

“The Most High Rules the Kingdom of Men”

The Eighth in a Series of Sermons on the Book of Daniel

Daniel 4:1-18; Matthew 13:31-35

In Daniel chapter 4, we are given remarkable insight into a man who has played a key role in Daniel’s prophecy—the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. In each of the three chapters of Daniel we have covered so far, Nebuchadnezzar has exerted his royal power and authority, demonstrated his hot temper and tyrannical nature, while championing the “gods of Babylon.” We have also seen that both his “gods” and his Chaldeans (the wise men and court magicians) repeatedly failed to give the king what he needed. The great king was even forced to seek help from one of his young Hebrew servants to interpret a troubling dream—which he will do yet again in chapter 4. YHWH has clearly won the battle with the idols of Babylon. Through all of this, it has become clear that YHWH is sovereign over all things, a fact which Nebuchadnezzar has been forced to admit repeatedly when neither his idols nor his Chaldeans could help him, and then again in chapter 3 when Nebuchadnezzar personally witnessed three Hebrew officials (who were friends of Daniel) survive being thrown into a super-heated fiery furnace with the aid of a mysterious fourth man (the pre-incarnate Christ, or an angel of the Lord).

In Daniel chapter 4 everything has changed. Much time has passed and Nebuchadnezzar is a different man. But Nebuchadnezzar has yet another dream which Daniel must interpret for him—only this dream comes much later in the king’s career, toward the end his life. In this chapter—filled with remarkable contrasts and ironies—we read of a king whose days as a cruel tyrant seem to be past. We find a man who greatly enjoys the creature comforts accrued after a long career as ruler of a great empire. Daniel’s report almost makes us feel sorry for Nebuchadnezzar as the pagan king is forced to wrestle with the fact that YHWH is the sovereign Lord, who rules the affairs of men and nations, and of whom Nebuchadnezzar will affirm, *“how great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation.”*

We also learn in this chapter that Nebuchadnezzar has yet another dream which must be interpreted by Daniel after we read again of the inability of the king’s court magicians to do so. We also learn (in vv. 28-33), that at some point during this period of his life, the great king experiences what used to be described as a “nervous breakdown.” This complete mental and emotional unraveling causes the king to flee his palace and his capital city to live among wild animals, while eating grass and becoming almost unrecognizable in appearance. Chapter four ends with Nebuchadnezzar regaining his sanity and affirming YHWH’s greatness, but not making a credible profession of faith.

On the one hand, this is a fascinating story as we witness such a mighty and cruel man come to the brink of faith, then instead fall into madness, only to be restored unto sanity. On the other hand, Nebuchadnezzar’s inner-struggles are revealed by Daniel to serve as a powerful reminder to the Jewish exiles then living under Nebuchadnezzar’s rule in Babylon (those who are the initial recipients of Daniel’s prophecy), that no human king is truly sovereign over the dealings of men and nations—only YHWH is. Kings rule only as YHWH allows them. YHWH can and will protect his people, even as they suffer under a tyrant’s rule, Daniel and his three friends being the proof.

Daniel’s message to the exiles is that YHWH chose to give this particular kingdom to this man at this time and place—YHWH even forces Nebuchadnezzar to realize that fact. But YHWH can just as easily give Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom to another—as we will see with the fall of Babylon to the Persians,

shortly before the end of Daniel's life. YHWH is Nebuchadnezzar's Lord. YHWH is the one who ultimately determines the fate of the Jewish exiles. Through his prophets YHWH has revealed to the exiles in Babylon that one day their exile will come to an end, and YHWH's people will return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city and its temple. Nebuchadnezzar cannot stop this, and in this chapter we are given a glimpse into why this is the case. The great king is a mere man, with a great many problems, fears, and weaknesses of his own.

