

Daniel 4:1-37

I. Daniel 4:1 — King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth: ...

In chapter one, we saw King Nebuchadnezzar besieging the city of Jerusalem and then carrying off some of its people into exile (1:1-4). In chapter two, we saw King Nebuchadnezzar “angry and very furious” and commanding that all the wise men of Babylon be destroyed (2:12). These were his words to the Chaldeans:

□ Daniel 2:5 — If you do not make known to me the dream and its interpretation, you shall be torn limb from limb, and your houses shall be laid in ruins.

In chapter three, we saw King Nebuchadnezzar issuing a decree that all peoples, nations, and languages must fall down and worship the golden image he had set up or else be cast into a burning fiery furnace (3:4-6). When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to obey we saw him “filled with fury,” and “the expression of his face... changed” against them as he ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated and these three men to be cast into it (3:19-20). At the end of chapter three, after God had delivered Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the burning fiery furnace the king issued this decree:

□ Daniel 3:29 — Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins.”

Are you getting the picture? Nebuchadnezzar is a ruthless king with apparently unlimited power *and* freedom to do whatever he wants. So when chapter four begins with these words, “King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth,” I think we have good reason to brace ourselves for what comes next.

II. Daniel 4:1-3 — King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you! It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me. How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation.

Nothing to this point in Daniel could possibly have prepared us for this. It’s totally unexpected and at least to this point totally unexplainable. And that’s actually the point. It’s the shock of this that prepares us to see the main theme and message of this chapter.

This is the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar who rules over all the peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth. And yet the kingdom Nebuchadnezzar speaks of here is the kingdom of “the Most High God” whose kingdom “is an everlasting kingdom, and [whose] dominion endures from generation to generation.” So what we have here is *two* kings and *two* “sovereignities.” On the one hand there’s the pagan King Nebuchadnezzar (ruling over all the

peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth), and on the other hand there's the "Most High" God. Do we feel that there's a tension here?

I know I use the word "tension" a lot. I was thinking last week about why I use it and whether I use it too much. The tensions that we often feel (or should be feeling) in reading Scripture are always the result of one or both of the following: The infinite and transcendent nature of God and His hidden wisdom (Trinity; Incarnation, Divine sovereignty and human responsibility) and/or our own fallen and sinful condition as finite human beings. It's as a result of who God is as the Creator and who we are *not only* as creatures but also as *fallen* and *sinful* creatures, that we will very often feel "tensions" when we come to the Scriptures honestly. So whenever I use the word "tension," what lies back of this word for me is the holy supremacy of God in contrast with my own creaturely limitations and/or my own fallen sinfulness. So once again, do you feel the *tension* here between these two "sovereignities" – between the rule of King Nebuchadnezzar and the rule of the Most High God?

The designation "Most High" appears six times just in this chapter and fourteen times just in chapters three to seven of Daniel so it gives us a major clue as to the theme of this chapter and the theme of Daniel as a whole. The "Most High" means exactly what it sounds like it means – the *Most High*, the one who has no rival, the one who is supreme over all. In the Psalms, this supremacy of God is revealed not just in His power (Ps. 18:13), but also in His saving righteousness (Ps. 7:17), His steadfast, covenant love (Ps. 21:7), and His infinite, perfect wisdom (Ps. 107:11). The "Most Highness" of God means especially that His rule and sovereignty doesn't have any boundaries, but encompasses the whole earth.

- Genesis 14:19 (cf. 14:22) — [Melchizedek] blessed [Abram] and said, "Blessed be Abram by **God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth.**"
- Psalms 47:2 — For **the LORD, the Most High**, is to be feared, **a great king over all the earth.**
- Psalms 83:18 (cf. 97:9) — You alone, whose name is the LORD, are **the Most High over all the earth.**

That's all very wonderful sounding, but how does it actually work out in practice? Who do we *see* ruling the world and apparently doing just as they please? We see human presidents, and human prime ministers, and human senators and congressmen, and human dictators and tyrants. At certain times in history we even see "King Nebuchadnezzar's" who can legitimately write: "to *all* peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in *all* the earth." It doesn't take a whole lot of honesty to feel that there's a tension here and even at times an irreconcilable contradiction between the claims of God's sovereignty as the Most High over all the earth and the claims of human "sovereigns" like King Nebuchadnezzar. This is especially true when God's people find themselves living in exile in Babylon. How can there be the Most High God who has no rival and who is truly over all the earth *and at the same time* a King Nebuchadnezzar? Maybe if all the kings of the earth were always talking like Nebuchadnezzar does here— but they're not are they? In fact, they rarely ever do. And yet what does Nebuchadnezzar confess?—That God's kingdom is "an *everlasting* kingdom" and that His dominion "endures [uninterrupted] *from generation to generation.*" But if what we see around us is actual reality—if the experience of God's people in

exile in Daniel was actual reality—how can this be? How are we to “resolve” this difficult tension?

