

## Nebuchadnezzar's Dream of the Tree

Daniel 4:1-37

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

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if you have your Bibles, I would invite you to turn with me to the 4th chapter of Daniel. We have said throughout our study of this great book that a central question in the book of Daniel is the issue, How can the Christian sing the Lord's song in a strange land? And as we live in a land which is stranger and stranger to us, in the sense of having lost some of the great commitments which we once had to the Lord in the past as a society, Daniel's words to us are very, very timely indeed. So let's hear from Daniel, chapter 4 the story of the dream of the tree:

### Daniel 4:1-37

*Our Father, we thank You for Your inspired word by the prophet, Daniel, and for this confession at the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar, the great king of Babylon. By it you show us your sovereignty. By it You show us Your power to break the pride of man. By it You teach us of repentance. May we learn of these things experientially, O Lord, for we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.*

Daniel, chapter 4 records the last of the series of dealings of the God of Israel and Nebuchadnezzar. This is the last of the cycle in Daniel in which Nebuchadnezzar is a key player. It is different, however, than the stories recorded in the first three chapters. In Daniel 1, 2 and 3 there is a specific threat posed against the sons of Israel, whether it be Daniel, or Hananiah, Mishael or Azariah or all those who would refuse to bow down to the idol of gold. In this chapter there is no specific threat, although you can immediately surmise that telling Nebuchadnezzar the meaning of this dream would not necessarily be advantageous to the advancement to one's career in the court of Babylon. Nevertheless, in this passage we do come to a climax of a theme that has been repeated in every chapter of Daniel 1, 2, 3 and 4. Over and over the kingdom of God and its sovereignty over the kingdoms of the world has been repeated and emphasized in these chapters.

**I. God will have every knee bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord**

Here in Daniel 4 we come to the climax of that theme. God's sovereignty over both nations and individuals is celebrated in each of the stories in Daniel 1, 2, 3 and 4. In Daniel 1, God's sovereignty over the nations and individuals is shown in the way in which He gives wisdom to Daniel and the three witnesses who survive the testing of their captivity in the court. God is shown to be sovereign as He preserves His people in spiritual purity even in a strange land. In Daniel chapter 2, God's sovereignty is shown in that Daniel alone is able to interpret the dream which was given to Nebuchadnezzar and which none of his own counselors or diviners was able to interpret. In Daniel chapter, 3 the preservation of Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah even in the fiery furnace before all the nations who were assembled on the plain of Dura showed God's sovereignty even over mighty Nebuchadnezzar and the land of Babylon. And now in Daniel chapter 4, the king's own confession of God's sovereignty culminates this theme which has been running throughout the first four chapters of Daniel. As we look at that theme I want to emphasize that whatever we make of Nebuchadnezzar's confession, what we have in this passage is an outline of the process of repentance. We see God dealing with heart issues which keep people from repentance. We see Him pursuing a soul until it deals with the sins which are blocking confession and repentance towards God, and we see a soul captured and acknowledging repentance and confessing the Lordship of God. And so there is much we can learn from Daniel, chapter 4, with regard to the doctrine of repentance. I'd like to point to three or four things tonight of particular interest.

First of all in chapter 4, in verses 1 through 18, we see something of the confession that is to be made by all men with regard to the sovereignty of God. What we have recorded in those first 18 verses is an open letter from King Nebuchadnezzar. He's sending a letter out to all the nations explaining to them his experience with the most high God and relating to them the story of his dream of the tree. And we learn there in those first 18 verses that God will have every knee bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord. The king's address in his open letter is recorded in verse 1 and you may wonder, "Good gracious, how could Nebuchadnezzar this pagan king of Babylon pen an open letter that was so filled with biblical imagery?" And it may well be that he called upon Daniel to help him draft this open letter to the nation. And that would explain why there's so much rich, biblical imagery in this letter which he sends to the nations.

In verses 2 and 3 you will see Nebuchadnezzar make an initial confession, confessing that God most high, the God of Israel is indeed sovereign over all the earth.

In verses 4 through 7 you see the story of the failure of his magicians to interpret this dream related. Now, I want to say in passing that as you read this story, the outline of what this dream means is pretty clear. You wonder, "Why did Nebuchadnezzar need to go to his magicians and his diviners and his conjurers and his Chaldeans to tell him what this dream is?" Well, there may be a number of answers to that.

For one thing, though the general outline of this dream is clear, there are certainly elements in it which are difficult to understand. If one was not familiar with the theology of Scripture, then all this reference to angelic watchers, I'm sure, would have been intriguing to a Babylonian. What are angelic watchers and what in the world do they have to do with me? On the other hand, it well may be that Nebuchadnezzar has a sneaking suspicion about precisely what this dream means and he wants somebody to tell him, "No that's not really what it meant at all."