As the fourth chapter of Daniel unfolds, we see the sharp contrast between Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom and Christ's. The Babylonian empire under Nebuchadnezzar's rule is mighty, powerful, and fearsome by human standards, yet is puny, weak, and pitiful when considered in the light of Christ's kingdom. Nebuchadnezzar's rule and kingdom will come to an end as foretold in the vision of the metallic statue in chapter 2. Yet not all the kingdoms of this world combined can defeat the kingdom of Jesus Christ, which, as we have seen, conquers not with the sword, but with the gospel. Jesus Christ's kingdom is a heavenly kingdom, which explains why earthly kingdoms and worldly power cannot contain it. This is the lesson the king is beginning to learn.

We turn our attention to Daniel 4, which recounts the 4th and final incident in the Book of Daniel from the life of Nebuchadnezzar. As is the case with Daniel 2, this passage is also a single literary unit and best covered in one sitting. But the tyranny of time does not allow us to do this with any degree of depth, so we will spend several weeks going through this chapter, precisely because it is so rich in historical, theological, and psychological insights. To hurry through the entire chapter in one sermon, just hitting the high points will cause us to miss much. So, we will turn our attention to the setting and background of chapter (toward the end of Nebuchadnezzar's reign), then take up Nebuchadnezzar's ascription of praise to YHWH (vv. 1-3), before turning to the king's second disturbing dream (vv. 4-18).

The theme of God's sovereignty over all things has been made clear by Daniel from the opening verses of his prophecy which recount Daniel's capture and forced indoctrination into the ways of the Babylonian court and its pagan religion. Daniel and his three friends actually thrived while under Babylonian control, even as they subversively resisted all attempts to convert them into pagans. In chapter 2, we saw YHWH give the king a dream which troubled Nebuchadnezzar greatly, yet which neither he nor his court magicians could interpret. Only Daniel could—since Daniel had been given the dream as well as its interpretation by YHWH. Then, in chapter 3, we saw YHWH's power in preserving Daniel's three friends (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) who refused to bow and worship the king's golden statue. In chapter 4, God reveals his power over Babylon and king Nebuchadnezzar, also revealing himself to the king, so that the pagan tyrant, now mellowed with age and illness, acknowledges YHWH as “the king of heaven” in the closing verse of the chapter. The change in this man is dramatic, but not necessarily the sign of conversion from a pagan polytheist into a worshiper of the true and living God.

The historical setting for chapter 4 is important because these events occur well after the scene in chapter 3 (which can be dated about December 594-January 593 BC). This material recounts events much closer to the end of the king's life than previous chapters. Daniel 4 recounts a time when Nebuchadnezzar is at home in his palace, while, as he puts it, was “*at ease and prospering*” (v. 4). One year later (vv. 26-29), the king is stricken with a loss of sanity for a period of “seven times,” often interpreted as seven years, but which is much more likely referring to a time of completeness (symbolized by the number 7), i.e., the time it takes the king to acknowledge YHWH's sovereignty over all things and then regain his sanity.¹

¹ Steinmann, Daniel, 236-237.

The historical record enables us to follow Nebuchadnezzar's subsequent career after the construction and erection of the gold statue in chapter 3. We know from Babylonian sources that Nebuchadnezzar's tenth year of his rule was 594 BC. He then laid siege to Jerusalem in 589-587, finally sacking the city and destroying the temple in 587. His motivation was likely the king's realization that the vassal king of Judah (Zedekiah), had made an alliance with other nations against Nebuchadnezzar. So, whatever acknowledgments Nebuchadnezzar made previously regarding YHWH in the first three chapters of Daniel did not prevent him from destroying YHWH's temple in Jerusalem.²

