

War of the Gods

Messages from the Book of Daniel

Message 5

King of Kings
Daniel 4:1-37

Frightened by a Dream

Nebuchadnezzar was the greatest king the world had ever seen. He commanded the most powerful military force in history. He ruled a vast empire extending from Mesopotamia to the edge of Egypt. First he destroyed the Assyrian Empire centered in Nineveh, then he conquered dozens of lesser kings. All this was under his unchallenged rule. Nebuchadnezzar also made Babylon the most magnificent city in the world. For hundreds of years her hanging gardens and other buildings were famous throughout the ancient world. All this proved that Nebuchadnezzar was master of the world. So it is with understandable pride that he looked out over his spacious palace and wonderful city, and praised himself for accomplishments that no one on earth was capable of matching.

Getting to the top – whether it is in business, or politics, or even academia – is a long, hard process. We tend to envy people like Bill Gates and President Bush and Olympic heroes, but most of us would not choose to expend the effort and energy such men and women spend to get to the top. But now after years of military campaigns and a life of struggle, finally Nebuchadnezzar has some peace. In our text he says, “[I was] at rest in my house, and flourishing in my palace.” All enemies and rivals were disposed. But just at this moment Nebuchadnezzar’s peace is disrupted by another disturbing dream. And this dream was so disturbing, it frightened the king.

We have been through this routine before, haven’t we? Again, Nebuchadnezzar called in all his wise men to interpret the meaning of the dream. And again, they were unable. And this time they did not have the excuse that they did not know the dream. This time, it appears that the king remembered the dream, but was greatly agitated to get the interpretation. Did you notice the difference in Nebuchadnezzar’s response to this dream compared to the one we encountered in chapter 2? Then the king flew into a rage when the magicians were unable to interpret it. He even began executing them in his anger. But there was none of that this time. This time he simply waited for Daniel to come forward. Daniel had been able to interpret the dream in chapter 2, and it is clear that the king trusted Daniel. Perhaps that is why he held his anger in check, knowing that Daniel, at least, would be able to solve this puzzle. Or perhaps Nebuchadnezzar is changing into a more moderate person. Perhaps Daniel was having a civilizing effect on him.

The Mature Daniel

Did you also notice the difference in how Daniel responded to the request for an interpretation of the king’s dream? In chapter 2 he asked for some time, and then he went and prayed for insight. This time it appears that Daniel grasped the meaning of the dream immediately – no prayer needed. This shows the difference between a novice and a veteran – and it illustrates the nature of spiritual maturity. Some people have the idea that the longer you know God, your relationship with Him becomes drier and more routine. New believers pray often and fervently, and see miraculous answers to prayer. Old Christians grow tired of praying and just go through the routines of the Christian life. Those who think this way look for signs and visions and miracles to keep alive the spark of spirituality in the Christian life. They measure the vitality of faith by such special events. This is a false understanding of Christian growth. It is true that the faith of some people grows cool over time, but that is by no means the normal course.

The problem lies in measuring the vitality of faith by special events such as miracles. But a miracle, by definition, is a rare event. If God always healed cancer victims, recovery would be natural, not miracu-

lous. No, the vitality of faith is not measured by spectacular occurrences. It is measured by godliness. Great faith produces great godliness. The one who walks with God year by year, decade by decade, becomes steadily more like God. This is Christian maturity. This is what God is doing in each of His children. He takes those who first place their trust in Him and slowly makes them more like Himself. This was Paul's prayer for the Philippian believers.

And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, ¹¹ being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1:9-11)

In the letter to the Ephesians Paul explains that the purpose of leaders in the church is to equip us...

