

“With a Grateful Heart”

Deuteronomy 8:1-20; Daniel 4 ¹

One of the more unusual stories in the Bible began with a dream Nebuchadnezzar had in 583 B.C., when he had been king of the Babylonian Empire for nearly twenty years. A brilliant military strategist, Nebuchadnezzar had subdued his enemies in a series of campaigns, the most famous of which was his defeat of the army of Pharaoh Necho at the Hittite capital of Carchemish about the year 605.

After achieving a measure of peace in the Fertile Crescent, a peace which included the conquest of Judah and the deportation of the Jews to Babylon in 587, Nebuchadnezzar had turned his attention to public projects of many sorts. It was he who constructed the famous “hanging gardens” of Babylon, one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world, and the famous Assyriologist, Henry Rawlinson, wrote that “nine-tenths of Babylon and nineteen twentieths of all the other ruins that in almost countless profusion cover the land are composed of bricks stamped with his name. He appears to have built or restored almost every city and temple in the whole country.”²

Archaeological findings suggest that Nebuchadnezzar may have been the greatest monarch that ever sat on a throne in the Middle East, and he himself was certainly of that opinion. You may remember that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego ended up in the fiery furnace because they refused to bow down to a ninety-foot tall golden statue that Nebuchadnezzar had made of himself, and it was this self-congratulation that led to the dream I mentioned when I began.³ Here is Nebuchadnezzar’s own account of that dream:

In the visions of my mind as I was lying in bed, I saw this: There was a tree in the middle of the earth, and it was very tall. The tree grew large and strong; its top reached to the sky, and it was visible to the ends of the earth. Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit was abundant, and on it was food for all. Wild animals found shelter under it, the birds of the sky lived in its branches, and every creature was fed from it.

As I was lying in my bed, I also saw in the visions of my mind a watcher, a holy one, coming down from heaven. He called out loudly: Cut down the tree and chop off its branches; strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the animals flee from under it, and the birds from its branches. But leave the stump with its roots in the ground and with a band of iron and bronze around it in the tender grass of the field. Let him be drenched with dew from the sky and share the plants of the earth with the animals. Let his mind be changed from that of a human, and let him be given the mind of an animal for seven periods of time. This word is by decree of the watchers, and the decision is by command from the holy ones. This is so that the living will know that the Most High is ruler over human kingdoms. He gives it to anyone he wants and sets the lowliest of people over it (Daniel 4:10-17).

Upon awakening, Nebuchadnezzar called for Daniel, whom he called Belteshazzar, and whom he had deported from Judah some years earlier. Daniel had proven himself an able interpreter of dreams through God’s power, and Nebuchadnezzar wanted to know what this troubling dream meant.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on November 19, 2017.

² <http://www.christiananswers.net/dictionary/nebuchadnezzar.html>

³ Saddam Hussein was very fond of thinking himself the successor to Nebuchadnezzar. It may help in the appreciation of Nebuchadnezzar’s ninety-foot statue to know that the famous statue of Saddam that was toppled in the 2003 invasion was only forty feet tall.

Daniel was aghast when he heard the dream, and he didn't want to tell Nebuchadnezzar what it meant. Finally, he said, *"This is the interpretation, Your Majesty, and this is the decree of the Most High that has been issued against my lord the king. You will be driven away from people to live with the wild animals. You will feed on grass like cattle and be drenched with dew from the sky for seven periods of time, until you acknowledge that the Most High is ruler over human kingdoms, and he gives them to anyone he wants."*

"As for the command to leave the tree's stump with its roots, your kingdom will be restored to you as soon as you acknowledge that Heaven rules. Therefore, may my advice seem good to you my king. Separate yourself from your sins by doing what is right, and from your injustices by showing mercy to the needy. Perhaps there will be an extension of your prosperity."

