

Sermon – 19/08/2007 pm

A Second Dream

Study Text: Daniel 4:1-18

Years ago during a trek in the Himalayas I entered a village house for some chai. The doorway to the house was only half my height so I had to crouch down to enter. If I ever get to build a church I think I will make such a doorway. Everyone who comes in will be forced to get down on their knees and enter the Lord's house with humility.

In the fourth chapter of Daniel we find ourselves once again in the palace of the king of Babylon, the greatest kingdom in the world at that time (6th century BC). Things were never the same in this palace after Daniel and his friends were taken there from Jerusalem. These young men purposed in their hearts to obey God rather than man. They put themselves into the hands of the covenant God of Israel.

In so doing they put themselves into conflict with the ruler of this foreign land. He worshipped other gods and even thought of himself as a god. In the previous chapter we saw a divine showdown as it were, with king Nebuchadnezzar being forced to admit that the God of Daniel was unique and all-powerful.

The God of heaven was not only protecting his faithful followers, he was set on teaching the king a lesson in humility. A man who thinks of himself as a god is usually a slow learner in the school of humility. Nebuchadnezzar was a slow learner. First God sent him a dream which Daniel interpreted for him. He told Nebuchadnezzar that the God of heaven had given him power and glory and that his kingdom, the head of gold, would soon come to an end. Nebuchadnezzar outwardly acknowledged Daniel's God but did not humble himself before the true God.

The popular proverb 'God helps those who help themselves' is not true to the Bible. God does not exalt those who exalt themselves. The Bible says *humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up* (James 4:10). God exalts those who humble themselves before the Lord. Nebuchadnezzar, like many today, would not do that – well not voluntarily. The Lord has ways of humbling those who refuse to bend their knee to him. One day every knee shall bow to the Lord Jesus (Philippians 2:10).

A Flourishing King

This chapter is not a narrative like the previous chapters in Daniel. It is in the form of a letter composed by Nebuchadnezzar. *Nebuchadnezzar the king, to all peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth* (4:1). Babylon ruled the known world in those days.

The letter includes an introductory doxology like that found in many of the Psalms of David. *Peace be multiplied to you, and his kingdom is an everlasting kingdom and his dominion from generation to generation* (4:1, 3). These are not words we might expect from a man like Nebuchadnezzar who not long before had tried to kill the servants of the Most High God. But these words are exactly the same as some found at the end of the letter after the king was humbled by God. Had the heart of this man finally been broken?

Nebuchadnezzar began his open letter to the nations describing the rest he was enjoying in his palace. He was flourishing, a word which literally means ‘growing green’. History tells a little of this great Babylonian empire, including the famous Hanging Gardens in this city. The king had subdued all his enemies and had completed great building projects. He boasted in his power and wealth. He revelled in his treasures and pleasures – until he had another bad dream.

A Second Dream

Nebuchadnezzar’s outward peace and prosperity was not matched by any inner peace. His dreams troubled him greatly. In his first dream he saw the awesome image of a man. His wise men could not tell him what this dream meant because he refused to tell them. In a rage he started killing his wise men.

With this second dream he was not so demanding. He called all his magicians, astrologers Chaldeans and soothsayers and told them the dream (4:7). Even then they could not tell him what the dream meant – it seems they kept their heads this time.

But at last Daniel came before the king (4:7). Why did he not call Daniel in the first place some people ask, since he told the king his first dream? Probably some years had elapsed and traditional life had returned to the palace, or maybe Daniel was away on some duty. Whatever the reason, the effect is to once again demonstrate to impotence of false gods and their followers, against the strength and knowledge of Daniel’s God.

Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged that the spirit of the holy gods was in Daniel (4:18). Pharaoh similarly recognised such a presence in Joseph when he interpreted his dream (Genesis 41:3-8). Nebuchadnezzar admitted to calling Daniel ‘Beltshazzar’ *according to the name of my god*, but it was the spirit of the holy god that was in him.

Daniel, like his young friends, did not walk in the fear of men or of anything in this world. They did not even fear death. Daniel was not troubled by dreams because he knew the God in heaven who reveals secrets (2:28). What a great testimony these young men had in this heathen nation. They did not set out to convert the king or anyone else, but did determine to live in obedience to the covenant commands of God.

What effect would you have on those around you if you similarly lived in obedience to the covenant commands of Jesus Christ? What are these commands? In summary they are ‘love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, and all your strength’, and ‘love your neighbour as yourself’.

Vision of a Tree

In his dream Nebuchadnezzar saw a tree, an enormous tree, *in the midst of the earth* (4:10). It was flourishing just like his kingdom. This great tree gave shade to the animals and a home to the birds. It gave fruit to feed all who came. *All flesh was fed from it* (4:12).

Can you picture such a tree? I remember an enormous wild cherry tree on the farm. We would eat the cherries in season. The cattle would shelter from the sun and from storms under this

tree. In India our children loved to play in a large spreading tree they called 'Silky'. Did you ever have such a tree?

The Bible is rich with imagery of large and flourishing trees. In the beginning God put trees in the Garden of Eden, trees that were pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in this garden, a tree which appears again in the heavenly Jerusalem. In Psalm one the righteous man is likened to a flourishing tree bearing fruit in season. Jesus is the only truly righteous man. What a glorious tree he is to those who come to him for shelter and for their daily needs.

In Nebuchadnezzar's vision the tree was cut down. He saw *a watcher, a holy one coming down from heaven* (4:13). The watcher gave the order to cut down this tree that reached to the heavens. Only a stump was left. This mighty tree looked indestructible. It was strong, it was lovely, it was pleasant, and it was flourishing. But at the word of the 'holy one' the tree was cut down. Why was it cut down? *In order that the living may know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives to whomever he will* (4:17). The Most High removes kings and raises up kings as Daniel previously declared (2:21).

The prophet Ezekiel (ch.31) spoke to Pharaoh about Assyria that was like a great cedar of Lebanon. As its top reached toward heaven God intervened to bring down this nation (at Carchemish in 609 BC). This mighty nation became proud and so was cut down by God.

The message is the same for all nations, and for all individuals. *Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall* (Proverbs 16:18). This is not just a proverb, a matter of cause and effect. It is a divinely ordained. Our popular proverb about 'tall poppies' takes on a whole new meaning in the kingdom of God. God will not give his glory to another. Those who change his glory into an image and worship creatures or man made things will be brought down by God.

This dream troubled Nebuchadnezzar, as it was meant to. He realised the message was meant for him, and the message was not really hard to understand. The message was quite clear. All Daniel would really tell him was 'you are the man' (4:22). That Nebuchadnezzar and his wise men could not get the meaning of the dream is strange. Maybe they were afraid to tell him. Maybe he was afraid to hear the truth.

Knowledge of God is not the same as believing in God. Many in our society have some knowledge of the Bible, indeed sufficient knowledge to believe in Jesus Christ. But they keep that knowledge at arms length, well away from their heart. 'I am not like other people' they say; 'I am not a terrible sinner, I am not an insecure person in need of religious crutches'. They are proud in their self-sufficiency.

Pride blinds people to the truth, just as it did with Nebuchadnezzar. They dread the day when God will say 'you are that man'. They love to point the finger at anyone and everyone around them but never at themselves. But one day the finger of God will touch them. One day their knee will bow to Jesus. Have you humbly come to Jesus, repenting of your sin, of your pride and rebellion against God? Better to bow before Jesus now than wait till that day when you will do so because of deadly divine power.

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