

Daniel 4 - Grace and the Beast

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 May 2016

Preacher: Will Spink

[0:00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Amen. Turn with me this morning to Daniel chapter 4. Daniel 4. There's been a clash of kingdoms going on so far in the book of Daniel.

Nebuchadnezzar and the kingdom of Babylon in one corner. And Yahweh and the kingdom of Israel in the other corner. Who's the true king with the lasting kingdom?

Who's going to come out on top? After an initial flurry of activity from Nebuchadnezzar conquering God's people and taking vessels from God's temple back to His own gods, God has one round after another shown Himself convincingly to be the strongest king, the God greater than all the gods of Babylon.

Last week, in fact, at the fiery furnace, God showed up to rescue His people from the clutches of Nebuchadnezzar and his idol and to prove once again that He is the only one worthy of our worship.

[1:18] Today, in round 4, chapter 4, God throws the knockout punch. This is the last time we'll hear from Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel.

His kingdom fades and God and His servants continue and stand. But Yahweh doesn't just defeat Nebuchadnezzar in this chapter.

He does it in such a way that when it's over, his opponent calls a press conference, so to speak, to praise the power of God. Nebuchadnezzar's declaration to all peoples is recorded at both the beginning and the end of this chapter.

I want us to read it together before we then go back and walk through the story that led him to make such a declaration as this. For now, we'll start reading at verse 34 of Daniel chapter 4.

Let's give our attention to God's holy word. At the end of the days, I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me.

[2:24] And I blessed the Most High and praised and honored 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 hosts 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 splendor returned to me. My counselors 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 honor 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. Pray with me. Father, indeed, You are the one whose kingdom lasts forever, from generation to generation.

You are the one who is able to humble the prideful. And Father, we struggle with our own pride, and we would ask this morning that through Your Word, You would humble us.

[3:47] That You would not only humble us, but give us great dependence upon You. Father, do that in my heart first. That the one who speaks Your words this morning would not do so in pride, but in complete dependence upon You.

Holy Spirit, work in my heart and in all of our hearts that Your Word might do its mighty work, and that we would be different forever because we met with You this morning.

We do ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Once upon a time, in a faraway land, a young prince lived in a shining castle.

Although he had everything his heart desired, the prince was spoiled, selfish, and unkind. But then one winter's night, an old beggar woman came to the castle and offered him a single rose in return for shelter from the bitter cold.

Repulsed by her haggard appearance, the prince sneered at the gift and turned the old woman away. But she warned him not to be deceived by appearances, for beauty is found within.

[5 : 05] When he dismissed her again, the old woman's ugliness melted away to reveal a beautiful enchantress. The prince tried to apologize, but it was too late, for she had seen that there was no love in his heart.

And as punishment, she transformed him into a hideous beast and placed a powerful spell on the castle and all who lived there. Ashamed of his monstrous form, the beast concealed himself inside his castle with a magic mirror as his only window to the outside world.

The rose she had offered was truly an enchanted rose, which would bloom until his 21st year. If he could learn to love another and earn her love in return, by the time the last petal fell, then the spell would be broken.

If not, he would be doomed to remain a beast for all time. That's a fairy tale. The prologue, of course, to the classic fairy tale we know as Beauty and the Beast.

But in real human history, there was another such prince in a shining castle, in a faraway land, with everything his heart desired, but spoiled, selfish, and unkind.

[6 : 24] And Daniel chapter 4 is the story of that prince becoming a beast until he learns something significant as well as the other prince had to do.

Until Nebuchadnezzar learns his own humble state in the glory and might of the true king. Let's start the story there with King Nebuchadnezzar, the self-made man.

Nebuchadnezzar is so proud of himself, isn't he? We've seen this king over and over through the first chapters of Daniel. Already he's marked by Aaron, arrogance, right?

Narcissism, we would say these days. Obsessed with his own glory. And you see it coming again in verse 4 of this chapter.

I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and prospering in my palace. And you think, by now, oh no, that may not last real long.

[7 : 29] And then Nebuchadnezzar gets a warning through a dream that he and his kingdom will be cut down and are coming to an end. We'll come back to that part in just a bit. But he gets that warning and still a year after that warning, we read this in verse 29.

