

Heaven Rules

Daniel: The First Wise Man, Part 3

Daniel 4:1-37

One of the universal traits of human nature is the unwillingness to listen to warnings.

The Associated Press ran a story some time ago of a man who simply refused to wear his seatbelt even though he had been ticketed and fined 32 times in five years. Even though it cost him a minor fortune, he insisted that within his own car he was the only authority and he paid a small fortune in traffic violations to protect his independence. Finally, he tired of paying the fines and instead of obeying the law he made a fake seat belt that hung over his shoulder to make it appear that he was wearing a seatbelt when he wasn't. He tied one end of the strap to his seatbelt just behind his head, and he'd sling over the bottom part to complete the deception.

You're thinking; why not take the same amount of time and just buckle up, right?

It's amazing the lengths someone will go through to resist submitting to authority.

Aren't you glad none of us do anything like that?

His trick worked and he wasn't pulled over. But then he had a head-on collision – one that he most likely would have survived – but it threw him into the steering wheel and he was killed.ⁱ

The resistance to heed a warning is actually more common placed than we'd like to think.

In fact, I came across a recent medical survey pointing out that around 600,000 people have open heart surgery every year in America. These patients are told that their bypass surgery is only a temporary fix and they've survived and have been given another chance to change. Doctors implore them to stop smoking, drinking, eating as much and start exercising.

In essence, this report said, Doctors have delivered the message to millions of Americans – “you've been brought back from the brink of death . . . you'd better change . . . next time it might not work.

According to this medical survey, get ready – 90% of open heart surgery survivors change nothing – end quote.ⁱⁱ

Why would that be?

Probably for the same reason we don't even like to pull over and ask for directions . . . we'd have to admit to a total stranger that we're lost. I mean, who wants to admit that you're wrong – who wants to change direction – who wants to admit to failure?

One of the most remarkable admissions of failure in the entire record of human history came from the pen of the most powerful King who ruled the most powerful kingdom at that time, on planet earth.

And his changed heart will bear witness to his remarkable conversion.

But it wasn't until after he'd effectively had a head on collision with the discipline of God . . . only in his case, he survived to tell his story.

It's found in *Daniel chapter 4*. Daniel chapter 4 is one of the most unique chapters in the Old Testament because it is an official autobiographical document.ⁱⁱⁱ

It's an open letter, prepared by Nebuchadnezzar and mailed throughout his entire kingdom, a copy of which is tucked inside Daniel's inspired record.

In typical, royal fashion of that day, the letter opens in *verse 1. Nebuchadnezzar the king to all the peoples, nations, and men of every language that live in all the earth: May your peace abound! 2. It has seemed good to me to declare the signs and wonders which the Most High God has done for me* – in other words, Nebuchadnezzar is about to deliver what we would call his personal testimony of conversion.

He ends his opening remarks by exalting God – notice *verse 3. How great are His signs and how mighty are His wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom and His dominion is from generation to generation.*

Now, most people are going to be under the impression that Nebuchadnezzar is going to run off just another one of his brag sheets on how close he is to divine power and how great he is.

But what he does instead is begin to reveal a detailed account of a nightmare he'd had, 7 years earlier, which had changed his life forever.

An Unexpected Vision

Notice verse 4. *I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and flourishing in my palace.*

Stop for just a moment – in the margin of your Bibles at **chapter 3**, you might write the words, 15-20 years later.

In other words, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego went through their fiery furnace ordeal 15-20 years after they'd arrived in the kingdom of Babylon.

Now, you might want to write next to the opening lines of **chapter 4**, the words, 20-25 years later. And that's because chapter 4 will take place some 20 years after the events of chapter 3.

By the way, this Diary of Daniel covers 75 years of Daniel's life . . . and right now in chapter 4 . . . he's in his early 50's.

And that's important to understand because we now know that Daniel's testimony has been weaving its way through the palace and court of Nebuchadnezzar now for 35 years.

