

The Way Up Is Down

Daniel 4

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Good morning. Welcome to Christ the King. If we haven't met, my name is Penny and I'm the senior pastor here, and it is good to be with you. If you are a guest or a visitor, welcome. We're glad that you're here, glad that you would join us as we come for worship, because we believe that worship is one of the most important things that we can be doing. This is the best way that we could be spending our Sunday morning, because as we gather for worship, and as we hear from God's Word, and we sing the songs that we sing, and we offer in prayers, we are being reminded, and we are reminding one another of the truth of the gospel, of who Jesus is, and what He has done. And we need this reminding because we are often bombarded, and we are invited to believe other stories about the world, and about who we are. And so, we need this reminder, we need this reorienting, and so that is one of the reasons we come back every Sunday: to be reminded and reoriented that Jesus is the one who reigns and that He is the one who has called us to Himself, to live as His people. And we learn what it means to live as His people, and the way we've been doing this recently is through this series in the book of Daniel. And this morning, we're going to be in Daniel chapter 4, so if you have a Bible, you can turn to Daniel 4. If you don't have a Bible, we have Bibles in the chairs, it's found on page 740. We also project the passage on the screen, you can follow along there.

But as you're turning there, just to remind you, Daniel is a book written to people, written about God's people, as they're in exile, they're in Babylon, living under a foreign king, in a foreign place, far from home. And this isn't just Israel's story, ancient Israel's story, but this is actually our story, because the New Testament tells us that we too live in exile. You guys have heard me say this, and Tobias say it, every week so far. By the end of this series, you will have heard it many, many times, right? We are an exilic people. This is not our home, right? We have citizenship in heaven. That's what the New Testament says. And so, as we live as an exilic people, we need to know how to live. And so, one of the things we've been talking about is that as we live in this world, that we do not want to assimilate, nor do we want to separate from it. And that's what we've seen with Daniel, and Shadrach, and Meshach, and Abednego, right? They have lived in Babylon, they haven't retreated away from it, and yet, as they live in Babylon, they live distinctively from Babylon. They live as God's people in exile.

Now, so far in the book of Daniel, we've been focused on how God has been working in and through Daniel, and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, right? He's been strengthening them, and protecting them, and helping them. But this morning, what we're going to see is how God deals with the man who is, who has been the foil to God's people. God is going to deal directly with King Nebuchadnezzar. That's what we see in chapter 4, and that's what we'll take up now. So, if you would follow along, we are going to read the entirety of the chapter. It is lengthy, but you can do it. Stay with me. So, chapter 4.

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

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

I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and prospering in my palace. I saw a dream that made me afraid. As I lay in bed the fancies and the visions of my head alarmed me. 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. 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. 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, “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. 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. The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. 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.

I saw in the visions of my head as I lay in bed, and behold, a watcher, a holy one, came down from heaven. 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. 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. 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. 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.’ 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.

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! 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, 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— 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. 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,’ this is the interpretation, O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king, 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. 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. 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.

All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar. At the end of twelve months he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, 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?" 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, 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." 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.

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; 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?"

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. 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." (ESV)

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord. Let me pray for us.

Heavenly Father, we ask that as we come to your Word now, that you would humble us, that you would turn our eyes away from ourselves, from the distractions of this world, and we would fix our gaze on Jesus. We would place our eyes upon you, and that we would know what it means to live as your people. To do this, we need your help, and so we ask by your Spirit that you would allow the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, to please you, our God and our King. In whose name we pray, amen.

