

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Faithful in Doubtland

Beloved Doubtlanders

(Daniel 4)

Study #5

Introduction: Like produces like...

Like produces like.

That's true, biologically, plants and dogs and cats and people reproduce after their own kind. It's also true for those who follow Jesus, who once told His disciples, **[Luke 6:40] "A pupil is not above his teacher. But everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher."**

For instance...

- Early on, the apostles James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven to consume their enemies. Not very Jesus-like. But later, James became the first disciple to die a martyr's death. And as an old man, John wrote a short letter (1 John) that repeatedly called Christians to **"love one another."** That's more like it.
- Simon Peter had been an impetuous, man, even a bit unstable. After decades of following Jesus, he become so solid that he willingly gave his life for the Gospel.
- Before coming to faith in Christ, Paul was famous for brutality. He imprisoned, beat, and killed Christians. Later, he was known to the whole Roman world for his love for God and his love for the lost.

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

This morning, we'll see that what was true for Jesus' disciples was also true in the Old Testament for those who followed God.

Daniel is going to show us that when we are actively following God, it's normal to be moved by the things that move God's heart.

We'll see all of that in two parts in the next few minutes as we turn to the fourth chapter of Daniel's book.

We might expect that the first words are spoken by Daniel. But they aren't. These are the words of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.

The Pursuing Heart of God (Nebuchadnezzar's story)

The King's Surprising, God-Honoring Speech (vv. 1-3)

[1] Nebuchadnezzar the king to all the peoples, nations, and populations of all languages who live in all the earth: "May your peace be great! [2] I am pleased to declare the signs and miracles that the Most High God has done for me. [3] How great are His signs And how mighty are His miracles! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, And His dominion is from generation to generation.

Fascinating. The king we have come to know as a thorough-going pagan praises the Most High God.¹

This is the king who had destroyed Jerusalem while killing lots of Jews, deported much of the population to Babylon, who worshipped the false gods of Babylon, and forced all his subjects to worship him.

Now, 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 the story of what God has done for him.

There is no marker to let us know when what he tells us about happened. But he's viewing his life's work through the rear-view mirror and he likes what he sees.

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

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

Dreams and visions, again (vv. 4-5)

[4] "I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and happy in my palace.

He was living large, surrounded by luxury, and had no worries. Everything was going his way.

Then, while he was "at ease", King Nebuchadnezzar got scared because, as had happened before, he had dreams.

[5] "I saw a dream and it startled me; and these appearances as I lay on my bed and the visions in my mind kept alarming me."

The king's dream here (and earlier, see chapter 2) were significant. They meant something.

So, as he had done earlier, he sought out his advisors to discover what these dreams 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, so that they might make known to me the interpretation of the dream.

The last time he had needed help from his magicians, he had not revealed the dream to them. He made them reveal his dream, which they couldn't do.

I suspect that these wise men were nervous about this summons to interpret another dream.

But this time Nebuchadnezzar told them his dream. This time, he wasn't trying to be tricky. He just wanted to know what the dream meant.

And, again, these wise men he had called for help "**could not make its interpretation known to me.**"

But the king didn't panic. He had an ace up his sleeve. He called in the man who had solved the mystery of his earlier dream: 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] 'Belteshazzar, chief of the soothsayer priests,² since I know that a spirit of the holy gods is in you and no secret baffles you, tell me the visions of my dream which I have seen, along with its interpretation.'"

By this time, Daniel had been in Babylon long enough to be fully assimilated into the Babylonian court scene and culture. He fit in - and yet he didn't quite fit in.

There was still something about Daniel that was distinctively non-Babylonian.

Nebuchadnezzar recognized this special quality about Daniel, valued him for it, and then told Daniel his dream.

The king relates his dream to Daniel (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 middle of the earth, and its height was great.

[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,

² We wonder how Daniel - God's prophet - appreciated being referred to as "**the chief of the magicians.**"? We might not take it as a compliment if someone called us the chief of the witches in Northwest Bexar County.