Next, the king laid siege for thirteen years to the coastal city of Tyre (from 586-573), he engaged in a battle in Egypt in 568/567 so as to crush another revolt by a vassal state subject to the Babylonian empire. We do know that Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC. So, if this chapter depicts a time at least one year prior to the king's death in 562, one possible time frame for the chapter is somewhere between 573-569, with Nebuchadnezzar in Egypt in 568/67 well enough to lead his troops being an indication that he had regained his health and sanity.³ No official Babylonian records mention the king's illness (official state records end in 594 BC—about the time the king built his statue), but there are other accounts of Nebuchadnezzar's illness and recovery which have come down to us in the form of tradition and legend. One Christian writer (Eusebius of Caesarea) recounts a Babylonian tradition that Nebuchadnezzar cried out from the roof of his palace that great misfortune was about to befall his people (a Persian victory). The Jewish historian Josephus cites a similar legend to the effect that the king was felled by a mysterious illness and died in his 43rd year of rule.⁴ So, while not ironclad as we would like, there is some external evidence to the effect that Nebuchadnezzar did have some sort of serious mental illness late in his career.

Why does this matter to us? The tyrannical king who played such a terrible role in Israel's history (equivalent to that of Pharaoh's role in the mistreatment of the Jews and then in the Passover/Exodus), who took Daniel and other Hebrew royals into exile, the same man who destroyed the city of Jerusalem and YHWH's temple, and who took most of the population of Judah into exile into Babylon in 587, was a mere mortal, brought to his knees by YHWH's mighty hand, his life and his empire now heading to their inevitable ends. Although the king was repeatedly forced to acknowledge YHWH's power and rule as superior to his own, he was eventually pushed to despair by this knowledge. He was then restored to sanity by the same living God who had revealed himself to the king so many times.

Although Nebuchadnezzar does not come to saving faith in YHWH's covenant promise to save sinners from sin and death, he nevertheless gives praise to the "King of heaven" in the latter years of his life. This entire chapter serves to remind the Jewish exiles in Babylon that Nebuchadnezzar and his empire (the golden head of the statue the king has seen in his dream) was used by God to bring judgment upon disobedient Israel, yet Nebuchadnezzar himself could not stop thwart YHWH's promise to allow the exiles to return home—as the prophets foretold. The great king is nothing before the sovereign God. No earthly king, president, tyrant, or dictator is—an obvious point of application for us today. The exiles need to be reminded of this so that they continue to hope that they will return to the land of promise to rebuild. This chapter serves that purpose, while reminding us of the same wonderful fact—no political figure, even one as powerful as Nebuchadnezzar, can keep God's covenant promises from being realized and fulfilled

² Steinmann, Daniel, 207-208.

³ Steinmann, Daniel, 208.

⁴ Baldwin, Daniel, 120-121.

in the lives of his people.

With the historical setting before us, we turn now to our text, the first three verses which present us with a challenge we will find throughout the balance of the chapter. The verses read as follows. “*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.*” It is rather startling to realize that Nebuchadnezzar himself is speaking to us in the first person throughout this entire chapter, with several brief sections inserted which are Daniel’s commentary on the situation.

But this is Nebuchadnezzar’s testimony to his people. The prophet Daniel skillfully takes a letter from the king, which reveals a great deal about otherwise unknown details of the king’s perspective, and then carefully incorporates it into his prophecy (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit). The king’s affirmations about YHWH, and regarding his mental breakdown come from the king himself. A similar style is found in Ezra-Nehemiah (the incorporation of letters from others directly into the text).⁵ Since most of the material we find in this chapter comes from Nebuchadnezzar’s own testimony, we gain profound insight into the king’s thinking. Furthermore, the Babylonians kings who come after Nebuchadnezzar cannot accuse Daniel of making this material up to slander the king’s reputation.

The first three verses take the form of a letter from the king to the hearer, identified as “*all peoples, nations, and languages*” who dwell upon the earth. It is Nebuchadnezzar’s desire *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.* Apparently recalling his two dreams (the second of which we will take up momentarily), Nebuchadnezzar knows that his rule will end at some point. Depending upon when this chapter was written, Nebuchadnezzar has been king at least 30 years, likely closer to 40. He cannot lead his armies as he used to do, and he is living comfortably as we would expect that a man of his age and stature would.

