

From Pride *to* Humility



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Dan. 4:1–33, Prov. 14:31, 2 Kings 20:2–5, Jon. 3:10, Dan. 4:34–37, Phil. 2:1–11.*

Memory Text: “How great are His signs, and how mighty His wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and His dominion is from generation to generation” (*Daniel 4:3, NKJV*).

Pride has been called the first sin. It is first made manifest in Lucifer, an angel in the courts of heaven. Thus God says through Ezekiel, “Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy brightness: I will cast thee to the ground, I will lay thee before kings, that they may behold thee” (*Ezek. 28:17*).

Pride leads to Lucifer's fall; so, he now instills pride in men thus leading them to be against God and so, to go down a path toward destruction. We are all fallen human beings, dependent upon God for our very existence. Any gifts we have, any things that we accomplish with those gifts, come only from God. Hence, how do we dare to be proud, boastful, or arrogant when, in reality, humility should dominate all that we do?

It takes a long time for Nebuchadnezzar to understand the importance of humility. Even the appearance of the fourth man in the fiery furnace (see last week) does not change the course of his life. Only after God takes away his kingdom and sends him to live with the beasts of the field does the king recognize his true status.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 1.

Is Not This Babylon the Great?

Read Daniel 4:1–33. What happens to the king, and why?

God gives Nebuchadnezzar a second dream. This time, the king does not forget the dream. But because the Babylonian experts fail again, the king summons Daniel to provide the interpretation of the dream. In the dream, the king sees a big tree reaching up to heaven and a heavenly being commanding that the tree be chopped down. Only the stump and roots would be left in the earth and would be wet with the dew of heaven. But what must have troubled Nebuchadnezzar was the part of the dream in which the heavenly being said, “Let his heart be changed from *that of a man*, let him be given the heart of a beast, and let seven times pass over him” (*Dan. 4:16, NKJV; emphasis supplied*). Recognizing the seriousness of the dream, Daniel politely expresses the wish that the dream would refer to the enemies of the king. However, faithful to the message conveyed by the dream, Daniel says that in fact the dream refers to the king himself.

Trees are commonly used in the Bible as symbols of kings, nations, and empires (*Ezekiel 17: 31; Hosea 14; Zech. 11:1, 2; Luke 23:31*). So, the big tree is a fitting representation of an arrogant king. God gives Nebuchadnezzar dominion and power; nevertheless, he persistently fails to recognize that everything he possesses comes from God.

Focus on Daniel 4:30. What does the king say that shows he still does not grasp the warning that the Lord has given him?

Perhaps what’s so dangerous about pride is that it can lead us to forget just how dependent we are upon God for everything. And once we forget that, we are on dangerous spiritual ground.

What things have you accomplished in your life? Can you take pride in them without being proud? If so, how so?

Warned by the Prophet

Read Daniel 4:27. Besides the warning about what will happen, what does Daniel tell the king to do, and why? (See also Prov. 14:31.)

Daniel not only interprets the dream but also points Nebuchadnezzar to a way out of his situation: “Therefore, O king, let my advice be acceptable to you; break off your sins by being righteous, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor. Perhaps there may be a lengthening of your prosperity” (*Dan. 4:27, NKJV*).

Nebuchadnezzar performs a massive work of building in Babylon. The gardens, a system of canals, and hundreds of temples and other building projects turn the city into one of the wonders of the ancient world. But such splendor and beauty, at least in part, is accomplished through exploitation of slave manpower and neglect of the poor. Furthermore, the wealth of the empire is used to gratify the pleasures of the king and his entourage. Thus, the pride of Nebuchadnezzar not only prevents him from acknowledging God but, as a consequence, also makes him oblivious to the hardships of those in need. Given the special care that God shows for the poor, it is not surprising that from the other possible sins that Daniel could have highlighted before the king, he singles out the sin of neglecting the poor.

The message to Nebuchadnezzar is by no means something new. The Old Testament prophets often warn God’s people against oppressing the poor. Indeed, prominent among the sins that bring about the king’s exile is neglect of the needy. After all, compassion for the poor is the highest expression of Christian charity; conversely, exploitation and neglect of the poor constitutes an attack on God Himself. In caring for the needy, we recognize that God owns everything, which means that we are not owners but merely stewards of God’s property.