Nebuchadnezzar writes: “It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me. How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders!” “Wonders” refers to the awe-inspiring, supernatural character of God’s works. But we remember that God’s wondrous works are never intended only to amaze. God’s “wonders” are also “*signs*” pointing beyond themselves to something we’re meant to understand. As “*signs*,” you could say that they always *signify* something; they’re always intended to communicate something deeper to us and ultimately to teach us wisdom. “How *great* are his signs, how *mighty* his wonders!” It’s here, then, that we must look for the resolution of that tension between the “sovereignty” of human rulers like King Nebuchadnezzar and the sovereignty of the Most High God.

III. Daniel 4:4–7 — I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and prospering in my palace. I saw a dream that made me afraid. As I lay in bed the fancies and the visions of my head alarmed me. 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. Then the magicians, the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers came in, and I told them the dream, but they could not make known to me its interpretation.

In Nebuchadnezzar’s first dream in chapter two (perhaps some twenty years earlier; Steinmann; Greidanus) “his spirit was troubled, and his sleep left him” (2:1); this time, even in the height of his power and glory, the king is “terrified” (cf. Dan. 7:7, 19) and “alarmed.” He calls for the magicians, enchanters, Chaldeans, and astrologers, but even though this time he tells them what the dream was, they still can’t tell the king its interpretation. I wonder if part of the reason was that they didn’t dare to confirm the part of the meaning that was already very obvious. And I wonder if another part of the reason was that they didn’t have any prescribed rituals or formulas for “undoing” or “voiding” a dream like this. Whatever the case may be, the stage is set, isn’t it? So we read in verses 8-9:

IV. Daniel 4:8–9 — 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, “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.”

Why wasn’t Daniel brought in at the very beginning? Maybe it was protocol to bring in the wise men of Babylon first, and only as a last resort to bring in the chief prefect over all the wise men. Maybe Daniel wasn’t able to be summoned as quickly or to make it to the palace as quickly as many of the others. Or maybe Nebuchadnezzar was hoping that his “regular” wise men would be more likely to give an interpretation—or at least a solution—to his dream that would calm his fears. But once again, whatever the case may be, we see how the stage is being set. Even in the way the story’s told—and some have suggested Daniel might have had a hand in helping the king compose this letter—even in the way it’s told we’re all being *drawn in* to see not just what the dream *is* but what its *meaning* will be.

V. Daniel 4:10–12 — “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. The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. 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.”

We see a tree growing “in the midst” of the earth – at the very *center* of the earth. In other words, all the rest of the earth is situated and oriented around this tree. The tree grows so that its top reaches to heaven and it provides food and shade for all the beasts of the field and for all the birds of the heavens and all flesh is fed from it.

This was an image that would have been *very* familiar to Nebuchadnezzar from the pagan myths of his day – myths that were invented in order to help explain reality.

“A lofty... verdant... tree [like this] is a common symbol for the living, transcendent, life-giving, sustaining Cosmos or Reality or Deity itself. A *sacred* tree at the center of the earth symbolically links earth [the dwelling of man] and heaven [the dwelling of the gods]” (Goldingay).

“Sometimes the king takes the place of the tree in the iconography; ‘in such scenes the king is portrayed as the human personification of the Tree. Thus if the Tree symbolized the divine world order, then the king himself represented the realization of that order in man, in other words, a true image of God, the Perfect Man’” (Longman, quoting Parpola).

Can you see the element of truth that still survives in this pagan myth? We read in Genesis chapter one:

□ Genesis 1:27–28 — So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Man as the image of God was to mediate God’s life-giving rule to the world as royal kings and queens. And the image of a life-giving tree is a wonderful way of picturing this. Within this pagan myth there *is* an element of truth and of real beauty – and yet this truth and beauty has been perverted and twisted. In the Bible, the Creator is never reduced to the level of His creation – He could never be physically represented in pictures or religious art as a sacred and life-giving *tree*. And in the Bible, even though man *is* the image of God, he is never the *personification* of God – he could never “stand in” for or “*take the place*” of “the tree.” So in this mythic imagery of the tree, can you see how the lines are completely blurred between the Creator and the creature? On the one hand the gods are brought down to the level of the creation and on the other hand man is elevated to the level of the gods. Isn’t that the very thing we see in Genesis when the serpent tempted Eve with the promise of being “like God”? (Gen. 3:5; cf. 3:22) Ever since the fall, the rule and the kingship that God gave to man has been pursued in rebellion against the rule

and the kingship of God, and that's what we see here in this image of the tree with its top that "reached to heaven." Remember the tower of Babel in Genesis 11 and the people who said:

- Genesis 11:4 — "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens..."

