



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Daniel 4:1-37

Daniel

"The King's Madness"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Thank you, Mark, and good morning. We are continuing our studies in the book of Daniel and we're looking at chapter 4 this morning. It's a lengthy chapter – 37 verses. We're going to seek to cover the entire chapter, but I'm not going to read the entire chapter. I'm going to read the very beginning and the last verses that capture really the essence of the lesson and the passage.

It's an interesting chapter, because it was written by Nebuchadnezzar and he speaks of his experience that was a great humbling, but the lesson that he learned for it. We see that from the beginning.

"Nebuchadnezzar the king to all the peoples, nations, and men of every language that live in all the earth: 'May your peace abound!' And then he tells his story about how God took this great man and humbled him. But then he ends in verse 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./'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?"

"At that time my reason returned to me. And my majesty and splendor were restored to me for the glory of 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. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and 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."

May the Lord bless this reading of His word. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, we give You thanks and praise You for this time that we have together this morning to read this great text of scripture written by one of the great kings of the ancient near east who gave some of the greatest praise to You in all of the Bible. What a work of grace that was. But it reminds us that You are in absolute control of all the events of life. Everything is under Your domain, and that means every detail in our life is as well.

And that means that regardless of what happens in life – and we do go through great trials – that we can rest confidently in Your sovereign will. Teach us that lesson and teach us the value of recognizing Your will and mercy that we be humble, humble in our relationships with one another, humble in our relationship with the world, and certainly walk humbly before You.

We thank You for Your grace that's brought us into Your family and for all the blessings that we have. Bless our time now, Lord, as we continue in worship. We pray You would bless our time of study together, and we pray these things in Christ name. Amen.

[Message] We've all heard stories, fact and fiction, about kings losing their minds – King Lear wandering aimlessly in a storm, commanding the wind to blow; George III becoming violently insane in the last years of his life. But no account of the kings' madness can compare to that of the king of Babylon. It's not only strange, it is instructive. It is a lesson in pride going before a fall, and the sovereignty of God.

Now, the sovereignty of God is the subject of this book of Daniel, but this lesson on God's sovereignty is a lesson on His grace, because that's what the king was given through his madness. Now that may sound a bit odd, but it's often said that a man must come to the end of himself before he comes to God. And so God brings men to that place, but it is in the affliction that He gives the cure. That's the story in Daniel chapter 4. The king was stricken. He learned the lesson, he lived to tell the story, and he was eager to do it. He wrote the chapter.

It begins "Nebuchadnezzar, the king to all the peoples, nations, and men of every language that live in all the earth: 'May your peace abound!'" He tells that God showed him signs and wonders, and confesses that He is the most high and that His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom.

Now, that's true. Every believer in the Lord knows that that is true. But here it is a pagan king making that confession and a king who believed that his kingdom was the one that would endure forever. He raised a great statue on the plain of Dura, a gold statue that declared that to the case, that his kingdom would last. And yet here he now makes the confession that it is the Lord's kingdom that is an everlasting kingdom. God clearly did a great work of grace in that man's heart.

That is what Nebuchadnezzar explains in the rest of the chapter. He had a dream. Years had passed since his first dream when he saw that colossal statue with its head of gold. It was now near the end of his reign. He had finished his wars. He had built his city. He was at ease in his palace. Then he was disturbed one night by visions that he saw in his sleep.

So he called for all the wise men, the best and the brightest in his kingdom, and asked them to explain the dream to him. They were unable to do that. They couldn't explain the meaning of it. Then he evidently moved up the ladder in significance. He called a second team in, the conjurers and Chaldeans. These were the best and the

brightest in the domain. These were the ones who were truly the smart men, but they could not explain it either.

So finally having exhausted Babylon's brain trust, he called for Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar dressed him according to his Babylonian name. he said, "O Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, no mystery baffles you, tell me the vision of my dream."

He then told Daniel the vision that he had seen. It was a vision of a great tree in the midst of the earth. It was tall and it grew large. It reached the sky and it filled the earth. It was beautiful. It was full of foliage and fruit that gave food to all. The birds nested in its branches. The animals rested under its shade. It was an impressive sight.

