

God Opposes the Proud

Daniel 4

In Jeremiah 29:11 the prophet wrote to the people of God, “*For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope*” (Jeremiah 29:11). This is one of the most well-known passages in the scriptures. You often see it posted on social media, hung on walls in homes or on bumper stickers. But although it’s one of the most well-known passages of scripture, it’s also one of the most misinterpreted.

For example, Jeremiah 29:11 is often used as a promise that well-meaning Christians site to others who are discouraged about where they are in life. And the way this promise is applied is to say to someone who is discouraged about their marital status, or their career or the city they live in, “Hang in there; God has a better plan for your life.” But although sometimes a passage like Jeremiah 29:11 may have more than one application; it only has one meaning. And to understand that meaning we must interpret Jeremiah 29:11 in its proper context.

In the beginning of the chapter, Jeremiah, who is a contemporary of Daniel, explains that he’s writing to Jewish exiles in Babylon. Because of their rebellion, the southern Kingdom of Judah was under Babylonian captivity. During this time, Nebuchadnezzar the King of Babylon had already begun to carry some of the Jews into exile in Babylon. The total invasion and destruction of Jerusalem was just a few years away.

So, with this in mind, in Jeremiah 29:11, the prophet is writing to say to the people of God, who were under judgment, that God had not forsaken them. In Jeremiah 29:10 the prophet reassures his people that after 70 years they would return to Jerusalem.

Interestingly, in Jeremiah 29:8-9 Jeremiah also explained that there were false prophets who were prophesying lies that were contrary to the plans of God for His people. The false prophets were prophesying

that they would not be in captivity for long and that in two years God would break the yoke of the Babylonians (Jeremiah 28:1-3).

But according to Jeremiah 29:4-7, part of God's plan entailed that during the 70 years while the Jews were exiled in Babylon, they were to get on with a normal life where they were. They were to also pray and seek the welfare of Babylon. As one commentator explained, "This is important instruction for God's people in all ages as we become the agents of God's righteousness in all places to which his providence calls us—agents of gospel transformation in the world in which we live" (Gospel Transformation Study Bible).

Now it is in this context that God promises His people in verse 11 that He has a plan for good not evil—to give them a future and a hope. But keep in mind that God's plan was not only about His people's return to Jerusalem. During the 70 years in exile, His plan was also for the present generation to seek the welfare of Babylon. They were to bloom where they were planted and be lights in the darkness. And that's exactly what Daniel and his 3 companions humbly demonstrated.

Similarly, God's plan for our lives may not involve a change of career, a change in scenery or going to a different church that offers more programs. What we may need most, which will bring meaning to our lives, is not a new plan for our lives, but to rediscover God's plan, namely to put on the mind of Christ and humbly seek the interests of others and not just our own (Philippians 2:1-4).

Main idea: God, who rules in the heavens, opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

To unfold this theme, we are going to learn 3 lessons from the rise and fall of King Nebuchadnezzar—the pride of Babylon.

1. Dangers of Prosperity

Lesson number one that we can learn from the personal testimony of the rise and fall of Nebuchadnezzar is the dangers of prosperity.

Remember that in the previous chapter there seemed to be a prideful change in Nebuchadnezzar's heart towards God. In chapter two, after Daniel interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream of an image with a head of gold representing Nebu, and other bodies parts representing other kingdoms that would all come to an end, Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged that Daniel's God was the God of gods.

But in chapter 3 he erects a 90 foot image made entirely of gold as if to say that his kingdom will last forever in direct opposition to his prophetic dream. Why the change of heart? I suggested that although he gave lip service to God, he never surrendered to His Lordship. His prosperity and success were his god, which could never fill the void in his heart.

Therefore, not long after, he ordered the 3 Hebrew youth to be thrown into a fiery furnace for not bowing down to his golden idol. But after God delivers the 3 Hebrew youth, who refused to bow to the golden image that Neb set up, he again praises the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego for what he did for them.

