The Return to Reason
Daniel 4

So this chapter is Nebuchadnezzar's last appearance in Daniel. By chapter 5, he's already history. But not yet; for now he's at his peak, and he has cemented Babylon's place in the world as the world superpower, and he is, literally, lord of all he surveys.

And for the first time in the book Daniel and his friends are not in danger. This time the one who's in danger is Nebucahdnezzar himself.

God is King
This chapter is like one of those books or films that begins with the end. It starts with the outcome of what it's going to recount, that Nebuchadnezzar finally comes to understand that it's God, not him, who is the supreme ruler. No more towering golden statues, idolising his unending rule. No more claims that no god can deliver from his hands. Instead, speaking of God, he says, v3, "*His* kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and *his* dominion endures from generation to generation."

But notice the context in which he says that. It's through a public declaration, verse 1, 'to all peoples, nations, and languages.' Now, some years back, when Tony Blair was British Prime Minister, an interviewer asked him a question about his faith, and his press secretary, a man called Alastair Campbell, leant across and cut him off, saying, 'we don't do God.' Now, whether politicians do, or don't do, God, there is this push from secularism for the privatisation of faith, that religion is a matter for your private life, not the public sphere.

But the book of Daniel challenges that. You see, if there is a God whose kingdom is from everlasting to everlasting then it is of huge public importance, isn't it. And Nebuchadnezzar does do God, because he has come to realize that it is God's kingdom that will last, not his own.

Now, why does Daniel want his first readers, Jewish people trying to live out their faith in pagan Babylon, and you and me in our increasingly secular 21st century West, to know what Nebuchadnezzar has come to know? Because did you notice the recurring phrase, that gets repeated three times in this chapter, v17, 25, 32: "the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will." So, why does Daniel want his readers, then and now, to know that? That it's God who's in control, and not just of kingdoms and governments, but of kings and presidents and events and circumstances, as well?

Because sometimes it doesn't seem that way, does it? Sometimes stuff happens in your life, or the lives of those you love, that leaves you thinking, 'is God really in charge? Or am I just deluding myself to believe that?' Or, you can look at the direction of society and culture, and see forces or individuals hostile to God on the ascendancy, or you can experience the difficulty of being a Christian at work or on campus, and you can begin to have this gnawing doubt, 'am I kidding myself to think God's in charge?'

And Daniel wants us to know that, despite all appearances, God is sovereign. And he wants you to know that, so that even when it seems otherwise, your faith can remain steadfast and even flourish.

And, Nebuchadnezzar learnt the truth of that, his life was transformed. And it can have the same effect on us.

Power, Pride and Performance: The problem of thinking you're king

So, Nebuchadnezzar has another dream, a dream he says in v5, "that made me afraid." But yet again, despite the fact that this time he's prepared to tell his wise-men what the dream was, they're either unable or unwilling to help him. And then Daniel enters: v8, 'At last Daniel came in before me – he who was named Belteshazzar after the name of my god, and in whom is the spirit of the holy gods.'

Now, does anything strike you about that? You see, firstly he uses Daniel's Hebrew and Babylonian names. Which means that despite all the power and influence of Babylonian culture and the state, Daniel is still Daniel. He's not just Belteshazzar. So he has managed to do what everyone of us who are Christians are called to do - to be in the world, but not of the world. He has faithfully served this king, and sought the welfare of the city, without losing his identity as a child of God, by being assimilated into the empire.

But secondly, Nebuchadnezzar describes the god Bel as 'my god', and he says Daniel is filled with the spirit of 'the holy gods' – plural. Which means, Nebuchadnezzar's polytheism is also alive and well. So, like most people you and I will meet in our own polytheistic world, Nebuchadnezzar is spiritually confused and he finds his security in, and gets his identity from stuff that isn't God.

But in interpreting the dream, how does Daniel treat him? Does he roast him for his sin and idolatry? Or does he give him a free pass? And tell him it doesn't matter how he lives, God loves him anyway? It's neither, is it?, He neither dismisses the man, nor his sin. Instead, Daniel shows grace to a man who needs it.

