

Daniel 4.19-37

Humbling the proud

Amington (Online)

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Daniel: Faithful in Exile (6)

Learning a lesson

Are you any good at learning from your mistakes? Do you ever have a quiet word with yourself, something like, 'Why can't you just learn the lesson?!'

I enjoy hiking and have quite a lot of experience following maps, and rarely get lost. But on one occasion I got *very* lost. I knew that I had to turn off the main path and walk through a wooded area, so I was looking out for a stile on my right. I came up to one sooner than I was expecting, but arrogantly assumed I was just walking, so hopped over and started walking. The first clue that I was wrong was the 'private' sign next to the stile.

At first the path was obvious, but soon started to fade away. That was the second clue I was wrong. I carried on, convinced I could see the path, congratulating myself for being off the beaten track.

At one point I turned round and couldn't tell which way I had come – the third clue. However, often paths in wooded areas are hard to follow, and I convinced myself I knew where I was going.

I could see from the contour lines on the map that I needed to be heading uphill. Up I struggled – it was quite a bit steeper than the contour lines looked – my fourth clue that I was wrong.

It wasn't though until I hit the fifth clue that I finally learned the lesson that I had gone wrong. The fifth clue was a barbed wire fence, stretching as far as I could see, at the edge of the wood. *Even then* I carried on, walking along it one way, and then the other, before I finally gave in and accepted I was wrong.

I turned back – and of course was completely and hopelessly lost. After walking round for an hour or so, the farmer who owned the wood saw me and started yelling at me – and then pointed the way I should go to get back to the path.

It was not my finest hour – in any sense!

But I am encouraged that I'm not the only one... today we hear about how Nebuchadnezzar refused to learn the lesson God was teaching him through Daniel and his friends: he needed to be a bit more humble.

In chapter 2 he had a dream warning him that his kingdom was not the last word in human power.

In chapter 3 he set up a statue celebrating his power, but God showed him through Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that actually *he* was more powerful.

In chapter 4 Nebuchadnezzar had another dream warning him against pride – which he also ignored.

Let's dive in.

Nebuchadnezzar's Pride (20-26, 28-33)

We heard about Nebuchadnezzar's dream last week. It was of a **large and strong tree (20) with beautiful leaves and abundant fruit, providing food for all, giving shelter to the wild animals, and having nesting places in its branches for the birds (21).**

Daniel told the king (22), **'You are that tree!'** He was a great and powerful king, and many nations lived under his protection – of course that's because he had brutally conquered them first.

In the dream the tree was **cut down**, left as a **stump, drenched with the dew of heaven**, living **with the wild animals**, instead of giving shelter to them (23).

This dream warned Nebuchadnezzar that he was in danger of being humbled – even humiliated. The once-great king would be brought low, **driven away from people, live with the wild animals, drenched with the dew of heaven** (25). But why? Remember the verse we focused on last week? Daniel 4.17:

‘“The decision is announced... so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes.”’

Daniel 4.17 (NIV)

We have it again in verse 25:

‘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 4.25 (NIV)

And again in verse 32:

‘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 (NIV)

These days when I'm writing something and I want to emphasise it I can simply use **bold** or *italic* or underline on my computer. The Biblical writers had no such tools, partly because they had no computers, but mostly because the Bible was written to be *heard*.

So emphasis is done through repetition. Three times the lesson is repeated: **the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes** (17, 25, 32).

Nebuchadnezzar was as bad at learning that lesson as I was at learning I had gone wrong on my walk through the woods.

A father was so proud when his wife gave birth to their sixth child. Of all the achievements in his life, this was the one he was most proud of. So he took to calling his wife, 'Mother of six.'

For months he called her, 'Mother of six,' 'Mother of six,' and boasted to their friends – she grew sick and tired of it. And let's be honest, he was proud but she'd done all the work!

Eventually, at a dinner party as she could hear him bragging about their six children, she snapped when he called out, 'Mother of six, bring us some more nibbles!'

'I'll be there in a minute,' she called back, 'Father of four.'

Nebuchadnezzar had much to be proud of. He ruled a huge empire. He had conquered the once-mighty Egypt. He built his capital city Babylon with a huge double-wall system all around, 21-feet thick, so wide he could drive his chariot along the top.

The hanging gardens, apparently built for his wife Amytis, were one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. He had at least three palaces, and a 400-foot long bridge spanned the river Euphrates, connecting the East and West sides of the city.¹

No wonder as he stood atop his palace he said (30), **‘Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?’**

Maybe he’d forgotten his dream a year earlier (29), maybe he didn’t care, maybe he didn’t believe it after all those months had passed. But immediately **a voice came from heaven** and announced the punishment the dream had warned him about. And so,

[Nebuchadnezzar] was driven away from people and ate grass like the ox. 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.

Daniel 4.33 (NIV)

It sounds fantastical doesn't it? But his condition has a name: boanthropy. Sufferers of boanthropy believe themselves to be a cow or an ox, and eat grass. It's rare, but not unknown – so let's not dismiss out of hand what the Bible says here.

