

The Testimony of a Proud Man

SERIES: DANIEL: LIVING BY FAITH IN A FAITHLESS WORLD

We live in a day when public figures live in fear that their private lives will be exposed. As a result, it's a rare and surprising thing when a public figure comes forward and exposes himself. This is why Daniel 4 is such a good read. In Daniel 4, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon steps forward and issues a press release for all the people of his kingdom to hear. It couldn't have been an easy thing to do. It's a kind of personal testimony in which the King chronicles his spiritual journey. It was a painful journey. It was a journey in which Nebuchadnezzar learned what a dangerous and foolish thing it is to walk in pride. This is the testimony of a proud man. A man that had to learn the hard way that not he, but God, is the Most High who rules over all the kingdoms of men. Someone once said that a man who thinks he is a god must become like a beast in order to learn he is just a human being. Nebuchadnezzar couldn't have said it better himself.

I want you to use your imagination this morning. If you want to follow along in Daniel 4 then feel free, but I want to invite you to sit back and listen to Nebuchadnezzar tell his story. This is the way this story comes to us in the Scripture, as a first-person narrative. So I want us to hear it in the way it's come to us - as the testimony of a proud man.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

Greetings and peace to all! It seems right and good for me, Nebuchadnezzar, to tell you about the amazing things which the Most High God has done for me. His deeds are truly great! I have a kingdom of my own, but His kingdom is everlasting! I rule over my own generation, but His rule is from generation to generation.

I didn't always think that way. Like some of you, I had to learn the hard way. But you have to consider my background. I was named after one of our gods - Nabu. My name means "Nabu has protected my inheritance." He was just one of many gods I served: Marduk and Shamash, Gula and Adad. None of these gods were considered sovereign over all the affairs of heaven and earth. They were gods who rivaled one another, like barking dogs protecting their own domain. They were not gods to worship or to love, they were gods to appease by throwing a bone in their direction.

I was the oldest son of Nabopolassar, founder of the great Babylonian empire. As Crown Prince, I led the Babylonian army to victory over the Egyptians at the battle of Carchemish. I was not one to watch the fighting from afar. My own hands were bloodied until every last Egyptian warrior was dead. It was on that same campaign that I

moved north and first encountered the Jews. I had heard about them. I had heard of their devotion to just one God, whom they called "The Most High." I had heard tales of how he brought Pharaoh to his knees with a series of plagues. I had heard of a Red Sea crossing and food falling from heaven to keep them from starving in the wilderness. After all of that, I half expected to be impressed with these Jews, but I found them no different than the others. Their religion was a mixture, they spoke of The Most High, but their land was dotted with shrines to other gods as well. Their pathetic king, Jehoiakim, submitted to me without much of a fight. He allowed me to take some young hostages back to Babylon for training in our ways and customs. He even allowed me to take some sacred vessels from The Most High's temple. I thought to myself that, compared to Nabu and Marduk, this was a weak and tired god.

It was during this time that I received news that my father had died. It was the 15th of August. How could I forget? It was the day I had waited for my entire life. I chose a few of my best men and together we rode 23 days across the blazing desert. On the 6th of September I took the throne of my father and became king over the greatest kingdom on earth. I married Nitocris and later Amytis. Together we had three sons. Each of them I named after Marduk to show my devotion. In the years that followed I defended my kingdom and I built Babylon into the greatest city on earth.

GOD'S PREPARATION

But I see now that the Most High was at work in my life. While my star was rising, he was beginning to put me in my place. It started with a normal day's work. I was to interview those young men whom we had groomed and educated for service in my court. I was amazed to find four young Jews, led by one they called Daniel, whom I renamed Belteshazzar. These Jews were more superior in wisdom and learning than all the others put together. As I interviewed these boys from my royal throne, I saw something in them that for just a moment I felt I lacked. Here they were, standing before me, the greatest king on earth, and they seemed so calm and confident, as if they knew another king greater than I was right by their side. For a moment, I wondered if it was The Most High who gave them such confidence.

But, I was a busy man. I did not have time for speculations about some god who couldn't even protect

his chosen people. I sent the four boys off to their places of service and forgot they ever existed. It wasn't until about a year later that the Most High began to trouble me again. Your own writings say it well. It is written in Job, **"In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men as they slumber in their beds, he may speak in their ears and terrify them with warnings, to turn a man from wrongdoing and to keep him from pride"** (Job 33:15-17). I had such dreams; dreams that terrified me; dreams I discovered no one but Belteshazzar could interpret. He told me this dream was of a great statue made of gold, silver, brass and iron. I was the head of gold and the Most High had given me power and glory and strength. But my kingdom would be succeeded by three others and finally a fourth would come and destroy all others and only that kingdom would endure forever. I knew that Belteshazzar's God had revealed this to him and I knew it was the truth. I began to think that there was more to this Most High than I had thought, and I made Belteshazzar chief of my spiritual advisors.