***And in it was food for all.
The animals of the field found shade under it,
And the birds of the sky lived in its branches,
And all living creatures fed from it.***

The centerpiece of this dream is a beautiful, tall, strong tree. It provided shelter and food for all kinds of animals. I imagine that Nebuchadnezzar figured out that the tree symbolized him. And, to this point, it's a flattering dream.

But then the dream shifted, and this is where the king became alarmed.

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 watcher³, a holy one, descended from heaven.

***[14] He shouted out and spoke as follows:
'Chop down the tree and cut off its branches,
Shake off its foliage and scatter its fruit;
Let the animals 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 animals in the grass of the earth.***

***[16] Let his mind change from that of a human,
And let an animal's mind be given to him,
And let seven periods of time pass over him.***

This majestic tree was to be cut down, but not killed. The stump and roots remain. But the stump was bound by a metal band.⁴

Then, notice, that the angel's words switch from referring to a tree, to a man. Not to an ***"it"*** but to a ***"he."*** (vv. 15-16)

³ ***"Watcher"*** was a Babylonian term describing what the Jews called an ***"angel."***

⁴ Perhaps the ring of iron and bronze is a symbol of the bondage in which Nebuchadnezzar will be kept after he loses sovereignty.

The man - formerly the tree - will be consigned to living the life of a wild animal. His mind and body will be changed, and he will continue in that state for seven ***"periods of time"*** (i.e. - years).⁵

The message concludes with the point of this dream.⁶

***[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 grants it to whomever He wishes,
And sets over it the lowliest of people.'***

That's the dream.

Then the king looked straight at Belteshazzar / Daniel and charged him to give an interpretation of this dream.

The king commands Daniel to interpret (v. 18)

[18] "This is the dream that I, King Nebuchadnezzar, have seen. Now you, Belteshazzar, tell me its interpretation, since 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."

Daniel obeyed the king's command, and enabled by God, told the king what his dream meant.

Daniel interprets (vv. 20-26)

He confirmed that the magnificent tree symbolized the king. (vv. 20-23) As for the rest of the vision - the tree chopped down, the

⁵ 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.

⁶ God gives authority to whomever He wills. Sometimes He even gives authority to the basest of men. Human sovereignty is not based on merit. These statements are direct rebukes to Nebuchadnezzar's pride.

⁷ For thoughts about God's elevation of those who rule, see 1 Samuel 2:7-8, Job 5:11; Psalm 113:7-8; Luke 1:52, and the story of Joseph (Genesis).

iron band around the stump, the tree image become a man who lives the life of a wild animal for seven years - Daniel interpreted that, too.

[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 animals 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 remain as yours after you recognize that it is Heaven that rules.”

The upshot of the vision is that tough times are ahead for King Nebuchadnezzar.

He's going to lose his sanity and his kingdom. He's facing seven years of the humiliation of being reduced to a beast.

There is light at the end of this dark tunnel, though, and a promise of restoration, but only after he acknowledges that God is the true Sovereign.

The king was forewarned. Sadly, he didn't heed the warning.

The King's Well-Deserved Judgment (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.

This rooftop exercise gave the king a panoramic view of the city of Babylon. And building Babylon, both the city and the empire, had been his life's chief project.

He built the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon (one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World), along with lots of temples and shrines and public buildings.⁸

Babylon was truly a magnificent city, and the king knew it.

[30] The king began speaking and was saying, “Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the honor of my majesty?”

He had been given a solid year to internalize the message of the dream - that God is sovereign; he isn't - and he had neglected God's warning. He will now pay the price for his pride.

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

A voice from heaven told the king that sovereignty will be taken away from him. He'll live with and like the wild animals until he recognizes ***[32]...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.

Just like that, Nebuchadnezzar went from palace to wasteland, and from man to beast. His hair grew long and matted. His nails grew thick (***“like birds' claws”***). He grazed like an ox, all the while retaining enough of his mind to KNOW that this was happening to him.⁹

⁸ From ancient digs, we know of at least fifty of his building projects.

