

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker
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Daniel 4 (read vv.1-18) “Daniel and the Wolfman”

Intro. This chapter is mainly a letter which King Nebuchadnezzar sent out, giving an account of his remarkable conversion. This probably took place toward the end of his 43-year rule. Such a letter would have clarified to his people the nature and significance of what had occurred during his years of absence from the throne. It was included in Scripture to show the truth of the last of v.17, “that the living may know That the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, Gives it to whomever He will....” Daniel may have assisted him in writing this letter.

What we have here is a personal testimony of what God did to change the life of a proud king. It is always exciting to see God change lives. Has God changed your life? Could you write a testimony of how God has changed your life once you believed in Jesus Christ as Savior? Is God still bringing about changes in your life?

Let's look into our story of what happened to this great king. First, we see:

I. THE KING DISTURBED

This was a bit unusual for Nebuchadnezzar at this time. As we read in v.4, he was at peace and prospering in a fantastic way. The word “rest” means that Nebuchadnezzar was “free from apprehension and fear.” There were no serious problems at home. There was no war in the kingdom and the empire was peace. Everything was going great. But he had a false security. It did not last.

So what was it that so disturbed the king? Notice that he was:

A. Disturbed by a Dream – We read in v.5, “I saw a dream which made me afraid, and the thoughts on my bed and the visions of my head troubled me.” At first in the original the word indicates extreme terror or fright. He had a nightmare! He was in a panic. Imagine, such a great king afraid! It would seem that he was secure as a mighty king of the strongest kingdom. I believe that he was afraid that the tree in the dream represented him. After all, in v.16, the voice indicates that the tree represented a man, a man whose heart would be changed into the heart or nature of a beast.

In vv.6-7 we read that Nebuchadnezzar did what was normally done at such a time. He called in the regular wise men to interpret the dream. He called back the same bunch of losers who couldn't help him years before. But this time the king only asked for the interpretation. The word “magicians” in v.7 would better be translated “scholars” or “diviner-priests” (HCSB). They could have used their dream interpretation books to make up an interpretation. However, we read in the last of v.7, “they did not make known to me its interpretation.” Perhaps it was because they could see that it was not a good sign for the king, and they didn't *want* to be the ones to deliver the bad news. Or, since Nebuchadnezzar is speaking, he could simply be writing from his perspective, and he realized that they could not give a *true* interpretation. After they failed, the scene was set for Daniel to come. So we see next:

B. The Prophet Delivered God's Word (v.8ff) –

1. The Messenger - Perhaps Daniel deliberately waited until the others failed, and thus magnified the superior power of God in his life! So Daniel may have made a grand entrance to see the king, and no doubt the king was glad to see Daniel. In v.9 we see that the king knew that the Spirit of God lived in Daniel. Do you live in such a way that people know that about you?

When Henry Stanley found David Livingstone in the heart of Africa, he stayed with him for 6 months. Stanley was a professed skeptic when he found Livingstone, but he came away a Christian. Asked what Livingstone said that converted him, Stanley replied, "It was not what Livingstone said; it was what Livingstone *was* that brought me to Christ." [Illus.#C- 1921]

So when Daniel came in, the king tells him the dream. [Read vv.10-17].

2. The Meaning - What could this dream mean? Daniel had a bad message to deliver and this is what caused him to be "astonished for a time, and his thoughts troubled him" (v.19). He took no delight in giving this message of judgment. That should be true of us today. If we are faithful to the Word of God, we know that it contains a message of judgment and hell to those who reject Jesus Christ. But we should not share such a message as if we were glad that sinners are going to hell. It should break our hearts! So for a certain amount of time Daniel said nothing, but no doubt he was inwardly troubled by the message he was receiving from God. That delay must have been difficult for Nebuchadnezzar! So he tried to encourage Daniel to tell him the interpretation. But regardless, Daniel was faithful to deliver God's message just as it was. He did not water down the message of the judgment of God like many preachers do today. Folks, based on the book of Daniel and Revelation and other Scriptures, our world is on a path to great judgment. We do not delight in that, but we must be faithful to warn people of the truth.

