

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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January 5th, 2025

Sermon Title: The Humbled King: Nebuchadnezzar

Sermon Text: Daniel 4:4-37

Dan. 4:4 ¶ I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and prospering in my palace.

Dan. 4:5 I saw a dream that made me afraid. As I lay in bed the fancies and the visions of my head alarmed me.

Dan. 4:6 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.

Dan. 4:7 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.

Dan. 4:8 At last Daniel came in before me—he who 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,

Dan. 4:9 “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.

Dan. 4:10 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.

Dan. 4:11 The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth.

Dan. 4:12 Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the heavens lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it.

Dan. 4:13 ¶ “I saw in the visions of my head as I lay in bed, and behold, a watcher, a holy one, came down from heaven.

Dan. 4:14 He proclaimed aloud and said thus: ‘Chop down the tree and lop off its branches, strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the beasts flee from under it and the birds from its branches.

Dan. 4:15 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.

Dan. 4:16 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.

Dan. 4:17 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 over it the lowliest of men.’

Dan. 4:18 This dream I, King Nebuchadnezzar, saw. And you, O Belteshazzar, tell me the interpretation, because all the wise men of 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.”

Dan. 4:19 ¶ Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, was dismayed for a while, and his thoughts alarmed him. 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!

Dan. 4:20 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,

Dan. 4:21 whose leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in which was food for all, under which beasts of the field found shade, and in whose branches the birds of the heavens lived—

Dan. 4:22 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.

Dan. 4:23 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,’

Dan. 4:24 this is the interpretation, O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king,

Dan. 4:25 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.

Dan. 4:26 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.

Dan. 4:27 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.”

Dan. 4:28 ¶ All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar.

Dan. 4:29 At the end of twelve months he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon,

Dan. 4:30 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?”

Dan. 4:31 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,

Dan. 4:32 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, 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.”

Dan. 4:33 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 eagles’ feathers, and his nails were like birds’ claws.

Dan. 4:34 ¶ 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 honored him who lives forever,

for his dominion is an everlasting dominion,

and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;

Dan. 4:35 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?”

Dan. 4:36 ¶ 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.

Dan. 4:37 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.

Main Point: Nebuchadnezzar not only learns humility before God but actually comes to confess the sovereign superiority of Daniel’s God who rules over all things.

Outline:

1. The Dangers and Occasions of Pride

2. The Necessity of Humiliation

3. The Goal is Repentance

Introduction

There is much debate about what actually happens in this passage today. We know that Nebuchadnezzar has a profound experience here where he is badly shaken, but the real debate is about whether he actually has a “conversion” and experiences real repentance, whether he experiences a false conversion that is only temporary, or whether perhaps he doesn’t really have a conversion so much as a submission of sorts and a recognition that he should have taken the God of the Hebrews more seriously.

For my part, I tend to think he does have a genuine conversion. I do suppose it is possible that what happens here is only a temporary humbling of the king that doesn’t stick, but from everything we can see here it seems to indicate a real change in the king, and we don’t have any reason to think otherwise, from what I can tell.

But here is a question that I think today’s passage helps us answer: how does God do a work in the heart of a hardened sinner, and what can we learn about our own hearts from what happens here to Nebuchadnezzar? Three points. First, the dangers and occasions of pride. Second, the necessity of humiliation. Then third, the goal of repentance.

I think that what we see here is a real and true heart change for this king. And by the time we’re done I hope we’ll see that we have way more in common with him than we might want to think. No, we aren’t Babylonian kings, but we can be lulled into complacency and pride by our comfort. No, we don’t live the exact same life as Nebuchadnezzar, and yet we do experience similar temptations to what God has to break through in this man’s life. So let’s look closer.

1. The Dangers and Occasions of Pride

To begin with, I want to mention something C.S. Lewis speaks of, which he calls “the great sin.”

“There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which everyone in the world loathes when they see it in others; and of which hardly any people, except some Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty themselves. There is no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves; and the more we have it in ourselves, the more we dislike it in others.”

He is of course talking about our first point today, which is pride. Pride is the thing about Nebuchadnezzar which must be broken in order for God to make inroads into this man’s life.