Nebuchadnezzar has heard the gospel – no doubt – from numerous conversations with his prime minister – the leading member of the Magi – Daniel – a man distinguished as the wisest man in the kingdom.

Now, **verse 4** here informs us that Babylon is enjoying a time of peace and prosperity. We know from history that Nebuchadnezzar is involved in a myriad of building projects at home and abroad.

He writes here, ***I was at rest and flourishing.*** That Aramaic word translated ***flourishing*** can be understood literally – “I was growing green.”

That doesn't mean Nebuchadnezzar started planting trees and recycling aluminum cans; it meant that everything was luxuriant and prosperous under his rule.^{iv}

And during this time of ease, Nebuchadnezzar starts having nightmares. And they troubled him so much; he called in all the magi, all the conjurers, all the diviners.

And as usual, they don't have a clue – because the dream is from God.

And, true to form, Nebuchadnezzar calls Daniel in last. Why?

We're not told, but my guess is that Nebuchadnezzar wanted to give his boys another chance – they keep flunking the dream test; more than likely, he already knew that this time around, the dream wasn't going to go his way.

And he would have been right.

Notice verse 8. *But finally Daniel came in before me, whose name is Belteshazzar according to the name of my god* – don't miss that by the way.

In this open letter to his kingdom he refers to Daniel by his Hebrew name . . . which is another clue that something was different about Nebuchadnezzar.

Since no one would have known who the king was talking about, he hadn't been called Daniel for 35 years, you notice that Nebuchadnezzar threw in Daniel's Babylonian name – Belteshazzar – and everyone probably said, “Now we know who you're talking about.”

In **verse 9** we pick up on two more observations – Nebuchadnezzar refers to Daniel's divinely connected spirit. Nebuchadnezzar is reporting, by the way, what he said at the beginning at this ordeal where he's still confused in his polytheism, but that'll straighten out by the end of the chapter.

He also calls Daniel, here in **verse 9**, ***the chief of magicians*** – you could translate that, the master of the Magi.^v

We'll deal with the Magi in detail on Christmas Sunday, Lord willing, but for now, here's the nightmare.

Let me just read through it . . .

Notice verse 10. *Now these were the visions in my mind as I lay on my bed: I was looking, and behold, there was a tree in the midst of the earth and its height was great. 11. The tree grew large and became strong and its height reached to the sky, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. 12. Its foliage was beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the sky dwelt in its branches, and all living creatures fed themselves from it. 13. I was looking in the visions in my mind as I lay on my bed, and behold, an angelic watcher, a holy one, descended from heaven. 14. He shouted out and spoke as follows – Chop down the tree and cut off its branches, strip off its foliage and scatter its fruit; let the beasts flee from under it and the birds from its branches. 15. Yet leave the stump with its roots in the ground, but with a band of iron and bronze around it in the new grass of the field.*

So far, you've noticed that everything is in reference to a tree. And Nebuchadnezzar has a pretty good idea – and so did all the other wise men – what this dream was implying.

In fact, it's quite possible the other officials didn't want to give the meaning to the king – at least

the obvious parts of it – because that wouldn't have been good for job security.

The king had a temper, remember? He had a furnace . . . and lions waiting.

Throughout history, a tree was often used as a symbol for a kingdom; the bigger the tree, the more powerful the kingdom. In Nebuchadnezzar's nightmare, the roots of this particular tree reached to the ends of the earth and its branches provided shade for everyone.

This is obviously a reference to the kingdom of Babylon.

But that's not the real nightmare part – the nightmare starts in when the language of the dream changes the pronouns from general to personal.

Notice verse 15b. And let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, and let him share with the beasts in the grass of the earth. 16. Let his mind be changed from that of a man and let a beast's mind be given to him, and let seven periods – seasons – literally, seven years, of time pass over him.

This isn't about a tree anymore . . .

Notice verse 17. The sentence is by the decree of the angelic watchers and the decision is a command of the holy ones, in order that the living may know that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whom He wishes – now notice – and sets over it the lowliest of men.

