

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Thriving in Babylon

(Studies in the life and times of the prophet Daniel)

Loving Our Beloved Babylonians

(Daniel 4)

Study #5

Introduction: Like produces like...

Jesus, in speaking to His disciples, once said, ***[Luke 6:40] "A pupil is not above his teacher. But everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher."***

In other words: *like produces like*. That goes for plants, dogs and cats - and for people who follow Jesus. There is no missing the increasing likeness of Jesus we see in His first disciples as they followed Him.

Early on, the Apostle John (who, along with his brother, James, were known as "***the sons of thunder***") wanted to call down fire from heaven to consume enemies. But as an old man, he wrote a short letter (1 John) that repeatedly called on Jesus' people to "***love one another.***"

Simon Peter had been an impetuous, flighty, somewhat unstable man. After decades of following Jesus he became a man so solid that he willingly died a martyr's death.

Before coming to faith in Jesus, Paul was famous for brutality, as he imprisoned, beat, and killed Christians. Later, he wrote the most beautiful and the most challenging sketch of love in all of literature. (1 Corinthians 13) He became known throughout the Roman world for his love for God and for his shepherd's heart.

You probably know people who have walked with Jesus for years and have become sweeter, gentler, more courageous.

The life-transforming power of God is a consistent theme in the Bible and this morning we'll see it on full display. Daniel shows us that when someone follows God, he or she will increasingly be moved by the things that move the heart of God.

This morning I'm going to use the normal allotment of minutes, but you'll be getting two messages.

The first message will provide more details than the second. The first message will take more time.

And then when it comes to content and application, the first message consists of a powerful, delightful glimpse of God's loving pursuit of people. The second message, while just as powerful, comes with an application that's about as subtle as a brick, packing the wallop of a delightful MMA punch.

When we open to Daniel, chapter 4, the first words are what we might expect from Daniel. But they aren't from Daniel. These are the words of Nebuchadnezzar, ruler of the Babylonian Empire.

The Seeking Heart of God (Nebuchadnezzar's story)

A Surprising First Speech (vv. 1-3)

[1] Nebuchadnezzar the king to all the peoples, nations, and men of every language that live in all the earth: "May your peace abound! [2] "It has seemed good to me to declare the signs and wonders which the Most High God has done for me. [3] "How great are His signs, And how mighty are His wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, And His dominion is from generation to generation."

Hmmm...

The king we have known as a thorough-going pagan praises the Most High God.¹

This is the king who had:

- destroyed the culture and the kingdom of Judah;
- killed many Jews;
- carried large numbers of Jews into exile from Palestine to Babylon (including Daniel and his three friends);
- worshipped Babylonian gods;
- looked to pagan magicians for the interpretation of his dreams; and
- forced all of his subjects to worship him.

Now, though, this king is declaring God's praise to anyone who will listen. He invites everyone to hear his story. And the story he wants to tell is all about what God Most High has done for him.

We discover what has prompted this amazing beginning in what follows.

The King's Dream (vv. 4-26)

Troubling dreams and visions (vv. 4-5)

When we catch up to him, Nebuchadnezzar was living a life of luxury and ease. Everything was going his way. At ease. No worries. Living large.

There is no chronological marker to let us know exactly when what we'll see today happened. But he's clearly in life's second half. He's viewing his life's work from the rear-view mirror and he likes what he sees.

Then, while he was "**at ease**", the mightiest king on earth became fearful because, for the second time in the book of Daniel, we read of the king's dreams.

[4] "I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and flourishing in my palace. [5] "I saw a dream and it made me fearful; and these fantasies as I lay on my bed and the visions in my mind kept alarming me."

Just as with the dreams we saw earlier (chapter 2), these dreams are significant. They mean something. In this case, the same dream repeats.

So, as he had done earlier, he sought out his advisors to discover what these dreams he was having meant.