Think of the *occasion* for the pride of this king. Verse 4 tells us that he “was at ease in [his] house and prospering in [his] palace” when God confronts him with this entirely unsettling dream. It’s a dream that this time he remembers unlike the last one.

But notice that Daniel doesn’t call on him to repent of his comfort and prosperity. Instead, the issue is that the prosperity becomes the occasion of his pride, but not the sin itself.

We have to be alert to this in our own lives. Comfort and prosperity have an incredible way of warping our perceptions of ourselves and of our lives. When life is running smoothly, when prosperity is on the rise, when we are very comfortable, we tend to look around and embrace all of it, to even think that we did something to make this happen for ourselves.

We are tempted to love things... which isn’t necessarily wrong. It isn’t wrong to love good things. To love the good is good. Things are not bad. Creation is good. Jonathan Edwards once defined true virtue as “benevolence toward being in general,” and what he meant by that was that we ought to love creation, and we ought to love things, while always loving them for God’s sake.

To love things is right, but the things are never meant to be an end in themselves. Our love of God is meant to be refracted *through* these things of this world. Nebuchadnezzar ought to have looked at his kingdom and thought, “Incredible. Look at all of this. God is over all things and he has granted me to be king over this

people. He's put me here, granted stability, given me a palace, and not because I deserve it." He ought to have marveled at the kindness of God and credited God with what he had. And he didn't.

And this is a lesson for us. Everything we see and own and enjoy is meant to be a window through which we are seeing the grace and love of God being shown to us.

So we love the place we live as a gift of God, not as though it's our own achievement. We love our family as a gift of God. We love a good meal as a gift from God. What does Ecclesiastes say? That "Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them [is] to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God" (Ecc. 5:19). So the answer is not to rejoice in the gifts in themselves, but to rejoice in the gifts *as gifts* from the giver.

If we are not consciously and intentionally loving the things we have *for God's sake*, then we end up loving them for their *own* sake. We make them idols, and even worse, we can convince ourselves that we are the gift giver instead of God.

Look how this plays out here. Here Nebuchadnezzar is, in his comfort and prosperity and he decides to preach a little sermon to himself in verse 30: "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?"

Even if no one else hears this sermon – this message – God hears it.

We will get to what happens here in a moment, but this is the sort of heart that God will have to break through to here.

And this passage speaks to us in our own day, because like Nebuchadnezzar here, we as a society in general know a level of comfort and prosperity that even the kings of the ancient world would have been baffled by. We are also tempted to look around and think, "Is this not America the great, America the beautiful, a land that we made by the sweat of our brow?"

We're capitalists, right? So we also might rightly say, "The state didn't create this wealth, we did." And all the while we forget that this, too, is actually a gift of God. And we can become puffed up with pride, both nationally and individually.

Ayn Rand once said, “No one helped me, nor did I think it was anyone’s duty to help me.” That’s Nebuchadnezzar right there. He’s Ayn Rand if she had lived 2600 years ago. Puffed up with pride and independence. How tempting to follow her lead. To follow the king’s lead here. Comfort and prosperity make this a very easy sermon to preach to ourselves. We become blind to the grace that surrounds every moment of our existence, and we lose gratitude, and we lose a sense that God has done this. We preach that message, we believe it. And it’s a lie.

How do you break through that sort of proud, hard heart? Well, it’s often by breaking the idol so we can realize what we’ve been obsessing over. The shaky foundations that our pride was resting upon.

2. The Necessity of Humiliation

This takes us to our second point, which is the necessity of humiliation.

There was a book called *A Severe Mercy* written years ago by Sheldon Vanauken. He was a friend of C.S. Lewis. And Sheldon loved his wife, whose name was Davy. They sailed around the world, and lived an amazing life together, but unbeknownst to Sheldon, he had made his wife into an idol. He didn’t see her as a gift of God, but instead loved her really in the place of God. He didn’t see this. It was only through loss that he was able to understand what was happening to him. And eventually Davy became sick, and she passed away.

