

Daniel 4:1-37 Pride comes before a fall

Introduction

What will it take for you or me to do what God wants us to do? If you have yet to come to faith what kind of intervention by God will be necessary before you are willing to entrust your life to Him? As a Christian have you been distracted from God's plans for your life or become cold in your love for Him through some circumstances of life that may be good or difficult experiences? Has God spoken in the past about something –to which you assented, but failed to put it into practice as you should have done? God will not tolerate the divided loyalties of His people. Joshua's words in his final address to the Israelites in Joshua 24:15 are applicable for every Christian in all generations prior to Jesus' return. *But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.* There is always an easier way and a harder way to live for the Lord in terms of our obedience to Him. However, the pathway of obedience may at a human level involve greater sacrifices materially and in some countries have a significant cost with respect to our liberty or even our lives. In the events summarised in Daniel chapter four the grace of God is incredibly evident towards this pagan king. God gives him personal advance notice of the consequences of potential misconduct in the conducting of his affairs through Daniel. The problem, though, is that with this privilege comes responsibility. He has no excuse for not taking heed to God's message for him. Likewise as God's people we are privileged in our access to God's word so we cannot say that we are ignorant of the principles by which we ought to live our lives. We know in our minds how we ought to behave and so are more accountable to the Lord for our choices than someone who has never professed faith in Jesus. Nebuchadnezzar was not a believer in the God of Israel. He was at the height of his prosperity and at ease in his luxurious palace and his splendid hanging gardens. The man who feared for the future of his reign when disturbed by a dream (Daniel 2) had long since felt assured that the future was only good and prosperous for him.

1. The reluctance Nebuchadnezzar displayed (Daniel 4:4-9)

(a) The tragedy of prosperity (Daniel 4:4) *I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at home in my palace, contented and prosperous.* Prosperity had caused more harm to his spiritual wellbeing than adversity. It can be the same for some Christians whose love for God and zeal for His cause is greatly diminished when their confidence grows in themselves leading them to take their eyes off Him. Paul writing to his young protégé Timothy in I Timothy 6:6-10 said this: *But godliness with contentment is great gain.⁷ For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.⁸ But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.⁹ Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.* There are a minority of people who are unaffected by material wealth but it takes a person with strong convictions not to allow materialism to suffocate our stand for biblical principles. One of the strongest churches in the late first century AD was at Laodicea in western Turkey. It was a financial district of wealthy people like the City of London or having a reputation like Morningside in Edinburgh for great wealth. The church there was large and its finances were substantial, but it would have gone unnoticed in a city where the majority of its citizens had a life of ease. Yet in Revelation 3: 14-22 Jesus gave this assessment of that congregation. *These*

are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation.¹⁵ I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other!¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth.¹⁷ You say, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing." But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so that you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so that you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so that you can see.¹⁹ Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent.²⁰ Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.²¹ To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne.²² Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. In the western world we have great material blessings and comforts. May the Lord help us never to lose our passion for His work and His glory through ease in our surroundings.

(b) **The tragedy of spiritual blindness** (Daniel 4:5-9) *I had a dream that made me afraid. As I was lying in bed, the images and visions that passed through my mind terrified me.*⁶ *So I commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be brought before me to interpret the dream for me.*⁷ *When the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners came, I told them the dream, but they could not interpret it for me.*⁸ *Finally, Daniel came into my presence and I told him the dream. (He is called Belteshazzar, after the name of my god, and the spirit of the holy gods is in him.)*⁹ *I said, 'Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you, and no mystery is too difficult for you. Here is my dream; interpret it for me...* In the Middle East and North Africa a far greater weight is placed on the meaning of dreams and unusual phenomena experienced by individuals even to this day. There are many accounts of Muslims coming to place their faith in Jesus as a result of encountering Him through a dream, despite never having met a single Christian. God does wish His people to use all appropriate means to share the good news of the Gospel but He is not restricted to using us. For this Iraqi ruler dreams appeared to be the key way to make him stop and think about his life. The challenge comes home to you and me- if God wants to speak to us and we are not listening what would He need to do to obtain our full attention and subsequent obedience? It is well worth asking the question.

