

“The Most-High Rules”
Daniel 4:1-34

Read Psalm 2 NKJV

Ever since sin entered the human family, the ungodly have tried to destroy the people of God. Cain killed his righteous brother, Abel. Ishmael mocked Abraham and Isaac, and his descendants have been in almost constant conflict through the millennia. Esau hated Jacob and wanted to kill him; likewise, his descendants, the Edomites, refused to let Israel pass through their territory on the way to Canaan. They later rejoiced in Israel’s downfall at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar.

Pharaoh, king of Egypt, tried to subjugate and then annihilate the people of Israel. The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC and led most of the population into captivity; the setting for the book of Daniel. The Babylonians were followed by the Persians and the Greeks. In 70 AD the Romans smashed and burned Jerusalem, wiping out Jewish control of the city (with brief exceptions) for almost 1900 years!

In the Middle Ages the fires of the Spanish Inquisition consumed the lives and property of untold numbers of Jewish people. The 19th century pogroms in tsarist Russia snuffed out many Jewish lives. In the 20th century Hitler’s rise to power culminated in the Holocaust, where millions of Jews and others were systematically exterminated like so much vermin. Today, the Iranian mullahs and other Muslim countries still harbor dreams of destroying God’s ancient, chosen, earthly people.

And then there’s the church; suffering severe persecution from Muslim, Hindu, and atheist governments around the world. These rulers seem to think they’re in control, but Psalm 2 reminds us that reality is different than appearance.

As we continue our study in the book of Daniel, we come to chapter four. Nebuchadnezzar was the powerful ruler of a world empire. He thought he was in control of his own destiny and millions of others. But God humbled him in such a way that he confessed that Jehovah, “the Most-High God,” rules in the kingdoms of men!

So, I’ve titled our study “The Most-High Rules.” And our text is Daniel chapter 4. Again, this is a lengthy text so I’ll only read the part of it that we can cover in the time we have today. Listen carefully as I read **Daniel 4:1-18**.

This text records a series of striking EVENTS that led King Nebuchadnezzar to acknowledge that “The Most-High Rules.” It’s a truth that you and I and every human being must ultimately embrace.

The First EVENT was,

A Tranquil Kingdom

In his early years as king, Nebuchadnezzar had been very active in military conquests. As I mentioned previously, his kingdom stretched from Egypt to India. Those areas were conquered through difficult and brutal military campaigns. But now, in the latter half of his reign, his vast dominions were secure. The huge expenses of far-flung military campaigns were over. He had a vast inflow of tribute from conquered subjects. So, he turned his attention and his resources to beautifying his kingdom, especially the city of Babylon.

The Ishtar Gate was the main entrance into the great city. It was a sight to behold; the gate was covered in lapis lazuli glazed bricks. Lapis lazuli is a deep blue metamorphic rock prized by the ancients for its color. These glazed bricks gave the façade a jewel-like shine. Alternating rows of lions, dragons, and bulls representing powerful deities formed the processional way. These conveyed the message that Babylon was protected and defended by the gods, and one would be wise not to challenge it. The magnificent structure was dedicated to the Babylonian goddess Ishtar.

The hanging gardens of Babylon were one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. They were Nebuchadnezzar’s most amazing feat of engineering. He had them built for one of his wives. She was from ancient Media, in the northwestern part of what is now Iran. She missed the mountains of her homeland, so Nebuchadnezzar had mountains constructed on the roof of the royal palace and planted all kinds of trees and other plants on them. He even designed a hydraulic lift system to bring water from the Euphrates River to water the elevated gardens. It must have been an amazing sight!

Nebuchadnezzar’s realm was secure and prosperous. He was surrounded by the visible evidence of his wealth and power. And then, the king had a dream. That dream becomes the basis for the second event that eventually led King Nebuchadnezzar to acknowledge that “The Most-High God Rules.” In retelling these events, the king sends the record of them to ALL peoples, languages, and nations. He is either boastfully arrogant – which the further picture of him in this

chapter shows – or he is using this as a way to mean everyone in his kingdom.