[Nebuchadnezzar ignored this advice, and] *All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. At the end of twelve months, as he was walking on the roof of the royal palace in Babylon, the king exclaimed, "Is this not Babylon the Great that I have built to be a royal residence by my vast power and for my majestic glory?"*

While the words were still in the king's mouth, a voice came from heaven: "King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is declared that the kingdom has departed from you. You will be driven away from people to live with the wild animals, and you will feed on grass like cattle for seven periods of time, until you acknowledge that the Most High is ruler over human kingdoms, and he gives them to anyone he wants."

At that moment the message against Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people. He ate grass like cattle, and his body was drenched with dew from the sky, until his hair grew like eagles' feathers and his nails like birds' claws (Daniel 4:24-33).

Daniel goes on to recount how, like the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), Nebuchadnezzar eventually came to his senses, gave glory to God, was restored to his throne, and ruled for another dozen years or so. His was a rare mental illness known as *zoanthropy*, in which the sufferer believes he is an animal. You may remember that the boy Mowgli, in Kipling's *Jungle Book*, grew up thinking he was a wolf (*lycanthropy*).

Neither this illness, nor the interregnum which it must have caused, have been found recorded in the official annals of Babylon; but there is a notable absence of any record of acts or decrees by the king during the period 582-575 B.C.—a period of seven years.⁴

An inscription has been found in Babylon that says that Nebuchadnezzar was ill for four years, and a bronze door-step has been discovered that says it was an offering presented by Nebuchadnezzar to the great temple at Borsippa after his recovery from a terrible illness. The ancient historians Berossus and Eusebius also mention this illness.⁵

By now some of you may be wondering what the point of all this might be, especially in a service focused on thanksgiving. And some of you may have noticed a similarity between this story and the text we read earlier from Deuteronomy. Let's look at that text again, beginning at verse six of chapter eight:

So keep the commands of the LORD your God by walking in his ways and fearing him. For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams, springs, and deep water

⁴ http://www.bookrags.com/Nebuchadnezzar_II

⁵ F.B. Huey, Jr., *Ezekiel, Daniel*, vol. 12 of *Layman's Bible Book Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1983), p. 133. See also <http://net.bible.org/dictionary.php?word=Nebuchadnezzar>.

sources, flowing in both valleys and hills; a land of wheat, barley, vines, figs, and pomegranates; a land of olive oil and honey; a land where you will eat food without shortage, where you will lack nothing; a land whose rocks are iron and from whose hills you will mine copper. When you eat and are full, you will bless the LORD your God for the good land he has given you.

Be careful that you don't forget the LORD your God by failing to keep his commands, ordinances, and statutes that I am giving you today. When you eat and are full, and build beautiful houses to live in, and your herds and flocks grow large, and your silver and gold multiply, and everything else you have increases, **be careful that your heart doesn't become proud and you forget the LORD your God** who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery. . . .

But **remember that the LORD your God gives you the power to gain wealth**, in order to confirm his covenant he swore to your fathers, as it is today. If you ever forget the LORD your God and follow other gods to serve them and bow in worship to them, I testify against you today that you will perish. Like the nations the LORD is about to destroy before you, you will perish if you do not obey the LORD your God (Deuteronomy 8:6-14, 18-20).

Do you hear the similarities in these passages? The pattern in Deuteronomy and in Daniel is the same: blessing, success, pride, and judgment. Israel did disobey God, for so long and to such an extent that it was indeed destroyed, and it was Nebuchadnezzar who carried out this judgment.

Scott Hafemann made the interesting point that "The essence of sin is not ingratitude but *misguided* gratitude." We all thank somebody or something—usually *ourselves*—for the blessings we experience and achieve; and **the object of our gratitude ultimately becomes the object of our worship.**⁶

It's dangerously easy to congratulate ourselves on the successes in our lives rather than giving glory to God for His blessings. In these prosperous times, we Americans are particularly in danger of self-congratulation that leads us to forget the LORD our God and to disobey God's commands, regulations, and laws. We would do well to remind ourselves that three hundred and ninety-seven years ago this month,⁷ forty-one of our forebears signed the *Mayflower Compact*, pledging themselves to the goal of planting a colony in the New World "for the glory of God and for the advancement of the Christian faith."