Who was it that failed to tell Nebuchadnezzar what his dream had been and as a result didn't have a clue about its possible interpretation? Daniel 2:1 reminds us: *In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind was troubled and he could not sleep.*² *So the king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed...* They all duly showed up as they had to! But what happened, could they help him? Certainly not! *The astrologers answered the king, 'There is no one on earth who can do what the king asks! No king, however great and mighty, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or astrologer.*¹¹ ***What the king asks is too difficult.*** *No one can reveal it to the king except the gods* (Daniel 2:10-11). Fast forward a decade or two what happens next? Daniel 4: 5-7: ⁵ *I had a dream that made me afraid. As I was lying in bed, the images and visions that passed through my mind terrified me.*⁶ ***So I commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be brought before me to interpret the dream for me.***⁷ ***When the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners came, I told them the dream, but they could not interpret it for me.*** One might delicately want to ask why he did not ask Daniel. There is a very real possibility that it was because of the answer Daniel would give. The so-called wise men would say whatever they thought he wanted them to say and usually were rewarded handsomely for it. However, Daniel was under a higher authority and reported to Nebuchadnezzar what he thought God wanted him to say. If there had been any genuine conviction of his sin by the Holy Spirit then this backslidden man was deliberately hardening his heart to avoid hearing from God words that he might not have wanted to hear! We must be careful not to over-interpret the passage to make suggestions that go beyond its contents, but it appears to point towards the fact that Nebuchadnezzar wished to avoid hearing from God so that his spiritual comfort was not disturbed. Some times God

allows His people to be tested or persecuted so that they remain or become much closer to Him. Eventually, there was no choice because his officials had claimed that they couldn't interpret this dream for him. Daniel 4:8 states so powerfully and so simply: ***Finally, Daniel came into my presence and I told him the dream.*** It was an 'anyone but Daniel' scenario because he will tell me things I don't want to face. Saddam Hussein in Iraq had a ruling Council who told him exactly what he wanted to hear with one exception. There was a very senior air-force commander, General Georges Sada, a Christian whose particular role was in private to tell Saddam what he needed to hear even if he didn't like it. Twice in his biography this man feared for his life, but he was too valuable because he could be trusted to say what he believed was the truth (Georges Sada & Jim Black, *Saddam's Secrets* 2006). Daniel had this important role in Babylon. What a complement Nebuchadnezzar paid to Daniel here in Daniel 4:9! ***I said, 'Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you, and no mystery is too difficult for you. Here is my dream; interpret it for me...'*** Well Daniel and us would rightly take issue with the plurality of deity reference, but apart from that it was a wonderful statement that this pagan ruler had seen that the Holy Spirit was working in and through Daniel enabling him to do things that other gifted officials in his employment could not do. How do your work colleagues view you? How do your non-Christian friends speak of you in your absence? It is not the sort of question we can ask, but the answer would be most revealing. May we pray that their perception of us is as people of integrity who can be relied upon to speak the truth as we understand it and who will be consistent in the views we proclaim both in people's presence and in their absence.

2. **The revelation Nebuchadnezzar received** (Daniel 4:10-18)

(a) **A picture of extraordinary power and prosperity** (Daniel 4:10-12) ¹⁰ *These are the visions I saw while lying in bed: I looked, and there before me stood a tree in the middle of the land. Its height was enormous. ¹¹ The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky; it was visible to the ends of the earth. ¹² Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it the wild animals found shelter, and the birds lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed.*

Nebuchadnezzar had erected a monument years earlier to represent his greatness. In this dream he is represented by this substantial tree that dominates the landscape. Most of us at one time or another have stood in a forest looking up at a magnificent specimen of a tree. If they are really tall it is difficult to hold your head back far enough to see its top. But you can have a sense of the proportions of such a large tree and its impact on its immediate environment. On the surface nothing was out of place or looked likely to be so. But as we know from the weather one day the sky might be completely blue with the sun shining and the next overshadowed with cloud and rain. Life too can be like that. In my home area in the north of England in the 1960s there was an outstanding young Christian businessman Eddie Brewer. His business acumen was noted and the prosperity of his company was admired. Yet his passion was not business but evangelism. He was a much sought after speaker who earnestly pleaded with his hearers to trust Jesus and have eternal life and avoid an eternity in hell separated from Him. Many lives were touched by his powerful preaching. However, one day an out of control lorry crossed the road crashing into his car and killing him instantly at the age of twenty-nine. Eddie was known for making every moment count and probably accomplished more in his short life for the Lord than many a Christian does in a life of more than double that length. All of us need to live with the realisation that one day our life will end. Are you ready to meet your maker? Are you ready to put your faith and trust in Him while you still have the opportunity? Nebuchadnezzar had foolishly delayed such a decision and had come dangerously close to missing out altogether. Foolishly he was lulled into a false sense of security in his life here on earth. It will not go on forever. For all of us we must be thankful and appreciative for the blessings we possess and not take them for granted. Is there

anyone here who in recent days has forgotten, consciously, to retain a spirit of appreciation to God and to other people for all they do for us?