Looking for an interpreter (vv. 6-9)

Counselors can't (vv. 6-7)

[6] "So I gave orders to bring into my presence all the wise men of Babylon, that they might make known to me the interpretation of the dream. [7] "Then the magicians, the conjurers, the Chaldeans, and the diviners came in, and I related the dream to them..."

The last time he had called them in to interpret his dream, he didn't tell them what his dream was. When they failed to reveal it he put them all under a death sentence.²

I can only imagine that the king's counselors were antsy about being called in to interpret another dream. But at least this time he told them what his dream was (as he had not done earlier).

This time, the king wasn't trying to be tricky. He really wanted to know what the dream meant.

The king tells us, "**...they could not make its interpretation known to me.**"

But, the king was desperate to know. So he called in the one man who had been able to solve the mystery of his earlier dream: Daniel.

¹ This was a common name for the true God used in the period of the Jewish exile.

² They were all rescued only because God revealed the king's dream to Daniel.

Daniel can (vv. 8-9)

[8] “But finally Daniel came in before me, whose name is Belteshazzar according to the name of my god, and in whom is a spirit of the holy gods; and I related the dream to him, saying, [9] ‘O Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, since I know that a spirit of the holy gods is in you and no mystery baffles you³, tell me the visions of my dream which I have seen, along with its interpretation.”

So, how do you think Daniel - God’s prophet - liked being referred to as **“the chief of the magicians.”**?

Would you take it as a compliment is someone called you a great sorcerer or the chief of the witches in Northwest Bexar County? Probably not.

But the way the king refers to Daniel here shows the degree to which he has been assimilated into Babylonian culture. He fit.

And yet, there was still that indefinable something about Daniel that was distinctively non-Babylonian. He fit, but he was still and always God’s man in Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar recognized this special quality about Daniel and valued him for it.

And since, for some reason Daniel had not been present for the first telling of the dream, now the king calls him in separately to see if he could find out the meaning of the dreams and visions. Here’s the dream.

The king relates his dream (vv. 10-18)

A giant, healthy tree (vv. 10-12)

[10] “Now these were the visions in my mind as I lay on my bed: I was looking, and behold, there was a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great.

³ “No mystery baffles you.” This makes me wonder if there had been other dreams Daniel had interpreted.

**[11] The tree grew large and became strong,
And its height reached to the sky,
And it was visible to the end of the whole earth.
[12] Its foliage was 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 sky dwelt in its branches,
And all living creatures fed themselves from it.**

The centerpiece of this dream is a tree, and it’s quite a tree. Tall, great girth, strong branches. It’s a beautiful tree. And it was useful, serving as a shelter for birds and beasts. Its fruit provided food for all kinds of animals.

I wouldn’t be surprised if Nebuchadnezzar suspected that the tree was a symbol for himself. But then the dream turned and this is where the king became troubled.

Judgment on the tree/person (vv. 13-17)

[13] I was looking in the visions in my mind as I lay on my bed, and behold, an angelic watcher⁴, a holy one, descended from heaven.

**[14] He shouted out and spoke as follows:
‘Chop down the tree and cut off its branches,
Strip off its foliage and scatter its fruit;
Let the beasts flee from under it,
And the birds from its branches.**

**[15] ‘Yet leave the stump with its roots in the ground,
But with a band of iron and bronze around it
In the new grass of the field;
And let him be drenched with the dew of heaven,
And let him share with the beasts in the grass of the earth.**

**[16] Let his mind be changed from that of a man,
And let a beast’s mind be given to him,
And let seven periods of time pass over him.**

⁴ “Watcher” was a Babylonian term describing what the Jews called an “angel.”

This majestic tree is to be destroyed, but not completely. Stump and roots remain. There is a future for the tree, but after it is chopped down.⁵

Then, notice, as the angel continues, the words of the decree no longer apply to a tree, but to a man. Not to an “it” but to a “he.”

The man, who was symbolized by the tree, will be consigned to the life of a beast. He will live in the wild. He will be drenched with the dew of heaven and he’ll eat grass.