Nebuchadnezzar had personally witnessed YHWH’s mighty signs and wonders—YHWH has preserved Daniel and his three friends from death on several occasions. YHWH has given the king his first dream and then sent Daniel to interpret it. YHWH has witnessed the three men survive the fiery furnace. Nebuchadnezzar is finally convinced that YHWH’s kingdom is eternal and will endure long after the king is dead and gone. By then, the Persians were already inflicting significant defeats upon the Babylonian armies at the fringes of the empire, and taking much territory. Even with the seeds of destruction beginning to bear fruit, Nebuchadnezzar’s own kingdom is still very great in his eyes—as indicated in his address to “*all that dwell upon the earth.*” Yet, the king is beginning to understand that YHWH’s kingdom is both different from his (since YHWH is the God of heaven), and eternal, (since YHWH’s kingdom alone is without end).

In verse 4, we the king is currently enjoying the fruits of his success, which points us to conclude that this takes place after his major military campaigns during a time of relative peace. “*I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and prospering in my palace.*” From the resume of battles and conquests we recounted previously, the king is obvious self-satisfied with his accomplishments and with all the perks he enjoys. But once again, YHWH gives the king a dream, which causes him great fear, yet a different

⁵ Goldingay, Daniel, 82.

kind of fear than he had experienced previously. He tells us, *“I saw a dream that made me afraid. As I lay in bed the fancies and the visions of my head alarmed me.”* The king’s life of ease and the feeling of smug self-satisfaction from his accomplishments was about to leave him. *“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.”* The king had tried this once before. Then as now, it did not work.

According to verse 7, *“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.”* Since it was YHWH who gave the king this dream, only a prophet of YHWH was capable of interpreting the dream’s meaning (vv. 8-9). It is important we notice that Daniel does not join with the pagans in their failed efforts to interpret the dream, but he waits until after their folly had once again been exposed to the king before making his entrance. *“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.”* Daniel appears before the king only once it becomes clear that the Chaldeans are stumped, and have nothing to offer the king to calm his fears.

At this point we are reminded that just as was the case of his friends, Daniel too had been given a pagan name (Belteshazzar), in honor of the king’s god, Bel (or Marduk). As we saw back in verse 7 of the first chapter, *“the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.”* When speaking, Nebuchadnezzar refers to Daniel by his Babylonian name, yet whenever he is speaking, Daniel uses his Hebrew name. What is truly remarkable in all of this is that Nebuchadnezzar acknowledges that *“the spirit of the holy gods is in”* Daniel, meaning that the king acknowledges YHWH as one of the gods, perhaps the most powerful, since YHWH enables Daniel to understand mysteries (such as dreams) which none of the Babylonian court magicians can.

This is a loud and profound echo here from Genesis 41:38-40, where we read these words of Pharaoh about Joseph. *“And Pharaoh said to his servants, ‘Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?’ Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command. Only as regards the throne will I be greater than you.’”* The great Pharaoh of Egypt admits that Joseph possesses the Spirit of YHWH, just as Nebuchadnezzar does of Daniel. Daniel’s point is that just as YHWH protected his people Israel while they were held captive in Egypt, so too, God will protect those Israelites then in exile in Babylon. One day, they too will leave their captivity in a great Exodus back to the promised land. On a personal level, just as Joseph prospered while in Egypt and was used by YHWH to protect his people, so too Daniel has prospered while in the Babylonian court. He too will be used of YHWH to protect his people (Israel) from the wrath of the king.⁶

The comparison of Joseph with Daniel does not stop with the new Exodus and the protection of YHWH’s people, but is evident in both Daniel’s and Joseph’s function as interpreters of the dreams of the two dreaded pagan royals who held God’s people in captivity. Joseph told Pharaoh that seven years of famine were coming (Genesis 41), while Daniel speaks of the “seven period of times” during which God will judge Nebuchadnezzar (v. 16). This serves the purpose of reminding the exiles in Babylon that just

⁶ Steinmann, Daniel, 232-233.

as God was in control of all things during Israel's time in Egypt, so too YHWH is watching over his people in exile. Just as God raised up Joseph, so too God has raised up Daniel.