...till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; ¹⁴ that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, ¹⁵ but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head – Christ... (Ephesians 4:13-15)

You see here that we are expected to grow up. We begin the Christian life as spiritual children, but God expects us to become mature. In brief, we are to become like Christ. Part of this maturing process is to *think* like Christ, and this is what happened to Daniel. At the beginning of his career he was immediately faced with an impossible demand, and God powerfully intervened to rescue him and all the wise men from the anger of the king. But now it is many years later. It would be shameful if Daniel still were ignorant of God's ways. By now the mature Daniel can see God's hand in this dream, and he can tell what God is saying. In 1 Corinthians 2:16 Paul says that we have the mind of Christ. Daniel has been exercising the mind of Christ over the years. Now when he is called upon to explain God's message, he is able.

I do not want you to misunderstand this process. I am not saying that the more mature you are, the less you pray. Absolutely not! For one thing, how do you think you become mature, if not through prayer, Bible study, and obedience to God's word? The fact that Daniel did not take a time out for prayer does not mean he did not pray. It means he had spent years praying, and over that time God had given him divine insight. This situation is analogous to a soccer team, which, having five boys, I am somewhat expert on. When you first begin playing you may occasionally make an amazing shot that goes right through the opposing goalie's legs. But of course the other team of six-year-olds is hardly skilled at the game. Years later you cannot expect such breaks. So parents stand on the sidelines and cheer for the team. If the team is doing poorly, they yell stupidities such as "kick it out of there!" But you know, once the team is on the field, all they can do is play the way they were trained. If they were drilled in the techniques and strategy of the sport, they will do well. If they have not been well trained, there is nothing the parents or coaches can do from the sidelines to improve the game. What you see here in Daniel is the result of years of training in prayer and study of God's word. Spiritual maturity does not consist of receiving visions or signs. It consists of years of training in walking with God.

So how in particular did Daniel know the meaning of this dream? Well a tree is a well-known symbol for a man. Psalm 1 says the godly man is like a tree planted by a stream of water. Psalm 128 says the godly man has children like olive plants around his table. And the prophet Ezekiel, who was preaching right there in Babylon, compared the great Assyrian Empire to a massive tree that spread throughout the earth and gave shelter to man and beast. (Ezekiel 31) Then in Isaiah 11 God predicted that a branch shall grow from the stump of Jesse. Jesse was the father of David. This is a fairly clear prophecy that the line of David would grow again after being cut down. Daniel knew these scriptures, and by long meditation upon

them he gained insight into how God thinks. So when he heard this dream, he recognized familiar features of God's work and could see right away what God was telling the king.

Did you think of those scriptures when you read this account of Nebuchadnezzar's dream? The first application to this passage is fairly simple: pursue spiritual maturity. There is no easy shortcut. You cannot become an accomplished soccer player or piano player by dabbling and dreaming, and the same is true of spiritual growth. It comes through many years of diligent practice. Sometimes, as with other accomplishments, there are setbacks. But the one who perseveres will grow. Constantly study your Bible. Constantly pray. Think about what you read and the world around you. Apply what you learn to every aspect of life. Then you will not need visions or signs. You will know what to do in confusing situations.

Compassionate Daniel

Daniel immediately understood that this dream was a severe warning to Nebuchadnezzar. Proud, powerful Nebuchadnezzar, ruler of the earth, was in danger of being cut down and shamefully humiliated. After all he did, after all Daniel's people suffered at his hand, don't you think Daniel was privately rejoicing that this pagan tyrant was now going to get a taste of his own medicine? How would you respond? Suppose Saddam Hussein killed all your family and forced you to serve him for most of your life – how would you feel? How would you react if God revealed that Hussein was about to be punished for his crimes? Of course you would need to pretend to be concerned. Otherwise you might lose your head. But don't you think that inwardly you would be thrilled?

Not so with Daniel. Daniel was upset at the thought that harm might come to Nebuchadnezzar. His immediate response was to wish that the dream would be true for the king's enemies. How can this be? Whatever happened to *lex talionis* – an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth? Shouldn't Nebuchadnezzar pay for his crimes? Why should Daniel wish that he escape after all he did to God's people? And to God Himself! Remember, Nebuchadnezzar stole the vessels of the temple in Jerusalem and put them in the house of his own god. Nebuchadnezzar was a bloodthirsty pagan. Death would be too good for him!