Now notice the interpretation. The focus of the dream was a tree. That it stood "in the midst of the earth" suggests that it stood alone in terms of great importance. In v.22 Daniel says, "It is you, O king...." The words are direct, in the vein of Nathan's words to David, "You are the man" (2 Sam. 12:7). The fall of the tree symbolized a fall into a period of insanity for Nebuchadnezzar. King, you have ignored God and His revelation to you. Notice vv.15-16, 25. Not only will you live with the animals, but also *as* the animals. Sin leads you down to the level of the animals. I do not believe in evolution, but I do believe in reverse evolution! He would eat "grass" like an animal. Actually, the word is more inclusive than grass. So he would live outdoors, and thus get wet. This would last for either seven months or 7 years. There is a somewhat rare mental disease called lycanthropy (Gk. *lukos* = wolf and *anthropos* = man) where a person feels that they are a wolf and they begin to act like it. A clinical case of this was observed in a British mental hospital in 1946. That patient's diet consisted exclusively of grass from hospital lawns. This is the basis of the legends about wolfmen. You've seen movies about that. But here, the king seemed to imagine himself as an ox. He fed himself from the grass and other vegetation of the field.

People at times imagine they are animals. A man went to a psychiatrist concerning his wife. "Doc, my wife thinks she is a chicken." The doctor replied, "Well, that's very serious. All we can do is send her away to an institution." "Oh, no" said the man, "don't do that. We need the eggs!"

So something terrible is going to happen to this great King. But the dream contains hope. In v.26 Daniel says, "And inasmuch as they gave the command to leave the stump and roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be assured to you, after you come to know that Heaven rules." Special instructions are given regarding the stump. The word carries the connotation of something alive, not dead, and thus would refer more to the living roots. Thus Nebuchadnezzar would continue to live, after being removed from his throne, and there would be the prospect of his being restored

some day. As we see here, that restoration would come only after he would come to know and acknowledge that the God of heaven rules the affairs of men.

So now let's see the aftermath of the dream. We have seen the king disturbed. Now let's see:

II. THE KING DERANGED

However, before this happens, notice:

A. Daniel Calls upon Him to Repent - In v.27 Daniel counsels Nebuchadnezzar to change his ways. He says, "Therefore, O king, let my advice be acceptable to you; break off your sins by being righteous, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor. Perhaps there may be a lengthening of your prosperity." He undoubtedly had been morally wicked and cruel to those whom he ruled. His concern had been to build a magnificent city as a monument to his name rather than to alleviating the suffering of the poor. Often kings showed little consideration to those who did the work on building projects, with hundreds dying of extreme heat and difficult conditions. Nebuchadnezzar was probably guilty of a lack of concern. So Daniel advises him to cease from committing sin. Daniel gives the hope that this judgment might not come to pass if repentance occurs, or at least it could be delayed. Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah, and so the warning of judgment was not realized in their lifetime. God changed His mind about judgment because they changed their mind about their sin.

Notice that one year elapsed before the prophecy was fulfilled in Nebuchadnezzar's life, as we see from v.29. So I believe that God was giving him time to obey the Word of God and repent. He has had a year of grace.

The Bible says God is slow to anger and willing to forgive. Just because God does not immediately forgive sin does not mean He is not just. And just because the wicked seem to prosper does not mean that a righteous God does not rule. 2 Pet. 3:9 says, "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." If you are not saved this evening, God is giving you at least one more day to believe. Will you take advantage of the opportunity you have, or will you presume upon the grace and patience of God? Get saved while you know you can!