In his grief Sheldon reached out to C.S. Lewis, who told Sheldon that he may not have seen it while she was alive, but Sheldon had made an idol of his wife, and Lewis humbly suggested that God took her from him as a “severe mercy” so that he could finally live before the face of God. The idol that he had made his wife into kept Sheldon from seeing the truth: that he leaned on her entirely instead of on the Lord. And he had to learn to love her for God’s sake and not for her own.

Often the way that God breaks us of our comfort and pride is by taking the very crutches upon which we lean. And until that thing is taken away we think, “I’m strong. I’m great. I’m fine.” And then it leaves us and we see that we’ve been deceiving ourselves.

Iain Duguid points out that “Discontent and disaster...are very often the necessary precursors of spiritual growth and change. As long as we are comfortable and at ease in this world, we are not normally ready to examine our hearts and institute deep changes” (64).

Prosperity becomes the occasion of pride. Pride becomes the occasion of God’s work here. But how does God break the king?

Well notice that as soon as the words of pride come from his mouth, God does something unexpected to him. Unexpected even though he had been warned by the dream a year before. Verse 31 tells us that God speaks words of judgment to him, and then in verse 33,

“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 eagles’ feathers, and his nails were like birds’ claws.”

You must remember the sort of man Nebuchadnezzar was before this. You don’t become the ruler of the greatest nation on earth by being a bumbling idiot. You have to plot and plan, you have to arrange your life the way an expert chess player moves his pieces. You have to plan and execute those plans – often ruthlessly by eliminating your enemies and challengers. This is the sort of man Nebuchadnezzar was: a highly intelligent and ruthless planner.

And he goes from that to being entirely reduced. He becomes antisocial. He stops physically taking care of himself. He stops eating normal food and starts living like an animal. God has forcibly brought Nebuchadnezzar to his knees, and stolen control from him. And so now the very one who thought to himself, “I made all of this,” now cannot even make himself presentable. **This man who once thought he was glorious enough for everyone to bow down to now cannot get off of the ground.**

Here’s an important reminder: we depend upon God even for our rationality and clarity of thought. If you can think clearly, if you can take care of yourself, if you can think and maintain rational ideas, even that is a gift – the sort of thing we

ought to thank God for. As we see here, it is also the sort of gift that God has the right to give and to take away.

This is an incredible part of the reason why we should not be proud. Proverbs 21:1: “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.” Even our minds and hearts are under the sovereign hand of God. This is what the Scripture says, not me. And sometimes it does take a radical experience to show us that.

I remember listening to a famous Hollywood actress [Aubrey Plaza] who was quite young relate her experience of having a stroke while in her 20s. She was at a party hanging with her friends, and suddenly she lost complete control and didn’t understand what was happening. And she said that the stroke made her realize that she had a soul. Because she said that she realized for the first time that she was not her brain. That her self was more than just her body. When she had the stroke, she was unable to speak, but knew what she wanted to say. She had thought that was independent of her own brain and body, but she couldn’t make what was in her soul connect with her brain to come out of her mouth. She said it was an incredibly humbling experience that changed how she saw herself and the world.

Sometimes those sorts of things happen to us to make us see that we are not as strong or independent as we thought we were. Even for our breath, our words, our thoughts – simple things – we depend on God.

Nebuchadnezzar experiences this humbling. He has to be stripped of the thing he prided himself on the most in order to realize his need. In this case that was his mind, his intellect, and his ability to control himself and how he presents himself to the world around him. It’s how he controlled the world around him, and he had that control taken away, too.

All of us are tempted to idolize certain things about ourselves or our lives. Hopefully they don’t have to be taken away from us for us to come to God in humility and see them as his gifts to use as he wills. Hopefully they don’t have to be taken away for us to see that, but often it does happen that way.

3. The Goal is Repentance

Third today, we see from this passage that the goal of the humbling is repentance.

The real key to really this entire chapter is in verse 27 where Daniel doesn't leave the king to wonder what on earth he is supposed to do now that he's had this nightmarish dream.

Here is the key: Daniel says, "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."

He tells him, this is how you should respond to suffering when it comes (and even before it comes): not by doubling down, but by yielding to the Lord. Even hardships are really the kindness of God meant to lead us to repentance.

