

# “All His Works Are Right and His Ways Are Just”

## The Ninth in a Series of Sermons on the Book of Daniel

*Texts: Daniel 4:19-27; Philippians 2:1-11*

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King Nebuchadnezzar has had a second terrifying dream. Once again his court magicians and wise men cannot interpret his dream. Greatly troubled, the Babylonian king summons his Hebrew servant Daniel to interpret this dream which has disrupted the king's life of relative ease and comfort. Daniel will reveal that the unsettling circumstances foretold in Nebuchadnezzar's previous dream are soon to come to pass. In the prior dream (as recounted in Daniel 2), the king saw a frightening metallic stature with a head of gold, which represented the king and his empire. But that kingdom will fall before a series of empires yet to follow. Nebuchadnezzar and his vast kingdom will come to an end—replaced by the Persian empire then just beginning to rise to power. Although Nebuchadnezzar remains convinced that his kingdom is mighty and that it stands as a testimony to his own accomplishments and greatness, as a consequence of these two dreams, the king is beginning to realize that his kingdom is no match for YHWH's. YHWH rules all the kingdoms of the earth from heaven. His kingdom is not of this world. His kingdom is eternal. None of this can be said of any earthly kingdom, including Nebuchadnezzar's.

As we continue our series on the Book of Daniel we pick-up where we left off last time (v. 19 of Daniel 4) when the king had another troubling dream and then summoned the Hebrew prophet (Daniel) to interpret the dream for him. Ironically, it was Daniel (a believing Jew), who, in gaining favor with the king after interpreting his first dream successfully was appointed prefect over Nebuchadnezzar's pagan court magicians. The king's magicians fail again and so it falls to Daniel to explain to the king what his second dream foretold—events which Nebuchadnezzar probably suspected (based upon his previous terrifying dream years before), yet which now brought him to a breaking point.

As we saw last time, ideally this passage (Daniel 4—Nebuchadnezzar's last appearance in the Book of Daniel) is best treated in one sermon, but the tyranny of time does not allow us to cover the passage in enough detail in one sermon to fully unpack its contents. Since this is a “part two” sermon in a sense, I'll briefly recap the ground we covered last time, before we turn to our text—the balance of Daniel 4.

The scene described in Daniel 4 comes late in Nebuchadnezzar's life and forty-plus year career, likely at some point after his prolonged military campaigns in Judah and Tyre, yet before his final campaign in Egypt and his death in 562 BC. Chapter 4 contains a first-person account from the king (in the form of a letter) about his dream, his subsequent break with reality, followed by his equally dramatic restoration. The king has witnessed YHWH's power and sovereign hand often enough to willingly confess that YHWH is the Most High God (v. 1), who is all powerful (v. 35), and whose kingdom will never end (vv. 3, 34). Yet Nebuchadnezzar never confesses his sins nor repents of them (or even acknowledges that he is a sinner). He never rejects the pagan gods of Babylon, even though he is forced to acknowledge that Daniel's God (YHWH) is much more powerful than Bel (Marduk), the king's preferred god from among the legion of Babylonian deities. We see in this chapter that Nebuchadnezzar has reached the pinnacle of his career, has another frightening dream, suffers a mental collapse (as foretold in the dream), and then has his sanity restored. All of this is YHWH's doing.

The reason for Daniel's inclusion of this first-person account from the king—including his reluctant

acknowledgment of YHWH as greater than his own gods, as well as his recounting a serious mental illness—is to remind and comfort the Jewish exiles forcibly taken from their homes in Judah, and now living under Nebuchadnezzar’s heavy hand in Babylon, that YHWH is sovereign over all things. YHWH has used the king and his empire as his agent to bring judgment upon disobedient Israel. Since YHWH is sovereign over all things, not Nebuchadnezzar, God’s promises to the Jewish exiles still stand. When their seventy years in exile are over, YHWH will ensure they are released from bondage and return home to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple. So, there’s much more here than a simple recounting of the king’s mental breakdown and restoration. The critical point is that YHWH will keep his promises to his people. He is Nebuchadnezzar’s Lord, an important and encouraging point for those reading Daniel’s prophecy to realize. They may live under the hand of a tyrant (Nebuchadnezzar), but that tyrant is no match for YHWH and loses his sanity as a consequence of his arrogance and boasting.

