

Good Kings, Bad Kings, True Kings

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[0 : 0 0] come to God's word. Our Father, we thank you for this word. Open our hearts and minds, we pray, to hear what your spirit would teach us today. Help me to rightly handle this word of truth to the glory of your name. Amen. Please be seated. Of course, Andrew knows exactly what he was doing when he put chapters 4 and 5 together. Together, they frame a very critical lesson for us and for our world. And it's a lesson that is probably the key theme to the book of Daniel 2. But I'll get to what that message is in a moment. Let's first consider what's in front of us today. We have two stories of two different kings. We heard the first one read in chapter 4 and then the second one explained in David's excellent children's talk. Two kings who encounter the most high God. And we see how these encounters unfold. Also, we'll discover what these encounters tell us about human kings. But more so, what these encounters teach us about God. And then, what relevance does this have for you and me here today in this world?

I said a moment ago that today's talk goes to the heart of the message of Daniel. And that message is this. God is in control. Demonstrably, unequivocally, independent of any other authority.

We didn't mention in the interview that I have done some studies at Ridley, and so I have to sneak this in. In theological terms, we call this the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. But I'll try and stick to this. God is in control. Because that's the message. Put simply, it means that God makes his own plans and carries them out in his own time and in his own way. And these two stories today, when we put them together, they help us develop what I like to call a big view of God.

God is in control. You see, our world today doesn't mind us talking about a small God. A God that is full of love and mercy. A God who doesn't require hard things of his people. Or a God who doesn't demand consequences for our actions. You see, they're happy with a God who stays rather inconspicuous.

He comes out for the popular holidays. And he's kind to children and small animals. This, however, is not the God revealed in Daniel 4 and 5. The God that's revealed in these passages is an offense to our world.

[3 : 2 6] You see, not only is he in control of all things, he's a God of wrath as well as a God of mercy. Furthermore, and this is probably the thing that really gets to the people of our world, He's a God who's jealous of his own glory.

He will not share it with mere humankind. Even the greatest king who has ever lived, he will not share his glory with him. And we have to make sure that we really, truly have such a big view of our God.

You see, our world and its gods are at war with this God. Beginning at the fall and throughout human history, this war has been raging.

Andrew demonstrated just one of those battles in chapter 1, verse 2. Nebuchadnezzar conquers Jerusalem, destroys the temple, and takes away the temple valuables, symbolizing that the gods of Babylon have defeated Yahweh, the God of Israel.

And this cosmic struggle continues in today's stories. So let's go. Story number one. It's actually an interesting and unique account.

[4 : 5 0] For a start, the style is what we call an encyclical. All an encyclical is a kind of royal letter to the empire. But it's a story from the lips of Nebuchadnezzar himself.

And even more amazing, it's an announcement praising the God of a vanquished people. A people that Nebuchadnezzar had defeated no less than three times, whose capital he had raised to the ground because of their duplicity and rebellion against him.

And we mustn't miss the significance. It's a magnificent turnaround. Jews and others hearing this would have been amazed. Asking themselves, how can this be?

The conqueror of Jerusalem praising its defeated God? This great king announcing to the known world that there is a king mightier than him?

And don't forget how mighty Nebuchadnezzar really was. He was a brilliant general. He won every battle he ever fought. He was a popular statesman. And a fantastic builder.

[5 : 59] He built the great hanging gardens of Babylon regarded as one of the seven ancient wonders of the world. And also the great walls of Babylon. You know, put it this way.

If Time magazine had to choose its hundred greatest leaders of history, Nebuchadnezzar's in the top three, if not number one. I was trying to think who might beat him. Maybe Genghis Khan and maybe one of the Roman Caesars for the extent of their kingdom.

But probably not. So here you have him. Contented, prosperous, politically and militarily invulnerable. He's untouchable. Yet, he can't sleep.

He's troubled at the height of his power, but haunted by a nightmare. He himself says he's terrified by this dream.

And seemingly no one can help him. Not as wise men, as magicians, as Chaldeans, as diviners. Except one man. Daniel, the proven interpreter of dreams.

[7 : 07] But Daniel, where is he? He's the last man in. Why is this? I think that it's possibly Nebuchadnezzar really does know that this dream is about himself.

But he prefers to seek palatable answers from other quarters first. I think that's typical human nature. I'm sure every one of us knows that we are prone to do the same.

The hard, the tough things. But we'll seek advice that might tell us the things we want to hear first. But this is too big an issue for Nebuchadnezzar to avoid for too long.