But I didn't need him much. I was busy. I had many gods to serve. It was during those years that I built Babylon into the greatest city in the world. I built a system of double walls around our city as wide as one your six-lane highways and as tall as an eight-story building. There were eight splendid gates, each named for one of my gods. For my wife, Amytis, I built the Hanging Gardens, considered one of the eight wonders of the world. I even built a 90 ft. image made of gold and set it up on the plains of Dura to unite our diverse nation under one great symbol. Some said it looked like me. It was out there on the plains of Dura that once again The Most High got my attention. Three of his servants refused to bow down to my image. I was angry. No one defies me like this! I warned them that I would throw them into the blazing furnace, but they believed that The Most High would deliver them. I thought they were fools, this is not the way of the gods, but it turns out I was the fool. I saw them walking in the furnace like it was a palace! I saw the angel that the Most High sent to save them! I touched their flesh when they came out of the fire! I made a decree, right then and there, that no one would speak against The Most High in my kingdom again, for there is no god I have seen who can deliver like this.

You can see that I was not a closed-minded man. I was willing to acknowledge the truth when I saw it. I respected the gods. I attributed much of my success to the gods. I did my best to keep them all happy. And by looking at my life you would think they were happy.

CONVERSION EXPERIENCE

My life couldn't have been better. I had my health. I had my family. I had my palace, which I called, "The Dwelling of Majesty." I had my kingdom, which encompassed most of what you call the Middle East. I

had my gods, whom I served with great devotion. Surely it was they who had rewarded me for my service.

There was just one thing I didn't have - peace of mind! The dreams started again. Night after night, I saw the same dreadful rerun played out in my mind. I'd wake up in a cold sweat, shaking, crying. Deep down I feared these dreams were the whispers of the Most High. I feared because I knew what he was trying to say. I kept seeing a great tree. Its branches spread like eagle's wings providing abundant shelter and food for birds and beasts and all living creatures. But then a messenger came down from heaven and ordered it to be cut down. It was stripped of its leaves and fruit, the birds flew off and the beasts fled until just a stump was left. And then the angel said that stump represented a man; a man whose mind was to become like a beast. For seven seasons he said this man would live like the cattle, drenched in the morning dew, eating grass from the ground with his teeth. This, the messenger said, was to teach him that The Most High rules over all the kingdoms of men. He gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them even the lowliest of men.

I knew there was one man who would tell me the truth about this dream, but I was afraid. I called in all my spiritual advisors except him. I knew it was useless. They're all idiots! Oh, they knew the meaning of this dream, but they would not tell me for fear I would kill them for announcing my demise. I figured as much. Have you ever been torn between hungering for the truth, yet fearing it. It was as if I was fighting the knife in the surgeon's hand, all the while knowing that without that knife I would never be well. Finally, I just got tired of fighting it. I called in Belteshazzar. I knew that in him was a spirit of the holy gods. He stood before me in silence as I recounted the dream. He listened and not only did he seem to understand the dream but he seemed to understand me. In his eyes, I saw both compassion and fear. It's a strange thing about Belteshazzar. Here this man was my prisoner in Babylon, but I trusted him like none other. I knew he did not wish for me the calamity of which this dream spoke. I assured him that he could speak candidly with me.

And he did. He gave it to me straight. He said I was being warned by the Most High. Like that tree, I was great and strong, but I was also proud. So God would soon cut me down and make me to think and live like a beast for seven seasons, until I was willing to admit that the Most High was ruler over the kingdoms of men and he gives them to anyone he wishes. And then Belteshazzar spoke to me in a way I've never been spoken to. He was not afraid. He looked me in the eyes. There was an urgency in his voice. He ordered me to break away from my sins by doing what I knew in my heart was right. He told me to show mercy to the poor and the oppressed. He said if I did this there might be some reprieve from my sentence. And then he just left.

