

# The Book Of Daniel

*And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom.  
(Daniel 1:20 ESV)*

*but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days.  
(Daniel 2:28 ESV)*

*And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.  
(Daniel 12:2–3 ESV)*

## **Nebuchadnezzar's Second Dream**

**February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020**

**Daniel 4**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning church! I'd like to invite you to open your Bibles this morning to Daniel 4; that's on page 740 in your pew Bibles. In Daniel chapters 1 and 2 we read some stories from the early days of King Nebuchadnezzar's reign. We aren't sure when Daniel 3 took place – there aren't any time indicators in the story - so we might assume that it comes from somewhere in the middle. This story in chapter 4 takes place near the end – not of Daniel's life but of Nebuchadnezzar's. Remember – Daniel outlived Nebuchadnezzar – in fact Daniel outlived the entire Babylonian Empire. Now we don't actually have a lot of information in extra biblical sources about this period of Nebuchadnezzar's life. The Babylonian records have a pretty big gap – they tell us lots of things about Nebuchadnezzar's early life and his various conquests but then they go mysteriously silent. Some later Greek historians talked about how Nebuchadnezzar went mad – some thought he was possessed – but everyone agrees that his later life was not something that the Babylonian historians wanted to write a great deal about and there are suggestions that he suffered from something that looked to everyone around him like mental illness. This story – as you will soon see – fits very nicely into the general description of that period.

It's a long story so we will divide it up into its various sections. We will hear first about the King's disturbing dream, we will then turn our attention to Daniel's inspired interpretation, after which we will hear about a regrettable response and then finally a most remarkable restoration. Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 1:

## A Disturbing Dream

King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you! <sup>2</sup>It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me.

<sup>3</sup>How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation.

Let me just pause and point out to you here the similarities in language here between this story and the story of the Exodus. God set his people free from Egypt by means of various signs and wonders – we often refer to them as the 10 Plagues. Well here Nebuchadnezzar uses that “signs and wonders” language – and it would have been reassuring to the many Jews now in exile in Babylon to recall that the same God who was powerful over Pharaoh – and the same God who set them free from Egypt by means of signs and wonders was apparently alive and well in Babylon.

These parallels between the Exodus stories and the Exile stories are intentional. We'll have reason to remark on those parallels again before this series is over.

We jump back into the story at verse 4:

<sup>4</sup>I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and prospering in my palace. <sup>5</sup>I saw a dream that made me afraid. As I lay in bed the fancies and the visions of my head alarmed me. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>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, <sup>9</sup>“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. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> “I saw in the visions of my head as I lay in bed, and behold, a watcher, a holy one, came down from heaven. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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.’ <sup>18</sup> 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.” (Daniel 4:1–18 ESV)

Now of course this story in Daniel 4 reminds us a great deal of the story in Daniel 2. Once again the King has had a dream that greatly disturbs him in his peace and prosperity – God has a way of messing with people who are too at ease in their peace and prosperity. Once again the King summons his magicians and wise men – and once again he demands an interpretation. The challenge this time is much easier – this time the King can recall the dream – but even still the magicians and wise men cannot or will not offer an interpretation. So Daniel arrives on the scene – and interestingly this time, he doesn’t need to pray or get his friends to pray – this time he knows immediately what God is saying through this dream.

Nebuchadnezzar no doubt would have assumed that this was BECAUSE Daniel was filled with the Spirit of the Most High God – he said that several times in the verses above. And certainly that was part of it. Daniel was filled with the Spirit of the Most High God – and he had the spiritual gift of dream interpretation – the Bible says that in Daniel 1:17. So he had the Spirit, he had the gifts – so he was good to go. That might be it. But if you are a Bible reader, then you also know that actually, this dream was pretty much entirely composed of figures and symbols that have already been established and interpreted in the text of Scripture. The whole tree thing for example,

is pretty much lifted wholesale out of Ezekiel 31:3-14. Do you remember that one? Ezekiel had a vision about a tree too – this tree represented Pharaoh and Egypt – I told you that we wouldn't have to wait long to remark upon the many similarities between these stories. Ezekiel said that Pharaoh was like an enormous cedar that:

towered high above all the trees of the field; its boughs grew large and its branches long from abundant water in its shoots. <sup>6</sup> All the birds of the heavens made their nests in its boughs; under its branches all the beasts of the field gave birth to their young, and under its shadow lived all great nations.... <sup>10</sup> “Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Because it towered high and set its top among the clouds, and its heart was proud of its height, <sup>11</sup> I will give it into the hand of a mighty one of the nations. He shall surely deal with it as its wickedness deserves.... On its fallen trunk dwell all the birds of the heavens, and on its branches are all the beasts of the field. <sup>14</sup> All this is in order that no trees by the waters may grow to towering height or set their tops among the clouds, and that no trees that drink water may reach up to them in height. For they are all given over to death, to the world below, among the children of man, with those who go down to the pit. (Ezekiel 31:5–14 ESV)

As you can see that is pretty much exactly the same dream. God gave Ezekiel a dream about how he moved in history to humble Kings who began to get to get a little big for their britches. When the tree started poking its nose up into the heavens, God sent someone to cut it down.