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, describes a patient with symptoms exactly like those from which Nebuchadnezzar suffered.

God used this discipline to confirm to the king His own sovereign control.¹⁰

We are listening to Nebuchadnezzar's personal testimony. Here is the mercy-filled resolution.

The King's Merciful Restoration (vv. 34-37)

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

[34] "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 of no account, But He does according to His will among the army of heaven And among the inhabitants of earth; And no one can fend off His hand Or say to Him, 'What have You done?'"

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

And when the king did that, God restored him, mentally, physically, royally - and spiritually.

Previously, Nebuchadnezzar had praised the God of Daniel (chapter 2) and the God of Daniel's three friends (chapter 3).

Here, he directly praised God Most High. And his praise may be the most eloquent testimony to God's sovereign authority recorded in the Bible. The king honored the KING whose kingdom endures forever.

Nebuchadnezzar confessed that God Most High 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 honor of my kingdom, and my state 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."

What an amazing about-face. There is nothing more thrilling than to see God transform a life. And that's what has happened here.

But I want to look with you, for a minute, at one line from Nebuchadnezzar's short speech.

He said, ***[35] "All the inhabitants of the earth are of no account."*** By that he means that God is greater than all the earth's inhabitants. AMEN. Well said.

But the king was NOT saying, and the Bible does NOT teach that the inhabitants of the earth don't matter to God. That's not true and that's obvious from what we've seen today.

God cares deeply for all people, even people like the pagan king of Babylon. He seeks them out. He pursues them with a heart to redeem and remake and restore them.

Summary: The pursuing heart of God!

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. With heart changed, there is great hope that he will change his behavior.

¹⁰ Nebuchadnezzar had been elevated to the throne immediately after his father died. The son returned from battle to be crowned king. God has now, just as quickly, removed his authority.

The life of Jesus repeatedly revealed the pursuing heart of God. Jesus pursued fishermen, Pharisees, and tax collectors, and both Jews and non-Jews.

The Apostle John gave most of a whole chapter in his Gospel (John 4) to show Jesus pursuing and then leading a lost Samaritan woman to faith.

Here, Daniel gives us an Old Testament picture of the same pursuing God. I think that this chapter should be seen as a template showing to what lengths God will go to bring one person to Himself.

Yes, God's pursuit of Nebuchadnezzar took the king on a long, hard path.

It took seven years of lost sanity and seven years away from the throne to bring this man to faith. And it was worth every one of those two thousand five hundred and fifty-five days.¹²

It was the kindness of God that brought Nebuchadnezzar to the end of himself.

It is always God's kindness that brings any of us to the end of ourselves, that brings us to repentance. And when we come to the end of ourselves, we have no one to trust but God.¹³

Nebuchadnezzar's story is your story. It is the story of the seeking heart of God.

I believe that if you reflect on your life, you will hear God's footsteps searching for you, you will see God's fingerprints.

God is like a shepherd who has one hundred sheep and loses one - you - and goes seeking it until He finds it. It's like when a child returns home after living in rebellion against his or her father. When

that father sees his child - you - returning, runs out to welcome that child home.

Twenty-six hundred years ago, God pursued a pagan king. Today, He is pursuing you. Wherever you are in your spiritual journey, turn to Him now.

- If you are His child, living 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, look to Jesus, the One who died that you might live - and believe in Him. Jesus assures you that if you believe in Him, you have received the free gift of eternal life. Believe in Him today.

We look at Daniel today and get to see a God who passionately pursues us. We also get to see something else. This is rich.

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

The King's Dream and Its Interpretation (reprised)

Remember. King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream. We've seen that and, and we've heard Daniel's interpretation of the dream.

A giant, beautiful tree housed animals and provided shade. The tree was cut down, but not destroyed - and it morphed into a man who turned into a wild animal. The dream had a good ending, but it took traveling a brutally hard path to get to that good end.

Listen carefully now to what we didn't read the first time through, after Daniel heard the king describe his dream.