Passages like this reveal the falsehood of that old lie about the God of the Old Testament being different than the God of the New. They look to the Old Testament and expect to see a God of wrath and vengeance. Then they look to the New to see a God of love and compassion. This is shameful nonsense. God is the same forever. He is, always has been, and always will be a God both of love and wrath, justice and mercy – in the Old Testament as well as the New. Here we see Daniel showing the same mercy to Nebuchadnezzar that God had shown to His people Israel for hundreds of years. From the beginning when God called Abraham out of this same country – Mesopotamia – God had given Israel impressive blessings. Israel had the law of God, they had the temple of the true God, they had prophets who explained God's word. Nebuchadnezzar had none of this. So here God shows compassion on this heathen man by giving him a chance to repent of his sins and worship the one true God. And Daniel is godly enough to recognize what God is doing, and share God's desire.

How do you feel about your enemies? If you do not have any real enemies, how about people who irritate and annoy you? Do you love them? Do you wish their health and prosperity? Do you shudder at their sin and weep at their suffering? Or do you rejoice in iniquity? This is a stiff challenge. It takes the heart of God to respond in a godly manner to our enemies. It takes a pure heart to love the wicked.

Blessed are the merciful, For they shall obtain mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, For they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, For they shall be called sons of God.
(Matthew 5:7-9)

If your heart is polluted with anger, envy, and malice – you will not be capable of mercy, and you will be unable to be a peacemaker. Daniel had a pure heart, and he longed for this ruthless king to receive mercy. Do you long for your antagonists receive God’s mercy? Do you weep for the lost? Or do you shrug your shoulders, satisfied that God’s will is perfect and His justice is right? God’s will is perfect, and His will is that you love the lost – even if they torment you.

One of the most moving instances of such love happened after World War II. Corrie ten Boom was a Dutch Christian who was imprisoned by the Nazis for hiding Jews in her house. (You should read the book or see the movie, *The Hiding Place*.) The women in the prison camp were horribly treated by the German guards. Corrie’s sister died there, along with many others. After the war she began giving speeches about her experience, and about how God had protected her and brought her through such a terrible ordeal. After one speech she was approached by a man who identified himself as one of the guards in that camp. He came to hear her speech, and to ask her forgiveness for all he had done. Miss ten Boom did not want to forgive this man. She hated him. She hated all he stood for and all he did. So she stood there, not wanting to forgive, but knowing she must. Finally she reached out and hugged her former tormenter. This is the power of God. This is mature faith.

Pride

You know, the central reason we do not want to love the wicked is the same sin God was confronting in Nebuchadnezzar’s life – pride. We do not want to humble ourselves and love the unlovable. And Nebuchadnezzar did not want to humble himself to admit that God was the source of all his success. God warned him through the dream that he must worship the Most High God of Heaven. After interpreting the dream Daniel blurted out his own plea that Nebuchadnezzar repent. Time went by. Twelve months passed, and still Nebuchadnezzar refused to acknowledge God. Suddenly he was struck down. The great Nebuchadnezzar became insane. He roamed the fields like an animal. He who was too proud to worship God became lower than the meanest peasant.

What is your pride? Is it your intelligence? Is it your car? In what way are you pleased that you excel? There is a proper sort of pride – enjoying what you have done. But even that is misplaced if you think your accomplishments are your own work. There is a sort of false humility which denies your own effort. Perhaps you have heard someone reply to a compliment saying, “Oh it wasn’t me. It was the Lord.” Of course the Lord is involved, but He works through *people* – and it is good to recognize that. But we are more likely to rely solely on ourselves and take all the credit for ourselves. A better course is to seek God’s help in everything you do. Whether it is telling your roommate about Jesus, or writing a paper, or doing the laundry – begin by committing your work to the Lord.