Funny thing, the dreams stopped after that. I did what I could to heed Belteshazzar's words. Of course, I still had a kingdom to run, but many said they saw a change in

me. I made some amends with my enemies. I stopped the foul language. I fed the poor. I built a few more Temples. I spent more time with my kids. I would have done more, but things were going so well. Within a month, I forgot I even had the dream. I continued to build. I continued to prosper. And then one day I took a walk. I was strolling on the roof of my royal palace. The sun was shining. I could see this great city of Babylon stretched out for miles before me. I was bursting with pride! I thought to myself, "It doesn't get any better than this! Look at me! Standing here in the royal palace of the greatest city on earth which I myself have built."

Have you ever done something and immediately, like an alarm going off in your head, you knew you were in trouble? At that moment I knew my judgment was sealed. I heard a small voice in the back of my mind, not an audible voice, but not my voice either. That voice said, "Nebuchadnezzar, your kingdom is being removed from you. You will be driven away from mankind and for seven seasons you will sleep in the cold like an animal and stoop down to eat the grass like a cow. This will continue until you recognize that the Most High rules over the kingdoms of men and he gives them to anyone he wishes."

From that point on, I really don't remember much. I'm told I went completely insane. Your psychology books speak of a condition called lycanthropy where a person believes he has actually become a wild animal and acts out the fantasies and delusions of a bull or a bird. I guess I looked and acted a bit like both. My counselors watched as I grazed in my own fields. They say my hair was matted like eagles' feathers and my fingernails grew like bird claws. For seven seasons my advisors covered for me: "The king is ill," was the line they gave.

Someone has said that a man who thinks he's God must become like a beast in order to learn he is just a human being. I don't remember much at all from those seven seasons, but one day I woke up, soiled and tired, laying with my face on the wet grass. Somehow I remembered something Belteshazzar had said to me: "The Most High rules over the kingdoms of men and he gives them to anyone he wants, even the lowliest of men." At that moment I knew that I had stooped as low as a man could stoop. I managed to turn on my back and look up to the sky and I just said it over and over: "The Most High rules...the Most High rules..." As soon as I said it, my mind began to clear. It was like I was awakened from a dream, but I wasn't the same when I awoke. For the first time in my life, I felt as if I could stop pretending. I knew who I was and I knew who he was. I knelt and prayed right there in the meadow. I lifted my arms to heaven and cried out, "His kingdom is everlasting. His rule is from generation to generation. He does as he

pleases in heaven and on earth. No one can hold back his hand. No one can question him." When I was finished, I looked toward my palace and I saw Belteshazzar and the others coming out to greet me. Within hours I was restored to my throne and Babylon prospered more than ever. But I was different. I was not pretending to be God, nor was I a beast, I was just a man. I knew that the Most High rules, and I knew that he is able to humble those who walk in pride.

CONCLUSION

I don't know where my story finds you. It seems to me that it could cut both ways. For some of you, my story might bring some comfort. You are not like I was. You are not a king or a queen. You have no illusions of being a god. You're on the other side of things. If anything you feel helpless in light of all the different things that are stacked up against you. You are like the Jews in my kingdom. When they heard how the Most High had dealt with me they became different people. They became as confident as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace. It was as if they knew that not I, but the Most High, was in charge of their fate. Perhaps my story could help you see that about your own life. There may be a person in your life that keeps you from fulfilling your dreams - an abusive spouse, a critical parent, an unfair boss. Perhaps it's just the circumstances of life that have beat you down; things you have no control over; things you are powerless to change - a crippling disability, a psychological disorder, a terminal disease. Take comfort; he is able to humble those who walk in pride. He rules over the affairs of men. A day will come when he will make things right. If he is able to humble those who walk in pride, he is surely able to exalt those who walk in humility.

But, for others, this is hardly a message of comfort. You may not be a king, but you sit on your own throne and you think you rule your own life. For some of you it's obvious. You've got no place for a God who demands absolute surrender. God is a cop-out; a crutch for the weak and irresponsible. You're the captain of your ship and you've done a pretty good job of it. For others, it's not so obvious. You're a religious person, just like I was. You have your nice house and your good job and your healthy family. You do everything you can to keep your little domain in order. You wonder why others can't seem to get it together. You don't know it, but you're just as proud as I was.

A day will come when God in his grace will warn you. It may be a dream; it may be a Belteshazzar; it may be something you just can't control. But the message will be clear: the Most High rules; humble yourself before him; break away from your sins and do what is right. If you don't humble yourself now, he will have to humble you later on. That's a message you might want to listen to. It's a dangerous thing to walk in pride. Take it from me, a man who thought he was a god, and had to be made into a beast, in order to learn he was just a human being.

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