But then Nebuchadnezzar said as he was observing all of this, suddenly an angel came down from heaven and gave the order to cut down the tree. He ordered that the branches be chopped off, that the foliage be stripped, and the fruit be scattered, leaving the beasts and the birds to flee. Then an iron band was to be put around the stump. Nothing was to be left, but the stump with its roots in the ground.

Finally, the words of the angel are spoken, and the words that the angel speaks regarding all of this are quite ominous. We read in verses 16 and 17, "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./This sentence is by 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."

Of course, Daniel explains in verse 24 that everything that happened, everything that those angels commanded, was, as he says, the decree of the Most High. They're carrying out His decree in all of this. But Nebuchadnezzar was puzzled by it. He wanted to know what it all meant and who it was about. Who was it whose mind would be changed into the mind of a beast?

The king was disturbed, and so was Daniel. In verse 19 he described as appalled. Apparently he understood the dream at once. Nebuchadnezzar tried to encourage him. He said, "Belteshazzar, don't let the dream or its interpretation alarm you. Speak. Tell me the meaning of it." It took some courage for Daniel to do that, because the dream was not pleasant. It was about punishment.

Still, he gave the king the bad news. "The great tree you saw is you, O king." He then explained that just like the tree that had grown great, the king had become great. His empire filled and nourished the earth. But just as the tree was cut down, Nebuchadnezzar would be brought down because of his pride. He would lose his mind. He'd become an animal and be in that condition for seven periods of time – seven years. Verse 25, "Seven periods of time will pass over you, until you recommend that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it on whomever He wishes."

There was a purpose in the punishment – to teach him, to teach Nebuchadnezzar, that God is sovereign over the affairs of men and over the affairs of nations. He rules the world. Daniel confessed that in chapter 2:21, in his prayer, when he prayed to the Lord, "He removes kinds and establishes kings." Rulers are only on their thrones by God's good pleasure, and the Lord wanted to teach that to this great king, King Nebuchadnezzar.

It seems like a rough way to teach him a lesson, reducing Nebuchadnezzar to that of an ox, giving him the mind of an animal and humiliation that that must brought to him. It was also necessary. He believed that he was a self-sufficient, self-made man. And God in His wisdom knew that it would take all of that – it would take that great humiliation, it would take bringing him down to that level, for him to learn this lesson.

Nothing is arbitrary with God. God does not act randomly. He brings trials that are tailor made to those who have them. He does it with precision, the precision of a spiritual surgeon. And God, in His grace, would deliver Nebuchadnezzar through this affliction. The

command to leave the stump with its roots in the ground and put a band of iron and bronze around it are actually a hopefully sign.

The chute can come from the stump and it can grow again. The band around it evidently was for protection. It was done to keep the stump from splitting. And what that signified seemed to be that God would keep the kingdom from dividing during this time of discipline.

And yet there was a pleasure from Daniel to avoid all of this. This was the dream, this was the decree. And yet he says, "Nebuchadnezzar, turn from your ways." Very often, we can avoid the trials of life if we will simply respond to God's word, if we will simply humble ourselves and be obedient. And that's what Daniel says to the king. That's the counsel that he gives. Daniel cared about this man. He had a real affection for Nebuchadnezzar. And out of concern for him, Daniel tried to direct him in the way of obedience.

"Break away now from your sins," he tells Nebuchadnezzar. "Break away by doing righteousness and from your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor." Repent is what he was saying. That's quite a statement for a young man like Daniel to make. Actually, he's not a young man at this point. This is much later in his life, but it was a bold statement for Daniel to make to this all-powerful monarch, to tell him to repent, to tell him to turn from his sins.

And yet out of concern for him, he did that. That's what we do when we have a concern or a love for others. It's tell them the hard things that they need to hear, and he had the boldness and the courage and the genuine affection for this man to do it.

But Nebuchadnezzar was unresponsive. So it happened as Daniel predicted, as the dream declared. Not immediately. The Lord was patient. A year passed. He had a year to think about the things that he had seen in those night visions. He had a year to think about what Daniel said. But as the year went by, the dream kind of waned and faded in the king's thoughts. And then one day, we read in verse 29, "he was walking on the roof of the royal palace." And as he was

looking over the city of Babylon, he was struck by the magnificence of it. And it was a magnificent place.