As with Pharaoh so with Nebuchadnezzar.

Now we know that Ezekiel and Daniel were contemporaries – Ezekiel was a priest in the Babylonian exile and he knew about Daniel, he mentioned Daniel in his book three different times – so it is reasonable to assume that Daniel knew about Ezekiel as well. That seems to be the case and that is almost certainly why Daniel didn't have to ask God for a miraculous interpretation – he had already been given one! God had already spoken and God's Word doesn't change. Daniel had the interpretation – but as we see, it was one that he was not eager to supply.

We pick up the story in verse 19:

### **An Inspired Interpretation**

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!<sup>20</sup> 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,<sup>21</sup> 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—<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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,’<sup>24</sup> this is the interpretation, O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king,<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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.” (Daniel 4:19–27 ESV)

So just like in the case of Pharaoh, God was going to send someone to chop down this arrogant tree. But this time, unlike in Ezekiel’s dream about Pharaoh, the stump becomes an image of hope. Nebuchadnezzar may be restored – if he repents. That’s the meaning of the bands around the stump. Tremper Longman III says here:

“The stump indicates that even though the tree is to be desolated, it is not to be killed. The roots are not touched.”<sup>1</sup>

So Daniel of course encourages the King to repent. Break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed that there may be, perhaps, a lengthening of your prosperity.

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<sup>1</sup> Tremper Longman III, *Daniel* in the NIV Application Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 119.

That was his interpretation and his advice – but unfortunately Nebuchadnezzar did not respond to this Word of God as he should have. We pick up the story at verse 28:

### A Regrettable Response

All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar.<sup>29</sup> At the end of twelve months he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon,<sup>30</sup> 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?”<sup>31</sup> 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,<sup>32</sup> 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.”<sup>33</sup> 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. (Daniel 4:28–33 ESV)

So it seems that IF Nebuchadnezzar repenting in response to Daniel’s advice, his repentance was short lived. Of course in the Bible the true test of repentance is ENDURING FRUIT and there is none of that in this story – at least at this point. One year later the effect of Daniel’s courageous rebuke to the King has clearly worn off and been forgotten. Nebuchadnezzar out onto his balcony and surveys the city of Babylon and he is amazed – at himself! He just can’t believe how good he is and he begins talking about himself as if he were God. He refers to the glory of his majesty – a phrase that generally and properly is reserved for God.

Clearly Nebuchadnezzar has failed to heed the warning, so predictably Nebuchadnezzar now receives the promised chastisement. He suddenly, and miraculously begins to manifest symptoms of severe mental illness. Scholars uniformly identify this illness as an extreme case of boanthropy. Andrew Hill for example says here:

“Nebuchadnezzar’s delusion that he was an animal like an ox or a bull is a form of mental illness, and the condition is known medically as lycanthropy or more precisely boanthropy”.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Hill, *Daniel* in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 95.

Apparently, so the experts say, the condition was reasonably common in the ancient world and was understood as a primitive psychological response to extreme guilt. Whether that is an accurate description or not I have no idea – what is clear is that this is an illness SENT BY THE LORD. This is Yahweh cutting down the tree.

We pick up the story in verse 34:

### **A Remarkable Restoration**

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;

<sup>35</sup> 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?”

<sup>36</sup> 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. <sup>37</sup> 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. (Daniel 4:34–37 ESV)

Thanks be to God!

### **Instructions (For The End Of The Age)**

Now as I said a couple of weeks ago – we don’t read these stories in church just to entertain ourselves – although they are remarkably entertaining. We read these stories to mine them for useful and life-giving instruction. The Apostle Paul said:

“Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.” (1 Corinthians 10:11 ESV)

These are useful stories – particularly for people living at the end of the age. So what is it that we are intended to see?

I think the first thing is pretty obvious. God wanted the Jews to see this – and he wants us to see this too. He wants us to understand that GOD IS GREATER than any earthly power – specifically in this story he wants us to see that God is greater than the King.

