

The sermon

Intro

How do you perceive God? A hands-off deity who wound the world up and let it go? A deity who lets everything go in the name of love and forgiveness and acceptance? A hateful, self-centered dictator whose greatest pleasure is human suffering?

Maybe you perceive God in similar terms? Maybe you've had conversations with co-workers, friends, family who viewed God this way? Let's look to Daniel for how to perceive God. We want to incorporate the things Nebuchadnezzar learned into our spirituality.

Body

Point 1: King's conclusions (4:1-3)

READ 4:1-3

We're given the end of the story from the beginning. It's like the prequels in Star Wars. We know Anakin Skywalker is going to become Darth Vader. We just don't know how.

What did Nebuchadnezzar conclude?

- 1) God intervenes in human affairs (signs and wonders).
- 2) God rules forever and ever without end (everlasting kingdom).
- 3) God's rule extends to every era in human history (*"from generation to generation"*).

What's being said here?

Babylon's wise men viewed their gods as distant and unwilling to communicate (2:11). Nebuchadnezzar discovered the one true God does communicate to his people.

Nebuchadnezzar didn't believe that either his gods or Daniel's God could interfere with his plans (3:15). Nebuchadnezzar discovered God does intervene in human affairs.

By the end of this episode, Nebuchadnezzar's understanding of God broadens once again. God not only reveals dreams and rescues his people from angry kings. God exercises his rule in every generation of human history.

God never hibernates. God never leaves the realm of mankind to itself. God's rule is perpetual and without end.

Point 2: Dream revealed (4:4-18)

READ 4:4-18

Why is the most powerful man in the world at that time terrified by a dream? Why isn't he so blinded by pride that he's numb to a dream?

He's a superstitious person who believes in signs and omens and fortune telling. Apparently he's afraid his dream is a bad omen. So he wants answers.

Help needed (4:7)

This time he reveals the dream. His experts in the magic arts are unable to interpret his dream.

Daniel (4:8-9)

“the spirit of the holy gods”

Daniel previously revealed a dream, so Nebuchadnezzar had already concluded “*the spirit of the holy gods*” was in Daniel. There’s a divine source behind Daniel’s ability.

Yes Daniel supervised a superstitious group of people who looked everywhere for guidance except God (“*chief of the magicians*”). Yes Daniel supervised a group of people who practiced forbidden activities that required the death penalty under laws given to Moses (Lev 20:27; Deut 18:9-14). His conscience permitted him to supervise this group, but it didn’t permit him to consume the king’s food and wine (1:8). Daniel wouldn’t practice forbidden sins, but he supervised people who did.

The dream

- 1) There’s a tree that rises to great height and feeds all the beasts and birds and humans (4:10-12).
- 2) An angel (watcher) commands the tree be chopped down (4:13-14).
- 3) However, the stump and roots remain (4:15).
- 4) The tree morphs into a human, for the tree’s mind is transformed into the mind of a beast (4:16).
- 5) The purpose is revealed in 4:17:

“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.”

God is the ruler of his creation. God gives earthly kingdoms to whoever he desires. God gives authority to lowly men.

This is one of the many things God wants us to know about him!

Application

So the most powerful king in the world is afraid of the future. Why are people afraid of the future? Because they don’t believe in a good, wise, and sovereign God. They don’t believe “*that for those who love God all things work together for good*” (**Rom 8:28**). They don’t believe that “*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life*” (**Psalms 23:6**).

So they look for assurance in other places. Horoscopes, tarot cards, contacting the dead, retirement accounts, health products. They lack hope. They lack certainty.

We don’t fear the future because God is directing our steps (Prov 16:9) and we’re confident God is actively acting on our behalf today!

Point 3: Dream explained (4:19-27)

READ 4:19-27

Daniel’s heart

Daniel’s disturbed and hesitant to explain the dream. Daniel says, “*My Lord, may the dream be for those who hate you and its interpretation for you enemies*” (4:19). Daniel isn’t taking pleasure in the king’s punishment. **We grieve God’s punishment of the wicked while affirming his punishment is just and right.**

Interpretation

- 1) Nebuchadnezzar is the tree.

it is you, O king, who have grown and become strong. Your greatness has grown and reaches to heaven, and your dominion to the ends of the earth. – 4:22

- 2) Nebuchadnezzar will be made mad such that he dwells “with the beasts of the field” for “seven periods of time” (4:25) = temporary.
- 3) Nebuchadnezzar will dwell with the beasts “till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will” (4:25) = till he learns his lesson.
- 4) The stump and roots indicate neither Nebuchadnezzar nor his kingdom will be destroyed (4:26).
- 5) Daniel counsels repentance (turning from sin):

"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." – 4:27

Summary

Nebuchadnezzar's sins are twofold:

- 1) Failure to recognize that his success is a result of God's choice.

Nebuchadnezzar rules over this kingdom because God chose to give it to him.

- 2) Unrighteous use of the power given to him:

Failure to mercifully deal with oppressed peoples in the kingdom. In the Old Testament the poor, the foreigner, the widow, and the orphan are objects of God's care.

Application

Failure to recognize God's rule hinders mercy. The flip side is recognizing God's rule leads to mercy.

If we see God as the source behind any good in our lives, we won't think ourselves more important than others. And we won't feel comfortable mistreating people.

If we view God as ultimate ruler, we'll be careful to avoid disregarding his word.

How we think and perceive things affects our conduct!

How does God rule? With justice and mercy. God's commands protect. God is against rape, kidnapping, violence, theft, fraud, harmful words, etc.