Nebuchadnezzar says, "Wait a second . . . that's me, isn't it."

I don't need help figuring this out!

And what do you mean by that last line – *the lowliest* wears the crown? I'm not the lowliest, I'm the greatest!"

And what do you mean by implying, the Most High put me on the throne? I'm the son of a King – and this kingdom that reaches to the ends of the earth is of my own doing!

Nebuchadnezzar's nightmare communicates the principle that God crowns whomever *He* chooses; sometimes God puts in place world rulers all the way down to civil leaders, who are the least deserving – the most wicked of them all.

Just read world news reports.

Like the recent scandal in China by one of the top administrators, trusted by so many and viewed as a benevolent man only to discover that over the years he had stolen and stashed millions of dollars away for himself.

Read of African and South American dictators who lead impoverished nations while keeping everything for themselves.

Listen, God is using even the lowliest of men to move their kingdoms of the world toward His final kingdom.

Nebuchadnezzar – you're a great tree . . . not because you deserved it, but because I made you that way – but here's a news flash – you're about to get chopped down.

Which is really an ironic metaphor given recent discoveries.

Archeologists have uncovered inscriptions by Nebuchadnezzar where he used the language of a tree under whose shelter everyone had found abundance.^{vi}

Renald Showers in his commentary on Daniel points out recent findings that Nebuchadnezzar had a thing for the power of trees. In fact, on one of his journeys through Lebanon, one discovery shows that Nebuchadnezzar actually chopped down one of those massive trees himself – he was so proud of himself that he had a picture of himself cutting that tree down carved into stone.^{vii}

Nebuchadnezzar, let me give you another picture – in this one, you're the tree about to be brought down by God.

Notice verse 19. Then Daniel, whose name is Belteshazzar, was appalled for a while as his thoughts alarmed him. The king responded and said, "Belteshazzar, do not let the dream or its interpretation alarm you." Belteshazzar replied, "My lord – which is tantamount to "your highness", if only the dream applied to those who hate you and its interpretation to your adversaries.

That's not what Daniel should say! What he ought to say is something like, "Are you ever in for it!"

"You destroyed our temple – you put my king's eyes out after killing his children – you destroyed Jerusalem – you tried to cook my only friends in a furnace . . . man, am I ever glad to see God finally chopping you down."

This is an amazing response here from Daniel – and quite an example for us as believers.

Daniel didn't pile on the table all the things that could have been eating away at him, making him bitter and resentful or frightened – you don't hear Daniel saying, "You've had it coming . . . and I think God is letting you off rather lightly!"

Instead, “King this is such bad news that I wish it was for those who hate you and want to see you destroyed.”

Which implies he isn’t one of them.

What grace . . . what humility . . . what compassion for the lost.

How can Daniel feel this way?

He can talk this way because he had believed the interpretation of this dream long before Nebuchadnezzar ever had it.

God rules over mankind . . . God is in control . . . the heart of the king is in His hand . . . the rulers of earth are ultimately under the management and appointment of God.

Because, Heaven rules!

An Unbiased Confrontation

And now Daniel provides the interpretation – let me summarize it for you.

Basically, in a sentence, “King, you are in deep trouble with God.”

He has decided to change *your mind* – *verse 16* – literally, *your heart*.

The Bible speaks of the heart as the seat of moral reflection; the choice of the will is made in the heart; the pattern of behavior emanates from the heart.^{viii}

In other words, Oh King – God is going to touch your mind and your heart – your moral compass and your patterns of behavior – you’re going to effectively lose your sanity and spend seven years acting and living like a brute animal.

It’s time you understood that, no matter how great you think you are, heaven rules.

By the way, Eastern Kings lived in isolation – many of them refused to even entertain bad news of any sort – they were used to hearing only good news.^{ix}

So, what happens next required courage; notice *verse 24, This is the interpretation, O king, and this is the decree of the Most High, which shall come upon my lord the king; 25. That you be driven away from mankind and your dwelling place be with the beasts of the field, and you be given grass to eat like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven; and seven seasons/years 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. And in that it was commanded to leave the stump with the roots of the tree, your kingdom will be assured to you after you recognize – get this – that it is Heaven that rules.*

Underline that . . . Heaven rules!