The mighty king Nebuchadnezzar, whose commands brought fear into the hearts of his advisors and his people, was brought low and truly humbled by the God Most High. Why? So he might **know that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes.**

Friends, God will not be mocked. We might not like to hear about God's judgement – but to water down what the Bible says about who God is and what God does, is to make God less than he is.

And, as we shall see, he is full of mercy as well as judgement.

Daniel's Humility (19, 27)

Some of you know that I enjoy to do jigsaw puzzles. I was really proud of myself this week because I finished a jigsaw puzzle that took me two years! I was especially proud because on the side of the box it said '5+ years'.

I wonder – if I had been in Daniel’s shoes, would I have acted as he did? He responded to the king so beautifully: he was gracious but honest, and brave but gentle.

First, Daniel was gracious but honest. **‘My Lord,’** he said (19), **‘if only the dream applied to your enemies and its meaning to your adversaries!’** He didn’t gloat, he didn’t enjoy passing on the warning. I mean, Nebuchadnezzar didn’t deserve such kind words and feelings – he was a terror, a raging monster, God’s enemy. But that’s the point of grace: giving what is not deserved.

Daniel was gracious – but also honest; he didn’t hide the truth or pull his punches. He wasn’t ‘nice’ because he didn’t shy away from challenging Nebuchadnezzar’s behaviour. He didn’t water down the truth: he was honest as well as gracious.

Second, Daniel was brave but gentle. He had shown his bravery before in chapter 2 when he said, **‘After you...’** (2.39). Here his bravery goes further: he offers the king **advice** (27)! And it’s not ‘do what you think is right’ or ‘be true to yourself’ or ‘follow your heart’ or any of the self-centred advice we like to live by today.

It was hard-hitting: **‘renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed’** (27). Wow.

You take your life into your hands when you say stuff like that to people with the power and pride of Nebuchadnezzar. Renounce your sins, Daniel said, and repent of your wickedness! Heed the warning, and maybe, just maybe, you won't suffer the punishment.

Daniel was brave – but he was also gentle. He began with, **'Your majesty, be pleased to accept my advice'** (27). Nebuchadnezzar's furious rage (2.12, 3.19) was met by Daniel's gentleness.

What a contrast Daniel is to Nebuchadnezzar! One is furious and angry and stubborn and arrogant – the other gracious and honest and brave and gentle. One is proud – the other humble.

Does Daniel remind you of anyone? I think those words – gracious, honest, brave, gentle – I think they describe Jesus, too, and show us something of what humility looks like in practice.

God's Mercy (34-37)

There's a scene in the hit Netflix show *The Crown* when the Queen has an argument with Prince Philip on the eve of her coronation. It's pure fiction, but good telly: the Queen refuses to make an exception for Philip, even though he is her husband, and insists that he kneel before her during the ceremony, along with everyone else.

She, of course, has not kneeled in homage before anyone since her father died in 1952 – anyone, that is, except God.

For even kings and queens must kneel before the King of heaven. We must *all* learn to be humble before the Most High God, lest *he* humble *us* (37), as he did Nebuchadnezzar: **those who walk in pride**, Nebuchadnezzar’s letter ends, **[the King of heaven] is able to humble** (37).

That’s the challenge of this passage. And it’s a tough one. We all need to root out the pride and self-centredness in our hearts. It’s not always obvious – but that’s why the Holy Spirit’s work showing us our sin is a mercy – because it allows us to say sorry to God, it gives us a chance to turn back from the woods in which we are lost.

You see for me this passage is actually about *mercy*. First there is the dream and the warning. That dream, though troubling, was mercy, because it gave Nebuchadnezzar a chance: a chance he didn’t deserve, a chance he ignored – but a chance nonetheless.

And then there was the restoration – **my sanity was restored**, Nebuchadnezzar said, along with **my honour and splendour** and the **kingdom** (36) – why? **I raised my eyes towards heaven, and my sanity was restored** (34), he said.

Mercy triumphs over judgement, James says (2.13) – but that doesn't mean we can do whatever we want and get away with it – it means God in his mercy warns us and gives us an opportunity to turn back, to start again, to have new life. But we must heed it, turn, and follow him, or we will stay stuck in the woods, lost and helpless. If we reject God's mercy... well... we're in trouble.

The world is all 'be true to yourself' and 'follow your heart' and 'do what you think is right' and 'I did it my way'. Friends, they are the opposite of the Christian faith because they are the way of self-centred pride, the way that leads to death.

God's way is 'be true to God' and 'follow Jesus Christ' and 'do what he says is right' and 'we did it his way'. These are the way of humility, the way of life.

God in his mercy offers that way to us – he sets us on that path. Thanks be to God! The question is: will we walk it?

Notes

¹ Dale Raph Davis, *The Message of Daniel (BST)* (Nottingham: IVP, 2013), 65.