

The king intuitively realized that his dream contained an important message he needed to know. But no one in his kingdom could explain it. The king called for Daniel because he knew that Daniel possessed the “spirit of the holy gods.” When he heard the king’s dream, Daniel knew exactly what it meant: “You, O king, are that tree!” (4:22). He goes on to say that God had ordained that the king will become like a beast of the field: *You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle 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 the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes* (4:25).

The key word is “until.” God’s judgment over the king is disciplinary, not merely punitive. For seven years the king will live as a wild beast, without his mind, “until” he acknowledges that God alone is sovereign.

The rest of the story unfolds quickly. For twelve months the king had time to change his ways. Evidently nothing Daniel said sank deeply into his soul. Perhaps he didn’t believe him or perhaps he thought he had plenty of time to repent. Perhaps he made excuses for his behavior. Then came the fateful moment that changed his entire life: *As the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, 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?’* (4:29-30). Note the pronouns: I and my. And the king’s boastful words: “I have built...by my mighty power...the glory of my majesty.”

Even while the words were still on his lips, Nebuchadnezzar heard a voice from heaven announcing God’s judgment upon the king: *Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle. 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* (4:33).

This is all that is said about his seven years of insanity. One moment the king is surveying his royal kingdom, the next he is ripping off his clothing, making strange snorting noises, and galloping on all fours. Those who have studied this text say that the king had a complete nervous breakdown. He lost all connection with reality.

It’s hard to imagine a more severe punishment from God. Why would God do such a thing? God did this to humble the arrogant king. Pride is a form of spiritual insanity. It is claiming credit for ourselves that rightly belongs to God alone. What happened to Nebuchadnezzar was a kind of spiritual parable for all of us.

But that’s not the end of the story. Seven years later the king’s life took another dramatic turn: *At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever* (4:34). Just as suddenly as he lost his mind, Nebuchadnezzar regained. He looked up (raised his eyes to heaven), he woke up (his sanity was restored), and he spoke up (he praised the Most High God), saying: *[God’s] dominion is an eternal dominion; [God’s] kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. [God] does as [God] pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back [God’s] hand or say to [God]: ‘What have you done?’* (4:34-35)

This once-pagan king now openly declares the praises of God. God’s message is received. God can do anything he wants to do, and no one can stand against him. Earthly kings rule by God’s permission and they stay on the throne only so long as it pleases God to give them power and authority. Nebuchadnezzar learned this truth the hard way. Now he proclaims it for all the world to hear.

Verses 36-37 give us the end of the story and the moral we should all take to heart: *At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honor and splendor were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisers and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything [God] does is right and all [God’s] ways are just. And those who walk in pride [God] is able to humble.*

Before this experience Nebuchadnezzar might have said that the greatest moment of his life was some great military achievement or some massive construction project. But afterwards the king looked back and claimed his greatest moment to be when he came to his senses and gave God glory. Seven years of insanity suddenly seemed a small price to pay in order to see God truly and clearly.

If we stand back and look at the entire narrative, we see King Nebuchadnezzar in three scenes: Prosperity, Judgment, and Restoration. It is tempting to focus only on the judgment, especially given the bizarre nature of his seven-year affliction; but to stop there misses the larger point. By the end of the chapter, the king has regained his sanity, regained his throne, and even increased his earthly glory; and along the way he has learned that God is sovereign over the affairs of humankind and that “those who walk in pride [God] is able to humble.”

In this we can all take great comfort. Though God should for a season afflict us with many trials, and though many of those trials may be of our own foolish doing, God’s purpose is not to destroy us, but to purge us from our sin and pride so that we might be brought into closer fellowship with God. In that sense Nebuchadnezzar’s insanity was a severe mercy from God, preparing the way for better things to come.

As I survey Daniel 4, I find great hope and abundant grace. There is hope for all of God’s children because God will not allow us to live in our sinful ways forever. God loves us too much to let us stay the way we are; sooner or later God intervenes, sometimes in ways both public and painful, to bring us back to God again.

And there is hope for those who are far from God today. Nebuchadnezzar was a pure pagan; he neither knew God nor worshiped him. Yet when God got through with him, the king sounded like a great theologian. If we believe that God is truly God, then nothing is impossible and no one is beyond the reach of God’s grace. This truth should give us great incentive to pray for those who feel lost and to proclaim the gospel with confidence. Even the most hardened hearts may yet come to faith in Christ.

God knows best how to get God’s message across. Which brings us back to where we started: How far will God go to get his message across to us? Just ask Nebuchadnezzar. God will do whatever it takes. God will stop at nothing, and no one can successfully oppose God. So be encouraged; but also be warned. God is not a safe God, but God is a good God. God doesn’t act according to our standards. God won’t stay in the “box” we construct for God. We dare not trifle with God. But God is good, which means that even when our tree is shaking, we know God means it for our good and God’s glory. Let God be God, and all creation will sing God’s praises. Amen.

The King Who Went Crazy For God

Sunday, February 1, 2015

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Daniel 4:28-37

How far will God go to get his message across to us? The answer is not hard to find. God will do whatever it takes to make sure we get the message. But what if we don’t want to hear what God has to say? If we choose not to listen to God, then God simply turns up the volume until God has our undivided attention.

Consider the story of the king who went crazy for God. The story begins at a time when King Nebuchadnezzar is on top of the world. He is contented and prosperous. At the height of his glory, Nebuchadnezzar was king over the greatest empire the world had ever known. The king’s word was law. Mighty armies obeyed his word. And Babylon! What a fabulous city: the famous Hanging Gardens were one of the wonders of the ancient world. The city itself was protected by 15 miles of double walls — 85 feet tall and some 27 feet thick. The walls were so wide that chariots would race around the circumference of the city. Visitors entered the city through the massive Ishtar Gate and traveled down the main boulevard toward the king’s palace.

Truly the king had every reason to feel secure, safe, and satisfied. Who in all the earth would dare to challenge him? But one night he had a strange and troubling dream. At first, the king saw a vast tree, with leaves and branches stretching as far as the eye could see. Birds nested in the branches and animals found shade under its leaves. Then the tree was cut down and stripped and the stump bound with iron and bronze. The stump becomes a person who lives among the animals for seven years; a poor, lost soul who has completely lost his mind.