As we turn to our text, verses 19-37 of Daniel 4, we pick up after Nebuchadnezzar’s recounting of the details of his second dream to Daniel in verse 18. *“This dream I, King Nebuchadnezzar, saw. And you, O Belteshazzar [Daniel’s Babylonian name], 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.”* Echoing the words of Pharaoh to Joseph (from the Joseph story in Genesis 37-50), the king acknowledges that YHWH’s Spirit indwells Daniel, which is why Daniel is YHWH’s prophet who can interpret the dream while the king’s magicians cannot.

We should immediately notice that Daniel is reluctant to interpret this dream for the king. The reason why is that Daniel knows that the dream will remind the king of YHWH’s former revelation that judgment will fall upon Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom (the vision of the metallic statue crushed by the rock made without human hands—Christ’s kingdom). Daniel also knows that the king can be a tyrannical ruler who does not respond well to bad news—in this case, the worst possible news. Daniel and his friends have barely escaped death several times before, and Daniel knows the same thing might happen again. So it is no wonder that we read in verse 19, *“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!’”* Skilled in the ways of the court, and with the gift of divine wisdom (given him by YHWH), Daniel demonstrates his loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar as his servant before interpreting the dream.<sup>1</sup>

Reassured by the king that his servant will not be harmed, Daniel begins by recounting the details of the dream to the king in beginning in verse 20. *“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.”* Daniel recounts the dream with several minor alterations and defers to the king’s greatness, “it is you O king” and “your greatness reaches the heavens.”

It is interesting to take note of the fact that in the next chapter (5:20), during the reign of Belshazzar (the eldest son of the last king of Babylon—and one of Nebuchadnezzar’s successors) when Daniel reads the

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<sup>1</sup> Steinmann, Daniel, 242-243.

mysterious writing on the wall,<sup>2</sup> he describes Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom in slightly less positive light than he does here. *“But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he dealt proudly, he was brought down from his kingly throne, and his glory was taken from him. He was driven from among the children of mankind, and his mind was made like that of a beast, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys. He was fed grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, until he knew that the Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom he will.”* When seen from this later vantage point, the main point of the dream (chapter 4) is a warning about the king’s grandiose view of himself and his cruelty toward the people of God (Judah).

Daniel continues to interpret the king’s dream in verse 23. *“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.’”* Once again Daniel repeats the dream with a few minor alterations. Daniel is being careful not to offend the king, yet not soft-peddling what YHWH has revealed to him about the king’s dream. Daniel omits the details of the tree’s destruction (obvious to the king) as well as the king’s severe mental break, simply telling the king he’ll have his portion with the beasts for a divinely appointed period of time, the “seven periods of time”—probably not seven years, but symbolic of a time of the completion of YHWH’s judgment upon the king.<sup>3</sup>

With the recounting of the content of the dream complete Daniel, gives Nebuchadnezzar the divinely-revealed interpretation of the dream. Beginning in verse 24, Daniel tells the king, *“this is the interpretation, O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king.”* Daniel tells the king that YHWH is sovereign over both the king and the details of the king’s dream. It is YHWH who sends the watchers (the angels) who go out to the ends of the earth, and then do as YHWH commands them. This is yet another powerful blow to the king’s massive ego and overestimation of the power and greatness of his kingdom—which is great, no doubt, in terms of worldly power, but completely insignificant in the face of YHWH’s power and decree. The watcher will come down and put in motion YHWH’s previously hidden decree which now plays out on the stage of human history.

YHWH’s has decreed for the king the fate spelled out in verses 25-27. This is not a message which Nebuchadnezzar wants to hear, especially at a time when he is living in ease and comfort, with a long list of accomplishments. But this is the warning YHWH sends him through the dream. *“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.”* The king will come under YHWH’s hand of judgment. He will lose his sanity. He will live among the beasts and eat grass like an animal.

This delusional condition will go on until the king once again acknowledges YHWH’s sovereign will and majesty (the seven periods of time). The king rules over Babylon because YHWH wills it. The king will come under YHWH’s judgment for as long as YHWH wills it. YHWH requires that Nebuchadnezzar

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<sup>2</sup> Baldwin, Daniel, 24-26.

<sup>3</sup> Steinmann, Daniel, 244-245.

admit as much—that the king of heaven rules, not Nebuchadnezzar or his earthly kingdom—and all will be restored to him. Although God’s rule is from heaven, it is God who directs, controls, and establishes the kingdoms of this world to serve his sovereign purposes. As one writer so eloquently puts it, “God rules down here, not merely up there. It was in the kingdom of men that he wanted his will done – in Babylon.”<sup>4</sup> YHWH’s kingdom extends to the ends of the earth. It is he who directs Babylon to execute judgment upon disobedient Israel. It is he who brings judgment upon Babylon and its king for refusing to bow the knee in faith to YHWH, after being shown YHWH’s might and power so many times.