If that didn’t take courage enough . . . Daniel now goes off script and presses for repentance. Daniel is after a decision from the king – notice *verse 27. Therefore, O king may my advice be pleasing to you; break away now from your sins by doing righteousness and from your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor, in case there may be a prolonging of your prosperity.*

Can you believe that? Oh King . . . stop sinning. Stop treating your people with callous disregard . . . God placed you on that throne for good, not evil . . . break away from your sins by repenting and acknowledging that Heaven rules.

Daniel has moved from prophesying to preaching . . . Nebuchadnezzar, you need to repent of your sin and get right with God . . . and notice here – at the end of *verse 27, maybe . . . maybe God will withhold this nightmare from ever taking place.*

With that, Daniel walks out to leave the King alone with his thoughts.

God evidently gave Nebuchadnezzar a year to repent.

An Unchanged Presumption

Notice verse 29. Twelve months later he was walking he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon.



<http://kenraggio.com/Iraq-Babylon-Ancient-2.jpg>

Now, don’t go too fast . . . try to get this picture in your mind.

From a human standpoint, Nebuchadnezzar had every reason to believe his own press releases.

He was probably the greatest builder of ancient times. Forty-nine building inscriptions have been discovered so far, bearing his signature. Most of the bricks recovered from ancient Babylon, located in modern day Iraq, have had stamped on every brick this inscription, “I am Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon.”^x

He's on top of the palace and frankly, he's on top of the world.

He's up there on that roof . . . notice verse 30. ***The king reflected and said, "Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty.***

You see, part of the problem is, he's gotten his way his entire life. Nobody ever stood up to him . . . he always came in first and always got his way.

He must have been a little terror growing up. I can't imagine what kind of 3 year-old, he'd been.

I remember reading the true story from one of the authors in my library of a little boy who arrived with his mother at the dentist's office. This little 5 or 6 year old didn't want to be there. He kinda strutted in, though, like he owned the place. The dentist introduced himself and could immediately tell this kid was used to calling the shots and he wasn't very happy.

The dentist said, "Son, go ahead and climb up in the chair." He said, "No." The dentist didn't crack a smile – he just said, "Mom, you can stand over there, and you, son, get up in the chair." And he said, "If you make me get up in that chair I'm going to take my clothes off." The dentist didn't even bat an eye . . . he just nonchalantly said, "Alright, go ahead and put your clothes on that table over there and then get up in the chair."

The kid was stunned. But he wasn't bluffing, so he took off his shirt and put it on the table. The dentist said, "Alright, now get up in the chair." The boy said, "I mean it, I'll take my clothes off." The dentist again said, "Okay . . . put them over there with your shirt." He stripped down to his shorts . . . and the dentist said, "Now get in the chair."

The boy completely wilted and climbed up on the chair and had his teeth cleaned while shivering there in his shorts. Finally, the dentist said, "Well, that'll be all." And the kid hopped down and went for his clothes and the dentist said, "Oh no, we're keeping your clothes – if your Mom wants to come back and get them later, she can."

So this little boy walked out into the waiting room, holding his mother's hand – for the first time in a long time. They walked through the room and out to their car.

A couple of days later, the Mom walked back in – you'd think to sue the dentist – oh no, she said to him, "I can't thank you enough. He's threatened that in the grocery store, the playground and in the neighborhood – whenever he didn't get his way.

You're the first person to stand up to him . . . and he hasn't been the same since!

Frankly, Nebuchadnezzar is like that little boy . . . all grown up, but still a big baby. Nobody's ever stood up to him. No one has challenged him and lived afterward!

As far as he's concerned – never mind what Daniel warned him about 12 months earlier – he thinks he's even bigger than God.

With his thumbs in his lapels he effectively says, "I don't even think the God of Daniel can take me on."