His mind will be changed to the mind of a beast, and he will continue in that state for seven **“periods of time”** (i.e. - years).⁶

At the end of the king’s dream, the messenger gives the purpose behind all that is predicted to happen to the man/tree.⁷

[17] ‘This sentence is by the decree of the angelic watchers, And the decision is a command of the holy ones, In order that the living may know That the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, And bestows it on whom He wishes, And sets over it the lowliest of men.’⁸

That’s the dream. And then the king looked straight at Belteshazzar/Daniel. He reminded him of the failure of the wise men of Babylon and charged him to give an interpretation of this dream.

⁵ What would be the purpose for leaving a band of iron and bronze around the stump? I have no idea.

⁶ The Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament) simply reads “seven years” here. Most Bible scholars believe that a seven-year period is in view.

⁷ This is the point of the vision that was given to the king. God gives authority to rule over nations to whomever He wills. Sometimes He even gives authority to the basest of men. Human sovereignty is not based on merit. Do you wonder how King Nebuchadnezzar would have received this (non-flattering) information? These statements are direct rebukes to Nebuchadnezzar’s pride.

⁸ See 1 Samuel 2:7-8; Job 5:11; Psalm 113:7-8; Luke 1:52, and the story of Joseph for thoughts about God’s elevation of those who rule.

Command to Daniel to interpret (v. 18)

[18] “This is the dream which I, King Nebuchadnezzar, have seen. Now you, Belteshazzar, tell me its interpretation, inasmuch as none of the wise men of my kingdom is able to make known to me the interpretation; but you are able, for a spirit of the holy gods is in you.”

We’ll pay more attention to Daniel’s very emotional reaction to this dream in a bit. For now, let’s note that Daniel obeyed the king’s command and, with God’s enablement, told what the dream meant.

Daniel interprets (vv. 20-26)

[20] “The tree that you saw, which became large and grew strong, whose height reached to the sky and was visible to all the earth [21] and whose foliage was beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in which was food for all, under which the beasts of the field dwelt and in whose branches the birds of the sky lodged-- [22] it is you, O king; for you have become great and grown strong, and your majesty has become great and reached to the sky and your dominion to the end of the earth...[24] This is the interpretation, O king, and this is the decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king: [25] that you be driven away from mankind, and your dwelling place be with the beasts of the field, and you be given grass to eat like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven; and seven periods of time will pass over you, until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whomever He wishes. [26] And in that it was commanded to leave the stump with the roots of the tree, your kingdom will be assured to you after you recognize that it is Heaven that rules.”

Sure enough, Nebuchadnezzar is the tree in the vision. And the upshot of the vision is that tough times are ahead for the king.

He’ll lose his sanity and he’ll lose his kingdom. He’s facing seven years of humiliating insanity. He’ll be reduced to living like an animal.

At the end there is a note of hope and a promise of restoration, but only after he acknowledges that God is the true Sovereign.

To be forewarned as the king has been is to be fore-armed. Sadly for him, though, he didn't heed the warning.

Warned, the King is Judged (vv. 28-33)

The king's arrogance (vv. 28-30)

[28] All this happened to Nebuchadnezzar the king. [29] Twelve months later he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon.

One year after Daniel explained the dream, Nebuchadnezzar was out taking a stroll on the flat roof of his house, an exercise that gave him a panoramic view of the city of Babylon.

Building Babylon had been his chief project. From ancient digs, we know of at least fifty of Nebuchadnezzar's building projects.

He built the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon (one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World), along with lots of temples, shrines and public buildings. Babylon was truly a magnificent city and the king knew it.

[30] The king reflected and said, "Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?"

He had been given a solid year to internalize the message of the dream - that God rules - and he had neglected God's warning. And now he will pay the price for his pride.

The king's judgment (vv. 31-33)

[31] While the word was in the king's mouth, a voice came from heaven, saying, "King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is declared: sovereignty has been removed from you, [32] and you will be driven away from mankind, and your dwelling place will be with the beasts of the field. You will be given grass to eat like cattle, and seven periods of time will pass over you, until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whomever He wishes."