In Ezekiel thirty-one, we read of another tree:

- Ezekiel 31:3–7 — Behold, Assyria was a cedar in Lebanon, with beautiful branches and forest shade, and of towering height, its top among the clouds... So it towered high above all the trees of the field... All the birds of the heavens made their nests in its boughs; under its branches all the beasts of the field gave birth to their young, and under its shadow lived all great nations... it towered high and set its top among the clouds, and its heart was proud of its height...

Nebuchadnezzar adds that in his dream the top of the tree was "visible to the end of the whole earth," symbolizing a rule that extends to "all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth" (4:1).

Nebuchadnezzar *already* saw himself as the personification of this life-giving, life-sustaining tree: exalted to the heavens, visible to the ends of the earth. Remember that there's much that could have been exceedingly good and beautiful about this picture. Remember that in the beginning God gave to man as His image bearer the privilege of mediating *His* life-giving, life-sustaining rule over all the earth as royal kings and queens. The problem here is that this tree has exalted its own rule and sovereignty in a bid to take the *place* of God. And there's another problem: In arrogantly exalting itself like this, it's inevitable that the power to sustain and protect life will be twisted and used instead as a means to oppress and destroy life.

So can you see, again, the tension? Is it coming into focus in high definition for us? How can there be the Most High God who has no rival and who is truly "over all the earth" and at the same time a King Nebuchadnezzar? It can very much feel like what we have here is an irreconcilable contradiction – especially for those of us as God's people who are still living in exile. If we can't somehow resolve this tension, then how can we be *equipped* to stay faithful in those times when it seems that the "sovereignty" of man has totally and completely usurped the sovereignty of God? That was very much the question for the exiles in Daniel's day, and that still remains very much the question for us.

In Nebuchadnezzar's pagan worldview, the tree was inviolate. By its very nature, it couldn't be touched. We can imagine, then, the reason for his terror when we read in verses 13-17:

VI. Daniel 4:13–17 — "I saw in the visions of my head as I lay in bed, and behold, a watcher, a holy one, came down from heaven. 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. 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. [Now the imagery changes from the tree to a

man:] Let him be wet with the dew of heaven. Let his portion be with the beasts in the grass of the earth. 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. 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.”

Can you see how shocking and horrifying this imagery is?—The *tree* chopped down, its branches lopped off, stripped of its leaves and all its fruit scattered. It was to *man* as His *image-bearer* that God gave the responsibility of mediating His own life-giving rule to the whole creation. The Psalmist celebrates this reality when he writes:

□ Psalm 8:4–7 — What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field...

But what do we see here? God dethrones man, how?—By decreeing that man, who was created as the image of God, be given the mind of a beast. “How great are His signs, how mighty His wonders!”

The evidences of God's unrivaled sovereignty and kingship are everywhere in these verses. “The sentence is by the decree of the watchers” (the unsleeping, constantly vigilant servants of God; cf. Ps. 121:4) and “the decision by the word of the holy ones” (the supernatural, heavenly beings). Of course, the decree and the decision is ultimately *God's*, but in being proclaimed and carried out by the “watchers” and the “holy ones” we have *pictured* for us how the sovereign rule of God extends over all the earth (think of when the Lord was standing above a stairway on which His angels were ascending and descending [Gen. 28:12-13]; think of the horsemen in Zechariah who were sent out to patrol all the earth [Zech. 1:7-11; 6:1-8]). Notice, too, how Nebuchadnezzar saw a watcher, a holy one, who “*came down* from heaven” in order to give the command to chop down the tree with the top that reached to heaven. We're reminded again of the Tower of Babel in Genesis eleven:

□ Genesis 11:5 (cf. 11:7) — And the LORD **came down** to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built [with the top that was to reach to heaven].

We asked earlier how God can truly be the Most High over all the earth if what we see around us is actual reality. And the answer is that while this is reality, it must always be interpreted in the light of a greater reality – one that almost always remains *invisible* to these eyes of flesh.