He had spared no expense to make it the most splendid city of the ancient world. It was rectangular in shape and surrounded by a wide, deep, water-filled moat, and massive double walls that extended 17 miles around the city. The Greek historian Herodotus described the walls as 300 feet high – probably an exaggeration, but others have calculated that they were probably at least eight stories high. The tops of the walls were highways for chariots and troops to move. The city was entered through eight great gates. Each one was named after a Babylonian god.

Broad, elaborately embellished streets passed through a huge metropolis that was full of canals and towers and ziggurats, palaces, and buildings adorned with glazed tiles. The most famous of the buildings was the Hanging Gardens, considered by the ancient Greeks to be one of the seven wonders of the world. Nebuchadnezzar built it for his Median wife who was homesick for the trees and the mountains of her country, and it was so high that it could be seen outside the walls. His own palace, and he had many palaces, but his chief palace was made of massive walls and adorned with enameled tiles and gold and silver and precious stones.

It was a brilliant city. And as he surveyed it, he said to himself, "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?" At the moment he said that, verse 31 says, "While the words were still in the king's mouth," the prophecy was fulfilled. The king lost his mind. He was driven from the palace and out into the fields, where he lived like an ox for seven years, eating grass. His condition is described in verse 33. He couldn't care for himself, so his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair had grown like eagle's feathers and his nails like bird's claws. And what triggered his insanity was his boast. "Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself

have built?" Pride goes before a fall, and how often we have seen there.

There is a sense, I think, in which success breeds insanity. And I mean by that what the world considers success. Success with money; success in terms of fame and power, the very things that most people desire above all else – to have riches, to have position, to have prestige. Well, we see that in all areas of life. We see it in politics. We see it in business. We see it in sports. People reach the top of their profession. They gain lots of influence. They gain fame. They gain money. And they lose touch with reality. A man becomes impressed with his achievements. He becomes impressed with himself, becomes full of himself and his own importance, and he puts himself above others. He thinks he's invulnerable, and then he falls.

And so it was with Nebuchadnezzar. He was enamored of himself. Really, of all of the gods of Babylon that Nebuchadnezzar worshipped, the chief god in his Pantheon was himself. He worshiped Nebuchadnezzar. "I built Babylon. By my might and for my glory." Power corrupts, we're told, and pride goes before a fall. That's the story of Nebuchadnezzar.

But it's the story of every man and every woman. Luther described the soul of the natural man, the unbelieving person, as curved in on itself. It only sees self. Life is all about him or her. It's all about self. God has no place in it. And when fame and fortune are added to that, it only aggravates that natural condition in the natural man. Very, very few people can handle fame. They lose touch with reality, and that is a madness. It may be a madness different from what this king experienced, but it is a kind of madness to lose touch with reality. And the effect is the same, which is the ruin of a life and, very often, the ruin of a number of lives.

Nebuchadnezzar's madness is a great object lesson on the foolishness and the consequences of pride. The greatest king of his day was humbled in the most amazing way and in a most appropriate way. Man is made in God's image. That's what separates us from the

animals. But when men deny God, they deny that image and they become like the animals. The more a person and the more a people depart from the revelation of God, from the light of His word, the more corrupt they become, the more lawless society is. And that's demonstrated here in this great and powerful king.

God gave him over to the natural consequences of his unbelief, which is the mind and the behavior of a beast. People who exalt themselves above God, whether they do it consciously or not, are headed for a fall. That's the warning of this passage.

But this is about more than pride in a pagan king. It's about the Lord God. It is chiefly about Him. It is a demonstration that God is God and that the success that anyone has, whether it's a minor kind of success or a major success like this man had enjoyed, that success is given by the Lord God. Daniel said that in the second verse of the book, when he wrote that the Lord gave Judah into Nebuchadnezzar's hand. God gave him his victories. God gave him his vast kingdom.

Now, it didn't seem that way to Nebuchadnezzar, certainly not at the time when he captured Jerusalem by the power of his own might and army. He captured the citizens. He took the best of the people and took them off to Babylon and put them to work in his government, and he put the vessels of the temple and to the temple of his won god. That certainly seemed as though Nebuchadnezzar had triumphed over everyone and every god. He was the mighty one. At least, it all seemed to point to that in his mind.

By the time of chapter 4, years have passed. It's probably the last decade of Nebuchadnezzar's life. His enemies are defeated. The empire is prospering and Jerusalem lay in ashes. From all appearances, Nebuchadnezzar was the greatest power on earth. Not even Jehovah could stop him. Nebuchadnezzar thought it was so. He was full of his own importance, and then God taught him this lesson.

