

A king's Folly

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[0 : 00] If you have your Bibles there with you, do turn it back to page 885. And as Enoch was saying, we're continuing in the prophecy of Daniel, chapter 4 today. I'm sure many of you are familiar with the concept of the open letter.

That's when you see in the media or in the national newspapers, prominent members of our society, many famous people that feel strongly about something that they write a letter to every and anyone in society, in the country, on a particular topic of their interest.

So here's a bit of a trivia, or maybe not even trivia, just quiz for you all. A month or so ago, there was a group of judges that wrote an open letter. Does anyone remember what the topic was?

Do you read the papers? Yeah, who said that? It is right, yeah, Josh, what? Yep.

So, yes, a group of judges wrote about the voice, but in particular, they wrote a letter to say that the proposed change to the constitution that we were voting on was constitutionally sound.

[1 : 16] And then a week or so later, maybe a bit longer, six of our former prime ministers, the ones still living, of course they have to be in order to sign the letter, also published another open letter.

Anyone know what that topic was about? Yeah, the war? To support Israel? To support Israel? To support Israel?

Not quite. I think it was to warn against, it was in support of Israel in the effect of it, but they were warning against using the current Israeli and Palestinian conflict to agitate or promote anti-Semitism.

Yes, so to support Israel in the end. But the point was not to use it to be anti-Semitic. Now, these letters carry weight, don't they, because of the people that write them. And they write to change public opinion.

Well, today in Daniel chapter 4, we have actually an ancient open letter, don't we? Written by King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, because we read in verse 1, to the nations and peoples of every language who live in all the earth.

[2 : 31] So King Nebuchadnezzar is not just writing to his subjects, but to everyone in all places. And I think by extension, to us as well.

So pay attention. He's saying, Listen up, all you peoples from across time and place, because I've got something important to tell you. And then he says, May you prosper greatly.

Meaning to say, I've got some wisdom to impart to you that could affect your prosperity. And I guess, when everyone hears, You might be prosperous, we all get interested, don't we?

Well, in verse 2 then, he gives us his executive summary. It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me. How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders.

His kingdom is an eternal kingdom. His dominion endures from generation to generation. That's a big surprise, isn't it?

[3 : 34] For this pagan king, this proud and mighty king, to be praising the Most High God. Something seismic must have happened in his life, surely.

Yes, last week we saw him praise the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, because he said that here was a God that saved like no other God can. And he demanded that all the nations respect their God.

But it fell a little short, didn't it? Of Nebi himself recognizing God's power. Him worshipping God in his own right.

Now, of course, the phrase Most High God is still a bit ambiguous. It doesn't point clearly to the God of Israel and Daniel. But as we will see as the events unfold, he will come to recognize this to be the God of Israel.

At least though now it's clear the king is recognizing the sovereign, universal and eternal rule of this God. Now, what has brought this about?

[4 : 42] Well, it turns out that this wisdom, this insight from him, has come about because of his folly. And so we begin, verse 4, for him to tell us his story.

And so we read, I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at home in my palace, contented and prosperous. I had a dream that made me afraid. As I was lying in bed, the images and visions that passed through my mind terrified me.

So I commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be brought before me to interpret the dream for me. When the magicians and chancers, astrologers and diviners came, I told them the dream, but they could not interpret it for me.

Finally, Daniel came into my presence and I told him the dream. He's called Belteshazzar after the name of my God and the spirit of the holy gods is in him.

So yet again, we have another disturbing dream. And yet again, the wise men of Babylon are not up to their job. At this time, he even tells them the dream and they still don't get it.

[5 : 49] And so it seems only Daniel is able to interpret it. King Nebi, you see, is beginning to realize the difference between Daniel and the rest. Yes, the king may have named him Belteshazzar after his own God, but now he says that he has, he recognizes the spirit of the holy gods is in him.

Now at this point, the king only knows Daniel's God as the holy gods, not the one true living God as we know him. But he's beginning to realize that Daniel's God is not like his God, that Daniel is different to his wise men.

And so he proceeds to share the next point, the contents of his dream, verse 9. I said, Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you and no mystery is too difficult for you.

Here is my dream, interpret it for me. These are the visions I saw while lying in bed. I looked and there before me stood a tree in the middle of the land. Its height was enormous.

The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky. It was visible to the ends of the earth. Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant and on it was food for all.