By serving others with our possessions, we honor God and recognize His Lordship. It is God’s ownership that should ultimately determine the value and function of material possessions. This is where Nebuchadnezzar fails, and we risk failing, too, unless we recognize God’s sovereignty over our accomplishments and manifest our recognition of this reality by helping those in need.

“The Most High Rules . . .”

Despite his being told to repent and seek God’s forgiveness, Nebuchadnezzar’s unrelenting pride causes the heavenly decree to be executed (*Dan. 4:28–33*). While the king is walking in his palace and praising himself for what he has accomplished, he is afflicted with a mental condition that forces his expulsion from the royal palace. He may have experienced a pathological mental condition called clinical lycanthropy or zoanthropy. Such a condition leads the patient to act like an animal. In modern times this disease has been called “species dysphoria,” the feeling that one’s body is of the wrong species and, hence, the desire to be an animal.

Read 2 Kings 20:2–5; Jonah 3:10; and Jeremiah 18:7, 8. What do these texts tell us about the king’s chance to have averted the punishment?

Unfortunately, Nebuchadnezzar has to learn the hard way. When invested with royal power, Nebuchadnezzar has no ability to reflect on his relationship with God. Thus, by depriving the king of royal authority and sending him to live with the beasts of the field, God gives the king an opportunity to acknowledge his total dependence on Him. In fact, the ultimate lesson God wants to teach to the arrogant king is that “Heaven rules” (*Dan. 4:26, NKJV*). Indeed, the judgment upon the king has an even larger purpose in God’s design, as so clearly expressed in the decree of the heavenly beings: “ ‘In order that the living may know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, gives it to whomever He will, and sets over it the lowest of men’ ” (*Dan. 4:17, NKJV*).

In other words, the discipline applied to Nebuchadnezzar should be a lesson for all of us, as well. Because we belong to the group of “the living,” we should pay better attention to the main lesson we are supposed to learn that “the Most High rules in the kingdom of men.”

Why is knowing that the Most High rules so important a lesson for us to learn? How should this knowledge, for instance, impact how we treat those over whom we have power?

Lifting Eyes Toward Heaven

Read Daniel 4:34–37. How, and why, do things change for the king?

God allows Nebuchadnezzar to be stricken by a strange disease, but eventually He readily restores him to a sound mental state. Interestingly, everything changes when, at the end of the seven years predicted by the prophet, the ailing king lifts up his eyes to heaven (*Dan. 4:34*).

“For seven years Nebuchadnezzar was an astonishment to all his subjects; for seven years he was humbled before all the world. Then his reason was restored and, looking up in humility to the God of heaven, he recognized the divine hand in his chastisement. In a public proclamation he acknowledged his guilt and the great mercy of God in his restoration.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 520.

No question, great changes can happen when we lift our eyes to heaven. As soon as his understanding comes back, the king gives evidence that he has learned this lesson.

But this story is not as much about Nebuchadnezzar as it is about the mercy of God. The king has missed three previous opportunities to accept the God of Israel as the Lord of his life. Such occasions are available to him when he recognizes the exceptional wisdom of the four young Judean captives (*Daniel 1*), when Daniel interprets his dream (*Daniel 2*), and when the three Hebrew men are rescued from the fiery furnace (*Daniel 3*). *After all, if that rescue doesn't humble him, what will?* In spite of the ruler's stubbornness, God gives him a fourth chance, finally wins the king's heart, and restores him to his royal office (*Daniel 4*). As the case of Nebuchadnezzar illustrates, God gives one chance after another in order to restore us to a right relationship with Him. As Paul writes many centuries later, the Lord “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (*1 Tim. 2:4, NKJV*). We see in this story a powerful example of that truth.

What are ways that you have been humbled by God? What did you learn from the experience? What changes might you need to make in order to avoid having to get taught the lesson again?

Humble and Grateful

The repentant king declares: “All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing” (*Dan. 4:35*). Given the context, what important point is he making?