At the end of 12 months after the dream, 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?

And you think, bless his heart. He just doesn't get it, does he? We've been reading your story. We know how this is going to go.

You didn't do all of this. But maybe that's what you expect from the king of Babylon, the enemy of God and his people.

He's the villain. He's the bad guy in the story, right? Of course he's like this. My eight-year-old daughter Caitlin came downstairs one morning this week and I was working on my sermon and she looked over the computer and saw Nebuchadnezzar typed in there and she said, oh, Nebuchadnezzar, I don't like him very much.

[8 : 48] She said, he's always grouchy. I thought, oh boy, our Sunday school teacher's doing a good job. They've pegged Nebuchadnezzar. He's always like this, right? That's just who he is.

But stop and think for a minute. Think of all Nebuchadnezzar has seen. Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego rise to the top of his advisors to the cream of the crop.

A dream interpreted for him about the fall of his kingdom. Three men spared from the fiery furnace. You think he'd begin to pick up on something here, right?

Then think of all of the things that he's said as he's witnessed these events happening. Daniel 2 at verse 47, the king says to Daniel, truly your God is God of gods and Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries for you've been able to reveal this mystery.

And then the next chapter, in chapter three, Nebuchadnezzar says after the fiery furnace, blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted him and set aside the king's command.

[9 : 55] They yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any God except their own. I'm gonna make a decree. Any people, nation or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb in their houses and ruins for there's no other God who's able to rescue in this way.

Sounds like a guy who's met Yahweh, right? Think of all the things he's done. Promoting God's people in his government. Protecting God's people through his decrees like that one. Trusting God's interpretation of his dreams through Daniel. This is the second time. And you'd think he'd be getting the message by now, wouldn't you? Nebuchadnezzar is on board.

He understands who the true king is. But as we've seen, that's not the case, is it? What we see here in this king is that pride blinds us from seeing our true selves or our true king accurately.

Despite what Nebuchadnezzar has supposedly learned, he still surveyed his kingdom and thought highly of himself. He was walking on the roof of the royal palace in Babylon, verse 29 says.

[11 : 13] A view from which you could see not only the walls of the city, thick enough for four chariots side by side to ride along the top of the wall.

He sees the expanse of his city and how far and how magnificent it looks. From the roof of the royal palace in Babylon, you can see the hanging gardens that Nebuchadnezzar has built.

One of the glories of the ancient world. And his pride obscures the reality of his condition and the true king of heaven.

He misses that all of these things come from God who gives power to whom he will. Perhaps it's his power that leads him to feel self-sufficient, that he's got that kind of influence over so many people. Or maybe it's his possessions, which do seem pretty impressive, you've got to admit, when you think about Babylon and all Nebuchadnezzar can call his own. But whatever it is, he looks out over his kingdom and he thinks, yes, I am pretty awesome.

[12 : 20] I am really fabulous, you know. As I stand up here and look out, I really am something. And we may chuckle at that, but we do the same thing ourselves, don't we?

We saw last week how easily we, like Nebuchadnezzar, worship idols to get what we really treasure. How often does our relative wealth tempt us to believe we are self-sufficient, self-made men and women?

Haven't we, like Nebuchadnezzar, praised the name of God in here on Sunday? Prayed to Him? Confessed our need of Him only to find our fickle hearts wandering right back to building our own kingdoms on Monday morning?

Nebuchadnezzar's not the only one, is he, to praise God with his lips only to see his life not back it up time and again, back and forth praise, and then living for my own glory?

We confessed together earlier this morning that we have a tendency to do that and trust ourselves rather than God, but we'll do it again this week, won't we? After all we've seen and all we've learned, we'll fall again and fail to trust Him.

[13 : 39] To be honest, it is quite ridiculous ridiculous that we do that. You'd think we'd know better by now. You'd think we'd have gotten it figured out and stopped pursuing our own desires and trusted that God knows best.

But you know, sin is ridiculous. That's what it's like. We should look and say, this makes no sense. Why do I live this way?

The pride in our hearts blinds us to seeing the seemingly clear reality about ourselves and about our true King. It's why pride often comes before destruction and a haughty spirit before the fall because it blinds us and so of course when we're walking around blinded, we're likely to stumble on something.

