

Daniel 4:28-37, No. 8
“Pride Goes Before the Fall”
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Remember, now, where we are. Nebuchadnezzar had another dream and Daniel interpreted it to mean that the king was soon to be humbled in a most dramatic way, unless, that is, he repented and began acting less like the arrogant man he was.

Text Comment

- v.30 A year had passed since the dream and its interpretation and, obviously, Nebuchadnezzar had neither repented of his sins nor humbled himself before God or man. Quite the contrary. He was reveling in his personal greatness.
- v.32 In other words, by repeating Daniel’s interpretation of the king’s dream, the Lord was reminding Nebuchadnezzar that this is precisely what had been promised and precisely the divine prophecy he had ignored.
- v.35 We tend to fail to appreciate the gifts God has given us until they are taken away. But, in fact, the world is full of powerful and often painful reminders of the greatness of the gifts God has given us. Nebuchadnezzar received back his *reason*. Those of us who have watched a loved one lose his or her reason have cause to consider our reason not as something to take for granted but as something to treasure and to thank God for.

In the Rayburn family we used to make fun of my mother for a comment she made many years ago at the kitchen table as the family was having supper. She opined that we didn’t think often enough of the gifts God has given us, *like gravity*, she said. We howled, pointing out that without gravity there would be no “us” to give thanks for anything. Ever after, when she would find some reason to reproach me for my behavior I would say, “Well, yes, but at least I’m thankful for gravity.” True enough, I don’t suppose that we need to spend our time thanking God for arranging the world so that human life could actually exist; that was his plan. But there are many things about human life that could be and often are otherwise. And we should be thankful that we are given to enjoy life and to profit from it as we are, when it is entirely possible that, like others, we might just as well not have been able to speak, to see, to hear, or to reason.

Ralph Davis (67-68) refers to Luther’s *Small Catechism* and its answer to the question: What does the first article of the *Apostles’ Creed* – that is, I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth – what does that *mean*? This is Martin Luther’s down-to-earth reply:

“I believe that God has created me and all that exists; that he has given and still preserves to me body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my limbs, my reason and all my senses; and also clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and

child, land, cattle, and all my property; that he provides me richly and daily with all the necessities of life..."

When was the last time you thanked God for your ears or your shoes? When the greatness of God is impressed upon someone, when he or she realizes that in every respect he or she lives at God's pleasure, it makes perfect sense to that person to thank God *for everything!*

In any case, Nebuchadnezzar's experience had the desired effect: the king finally recognized the difference between himself and God. Or, better, he realized who the real king was! [Lucas, 118]

- v.36 Like Job, Nebuchadnezzar's final years were even more prosperous than his early years had been, though, unlike Job, Nebuchadnezzar may still not fully have understood the lesson he had been taught. Is there here still too much "me" and "my" in his outlook? There has been through the ages a debate among believing commentators on Daniel whether we are here given to understand that Nebuchadnezzar ended his life as a converted man, a believing man, what we would call a regenerated man or a "Christian." Calvin thought not but E.J. Young, the extraordinarily learned OT professor of the early years of Westminster Theological Seminary thought that the end of the chapter presents Nebuchadnezzar as a man whose faith, perhaps still weak and unformed, was nonetheless real. Some argue, to the contrary, that his faith and repentance were such as even an unbelieving man can offer to God, as King Ahab did when he heard God's promise of judgment upon his house, or as the Assyrians in Nineveh did upon hearing the preaching of Jonah. Who can say for sure? It is certainly possible that a pagan king was granted saving faith. Think of Namaan the Syrian general. But the text doesn't seem to place the issue beyond reasonable doubt. It is a happy thought, though, to imagine Nebuchadnezzar, of all people, in heaven among the saints!