You and I most likely haven't had a dream like King Nebuchadnezzar. But we must understand that times of tranquility and prosperity can be dangerous to us. Remember Moses' warning to Israel in Deuteronomy chapter six? He said when you get into the land that God has promised you, and you have all these things that the Lord has provided for you, when you're at ease and your stomach is full, then beware! Beware, because you will be tempted to forget the Lord your God. You will be tempted to think that it's your might and your ability that have provided these things for you. That is a cogent warning for us today.

The Second EVENT was,

A Terrifying Dream

This is Nebuchadnezzar's second dream that's recorded for us in the book of Daniel. In the first dream, in chapter 2, he couldn't even remember what the dream was. He wanted his wise men to tell him the dream and the interpretation. That dream led him to the conclusion that Daniel's god was "a god of gods and a revealer of secrets."

This time, he remembers the dream and he's terrified! The original language is much stronger than our translation, "made me afraid." Imagine him awaking trembling from the dream and then lying there on his bed thinking about it. None of my dreams have been like King Nebuchadnezzar's, but some have seemed so real that it takes time to calm down afterward.

Why was this dream so terrifying? Well, consider the earlier dream the king had about the unusual image. He was involved in that dream as the head of gold. Part of the interpretation was that the whole image, including that head of gold, would be destroyed and replaced by an everlasting kingdom. The king probably liked the idea of being the head of gold but didn't like the prophecy that a "stone out of the mountain" would destroy the image.

That may be why, in chapter three, he builds this huge image of himself or at least of a figure that represents the power and might of his kingdom. He recognizes Daniel's ability to interpret dreams but doesn't necessarily like the outcome. He's still not convinced that Daniel's god is sovereign, even though he acknowledges he's powerful.

Nebuchadnezzar shares the specifics of the dream in verses ten to seventeen. He saw a tree standing by itself; a tree so strong and that grew so high it could be viewed all over the earth; an extraordinary tree. The image of a tree representing a nation, or a kingdom should be familiar to

readers of Scripture. Jesus spoke of Israel as a “fig tree,” in Matthew chapter 24. In Ezekiel chapter 31, Pharaoh and the king of Assyria are compared to a cedar of Lebanon. There are numerous examples of this typology in near eastern literature as well.

So, here is this magnificent, extraordinary tree. The beasts of the field and the fowls of the air found protection in its branches and the shadow cast by those branches. Its leaves were fair, and it produced so much fruit that the whole world was fed by it.

But as the king observed the tree a watcher, a holy one comes down from the heavens. This heavenly messenger even refers to himself with this language in verse seventeen. We would refer to this being as an angel.

The angel cries with a loud voice; literally, cries with might! “*Cut down the tree and cut off its branches. Shake off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Tell the beasts under it to go to another place and tell the birds to fly away to a new home.*” The record doesn’t state that this command is carried out, but it is implied.

But now notice the special instructions given concerning the stump of this tree. The stump, with its roots, is to be left in the earth; no burning, no digging, no removal. The stump is to be bound, or encircled, with a band of iron and brass. What’s the meaning of this? Certainly, that won’t prevent the stump from rotting. This could signify the preservation of Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom. Or it could signify the mental illness that would bind the king for seven seasons or times. Perhaps it does both!

The stump is to be surrounded by the tender grass of the field and to be wet by the dew from heaven. Here, the KJV changes from it, the stump, to him, the king. “*Let his portion be with the beasts in the grass of the earth.*” The watcher states that the king would be given the heart of a beast instead of a man’s heart. The duration of his madness would last until seven times, or seven periods of time, pass over him. The period is specific, though we’re not sure exactly how long it was. It seems that years would be logical, especially since Daniel uses the same terminology to refer to years later in the book.