We don't see reality the way we should. Have you ever in your heart looked out from your back porch or your office window and thought to yourself, oh yeah, I am something.

Or maybe you've walked in to look at your kids sleeping at night before you go to bed and you've looked over them and thought to yourself, is it not this a great life or family?

[15 : 02] Or kingdom that I've built? Haven't I done just a wonderful job? I haven't struggled with that since last night. Percy Shelley captured the emptiness of our feelings of grandeur in his classic sonnet, *Ozymandias*.

If poetry is not your thing, this is the poem, but if you're not going to figure it out anytime soon what he's saying, I'm with you. What he sees is a broken statue.

This statue with only the trunk, the legs left, and this broken face, the head of the statue, sitting there in the middle of the desert sand.

And he realizes that there's a plaque on the bottom of a statue, like all good statues, to tell you who it is, right? Who is it who had this statue built of himself?

And it's down here towards the end of the poem. On the pedestal, the words read, My name is Ozymandias, King of kings. Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair.

[16:09] The king is so confident in his own might, and Shelley says, Nothing beside remains. Sand.

A broken head, some crumbling rock, and desert all around. As far as the eye can see, that's all that's left of apparently a once mighty kingdom.

We outwardly prosperous, successful people of southeast Huntsville need to realize something this morning. It's hard to see reality when you've built or accumulated lots of things that seem great and wonderful, but really don't last.

It makes it hard to see the reality about yourself or the reality about God. Nebuchadnezzar's pride blinded him to the reality that he was not the king of kings, that he wouldn't last forever.

His days would pass, and his kingdom would end. That's the reality that Nebuchadnezzar only realizes as the humbled beast.

[17:26] Now there's a dream here in this passage and then Daniel interprets the dream for Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel's interpretation recounts almost all of the dream in the interpretation, so I'm just going to read us the interpretation part and you'll get a pretty good idea of the dream itself.

Let's read at verse 20 of chapter 4. Daniel talking to Nebuchadnezzar says, The tree 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 the beasts of the field found shade and in whose branches the birds of the heavens 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. I mean, Nebuchadnezzar was quite a guy, right?

And Daniel says, It's true. This tree in your dream is a picture of you and your kingdom. But there was more to the dream. 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 beasts of the field till seven periods of time pass over him. Because that happened, Daniel says, this is the interpretation of that, O king.

[19:01] 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 beasts of the field. 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 the time that you know that heaven rules.

The dream actually comes true in the worst way right at the height of the king's pride right when he's making that statement of how awesome Babylon is as he looks at it.

Verse 31, those words are still in the king's mouth and a voice falls 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 Nebuchadnezzar immediately becomes a beast and fulfills the dream that he has had.

we must see the darkness of our hearts of our sin for what it really is. The beastliness that is true of us.

[20:26] That we're not the greatest of kings. That we have no power and no great deeds to trust in before God. That what we accomplish doesn't impress God.

We have to see that reality in our own hearts and lives. While pride blinds us to that reality so we don't see it clearly, humility opens our eyes to our own weakness and God's strength.

We learn those things together, don't we? John Calvin says in his Institutes that that's how it works. Knowledge of ourself and knowledge of God coming hand in hand.

They work together. As we see our own emptiness and need, we see God's fullness and provision at the same time. It's when we see how incredibly worthy of all worship and glory God is that we know clearly that we are not worthy of worship and glory.

It's when we come to the end of ourselves that we begin to see God for who He really is. And that's what we can learn from watching Nebuchadnezzar's life.

[21 : 44] As amazing as were all the signs and wonders from God that he had already seen, there was too much of himself left to see God as the only true king.

God was impressive to him. He said as much, didn't He? But Nebuchadnezzar was pretty good too. You know? I mean, as far as kings go, He had a few things going for Him. He'd done some pretty powerful stuff.

And so God persists in showing him His beastliness in all its ugliness, in all its limitations, until Nebuchadnezzar learns that the Most High rules the kingdom of man and gives it to whom He will. Three times that's repeated in this passage. Until you learn that heaven rules, that Yahweh is not one God among many, but is the Most High God.