Now whereas in chapter 3 he superficially praises the God of the 3 Hebrew youth for what he did for them, chapter four begins with Nebuchadnezzar praising God for what God did for him. He writes: *"King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you! 2 It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me. 3 How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation"* (Daniel 4:1-3).

Now after Neb humbly praises the wonders that the Most High did for him, the rest of chapter 4 is an account of this season in Neb's life that changed his heart and led him to repent of his pride before God and the entire nation. As we will see, the events in Neb's life involved losing everything that he cherished and that lifted him up in pride.

But before that happened Neb had another dream that in the height of his prosperity frightened him. As he recounts beginning in verse 4: "I,

Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and prospering in my palace. 5 I saw a dream that made me afraid. As I lay in bed the fancies and the visions of my head alarmed me. 6 So I made a decree that all the wise men of Babylon should be brought before me, that they might make known to me the interpretation of the dream” (Daniel 4:4-6).

Notice that Neb begins his story of transformation by stating, “*I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and prospering in my palace” (Daniel 4:4-6). Is it wrong to own a house and enjoy the comforts of home? It’s not a sin to own or to enjoy certain material possessions.*

But there is a danger. Oftentimes the material things we possess begin to possess us. Jesus said, “*Where your treasure is there will your heart be also.*” Neb had the privilege of personally witnessing great displays of God’s power and as a result he acknowledged God’s sovereignty over all other powers. But although he saw and had acknowledged God’s sovereignty, he continued to live his life as if he was the captain of his own soul. He did not use his power and influence to serve God’s purposes.

On the contrary, the comforts and prosperity that he had only added to his false sense of security and invincibility. This is why Jesus also said that *its easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven.* Although enjoying comfort and prosperity is not necessarily a sin, they can easily become an obstacle to the greater things God wants to do in and through our lives.

But because as humans we often value the temporal over the eternal, the material over the sacred, possessions over people, and finances over family, it often takes the shaking up of our personal kingdoms to grasp what matters most.

In the case of Neb, God in his mercy began to shake things up in his life. And it all started with a dream. And like he experienced before, the wise men, the magicians, and the astrologers that he called on to

interpret the nightmare were unable to give an interpretation, that is except for Daniel.

Beginning in verse 8 we read: *“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—and I told him the dream, saying, 9 “O Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, because I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you and that no mystery is too difficult for you, tell me the visions of my dream that I saw and their interpretation. 10 The visions of my head as I lay in bed were these: I saw, and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. 11 The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. 12 Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the heavens lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it. 13 “I saw in the visions of my head as I lay in bed, and behold, a watcher, a holy one, came down from heaven. 14 He proclaimed aloud and said thus: ‘Chop down the tree and lop off its branches, strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the beasts flee from under it and the birds from its branches. 15 But leave the stump of its roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze, amid the tender grass of the field. Let him be wet with the dew of heaven. Let his portion be with the beasts in the grass of the earth. 16 Let his mind be changed from a man's, and let a beast's mind be given to him; and let seven periods of time pass over him. 17 The sentence is by the decree of the watchers, the decision by the word of the holy ones, to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men” (Daniel 4:8-17).*

What does this dream mean? Before answering that question it's important to note that because Daniel knew the dream was not good news for Neb, in verse 19 we read that Daniel was visibly distressed and did not immediately give the interpretation. And knowing that he was visibly distressed about the dream, Neb encourages Daniel not to be alarmed. In other words, he seems to be saying to Daniel, “Don't

worry, I can handle it” or he’s reassuring him that he would not take it out on him.