Now the story of chapter 4 is a proud man's journey to humility. We are all proud. Christians especially are especially sensitive to the fact that pride, in Shakespeare's famous description

"Peep[s] through every part [of them]"

Interestingly, almost everyone still thinks pride – or what he or she takes for pride – is wrong. The rest of the seven deadly sins have, in our time, been reduced to mere peccadilloes or even re-categorized as virtues, but pride remains something we despise when we see it or hear it in others. But, nevertheless, everyone is proud and everyone is giving that fact away virtually every day in any number of ways. Iain Duguid, now of Grove City College and author of a popular commentary on Daniel, describes one of those Christmas letters we have all gotten at one time or the other:

"It's been a great year for the Lamplighters! Greg had been hoping for a promotion, but what a surprise when the CEO came to his desk and begged him to take over the company. The whole office chipped in and gave the family a week in Paris to celebrate. Wasn't that nice? Of course Jeanne has been busy as well. You probably saw that news

item about how she rescued a school bus full of children from a kidnapper, armed only with a plastic comb. Nice to think, too, that the poem she wrote for last year's holiday letter will be chiseled into the wall of the Library of Congress. The twins did so well at the state tap-dance championship that Spielberg is crafting a movie around them, while Greg Jr.'s science fair project was the topic of much excitement in the *New England Journal of Medicine*." [61-62]

The problem isn't simply that the Lamplighters are boasting of their achievements, not unlike Nebuchadnezzar; the problem is just as much that *we* hate to hear such things *because they reflect poorly on us*. We are so hyper-sensitive to the difference that we immediately notice that things have been said of them that could not be said of us. We feel smaller in comparison, and we hate that feeling. We are always either provoking people by our pride or being provoked by theirs!

Now, unlike Iain Duguid's fictional Lamplighter family, Nebuchadnezzar had more reason to boast. Two of the seven wonders of the ancient world *were his achievements!* They were both things he built in his capital: the hanging gardens and the walls of the city. It was a hugely impressive city.

"Babylon was a rectangularly shaped city surrounded by a broad and deep water-filled moat and then by an intricate system of double walls. The first double-wall system encompassed the main city. Its inner wall was twenty-one feet thick and reinforced with defense towers at sixty foot intervals while the outer wall was eleven feet in width and also had watchtowers. Later Nebuchadnezzar added another double-wall system (an outer wall twenty-five feet thick and an inner wall twenty-three feet thick) east of the Euphrates that ran the incredible distance of seventeen miles and was wide enough at the top for chariots to pass. The height of the walls is not known, but the Ishtar Gate was forty feet high, and the walls would have approximated this size." [S. Miller in Davis, 64]

The Ishtar Gate opened into Procession Street (62 feet wide, and a thousand yards long) which was paved with imported stone. Nebuchadnezzar had built three palaces for himself in the city. The site of the hanging gardens has not been located. But they were by all accounts magnificent: an ascending series of tiered gardens, containing all manner of trees, vines, and other plants for which water was supplied by mechanical means. In Babylon's temples could be found treasures taken from all the other temples of the near eastern world, including the temple in Jerusalem. And it wasn't just the magnificent city he had built. He had constructed canals, aqueducts, temples, roads, and reservoirs all over Babylon and, indeed, his far-flung empire. More than that, he had laid Egypt low, for thousands of years the great power of the ancient world. He had conquered Tyre, thought to be impregnable, and a great many other prosperous states and peoples. He was the most powerful man in the world! He was probably also the most interesting man in the world. Everyone wanted his time and attention. In v. 22 even Daniel admits that no one on earth was as great as Nebuchadnezzar! So when Nebuchadnezzar, in v. 29, walked out on the roof of his palace, a roof made of milled cedar brought from Lebanon, there was some reason for the king to be impressed with what he had accomplished. Can you imagine reading Nebuchadnezzar's Christmas letter? [Duguid, 64]

And, of course, there is nothing wrong with a sense of satisfaction in a job well done. But that was hardly Nebuchadnezzar's state of mind. He was full of himself and his glory and he had no thought for God who had given him his position or enabled all of his accomplishments. He was worshiping himself entirely. Interestingly, as today, even in Babylon there was an understanding that pride was a bad thing and that it was foolish to lose touch with the true position of human beings and human kings. At his accession to the throne it had been said as part of the ceremony that god (Marduk) had given him his throne and his wealth and power. His father, the first Nebuchadnezzar had represented himself on a monument as the "son of nobody." Two of the streets below him were named "Bow Down Proud One" and "May the Arrogant not Flourish." [Ferguson in Davis, 64n] But then as now, it is far easier to condemn pride than either to recognize it in oneself or to practice real humility!