Just as the prince in the movie has to learn as a beast to love, and that true beauty lies within, Nebuchadnezzar has to learn as a beast to bow, and that true power lies above.

[23 : 04] Nebuchadnezzar has to see himself as nothing to see God as everything. That's how he describes all the inhabitants of the earth in verse 35.

That includes him, right? One of the inhabitants of the earth, he says, all of them are accounted as nothing. Nothing. They don't register on God's scale in the scheme of powers and of glorious rulers and great kingdoms.

Even the most powerful are not on the chart. Only God is king and He will reign forever. So if His kingdom is everlasting, mine never rules.

If all power and authority comes from Him, mine is never my own to glory in. Are you willing to see your beastliness this morning?

Do you see the horror of your own self-focused desires and decisions and what a life built around my glory looks like? Do you acknowledge the absurdity of your own claims to control and glory that it makes no sense to think of ourselves as strong?

[24 : 25] If you're willing in humility to be completely weak, you will find God to be for you immeasurably strong. And that's really the beauty of the gospel of grace that we see on display in this passage, isn't it?

Perhaps the pride and the depravity of King Nebuchadnezzar is not surprising to you. Maybe you expected that of him. But the gracious pursuit of the King of Heaven certainly is amazing.

We can't say for certain here. There are some commentators who take Nebuchadnezzar's statements of praise for God in this story to be yet again more examples of his false worship just like the statements we read from earlier in the book.

But I think the evidence is pretty strong toward Nebuchadnezzar finally and sincerely bowing the knee to Yahweh. I think that's what happens here.

Regardless of that reality, what we can say for certain is that God is amazingly gracious to the guy who all the way through the first stories of this book is his arch enemy in these stories, right?

[25 : 38] Whose kingdom is set up against his. The king deserves, of course, to remain a beast forever. Yet when Nebuchadnezzar acknowledges God's greatness, when his reason returns after some time, perhaps seven years, we don't know for sure, he's restored to his senses and to his throne.

Look at verse 34. At the end of the days, at the end of my days as a beast, I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven and in the moment of me looking up to heaven, sanity comes.

Reason returns to me when I look up to heaven. I bless the Most High, praised and honored Him who lives forever, for it's His dominion that's an everlasting dominion and His kingdom that endures from generation to generation.

And at that same time that my reason returned to me when I saw things correctly, for the glory of my kingdom, my majesty and splendor returned to me. My counselors and lords sought me again as the king.

I was established in my kingdom and even more powerful, even more greatness added to me.

Nebuchadnezzar's restored and in fact grows after being a beast. Wouldn't have seen that coming.

[27 : 01] Consider the incredible grace and patience God shows to this pagan king. Think about it for a minute. Nebuchadnezzar has brutally murdered the people of God.

He has repeatedly spurned God's miracles. He has sought His own glory above all else. He has neglected the poor while living a lavish lifestyle.

He has built monstrous idols to be worshipped by everyone. He's done everything to earn the judgment of God. Shouldn't God give up on him?

Shouldn't He be done with him? That's not the heart of our God is it? His grace reaches to love those who seem least deserving.

He delights to display the riches of His grace by pouring it out on the spiritually poorest of men. You're not beyond His grace this morning.

[28 : 02] You're not. No matter what you've done, no matter how you feel, you're not beyond the reach of His grace. Are you burdened by the shame of beastly desires and actions in your present or your past?

Do you know that reality and it weighs you down and you can't even lift your head? Listen, you need to know Christianity is not a religion where the favor of God falls on those who appear most deserving.

Christianity is good news that takes beasts and wretches and makes them children of the King. That's what the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ is all about.

It's a situation where the lost are found and the blind see not because they looked inside themselves and found the moral fortitude to earn God's favor, to perform just well enough to deserve it, but because they gave up on earning it and they looked up to heaven like Nebuchadnezzar to receive God's favor as a gift that they could never have earned.

God relentlessly pursues the proud king until he humbles him and makes him look to heaven for help. That's how God works, isn't it?

[29 : 34] It's what he does in our hearts. God's grace makes proud people humble and humble people his children. He opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble we read.

And sometimes, sometimes his grace is so incredible that it doesn't just find the humble person and come meet him there. Sometimes it chases after the proud person and actually turns him into a humble person then meets that humble person and adopts him as his child.

