

Clash of Kings

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[0 : 0 0] I wonder what you are most proud of. What are you most proud of? For King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel chapter 4, it was as he stood on his balcony looking out at this great city, Babylon, that he had helped build.

Apparently it was quite a sight. You've probably heard of the Ishtar Gate and the hanging gardens of Babylon. There was walls so wide that you could race a chariot along them.

Imagine that. The city was impenetrable. It was the largest empire that the world had ever seen. That was Babylon. And in chapter 4, King Nebuchadnezzar, who's now reigned for about half his life, he is looking out at that city.

And he's rightfully proud. There's a great deal to be proud about. He has accomplished more than almost any man in the history of the world. And it's in that exact moment that God strikes him down.

And for a season, and we're not preaching on this chapter, you can probably guess why. It's very strange. For a season, he walks as one of the animals. Everything that he has is taken away from him.

[1 : 2 5] Instead of sipping from the finest cups, he's eating grass like a donkey. Until he learns not to lift his eyes to his own accomplishments, to his own kingdom, but to lift his eyes further up and look at the Lord God and recognize that he alone is the true king.

And that's a refrain that goes all through the book of Daniel. This refrain that says something to the effect that the Lord God is the true king. Let me just summarize chapter 4 by reading something from the very last verse.

I want you to consider for a moment that these are the last recorded words of one of the greatest men in history, King Nebuchadnezzar. He's speaking in the first person. And he says in verse 37 of chapter 4, Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the king of heaven.

For all his works are right and his ways are just, and those who walk in pride he's able to humble. Isn't that amazing? That this Babylonian king is able to say that?

Those are his last words in the book of Daniel. And so we come to chapter 5. It's kind of abrupt. I don't know if you thought of this, but it's kind of abrupt because we've been looking at Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel for four chapters, and suddenly he's gone.

[3 : 0 2] And we have a new king. His name's Belshazzar. And if you have your Bible open to chapter 5 with me, look at verse 1. We see that he is making a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drinking wine in front of the thousand.

So who's this? Why the sudden change? Well, we fast forwarded about nine years, and actually we fast forwarded right through about three kings, all of whom obviously had short reigns.

And we're in the final moments of the Babylonian empire. The year is about 539, and Belshazzar is the last king of Babylon. And apparently he doesn't remember much of the story of Daniel 1 to 4.

What's he doing? He's drinking too much wine. And in that moment of revel, reveling with his friends and concubines, he invites his guests.

He does something very foolish. He calls for the vessels from the temple in Jerusalem, the vessels that his grandfather or his predecessor brought back from Jerusalem in chapter 1, verse 2.

[4 : 10] And he says, hey, let's have a toast from these holy cups. And it's at that exact moment that we get the dramatic writing on the wall.

The hand of God. Verse 5. Immediately, immediately, the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace opposite the lampstand.

So it's like there's a spotlight on it. And it really shakes him up. Three times it tells us that his color changed. He shook. He's undone.

Because this is a message from God himself. And we know this because none of his interpreters, none of those wise men can explain it. It's only Daniel who can finally explain it as a prophet of the one true God.

And then our hunch is confirmed a little further down in verse 24 because Daniel actually says this. He says, then from his presence, that is from God's own presence, the hand was sent and this writing was inscribed.

[5 : 17] So this is the word of God written, etched on the wall. A word of judgment on King Belshazzar. You have been numbered, weighed, and found wanting.

And at the very end of the chapter, verse 31, that very night, Belshazzar, the Chaldean king, was killed. And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about 62 years old.

And those last verses, they're just as abrupt as the very beginning, aren't they? Just like that. In two verses, the greatest empire the world has ever known is gone.

It's finished. In one night. Why? What is it that King Belshazzar has done?

Well, let's be clear. It's not about using the fancy dishes for the wrong occasion. I hope that's obvious. So let's say you arrive at work, and you find your desk, and your chair, and your filing cabinet, your computer, the pictures on your wall.

[6 : 27] You find all of them sitting in the hallway outside your office. You get the point. It's not just your stuff that's out.

It means you're out. You've been fired. Your office door is locked. So the question is, was drinking out of the temple cups really so bad?

Yes. I mean, have a look at verse 22 with me. Verse 22, right at the top. Sorry, a little ways down. On page 743.

And you, his son, this is Daniel speaking. And you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven.

Belshazzar, he called for those fancy gold and silver cups because he believed that Israel's God had been conquered, had no real power.

[7 : 29] He said, I'm the king over all the earth. I'm like a God over all the earth. And in that moment, this moment that Daniel is pointing to in his life, that's more than just drinking out of a fancy cup.

We get right at the heart of the problem. And the root of the problem here in chapter five is pride, human pride. Pride is an attitude of self-sufficiency and self-exaltation, a raising up of ourselves, a puffing up and lifting up in our relationship to God.

And when it turns outward towards those around us, it's a promotion of a competitive spirit and an attitude of boastfulness and contempt because pride's never happy as long as someone else is better than us.

It can never rest. I don't know if you've noticed or thought about this, but it seems to me that our North American culture promotes pride as a virtue.

We hear there's slogans like, take pride in yourself. Take pride in your work. We say to our children, I'm proud of you, sweetie. And those seem innocent enough.

[8 : 55] They seem like good things. In fact, I'd say that low self-esteem or a lack of pride is often blamed for a variety of the personal problems that we face in everyday life.