As he closes the recitation of this terrifying dream, Nebuchadnezzar acknowledges that the things he saw are decreed for a specific purpose. God will do these things “*to the end that the living may know that Most High rules in the kingdom of men and gives it to whom He will and sets over it the lowest of men.*”

Now, it is up to Daniel to tell the king what the dream means. That leads us to

The Next EVENT which is,

The Troubling Interpretation

Daniel is introduced earlier in the chapter, verses 8 and 9. Of all King Nebuchadnezzar's wise men, only Daniel has the ability to correctly interpret dreams. Why Daniel wasn't summoned first, we can only guess. Perhaps, the king realized that the frightening dream did not portend well for him. Or perhaps, as I suggested earlier, the king still hoped to salvage the reputation of his gods as more powerful than Jehovah.

Some readers may question why Nebuchadnezzar uses Daniel and Belteshazzar in his communicate? Remember, this report is going to the whole world; actually, just those parts under the king's authority. So, using both names, the Hebrew and the Chaldean, would have clarified across the empire exactly who was being spoken about. He expresses confidence in Daniel's ability to interpret the dream because "the spirit of the holy gods is in you."

Hearing the details of the king's dream, Daniel is deeply troubled and silent for a considerable period of time. The ASV renders it "*stricken dumb for a while.*" He didn't want to tell the king the meaning of the dream. As Nebuchadnezzar observed Daniel's demeanor, he came to his rescue by saying, "*Belteshazzar, let not the dream or the interpretation alarm you.*" Daniel response shows his high regard for the king. "*My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you and its interpretation for your enemies!*"

Then, Daniel interprets the dream in verses 20 to 26. To begin, he rehearses the dream scene by scene to let the king know that he has completely understood what he was told. That assures Nebuchadnezzar that he's accurately interpreting the dream.

Daniel identifies the tree as representing Nebuchadnezzar. "*It is you, O king, who have grown and become strong. Your greatness has grown and reaches to heaven, and your dominion to the ends of the earth.*" Daniel then goes on to rehearse the appearance of the watcher, the holy one, coming down with the heavenly decree in all its details.

Daniel reluctantly tells the king that he will be driven out of his palace and take his place with the beasts of the field. He will eat grass like an ox and will be wet with each morning dew. This condition will last until seven periods of time (most likely seven years) pass over him.

All this is to bring the king to the place where he knows (experientially) that the Most-High rules in the kingdoms of men and He gives those kingdoms to whomever he wills. Daniel further assures the king that the command to leave the stump of the tree in the earth means the kingdom

will eventually be restored to him. Nebuchadnezzar, in spite of his pride, was to know the graciousness of God to him.

In verse 27, Daniel, in his love for the king issues an appeal. He urges Nebuchadnezzar to break-off his sins and practice righteousness. The king had undoubtedly been cruel and morally wicked to those whom he ruled. He most likely exploited people in the building of his magnificent city. Most kings had little regard for the value of human life. Daniel calls the king to renounce his iniquities by showing mercy to the poor. If you do these things, God may lengthen your prosperous reign!

This appeal should be a warning to each of us. We too often walk in pride. But God is willing to extend grace to us when we repent and acknowledge our complete dependence on Him. He wants us to acknowledge Him and live in service to others.

Sadly, the king accepted Daniel's interpretation, but failed to accept Daniel's counsel. That leads us to

The Next EVENT which is,

The Tormented Existence

One year has passed since Nebuchadnezzar's strange dream and Daniel's interpretation of that dream. The king is walking in his palace; one of his crowning architectural triumphs. As he looks out over the magnificent city his heart swells with pride. *"Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?"*

Babylon was a magnificent city. Its outer wall was wide enough for two chariots to pass each other – on its top! Nebuchadnezzar built great fortifications and canals through the city to increase commerce. Nearly 50 different buildings with his inscription have been uncovered. Even secular history records the king's pride in his city. In one of his prayers to the god, Marduk, he says "Like dear life I love thy exalted lodging place; in no place have I made a town more glorious than thy city of Babylon." While the king could have justly felt a sense of accomplishment in all of this beauty, he forgot that none of it would be possible apart from God's sovereign will.