[7 : 07] Under it, the wild animals found shelter. The birds lived in its branches. From it, every creature was fed. In the vision I saw while lying in bed, I looked and there before me was a holy one, a messenger coming down from heaven.

He called out in a loud voice, cut down the tree and trim off its branches, strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the animals flee from under it and the birds from its branches.

But let the stump and its roots bound with iron and bronze remain in the ground in the grass of the field. Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven and let him live with the animals among the plants of the earth.

Let his mind be changed from that of a man and let him be given the mind of an animal till seven times pass by for him. The decision is announced by messengers.

The Holy One declares the verdict so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of people.

[8 : 10] This is the dream that I, King Nebuchadnezzar, had. Now, Belteshach, tell me what it means for none of the wise men in my kingdom can interpret it for me.

But you can because the spirit of the holy gods is in you. We'll get to the details of the dream in a while when we interpret it with Daniel, but Daniel's initial reaction was one of being greatly perplexed, wasn't it?

He too was terrified by the details of the dream. And so for a while, he probably wasn't willing to share his interpretation with Nebuchadnezzar. But the king wants to know, you know, so he assured Daniel, Belteshach, do not let the dream or its meaning alarm you.

It's okay, you can tell me. And so Daniel answers, my lord, if only the dream applied to your enemies and its meaning to your adversaries.

He's trying to manage expectations here, isn't he? He's going, my lord, you're not going to like what you hear, so just hang on to your seats. And so he said, the tree you saw, which grew large and strong with its top touching the sky, visible to the whole earth, with 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.

[9 : 33] 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 the distant parts of the earth.

Nothing really scary with that bit, right? I think King Nebuchadnezzar would love to hear that. But then he goes on. Your majesty, so a holy one, a messenger coming down from heaven and say, 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.

Let him be drenched with the dew of 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 the most high has issued 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.

[10 : 57] 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. Now, the interpretation is pretty clear that it doesn't need much explanation but unlike the dream in chapter 2 from two weeks ago where the kingdoms themselves were the ones cut down by the stone if you recall by the lord, here, God gets personal, doesn't he?

It's Nebi himself who will be cut down. He's the tree. Yes, he's become strong and great and his greatness extends to the ends of the earth but he's also become proud and arrogant.

He's failed to acknowledge that his power is from God and what's more with his pride has come oppression because he's been using his power to do wicked things to others.

So judgment will come upon him a time of humbling when he will be cut down like a tree stump to the point of just mere existence. Barely alive, living like an animal, eating grass, out in the wild.

All this, verse 22, until, 25, sorry, until he acknowledges the most high God, that this God is sovereign over all kingdoms including his and that God, not him, rules over all.

[12 : 31] Now even here, Daniel gives a glimmer of hope for him, doesn't he? None of this needs to happen because at the moment it's just a dream. The king can avert it by renouncing his sins and changing his ways.

Then perhaps his prosperity can continue. In other words, Daniel was warning, humble yourself now or God will do it for you.

One way or another it's going to happen but you get to choose how. Well, it takes about a year before we find out but in verse 28 we get King Nebuchadnezzar's response.

All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. Twelve months later as the king was walking on the roof of his 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?

Deng! Wrong answer. And don't say you have not been warned. And even as the words were on his lips, a voice came from heaven.

[13 : 48] This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar. Your royal authority has been taken 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.

You see, all the words have been repeating itself, isn't it? What he saw in the dream, what Daniel interpreted, and then now what is being fulfilled is almost to the point of word for word, isn't it?

Verse 33, Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. God's word is true. 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 claws of a bird. Now, we're not sure quite how all this comes about, whether it was real, you know, eagles' feathers or it just looks like it, don't know.

[14 : 58] But it appears like some form of temporary insanity. It forced the king from human society and he had to live exposed to the elements, probably, foraging in the wild, you know, and so probably started growing lots of stuff on his body.

Now, interestingly, in psychiatry, I had to look this up on Google, so it's definitive, there's actually such a diagnosis. On the next slide, zoanthropy is actually a condition of delusion that you're an animal.

It's for real. Boanthropy, a bit more specific, is thinking and acting like an ox or cow. It's a rare condition, but it's actually been clinically documented.

All right? So, it happens. Now, in fact, there was a recent viral video of a Japanese man, you might have seen this one, Toko-san, I think is his name. He spent \$15,000 to make a collie, a costume of a collie, because he wanted to be a dog.