(b) **A picture of severe judgement and humiliation** (Daniel 4:13-16)¹³ *In the visions I saw while lying in bed, I looked, and there before me was a holy one, a messenger, coming down from heaven.*¹⁴ *He called in a loud voice: "Cut down the tree and trim off its branches; strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the animals flee from under it and the birds from its branches."*¹⁵ *But let the stump and its roots, bound with iron and bronze, remain in the ground, in the grass of the field. "Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, and let him live with the animals among the plants of the earth."*¹⁶ *Let his mind be changed from that of a man and let him be given the mind of an animal, till seven times pass by for him.* What has happened here? In the light of modern medical knowledge Nebuchadnezzar was suffering from an acute bout of mental illness which in the days before medical intervention was possible must have been terrifying both for the individual and their family and friends. The medical condition in question in which a human being thinks they are a particular animal and acts accordingly could last for a matter of months or as in this case an unknown number of years. The vast majority of sufferers in time regained all their faculties and are able to regain their place in society. In the present day medical intervention techniques would enable such a patient to regain their equilibrium a lot quicker. Nebuchadnezzar had thought that everything was under his control! No-one can make such a claim. Each day is a new gift from God. Do I need to have a consciousness of the valuable ness of time and the nearness of eternity? Do I need to grasp the significance of doing what I can now for the Lord because in the next phase of my life when I thought I might be less busy or have more opportunities to do things for God might turn out very different to what I had planned? The ruler of the greatest empire of the day being looked after like a cow or sheep in the field or watched over like the family pet dog in the park!

(c) **A predicament that required an explanation** (Daniel 4:17-18)¹⁷ *"The decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone He wishes and sets over them the lowliest of people."*¹⁸ *'This is the dream that I, King Nebuchadnezzar, had. Now, Belteshazzar, tell me what it means, for none of the wise men in my kingdom can interpret it for me. But you can, because the spirit of the holy gods is in you.'* Unlike the vast majority of situations in our own lives and those of the majority of people in every generation Nebuchadnezzar is given a very clear explanation of 'why' this event had been allowed to happen. God will do what is necessary to get our attention. What might he need to do to get your attention today? Here was a ruler in his magnificent palatial home containing fifteen million bricks stamped with his name and royal titles. There were six walls and a 262 foot moat. Nebuchadnezzar had forgotten that 'all the bricks were made of mud. He had also forgotten the affirmation made at his accession that all he possessed came from one deity. He had not remembered that his father had represented himself on a monument as: 'the son of nobody', helpless without the aid of his god. He had also failed to notice that two streets below him were called: 'Bow Down Proud One' and 'May the arrogant not flourish'. He also may not have recalled that one of the names of his palace was: 'The place where Proud Ones are compelled to submit' (Paul Ferguson, 'Nebuchadnezzar, Gilgamesh and the 'Babylonians Job', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 37.3 (1994), p. 321). In our lives if we fail to give God His place then He will do what is necessary to get our full attention. However, the message to this monarch was crystal-clear and it appears that it did get through to him. How long though would its impact last? What about you and me? The siren voices enticing us away from God are all around us. But we must take our stand and seek to honour the Lord and give Him first place in our lives.

3. **The response Daniel declared** (Daniel 4:19-27)

(a) **His compassion and pastoral sympathy** (Daniel 4:19a) *Then Daniel (also called Belteshazzar) was greatly perplexed for a time, and his thoughts terrified him. So the king said,*

'Belteshazzar, do not let the dream or its meaning alarm you.' This is a delicate pastoral setting for Daniel. By now the old monarch has a great respect for him and although he may choose to ignore Daniel for a while, this said more about his guilty conscience regarding the claims of the God of Daniel on his life. The wisdom of Daniel here is apt. He took his time in giving an answer. To often today we are afraid of silence! We have to fill it with noise of some kind or other. Background noise has become so common that there are shops that would feel quite odd if you were to walk around them without music or radio or some shop staff member offering some form of promotion on the loud-speaker system.