But the Bible warns us that pride is one of our greatest enemies. Incredibly slippery and self-deceiving.

It grabs a hold of our hearts and it's capable of doing great damage. Here's C.S. Lewis diagnosing the problem of pride in mere Christianity.

Listen to this. There is one vice of which no person in the world can flee, which everyone in the world loathes when he or she sees it in someone else, and of which hardly any person except Christians ever imagine that they are guilty themselves.

I have heard people admit that they're bad-tempered or they cannot keep their heads about girls or drink or even that they're cowards. I do not think I have ever heard anyone who is not a Christian accuse herself of being proud.

[10 : 12] So we all suffer from pride, but it's very hard to self-diagnose. How do I detect pride in myself then? Here's Lewis again.

If you want to find out how proud you are, the easiest thing to ask yourself is, how much do I dislike when other people snub me or refuse to take notice of me?

Because the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others. So let's take a moment and turn to our neighbor and ask... I'm just kidding.

Just making sure you're awake. Okay. So maybe Lewis is giving us a helpful start there. It's a very helpful question to ask yourself.

But where else do I turn? What about... What about if I want to educate myself with more information? Is that going to help? We often hear the rallying cry that education will bring transformation.

[11 : 12] But we can't battle this heart condition with just better data, more information. Information is not enough on its own.

And I want to jump back into the Daniel text. I'll show you why I say that. Have a look again with me at verse 22. And this comes at the end of a lengthy speech that we brushed over.

Daniel's speech to Belshazzar reviewing what happened to his grandfather, King Nebuchadnezzar. I summarized it for you at the beginning. When Nebuchadnezzar's pride got out of hand and he forgot that God is the one who gave him his kingdom.

That speech you can read in verses 18 to 21. But I read for you already verse 22. This time I want you to read it with me again and listen for a special emphasis that I'm going to add. Verse 22.

And you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart. Here it is. Though you knew all this. Though you knew all this.

[12 : 20] What is it that Belshazzar knew? The point is that Belshazzar should have known better. He knows the story that we read in chapter 4 or that I summarized in chapter 4.

The story of King Nebuchadnezzar's great rise and then his tremendous fall and then his declaration that it was only as he realized that everything came from the true king, God over all the earth, that he was restored.

He knows that story. He has all the information. And yet it doesn't change a thing for him. Having clear information, it doesn't, it never, it will never guarantee a right response in our hearts.

Hearing the word of God, in other words, we have the expression, the writing's on the wall. It's literally on the wall there for him. Hearing the word of God this morning, it will not guarantee a right response in you.

Alone. Truth is important, but brothers and sisters, we need help to receive and respond to the truth with humility instead of pride.

[13 : 33] And where will this help come from? Here's a quote from Tom Torrance. As those who are in Christ, he's speaking of you and me, if we are in Christ.

As those who are in Christ, our perspective on humility can be radically changed if we will ponder and meditate on the greatest example of humility in history, Jesus Christ.

By the very act of leaving heaven, coming down to earth, taking the form of a man, he demonstrated an unfathomable humbling of himself, saying, I have come not to be served, but to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many.

That's from Mark 10, verse 45. That last bit. But let me take it one step further because we don't just need Jesus' example.

It's not even going to be enough if we just meditate on what Jesus did, as Torrance says there. Friends, we must earnestly seek God in prayer and ask him to show us sinful pride in our life so we can repent and turn away from it.

[14 : 47] We must plead with the Holy Spirit that he will cause the word of God to bring, to bear fruits of Christ-like humility and childlikeness in ourselves and in our congregation.

And when this happens, it leads us together to sing praises to God as our king. That's what I think Nebuchadnezzar is doing at the end of chapter 4 there. He's singing a praise. You can kind of see it, the poetry of it, in the way it's spaced out on the page.

And here's the key. We often think that humility is more like humiliation and that when the Bible talks about how the Lord brings down the proud and raises up the humble, that what he's really doing is making sure that nobody is ever better than him, that he always has, he's kind of got an ego problem.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The gift of humility from the Holy Spirit is a gift so that God can exalt us, not so that he can hold us down.

That's the paradox of this transformation. It's actually that when we are brought down from our humility, from our pride, into humility, into Christ-like humility, that Jesus promises that he will exalt us.

[16 : 18] we receive in Christ's incarnation and his death and resurrection, we actually receive the gift of a right view of our relationship with God and with one another.

A right view where we no longer see ourselves puffed up, looking down on everyone around us, competing with everyone around us, but we see ourselves as creatures and as children, not just creatures.

That's very key. But as children. Pride is no joke.

I hope you see that from this chapter. It's a spiritual cancer that actually eats up the very possibility of love or contentment. That's C.S. Lewis again.

But when we humble ourselves before the Lord, he delights to exalt us as children and heirs with Christ.

[17 : 19] And so as I close, I'd like to pray for us once again. Let's take a moment and prepare our hearts. Lord, we confess that we are proud before you and we hardly even notice it.

And we thank you for the gift of your word in Daniel. We thank you even for the judgment upon King Belshazzar, which serves as a testimony to us of your judgment on pride but also of your sweet mercy, your tender desire to see us, to give us the gift of humility.

And Lord, we pray and we ask for this gift. We ask, Holy Spirit, that you would make us more like Christ, that we would turn away from pride and turn towards humility.

And this we can only ask through what Jesus has done for us on the cross. And we ask it in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Thank you.