And so in comes Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar tells him the dream. You heard it in the reading. It's a dream of a great tree reaching up to heaven, visible from the whole earth.

It provides sustenance and comfort for all under its great canopy. Beautiful to behold, abundant fruit. But unfortunately, it hides a darker side too.

[8 : 20] You see, it harbors an all-sufficiency and a towering ambition. And these are things that are an affront to the God of heaven.

So in the dream, an angelic messenger comes down from God. the messenger declares that the tree must be cut down, stripped bare, bound with iron, useless to all who sheltered there.

And the one represented by the tree must lose his reason and become like a beast, driven into the fields to live there for seven periods.

Most commentators say that's definitely seven years, so for a long period. This tree, this tree of Babylon should remind us of another that rose out of that same plain, the Tower of Babel, both representative of something that is anathema to our God.

Idolatrous pride is something that Yahweh hates. He hated it then and he still hates it today. and Daniel understands the meaning of this dream.

[9 : 42] He's very troubled. He says he's terrified, in fact. He doesn't want to relay this to the king. You wonder why. But I think it's obvious that Daniel, he respects King Nebuchadnezzar.

given he's the chief of his magicians, which is probably something like the prime minister, which really does surprise us, why was Daniel the last one in?

you know, it goes back to my first point. But Daniel being who he is, and being as close to the king as he is, he knows Nebuchadnezzar's frailties.

He knows that he's an impetuous man. We saw that with the way he behaved with Shadrach Meshach and Abednego when building the great statue.

We know he's a self-indulgent man, both in those. Certainly he's a very superstitious man. And most of all, he's got a track record of trying to compete with God.

[10 : 43] In that, he's just like his predecessors who built the Tower of Babel. So, because Daniel is first and foremost Yahweh's servant, he interprets the dream and he tells the bad news to Nebuchadnezzar.

You see, Nebuchadnezzar is the tree. And God has plans to bring Nebuchadnezzar down, down to earth, down from those lofty heights that he has begun to see himself in.

However, Daniel does something else. He preaches repentance to this king that he respects. He pleads to Nebuchadnezzar to turn from his sin and to beg for mercy.

Daniel's fully aware of what's going on. He knows that God has been at work revealing himself to Nebuchadnezzar and to the courts of Babylon.

We saw it in chapter 1, protecting Daniel and his friends. In chapter 3, rescuing the three friends from the fiery furnace. And in chapter 2 and in chapter 4, God sends dreams to Nebuchadnezzar and provides the interpretations thereof.

[12:04] You see, our God is a patient God. His grace means that he gives time to even the most recalcitrant of sinners.

He plays the long game, as it's called sometimes. And we as his people, we should know that. And we should rest easy in that. That we will talk about terrible things, God's wrath.

But we see even more so here to Nebuchadnezzar his mercy. Nebuchadnezzar has already acknowledged God after a fact.

He's called him the true God back in chapter 2, verse 47, and even the greatest of gods. But Nebuchadnezzar's problem is that he has not called him the only God.

Nor has he bowed his knee yet. And so it comes to pass, 12 months in fact, and I guess that's further evidence of God's grace at work.

[13:12] Either Daniel's pleading or perhaps Nebuchadnezzar's heeding, but unfortunately, the dream must come to pass.

inevitably, Nebuchadnezzar has to learn his true place in the greatest scheme of things. That for all his power and all his accomplishments, these are not of himself.

They are predicated on the will of Yahweh and Yahweh alone. So we find Nebuchadnezzar on the palace roof surveying all that he has built and owns and conquered.

And palace roofs are dangerous places as we've seen in the life of David. It's a heady place full of I and me and my and my glory.

Nebuchadnezzar had his warning, but his heart is unmoved. His spiritual pride is monstrously great. And so in an instant, it says, he's brought to his senses.

[14:24] from the highest ziggurat in Babylon to flat on his belly in the dust of the field. How have the mighty fallen?

No human dignity, no human reason, his hair matted, his fingernails grotesque. King, this king who wanted to be more than a man to be a god is now less than a man, made a beast in the fields.

And it's a state he'll be in for a very long time. Until, until he repents, until he raises his eyes towards heaven and away from himself, until he realizes that it is not I and my, but he and his.

Only then will God relent and restore Nebuchadnezzar to his former glory. So it takes seven long years, but finally Nebuchadnezzar declares this truth.

The truth that there is a Most High God, whose kingdom is eternal, and a God who is not absent or careless, but does what he wills in the affairs of humankind.

[15:58] also Nebuchadnezzar declares that he, God, Yahweh, is the one who rules justly, especially given that we, even kings, even great kings, are nothing before him.