And many of us know that story don't we? We've experienced it firsthand that his grace has humbled our prideful hearts and then in our lowest point met us there to say but I love you and you're my child.

It's not the great king that I wanted to adopt it's the humble lowly beast. You I love you're my child. Sometimes he does that. He allows us to see our emptiness and then he meets us there empty and gives salvation that's by grace alone nothing we could have earned.

[30 : 47] Look how Daniel reflects that heart of God toward this stubborn violent king in this passage. Daniel has some bad news to tell him doesn't he? Daniel because he knows the interpretation of the dream is dismayed for a while it tells us I don't know how long Daniel doesn't want to tell the king.

He has so much respect for this pagan king that Daniel doesn't even want to deliver the bad news. Nebuchadnezzar has to pull it out of him.

And when he does Daniel says my lord may the dream be for those who hate you and its interpretation for your enemies. I don't want this to be true of you it's bad news.

Then in verse 27 after Daniel tells him the dream he says listen king hear my heart for you in light of this terrible dream you've had. 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. Daniel cares about this guy doesn't he?

[31 : 52] He wants him to prosper. That makes no sense. He realizes he has bad news for the king but he's taken to heart the compassionate and gracious heart of his God.

He desires the welfare of even the pagan king who has persecuted God's people and spurned God himself. In doing this Daniel reflects the call of the prophet Jeremiah who tells the exiles to seek the welfare of the land in which they live to pray for it to work for its blessing and that of its people.

And so Daniel remarkably offers life through repentance to a king who has already ordered the death of him and his friends. Amazing.

But that's the heart of God reflected in his servant. Do you reflect that same heart? Do you pray for and seek the salvation of your enemies?

Goodness. I struggle with my friends. Who needs to hear the hope of the gospel from you? Whom have you given up on assuming he's so arrogant and so stubborn that he's beyond the reach of God's grace?

[33 : 09] grace? Who needs to know the message of repentance? There is yet time to turn from her own attempts at control and look to heaven.

That's the heart of our God that we are called as his people to reflect. What we see about him particularly in this passage, we learn about God here is that his grace extends to his proudest, most hardened enemies.

You don't get a much better example than Nebuchadnezzar. For depth of depravity, for years of resistance, the Bible offers few worse characters than this king of Babylon, but God's grace knows no bounds and it restores even the beastly king.

king. I didn't read you the whole prologue to Beauty and the Beast at the beginning. There's one more sentence.

After saying that if the prince couldn't learn to love and be loved in time, he would remain a beast forever, it ends this way. As the years passed, he fell into despair and lost all hope.

[34 : 31] For who could ever learn to love a beast? Who could love a beast? Have you ever asked that question about yourself in your shame, a particular moment or season of discouragement, being aware of your failures?

Have you ever wondered that towards someone else that you don't seem to be able to find it in your own heart to love such a beast, to care for them and want their good?

Who could love a beast? Praise God. Our gracious, faithful, forgiving, patient king does love people like that and people like us.

And just as the beast is restored to a prince in the movie, I believe that thanks to the incredible, undeserved, persistent love of God, Nebuchadnezzar is restored to being not merely an earthly king over Babylon again, but a prince, a child of the true king over heaven and earth because there's grace for beasts and arrogant leaders and short tempered parents and selfish kids.

Grace that finally takes our hearts from their self-centered bent and focus and turns them to heaven to see God as the supremely valuable, the supremely powerful, the supremely gracious king that we all so desperately need.

[36 : 22] Let's pray. God, would you turn our eyes there this morning? If we can't see ourselves for who we are, might we see you as supremely valuable and powerful and gracious as the king who delights to love and to restore and to forgive, might that give us an awareness of our need for you to do that in our lives?

Father, for those of us who can't see a God like that at all, we've never known love like that, would seeing the beastliness of our hearts, the selfishness of the way we treat others, the emptiness of trying to make life all about us, might in that moment that give us a vision for your glory, that there is something worthwhile and someone worthy of all of our praise.

Oh, Father, do that work in our hearts by your grace because it's the thing that you love to do.

Would your grace be strong and powerful in our hearts today?

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.