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding;
In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths.
(Proverbs 3:5-6)

Say, “God, thank you for the opportunity to do this work. I will only succeed if you help me. Please use my efforts to please you.” And a better response to a compliment would be, “Thank you. I did work hard. But God made it a success.”

It is significant that Nebuchadnezzar’s fate was to become like an animal. It is a vivid illustration that sin is essentially dehumanizing. God made man the pinnacle of creation. He gave man rule over the animals. But man will only rule the earth as long as he submits to the rule of God. When man refuses to submit to God, he loses his authority, and he also loses his humanity. You see all this in the garden in the third chapter of Genesis. Man chose to listen to an animal instead of to God. In the process he came under the power of sin and lost his authority on the earth. Psalm 8 is a reflection on the status of man.

When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,
The moon and the stars, which You have ordained,
What is man that You are mindful of him,
And the son of man that You visit him?
For You have made him a little lower than the angels,
And You have crowned him with glory and honor.
You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands;
You have put all things under his feet.
(Psalm 8:3-6)

But the book of Hebrews admits that this is no longer true of man. It is true, however, of Jesus, the Son of God and Son of Man. We become truly and fully human only in union with Jesus. But if we rebel against God and refuse to believe in Jesus, we become less human, more animal-like. When Paul wrote to Titus, a pastor on the island of Crete, he said this about the inhabitants:

One of them, a prophet of their own, said, “Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.” This testimony is true. (Titus 1:12-13)

Moderns who champion an evolutionary theory of origins rejoice in the beastliness of sinful man. This excuses us from the challenge of acting like men and women. But however low mankind may sink, he was nevertheless created for glory. Through Jesus Christ we may escape from sin and become fully human.

This passage teaches us that sin makes us animal-like. It also teaches us that sin is insanity. Here Nebuchadnezzar became clinically insane, and this is a picture of the insanity of all sin. Verse 34 states that the only sane path is to worship God. “And at the end of the time I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever.” (Daniel 4:34) Nebuchadnezzar became sane only when he looked to heaven and worshiped God. Serving God is the only sane way to live.

Praise to God

What makes this chapter so utterly astonishing is that this humble confession was written and sent all over the earth. For this reason many commentators deny its authenticity. They are too proud to submit themselves to God, and they cannot imagine anyone else doing so. But aside from the imagination of sinful men, there is no reason to doubt this account. Look at the lavish praise Nebuchadnezzar pours out to God.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion, And His kingdom is from generation to generation. ³⁵ All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; He does according to His will in the army of heaven And among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand Or say to Him, “What have You done?” (Daniel 4:34-35)

All the inhabitants of the earth are counted as nothing – including great king Nebuchadnezzar. No one can restrain His hand, including king Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar made war against the God of the Hebrews. He conquered God’s people and stole His temple vessels. Nebuchadnezzar thought he defeated God and imprisoned Him in the temple of his god. But God does not live in temples made with hands. No one can contain Him. God is sovereign over all. He is able to give conquest to pagan kings, and he is just as willing to be merciful to His enemies. It took a lifetime, but in the end Nebuchadnezzar bowed before the only God there is. In his life-long war with God, God won. And when God wins, man is saved from destruction – even a pagan king.

Commentators differ on this, but I think we will see Nebuchadnezzar in heaven. He will still be the

energetic, action-oriented man we see in the pages of the book of Daniel. His handshake will be a bone-cruncher. He will still be building magnificent buildings. If we were able to interview him this morning I think he would say, “Morning folks! A great day for construction, isn’t it? But so is every day here in heaven. Praise God! Well, got to go. Jesus says He has a group of people at Lehigh University who are going to need a place to live here some day, so I’m busy building their houses.”

The last words of this remarkable man ring through the ages. “Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all of whose works are truth, and His ways justice. And those who walk in pride He is able to put down. (Daniel 4:37) Amen! May God enable us likewise to worship Him before the whole world.

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