He'd been teaching the king all along. Nebuchadnezzar had learned that the Lord interprets dreams and he delivers people from the fire. But now he learns a final lesson, and that lesson is that God

alone rules in heaven and earth. He is the only God and the King over creation. And the miracle in all of this is he learned the less. And here the account returns to the first person, and Nebuchadnezzar speaks.

We read in verse 34, "But at the end of that period, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward my health and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever." Now that response was an act of submission. But it was a response and result of sovereign grace.

How does a cow begin to think like a man? Well, the only way is God can give that cow, that ox, the reason of a man, and He took this man who He'd reduced to an ox and gave him back his mind. He restored him. That's the only explanation.

It's reminiscent, I think, of the prodigal son in Luke 15, who goes off to a far country, wastes his fortune and ends up in a pigsty eating pig food. That was a kind of madness in itself. Completely self-oriented young man – but then the text says, "When he came to his senses," he said, "I will get up and return to my father." I think probably the proper understanding of when he came to his senses is when his senses came to him. That was a work of God in his life. God brought him down to the lowest point, which is what he has to do sometimes in order to bring us to Himself. And that's what happened with Nebuchadnezzar.

At the end of his sentence of seven years, he looked up. Why? Why does this man look up? Oxen don't look up. But he looked up. He looked up to heaven, because God made his senses return. It was an act of grace. And in response, he gave glory to God. Verse 34, "For his dominion is an everlasting dominion."

I thought yours was, Nebuchadnezzar. You thought it was. No, "His dominion is an everlasting dominion,/And His kingdom endures from generation to generation/"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 the earth;/And no one can ward off His hand/Or say to Him, 'What had You done?'"

Well, Nebuchadnezzar sounds a lot like the apostle Paul and the prophet Isaiah, all rolled into one. Isaiah wrote in Isaiah 40:17, "All the nations are as nothing before Him,/They are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless." They're like a speck of dust on the scales. God acts according to His sovereign will. No one can turn back His hand. Isaiah said that very thing. He does as He pleases. Nebuchadnezzar said no one can say to Him, "What have you done?" Paul wrote that in Romans 9:20, "Who are you, O man, who answers back to God? "Why did you make me like this?"

God is sovereign. He is not answerable to man. And the fact that a proud and powerful king came to that understanding and that belief is itself a great miracle of God's sovereign grace. That's the very thing that the natural man, the unbelieving man, will not recognize, that he is under the authority of God, that he is to bow to Him. The natural man does not recognize that, does not recognize that you cannot turn back the hand of God. And I have to say, they're even genuine Christians who struggle with that.

Sovereignty of God is something of a polarizing doctrine in the church. Now, no one would say, "I don't believe in the sovereignty of God," and I'm speaking now of professing Christians who wouldn't say, "I don't believe in the sovereignty of God." They all will say, "I believe in the sovereignty of God." But what they then do is define it down. His sovereignty is He rules the world in a rather general way, that's true. He has a plan, we know that. But I rule my will. I live as I please, really.

Not Nebuchadnezzar. He doesn't say that at all. He said He, that is, the Lord God, does according to His will and no one can ward off His hand. He does according to His will. Well, that's Ephesians 1:11. "God works all things according to the counsel of His will." No one has the wisdom and the might to challenge God. And what He wills is always right. It's always wise. It's always good.

As I said earlier, God doesn't act in arbitrary ways. He's not random in His decisions. Everything is purposeful. Everything is wise.

Everything that happens, whether we understand it or not, and oftentimes, as we've said many times, we don't understand the things of life and why things happen the way they do and why they turn out the way they do. Nevertheless, what we can know is this: God is sovereign and He's wise and good and He works all to a good purpose, whether we see it or not. Someday we will.

And here Nebuchadnezzar is basically confessing all of that, confessing what Paul teaches. "He works all things after the counsel of His will." And so the king humbled himself. Through it all, through this terrible affliction, through God bringing him down to the lowest place, he repented and God restored his kingdom to him. Verse 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."

God who removes kings and establishes kings, protected Nebuchadnezzar all through his madness, through this period of discipline that He put him through. He preserved his throne from palace coup and he restored him to his power. In fact, the Lord gave him even more power and more prestige than he had before.

