

We are continuing our series through the life of Daniel. For the entire series, we have focused on the life of Daniel, seeking to draw lessons from his example of how to exist and thrive faithfully in exile. But last week and this week, we are taking a sort of excursus into the life of Nebuchadnezzar.

If you haven't been following with us or are new to the narrative of Daniel, remember, Nebuchadnezzar is the King of Babylon and at this point in history, the most powerful man in the known world. And he knows that. He has now taken a group of Israelites, which includes Daniel, back from Jerusalem into Babylon as exiles or prisoners of war.

One of the currents taking place right beneath the surface of the entire narrative is the story of Nebuchadnezzar's humbling and the work of God in the process. Because this has been taking place and it is so instructive for where we find our stories of God's work in our lives, we felt it necessary to highlight this for a few weeks.

At the center of Nebuchadnezzar's story and what the author of Daniel is highlighting is the consistent pride and arrogance that has been elevated throughout his story. Nebuchadnezzar's ascent has elevated his ego and distanced himself from God. What you see in the narrative of Nebuchadnezzar is an exposé on pride and its effects on the human condition. You see his inflated ego and the manner that it erodes his soul.

We live in a world that has constructed a moral ecology built on external achievement. It thrives on pride and accomplishment. There has been a historic drift over the past few centuries where the external has become the grounds for change, and the internal has been considered as something to be liberated, not tamed and transformed. And, of course, this problem of pride is not a new phenomenon. Maybe there are different propensities toward pride in our day than in past ages, but pride has been a problem as long as humans have been around.

CS Lewis, in his classic book, *Mere Christianity*, called pride "the great sin." For Lewis, pride was the sin from which all other sins stem. It is a sin that plagues all human existence and affects all people.

**...the essential vice, the utmost evil, is pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind...Now what you want to**

**get clear is that pride is essentially competitive—is competitive by its very nature...We say that people are proud of being rich, clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, cleverer, or better-looking than others.**

What Lewis notes is that all pride is at its core competitive by its very nature. You are prideful because you desire to have more success than others, or more money than others, or be more beautiful than others, or whatever it is that is your particular vice of choice that pride embodies. But the root of the problem is it centers yourself above everything and everyone. It drives one toward competition, turning people into rivals. By doing so, it makes love antithetical; it is not something to achieve but something to be overcome in order for you to thrive. It is insidious and metastasizes throughout all it touches.

David Brooks, in his great book *The Road to Character*, picks up on the competitive aspect of pride and links this to the reason we have increasing levels of self-aggrandizement in our culture. It is because we are living in an increasingly meritocratic society, meaning a society based on external merits and achievements alone.

In a society built on meritocracy, the struggle for self-actualization lies not internally healing the brokenness within each of us but externally on the overcoming of structures systems, as well as overcoming the others that hampers our growth. Others are viewed not as co-laborers toward the common good but a competitor in the quest for capital, likes, attention, power, fame, etc. This shift tragically leads to a swelling of cultural pride as the very air we breathe. Toward the end of his book, he details 15 items in what he calls the "Humility Code." In it, he contrasts humility and pride and defines them this way:

**...humility is the greatest virtue. Humility is having an accurate assessment of your own nature and your own place in the cosmos. Humility is awareness that you are an underdog in the struggle against your own weakness. Humility is an awareness that your individual talents alone are inadequate to the tasks that have been assigned to you. Humility reminds you that you are not the center of the universe...Pride is the central vice...Pride blinds us to the reality of our divided nature. Pride blinds us to our own weaknesses and misleads us into thinking we are better than we are. Pride makes us more certain and closed-minded than we should be...Because of pride we try to prove we are better than those around us. Pride deludes us**

## into thinking that we are the authors of our own lives.

This is the world we live in. A world caught between the tension of pride and humility. In the age of pride and self-aggrandizement that we live, the gospel the world preaches is about overcoming any and all restraints, whether it is individuals, structures, or anything that hinders the ability to advance your own personal status and identity.