Daniel's face gave away what he was thinking. Some of us struggle to hide what we are thinking at times. This fact must have made it worse for Nebuchadnezzar. Just imagine you were waiting for some medical test results. You are ushered into a room with a consultant who opens an envelope with a message for him containing your tests or operation results. If his face drops and goes rather pale, it is safe to infer that it is not good news! Daniel would tell Nebuchadnezzar exactly what God had revealed but he took time before speaking to compose himself and think out what words he would use to convey God's message. In our love for one another in our church family we also need to choose our words carefully in our conversations, to help build others up in the faith; offering encouragement to the discouraged, but also bringing God's love and grace in liberal quantities into each and every setting. We must convey clearly and with absolute sincerity to people that we love them in His name and for His sake. We demonstrate our interest by our pastoral input into their lives. We won't always know what to say, but on occasions just being there is sufficient so that they see that we care.

(b) **His courage in witnessing** (Daniel 4:19b-27) (i) **The explanation** *Belteshazzar answered, 'My lord, if only the dream applied to your enemies and its meaning to your adversaries! ²⁰ The tree you saw, which grew large and strong, with its top touching the sky, visible to the whole earth, ²¹ with beautiful leaves and abundant fruit, providing food for all, giving shelter to the wild animals, and having nesting places in its branches for the birds – ²² Your Majesty, you are that tree! You have become great and strong; your greatness has grown until it reaches the sky, and your dominion extends to distant parts of the earth. ²³ 'Your Majesty saw a holy one, a messenger, coming down from heaven and saying, "Cut down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump, bound with iron and bronze, in the grass of the field, while its roots remain in the ground. Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven; let him live with the wild animals, until seven times pass by for him." ²⁴ 'This is the interpretation, Your Majesty, and this is the decree the Most High has issued against my lord the king: ²⁵ you will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone He wishes. ²⁶ The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules. Praise God that Daniel was willing to pass on this most uncomfortable explanation to Nebuchadnezzar. It is possible that his wise men did guess what this dream meant but like Pharaoh's experts who declined to predict the years of famine in the time of Joseph, they took the easy option by declining to give an explanation. Genesis 41:8 records: *In the morning his mind was troubled, so he sent for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but no one could interpret them for him.* Daniel did not neglect to declare what was plain but also was equally careful not to go beyond what his first hearers and then readers could take in. May the Lord help us in our witness to be clear with our words and consistent in our actions to the glory of God.*

(ii) **The appeal** (Daniel 4:27)²⁷ *Therefore, Your Majesty, be pleased to accept my advice: renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue.'* Decades of honourable service and an exemplary track record of speaking the truth courageously to this dictator had allowed Daniel as an older man

to earn the right to say what no-one else in the Babylonian Empire would have dared to say-or dare to say and have any chance of surviving the experience. The elderly ruler needed Daniel to help him see exactly where he stood. Daniel was the best friend he could have at that time. In our 'instant' culture we forget that most things take time –more than we have allowed, for example, for people to come to faith; for lives to be transformed through personal witness and for churches to be planted or a significant impact made on a wider community. Daniel's impact has to be measured over the long-term and ours too will be most effective on such a timescale.

4. The results Nebuchadnezzar experienced (Daniel 4:1-3; 28-37)

(a) **Judgement** (Daniel 4:28-33) *All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar.* ²⁹ *Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon,* ³⁰ *he said, 'Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?'* ³¹ *Even as the words were on his lips, a voice came from heaven, 'This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: your royal authority has been taken from you.* ³² *You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes.'* ³³ *Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like the ox. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird. God has been incredibly generous in giving a warning but within a year it had been forgotten. Judgement was swifter because he had no excuse.*

(b) **Mercy** (Daniel 4:34-36)³⁴ *At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes towards heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honoured and glorified him who lives for ever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation.* ³⁵ *All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: 'What have you done?'* ³⁶ *At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honour and splendour were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisors and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before. God does not treat us as we deserve. His grace truly is amazing. The question is this: how closely am I reflecting his graciousness to other people who make mistakes or am I closer to the unforgiving servant Jesus describes in His story in Matthew 18:21-35). The lesson Jesus gave there was unmistakable. *This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart'* (Matthew 18:35). Do I need to be reminded afresh of these words?*

(c) **Gratitude to God** (Daniel 4:37, 1-3)³⁷ *Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything He does is right and all his ways are just. **And those who walk in pride He is able to humble.** King Nebuchadnezzar, To the nations and peoples of every language, who live in all the earth: May you prosper greatly!* ² *It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me.* ³ *How great are His signs, how mighty His wonders! His kingdom is an eternal kingdom; His dominion endures from generation to generation...Did he finally come to faith? I hope so! May each of us in our witness be patient and persistent over the longer term, with the expectation of the conversion of others, to the glory of God, for Jesus' sake, Amen.*