

## **DANIEL 4    CBC 1.11.2020**

***Please read Daniel 4:1-37 ...***

### **INTRODUCTION: A CHANGED MAN! vv.1-3**

Something has happened to Nebuchadnezzar! God has become a reality to him. In vv.1-3, for the first time he speaks of God personally, declaring his faith in God – and he’s not even looking for votes! He makes an international broadcast (v.1) and even the tone is different. In the past when he spoke, he threatened. Yet now (v.2) *“It’s my pleasure to tell you Good News... I don’t have any threats at all, I just want you to be as happy as I am.”*

And his message is no longer about himself and his glory, but about the God who is everyone’s King: *“the Most High God”* (v.2) whose kingdom alone is eternal (v.3). This is the keynote of the chapter (and indeed, of the book of Daniel). Biblical writers didn’t have a computer with bold font, but they highlight the main point in other ways, especially repetition. The lesson of this story is stated for us three times: *“the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone He wishes”* (vv.17,25,32 – and there are many other echoes).

Yet the message is profoundly personal: it’s about what *“the Most High God has done for me!”* (v.2). That’s important: the repeated truth of God’s sovereignty in this book isn’t meant to crush humanity. Nebuchadnezzar wants to tell us about God’s personal kindness toward Him. God’s rule is an expression of His love, not a contradiction of it. Nebuchadnezzar has discovered a God who uses His power to transform lives.

That’s where he’s ended up; and vv.4-37 are a flashback telling us how he got there. This is his story:

### **1. GOD WARNED HIM vv.4-27**

Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that terrified him (v.5). In chapter 2 God had spoken to him through a dream that concerned a colossal statue. This time it’s a tree, and it’s even bigger – dominating the entire world yet providing shelter (of a kind) for many creatures. But just like the statue before it, the tree is condemned to destruction, only the stump being left. And the stump stands for a person who is to be reduced to thinking and acting like a wild beast, so that (v.17) *“the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes ...”*

Nebuchadnezzar sent for the magicians to interpret his dream, but they couldn’t. So *“Finally”* (v.8) he turned to Daniel, and Daniel revealed that the tree represents Nebuchadnezzar, whose great empire was home to many people. But as his empire had grown, so had his pride, and from his pride came oppression (v.27). What Nebuchadnezzar built was beautiful, but it was built through injustice and exploitation.

We love visiting stately homes but we’re being reminded today that they were often built on some pretty unpleasant things. How many palatial homes in the UK today are funded by the proceeds of drugs, people trafficking, and other organized crime? How many respectable company profits are boosted by child labour in poor nations?

That’s why the first commandment is: *“No other gods but me!”* (Ex 20:3). Because if God isn’t ruling your heart, you won’t keep the rest of the commandments – you’ll break them all. Idolatry and tyranny go hand in hand because there’s no-one above us to restrain us. The key to social justice is for those who exercise power to know whose ministers they are.

And now God is warning Nebuchadnezzar that if he doesn't change his ways, then like the tree in his dream he'll be struck with catastrophe. Does that sound harsh? It's actually amazing grace. God gave him dreams to warn him, Daniel to instruct him, and a year to change his ways (v.29: *have you ever told a child to do something and then said, "I'll give you a year to think about that"? We know nothing of this patience*). It's amazing grace to such an arrogant, murderous man. We should be stunned. If all God wanted to do was judge this man there wouldn't be a warning. This man is given another opportunity to turn.

And God does this in our lives – in moments when we act like He doesn't exist; when we do what we want to do even though we know it's wrong, etc. It's an awesome thing that God doesn't strike us at that moment – He warns again and again ... His judgement delays again and again ... He shows mercy again and again – because He's a God of amazing grace. What a beautiful message! *It's a great gift when God warns us – perhaps through a Christian friend or life-group conversation or sermon. Don't resent it – be grateful, because God is being patient with you!*

## **2. GOD DISCIPLINED HIM vv.28-33**

Sadly, Nebuchadnezzar didn't heed the warning. A year later he's strutting like a peacock on the roof of the palace, congratulating himself on his achievements. v.30: *"Isn't this the great Babylon I have built by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?"*

The city he'd built was indeed magnificent, especially the hanging gardens he'd constructed for his wife. God Himself said that the tree in the dream was beautiful! But Nebuchadnezzar made two fundamental mistakes in his thinking. He was wrong about the source of his ability: the power came from God, not himself. And he was wrong about the goal of his gifts: they were for God's glory, not his own. Nebuchadnezzar was delusional long before he started eating grass.

The punishment fits the crime. He talks as though he's more than human; God reduces him to less than human. We're left watching in horror as the great king is dismantled before our eyes. He loses his mind, and behaves like an animal. This will become a big theme in Daniel: how sin turns creation upside down. Human beings should be over the animals, not behaving like them! And Daniel is going to introduce us to many animals, including some very strange ones. We'll see that when the animals rule, human beings are crushed. And in Daniel 7, we'll meet a son of man who restores order.