Why was Daniel in distress? Was he afraid that the King would be angry with him? I appreciate one bible teacher’s observation: “It appears that Daniel by this point had learned to genuinely love King Nebuchadnezzar. Not to admire him or approve of all his practices—far from it—but to love him as a PERSON. Daniel had obeyed God’s command that we looked at in Jeremiah 29 to make his home in Babylon; to seek the blessing of its inhabitants. And he genuinely loved Nebuchadnezzar. I’d ask you: Is that how you feel about the antagonistic Babylonians around you—whether the ones in politics or your neighbors—even when they threaten to throw you in the fiery furnace? Are your Babylonian neighbors around you, with their offensive signs in their yards and Facebook posts, primarily political opponents for you to overcome, or people you genuinely love, weep for, and pray the best for?” J.D. Greer

Now after insisting that Daniel, who he came to trust, share the meaning of the dream, Daniel respectfully complies. Beginning in verse 24 we read: *this is the interpretation, O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king, 25 that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will”* (Daniel 4:24-25).

What did the dream mean for Neb? This question leads us to a second lesson that we can learn from the rise and fall of Neb, the **downfall of the prideful.**

2. Downfall of the Prideful

Like the tree that touched the sky providing food and shelter for beasts and birds, was chopped down in the dream, so too would Neb be

brought down. He would not only lose his power and prosperity, he would also lose his mind and his humanity.

But notice that in verse 26, Daniel explains: *“And as it was commanded to leave the stump of the roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be confirmed for you from the time that you know that Heaven rules”* (Daniel 4:26). Even though like the tree that was chopped down Neb would also fall and be brought low, the command in the dream to leave the stump of the roots of the tree, is a sign of hope.

Although Neb would go through a time of judgement described as “seven periods of time” in verse 23, he would be lifted up again. Seven in the bible is the number for completion. In other words, when the time was complete, and Neb was convinced in his heart that Heaven rules—that God was in charge of the universe not him, his kingship would be restored to him.

But notice that Daniel also appealed to Neb to give his heart to God even before this period of humbling began. In verse 27 Daniel pleads: *“Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity”* (Daniel 4:27).

It appears that Neb’s fate could have been avoided if he would only heed the merciful warning, and repent of his pride. Do you know that the essence of sin is a prideful act of independence from God? It’s thinking you know how to run your own life better than God.

Therefore before learning the hard way that he’s not the master of his fate, Daniel calls Neb to demonstrate a heart of true repentance from his prideful ways by practicing righteousness and showing compassion for those in need—by seeking the interests of others and not just his own.

Likewise as the Lord graciously warned Neb about the path of pride, which would lead him to destruction, God warns us. As one commentator suggest, “Perhaps he shows us someone else who is

further along the same path that we are headed down and we catch a glimpse of what we too may look like ten or twenty years from now. As a pastor, there is nothing more sobering to me than to see elders and ministers who have now made shipwreck of their lives. These men were friends and colleagues who once faithfully preached the gospel and encouraged the saints, but are now disqualified from ministry because of moral failure. [This] challenges my pride, for I know that I am no better than they were, and only God's grace will keep me from a similar fate. Alternatively, sometimes God gives us a glimpse of the depravity of your own heart, as you catch yourself thinking (or even saying) something truly vile. You haven't yet committed the act, perhaps, but in your secret thoughts, you see the seeds of that sin within yourself. It is a [warning], a challenge to repent and humble yourself before the Lord while there is still time, asking for his strength to hold you up and keep you faithful (Iain Duguid).

Sadly Neb did not heed the gracious warning of Daniel to humble himself or be humbled. Although it doesn't appear that Neb resented Daniel for speaking hard truth into his life, Neb did not act upon the warnings.

Have you ever tried to warn someone about being on a wrong path, and their response was, "I know, I know." But although they claim to know, they don't do anything to change course.

How many of you know, delayed obedience is disobedience. But a prideful heart is often cloaked in a false humility that's makes excuses for our disobedience. We might admit that what we are doing is wrong, but our delayed obedience is saying that our plan is better than God's which is an act of open rebellion and pride.

Sometimes when we delay to obey we mistake God's patience for God's permission. How many of you know, the longer you delay to humbly obey, the greater the likelihood that you won't or that it will take you having to learn some hard lessons before you finally do.

