebuild the tower of Babel would you the tower that makes them great not when you know that there is one to whom those who build the tower of

Babel must give account before whom they will stand the one who all power and authority and the Bible's word for that living logically is wisdom wisdom isn't in the Bible isn't about being clever though it is about knowing stuff it's closer I think to what we mean when we talk about godliness living in response to all that God has done and said in response to his character humbly in the light of what he's revealed to us and we hold on to what he's revealed firmly alongside what we know and experience and see all around us in this world wisdom comes from God making it clear that he is the king of heaven that we are not at the center of everything but the sun is and when you can see how the pieces fit together when God has revealed that to us when we can see how everything will be at the end when it's all finished live logically or be wise at the funeral of

Louis the 14th in Notre Dame in full view of the open coffin and if you've been to Notre Dame if you can picture the scene there an open coffin Louis the 14th the preacher began his sermon with the shout only God is great only God is great that must have been an electric moment don't you think our pride is perhaps not like Nebuchadnezzar's maybe not like Belshazzar's but we've got our own little empires haven't we something that we built up a family perhaps a home life a career a lifestyle we built it into something which if we're honest it works for us doesn't it it's something about which our mummy and daddy can feel proud and about which we therefore feel proud we look at ourselves in the mirror we survey our successes very like

Nebuchadnezzar does in chapter 4 verse 30 don't we is not this the life I've built for myself we take pride in our children we take pride in our position if I'm honest I often take something down from the

shelf which I've had a hand in and I admire it when I speak somewhere for example of course I want to do it for God's glory but I like seeing my name in the program and even if I spiritualize my success and my prosperity as God being pleased with me or using me that's pride isn't it I was talking to my brother not that long ago and we were admitting to each other we don't need to pray if we're completely honest that's the bottom line we think we can do it we can manage by and large we're competent we've got our lives to work for us we think we don't need to pray do you not realize it will all pass you will pass you only need one wire in your car to burn out and you can spend eight hours sitting beside the road waiting for the

A to come and sort you out you only need one little vote about Brexit and the share price of your company falls to the floor you only need one hostile little organism to take up root in your body and the test results are desperate and at the end the bottom line we'll all die God does that to show us we are no different from the animals we come to the Bible is now confined to room 55 in the British Museum that's what happened to all that he surveyed in verse 30 possibility thinking may not be the technique we use we may sneer at the selfie generation but being like Narcissus is common isn't it full of ourselves with us at the center I can do great things I can

[39 : 07] I can I can and proud people like me are the proud whom the king of heaven humbles whether I am as militantly anti God as can be or as committed a Christian as you could imagine that Copernican revolution is something I need every day isn't it I do not rule heaven and I do not rule earth live logically be wise live in the light of this truth chapter 4 verse 37 those who walk in pride he is able to humble to hear s■ propheettes from verse times the name Czyli v thoughts lifes movimento wisdom zodiac

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