But that's for another day. In Daniel 4 we meet the first of Daniel's animals, and it's a very sad animal. Nebuchadnezzar thinks he's superhuman, and God makes him subhuman. A picture of the awesome, scary power of God – literally mind-blowing.

Again, does that seem harsh? It's grace! We think of grace being a comfortable thing, but sometimes God's grace has to break our stony heart in order to reclaim it. That's the loving thing to do. This is love that won't turn its back and walk away. It's the grace of rescue that's operating in Nebuchadnezzar's life.

Do we need this lesson too? Yes! Why is there such a lot about Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel? Because there's a lot of Nebuchadnezzar in every one of us. You may hear that and think, *"I'm nothing like Nebuchadnezzar!"* But the root of all sin is self-glory: my pleasure, my will, my way, my comfort, my glory. I will have it! The collision between God's kingdom and your kingdom is in your life every day.

Where are you tempted to stand on your balcony, pat yourself on the back and think life is all about you? At that point, you're not worshipping God – you're worshipping YOU. And if you're not careful, it will turn you into an animal.

So there are ways in which everyone of us is more like Nebuchadnezzar than unlike him. And in the end God may need to humble us painfully. And we'll think, "Where is the grace of God?" We're getting it! Not the grace of relief, but the grace of rescue. Maybe you've come to that point in your life. Then notice this:

### **3. GOD RESTORED HIM vv.34-37**

When God humbled Nebuchadnezzar and sent him out as an animal, He graciously protected him because He was going to restore him. In God's perfect timing (what the Bible calls "seven times", v.32), God brought Nebuchadnezzar back and caused him to lift up his eyes to heaven and recognise that God is God. That's the beginning of sanity for anyone. And as he began to honour God, God restored his throne and his humanity. It's significant that as he learns what it is to be a human being and not a god, his relationships with other people begin to change: his advisers and nobles seek him out (v.36). He becomes more approachable. The truth has set him free!

No wonder he ends (v.37) by praising God for having rebuked his pride. His pride had blighted everything he'd ever done: it separated him from God and made him impossible to live with. So he's grateful that God has humbled him, and set him free to live a properly human life.

This is a gospel story! And it should give us hope. If you'd seen Nebuchadnezzar at his worst you'd have thought he can't ever be fixed. But the Most High is sovereign, and one of the things He does is act in sovereign grace to mend broken people as only He can do. Nebuchadnezzar's dream tree was trying to reach from earth to heaven – remember its top touched the sky. But no achievement of human pride can bridge the gap between earth and heaven. The mending of broken people is only possible because of another tree.

The tree is a loaded symbol in the Bible. It begins with a tree of life (Ge 2:9) – the man and woman are cut off from that tree because of sin. And then at the end of the Bible there's the tree of life again, and access to it (Rev 22:2). How did that happen?

Right in the middle of the Bible there's another tree which, like the dream tree, had to become a tree of humiliation before it could be a tree of glory. It's the tree on which Jesus died. And it's because of that tree that mercy is possible and broken lives can be restored.

Jesus bore our sins in His body on the tree (1Pe 2:24). He was a greater king than Nebuchadnezzar, yet He was humiliated willingly for proud people like you and me. He did that because there was no way we could help ourselves. We needed divine rescue, and He was willing. He died on that tree, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God. And everyone who knows they've turned their back on God, but puts their faith in Jesus, will one day share in the glory of God. The tree is really the story of the Bible.

And when Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God, He said (Mt 13:32) it's like a small seed that becomes a tree, and the birds find shelter in it. In the kingdom of God, said Jesus, you'll find your true home.

There's gospel in Daniel 4: the mending of brokenness. Behind our confident exteriors there's a lot of brokenness. And the message of Daniel 4 is that the Most High has it in His power to mend

broken lives, and He delights to do so. And the person who realizes this and bows to God as King finds what Nebuchadnezzar discovered: that everything fits well under God's rule – that our lives finally begin to come together and make sense.

## **CONCLUSION**

Have you ever come up against a bigger kingdom than your own? And have you acknowledged a greater King who is now in charge? The most popular funeral song in Britain is reputed to be, *"I did it my way."* This chapter is a warning against all such folly: the folly of pretending to be king.

That's what Nebuchadnezzar learned the hard way. His pride led to his fall; but praise God, his confession led to his restoration. How about you?

Perhaps you need to pray, *"O God, my pride has nearly ruined me and I've been brought low. Please change me. Lift me from my desperate and deranged state to give you the throne of my heart that is your due."*

If you've been resisting God's rule, you don't have to wallow in shame. You can run into the arms of this King of astonishing grace!

**Take a moment for silent prayer ...**

## **FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION:**

- Which of your desires, words or actions this week have revealed your zeal for your own glory rather than God's?
- Try to recall a time when God brought you low in order to lift you up. How have you responded?
- What can you share of "what the Most High God has done for me" (v.2)? With whom could you share it this week?