B. The Problem of Pride - Nebuchadnezzar may have intended to make some changes, but good intentions somehow had been lost, as days had slipped by and old patterns had been hard to break. Unfortunately, even after receiving this dream and hearing its interpretation, Nebuchadnezzar refused to repent. So notice vv.29-30, "At the end of the twelve months he was walking about the royal palace of Babylon. The king spoke, saying, 'Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power and for the honor of my majesty?'" He took great pride in his achievements as he walked around his palace, perhaps on top of his palace. And from a purely human perspective, many would feel that Nebuchadnezzar had reason to be full of pride. He had led his armies to conquer the known world. Now his vast domains had been made secure and he was at rest (v.4a), and now Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilling his heart's desire by making Babylon one of the most fabulous cities of the ancient world (v.4b). Note again in v.4 that he said he was "flourishing in my palace," which is from a word meaning "to be growing green", such as the growth of green leaves on a tree. This ties in with the tree of his dream. There are frequent mentions of the great buildings of Babylon in ancient literature. The famous "hanging

gardens" was regarded as one of the Seven Wonders of the World. The gardens were planted on top of a building and served both to beautify and to keep the building cool from the heat of summer. The city was surrounded by 17 miles of wall wide enough for chariots to pass on top. He had a banquet hall that could seat 10,000 people. The city was known as a city of gold, with many golden buildings.

Application: One of the characteristics of the world is "the pride of life" (1 Jn. 2:16). Today, many people imagine their financial success, or business success, or athletic success, other type of success is all of their own doing. And the problem is that success breeds pride. So his pride reached a new peak as he asked the question, "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honor of my majesty?" (v. 30).

Oh, pride is a terrible sin. It not only condemned Satan and his angels, but has condemned man throughout history. God alone is to be worshiped and praised. In spite of this, pride asserts that man takes supremacy over God. Pride places self above God. That is the essence of pride. But God proclaimed through Isaiah, "...My glory I will not give to another" (48:11).

So next we see:

C. God's Judgment upon Pride - God's judgment came suddenly. We read in v.31, "While the word was still in the king's mouth, a voice fell from heaven: "King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: the kingdom has departed from you!" God did not even wait for the king to finish his little speech. Judgment fell quickly. Apparently, a message came by a supernatural voice, with no human instrument involved. The king was informed that the dream he had experienced a year before was about to be fulfilled in his life due to his pride. In fact, in v.33 we read, "That very hour the word was fulfilled concerning Nebuchadnezzar...." Prov. 16:18 says, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." Prov. 29:23 says, "A man's pride shall bring him low..."

Now let's see from our text:

1. The Description of His Judgment – Notice what happened, as recorded in the last of v.33, "he was driven from men and ate grass like oxen; his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair had grown like eagles' feathers and his nails like birds' claws." A rather sudden change took place. His face gave the look of a wild man. He perhaps started running through the halls of his palace, shedding his clothes and seeking the outdoors. V.33 adds that his hair would grow like the feathers of an eagle, completely neglected and matted, and his nails would grow like birds' claws. In his madness, he may have resisted anyone trying to cut his hair or trim his nails. Prov. 11:2 says, "When pride comes, then comes shame...." How quickly God can reduce a man at the height of his power!

His counselors recognized that the king had become seriously ill. They met and decided on a course of action. It is probable that Nebuchadnezzar was kept in the palace gardens away from abuse by the common people. Although given no care, he was protected; and in his absence his counselors, possibly led by Daniel himself, continued to operate the kingdom efficiently. Daniel must have assured the counselors that Nebuchadnezzar would be restored, and amazingly they cooperated. What a contrast for that day, because kings would usually be murdered at the first sign of weakness.¹

2. The Reasons for His Judgment - Why did God judge him in such a way? It was to accomplish his purposes in his life.

¹ Besides, several forms of mental illness are episodic. They come and go. They felt they should give him some time to see if the illness would go away.

a) To Reveal His Sinful Heart - He and others could see that pride is indeed sin. He could see the sinfulness of his own heart. His past sin was great. When he conquered other kingdoms, he was cruel. He had a king of Judah see the slaying of his sons, and then he put his eyes out, so that the death of his sons would be the last thing he saw!

b) To Punish Sin - Galatians 6 says, “Be not deceived. God is not mocked. For whatever a man sows, that shall he also reap.” You can’t lift your heart in pride and get by with it. James 4:6 says, “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

c) To Bring about Repentance - Nebuchadnezzar got just about as low as you can get. Some must hit the bottom before they will look up to God. This would certainly be true of a great, proud king like Nebuchadnezzar. Has God brought you low lately? Is He trying to tell you something? Most alcoholics do not change until they hit bottom.