As the king was speaking these words of pride, a voice from heaven fell on his ears. *"O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you, and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. And you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that*

the Most-High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.”

Immediately, he was stricken with *boanthropy*. This is a recognized mental illness where the victim believes he or she is a bovine and acts accordingly. He was driven from the palace to begin his season of insanity. One of the interesting things about this disease is that the person still retains an inner consciousness. And we see that consciousness in King Nebuchadnezzar later in the chapter.

What a picture of the destructive nature of pride! From the royal throne of the world’s mightiest kingdom (at the time), to the royal pasture in a heartbeat. From a well-manicured, perfumed monarch, to a dirty, smelly ox. From a position of being waited upon hand and foot, to a position where you’re tolerated and mostly just ignored. From one who had no use for The Most-High to the lowest of men. We can only imagine the appearance of Nebuchadnezzar as the months passed over him; hair like eagle’s feathers and nails like a bird of prey. What a “come down” from such an exalted position.

Pride is the root of ALL sin. It was the sin that got Lucifer in trouble; the focus on I! How many men in positions of responsibility and authority have become enamored with power? How many, like Nebuchadnezzar, have boasted in their accomplishments, forgetting the God who is the giver of everything? God is still humbling proud people today; so be careful to give God His glory and thank Him that you can be His servant.

The Final EVENT which is,

The Transformed Heart

This final part of the narrative is written in the first-person. The king speaks directly of his experiences, using the personal pronoun, I.

So, here is the king out in the field behaving like an ox. His focus is on the ground and what he can find to eat. And yet he isn’t totally devoid of reason. Notice that at the end of the seven years, he lifts his eyes toward heaven. His inner consciousness motivated him recognize the power of The Most-High. His powers of reasoning were fully restored! His experience reminds us that the first step in repentance is to lift our eyes toward heaven; to get our focus off ourselves and look to God.

It is important to note the connection here between the exercise of faith and the return of reason. While he was full of his own importance Nebuchadnezzar’s world revolved round himself.

It did not strike him how unrealistic this was until he was brought low by illness. Sanity begins with a realistic self-appraisal.¹

As a result of his experiences he blesses God and offers praise to the One who lives forever and ever. He recognizes that God is sovereign over all things, including the kingdoms of the world. No one has the authority to ask Him “What are you doing,” and no one can stop Him from accomplishing His plans. We can’t determine with absolute certainty from this account if Nebuchadnezzar fully embraced faith in Jehovah God. But we must admit the possibility.

He confesses that God is eternal, that He has an everlasting dominion, and that He rules over a kingdom that endures from generation to generation. This is more than what he ever attributed to the gods of Babylon. He states that God’s omniscience enables Him to view the inhabitants of the earth as nothing. His statement reminds me of Isaiah 40, verse 15 where God regards the nations as drop of water that falls from a bucket into the dust and disappears, or like the light film of dust that lays on the scales.

Evidently, the king’s counselors had kept watch over him during this time of insanity. They immediately noticed the change in him. His kingdom and his officials were restored to him with additional majesty and glory. He praised and honored and extolled the true God as the King of Heaven whose works are truth and whose ways are justice. His final statement is made with the authority of experience: “those who walk in pride [God] is able to humble.”

My friend, have you experienced the reality of this truth; that The Most-High God rules? Do you see His hand at work in history and in the present? The most important question, however, is this one; “Does The Most-High rule in your life?”

The reality is, The Most-High rules! He rules over all; over the lives of Believer and Unbeliever alike. The difference is, do we acknowledge that rule and willingly submit to it? If we do not submit to God’s rule, then we can expect God to allow experiences into our lives to break our will and make us willing to submit to Him. The other choice is to submit voluntarily and bypass the pain of being involuntarily broken. What will your choice be?

¹ Baldwin, J. G. (1978). [*Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary*](#) (Vol. 23, p. 129). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.