The Pride of Humanity

Well, Chuck Colson was a man who grew up in a middle-class family. He had a good education. He served for years in the Marines, and he eventually got a law degree from George Washington. Chuck Colson was a very ambitious man. He wanted influence. He was drawn to power, and in 1969, those dreams materialized. They became a reality, because from 1969 until 1973, Chuck Colson served as special counsel to the President in the Nixon White House. Looking back at his years in the White House, he said that "to walk into the Oval Office, to sit at the right hand of the President of the United States, is to feel the surge of history and power. I lived in a world of access and influence. People returned my calls instantly. Doors were opened. I was important. He had risen to this great level of power." One of the most powerful men in the country, right? He had ear to the President. He had access to the Oval Office. Colson was later called Nixon's hatchet man, because he was

willing to do whatever it took to remain in power, to continue with his influence. In fact, he once was quoted as saying that he would walk over his own grandmother to get Nixon re-elected. That power, that influence, that place that he had achieved, he had to hold on to it. In fact, he said as much when he said that working in the government and pursuing its agenda, he depended on these things to maintain power. And he had acquired power. I imagine that the height of his power, he imagined he would never lose it. It would never go away, right? That he would continue to have this influence, this power. He needed to maintain it. This place of influence, he had to hold on. I mean, he had worked for many years to achieve this place. He had climbed ladders. And now, when he was named special counsel to the President, he could look at all he accomplished and take pride in this role. For years, one of the most powerful men in the country.

Now, we know Nebuchadnezzar wasn't just the most powerful man in his country, but he was one of the most powerful men in all the world, right? Babylon was a global force. And Nebuchadnezzar was its ruler. He was the ruler, and he ruled with power. And as he ruled, he had an over-inflated view of himself. He had a pride in what he had done, what he had accomplished. He had pride in his rule. And that pride is being challenged in our passage. It's being challenged in this second dream that Nebuchadnezzar has had, and it terrifies him. So, Nebuchadnezzar has this second dream. And like the dream before, he calls his magicians and his astrologers and his wise men and his Chaldeans to come and interpret the dream. But like the dream before, they can't interpret it, and only Daniel can. And so, Daniel comes and says, "well, the dream, it's of a great tree, and it's strong, and it reaches to the heavens, and it's visible over all the earth. Nebuchadnezzar, this tree is you. It is the greatness of your kingdom. And that greatness will be chopped down." That's what Daniel tells him. "You will be driven away and become like a beast, eating grass and having hair like the bird's feathers and having fingernails like talons. This dream, Nebuchadnezzar, is that you are one, you are powerful, but your power will one day come to an end."

Now, I want you to think about yourself, like put yourself in Nebuchadnezzar's shoes. I want you to imagine that this is the dream, this is the interpretation that you have heard. So, what would you do with this information? You're in power, but you're going to lose it. You're going to become like a beast. So, what would you do? Maybe, Nebuchadnezzar, having seen God's work, right, he's already seen it on display, having heard God's word interpreted to him, maybe he would rethink his position. Maybe he would rethink his kingdom. Maybe he would rethink his life. You would think that maybe he would do that, right? But instead, in verses 29 and 30, what does he do? Well, at the end of 12 months, he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, and the king answered and said, "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and of the glory of my majesty." You see what he does? I mean, the hubris, right? He has just been warned, your power, it's going to be wiped away, it's going to be destroyed, but instead of humility and self-reflection, all he has is pride. "Look how great a city I made. Look what I have done. Look how great I am."

Now, listen, y'all, Babylon was a great city. The hanging gardens of Babylon, historians believe they came from this period of time, right? One of the seven great wonders of the ancient world. I mean, Babylon was a great city, and Nebuchadnezzar was a powerful man, and there's nothing wrong with acknowledging strength and beauty and leadership, right? I mean, in our own lives, there's nothing wrong with acknowledging success and hard work and excellence and gifting, right? To say that I'm good at whatever it might be, right? I mean, there'd be nothing wrong with Rebecca, our piano player, who sang that beautiful song,

saying, "I play the piano pretty well", right? I mean, it would be silly if she didn't, because she clearly does. Or, Rachel O'Brien, our harpist, if she just kind of made light of her ability to play, we'd be like, "come on, quit with this. We know the truth. You're great", right? We know this, and there's nothing wrong with saying those things. That is not pride. Pride is exalting those things apart from recognizing the hand of God in those things. And Nebuchadnezzar sees only himself: "I built this city with my power, the glory of my majesty." There is no recognition, even after he's been warned, that these things have come from God. And this is what he and what we need to realize, that all that we have, our gifts, our abilities, our talents, our opportunities, these are from the hand of God.