How do we know that Nebuchadnezzar indeed genuinely accepts the true God? We find a major piece of evidence in the fact that Nebuchadnezzar himself is the author of the letter inserted by Daniel in chapter 4. Indeed, most of this chapter seems to be a transcription of a letter that the king distributes to his vast kingdom. In this letter, the king tells about his pride and insanity and humbly recognizes God’s intervention in his life. Ancient monarchs would rarely write anything derogatory about themselves. Virtually all ancient royal documents that we know of glorify the king. A document such as this, therefore, in which the king admits his pride and his beastly behavior, points to a genuine conversion. In addition, by writing a letter recounting his experience and humbly confessing God’s sovereignty, the king is acting as a missionary. He can no longer keep to himself what he has experienced and learned from the true God. What we have seen here, then, in the king’s prayer and praise (*Dan. 4:34–37*), reveals the reality of his experience.

The king now has a different set of values and can recognize the limitations of human power. In a profound prayer of thanksgiving, the king extols the power of Daniel’s God and admits that “all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing” (*Dan. 4:35, NKJV*). That is to say, humans have nothing of themselves of which to be boastful. Thus, this last glimpse of Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel shows a king humble and grateful, singing the praises of God and warning us against pride.

Of course, God continues to change lives today. No matter how proud or sinful people may be, in God there is mercy and power to turn rebellious sinners into children of the God of heaven.

Read Philippians 2:1–11. What do we find here that should eradicate pride in our lives?

Further Thought: “The once proud monarch had become a humble child of God; the tyrannical, overbearing ruler, a wise and compassionate king. He who had defied and blasphemed the God of heaven, now acknowledged the power of the Most High and earnestly sought to promote the fear of Jehovah and the happiness of his subjects. Under the rebuke of Him who is King of kings and Lord of lords, Nebuchadnezzar had learned at last the lesson which all rulers need to learn—that true greatness consists in true goodness. He acknowledged Jehovah as the living God, saying, ‘I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and His ways judgment: and those that walk in pride He is able to abase.’

“God’s purpose that the greatest kingdom in the world should show forth His praise was now fulfilled. This public proclamation, in which Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged the mercy and goodness and authority of God, was the last act of his life recorded in sacred history.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 521.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 “Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind. Does this seem to you exaggerated? If so, think it over. . . . [T]he more pride one had, the more one disliked pride in others. In fact, if you want to find out how proud you are the easiest way is to ask yourself, ‘How much do I dislike it when other people snub me, or refuse to take any notice of me, or shove their oar in, or patronise me, or show off?’ The point is that each person’s pride is in competition with everyone else’s pride. It is because I wanted to be the big noise at the party that I am so annoyed at someone else being the big noise. Two of a trade never agree.”—C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), p. 110. What is Lewis saying here that could perhaps help you see pride in your own life?
- 2 A theme seen in this chapter, as well as in some preceding it, is the sovereignty of God. Why is this such an important topic to understand? What role does the Sabbath play in helping us understand this crucial truth?

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Daniel 4:3*

Study Focus: *Dan. 4:1–33, Prov. 14:31, 2 Kings 20:1–5, Jon. 3:10, Dan. 4:34–37, Phil. 2:1–11.*

Introduction: Nebuchadnezzar already had encountered at least three opportunities to understand that all his accomplishments should be credited to the Hebrew God. But because he did not learn this lesson, God gave him a final lesson to help him understand the difference between pride and humility and to have a glimpse of God’s character.

Lesson Themes:

- 1. Pride.** In focusing on his own accomplishments, Nebuchadnezzar forgot the God of Daniel to whom he owed his throne and everything else.
- 2. Humility.** Only after he lost his kingdom could Nebuchadnezzar recognize the God of Daniel as the source and sustainer of his power.
- 3. God.** God reveals Himself in this episode as the One who establishes kings and removes them.

Life Application: There is a Nebuchadnezzar in everyone. To overcome pride and become humble is an ideal we cannot achieve in human terms. Humility is an elusive goal. As soon as we think we have reached it, it is already lost. But Jesus can give us power to overcome our arrogance and live a humble life. He can change every “temptation to pride into an opportunity for gratitude.”—Christopher J. H. Wright, *Hearing the Message of Daniel: Sustaining Faith in Today’s World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), p. 94.

