

Daniel 4:1-37

Introduction

This week, the 81st United Nations General Assembly has been in the news. World leaders have gathered in New York. And over the course of the week, each of these world leaders has had the opportunity to address the gathered Assembly. They've spoken about things like Artificial Intelligence, Global Conflicts and Climate Change. And of course, while they're speaking to a room full of people, they know that TV cameras and journalists are recording everything they say and relaying it to audiences around the globe. In other words, it's been an opportunity for these leaders to deliver a message to the whole world. And that's what we've got here in chapter 4 of Daniel. It's a message from King Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, to the whole world. See how it begins:

King Nebuchadnezzar,

To the nations and peoples of every language, who live in all the earth:

May you prosper greatly!

It's a good start. But I imagine that if one of the world leaders at the UN General Assembly had stood up and delivered the message that follows, it would have caused something of a stir. See how he goes on: **It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me.**

The message Nebuchadnezzar wants to share with the world is a personal one. It's about what God has done for *him*. And it's good news. He can't keep it to himself. It's his testimony about how the Most High God has stepped in to graciously transform his life. But it's about more than that. See what he says next:

How great are his signs,

how mighty his wonders!

His kingdom is an eternal kingdom;

his dominion endures from generation to generation.

This message is about a kingdom that God is establishing on earth. If you've been with us over the last few weeks, you may recognise it as the kingdom of the stone that we read about in chapter 2, that became a huge mountain and filled the earth. It's God's everlasting kingdom.

This is what Nebuchadnezzar wants everyone to hear. Imagine *this* being proclaimed at the UN General Assembly! And notice how those words are laid out on the page. They're laid out as poetry. It's as if Nebuchadnezzar is so passionate about what he wants to say that he wants to sing it to the world.

Those of us who are Christians will have no difficulty in recognising this as the kingdom of Jesus. The message of his kingdom is the message that *we* too want all the earth to hear. Like Nebuchadnezzar, we sing about it every time we meet. It's a message we're passionate about.

And if you wouldn't yet call yourself a Christian, it's the message we want *you* to hear. We're delighted that you're with us this morning. I'm thrilled that you're listening to this sermon. And even if you don't particularly enjoy singing yourself, please do listen to the words we sing, because they're all about the same God and the same kingdom that Nebuchadnezzar is speaking of here.

By the end of the next twenty minutes or so, I hope that this kingdom, the kingdom of God, is something we will all want to spend more time talking about. So then, let's listen to what Nebuchadnezzar wants to tell us. And it begins with another terrifying dream. So firstly then, Nebuchadnezzar's terrifying dream.

Nebuchadnezzar's terrifying dream

Please look down at verse 4. **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.**

This is the second dream we've read about. Like last time, Nebuchadnezzar calls upon his wise men to interpret it for him. And once again, they can't. Finally, Daniel enters, and Nebuchadnezzar tells him what the dream's about. It's about an enormous tree.

I'm not great with trees, but I've Googled it, and it seems that there are at least three different ways of measuring the size of them. You can measure the volume of wood it contains. Apparently, the largest tree on that basis is a Giant Sequoia, which has been named the General Sherman, after the American military leader. It's in California. And it contains nearly one and a half thousand cubic metres of wood and weighs about two thousand tonnes. If you cut it down, the timber would fill Summerfields swimming pool three times over.

Or you can measure by height. On that basis, the largest tree is a Coast Redwood known as the Hyperion, named after the titan in Greek mythology. It's also in California. It stands nearly a hundred and twenty meters tall. That's taller than Big Ben and nearly as tall as the London Eye. Or you can measure by the size of its canopy. By that measure, the largest tree is the Banyan Tree, which is a kind of fig tree that grows in India. Its canopy can cover nearly 5 acres. That's almost enough to cover three standard size football pitches.

Those are big trees. But they're nothing compared to the tree in Nebuchadnezzar's dream. This tree doesn't reach as high as the London Eye. Its top touches the sky. And its canopy doesn't merely cover three football pitches. It can be seen from the ends of the earth. This is a seriously impressive tree! And it's a beautiful tree. Its leaves are beautiful. Its fruit is abundant. And it provides shelter and food to every living creature. This is an amazing tree.