You see, in his dream the king has seen a tree, and v11, 'Its top reached to heaven.' And it's tall, it's strong, its leaves are beautiful and its fruit abundant, and animals and birds find shelter in it and peoples are fed from it. And Daniel knows immediately who this tree is: v22, "It is you, O king, who have grown and become strong."

Now just think for a moment who Daniel is talking to. Here is a man, Nebuchadnezzar, with whom Daniel profoundly disagrees on a whole multitude of things; whose world view is totally alien to his own; a man who destroyed his homeland, probably killed his loved ones, uprooted him from all he knew, razed the temple of God in Jerusalem to the ground, and more recently threatened the lives of his friends. And yet, at no point does Daniel take any delight in what he knows is going to come upon the king unless he repents. At no point is there any sense of, 'ha, at last you're going to get what you deserve.'

Instead, what does Daniel express? It's a real and deep compassion for the man. Verse 19, 'Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar was dismayed for a while, and his thoughts alarmed him'. Now, he's not worried for himself, is he? That if he tells the king the truth it's going to put his own life at risk. No. Verse 19, "My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you and its interpretation for your enemies!" In other words, Daniel wishes the message of this dream was for someone other than this man he is so different from.

Now, why is that extraordinary? Because, all too often we do wish harm on those we disagree with, or who harm us, or harm the causes we believe in. Or if not wish them harm, then at least we can feel a lack of compassion or love for them. So, the question is, how can you develop a sense of love or compassion for those who are different from you, or with whom you profoundly disagree? Well, in Luke 10 Jesus tells a story to some Jewish people about a Jew, so someone 'like us', who was attacked and left for dead on the roadside. But who stopped to help him? Was it another 'one of us'? A fellow conservative, or liberal? Was it the levite – the Bible teacher, or the priest – the pastor? Someone we respect and look up to? Was it the theologically, or morally, or racially pure? No! It was a Samaritan – one of 'them', one of those people the people listening looked down on and despised. But if that was shocking, what's even more shocking is who Jesus put in the street in the first place –the one who's in need of help and rescue. And it is the Jew – not the Samaritan. It's us, who think we're the one's who are right, who aren't like this Nebuchadnezzar, or these Samaritans, or these liberals or these conservatives. And it's only when you realise that you're the one lying in the road, in need of God's mercy and grace to stoop down and pick you up and rescue you, that you will be able to love your neighbour who you might be tempted to despise, and who you find in the street.

But, having compassion for the king did not mean that Daniel shrunk from telling him the hard things, did it. And he tells him that he will be reduced to a stump of a man, v25, 'till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.' Then, v27, "Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins… and your iniquities." And from a heart of compassion Daniel is prepared to confront. And we cannot do one without the other. Daniel isn't harsh, but neither does he fudge it. He combines a deep love for this man, with a deep love for God that is prepared to say the hard things. And in the gospel, we hear the same: that we are so sinful that the Son of God had to die for us, but so loved that he did die for us.

But it's Daniel's call to repent, and what follows, that tells us what Nebuchadnezzar's underlying issue was, and it's pride.

And he has plenty of reasons to be proud, doesn't he. After all, he's achieved; he's succeeded. In v4 he tells us, 'I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and prospering in my palace.' He has power and prestige, he has wealth and influence. He's built Babylon into *the* major city of the world, with magnificent city walls, and temples, and palaces, and to top it all, the hanging gardens of Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. And tens of thousands of

the bricks that were used to build this city were fired with his name printed on them. So, quite literally, this man has built a name for himself.