## 1. God > King

People are often intimidated by PROXIMATE POWER. We fear the POWER that is nearest and most immediate to us – when actually, according to Jesus, we should fear the power that is ULTIMATE and most RELATED to us. In Matthew 10 Jesus said:

“do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Matthew 10:28 ESV)

The power of the state is LIMITED. The worst thing it can do is kill your body. But the power of God is UNLIMITED – he can destroy both body and soul in hell – therefore, you should be less concerned about the power of the state and more concerned about the power of the Lord.

That’s what this story is saying.

You’re worried about the King – but it’s the king who ought to be worried about God. Because God knows how to deal with kings. Sometimes he will crush the King – as he did to Pharaoh – and sometimes he will convert King as it looks like he did here to Nebuchadnezzar. Joyce Baldwin says:

“The king tells the story against himself to explain how he came to capitulate to the God of the captives he had brought from Judea.”<sup>3</sup>

So did he capitulate or convert? I don’t know but I do know this:

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<sup>3</sup>Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 23 of Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 119.

“The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.”  
(Proverbs 21:1 ESV)

You let God worry about the King – you worry about God.

The second thing we see in this story is also pretty obvious. This story is a giant reminder that:

## **2. Pride Goeth Before A Fall**

That of course is a truncated version of Proverbs 16:18 – in the old KJV no less:

“Pride *goeth* before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.” (Proverbs 16:18 KJV)

That is a principle which is consistently taught throughout Holy Scripture. You can see it in Ezekiel 31, you can see it in Daniel 4 and you can see it in the New Testament as well. The Apostle James – the brother of the Lord said:

“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” (James 4:6 ESV)

God opposes the proud.

One thing you should know friends, is that God tolerates no rivals.

He will be at the centre of your world – or he will be the destroyer of your world. Those are the only options. And blessed are those who understand that.

God opposes the proud and therefore, if you are proud – understand this: down is the only way up.

## **3. Down Is The Only Way Up**

Danna Fewell said it very well. He said:

“A man who thinks he is like a god must become a beast to learn that he is only a human being.”<sup>4</sup>

That is the point of this story in Daniel 4 but it also, kind of, the point of the entire Bible. Adam and Eve wanted to be like God – deciding right and wrong for themselves – so reaching up – they fell down. And they fell away from the Word and Presence of Almighty God – and they became less. The Book of Hebrews says:

“What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him? You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything in subjection under his feet.” (Hebrews 2:6–8 ESV)

Do you see that?

You made him for a little while lower than the angels – why? Because down is the only way up. Human beings in general have to come to understand that – we have to travel this road - because down is the path of humility and down is the path of healing.

That’s the shape of the Biblical story – that’s the shape of the Gospel! Jesus came down to us in our utmost humility so as to lift us up BACK to God and back to our original design and glory. Paul says that in Philippians chapter 2. He says:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,<sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,<sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.<sup>8</sup> And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.<sup>9</sup> Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,<sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,<sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5–11 ESV)

Do you see that?

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<sup>4</sup> Danna Fewell, *Circle Of Sovereignty* as cited in Longman III, 122.

Jesus came down to lift us up! Jesus knew that down was the way up – so let that same mind be in you! Get your head around that! Humble yourselves and take hold of the rescue from God that is the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Understand that you are fallen!

Recognize that you are little more than a beast.

You are not who you were created and intended to be – you are fallen. You are a sinner and you need a Savior. So God came down to lift you up.

That’s the Gospel and that’s the main point being made here in this story.

“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” (James 4:6 ESV)

And that brings us to our final point. God knocks us down to lift us up. He humbles those who need to be humbled - but then – thanks be to God – he honours those who honour him.

#### **4. God Honours Those Who Honour Him**

We’ve got to be careful not to forget this part of the story. When Nebuchadnezzar humbled himself – God restored him to his former glory. Again – that’s the story of humanity in miniature. Spoiler alert – that is exactly the note on which the Book of Daniel ends. In Daniel 12 a heavenly being – who might be Jesus – we’ll get to that - tells Daniel that:

“those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.<sup>3</sup> And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. (Daniel 12:2–3 ESV)

Those who honour God will be restored to their intended glory. That’s what happened to Job at the end of his story, that’s what happened to Nebuchadnezzar at the end of his story – and that is what will happen to you at the end of your story if you repent of your pride and honour the Lord as he has revealed himself climactically in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

He came down to lift you up.

That's the story, friends – that's the truth – and I know that, because this is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God, let's pray together.