And so God did what trite aphorisms – the sort that are embroidered, framed, and hung on the wall – would never have done. He took the man down to the bottom. The condition that is described here in vv. 33 actually is a recognized psychological disorder variously named zooanthropy, lycanthropy or boanthropy. The person thinks he or she is or has become an animal and behaves accordingly. The biblical scholar R.K. Harrison actually observed a person with this disorder in a mental hospital in Britain in 1946.

"His daily routine consisted of wandering around the magnificent lawns...and it was his custom to pluck up and eat handfuls of grass as he went along. On observation he was seen to discriminate carefully between grass and weeds, and on inquiry from the attendant was told that the diet of this patient consisted exclusively of grass from the hospital lawns. He never ate institutional food with the other [patients], and his only drink was water, which was served to him in a clean container so as to make it unnecessary for him to drink from muddy puddles. The writer was able to examine him cursorily, and the only physical abnormality noted consisted of a lengthening of the hair and a coarse, thickened condition of the finger-nails." [*Intro. to the OT*, 1116]

All of that to say only that Nebuchadnezzar's condition as described here is not intrinsically impossible! It was always rare, but we see it still less today because the mentally ill nowadays are more likely to receive the kind of care that would prevent them from walking about or living outside. [Lucas, 111]

More to the point, however is the question whether Nebuchadnezzar's condition was an arbitrary punishment, as if it might just as well have been leprosy, arthritis, or gout. The sense of the chapter, however, is that Nebuchadnezzar's boasting, his view of himself, his captivation with his own glory, *was* insanity, a genuine detachment from reality. To be condemned to a more complete detachment from reality, to a condition *everyone* would regard as insanity, was only fitting. Man who glories in himself *is* insane in the truest sense, even as he employs his mental powers in a normal way. Most don't think themselves animals – though we now have an increasing number of academic types who declare that we human beings are animals and nothing but animals, just more advanced than the others – but actually they think of themselves gods, or, at least, they act as if they were: deserving of the worship of others.

Christian theology has long held that pride, *superbia*, is the bottom sin of human life, the first sin and the cause of much, if not all of the rest of our sin. It was this understanding that prompted Augustine to say, “That which first overcomes man is the last thing man overcomes.” Or, as C.S. Lewis put it:

“From the moment a creature becomes aware of God as God and of itself as self, the terrible alternative of choosing God or self for the centre is opened to it. This is...the fall in every individual life, and in each day of each individual life, the basic sin behind all particular sins: at this very moment you and I are either committing it, or about to commit it, or repenting it. We try, when we wake, to lay the new day at God’s feet; before we have finished shaving, it becomes *our* day and God’s share in it is felt as a tribute which we must pay out of ‘our own’ pocket, a deduction from the time which we ought, *we feel*, to be ‘our own.’” [*Problem of Pain*, 63]

By the way, if you have not read or read recently C.S. Lewis’ magnificent dissection of pride in *Mere Christianity* (109-114), be sure that you do. It will prove to you all over again that your own pride is just as bad as Nebuchadnezzar’s and, since you know better, actually worse!

Western man certainly walks in Nebuchadnezzar’s shoes. All men do, of course, but Western man has turned pride, as Nebuchadnezzar had, into an art form. We hardly hear of humility as a virtue any longer. When was the last time you heard any public figure celebrated as a genuinely humble man or woman? In an age of celebrity we fawn over the rich and beautiful in ways Nebuchadnezzar never dreamed of. And they bank their celebrity to the tune of millions. Pride is worth much more than humility in the age of the “touchdown dance.” More significantly, we have largely removed the scaffolding that long supported at least some measure of public recognition of the sin of pride. We now, for example, as a civilization, hold that man is basically good and deny original sin, the only Christian doctrine, G.K. Chesterton pointed out, for which there is overwhelming empirical proof! Why are there fewer and fewer Christians in North America and Europe? Well one answer is surely because pride is now regarded, publically, institutionally and culturally, as an acceptable defect of the human spirit, if a defect at all, and so vast numbers of people in the western world are never, *I mean never*, confronted with their pride, their silly, dishonest, utterly irrational admiration of themselves! And no proud man or woman is going to be interested in the gospel of Jesus Christ, a message that absolutely requires a person to admit his or her desperate and hopeless condition before God, his or her actual badness, and the justice of God’s condemnation of him or her precisely on account of what sort of person he or she actually is!