So, that's actually Toko-san, not a collie. So, something similar, I think, could have happened here. But, apart from here in Daniel chapter 4, there's actually no other independent historical record of this happening to this king, Nebuchadnezzar.

[16:24] Interestingly, though, there's this tantalizing detail. It's merely a tantalizing detail, so we don't know for sure. But, in those days, all the mighty kingdoms of those days would be meticulous in keeping records of their achievements, and particularly of their kings.

So, they would have all these cuneiform tablets, which they'll carve on or whatever, and, you know, on it, they would say what year, what the king did, what city they conquered, you know, what city, what bridge they built, what, you know, what royal gardens of Babylon was built, blah, blah, blah, whatever.

And, interestingly, no such records are found for any governmental activity for seven years between 582 to 575 BC.

We sort of coincide, so it's about 15 years after the beginning of the exile of Judah. It's just a tantalizing detail, but it's interesting, isn't it?

Now, okay, it could be that after I've said this next week, they'll come up with another tablet that says, here it is, 582 BC. So, we don't need to bank all our hopes on that.

[17:34] It's only background information. But I think what's more important here is what King Nebuchadnezzar himself declares in his own letter. Now, remember, this is an open letter that he's offering his wisdom, you know, I'm so smart now, I want to offer you what I think is right.

Although, ironically, I say that he's gained this wisdom as a result of his folly, isn't it? But here's what he says, verse 34, at the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven and my sanity was restored.

Then I praised the Most High. I honored and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion. His kingdom endures from generation to generation.

And so the king is sharing lessons from his own humbling experience. He wasn't just humbled from a king to a commoner. No, he went even lower, didn't he, to that of a beast.

But no sooner did he acknowledge his pride, which is indicated by him raising his eyes toward heaven, God restored his sanity. He then praised and glorified God.

[18:45] He uses the same words he used at the start of the letter to say that God's dominion is an eternal dominion. His kingdom endures from generation to generation. And so this is the wisdom.

This is the reason for the open letter that he wants to share with all of humanity that the prosperity of the entire human race depends on. And so I've got at the bottom of the outline there three points, three lessons.

First, the lesson to be learned is that humanity needs to get its relationship right with the Most High God. He goes on to say, all the peoples on earth are regarded as nothing.

He does as he pleases, God does, with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. Even a powerful king like me is debased by God's mere word. No one can hold back his hand, he goes on to say, or to say to God, what have you done?

At the same time that my insanity was restored, my honor and splendor will return to me for the glory of my kingdom. My visors and nobles sought me out and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before.

[19:54] Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt 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's able to humble.

What amazing declaration, isn't it, from this pagan, proud and arrogant king. Now even though exalted greater than before, giving praise and glory to the king of heaven.

And this is the truth, isn't it? Even today, this is still the truth and yet sometimes we do look at our rulers and authorities and powers of this world and put too much them on par with God, don't we? we're afraid of them, thinking we need to obey them more than God as though they were some serious rival to God's authority. Well time and time again in Daniel and that's the theme of the prophecy, we see that the reality is God is without peer.

No one can compare to him. He stands alone and all of humanity, even kings, powerful kings, are under his absolute sovereignty. He's the one who assigns glory to them.

[21 : 10] But more than that, the king now acknowledges in verse 37, this king of heaven is the one who does everything right. All his ways are just, meaning he's not just a powerful God, he is a good God.

He's a God that we can trust to do what is right for this world as well as for us. Well the second lesson then, from this letter, is then to consider the insanity of pride.

That is that being proud actually doesn't make sense. Now it's true that the king's situation here is a result of God's direct intervention to make him sort of insane.

But if you think about it, all insanity at its heart really is a distorted view of reality. When you're saying someone's out of their mind, they're actually having a distorted view of reality.

That is, we have a false conception of what is really true in this world. And so by definition, pride is one such form of insanity, isn't it?

[22 : 24] Because pride actually is a distorted view of oneself. we think we're better than we really are. Our view of humanity's relationship with God and indeed our own relationship with God is distorted.

We have a distorted sense of our own self-importance, an inflated ego. But that's a delusion, isn't it?

And you know, we actually see it quite often, don't we, in the public sphere with leaders, particularly world leaders, of powerful nations. Sadly, we see it too with church leaders, of megachurches, but not only of megachurches.