On the other hand you may wonder at the inability of the wise men and magicians of Babylon to tell him what the dream meant because the angelic watcher actually tells Nebuchadnezzar the interpretation of the dream at the end of it. Well again it may well be that these wise men and magicians are wise enough that they don't want to give this kind of bad news to Nebuchadnezzar, and maybe they're actually hoping that Daniel will show up to deliver the blow. At any rate, Nebuchadnezzar does not get an answer to the interpretation of this dream from his magicians and so Daniel steps in.

Isn't it interesting, in verses 8 and 9, how they record for us both Nebuchadnezzar's trust in Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar's fear of Daniel. Notice in verse 8, Nebuchadnezzar is careful to call Daniel Belteshazzar who was named after his own gods. It's almost like he reminds himself that Daniel is Belteshazzar, who is named after his own gods, to protect him from any undue influence that this Hebrew prophet might have over him. You can almost see the king's insecurity with the power of this man, with this man's connection with heaven, with his evident godliness and character, and so he makes sure to call Daniel, not by his Hebrew name, but by his Babylonian name and remind himself that that name itself is the name of Nebuchadnezzar's own god. He's a little bit frightened of the kind of influence that Daniel may have over him. And at the same time, we see in verses 8 and 9 that Nebuchadnezzar knows that Daniel will tell him the truth. What a testimony to Daniel's faithfulness. Of all the people in Nebuchadnezzar's court, Daniel and those three witnesses were the most faithful friends that Nebuchadnezzar really had because they would tell him the truth no matter what. Even Nebuchadnezzar knew that. He knew that whatever the case was, Daniel was going to tell him the truth, he would tell him what that dream really meant.

Again, we've seen that the dream recorded in verses 10 through 18 is clear enough in outline. And Nebuchadnezzar either wants Daniel to fill in the details or maybe he's hoping that Daniel will give him an interpretation which will explain away his fears. Now there's much for us to learn in the story of Nebuchadnezzar's confession and open letter in this dream which is recorded here in verses 10 through 18. But two things in particular I would point to you.

First of all, note that this dream is primarily designed to bring about

Nebuchadnezzar's confession of the Lord's sovereignty. This dream has a purpose - to make Nebuchadnezzar bow his knee to the Lord God. Sinclair Ferguson has said, "The purpose of this dream and decree was not left to Nebuchadnezzar's imagination. It was to teach men that God reigns, that He sets up and pulls down kingdoms, that His action in history focuses on the work of humbling men in order that they may dispense with their foolish pride and acknowledge Him as their God." That is clearly the purpose of the dream. Even the watchers' words to Nebuchadnezzar made that clear. He didn't even need Daniel to tell him that as the purpose of the dream. That is clearly what the dream is designed to do. It is designed to evoke a confession of the Lord's sovereignty. And notice that even as Nebuchadnezzar is recording for you the contents of the dream in the context of an open letter to the nation in which he confesses the Lord's sovereignty, you see again that the Lord always gets His man. If the Lord wants a confession of His sovereignty, He's going to get it one way or another. And He got it in the case of Nebuchadnezzar.

But let me also say that perhaps hidden behind Nebuchadnezzar's desire for his own magicians to give Him an interpretation of the dream is an interesting contrast between a pagan's view of God's providence and a Christian view or a believing view, or a biblical view of God's providence. It is possible that the reason that Nebuchadnezzar hoped for an interpretation for this dream from his own magicians was that he believed if he could understand what the dream meant that he could actually do things that would keep the truth of the dream from coming about. It's almost like the pagan views God's sovereignty in this sense: "Well, God has done this, but if I do this or this or this, then God's plan changes." It's almost like God is a giant chess player in the sky and Nebuchadnezzar is trying to make counter moves in order to contrast or oppose God's purposes in history. We often have Christian friends describe God's sovereignty in precisely those terms: "He's the great chess player." That is essentially a pagan view of God's providence. As far as Daniel is concerned there are no questions about the fulfillment of God's providence. Daniel simply says this: "Nebuchadnezzar, if you will repent perhaps God will prolong your reign." For the Christian, and you can see this throughout the words of the Hebrew prophets. When God's will has been announced there are always and only two options. His threats will be fulfilled if men do not repent, or men will repent and God's blessings will follow. There's not all this 15 other options that might happen if you do this or that. It's either repent or it is receive the threatened action in accordance with the providence of God. So we see a contrast between a Christian or a biblical view of God's providence, and a pagan view. The pagan view wants to know how can I manipulate God's plan? The Christian view, the biblical view says, "How do I respond in accordance with the message of God's providence?" If God's providential message is repent, how do I go about doing that in a way to honor God's providence? If God's providence is 'you will be blessed,' how do I go about believing that He will bless despite the evidence to the contrary? So we see two entirely different reactions to God's providence here in verses 1 through 18.