[33] Immediately the word concerning Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled; and he was driven away from mankind and began eating grass like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until his hair had grown like eagles' feathers and his nails like birds' claws.

His transition from sanity to insanity was instantaneous. He went immediately from palace to wilderness, from man to beast.

He neglected his hair so that it became matted. His nails grew thick ("***like birds' claws***"). He ate grass and fled from the comforts of the palace - all the while retaining enough of his mind to KNOW that this was happening to him.⁹

Earlier in the book Daniel had praised God after God had revealed the king's first dream with these words:

[2:21] It is He who changes the times and the epochs He removes kings and establishes kings.

And Nebuchadnezzar's career confirms God's sovereign control. He had been elevated to the throne in an instant. When his father, Nabopolassar, died, Nebuchadnezzar returned from battle to Babylon to be crowned king.

God has now, just as quickly, removed his authority.¹⁰

⁹ While Nebuchadnezzar obviously suffered directly as a result of God's intervention, a condition like his is documented. A certain form of mental illness - *insania zoanthropica* - has been noted in which men think of themselves as beasts and imitate the behavior of a beast. (So, Keil) Another form of insanity is *boanthropy*. One rather famous case of *boanthropy* is cited by Walvoord in his commentary, pp. 109-110, describing a mental patient with symptoms exactly like those from which Nebuchadnezzar suffered.

¹⁰ Evidently the Babylonian Empire operated smoothly during the king's seven-year absence, proving that God's blessing was a more important piece of the puzzle than the king's presence on the throne. I suspect that Daniel would have been a major leader in Nebuchadnezzar's absence.

But then, at the end of the seven years of God-imposed insanity, Nebuchadnezzar - still a man made in the image and likeness of God - did what the beasts don't do. By the grace of God, he raised his eyes toward Heaven.

And when he did that, God restored him, mentally, physically, and royally. Nebuchadnezzar now tells us the rest of the story.

The King Looks Up, is Restored (vv. 34-37)

Sanity restored, the king worships the Lord (vv. 34-35)

[34a] "But at the end of that period I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward 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,

But He does according to His will in the host of heaven

And among the inhabitants of earth;

And no one can ward off His hand

Or say to Him, 'What have You done?'

Previously, Nebuchadnezzar had praised the God of Daniel and the God of Daniel's three friends. Now, he directly praised God Most High and gives what may be the most eloquent testimony to God's sovereign authority we find anywhere in the Bible.

This earthly king honors the KING whose kingdom endures forever. The ruler of the Babylonian Empire confesses that it is God alone who does what He wants.

And what God Most High wanted to do was restore this king to his kingdom. So He did.

Kingship restored and to God be the glory (vv. 36-37)

[36] "At that time my reason returned to me. And my majesty and splendor were restored to me for the glory of my kingdom, and my counselors and my nobles began seeking me out; so I was reestablished in my sovereignty, and surpassing greatness was added to me."¹¹ [37] Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise, exalt, and honor the King of heaven, for all His works are true and His ways just, and He is able to humble those who walk in pride."

Wow. This is impressive. King Nebuchadnezzar has taken an about-face and it is a thrilling thing to see. But I want to highlight one line out of his short speech for a quick comment.

In verse 35, he said, "***All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing.***" By that I think he means that God is greater than all the earth's inhabitants. AMEN. Well said.

But I wouldn't want us to think that Nebuchadnezzar is saying or that the Bible teaches that the inhabitants of the earth don't matter to God. Because that is not true.

What we've seen so far today assures us that God does care deeply for people. He even cares for individuals like the pagan king of Babylon. He seeks them out. He pursues them with a heart to redeem and remake and restore them.

Summary: Behold the searching heart of God!

Just like the Apostle John gave space in his Gospel to show Jesus leading a lost Samaritan woman to faith, Daniel gave an entire chapter to show God leading Nebuchadnezzar to faith.