These people can be full of themselves, can't they? Thinking their country or church needs them. They're self-appointed messiahs that think they have a special anointing.

And so taken to the extreme, pride leads to narcissism, doesn't it? But you know what? Sadly, we're all prone to this, aren't we?

[23 : 32] We may not be megalomaniacs thinking we're God's gift to the world, I hope not, but we are proud by nature, aren't we? It doesn't take much to get offended by people when we're slighted.

If we get a promotion at work or we do well with something, so easy, isn't it, for us to go straight away to think, oh, I'm good, aren't I? At least I'm better than the rest.

And that's why a few weeks ago it was good, isn't it, for Andrew to remind us the importance of giving thanks to God. Because when you give thanks to God, it cultivates humility, doesn't it?

A thankful heart cultivates humility. It looks to someone else as the source of your blessing rather than your own achievements. Because if we don't do that, pride will creep in.

When we're not thankful, we will naturally gravitate to pride. And God will not allow it to persist forever. Sooner or later, just like King Nebuchadnezzar, he will give us a reality check.

[24 : 38] Because that's the reality, isn't it? For Daniel warned the king to repent. He got his chance, but he didn't use it. And so God did it for him. And that's why King Nebuchadnezzar can proclaim at the end of his letter, those who walk in pride, God is able to humble and will humble.

So we don't want to wait for that to happen, do we? We don't need to. We can take the initiative and humble ourselves now. And that's why Peter writes in that letter, 1 Peter 5, verse 6, humble yourself therefore under God's mighty hand.

Because there's wisdom, isn't there, in humble repentance. It's the right and good thing to do. It's the best thing to do. And then Peter gives us the motivation. Because when we humble ourselves under God's mighty hand, God will exalt us in due time.

He will lift us up in due time. And it's important to recognize when that point was for King Nebuchadnezzar, wasn't it? His point of humble repentance was not when he lost his sanity, right?

Seven years earlier. That was actually his point of humiliation. But it was when he raised his eyes to heaven. That was his point of humble repentance.

[26 : 05] When he recognized and put himself in right relationship with God. And then God restored him immediately. And so that's the same for us, isn't it?

Sometimes we get chastised, we get into trouble because of doing something wrong and God is disciplining us. And what we do is we wallow in our misfortune, right?

We have self-pity and all that kind of stuff. That is not the point of your humility. It's only when you turn back to God. When you recognize and renounce your sin and turn away from your wicked ways, that is the point of humble repentance, not the point of when you are being chastised by God. And God is always gracious, isn't he? Because as he's promised, when we humble ourselves, then he will exalt us and lift us up in due time. Now, you know, this is actually just the trajectory of all humanity.

Because if you look at the life of Jesus, even though he was sinless, and you know, he didn't need to repent, yet he modeled for us, didn't he? This life of humility, becoming a man, a servant, even lower than that, death on the cross for us, and then afterwards with the result that what God then did was exalt him and gave him a name that is above every name, far above every king and authority.

[27 : 31] So if that is what Jesus had to go through, I mean, what about us? Do you think we're better than Jesus, and we don't need that? You see, even though we're humans made in God's image, and what a privilege to be made in God's image, the Bible also teaches us our frailty, don't they?

It says in Psalm 8, what is mankind that you, God, are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? Yeah, who are we? We're nothing, are we?

And yet at the same time, in the very next verse, he has made us a little lower than the angels, and crowned us with glory and honor. That's the right balance to have, isn't it?

Who are we? Nothing, and yet crowned with honor and glory, provided we're humble in repentance. So friends, there is really no downside in humble repentance, none.

When we acknowledge our sins, just as Daniel told the king, we will find forgiveness from God for us through his son Jesus. And then just as God raised Jesus from the dead, God will also lift us up, raise us up to eternal life so that we might share the riches of his inheritance as God's son.

[28 : 55] Let's pray. Father, we acknowledge that there is none like you, for you are the sovereign Lord over all creation. over even the seemingly powerful rulers of this earth.

Help us to guard against the sin and folly of pride. Help us to see ourselves as we truly are, lowly, and yet when we repent and acknowledge our sins, we enjoy the glory of being exalted in Christ Jesus.

So Lord, help us not to boast in ourselves, but to turn away from our sins and look to you for our exaltation. In the name of Jesus, your son, your glorious son, we pray.
Amen.