God's commands foster doing good to our neighbor. God is for treating those created in his image with dignity, honesty, kind words, generosity, etc.

What I'm saying is that God's commands/laws are good for us. They're life-giving. On the other hand, rejecting God's commands brings ruin on ourselves and others. So we have school shootings and metal detectors in our schools and airports. If humanity simply obeyed God's commands we wouldn't need metal detectors. The problem lies in us.

God is just and merciful. There's just punishment for the unrepentant. There's mercy for the repentant. What's the proof that God cares about human suffering? God punishes those who bring suffering on others. It's merciful for God to punish Nebuchadnezzar.

Point 4: Warning unheeded (4:28-33)

READ 4:28-33

Nebuchadnezzar neither heeded the interpretation nor Daniel's counsel. After having 12 months to repent (4:29), Nebuchadnezzar was punished.

God altered his mind such that he lost normal human sanity and conducted himself like an animal (he now thought he was an animal?). Took away sanity and gave delusion.

A particular act of pride occasioned judgment.

"Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?" – 4:30

I've done it and it's all for me. As Nebuchadnezzar celebrated himself, God humbled him. But the humbling wasn't permanent.

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." – 4:32

Until he learned his lesson.

"seven periods of time"?

Period doesn't mean year. An unspecified period of time.

Insanity of sin

There's something odd you might have noticed. Nebuchadnezzar was afraid of the dream, but not the interpretation. That's afraid of a bad omen, but indifferent to God's judgment. Apparently he didn't fear Daniel's God because he goes about his business as normal for 12 months.

Note Nebuchadnezzar had proof. Daniel's God had access to his dreams. Daniel's God rescued his people from the fiery furnace. Why wasn't he concerned about the interpretation? It makes no sense!

This pictures the insanity of sin. To defy the one with power to create our world and its creatures by speaking us into existence makes no sense. To defy the one who furnished proof of the final judgment by rising Jesus from the dead makes no sense. To defy the one who knows what we are and what's best for us makes no sense. To reject the one who offers mercy and eternal life makes no sense.

Why the defiance? He doesn't see. He's blind, darkened, dead in his sins. If this is you, ask God for sight. Ask God to shine his light in your heart so that you behold the glory of Jesus Christ.

Our part, God's part

Another thought. Didn't Nebuchadnezzar play a part in his own success? Yes. He led his troops in battle. He made decisions that expanded the empire. He issued orders that built up the physical structure. Then why the rebuke?

Nebuchadnezzar errs because he fails to acknowledge God. It was God who brought him into the world as the son of a king who ruled over an empire. It was God who constituted him with courage, a mind for military strategy, and a mind for administration. It was God who gave him victory in battle (1:2).

Any natural good we have comes from God. The ability to walk, read, write, and reason. Any spiritual good we have comes from God. The Spirit enables us to obey. Jesus took our sins on the cross so we could be forgiven. I'm not discounting human effort, but wherever we see good in ourselves, we should see the glory of God.

Point 5: King's conclusions part two (4:34-37)

READ 4:34-37

At the end of the days

After the unspecified period of time was over.

I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven,

Some acknowledgement of God. Acknowledging his rule? Prayer for mercy?

and my reason returned to me,

Beastlike inclination removed. Restored to sanity.

and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever,

He spoke well of God.

for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;

Explained in the next verse.

all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,

In comparison to God's power, we are nothing. God rules, not us. This isn't saying we have no value. By virtue of being created in the image of God, we have value.

and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth;

God does whatever he pleases. Among angels in heaven. Among us on earth.

and none can stay his hand

No one can stand against God. No one can stop God from accomplishing his will. Job came to this conclusion:

"I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted." – Job 42:2

In the context of Daniel thus far this means:

- 1) No one can stop God from giving Babylon victory over Judah.
- 2) No one can stop God from giving his people favor.
- 3) No one can stop God from giving his people superior wisdom.
- 4) No one can stop God from rescuing his people from death.
- 5) No one can stop God from putting who he wants on the throne.
- 6) No one can stop God from exacting judgment on prideful rulers.

or say to him, "What have you done?"

No one can question God's actions or commands. That's what the phrase "*What have you done?*" means. This reverses the Creator-creature distinction. For this reason we can't accuse God of wrong when we pray. God wants you to be real, pouring out your hearts with raw honesty. God wants our hearts not formulaic ritual! We can ask questions. We can share our confusion with blunt honesty. But we can never charge him with error or evil. **We need to be real and reverent.**

Nebuchadnezzar concludes:

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. – 4:37

Scholars are divided on whether or not Nebuchadnezzar had saving faith. Was Yahweh just one of many gods he worshipped? I take this as saving faith.

His stance towards God changed. He repented. He now speaks well of God and desires the peace of his people (4:1). He acknowledges whatever God does is right and just. And he acknowledges he was a prideful man humbled by God.

Conclusion

How do we relate to God?

First, we acknowledge his lordship over us. He determines what's right and just, not the other way around. He gives the orders, not the other way around. He judges us, not the other way around.

Second, we acknowledge our sins against him. Sins like pride. Thinking too highly of ourselves.

Third, we repent of our sins. That's turning from indifference to God's commands to faith. In God's mercy, Jesus died as a substitute for sinners such that whoever believes will be forgiven and have eternal life. We turn from sin by trusting in God's promises and embracing his rule.

Fourth, we live from confidence in God's forgiveness through Christ.

Fifth, we speak well of God to others. We tell people about God's glorious rule and how he mercifully saves sinners through Jesus Christ.