And because of that he therefore humbles the proud. And we're all proud, Nebuchadnezzar had a lot to be proud of, but Nebuchadnezzar is no different.

His heart is no different from yours and mine. He goes ahead in his declaration and calls Yahweh eventually the Most High God, and in doing so acknowledges the sovereignty of God to the nations around about, to his own people, and in a way to us throughout history too.

And so Nebuchadnezzar is finally brought to his spiritual senses. He finally fulfills that biblical picture of what a good king is.

A good king is one who acknowledges the source of his power and who seeks in the use of that power to serve God first.

[17:29] You see, stealing God's glory is a sin. Our world may not like that. Probably our own hearts rebel against that too. And Nebuchadnezzar had to learn it.

You see, it's a message that doesn't resonate in our world or our hearts because we are too proud in our own humanity. We have elevated our humanity to a higher place than God.

And don't go around proclaiming a God like this. This is a message that will get you shunned or humiliated or worse. And not only by strangers.

Within your own families and communities at work and with your friends. Before we leave this passage, it's a question that often gets asked.

Was Nebuchadnezzar saved? I don't know. There's still a lot of me and Ma in his final statement. But isn't that the same as us?

[18 : 36] And I am encouraged by the movement that I see in Nebuchadnezzar. and I've said that God is sovereign. And so with him anything is possible.

But if Nebuchadnezzar was the good story, let's get to story number two. I hope you were all paying attention to David's children's talk because I won't be repeating much of the narrative of the story, but we'll try to go straight to the lesson instead.

However, as an aside, I do want to ask a question, because I think it's one that will bring us great encouragement. Who was King Belshazzar?

You see, the Babylonian records don't have a king of that name. And for many, many years, liberal attacks on the veracity of Daniel have seized on this, among a couple other points, and have made out that Belshazzar was the invention of a second century BC writer of Daniel who didn't even know all his facts and simply included Belshazzar.

However, modern researchers vindicated our trust in Daniel. Belshazzar has been uncovered. He was the son of Nabonidus, who was the successor to Nebuchadnezzar, and he is probably the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar too.

[20 : 04] His father Nabonidus is busy fighting a war on the eastern frontiers against the Persians, and so Belshazzar, we've discovered, was appointed regent of Babylon, with almost all the power of a king, while his father was fighting away, seldom to be seen in Babylon, it appears.

And the interesting thing, of course, is it tallies right back with a story, because Belshazzar could only offer Daniel the third seat in the kingdom, why?

Because he himself only had the second seat, and I find this great, knowing that these scriptures are trustworthy. In spite of the attacks of liberal critics, we see the scriptures vindicated.

Belshazzar did exist, the writer of Daniel spoke truly. And as we heard, Belshazzar was a bit of a party animal, clearly he hadn't earned his kingdom, but wanted to live the way kings live.

And while you might say, well, what's strange about a king throwing a party? Well, he's got a real problem right now. The Medes and the Persians are at the gates of Babylon, literally.

[21 : 27] And instead of preparing for a siege, what have you got here? The A-list of Babylon in all their finery, the wines flowing, you get the picture.

Instead of ruling as good kings do, Belshazzar is reveling instead, thinking he's safe behind Babylon's mighty walls and in the height of his drunken folly, he calls for the implements of the Jerusalem temple, for the casual use of his guests and in the worship of his idols.

This is an act of defiance against his grandfather's legacy, but worse, it's an act of direct defiance against Yahweh. Belshazzar deliberately and knowingly profanes God's name and chooses to praise these idols of gold and silver, bronze, wood and stone instead.

Andrew in his commentary says that he throws down the gauntlet against God in a way that even Nebuchadnezzar, the great king, never dared.

And God's response is immediate. And what do you have here again? Another terrified king in the face of God's intervention. Hebrews 10 31 tells us that it is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

[22 : 56] I think we forget that verse. It's conveniently slipped away. Our world probably doesn't even know it's in the Bible. What happens? We heard it in the children's talk.

The supernatural event, this disembodied bodied finger writing on the wall, meany, meany, tickle, parsim. No one knows what's happening.

Confusion abounds. Belshazzar is at his wit's end. It actually takes the queen mother to come to the rescue and remind him that there is one, old, forgotten Daniel, who served his grandfather so well. Daniel rejects the offer of riches and position, probably knowing that they're worthless anyway. But nevertheless, he interprets the judgment.

before that though, he reminds them all of something that they should not have forgotten, that Nebuchadnezzar had had to learn the hard way.