Do you want to know why there is so much suffering in the world? Prosperity teaches a person almost nothing that he or she really *must* know; but adversity teaches him the truth, the hard truth about himself, the truth about God, and the truth about the world, truth he would never admit until forced to. Nebuchadnezzar was a better man, a wiser man, after his catastrophic fall into insanity than he was or ever could have been had he kept his wits about him. God doesn’t care how rich you are, how comfortable, how successful, how happy. God wants you to know the truth about himself, about yourself, and, especially, about how you might get to heaven with a heart as black and as silly and as stuck up as yours. He wants you to be humble – as you ought to be – and to be good. Because only if you are, can you find the true fulfillment of life, that

satisfaction that must remain a mystery to everyone who is preoccupied with himself or herself and entertains delusions of grandeur.

I'm reading a fascinating new history of the Second World War by Andrew Roberts. Along the way he offers little vignettes disclosing the characters of some of the prominent military leaders in that great conflict. In describing the vanity and red-hot jealousy of some of the principal allied field commanders – MacArthur, Patton, and Montgomery – he remarks:

“Squabbling schoolgirls could hardly have been as petty and bitchy as these senior Allied commanders.”

Fortunately for our side, as he goes on to say:

“...the German and Russian generals seem to have been just as vain, ambitious, backbiting and political as the British and American ones.” [A. Roberts, *The Storm of War*, 305]

But it is the same in every walk of life. Jealousy, the desire for superiority, the hatred of the more capable, the hunger and thirst for recognition drives the academic world as well. Only a few academics are as honest as the late mathematician R.L. Moore, who admitted, “I'd rather a theorem not be thought of than I not be the one who thinks of it.” [P. Hoffman, *The Man who Loved Only Numbers*, 41]

But if eternity beckons, how deadly this becomes, this pride that rules a human heart! How can a proud heart rejoice in the glory of God? How can it receive the truth of the gospel: the fall of man into sin, his helplessness and hopelessness apart from Jesus Christ? How can a proud heart come to the cross of Jesus Christ? How can a proud heart spend its days seeking forgiveness for its sins, which the Bible says, will not be given if it is not sought? What does the Scripture say? “*In his pride* the wicked does not seek [God]; in his all his thoughts there is no room for God.” [Psalm 10:4]

What this chapter makes unmistakably clear – in v. 17, in v. 25, in v. 27, and then in Nebuchadnezzar's own reflections on his experience – is that Nebuchadnezzar *had to be brought low* to cure him of his pride. He had been given a dream, a warning, but that was not enough. A year passed and the king was as much a peacock as he had ever been before, and was no doubt oppressing people as he had always done before, thinking himself above any obligation to consider others as important as himself. And then, *wham!* He found himself eating grass, wandering his lawns, and perhaps wondering why no one wanted to be seen with him any longer. Absent the blessing of God – Daniel's God! – he was lost, powerless, hideous, no doubt the butt of many jokes told behind his back by people who never imagined that this pathetic creature would one day be restored to power.

The lesson of the chapter is not stated in these terms to be sure. Daniel doesn't define the meaning of the dream and Nebuchadnezzar does not interpret his experience in just that way. What both men say – what Daniel says at the outset and Nebuchadnezzar at the end – is that God is in control, that the king is not; that the king lives and reigns at the pleasure of God. But, you

see, it amounts to the same thing. To say that God is very great – the lesson the king learned the hard way – is to say that we are not. To say that God is in control is to say that we are not. To say that God does what he pleases in heaven and on earth is to say that we are utterly dependent upon his pleasure, that he will do with us whatever he pleases and there is nothing we can do to stop it. And the honest and serious recognition of that fact *is* humility in the Bible and leads to a host of inevitable consequences. For example, we can no longer treat others as beneath us or unworthy of our regard because to do so would be to demonstrate that we really don't understand our place before God. More than that, if we really believe that God is very great and is in absolute control of everything, including our own life, then we will accept that we are obliged to do his will, to honor him with our lives, and to seek his approval. Loving others is what he commands and if we believe what Nebuchadnezzar came to believe about God, that is what we will do. We will do it and we will like doing it because by this means, and only by this means, do we find our rightful place in God's world; only in this way are we, in fact, living *in the real world*. The very worst thing about pride is its deception; it fosters a view of ourselves that is deeply and fatally *untrue*.