¹¹ Note that at the end, nothing is said of Nebuchadnezzar alleviating the plight of the poor (v. 27), but that he confessed that the God of Heaven was truly God, and worshipped Him. This is the way God works in a human heart. He convicts of sins, which drives a man to cast himself on God for mercy so that the man is saved. Nebuchadnezzar's moral failings led to his judgment and repentance and change of heart. And with a changed heart, there is great optimism that he will change his external behavior.

And we would totally miss the point of Daniel 4 if we didn't see here the seeking heart of God. God went to great lengths to pursue this king.¹²

Yes, God's pursuit was hard. But it wasn't mean.

Seven years of lost sanity and seven years away from the throne was necessary to bring this man to faith. So, it was the kindness of God that brought Nebuchadnezzar to the end of himself.

It is always kindness of God to bring us to the end of ourselves. This turning from self-reliance to God-reliance, this repentance from independence to faith, is a movement that shows us that L-I-F-E is only found in a trusting relationship with God.¹³

God is sovereign. And there is a purpose to the exercise of His sovereignty. He does what He does to show His own majesty and greatness. And He does what He does toward us lovingly, redemptively.

And Nebuchadnezzar's story is your story. It is the story of the seeking heart of God. He pursues you. He woos you. He is the loving hound of heaven.

Reflect on your life and see if you can see God's search for you. Can you hear His footsteps, pursuing you? Can you see His fingerprints all over your past hardships and in your present trials? He is at work driving you to Himself.

God is like a shepherd who has one hundred sheep and loses one - you - and goes seeking you until He finds you. He is like a father with a son or a daughter - you - who returns home after wandering in rebellion and who runs out to welcome you home.

¹² To say nothing of God's wooing him through: (1). Daniel and his friends' health on a non-Babylonian diet; (2). Daniel's revelation of his dream and its interpretation; (3). Daniel's three friends' survival of the furnace for not bowing down to his image.

¹³ *[Romans 2:4]...the kindness of God leads you to repentance.*

Daniel 4 is the Old Testament version of one of our favorite New Testament verses: ***[Romans 5:8] But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.***

God pursued Nebuchadnezzar, the pagan king, and today He is pursuing you.

So, wherever you are in your spiritual journey, turn to Him now.

If you are in rebellion, turn to Him in submission. If you're at a point of apathy, turn to Him with passion. If you've never turned to Him before this morning, turn to Him and see Jesus, who died that you might live - and put your faith in Him and receive the free gift of eternal life from this pursuing God.

That is the first message this morning. Here is the second.

The Heart That Beats with God's Heart (Daniel's story)

The King's Dream and Interpretation

King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream. We've seen all of that.

He called in his counselors, magicians, conjurers, and Chaldeans to tell him what the dream meant - and they couldn't.

So then he called in Daniel whose track record of service after years in the king's court has been exemplary. His reputation for dream interpretation was impressive.

The king laid out his dream to Daniel, told him about the giant tree that was a source of life to birds and beasts. The tree was huge and it cast a long shadow.

Then he told Daniel that in his dream he saw the tree cut down. And the tree became a man who was "cut down" to size. Humiliated. Turned into a beast.

And yes, the dream had a good ending, but the path to the good ending was going to be brutal.

Listen carefully now to what we ignored the first time through.

Dani is Appalled at His King's Judgment (v. 19)

[19] Then Daniel, whose name is Belteshazzar, was appalled for a while as his thoughts alarmed him. The king responded and said, "Belteshazzar, do not let the dream or its interpretation alarm you."¹⁴ Belteshazzar answered and said, 'My lord, if only the dream applied to those who hate you, and its interpretation to your adversaries!'

That's a very interesting response. That's how I respond when a good friend tells me about a serious diagnosis or a job loss or some terrible grief.

Reading Daniel's emotional reaction, if I didn't know better, I might think that he actually cared about the king. And isn't that an intriguing thought - that Daniel was *for* the king of Babylon.

But remember. Because of this king, Daniel had been ripped away from his family and his homeland, forced to land in Babylon, and had been turned into a eunuch to serve in the king's court. This king had killed his fellow Jews in Judea and brought him into the land of exile. Daniel had suffered terribly because of Nebuchadnezzar.