Daniel 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

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.*

you.”¹⁴ Belteshazzar replied, ‘My lord, if only the dream applied to those who hate you, and its interpretation to your adversaries!’

That is a fascinating response.

Hearing Daniel’s emotional reaction, if we didn’t know better, we might think that he cared about the king. And isn’t that a thought - that Daniel might have been concerned for the king of Babylon.

I mean, think about what this king has done to Daniel.

He had killed Daniel’s fellow Jews in Judea and ripped Daniel away from his family and homeland. He forced Daniel to land in Babylon as an exile/refugee and turned Daniel into a eunuch to serve in his court.

Daniel suffered terribly because of Nebuchadnezzar.

We would understand if Daniel had been simply “putting up with” the king through these long years of court service.

We could imagine Daniel harboring a decades-long bitter disdain for the people he worked with and for this king.

We might even figure that when he learned what the king’s dream meant he would have (internally) rejoiced, that he would have seen it as good news that his boss would finally get what he had coming to him.

If those reasonable thoughts have been our thoughts, we have another thought coming. Daniel was *“appalled”* at the king’s dream because he was concerned for the welfare of the king.

His response is what any of us might think when we hear of a good friend’s serious medical report. *“Oh no! Not that. Not YOU! Why couldn’t it be somebody else?”¹⁵*

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.

¹⁵ This is, by the way, exactly what we saw in chapter 2 when Daniel 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.

So, we note here that Daniel was deeply concerned for the king, and he dreaded the severe discipline that was coming.

But Daniel went ahead and interpreted the dream.

He told him that the dream predicted a chopped down life, seven years of a loss of personal autonomy and royal sovereignty.

And we listen again, to something we skipped over the first time through.

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

[27] “Therefore, O king, may my advice be pleasing to you: wipe away your sin by doing righteousness, and your wrongdoing by showing mercy to the poor, in case there may be a prolonging of your prosperity.”

From those words, we learn that Nebuchadnezzar was cruel, merciless to the poor, and unrighteous - all of which was about par for the course for an Ancient Near Eastern monarch.

If building his own empire meant overburdening the poor, so be it. Nebuchadnezzar was always and only about the welfare of Nebuchadnezzar.

Daniel urged his king - for the king’s own good - to change his ways. Daniel was hopeful that judgment could be forestalled - maybe even avoided altogether - if the king turned from his sin.¹⁶

And in this urging, Daniel’s isn’t simply serving the king as a good court official. He’s serving as the sinful king’s friend.

And in this, Daniel reminds us of Jesus, who had a well-earned reputation - usually spoken by His enemies as an insult, as *[Matthew 11:19] “a friend of sinners.”*

¹⁶ Nebuchadnezzar is not promised forgiveness on the ground of good works. The issue is that, if he showed mercy and justice, he would delay (and possibly remove) the necessity of God’s temporal judgment.

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, just like He did.

Conclusion:

It’s stunning when we realize that Daniel was *“appalled”* at what the king’s dream revealed and that he urged Daniel to turn from his sin to avoid God’s hard judgment.

I wonder if this is what happened...

Daniel was a man of prayer. We know that. I suspect that he had prayed for Nebuchadnezzar throughout the long years he had been serving in Babylon.

And it’s a funny thing about prayer. When you pray consistently for somebody over time, your heart softens toward them. (I’ve found that to be the case, personally.)

I believe that Daniel had a genuine affection for this pagan king who had wronged him, an affection nurtured over the years through prayer.

As he served in Babylon’s court, Daniel came to love the sinful king who had wronged him and his people, just like God did. His heart beat fast with the things that touched God’s heart. Daniel was being transformed in a man who loved the things his God loved.

Just like Jesus said, ***[Luke 6:40] “A pupil is not above his teacher. But everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher.”***

If you and I would learn what Daniel is teaching us, we will nurture a heart of love for those who are far from God. 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 our beloved doubters. (See Matthew 5:44; Romans 12:14)