The command to chop down the tree is followed by this qualification: “But leave the stump of its roots in the earth... and let seven periods of time pass over him.” So what happens after these seven periods of time have passed? Will the stump bud and put out branches and grow again into a lofty, life-sustaining tree in the midst of the earth (cf. Job 14:7-9)? How can that be? Why would God not just *allow* but even *decree* such a thing? The answer is found in these words: “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.**” Did you see here that there are still *two* “sovereignties”? And did you see how they’re related? “The Most High rules the kingdom of men.” Or we could say, “The Most High rules the rule of men.” The point is not that the Most High rules the kingdom of men only when men see and admit that He does. The point is that the living may know that even when they can’t see it and aren’t confessing it—even then the Most High rules in absolute sovereignty over the kingdom of men, *giving it to whom he will and setting over it* the lowliest of men. In other words, it was God who willed to give the kingdom to Nebuchadnezzar; it was the Most High who purposed to set Nebuchadnezzar over the kingdom of men. This is what we’re meant to see with the eyes of faith as we live still in exile in this fallen world; this is the wisdom that we’re meant to learn. So let’s go on to read, now, in verses 18-26:

VII. Daniel 4:18–26 — “This dream I, King Nebuchadnezzar, saw. And you, O Belteshazzar, tell me the interpretation, because all the wise men of my kingdom are not able to make known to me the interpretation, but you are able, for the spirit of the holy gods is in you.” Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, was dismayed for a while, and his thoughts alarmed him. The king answered and said, “Belteshazzar, let not the dream or the interpretation alarm you.” Belteshazzar answered and said, “My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you and its interpretation for your enemies! The tree you saw, which grew and became strong, so that its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth, whose leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in which was food for all, under which beasts of the field found shade, and in whose branches the birds of the heavens lived— 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. And because the king saw a watcher, a holy one, coming down from heaven and saying, ‘Chop down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump of its roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze, in the tender grass of the field, and let him be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts of the field, till seven periods of time pass over him,’ this is the interpretation, O king: It is a decree of the **Most High**, which has come upon my lord **the king**, 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. 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.**”

Not, “From the time that you *let* Heaven rule” but “from the time that you *know* that Heaven *rules*.” Not, “Till you *allow* the Most High to rule the kingdom of men and give it to whom he will” but “till you *know* that the Most High *rules* the kingdom of men and *gives* it to whom he will.” Here, again, are words that are almost literally breathtaking in their scope and power. Here are words that expose the true feebleness of our faith and the true extent of our unbelief!

So we ask: Does this mean that God can ever look with favor on the king (or the ruler, or the president, or the lawmaker) who takes his power to sustain and protect life and uses it instead to oppress and destroy? We go on to read Daniel’s last words to the king in verse 27:

VIII. Daniel 4:27 — “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.”

We may not understand *why* God sometimes wills to give the kingdom to oppressive rulers and tyrants—any more than we can understand why God sometimes wills to give the kingdom to men who are actively seeking to exalt themselves above God(!)—but this we can always know: God’s revealed will is always for rulers to break off their sins by practicing righteousness, and their iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed. And this, too, we can always know: even when human rulers seek to exalt themselves above God and even when human rulers use their power to oppress and destroy (even to oppress and destroy God’s people), it’s still—even then—the Most High who gives the kingdom to whom *He will* and sets over it whom *He will*. And so we read in verses 28-33:

IX. Daniel 4:28–33 — All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar. At the end of twelve months he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, 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?” 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**, 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.**” 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.

Man, who was created in God’s image and given the privilege of ruling over all the beasts of the field now loses that privilege in a single moment—by being, as it were, turned into a beast himself. “How great are His signs, how mighty His wonders!” And so we learn wisdom.

The last fifteen verses have all been in the 3rd person, but now the chapter concludes with a return to the 1st person testimony of Nebuchadnezzar. Now the theme of the opening verses is taken up again and intensified. Now the theme of the whole chapter is given its most powerful, most breathtaking expression.

X. Daniel 4:34–37 — 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; 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?” 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. 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.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, what is all of this meant to teach us? What is the wisdom that these words impart to us? The point of this chapter is not for us to put ourselves in Nebuchadnezzar's shoes and remember that if we become arrogant like he did, God can humble us. That's certainly true and it's a legitimate lesson to learn, but it's not *at all* the point of the passage. The point is for us to learn a different "kind" of humility.

The point is for us to learn to humble ourselves before the God who wills to give the kingdom to "Nebuchadnezzars" — and even to Hitlers, and Saddam Husseins, and Kim Jong-uns. That's the point. The point is for us as God's people to worship before Him, humbly confessing that the *Most High* 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?" How often have we said in our hearts: "What have you done?" The signs and wonders of the Most High here in this chapter are meant to teach us a wisdom that humbly confesses instead: "All his works are right and [all] his ways are just." And though He doesn't always do it on our timetable or even in our lifetime, we know that "those [human kings and rulers] who walk in pride he is *able* to humble." And so we worship, and we trust, and we rejoice, and we hope, and so far as we're able, we submit to the governing authorities because we know that there is no authority except *from God*. And then we remember these verses:

- Ezekiel 17:22–24 (cf. Mat. 13:31–32) — Thus says the Lord GOD: "I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest. And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it."

- Isaiah 11:1–5 — There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.