An Unwavering Discipline

At that moment, God speaks – ***verse 31 – While the word was in the king's mouth, a voice came from heaven saying, "King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is declared; sovereignty has been removed from you; 32. and you will be driven away from mankind, and your dwelling place will be with the beasts of the field . . . verse 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.***

From the perspective of God – He has touched the mind of the king and removed a measure of his sanity.

From the human perspective, the technical term for this is Zoanthropy, a rare delusional disorder in which a person believes they are an animal, manifesting itself in a variety of animal-like behaviors such as walking on all fours, eating grass and communicating only through animal-like means.^{xi}

Warren Wiersbe adds a point of application in his commentary on this passage, the practical application that whenever men and women refuse to submit themselves to God as creatures made in His image, they are in grave danger of *descending to the level of animals.*^{xii}

We might not eat like them and talk like them, but we can certainly *live* like them.

Well, God keeps His promise of discipline, but He also keeps His promise of deliverance.

An Undeniable Conversion

Notice verse 34. But at the end of that period – seven years – 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.

Don't forget, this is an open and official declaration of faith and reverence toward the true and living God.

Nebuchadnezzar is effectively telling his entire empire that he is now a follower of this God of Daniel who disciplined him so severely.

He's effectively saying, the best thing that ever happened to me happened to me was when God caught me in my sin and cared enough to discipline me.

Every parent in this room understands the value of that, right? Every child doesn't understand that . . . but will, one day.

When I was growing up, as a missionary kid, it seemed I always got caught . . . I could never get away with anything.

And I'm glad about that now.

I remember when I was around 8 years old my missionary father, doing his best to try and feed his family of four sons, arrived home one afternoon with a huge stalk of bananas; it was at least 5 feet tall – must have been at least 150 bananas.

He'd gotten it from the banana docks in Tampa, he brought it home in the mission van, lugged it down to our basement, where it was cool, hammered a hook underneath the stairwell and hoisted that stalk of bananas up on that hook and then closed the curtain.

He turned, looked at us and said, "Boys, stay away from this stalk . . . do you understand?" We said, "Yes, sir."

He left to back downtown.

As far as we were concerned, behind that curtain was the Ark of the Covenant – that was the Holy of Holies . . . I wanted to be the High Priest and go behind that curtain; so we sacrificed my little brother . . . just kidding . . . we actually left to go play.

But then my friend, Ronnie came over . . . did I have the biggest news or what? So we went down there and I pulled back that curtain and we just stared.

One won't hurt. There were hundreds . . . thousands of bananas.

We ended up devouring one after another . . . we even started racing to see who could eat one the fastest. We got stuffed. But now we had 24 banana peelings to get rid of . . . nearby was our old piano –

a huge upright piano . . . it was the perfect spot – I think it weighed 3,000 pounds, but we inched it away from the wall enough to toss all those banana peelings safely behind it.

All that was left was a stomach ache.

That night for dessert . . . well, for the first time in my life, I turned down banana pudding. I'm sure my parents wondered why?

A week later, for some odd reason, my parents decided to shift the furniture around in the basement. And they moved that piano. They discovered all those dried, blackened, shriveled up banana peelings. They remembered dessert time . . . they put the clues together and asked me to come down into the basement; and judgment fell.

I could never get away with anything . . . and am I ever glad.

How about you? Are there banana peelings in your life, right now . . . hiding . . . waiting . . . I'm praying you will get caught – and your life brought to repentance. Oh, I fear for the one who never found out.

Nebuchadnezzar had heard the warning . . . but he's up on the roof . . . there's nobody there . . . no one will hear his arrogant boast . . . just a sentence or two!

And he gets caught . . . God was listening . . . and seven years later he announces here that he's glad he was held accountable.

And now what a difference.

In this open letter, the king is admitting to having been deranged, but now he's honoring God.

Can you imagine that mass mailing?