## **II. That we might confess Him, God pursues the root sin of pride**

Notice also in verses 19 through 27, that here we see an admonition from Daniel, even as he explains this dream to Nebuchadnezzar. He issues a dire warning against the king and there he teaches us that in order that we might confess God, in order that we might confess Him to be Lord, God pursues the root sin of pride. In order that we are able to confess God as Lord, He pursues the root sin of pride. This contest, this confrontation between Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel, chapter 4, is one of the great contests of biblical history. It ranks with the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh, the confrontation between Elijah and Ahab, the confrontation between John the Baptist and Herod, the confrontation between Jesus and Pilate, and Paul and Agrippa. It's one of the great contests between a man of God and a man of this world recorded in the Bible. And I want you to note several contrasts between Nebuchadnezzar and the Lord God as evidenced in this contest between Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar.

First of all in verse 19, I want you to note Nebuchadnezzar's insensitivity to the gravity of this message, in contrast with this prophetic, courageous man, Daniel's sensitivity to the message. When Daniel hears the dream, he is appalled. He is undone. It is a great testimony, is it not, to this man Daniel who was living as a captive, an important captive albeit, but a captive nevertheless, in a strange land under the rule of a people who had usurped the authority of Israel and led his people into the captivity, that he genuinely cared about Nebuchadnezzar. When he heard that dream, Daniel was absolutely horrified. His immediate reaction is, "O king, may this not be about you. May it be about those who hate you." This man, Daniel, genuinely loved Nebuchadnezzar. Oh that we could have that kind of love for unbelievers. It's reminiscent of Paul, isn't it? I could wish myself a curse if my own kinsmen according to the flesh would but come to Christ and confess. His sensitivity to what God is saying in this dream is extremely heightened precisely because he's close to God.

Now notice in that same verse how Nebuchadnezzar reacts to that. "Daniel, don't overreact to this. Don't be troubled about this, Daniel. There's nothing to worry about." Oh yes, there is. Oh yes, there is, Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar is deadened to the spiritual gravity of this message whereas Daniel, who isn't even involved in the judgment of this message, is broken-hearted. That's how we ought to be when we see the gospel in its application to the world. Our hearts ought to be tender even if the world is hardened to the gravity of the message.

Notice also in Daniel, chapter 4, verse 6, Nebuchadnezzar's decree contrasted with God's decree. Nebuchadnezzar gives a decree for his wise men to come and interpret the dream for him. Remember verse 7? His decree didn't work. But God's decree is recorded in verses 17 and 24 and 25 and 26. And God's decree worked. Even in the contrast between Nebuchadnezzar's decree and God's

decree, we see God's sovereignty.

Notice again Nebuchadnezzar's sense of self-importance contrasted with God's judgment of Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel, chapter 3 gives you a big picture of just how significant Nebuchadnezzar thought he was. And the very picture of this gigantic tree with its branches spread throughout all the earth is a picture of Nebuchadnezzar's own self-estimation. That's a picture of what he thinks of himself. But in verses 17 and 25, in the cutting down of that great tree, we see a picture of Nebuchadnezzar under God's hand of judgment and again that shows forth the sovereignty of God.

And again in Nebuchadnezzar's mercilessness in verse 27, we see a contrast between his mercilessness and God's mercy. Nebuchadnezzar had not shown mercy to the poor in his land and yet God was merciful enough to send a judgment against him so that he might repent. There is a contrast all along between the sovereignty of Nebuchadnezzar which was really tyranny, and the sovereignty of God which was good and which was designed to set us free from sin. Nothing breaks down pride like a view of God's sovereignty. God's sovereignty is perhaps one of the greatest evangelistic tools we have. It is precisely when we realize that God *is* God, that evangelism begins. Pat Morley says it this way in his book, "There is a God we want and there is the God who is, and the two are not the same." And it is precisely when we realize that the God who is is, not the God we want, and the God who is is, that's when spiritual life begins." And that view of God's sovereignty is God's tool for breaking down our own pride.

During the great awakening, Jonathan Edwards commented on how frequently the doctrine of God's sovereignty was used to bring about spiritual conversions. He said this, "I think that I have found no discourses have been more remarkably blessed than those on the doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty with regard to the salvation of sinners." Isn't that interesting. Because we're usually told today, "The problem with you Presbyterians is you believe in God's sovereignty and that's going to keep you from doing evangelism." But it's the other way around, isn't it? We really have a view of bringing those who are puffed up in pride and self-righteousness to the Lord and lift up the biblical truth of God's sovereignty so that they might be humble and cast their hope on the Lord. God's sovereignty is His great evangelistic tool.