In verses 10 and following, Nebuchadnezzar describes his dream. He recounts seeing a tree, a very common metaphor for nations and their influence over all those within their sphere of influence (its subjects are within its shade and branches). *"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."* Nebuchadnezzar's tree, we should note, reached toward heaven and was seen by "the whole earth," a sign that the king had an exaggerated opinion of the power of his empire—especially in light of YHWH's previous efforts to remind the king that YHWH, not Nebuchadnezzar was Lord of all things. At this point in his life, the king is full of himself. As one commentator puts it, "his psyche felt secure and at ease. His ambitions had been achieved."⁷ Although affirming YHWH's greatness, Nebuchadnezzar still conceives of his kingdom as a rival to the kingdom of God.

But in verses 13-15a, the king reveals the second part of the dream. *"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."* There are a number of biblical references to angels who stand watch over the earth—Ezekiel 1:17-18, Zechariah 1:10, for example. The watchers are sent by YHWH to come and chop down the great tree but leave the stump remaining. The birds and beasts will leave, the leaves and fruit will be scattered, and the stump bound in iron—an act for which the meaning is unclear, but may refer to the tethering of an animal which the dream suggests will become Nebuchadnezzar's fate (in 15b). *"Let his portion be with the beasts in the grass of the earth."*⁸

In the closing portion of the king's dream, his fate becomes clear. *"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."* This, as we will see, next time, is exactly what happens to Nebuchadnezzar when he suffers his breakdown. The purpose of all of this is spelled out in verse 17. *"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."* The watchers (the Lord's angels) bring about YHWH's sentence of judgment upon the king and his empire. The king will lose his power, he will become like a wild beast. The king is now totally bewildered by this terrifying news. What does all of this mean?

With his Chaldeans unable to interpret the meaning of this, the king once again appeals to Daniel. *"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."* In the balance of the chapter, Daniel will interpret the dream (vv. 19-

⁷ Baldwin, Daniel, 124.

⁸ Goldingay, Daniel, 82.

27), we will read of the king's humiliating breakdown (vv. 28-33), followed by his restoration and blessing of YHWH (vv. 34-37). These are matters we will address next Sunday, Lord willing.

Our application arises from the contrast between Jesus Christ's kingdom and Nebuchadnezzar's; something which Nebuchadnezzar does not yet grasp but which is vital information for all those exiles reading Daniel's prophecy. Nebuchadnezzar dreamt of a great tree which provided leaves and fruit, shelter for the birds and beasts, and which extended to the highest heavens. His kingdom was extensive and protected his subjects. But like all earthly kingdoms, the Babylonian too will come to an end—just as will the three empires which follow it. The axe will be laid to the root of the tree.

We fast-forward ahead to the New Testament era, and notice that after Jesus' messianic mission was well underway, our Lord was faced with the unbelief of Israel. Jesus began speaking to the crowds in parables—hiding the truth from all but his disciples as a form of judgment. In Matthew 13:31–32, Jesus tells the following parable. *“He put another parable before them, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.’”* Christ's kingdom may have a small and inauspicious beginning (twelve disciples) but it becomes far greater than any geopolitical empire (such as Nebuchadnezzar's), as the gospel spreads to the end of the earth, through word and sacrament. As the Apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 2:8, *“none of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”*

Jesus' kingdom—which uses the same tree imagery as found in the king's dream—truly shelters the birds and beasts (symbolic of the great expanse of this kingdom), and provides genuine rest and shelter for the people of God. This is that kingdom which Jesus ushers in through his preaching, miracles, healing, and in his death for our sins, his resurrection from the dead, and his ascension to the Father's right hand. This is the kingdom which will stand forever after all the kingdoms of this world and their leaders are dead and gone. And this is the kingdom to which we have been called, and the kingdom which draws near to us yet again.