But then Nebuchadnezzar sees an angel come down from heaven and announce that the tree is to be cut down. Its branches are to be lopped off. Its leaves stripped. Its fruit scattered. And the animals that sheltered under it will flee. All that will remain is a stump.

And strangely, the angel describes this stump as a person. This person will live with the animals among the plants of the earth. They will be given the mind of an animal. And they will remain this way until the end of a set time that God had determined.

Then, in verse 17, the angel says: **“The decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare 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.”** The chopping down of this tree, and the strange behaviour of this person, will send a message to the whole world. It will demonstrate that God rules. He gives the kingdoms of the earth to anyone he wishes. And he sets over them the lowliest of people. If we’re familiar with the Bible, we can’t hear those words without thinking of Jesus.

But what does all this mean? That’s what Nebuchadnezzar wants to know. He’s afraid of what it might signify. And as we read on, we find that he might well be afraid. In the verses that follow, Daniel warns Nebuchadnezzar that this is all about *him*. So next then, Daniel’s courageous warning.

Daniel’s courageous warning

When Daniel hears of this dream, *he* is terrified. Look at verse 19. **Then Daniel (also called Belteshazzar) was greatly perplexed for a time, and his thoughts terrified him. So the king said, ‘Belteshazzar, do not let the dream or its meaning alarm you.’**

As we’ve read the book of Daniel, we’ve seen Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery temper. He thinks nothing of throwing people into a blazing furnace or having them cut into pieces and their houses turned into piles of rubble. It seems to be one of his favourite punishments. Daniel might well have been terrified at the thought of explaining this dream to him. It wasn’t good news. But his reaction can also be explained by compassion. Daniel takes no pleasure in knowing what is coming; that Nebuchadnezzar is about to experience God’s judgement. In fact, he begins by saying that he wishes the dream applied to someone else; one of Nebuchadnezzar’s enemies.

As we see Daniel’s compassion, we’re catching a glimpse of Jesus. As he approached Jerusalem, knowing that it was facing God’s judgement for its rejection of him, that all its inhabitants would perish and not one stone would be left on another, what did he do? We’re told that he wept (Luke 19:4). And our hearts break when we think of God’s judgement coming on those we love. It’s hard to tell someone something when we know it’s not what they want to hear, especially when it’s someone we care about. That’s true in life generally. But it’s particularly true when it comes to warning them of God’s coming judgement and the reality of hell. We would rather not have to tell them. And we find no pleasure in it. We would rather keep quiet. Yet Jesus spoke about those things freely and vividly. And he did so out of love. And so does Daniel. He courageously speaks up. And he’s honest. He doesn’t water anything down or hide anything.

Look at verse 22. He says, **‘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 distant parts of the earth.’**

And look down to verse 24: **‘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.’**

As we’ll see, the problem is pride. This enormous tree reflects how Nebuchadnezzar thinks of himself: he thinks of himself as a god.

There was uproar a few years ago when two men took a chainsaw and cut down the famous Sycamore Gap tree next to Hadrian’s Wall. It was a cherished landmark and had been voted the ‘Tree of the Year’ in 2016. It had even featured in the film, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*. People were outraged when this great tree was reduced to a stump. But God has no such sentimental feelings when it comes to human pride. Nebuchadnezzar’s pride would be stripped away, and he would live as an animal. He would go from being superhuman to being subhuman. And this would last for a set time, until he acknowledged **‘...that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes.’**

So, Daniel urges him to do the one thing that is necessary. He calls Nebuchadnezzar to repent and offers him hope. Look at verse 27. **‘Therefore, Your Majesty, be pleased to accept my advice: renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that your prosperity will continue.’**

This is a model for us as we try to warn others of God’s coming judgement, even as our hearts break for them. We must be willing to warn them that the problem is pride: that very human desire to push God aside and live as though we’re the ones in charge of life; as though we’re the ones who call the shots. We must urge them to repent; to acknowledge that it is God who rules. And we must offer them the hope of the gospel; of a place in God’s kingdom, in which they will enjoy God’s love and goodness in eternity, through faith in Jesus.