### **III. God must break the sinner of pride and self-will before true confession can be made**

Notice also in verses 28 through 33 we learn something else. There we see a picture of a broken sinner. In Daniel 4:28-33 we see a picture of a sinner who has been humbled under the Lord's hand. Nebuchadnezzar is deranged, his kingdom is taken away from him and he wanders like an animal in the grass. And there we

learn that God must break the sinner of his pride and self-will before true confession can be made. Nebuchadnezzar failed to repent. Even after Daniel interpreted that dream, Nebuchadnezzar failed to repent, and many months later he's walking in Babylon, he's surveying all the wonderful things that he's had built. He was the great builder of Babylon. He goes down in the history of Babylon as the one who built the greatest things and he was out admiring his architectural work. No doubt he's in the hanging gardens, looking at this fabulous thing that was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. And even as he is speaking about these amazing things that he has done, a voice comes to him and he is humbled. When we fail to honor the Creator-creature distinction, when we fail to acknowledge that God is God and we are not, when we refuse to acknowledge that everything we have comes from the Lord and that apart from the Lord we would be nothing, we are setting ourselves up to be humbled, and that is precisely what happened to Nebuchadnezzar.

And isn't it interesting that it is precisely when he was so exalted in his own mind, exalted to super human proportions as the greatest human on all the earth, that it is precisely at that moment that God reduces him to a sub-human condition. He wanders as a beast in the field under the judgment of God. You see a spirit of spiritual independence and self-reliance are inimical to the reception of grace. You can't receive grace if you spiritually don't think you need it. If you spiritually are self-reliant you are not even in a position to embrace it because you don't think you need it.

And it is precisely this that God is dealing with in Nebuchadnezzar. God must deal with us there first before we are in a state to embrace His grace. Now, we can either do it the easy way or the hard way. When I was a young man, the most feared instrument in our household was known as *Mr. Belt*. Usually when I had not responded to my father's first kind overtures, he would remove that belt and snap it a couple of times and he would say something like this "Do you want Mr. Belt?" And if I didn't respond to that, I always had one last chance and the words were always this, "Son, we can do this the easy way or the hard way." Now, I was not a bright boy and I often did things the hard way but one of the good things about that is I did learn a little bit about repentance along the way. At any rate, that is precisely the case with Nebuchadnezzar. He could have done it the easy way but because he refused to repent, the Lord did it the hard way. He humbled him and friends, we can relate to that in our own experience. We know circumstances in our lives when we have been going astray and the Lord has had to do it the hard way because we refused to repent under his tender overtures, and one of the messages of this is, 'Don't make it hard on yourself.' If the Lord's grace is upon you, He's going to bring you back one way or the other, so why don't you spare yourself being humbled to the dust and respond to the goodness of His overtures?

#### **IV. True Confession of God's Lordship is always accompanied by true**

## repentance

Finally there's this, in verses 34 through 37, where we see the very nature of repentance spread out before us. We see a picture of Nebuchadnezzar's repentance and it has four elements in it. This reminds us that confessing God to be Lord, confessing God to be sovereign, is always accompanied by true repentance. Look at the elements of King Nebuchadnezzar's confession.

In verses 34 and 35 Nebuchadnezzar acknowledges that God is sovereign. He acknowledges that God is the Lord. He basically acknowledges that little two-word phrase that encapsulates the theme of God's kingdom in Daniel, "Heaven rules." He comes to that point where he recognizes the Godship of God.

In verse 35 he acknowledges that man is creaturely. In those words he is repenting of his own pride. He is recognizing that he overestimated his own importance and significance and independence and so he repents.

In verse 37 he confesses that God is truthful and righteous. God's penalty against Nebuchadnezzar had been severe. God had left him as a deranged man who lost the reins of power and Nebuchadnezzar, even in spite of that judgment, basically is saying in verse 37, "God, Your judgment against me, Your punishment against me was right. You were right to do what You did." And that is one of the marks of repentance. Repentance doesn't say, "Lord, You've been hard on me. Lord, You've been unfair to me." Repentance always recognizes that God has done exactly what was right and exactly what is good.

And finally in verse 36, he states that refrain which we hear in the book of Proverbs, chapter 3, verse 34 that "God resists the proud." He acknowledges the spiritual principle that "God opposes the proud but he gives grace to the humble."

And so in this section we learn much about the nature of true repentance, the components that go with it. When a person repents, that person acknowledges the sovereignty of God, the creatureliness of man, the rightness of God's judgment and God's resistance to the proud, but the fact that He always gives grace to those who are humbled.

Can we turn from our pride and humble ourselves before the Lord? God would have humbled servants. Show me a real Christian and I'll show you a humble person who has embraced God's sovereignty, not just in the head, but in the heart in the experience of life. May the Lord make it so with all of us. Let us pray.

*Our Lord, we thank You for Your gracious sovereignty and Your pursuit of us. You will not let us go, O Lord, until we bow the knee. We would bow that knee willingly all to Your glory and for our good, we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.*



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