According to verse 28, an entire year went by before the warning of Neb's dream was realized. Beginning in verse 29 we read: "*At the end*

of twelve months he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, 30 and the king answered and said, "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?" 31 While the words were still in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, "O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you, 32 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." 33 Immediately the word was fulfilled against Nebuchadnezzar. He was driven from among men and ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair grew as long as eagles' feathers, and his nails were like birds' claws" (Daniel 4:29-33).

Foolishly, rather than heeding the gracious warnings of his dream and turning his gaze to God in humility, Neb turns his gaze to the greatness of his kingdom. History tells us that there was much beauty to admire and to be fascinated by in the ancient kingdom of Babylon. The hanging gardens, which are considered one of the seven wonders of the world, were built by Neb. The Ancient Greek historian He-ro-do-tus records that parts of the walls of the city of Babylon, which were 56 miles long, were so wide that chariots driven by four horses could ride and turn on top of them.

So, as he walked on the roof of his royal palace, instead of looking out and praising God for allowing him to breathe fresh air, Neb begins to glorify himself for what he thinks he accomplished in his own power. And as soon as he began to lift himself up, a voice from heaven pronounced his fate, and his demise began to quickly unfold.

The prideful king would become like a wild animal. He would lose everything he pridefully cherished, including his mind. He would personally experience the warning of Proverbs 16:18: *"Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall"* (Proverbs 16:18).

But you know, as much as God opposes the proud, He gives grace to the humble. And because God is drawn to the broken and contrite, what seemed to be the worst thing that could have happened to Neb was actually the best thing that could have happened to him.

This leads us to our final point, namely the deliverance of the penitent.

3. Deliverance of the Penitent

After living like an animal for seven periods of times, which some commentators believe means seven years, we read in verse 34: *“At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; 35 all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, “What have you done?” 36 At the same time my reason returned to me, and for the glory of my kingdom, my majesty and splendor returned to me. My counselors and my lords sought me, and I was established in my kingdom, and still more greatness was added to me. 37 Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble.”* (Daniel 4:1-37).

Notice that according to verse 34, Neb’s restoration began when he looked away from himself and lifted his eyes to heaven, which was a sign of repentance, and proceeded to praise and give glory to God. Neb was not the self made man that he thought he was. He owed everything to God and so do each of us.

But how many of you know, when we take our eyes off of the things of heaven and set our hearts on the things of this earth, we forget where we came from, we forget that even our breath is in God’s hand. And when we do, as Paul explained in Romans 1, when we forget to thank God and give Him the glory for all that He’s done and all that He’s

created for our good, we will begin to look to lesser things to do for us what only God can.

When we fail to acknowledge God's sovereign rule over our lives we will suppress the truth and live according to the lies of this world that will turn us into animals. We will codify the killing of unborn babies for our convenience and call it an act of righteousness.

How do we keep from being lifted up in pride to our own destruction? You know, Neb's fall and restoration was a picture and a warning to the people of God, who in times of prosperity, were prone to forget God. While warning His people of this malady, God said through Moses: *"Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day."* Deuteronomy 8:17-18

How do we keep from being lifted up in pride to our own destruction? We must never forget to give praise and thanksgiving to God for who He is and all that He graciously provides for our good and His glory. We must, like Neb, stop looking to this world to find our value and worth, or comparing ourselves to others, but instead lift up our eyes to heaven and find our worth in all that God is for us in Christ.

And when we fail to look to God's sovereign rule over our lives, and God in His grace warns us, we must be quick to humble ourselves before Him and repent. And the sign of true repentance is that like King Jesus who was equal with God but humbled Himself to become a servant and a savior to all, we cease looking out only for our own interest and begin looking out for the welfare of others wherever God has planted us.

Conclusion

Oh, can I tell you, no matter how low you may have fallen in your pride and forgetfulness, because Jesus humbled Himself to die on a cross for us, when we humble ourselves, and surrender to Him, He will lift us

up again so that we can know His restoring grace and make it known in our world. “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” (James 4:6)