If you wouldn’t yet call yourself a Christian, and someone close to you has tried to speak with you about judgement and hell, please understand that they have done so not out of hardness or gloating but out of love. Please recognise the courage it took for them to do so. And please understand that they have done so to offer you hope and a way out. If they *haven’t* spoken with you about those things yet, why not make it easier for them, and ask them to do so. It may be the most important conversation you ever have with them... because what God offers is a gracious transformation. And that’s our final heading.

God’s gracious transformation

Look at verse 28: **All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the 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?’**

Then a voice came from heaven and everything that had been foretold in the dream was fulfilled: he was **driven away from people and ate grass like the ox**. It’s a very rare

psychological condition known as boanthropy, when a person believes they are a cow or an ox and lives as such.

Nebuchadnezzar had cause to be pleased with what he saw as he walked on the roof of the royal palace. Babylon was an amazing city. It's associated with one of the seven wonders of the world. And he built it. Ninety percent of the bricks unearthed by archaeologists are inscribed with his name. Yet he sought glory for himself rather than giving glory to God. And God brought him low.

It still happens today. People can accomplish great things and think they've 'made it'. They've got financial security, popularity, admiration. Yet suddenly they're brought low by an unexpected event – an illness, or a scandal or something else. Human pride is very fragile. God can strip it away in a moment.

But his purpose is gracious. It was to make Nebuchadnezzar a worshipper. And that's what happens. Look at verse 34.

At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes towards heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honoured and glorified him who lives for ever.

**His dominion is an eternal dominion;
his kingdom endures from generation to generation.**

**All the people of the earth
are regarded as nothing.**

**He does as he pleases
with the powers of heaven
and the peoples of the earth.**

**No one can hold back his hand
or say to him: 'What have you done?'**

Those are remarkable words coming from the one who had destroyed God's temple in Jerusalem and carried his people into exile. It's a complete transformation. God had humbled Nebuchadnezzar so that he might lift him up again. And in verse 36 Nebuchadnezzar tells how his honour and splendour were returned to him, and he became even greater than before. Except, now, there's one very important difference. Now he knows that there's a King in heaven even greater than him, who has dealt with him far better than he deserves. Look at verse 37. **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 is able to humble.**

Those are Nebuchadnezzar's final words in the Bible. And they're a picture of what must happen in each of our hearts if we would enter God's kingdom and enjoy the blessings in eternity that only he can give. We must realise that we are not self-sufficient, all-powerful rulers of our own lives, but lowly creatures who are dependent for everything on the goodness of God our Creator. That kind of transformation is never easy.

In his book, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, C S Lewis gives a picture of it. One of his characters, Eustace, is a proud and arrogant boy, whose pride eventually turns him quite literally into a deranged dragon. Aslan, the lion who represents Jesus, tells him, 'You will have to let me undress you.' And Eustace describes what happens like this:

'I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I can tell you I was pretty nearly desperate. So I just lay flat on my back and let him do it. The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right to my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I had ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off.'

To have our pride stripped away can be painful. But it's good. It feels good to be released from our pride and to know that we're *not* the rulers of our own lives; that there is a God who rules over us, who is good and loving and gracious, who holds our lives in his hands. It's good to know that we weren't made to live for our own glory, but for his.

Those who walk in pride, God is able to humble. And when God humbles us in that way, and brings us to faith in Jesus, life doesn't get worse. It gets better. And those who have experienced his transforming power in that way can testify with Nebuchadnezzar that everything God does is right and all his ways are just.

Conclusion

What does it take to bring a person such as Nebuchadnezzar to faith?

As we've listened to his own personal testimony, he's told us that it takes two things. It takes a godly person's courageous but loving words as they speak honestly about coming judgement and the hope of the gospel.

And it takes a powerful but gracious work of God.

Let's pray that God would give us the courage to do the former. And that we would have the joy of seeing him doing the latter.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, please forgive us for the times we have failed to warn others of coming judgement because we've been afraid of how they may respond. Please give us the courage of Daniel and the compassion of Jesus to speak wisely and sensitively to those we know and love and to share with them the hope of the gospel. And as we do, please would we see you graciously at work, to strip away the pride that is so very natural to each of us, and to transform people's lives, so that they too may live with the hope of heaven, through faith in Jesus. And we ask it in his name. Amen.