Daniel's message here to Nebuchadnezzar is almost exactly how the gospel is preached to King Agrippa by Paul in Acts 26:20, where Paul says, that he should "repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with [his] repentance."

Repentance is not just about seeing our sin, and about seeing God's holiness and that we're not. It also means seeing that Christ offers us all the cleansing that we need. He does call upon him to perform deeds, but he's not calling for him merely to by sheer willpower be a good man so he can *then* be forgiven. He is calling upon him to show the fruits of repentance; he's calling for a change of heart – a heart change that is seen by its fruits.

Notice the message of repentance here: Daniel says, "break off your sins by practicing righteousness." Martin Luther points out that the peace Nebuchadnezzar ultimately finds doesn't come by law. "This king became a believer in God and a righteous man...yet he was not circumcised, and he was not bound by any of the laws of Moses." The point Luther makes is that peace here doesn't come to the king by the law, but by grace. It's only by humbling himself and lifting his eyes to heaven that his reason *really* returns to him. That act of looking to God isn't meritorious, but is an expression of dependence, helplessness, and humility.

Only when he sees himself as he is before God can he know real reason, real rationality, real understanding. As Calvin famously said at the beginning of his

Institutes, “No one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God, in whom he ‘lives and moves.’” Only when we acknowledge the creator can we know true knowledge and wisdom.

But this is a man who had to be broken of his pride and humbled. That meant that he had to go from being self-centered to being God centered. He had to lift his eyes from himself to the creator.

“It is significant that the end of Nebuchadnezzar’s humbling and the return of his reason came when he took his eyes off himself and lifted them to heaven in an act of supplication and dependence. This looking away from oneself is the essence of true humility” (Duguid, 71).

Conclusion

Think about how God works. Think about how we often think about how God works.

Sometimes God shows his greatness in ways that are incredible and easy to see.

Today’s passage is one of those incredible and visible displays. We know from the records of Babylon that something did, indeed, happen to the king here. There is a broken Babylonian cuneiform text describing events near the end of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign that seem to refer to what happens in this passage. Keep in mind, this is written by the Babylonians, and is written to spin the king’s reign in a positive direction. But the broken cuneiform states this:

“Nebuchadnezzar pondered ... his life was of no value to him.... To Amel-Marduk he speaks what was not ... he does not heed the mention of his name (or pronouncement) ... he does not have in mind (any concern) for son or daughter, for him there is no family and clan does not exist ... he prays to the lord of lords, his hands raised (in supplication). He weeps bitterly to his god.”

The Babylonian record seems to speak of the king as experiencing a kind of madness where he babbles, talks nonsense, he doesn’t respond to his own name, he stops caring about his family or his responsibilities, and goes about weeping

bitterly to his god. This is a historical document from the Babylonians that seems to confirm what we've seen in today's text.

But here's the point I want to make. Sometimes the things God does are so big and grand and obvious that they leave echoes even in the historical record and leave future generations marveling at what he has done. Sometimes that is what God does.

But I would suggest those things are the exception, not the norm.

We should be amazed when they happen, but usually God shows his greatness in ways that to us might seem understated. I can't tell you how many Christians I have heard say, "I don't have a very exciting testimony. I was raised in a Christian home, I don't remember I time I didn't believe. I don't have a radical conversion story or a Damascus road experience like Paul did. My story's not very interesting."

To that I say, "Look again."

Paul tells us that if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. Anyone. King or commoner. Whether the conversion was dramatic or not. Whether it was noticeable or not.

If you are a new creation, that is as radical and incredible as it gets. Every single Christian, in other words, is a miracle of God – a conquest of God over the human heart. If someone like Nebuchadnezzar can be humbled and restored, then surely there is no one you know who is beyond the reach of God's mercy.

No matter how dramatic, *or* seemingly mundane our story is, if you are in Christ, you are his workmanship. If you are in Christ, he has formed you like a potter forms clay.

Like Nebuchadnezzar he may have shattered you and then rebuilt you. Or he may have been steadily and slowly over a lifetime shaping you, forming you, and doing incredible things in you. If you are in Christ, that means that he has done an incredible work in your heart – a work that is always amazing and miraculous.

Let's pray.