So, just like the tree, Nebuchadnezzar has grown great. His rule, his persona, his self-confidence, his ego, are all great – too great. And as he walks on the roof of his palace, looking across the city, he says, v30: "Is not this great Babylon, which *I* have built by *my* mighty power as a royal residence for the glory of *my* majesty?" I, my, my. And pride is a dangerous thing, isn't it? Especially pride in your performance

Firstly, it's dangerous for others. Look at Daniel's counsel in v27: "Break off your sins by practising righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed." You see, when you want to make a name for yourself, when your sense of self-worth is dependent on your performance, righteousness becomes expendable, and you cut corners morally, and you compromise your integrity. And, if you do succeed, you can become proud, and you begin to think you're self-sufficient, and you're the one in charge, and you're answerable to no-one, and you neglect righteousness. And you either become an oppressor of others, because you need to keep others down to maintain your own position, or you fail to show mercy to those who are less fortunate than you, because what can they do for you? Unless, of course, it's for a good publicity moment. So, when pride takes a grip on your heart, righteousness and justice lose theirs.

But seeking your self-worth in your performance or taking pride in your results isn't just bad for others – it's bad for you too. You see, what if you don't make it? What if you don't publish more papers, or achieve that position, or get that bonus? What if your family or your marriage isn't the idyllic one you always dreamt of? Then you have no peace, and inside you die. So, whether it's for the good of others, or for the good of our own hearts, we need to get our significance from somewhere much better than Nebuchadnezzar's and Babylon's performance-based culture. We need a worth outside ourselves.

And so, like Nebuchadnezzar, we too need to be reminded that we are not God, and we don't need to try and be like God. So Daniel warns the king that unless he repents, he will experience this deep humbling.

The Terrible Descent

And it seems that God gave Nebuchadnezzar 12 months, and it was only as he stood over Babylon glorying in his own greatness, that the dream became a reality, and Nebuchadnezzar's world crumbled with one word from God: v31, 'There fell a voice from heaven, "O king Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: the kingdom has departed from you."' And what follows is a total humbling of the man, and he ends up behaving like an animal.

And that's the great irony of human pride, isn't it? We're made in the image of God, distinct from the animals, but in our pride we think we are God, that the world revolves around me, and I'm the one who rules, I'm the king. And in the process we come to behave like animals: we become aggressive and territorial, we eat and devour one another, we lust after others or what others have, we

insist on our pecking orders and jostle for position. And so Nebuchadnezzar, the man who considered himself so great, becomes externally what he was internally: like an animal.

Now, if you're tempted to think this is all too crazy to be true, tragically it's not. There are psychiatric conditions that can do this. But whatever the medical cause was, when he regained his former self Nebuchadnezzar tells us what was really going on: v34 and 36, '*My reason* returned to me.' So this was a loss of reason, it was a descent into intellectual darkness.

And the apostle Paul says that that is exactly what happens when we reject God, and instead put ourselves in his place, it has this negative, darkening effect upon the mind: Romans 1:21-22: 'For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became *futile in their thinking,* and *their foolish hearts were darkened*. *Claiming to be wise they became fools*.'

Now just think about that. You see when we think our success is down to us, that we're a self-made man or woman, we fail to thank God – because gratitude expresses dependence, it acknowledges a sense of indebtedness. But human pride says, 'no, I've done this'. And that dismissal of God, Paul says, leads to this darkening of reason. Which is all a bit ironic, isn't it? You see, some modern proponents for atheism say stuff like 'religious belief is like a virus, infecting the mind'; and that to believe in God is counter to reason, and you have to be a fool to believe. And yet the Bible says otherwise. But so too does your experience.

You see, have you ever met someone who is otherwise very rational and intelligent, but when it comes to talking about God or religion, they become irrational. And they make sweeping statements about the Bible that leave you thinking, 'you haven't even read this, have you?' they comment on an area of knowledge in a way they'd never dream of doing in their own field. Or they might insist that you've got to choose between science and God – as if those things are totally incompatible alternatives. Or they insist that atheism is not a belief system, but then say they believe it's true, and when offered evidence for belief in God refuse to consider it because they 'don't want to believe.'

Now, is any of that rational? No. It's the intellectual darkening that Paul talks about here in Romans 1, that Nebuchadnezzar experiences and that comes when we refuse to acknowledge God.