[23 : 59] Yahweh is not a God to be trifled with. He is a sovereign God who does as he pleases. He goes on then to address Belshazzar directly.

You, Belshazzar, in spite of knowing that God requires humility, instead, you have lifted yourself up against the God of heaven.

The message on the wall is a very cryptic message full of double meanings. Directly translated in modern terms, it could be something like a dollar, a dollar, two cents, fifty cents.

but it's also a play on verbs. Numbered, numbered, weighed, divided. And it takes Daniel to provide a shocking revelation to Belshazzar.

He has been weighed in the balances and found wanting. Therefore, his kingdom is removed from him and given to the Medes and the Persians.

[25 : 06] And as we heard, Daniel's interpretation came true that very night. The empire of Babylon was not an eternal one. The head of gold lasted barely three generations before it fell.

And Babylon's walls secure? No. While they were partying, Darius's engineers are busy damming up the river so that his army can simply stroll in and take the city.

They just simply walked under the walls. History tells us that the fall of Babylon was surprisingly easy and shockingly swift. You see, our God does bring down empires in an instant if he so chooses.

Remember the Berlin wall anyone? Or the dissolution of the USSR? So what do these two stories teach us about kings then?

There are kings that rule well and receive God's commendation. Nebuchadnezzar was eventually one of these. But there are also kings who rule badly and God will remove their crowns.

[26 : 26] but ultimately there is only one true sovereign in this universe. He is the God of Daniel and he is our God too if we have turned to him in faith.

And so what do these mean for us today? Well, if God is indeed in control as we said was our central premise then two very clear lessons.

we must flee pride and we must abhor blasphemy. And we can also take heart. You see this was a story of comfort and hope for the exiles of Judah and it is also hope and comfort for all God's oppressed servants everywhere and in all of time.

Whether that oppression is political and systemic or whether it's oppression of a personal nature the message remains the same.

God is in control. He is at work according to his purposes and those purposes are always just and right.

[27 : 45] Nebuchadnezzar got it right in the end. So what must we do? Well one thing we can do is follow Daniel's example. You see he interceded on behalf of proud Nebuchadnezzar.

He loved and served his leaders well but he also boldly denounced profane Belshazzar which is a scary and dangerous thing to do.

Profanity as stark as Belshazzar's is perhaps easy for us to hate when we read it in the distant years of the Old Testament. Although I do think we need to ask how are things profaned today? How are things blasphemed today? And in one sense everything has been made holy. The temple implements were specifically holy under the old covenant but everything has been made holy in the service of Jesus.

So the writing is therefore on the wall for all who would blaspheme Christ and his gospel. Don't get that wrong. They may escape for a while but blaspheming the gospel of Christ will bring the same consequence as was Belshazzar's.

[29 : 05] Okay, so blasphemy you may get. But what's so bad about pride? Well, Nebuchadnezzar discovered this truth and many of the rich and famous of today also know it.

No matter how prosperous, no matter how successful, it is never complete. It is never enough. The human soul wants something unattainable.

It wants the whole world. You see, pride tells us, I did it. It's all about me. Everything I have achieved is by my own efforts and skills.

And therefore, I am owed. It is my right. And this attitude is at play in all of our hearts all of the time. When things are going well, it's because of what I've done.

When things are going badly, well, I'm suffering more than I deserve, more than I'm owed. And the implications of this, as it was quite made clear to Nebuchadnezzar, is that this attitude robs God of his due, what he is owed.

[30 : 22] It also attempts to wrestle control away from him. When I'm in pride, my pride, God is not in control. And really, it makes us refuse to acknowledge the reality of this existence, that almost everything about our lives has absolutely nothing to do with us, where we were born, in which country, to what parents, where we luckily, most things that brought you to where you are today were way beyond your own control.

So where does this leave us? Well, Philippians 2 verse 3 tells us, do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.

You see, humility is the opposite of pride. It accepts with joy all that life gives as a gift. It knows that we are undeserving, but thankfully glorifies the giver.

It rests comfortably knowing that God is at work. And if Nebuchadnezzar was our starkest model of idolatrous pride and had to be reduced to less than a man before he would glorify God, then Jesus Christ is the model that our New Testament reading exhorted us to follow.

He who had everything gave it up to become nothing, less than a man, in order that he might be raised up above everything and take his rightful place as the one sovereign king.

[31 : 58] And Daniel points towards a future king in this book of his. That king is Jesus Christ, the righteous one. So as our next hymn exhorts, let us go out and consider Christ.

Amen.