Usually kings tell their subjects what to do. But Nebuchadnezzar now learns that he too is a subject—of YHWH, and that he must do as YHWH commands. Daniel exhorts the king to repent and seek YHWH’s favor much like the prophets whom YHWH sends to his people Israel in calling for repentance.<sup>5</sup>

*“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.”* Daniel, speaking as YHWH’s prophet to a pagan king, weighing his words carefully (so as not to show haughtiness or disrespect), nevertheless commands that Nebuchadnezzar repent of his sins—specifically his “iniquities.” Once having done so, the king is to live righteously (obeying the commandments of God), specifically by showing mercy to his subjects.

This is the pattern of salvation we find throughout the Scriptures. The law of God condemns us before him and shows us our need of a savior. When we measure our obedience against the law of God (we check to see how we are doing at actually obeying the commandments of God), we realize that we have not obeyed God’s commands perfectly, and that we need a Savior from the guilt and power of sin. Once we come to faith in God’s covenant promise that he will forgive iniquity (in the Old Testament sense, in the New, faith is directed to the person and saving work of Jesus Christ), we do good works because these are the fruit of genuine faith. Should Nebuchadnezzar do these things, it would be a sign that he believed YHWH’s promise, and that he had come to realize his lowly position before God—all of us (including kings, queens, and presidents) are beggars before God and can make no claims upon him.<sup>6</sup> Daniel reminds the king of this, when he tells him, “should you do this, God will prolong your days.” The evidence tells us that Nebuchadnezzar never did do these things, so the events foretold in the dream will come to pass—exactly as we see in verse 28.

A year has now passed since the second dream. YHWH has given Nebuchadnezzar plenty of time to heed his warning and repent. The king is still in Babylon in residence in the royal palace. But there has been no change in the king’s thinking or attitude. Daniel tell us, *“all this,”* that is everything foretold in the dream of the previous year, *“came upon King Nebuchadnezzar.”* In verses 29-32 Daniel recounts how *“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*

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<sup>4</sup> R. S. Wallace, cited in Davis, The Message of Daniel, 65.

<sup>5</sup> Baldwin, Daniel, 126.

<sup>6</sup> Steinmann, Daniel, 245.

*that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.*” YHWH has warned the king through a dream. He now speaks to the king directly—only this time it is to pronounce judgment.

Despite YHWH’s dream, pointedly warning the king of what was to come, and despite sending Daniel as a preacher of righteousness and repentance, Nebuchadnezzar had not repented, and the next year finds him back in his palace (the same place where he had his two dreams) walking on the roof, arrogantly boasting about all of his accomplishments and his own greatness. Babylon was truly a great city during this time—anyone who has ever been to the Pergamon museum in Berlin has seen the great mosaics (of lions, antelopes, and griffins) and blue mosaic walls from the Ishtar gate. The city was also home to one of the seven wonders of the ancient world—the Hanging Gardens, which the king had built for his wife, Queen Amytis. His musing about his own greatness reveals that despite YHWH’s gracious warning, Nebuchadnezzar still does not get it—YHWH is King of kings and Lord of lords, not Nebuchadnezzar.

With YHWH pronouncing judgment upon the king, the results are swift, debilitating, and for someone like Nebuchadnezzar, completely humiliating. We read in verse 33, “*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.*” Banishment is not only the original punishment for human arrogance (we think of the Fall of our race as recounted in Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden), but it also becomes a common form of biblical punishment. We see this in God’s judgment upon Israel—the Northern Kingdom being defeated and captured by the Assyrians—as well as in Judah, because idolatry and unbelief led to God’s judgment when Judah falls to Nebuchadnezzar as evident by the Jews now in exile in Babylon, banished, for a time (seventy years), from the promised land. Jesus warned Israel of possible banishment yet again in the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24, Mark 13), a warning which was fulfilled in A.D. 70 when the Jews were dispersed into the four corners of the earth by the Romans.

The same banishment judgment now befalls Nebuchadnezzar, who after the long-suffering patience and repeated revelation from YHWH continued to speak as though “he were the eternal king and God did not exist.”<sup>7</sup> The king mentally snaps and begins to live the life of a beast, with long unkept hair, uncut nails, eating grass. The nature of Nebuchadnezzar’s illness has produced much speculation across the centuries—one influential commentator on Daniel concluding that the king suffered from lycanthropy, a disease long thought to be tied to hydrophobia (fear of water) in which people were thought to display symptoms similar to dogs and wolves with rabies.<sup>8</sup> Lycanthropy (as an illness) later gave rise to the Werewolf legends now so popular in film and novels.