It would be understandable if we thought that Daniel had just been "putting up with" the king through these long years of exile.

Maybe we could imagine Daniel harboring a decades-long bitter disdain for the people he worked with and for the king in whose court he served. Maybe we figured that when he learned what the dream meant he would have shouted for joy and seen it as wonderful good news that his boss would finally get what was coming to him.

If those had been our thoughts, we have another thought coming. He was appalled at the bad news of the king's dream. He was speechless at the king's vision because he was concerned for the welfare of the king.

¹⁴ It appears to me that the king was trying to comfort Daniel, who was having a real struggle with how to tell him the interpretation of the dream.

Is it possible that Daniel loved Nebuchadnezzar, that he had a heart for this king?¹⁵

I think so.

I suspect that that Daniel, whom we know to have been a man of prayer, had prayed for Nebuchadnezzar faithfully over the years that he had been serving in Babylon.

And it's a funny thing. But when you pray consistently for somebody over time, your heart softens toward them. Daniel, I believe, had a genuine affection for this pagan king, nurtured over the years through prayer.

So, he was deeply concerned for the king he served. Even though he knew that the judgment was for the king's ultimate good, he dreaded the severe future that was ahead of his king.

So, Daniel went ahead and gave the king the dream's interpretation. We've seen that already. He told him that the vision indicated a chopped down life, seven years of insanity, loss of personal and royal sovereignty.

But at the end of the interpretation, listen now to what we first skipped over.

Daniel Begs His King to Turn from His Sin (v. 27)

[27] "Therefore, O king, may my advice be pleasing to you: break away now from your sins by doing righteousness, and from your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor, in case there may be a prolonging of your prosperity."

Daniel mentions things here we wouldn't have known from what we've read in his book. But from this we know that Nebuchadnezzar had been a cruel dictator, and that was par for the course for an Ancient Near Eastern monarch.

¹⁵ This is, by the way, exactly what we saw in chapter 2 when he told the king of the certainty of the interpretation of his dream there, and urged the king to take the matter to heart and subject himself to God.

For as long as he had sat on the throne of Babylon, his concern had been to build FOR HIMSELF a great empire, city, and palace. And he had never been all that concerned to lighten the load of the poor or to hand out mercy.

So Daniel urged his king to replace sins with righteousness. Knowing God as well as he did, Daniel was hopeful that judgment could be forestalled - maybe even avoided altogether - if the king turned from his sin and from his pride.¹⁶

There is no question that Daniel is serving the king of Babylon well. But he's not just serving him as a good court counselor. He's serving as the king's friend.

And in this, Daniel reminds us of Someone else who had a well-earned reputation - one meant as mockery by some - as **[Matthew 11:19] "a friend of sinners."**

Summary: Daniel's love for his far-from-God king

It appears that as he served in Nebuchadnezzar's court and as he walked with God, Daniel developed the same heartfelt love for his far-from-God king that his God had.

He actually loved the king who had wronged him. He loved this king who worshiped idols.

If you and I would reflect the heart of God today and if we would learn the lesson Daniel teaches, we will nurture a genuine love for those who are far from God.

We will learn to love those who don't hold to a biblical worldview. They know that we *disagree* with them. They need to see that we *love* them.

We will love those who cheer for the things we mourn and who hate the things we love. We'll not change our belief or our convictions. But we will pray for these beloved outsiders until love flows from God through our hearts and lives to them.

And this is nothing new. The Apostle Paul said that we are to bless those who persecute us (Romans 12: 14). Jesus said to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44).

Jesus was the best Friend sinners have ever had. "*Like produces like*" and our world will know that we have been with Jesus when we love those who are far from God as He did.

¹⁶ Nebuchadnezzar is not promised forgiveness on the ground of good works or alms to the poor. Rather, the issue is that, if he showed mercy and justice, he would delay (and possibly obviate) the necessity of God's immediate judgment.