And so the king concludes his testimony with additional praise to the Lord at the end of the chapter, in verse 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."

Nebuchadnezzar didn't think it was an unjust thing that happened to him. He didn't think it was unfair. He said all "His ways are just, and He is able to humble those who walk in pride," which was his way of identifying his sin. It was pride and confessing it. God humbles the proud, and that's really the lesson of this chapter. It's Proverbs 16:18, "Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall."

That's a painful lesson to learn. It's a lesson to some degree that we all have to learn. And many people who fall don't learn it. They don't learn that lesson. But those who do, that fall doesn't crush them; it cures them. That's the intent. That's why the Lord afflicts us, to cure us. He did Nebuchadnezzar. This man writes these great words of praise and I don't think we can find words of praise much greater than what he writes here in this fourth chapter of the book of Daniel, which raises a question that many have asked, and that is was he genuinely converted from paganism to a belief in the living God?

Well, people, good people, good commentators, are divided over that. But I side with those who think that he was converted. His confession is profound. He begins the chapter by confessing that the Lord is the most high God, and he ends by confessing that He is the King of heaven. His understanding of God, his theology expressed here, is deeper than that of many evangelicals today.

He recognized his sinful condition. He confessed his pride. He submitted to God's discipline. Pharaoh never did that. Pharaoh was under the hand of God. He was under the punishment of God, but he never yielded. He resisted God to his own destruction.

But Nebuchadnezzar submitted to the heavy hand of God and he praised the Lord for it. He worshipped him. All of that is what a regenerated, a born-again person does. The natural response of a convert is to confess the Lord and to praise Him for his salvation. And that fits into the lesson of the chapter. The moral lesson of the story is given in verse 37. "He," the Lord, "is able to humble those who walk in pride." So turn from your pride. But the purpose of the event is given in verse 25 to show that the Most High is ruler.

Historians debate whether history is shaped by great ideas and great movements, like democracy or capitalism. Or is it shaped by great men – charismatic figures like Alexander or Washington or Churchill. What scripture clearly teaches is God produces history. He uses great men, He uses great ideas, but it is His work. It's the product, history is, of His eternal plan. That's all history is. It is the

unfolding of God's eternal plan and that plan is moving toward a end, a glorious end, a destiny.

Men like Nebuchadnezzar are His agents in that. And that's the message of Daniel 4. In it is the lesson of God's sovereignty and it is the lesson of God's mercy. And it shows that His love is for the Gentile as well as for the Jew. He loves the sinner. He loves even the proud and is able to bring even a powerful pagan king into His family. He saves all kinds of men. He saves all kinds of people. He's patient with them. He gave Nebuchadnezzar a whole year to repent before He afflicted him with madness. He's patient with all of us.

But sometimes He must bring a man to the end of himself before He can bring that man to himself and to the Lord himself. And yet when He does, that man will praise and thank God for that affliction, because of the cure that it brings.

Well, it may be that we have some here who with whom God is being very patient. They've heard the gospel but refuse to repent. Jeremiah had a whole congregation, as it were, like that. He was a prophet to the nation of Judah and he said to them, "Why will you die? Why will you not repent and submit?" And they heard that cry and they heard his sermons. They heard that plea and they would not respond, and so because they would not repent, they suffered judgment.

Well, that's the question for you. Why will you not turn to Christ and be saved? He is the Savior who died for sinners, and all who believe in Him are saved at the moment of faith. You are not asked to go on pilgrimages or afflict ourselves in some way to pay penance or do a whole series of works. What we're called upon to do is to repent of our sin and trust in Him, look to Him alone for salvation, believe.

So if you're here without Christ, we all who have believed, exhorts you and invites you to do that. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. And you who have – and perhaps it's everyone here; I hope it is – rejoice. Rejoice because of what we see here in this great fourth

chapter of the book of Daniel. God is sovereign and merciful. And His kingdom will come. And it is, as Nebuchadnezzar confessed, it is an everlasting kingdom. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, we too give our thanks and our praise to Your amazing grace, grace that saves rebels and makes them his sons. We thank You for Christ. We thank You for His death. Now, Lord, we pray that You'd bless our time of fellowship together. And we pray these things in Christ name. Amen.