If you remember, last week, we watched Nebuchadnezzar reflect on his story and what God did throughout his awakening to his own pride and transformation. He begins his story by remembering his inability to accept that Yahweh is greater, making God an object of rivalry that threatens his position of power. This is the source of his pride.

Notice and remember the phrases that Nebuchadnezzar has used prior to talking about his own power. Remember in chapter 3, out of insecurity and fear of another Kingdom coming and crushing his own, he constructs the massive statute to institute state worship. It was the insecurity that drove him into competition with the other gods and Yahweh. *"Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" (Daniel 3:15).*

And then, later in the narrative, after having been confronted by Daniel about his arrogance and after God had sought his humility, 12 months go by, and this is what he says after that time... *"he said, 'Is not this the great Babylon I have built as my royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?'" (Daniel 4:30).* Nebuchadnezzar could never be humbled. Up until this point, he could never set aside his ego to realize that God is greater, God is higher, and God is sovereign.

What has been playing out beneath the surface of the entire book is this subtle battle of who is in charge of the universe. This has been a theme that has undergirded the entire narrative with Nebuchadnezzar challenging the sovereignty of God and finding himself falling short over and over. This is what eventually leads to the humbling of Nebuchadnezzar.

**You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes. Daniel 4:32**

Notice the emphasis on the kingdoms on earth. You see, Nebuchadnezzar would have had no problem accepting that Yahweh was the king and ruler of the heavens; that was the purpose of the gods, to rule in the heavens.

This is where the real rub comes; most of us are quite comfortable with God ruling in the heavens. Where we find our own humbling is when we allow and see God ruling the "kingdoms on earth." We are quite ready to embrace and praise a God who rules in the heavens, so long as he stays there in the heavens. It

was once he imposed himself onto Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom that he had an issue. And this is much like us. Because we all have a "kingdom." It is different from the kingdoms of rulers like Nebuchadnezzars. But we all have a "kingdom."

You could define kingdom as the range of your effective will. Or put differently, it is the place in which what you want to have to happen happens. This could be in your home with your kids, your job, or your social life. We all have some level of autonomy and the ability to have happen what we desire to have to happen. For some of us, that is a large kingdom. Maybe you have great influence in your work or social life, and so with that greater reach and range of your will, you have greater responsibility. Others of us that may be smaller, but regardless of size, the goal is always to bring our kingdoms under the kingdom of God rather than warring against it.

But pride is the assertion that our kingdom is more important and therefore does not need to be subject to other kingdoms. This is what Nebuchadnezzar runs into. And this is what we run into when we are confronted by Jesus.

This is why, if we are to take seriously following Jesus and entering into the kingdom of God that Jesus has declared near, then we are going to be quickly uncomfortable. Because this was the gospel message, the reign and rule—the kingdom of God—became a present reality when Jesus came on the scene. And when we recognize this as our reality, because it is a reality, Jesus is Lord, and the Kingdom of God is available to all, we experience the same humbling as Nebuchadnezzar.

This will always take humbling because whether it is a government power, a social leader, a CEO, or an individual, no one likes to have their kingdom encroached upon by another. But this is exactly what the Kingdom of God does, it imposes itself on us, and until we find our lives in congruence with it, we will be restless. In different words, Nebuchadnezzar was brought to confess what we all will one day confess as well, *"Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."*

So what is the result of Nebuchadnezzar's humbling? Where did that lead Nebuchadnezzar? How did he turn from his arrogance and pride to come to worship Yahweh? These are the questions that we arrive at in this text.