This is precisely why the sight of God in his greatness, his sovereignty, and his power is the death of pride. When once his eyes are lifted to God *as he actually is* – not as Nebuchadnezzar imagined Marduk to be, but as the living God really is – the proud man recovers his reason, he is restored to a sound mind. Most people don't have sound minds. The people we rub shoulders with everyday are living in some state of insanity. They might not be eating grass, but they are still living in a fantasy world – a world of their own imagination – not in the world that actually exists. This is what people desperately need to learn: the world they imagine themselves to be in – the world that accommodates their pride and their self-centeredness – *is not in fact the world that actually exists!*

The end of pride is the sight of the living God. So is the end of oppression, of the alienation of human beings from one another, and of human cruelty. So, how should Christians like you and like me, apply this truth to our lives? *We don't deny anything in this chapter*. We understand it. We know why God did what he did to Nebuchadnezzar and we agree that it should have been done. We love the effect it had on the king and we know we ought to think and say about God what he thought and what he said when he recovered his reason. We know that God is impossibly great and glorious and we know that our pride – the self-love and selfishness we struggle with in a hundred ways every day – is both stupid – for its dishonesty – and harmful – for the debilitating effect it has: displacing both God and others in our hearts.

But how are we to attack our pride in the ordinary course of daily life. Knowing what we know has not killed it; it is still our greatest struggle as Christians to live in true humility before God and man. Well, take heart from the lesson of the chapter. Nebuchadnezzar had to take his eyes off himself. It was not until he did so that he really saw God for who he is.

God forbid that any of us would have to be sent into the fields to eat grass in order to focus our attention on God rather than on ourselves. So how do we lift our eyes upward to God? Well, given the account before us, surely one thing – the same thing that Nebuchadnezzar was forced to do – *is to take our eyes, on purpose, to take them off ourselves*. The masters of the Christian life have always recommended this. Before our attention can go to another, to God or to other

people, it has to be removed from ourselves. You need to make a habit of removing your attention from yourself. You need to do that on purpose. How do we do that? Well, listen.

1. Charles Simeon: "Talk not about myself."
2. Thomas á Kempis: "Desire to be unknown."
3. Jeremy Taylor: "Teach me to love to be concealed."

Turn that wise advice into action. Shut up about yourself. Retire into the group instead of pushing yourself forward. And what will help me want to do that? To remember that the King of Kings, who had every right to glory in himself and his accomplishments, humbled himself, traveled downward a very great distance, *for you and for your salvation!* He was willing to be concealed. He was willing for people to think him much, much smaller than he actually was. Humility – which is the true understanding of one's place as a creature and a sinner before the living God – is a beautiful thing, a wonderful thing, a life-giving thing. It is so much so that, as one Scottish divine put it:

"There is not one humble heart in all the world that the High God is not dwelling in." [A. Moody Stuart, *Memoir*, 247]

More than that, there is a pleasure and a freedom in humility that can be found in nothing else. In Henry Scougal's masterpiece *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* you find this.

"[This grace] of humility is accompanied with a great deal of happiness and tranquility: the proud and arrogant person is a trouble to all that converse with him, but most of all to himself: everything is enough to vex him; but scarce anything sufficient to content and please him. He is ready to quarrel with everything that falls out; as if he himself were such a considerable person that God Almighty should do everything to gratify him, and all the creatures of heaven and earth should wait upon him, and obey his will. ...but the humble person has the advantage...that none can think more meanly of him than he does of himself and therefore he is not troubled but can easily bear the reproaches which would wound the other to the soul." [81]

And remember this: the Lord Jesus, who humbled himself even when he did not have to, who humbled himself *for you*, was then exalted to the highest place. The truly humble will someday stand on a palace roof and take far greater pleasure in all that lies before them than Nebuchadnezzar ever did, because he or she will know that all of this beauty, all of this magnificence, is the gift of God's love and that it can never be lost.