And so God afflicts Nebuchadnezzar, not to destroy him, but to truly restore him. He brings him low, so that he might be lifted up to a place better than he was before. And Nebuchadnezzar can only *truly* be king when he recognises he isn't. But the same is true for you and me, isn't it? It's only as we recognise that we are not king and not God and are not free of him, that we can become truly free and be all we were meant to be.

But did you notice how the king's return to reason begins? Verse 34, 'At the end of the days, I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me.' He just has to look upwards. Now, why does that begin this dramatic

turnaround in his life? Because it's a recognition that there is a power greater than he; that there is one who rules over him, and that he cannot restore himself. And Nebuchadnezzar has been brought to the place of realising just how un-godlike he really is. And he recognises that God is God, not him; that thine is the kingdom, not mine; that God's will is sovereign, not my personal freedom. And his sanity returns.

And for you and me, it's only as we realise that the universe does not revolve around us that we can come to our right mind and find our right place in the universe. It's only as we realise that it's God who rules, not me, that I can be freed of the pride of performance, or the lack of peace that comes when I fail. And it's only when our inner confidence and security is based on something much better than our achievements or the state of the world around us that our faith can flourish in a rapidly changing world.

The Truly Humble King

Around November time, our village is shrouded in fog. And after days of this grey soup you long for the sun to break through. And that's what happens for Nebuchadnezzar. The light of right thinking cuts through his mental fog and he sees himself and God as they really are. Verse 34, 'I blessed the Most High, and praised and honoured him who lives forever, for *his* dominion is an everlasting dominion, and *his* kingdom endures from generation to generation.' And in v37, he calls God, 'the King of Heaven', because finally he gets who the king really is.

But look again at what the angel says to Nebuchadnezzar in the dream: v17, 'the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men.' It's a reminder that without God, Nebuchadnezzar would be nothing.

But it's more than that. You see, years later the lowliest of men, Jesus of Nazareth, would take the highest of thrones. And in Paul's words from Philippians 2, Jesus 'humbled himself.' And in response, v9-11, 'God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow… and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.'

And here, Nebuchadnezzar is wealthy and powerful and proud, and is brought to nothing, and reduced to a stump, so that he might be saved. But at the cross, the Lord Jesus, from the stump of Jesse, from the family tree of King David, was also cut down, not for his sin, but for ours. And he made himself nothing, to make us something.

And he's the king before whom Nebuchadnezzar, and you and me, and every other wannabe king, must bow. And in Luke 4:43, Luke tells us that Jesus came preaching 'the good news of the kingdom of God.' But ask yourself, why is Christ the King good news? Because, when you're facing opposition for your faith you know who's in control, and that means you don't need to fear for the future, or what others will say about you – because you know who's king and you know whose word about you really matters.

But it's also good news because when you think you're king or that you have to build your own kingdom to feel good about yourself, you'll end up pushing others down and trampling on them. But when you know Christ is king you know you don't need to prove yourself that way, so instead you can lift others up. And when Christ is king, it's not just others you don't need to impress, you also don't need to prove yourself to yourself, and that brings real inner peace.

And here, Nebuchadnezzar's world crumbles with one word from heaven. For us, our world might crumble with a word from the doctor; or a call from a relative; or a visit from the police; or a request to come into your boss's office. And life's great when you're at ease and prospering in your palace, and you feel in control. But what happens when life crumbles? Then you need to know that you are held in the hands of a power greater than you, that there is a king in heaven who loves you, regardless of your performance.

And the good news of God's kingdom gives you that. And when you lift your gaze to Jesus, and see with faith what he has done for you, it can transform your life, just as Nebuchadnezzar's upward look transformed his. It gives you a real and radical humility, because it tells you you're so sinful, so lost in the irrational fog of thinking that you're the king, that the real king had to die for you. But it also doesn't crush you, instead it gives you a deep inner confidence, because it tells you you're so loved the real king did come to die for you. So the cross of Jesus kills both your pride and your self-loathing. So whatever is happening in the world, or in the circumstances of your life, when you know that Jesus is king, it gives you a peace and a security that nothing can shake.