Wouldn't it be great if some political leader in our world – someone high up in the echelons of power grabbed a microphone and said on national television, "I just want you all to know, my reason has returned to me – I was foolish and deranged, but now I'm in my right mind – I know that God is the King of Heaven – and I want to give glory to the One whose kingdom endures from generation to generation."^{xiii}

Nebuchadnezzar is bragging on God.

He basically brags on at least three attributes of God.

- **First he announces on that God is unequalled in ruling His creation**

That's *verse 34, He is the Most High God . . . He lives forever . . . His dominion is everlasting . . . His kingdom endures forever.*

- **He announces through a mass mail campaign, secondly, that God is unaccountable in answering His creation**

Notice verse 35, All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing. But He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, "What have You done."

And that attribute is one that creates more anger in mankind than perhaps anything else; that God is sovereign and owes mankind absolutely no explanation for what He does.

The very thing the human race wants to be – unaccountable; is the very thing the human race dislikes the most about God – that He is unaccountable.

Spurgeon said it well when he wrote, "We all like to be little sovereigns."^{xiv}

I'm not going to change . . . or repent . . . or budge . . . this is my life!

One author wrote that a ship's Captain peered into the darkness of the night and caught the faint glow of a light in the distance. He immediately told his signalman to send the message, "Alter your course 10 degrees south." Promptly, a return message flashed back – "Alter your course 10 degrees north."

This really angered the Captain that his command had been ignored. So he sent a second message: "Alter your course 10 degrees south – this is the Captain." The message came back, "Alter your course 10 degrees north – this is a second class seaman."

Immediately, the captain sent a third message, knowing the fear it would produce in this wise guy, "Alter your course 10 degrees south – I am a battleship." The reply came, "Alter your course 10 degrees north, I am a lighthouse."

Nothing more needed to be said.

- God is unequaled in ruling His creation
- God is unaccountable in answering His creation
- **Finally, God is unhindered in managing His creation**

*Notice verse 36 – At that time my reason returned to me. And my majesty and splendor were restored or returned 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 – or kingdom – you could understand him to simply be referring to his throne – in other words, God put me back on my throne; but **notice – and surpassing greatness was added to me.***

Not – earned by me; deserved by me . . . but added to me – by whom? *Verse 37 – The formal letter concludes, 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 walk in pride.*

That's a long way of saying, "Now I know . . . heaven rules."

And by the way, in this entire closing paragraph, Nebuchadnezzar never once refers to himself as king – but did you notice in *verse 37*, where he concludes, "let me tell you about the King of Heaven."

I would agree with those commentators and scholars that we will one day see Nebuchadnezzar in heaven. As horrific as these 7 years were, they brought about an alteration in the eternal direction of Nebuchadnezzar's life.

And he became the Emperor-Ambassador, from this moment on, and his message was fairly simple – Heaven rules (period).

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/2/2012 by Stephen Davey.

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i "Fake Seat belt to fool police causes death" (The Associated Press, 2-22-08); citation; Christianitytoday/preachingtoday.com

ii Thom S. Rainer & Eric Geiger, *Simple Church* (Broadman, 2006), p. 229

iii Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Resolved: Daniel* (Victor Books, 2000), p. 49

iv John MacArthur, *The Rise and Fall of World Powers* (Word of Grace Communications, 1989), p. 74

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- v John Phillips, Exploring the Book of Daniel (Kregel, 2004), p. 73
- vi Renald Showers, A Commentary on the Book of Daniel: The Most High God (Friends of Israel, 1982), p. 43
- vii Ibid
- viii Frank E. Gaebelin, editor, The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Zondervan, 1985), p. 61
- ix Wiersbe, p. 54
- x Showers, p. 45
- xi Charles R. Swindoll, Daniel: Volume 1 (Insight for Living, 2008), p. 62
- xii Wiersbe, p. 52
- xiii Adapted from John MacArthur, "*A Warning to Every Proud Ruler*" (www.gty.org/resources/sermons/90-450)
- xiv Charles Spurgeon, quoted in Wiersbe, p. 58