*"At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes towards heaven, and my sanity was restored." (Daniel 4:34a).* At the time of his humbling, Nebuchadnezzar was in an animal-like state, but the story returns now to Nebuchadnezzar as himself again. He is now a different man. The wilderness season has changed him and formed him. He is no longer the self he had been before or during the illness. Here we see that the season of humbling undertaken by God that drove Nebuchadnezzar out into the wilderness and into a sort of animal-like state has come to an end. *"At the end of that time..."*

There is a two-fold example of mercy that God is providing in the story. First, it is the severe mercy that we talked about last week. For many of us, we must be driven out into the wilderness and stripped of all our power and privilege in order for us to see more clearly the folly of our ways, to expose the pride that festers inside of us. Second, it is the mercy to restore us back to our previous state. This is the “dew of heaven” that we talked about last week. It exposes, and it restores. Each of us must at some point experience this severe mercy.

Newsom's commentary on Daniel states that for Nebuchadnezzar, his suffering was “not merely educative, but also transformative.” Nebuchadnezzar did not gradually come to an understanding of Yahweh as the ultimate sovereign power. Rather, his suffering needed to continue “for a time.” But when that time ends, he is restored.

*“I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes towards heaven, and my sanity was restored.”* This is an interesting phrase that seems to suggest that part of what brought Nebuchadnezzar's time in the wilderness to a close was his turning to look to God. This is a marked difference in Nebuchadnezzar. Remember before in chapter 3, Daniel confronts Nebuchadnezzar on his pride, and after a set of time, 12 months, Nebuchadnezzar remained in his pride, but here, a set amount of time has passed, and Nebuchadnezzar shifts his eyes to heaven. Looking to heaven would imply a looking beyond his own ability, moving beyond seeing himself as everything. It takes humility to look beyond oneself.

The insanity that filled Nebuchadnezzar's past was removed once he was able to lift his eyes to heaven. Maybe the central effect of our pride is our inability to see beyond ourselves. We get so centered on our own lives that we are not able to see beyond our own stuff. This has been the gift of good Christian community and therapy for me. In a world that is organized around the individual, it can be nearly impossible to see life beyond our own lives. But what Nebuchadnezzar had to learn the hard way was that there was life beyond himself, and there was one greater than him.

We must find something that exposes the faults of our own making. Community and proximity to others are the primary ways that this takes place in the Christian. For Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel functioned as the one who was able to expose his inner pride.

What is the result of an encounter with God? What results in a life that moves beyond the self-centeredness of pride?

### **Nebuchadnezzar's Prayer**

**Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the**

**earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: “What have you done?”” Daniel 4:34b-35**

After having his reason returned to him, Nebuchadnezzar bursts into praise for God that is fit for a king. Finally, Nebuchadnezzar is able to recognize one greater than himself. “His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation.” The praise is specifically befitted for a king and in the interest of a king. It opens speaking specifically of a dominion and a kingdom; that is, royal language.

Remember that throughout the book, thus far, Nebuchadnezzar has been concerned with his kingdom collapsing. He has had visions of his kingdom losing its power and him falling from authority. But in his humbling, he recognizes that Yahweh's kingdom is one that will endure, beyond what even he could imagine. Unlike all human kingdoms, Nebuchadnezzar realizes that God's kingdom will never end.

*“All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing...”* The reach of God's kingdom is to all peoples of the earth. Kings have subjects but only to the extent of their borders, but Nebuchadnezzar realizes the extent of God's kingdom as beyond any border and reaches to all peoples.

In effect, Nebuchadnezzar realizes that his reach is merely as far as God allows. He is a sub-regent to God. All his power is derived from God and is relative to God. *“He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth...”* God is in total and utter control. Anything he chooses to do, he does, and anything he chooses not to do is a result of his power. He has power over heaven, and he has power over earth. *“No one can hold back his hand or say to him: ‘What have you done?’”* No one or no thing can hold back God from accomplishing what God sets out to accomplish. Again, the picture is of utter sovereignty over all creation.

The image we see here of Nebuchadnezzar is an image of a complete reversal from other points in the book. Rather than viewing God as a rival to be challenged and confronted, Nebuchadnezzar views God as supreme and one to be worshipped. This is a moment all of us, at some point, must come to, the moment where we recognize and yield to the authority, power, and grace of God. And it is in this space that we find our humility and also our source of life. Nebuchadnezzar's response continues.