That's what James 1 tells us. "Every good and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights." Now, this might be where some of you go, "well, that's all well and good, but come on, pastor, like, I work hard." And students, you know, you might be saying, "well, I study hard, and I devote time and effort to my career and my families and my future." And you are doing those things. I know most of you, y'all are very hard workers and talented and gifted and intelligent, personable. You are doing those things. And where did those things come from? The drive, the work ethic, the intelligence, the ability, where did they come from? Originally. I mean, you had no say in who your parents were. You had no say in the DNA that's in your body. You had no say in the place that you were born or the opportunities that you have been given. Those were not your creation. They came from the hand of God. And when we recognize this, we will turn from pride to humility, from arrogance to gratitude. We'll stop looking at ourselves, and we'll start looking to heaven.

The Truth of the Prophet

C.S. Lewis once wrote that a proud man is always looking down on things and people. And of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you. You see, the prideful looks to self, not to God. And that looking to self leads ultimately to our demise. And that's the truth that the prophet speaks. The truth that Daniel speaks is the truth of the dream, that Nebuchadnezzar, your kingdom, will be struck down, that your glory will fade, your power will crumble. Okay. That's not a very appealing message to have to give, right? I mean, put yourself in Daniel's shoes. Daniel, he's living as an exile, living under this foreign ruler, this one who opposes God's ways, who doesn't worship Yahweh. And who knows how Nebuchadnezzar might respond to this bad news that Daniel is going to give. I mean, anger, fury, rage. He's got the fiery furnace. He's used it once before, you know, so maybe Daniel might be thinking, might use it on me. Or maybe something worse, right? It's not hard to imagine that maybe Daniel would have a little bit of fear. And in fact, we're told in verse 19 that hearing this and understanding this dream and the interpretation, he was dismayed and alarmed.

But also, I can't help but imagine that maybe there was just a little part of Daniel that relished in the interpretation of this dream. The downfall of Nebuchadnezzar. I mean, it's not hard to imagine that. I mean, he's living as an exile. To think, Nebuchadnezzar, you think you're great? You think you're mighty and powerful? You who have challenged Yahweh? Well, now God's going to get you. I mean, it's not hard to imagine that maybe Nebuchadnezzar or Daniel would take pleasure in bringing this message of judgment because it would mean that this one who opposed God would come crashing down. It's not hard to imagine because, if we're honest, we can feel that in our hearts, can't we? About the people, we don't call them enemies, right? We know better. But those people that maybe we just don't like. And we don't think work very hard at work. And those people who have achieved things that we don't think

that they deserve, don't we struggle with thinking, man, if people only knew, if they really got what they deserved.

And yet, I get no sense from the passage that Daniel took any pleasure in speaking judgment to Nebuchadnezzar. In fact, what we see is that judgment isn't the only truth that Daniel speaks. Because when Daniel interprets the dream and he speaks the judgment, he then says in verse 27, look at this, "therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you." Okay, in other words, hear my words, give heed to what I'm about to say. Judgment is coming, so 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. Do you see what Daniel's doing? He is speaking not only the truth of judgment, but the truth of repentance. Daniel is holding out hope to Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel is holding out hope even to Nebuchadnezzar, even to this one who was an oppressor, a killer, an ignorer of God, even he could be saved. Y'all, I wonder if we believe that. Not about Nebuchadnezzar or the people of the Bible, right? They're distant from us, you know, of course they can be saved, but what about those people in our lives who we would think would never darken the door of a church? Those people who have mocked the faith, who have scorned God and his people, do we believe that repentance is possible for them? Maybe you're one of those people here this morning. Maybe you never thought you would end up in a church, and you're not really sure why you're here. Maybe someone invited you, or you just simply walked in, and maybe you've thought that that all that is offered to me is judgment. But what Daniel offers is repentance. He holds out hope. I wonder, do we, do we relish in judgment, or do we hold out hope? Because, y'all, that's many of our stories, right?