It is useless to speculate about the exact nature of the king’s illness, except to say his condition is as a direct result of God’s immediate judgment. It is also clear from this account that it is far better to heed YHWH’s warning (in this case, repeated warnings) than it is to mock YHWH by acting as though he did not exist, and that your kingdom was your doing, even after all that YHWH had shown Nebuchadnezzar to demonstrate otherwise. In this episode we see something about ourselves—we see how deeply and completely sin resides in the human heart (including our own), so that even after repeated revelations and warnings, Nebuchadnezzar still refuses to humble himself and repent. Unless the Holy Spirit opens our hearts and grants us faith and its fruit (repentance), we are all just like Nebuchadnezzar, thankfully with

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<sup>7</sup> Goldingay, Daniel, 95-96.

<sup>8</sup> Baldwin, Daniel, 126.

much less geopolitical power and with common grace institutions within the civil kingdom controlling our evil impulses—jails, police, courts, etc.

Now the king will suffer in this deplorable state as long as God wills it. The exact length of time is not specified (other than seven periods of time), but we are told in verse that at some point when YHWH's judgment had runs its course, "*at the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me.*" YHWH's judgment upon the king had been lifted and his sanity was returned to him. His first act once his sanity has been restored is to acknowledge YHWH as sovereign Lord, whose kingdom alone is without end. Nebuchadnezzar tells us, "*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.*" Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom will certainly end, and the king will eventually die as do all the children of Adam. But YHWH and his kingdom are eternal. Finally, the king grasps the very thing YHWH has communicated to him many times before. YHWH is sovereign over all things, without beginning or end. Nebuchadnezzar is a king with a powerful kingdom, humanly speaking, but nevertheless subject to YHWH's will, and like all human kingdoms, Babylon will become a footnote to human history and the great city reduced to an exhibit in a museum in Berlin.

Praising YHWH as sovereign king and Lord is something Nebuchadnezzar has been forced to do before. After his time of living with the beasts and eating grass, the king finally understands the corollary of confessing YHWH as Lord. If YHWH is sovereign, then the king is not. He states in verse 35, "*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?'*" Nebuchadnezzar finally "gets" (and confesses) what so many people in our world will not or cannot confess (even many professing Christians), namely that if we are but creatures who are born at a particular time and place, to particular parents, and possess a unique physical appearance and unique DNA, all determined by YHWH, then who among can stay his hand? Who among us can overturn, thwart, or disrupt YHWH's will? Not one of Adam's fallen race. We are his creatures.

Nebuchadnezzar closes his letter (vv. 36-37) with words of praise for YHWH (whom he calls the king of Heaven, who always acts righteously), yet falls far short of confessing his sins, trusting in YHWH's covenant promise, and did not repent by doing those things YHWH commanded him (through Daniel). "*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.*" Driven to insanity by YHWH's hand of judgment, the king acknowledges what his Jewish subjects in exile have known all along—YHWH is the true and living God who is sovereign over all. What the king fails to acknowledge is what those believers in YHWH's promise in Israel confess. YHWH is a merciful God who forgives sin and who promises a heavenly inheritance to all his people. Sadly, such a confession cannot be found on Nebuchadnezzar's lips.

Well then, what do we take with us from this passage? Nebuchadnezzar's acknowledgment that YHWH is Lord of all quite remarkable, but only after coming under God's judgment. The great king has been humbled, has a breakthrough in understanding his place before God, and he understands that his kingdom is not as great or mighty as he thinks it is. Yes, Nebuchadnezzar confesses of YHWH, "*all his works are right and his ways are just,*" but the words, "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner," are not found.

When we compare the king's attitude—even after forcibly humbled by YHWH—to that of the true King of

kings' attitude toward suffering and obedience to God's will, our application comes into view. In Philippians 2:5-11 (part of our New Testament lesson), Paul gives us this amazing description of Jesus' attitude toward his messianic mission and the suffering and obedience it required,

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

If anyone could boast of unlimited power and unsurpassed authority it is Jesus. Yet he humbled himself even to death upon a cross. He conquers kingdoms like Nebuchadnezzar's by suffering and dying and obeying God's will—not by coercive force or the power of the sword. In doing this, Paul says, Jesus becomes our example of true humility, as well as our Savior. It is Jesus, not any earthly king, who is truly the King of kings and Lord of lords, before whom all of the Nebuchadnezzars of this world will bow, and confess Jesus' majesty to the glory of the Father.