Four centuries later, anything good there is in your life and mine is there primarily because of the grace of God. You and I don't stand on foundations of our own making. We stand always and forever on the shoulders of others who have poured their lives into ours, both directly and indirectly, and when we come to understand this, it's a very natural thing to give glory to God!

This much is relatively easy, but there's another piece to Nebuchadnezzar's story that we need to notice. At the end of Daniel 4, Nebuchadnezzar wrote that "*But at the end of those days, I, Nebuchadnezzar, looked up to heaven, and my sanity returned to me. Then I praised the Most High and honored and glorified him who lives forever: For his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation. . . . Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise, exalt, and glorify the King of the heavens, because all his works are true and his ways are just. He is able to humble those who walk in pride*" (4:34, 37).

⁶ Scott J. Hafemann, *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith* (Crossway, 2001), pp. 36-37.

⁷ November 11, 1620

As would later happen to the Prodigal Son—and perhaps to many of us, as well—it was in his time of struggle and pain that Nebuchadnezzar finally came to his senses. Rick Warren has reminded us that “The deepest level of worship is praising God *in spite of* pain, thanking God *during* a trial, trusting him *when tempted*, surrendering *when suffering*, and loving him *when he seems distant*.”⁸ Similarly, recognizing that God is always at work in our lives, Paul wrote, “*Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in everything; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus*” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

Examples could be multiplied many times over, but Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Chuck Colson both thanked God for the changes that came into their lives while they were in prison. Steve Jobs, in a commencement address at Stanford University in 2005, said, “I didn’t see it then, but it turned out that getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. The heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again, less sure about everything. It freed me to enter one of the most creative periods of my life.”

Steve Jobs gave no indication that he intended to give glory to God in that admission, though he did acknowledge a certain level of humility, as Nebuchadnezzar did. But news commentator Cal Thomas did give glory to God when he told this story:

“On a Friday in 1973, my boss at NBC said, ‘Got a minute?’ I got fired—because of my ego, big mouth, and jealousy of now-dead people. That was part of my trembling struggle toward the glory of Christ. He was holding me back for my own sake.

“My wife said, ‘You will never be free of the burden of success if you don’t thank God for losing your job.’ In tears I recommitted my life to Christ that night, and that led to eleven years in the wilderness.”⁹ God worked in Cal’s life in those wilderness years, and today he is a respected commentator on American life from the perspective of Christian faith.

C.S. Lewis put it well when he wrote that “**What we would here and now call our ‘happiness’ is not the end God chiefly has in view: but when we are such as He can love without impediment, we shall in fact be happy.**”¹⁰ Our challenge and our opportunity is to express gratitude to God in what we experience as painful times just as much as in times that are more comfortable. That’s what the 23rd Psalm is talking about when it speaks of “*green pastures*” and “*still waters*” on one hand, and about “*the valley of the shadow of death*” and “*a table in the presence of my enemies*” on the other.

That’s also what the 100th Psalm is talking about when it calls us to “*Acknowledge that the LORD is God. He made us, and we are his—his people, the sheep of his pasture. . . . Give thanks to him and bless his name. For the LORD is good, and his faithful love endures forever; his faithfulness, through all generations*” (vv. 3-5).

On this pre-Thanksgiving Sunday morning, I have many things for which to thank God, but high on my list is my gratitude for the privilege of serving you as your Pastor. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “*This is why, since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I never stop giving thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, would give you the Spirit of wisdom and*

⁸ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What On Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), p. 107.

⁹ Cal Thomas, quoted in Tony Carnes, “Conservative like a Fox,” www.ChristianityToday.com (July 8, 2004).

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan), pp. 40-41.

revelation in the knowledge of him. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what is the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the mighty working of his strength” (Ephesians 1:15-19)!

Amen, and Amen.