**At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honor and splendor were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisors and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before. Daniel 4:36**

At some basic, baseline form, Nebuchadnezzar had grown in wisdom by recognizing the true living God. He found the clue to wisdom, and it qualified him to return to wisdom. The season that stripped his power and authority functioned as a liminal space in which he was forced to experience the privations and humiliations, but all of it led to knowledge. Isn't this the case

with us as well. At times, we have to experience exile in order to come to the true knowledge of who we are and the proper ordering of our role in the world.

This is part of the process of humbling because, in a state of pride, our understanding of self and the world is distorted; it is bent inward. And that can if untended, result in a spiral of misunderstanding.

His transformation was such that his advisors and nobles were prepared to receive him back. The whole story humanizes Nebuchadnezzar. One who once thought of himself as a god is humbled and restored through genuine knowledge of the truth. Nebuchadnezzar goes on with this summary statement, which stands not only as a summary of his story here but actually as a summary statement of the entire book of Daniel.

*"Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does it right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble" (Daniel 4:37).* Over these chapters, we have witnessed the humbling of the pride of Nebuchadnezzar as he has been waking up to the reality of God as sovereign overall.

What a statement at the end of such a long transformative story for Nebuchadnezzar...*"Now I... praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven..."* It is a stunning admission that was inconceivable that Nebuchadnezzar would one day confess. A beautiful confession to a great story of change!

As we have watched and witnessed Nebuchadnezzar's conversion to the way of God, I wonder what this would look like for you? As I mentioned last week, we all have some level of Nebuchadnezzar in us. For Nebuchadnezzar, he reached the place of humility through a process of being humbled by God. But he arrives at being able to exalt the "King of heaven." I think there are two things we can draw that place us on the "way to humility." Two simple things we see in Nebuchadnezzar that we too can replicate.

What we learn from the story of Nebuchadnezzar is that the way of humility leads to God. And this is an example for us all as well. I want to close by returning to the story of Nebuchadnezzar as an example for us all.

### **Raise Our Eyes**

The first thing we can do to model Nebuchadnezzar's humility is to raise our eyes towards heaven. If pride is the affection and attention of the individual turned inward, the anecdote is to fix the attention outward. The focus shifts from the self, moving from self-absorption to moving toward God. The problem for

Nebuchadnezzar was that his eyes were in two places, neither of which were on God. His eyes were fixed on himself, and they were fixed on looking down on everyone else. In order for him to raise his eyes toward God, he had to stop looking down on others and start to look elsewhere.

I'm reminded of the Proverb in chapter 9. *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. For through wisdom your days will be many, and years will be added to your life."* (Proverbs 9:10-11). This is the beginning of knowledge, the fear (reverence) of God. When God is centered, when God is made central in our understanding, that is the source of knowledge.

### **Praise the Most High**

The shift in perspective and the shift in gaze transforms the experience and transforms the individual, so it swells up into praise. It demands praise of something other than the self. Worship, praise has a formative effect on your soul. Genuine worship breaks down one's pride, and in worship and praise of the "most High," we are de-centered and reminded of our own frailty. We are broken and faced with our own insufficiency

Humility leads one to seek wisdom. Humility begins with an accurate understanding of ourselves—frail and broken. We tend to be self-centered and overconfident. We believe ourselves to be the center of the universe and fail to recognize God as the center of the universe. Pride blinds us to our weaknesses and makes us think we are better than we are. But it is in humility that we find our way back to God.

Would you pray with me? Holy Lord God, who sent your only Son Jesus Christ to be crucified for our sins, have mercy upon us. May we follow in his example, leading and loving in great humility, for you oppose the proud but raise up the humble. Help us to be humble and gracious in every interaction, patient, loving, and kind. I humble myself before you, Lord, for I am nothing without you. I long to serve you, Lord, and follow in your way. Amen.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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