d) To Bring Him to an Understanding of the Sovereignty of God – Notice in the last of v.25 that Daniel warned that Nebuchadnezzar would have this terrible condition, “till you know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses.” You see, Nebuchadnezzar had it in his mind that he was mainly responsible for the great success of his kingdom. What he had forgotten was that none of this would be possible apart from God’s sovereign will. God had his own purposes for allowing Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon to become so great and powerful. One reason is mentioned in the Old Testament, and that was to punish Israel.

In v.35 he expresses what he learned about the sovereignty of God. None “can restrain His hand.” Literally, the meaning is “strike his hand.” It can refer to the custom of striking children on the hand in chastising them. You can’t do that with God! Nor are we in a position to question what he does. When you start blaming and rebuking God for the bad things that happen, you are on dangerous ground. So God judged Nebuchadnezzar and brought him low. God was going to get through to him.

Application: I wonder what it will take for God to get through to many people today? Preaching doesn’t seem to be getting through to many people. What will it take? Perhaps God will have to bring you to rock bottom. And when He does, I have good news for you. If you will only look up to God and trust in Him, He will lift you up. 1 Peter 5:6 says, “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time.”

In our story today, we have seen the king disturbed, the king deranged, and last of all, let’s consider:

III. THE KING DELIVERED

Here we see the wonderful truth that God can deliver us when we are down if we only look to him. Daniel was a man of prayer, and he undoubtedly prayed for Nebuchadnezzar. We do not know for sure that Nebuchadnezzar had a true conversion experience, but I would like to think that he did. At some point, like the prodigal son, Nebuchadnezzar must have come to his senses and said to himself, “Just look at me. Look at what I have become. Why should I stay like this when my life can be something different?” And yet, through the witness of Daniel and others, he knew that only the one true God could change his life. And so first of all:

A. He Raised His Eyes – In v.34 we read, “And at the end of the time I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven....” Nebuchadnezzar perhaps remembered the prophecy Daniel had given from God. In humility he looks to Daniel’s God. Psa. 121:1-2 says, “I will lift up my eyes to the hills—From whence comes my help? My help comes from the LORD, Who made heaven and

earth.” He remembered that the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego had delivered them from the fiery furnace, and he believed that God could save him as well.

Also involved in his conversion was the fact that:

B. His Reason Returned – The king said in v.34, “my understanding returned to me” (see also v.36). Salvation is a return to reason. Isa. 1:18 says, “Come, let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as wool....” How unreasonable it is that anyone continue down the destructive path of sin and reject the forgiveness and mercy of God! How foolish it is to reject God from your life, for He is the source of life and every true blessing!

C. He Praises God – We see in v.34 that the king “blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever....” Likewise, we read in v.37, “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.” He also praised God with the written proclamation that is recorded back in vv.2-3. There he says, “I thought it good to declare the signs and wonders that the Most High God has worked for me. How great are His signs, And how mighty His wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, And His dominion is from generation to generation.” For a former pagan, these are some wonderful words of praise! The King praised the greatness and power of God. He gave due acknowledgment of the eternal sovereignty of God. Unlike himself, whose rule was temporary, God’s rule is stable, unchanging, and eternal.

The king is now a different man. If God could save a great sinner like Nebuchadnezzar, He can save you, for a loved one you care about!

Conclusion: Are we going to let an old pagan king praise the Lord better than we do? Some of you would say that you are a Christian, and yet you have never professed that before a church, and you have never been baptized. Well I want you to know that one of the best ways you can bring praise to God for what He has done for you is to make a public profession of your faith in Jesus Christ. Won’t you do it today?

Sources: John MacArthur, Jr., *An Uncompromising Life* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon tape of 4/2/80); John F. Walvoord, *Daniel The Key to Prophetic Revelation* (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute, 1971); Leon Wood, *A Commentary on Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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