I mean, that's my story. Not as extreme as Nebuchadnezzar, but many of us were far from God, living in debauchery, opposed to his ways, and if God's grace was enough to lead us to repentance, why don't we not others? That's some of our stories, and it's this story, because God's grace not only is able to penetrate our hearts, but it's able to penetrate Nebuchadnezzar's pride, and that's what we see. We see the grace of God penetrating and humbling Nebuchadnezzar, because Nebuchadnezzar didn't heed David's warning. Instead, he doubled down on self-exaltation. We see it in verses 31 and following. "While the words were still on the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, 'O king Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken. The kingdom has departed from you, 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.'"

The Grace of God

And that's exactly what happened. Nebuchadnezzar was brought low. He was made insane. He lived like a beast, not like a man. He was humbled, and that humbling is a reflection of God's care. It is a reflection of God's grace to him, because God didn't leave him in his pride, but he humbled him, and that is exactly what he needed. Now, y'all, some of y'all know who Chuck Colson is, and you know his story, and you know that his story didn't end with power and influence, because after Watergate, he was convicted of obstruction of justice, and he served years in federal prison, and he wrote after that time that it was in prison, with everything gone, that I realized the great lesson of life. When you lose your life for Christ's sake, we find the only meaning and purpose in life. You see, what Colson realized, what Nebuchadnezzar is being revealed, is that this is the best thing that could have happened to them, that to be humbled, to be brought low, that that was the best thing that could happen to

them, because in this happening to them, in doing so, they were taking their eyes off themselves, and they were turning their eyes to the Lord. In fact, that's what Nebuchadnezzar says in verse 34.

He says, "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." Verse 37, he says, "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." Nebuchadnezzar turned his eyes from himself, he looked to heaven, and he saw clearly, his reason was restored. I love that that's how he described it. His reason was restored, because he realized that the most insane thing that we can do is turn our eyes from the Lord. And when he turned them to the Lord, his reason was restored, and he saw clearly. He knew the one who humbled him. He knew who truly reigns over the earth. He honored not himself, but he honored the Lord. God humbled Nebuchadnezzar, and he humbled Colson, and he led them to repentance.

And y'all, you do not have to wait to hit bottom to move to repentance. You can humble yourself today. You can turn your eyes from yourself, and turn them to heaven, and ask God to reveal his grace to you. Because God's grace has come, and it is available to all who look to him. It has come and is come through the humility of Jesus I mean think about that. What is as amazing as that? Jesus who lived and reigned with the Father who were told in the book of Philippians didn't regard equality with God something to be grasped but humbled himself. And How did he humble himself? By taking on flesh and living and dying, dying even on the cross. This one, who should be worshipped by angels, left the place of exaltation, and in humility, he gave his life so that we would know his grace. That's what he has done. The one who should be exalted humbled himself so that the humble would be exalted. And so friends, today, let us turn from our pride. Today, hear the words of truth today. Cling in humility to the grace of God that is offered in Christ. Amen. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your grace and thank you that you have sent your son, our Lord Jesus, and in sending him you humble the pride of our hearts and of this world because Jesus, the one who should be exalted, became man and became a servant to many. And so we pray, Father, turn our eyes from ourselves. Turn our eyes towards Christ. Humble us so that we would stand before you in repentance, clinging to your grace, standing not in pride but humility, exalting the King of heaven, the one who can humble the pride. Father, we pray that you would do this in our midst and in our lives for the glory of Christ and for the good of your people. And we pray all this in Jesus' name. And God's people said together, Amen.