Part II: Commentary

1. Pride

Daniel 4 records a personal testimony of Nebuchadnezzar. As the narrative unfolds, the king recognizes that pride was the cause of his fall from kingship and proceeds to recount how God acted in order to bring him to humility. At the peak of his accomplishments (about thirty years after the events reported in Daniel 3), the king had a dream of a gigantic tree that

provided shelter and sustenance to all creatures of the earth. Next, due to a heavenly decision, the tree was chopped down. Again, only Daniel was able to tell the king the true interpretation. That luxuriant tree represented the king himself in his arrogance. Indeed, trees and vines are depicted elsewhere in Scripture as symbols of arrogant kings and kingdoms that God eventually brings down (*Ezek. 17:1–15, Ezek. 19:10–14, Ezek. 31:3–12*).

With extreme pastoral sensitivity, Daniel explained that the tree represented the king himself. God would remove him from the throne unless he changed his attitude toward his subjects (*Dan. 4:27*). Pride, as usual, has repercussions in the social sphere. But the time had come for Nebuchadnezzar to be held accountable for his haughty administrative style. If he wished to escape his dire fate, he had no option but to replace oppression with justice and thus reflect the character of God in the affairs of his kingdom. But the king was not willing to set aside his arrogance and change his ways. A year later, he was reveling in his building accomplishments (*Dan. 4:29, 30*), which is an irony. After all, “Nebuchadnezzar probably never handled a brick in his life. *He* had not built Babylon. It had been built by the sweat of the nameless thousands of oppressed slaves, immigrants, and other poor sections of the nation, the kind of teeming multitudes whose labours have built every vaunting civilization of the fallen human race in history.” —Christopher J. H. Wright, *Hearing the Message of Daniel*, p. 101.

At that very moment, the king was afflicted by a mental disease, possibly a mental disorder known as *lycanthropy* or *zoanthropy* in which a person thinks he or she has become an animal and behaves accordingly. For seven years Nebuchadnezzar had to live among the beasts of the field. Thus, the one who thought himself to be a god became less than human. As Scripture says: “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (*Prov. 16:18, NKJV*).

2. Humility

Nebuchadnezzar learned the lesson God designed for him. After seven years among the beasts, the king had a radical change of attitude: “I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven” (*Dan. 4:34, NKJV*). This look upward signals a shift in Nebuchadnezzar’s mind-set. Formerly, the king used to look down from the height of pride. And as he looked upward, whence all power and wisdom comes, three important things occurred: (1) he was healed from his mental illness (“my understanding returned to me”); (2) he acknowledged God as the sovereign of the universe; and (3) he was restored to the throne (*Dan. 4:34–36*). As the king himself stated: “I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all of whose works are truth, and His ways justice. And those who walk in pride He is able to put down” (*Dan. 4:37, NKJV*). No one more than Nebuchadnezzar could recognize the truth that God puts down “those who walk in pride.”

But the process of humiliation lasted seven times; the original word

most likely means “years,” and here must be understood in terms of seven literal years. These seven years refer to a literal time period during which the king, removed from the throne and humiliated, had to live among the beasts of the field. Therefore, unlike the time periods mentioned in the apocalyptic sections of Daniel, the seven years are not to be interpreted according to the day-year principle. As mentioned earlier, 12 months elapsed between the king’s boasting and his period of being under judgment, which lasted seven times. So, at the end of the seven years, the king was restored to the throne. Thus, there is no indication that the time period mentioned in Daniel 4 should be interpreted in any but a literal way.

It took a terrible judgment from God upon the king to awaken his mind fully to realize that the God of Daniel was the one in charge. Why is it so difficult for a human being to become humble? It is because we are all infected with the desire to be served and praised, which is nothing more than the desire to be treated like God (*see Genesis 3*). But because we cannot become God, pride produces a sour frustration. Humility, however, brings satisfaction. We always can find someone in need to serve, and in doing so, we experience the joy and fulfillment of serving Christ (*see Gary Thomas, “Downward Mobility,” Discipleship Journal, July–August 2005, pp. 34–37*).

3. Conversion

A question that often emerges in this connection concerns whether or not the king was truly converted. Although some commentators feel that there is not enough evidence to confirm a genuine conversion, there is enough evidence that points in that direction. As we look at the heart of the king’s confession in Daniel 4:34, 35, four elements stand out:

1. He confesses the sovereignty of God, who establishes a kingdom that is without end. God “does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’ ” (*Dan. 4:35, NKJV*). There is a hint of the infinite and eternal in Nebuchadnezzar’s words when he states, “His kingdom is from generation to generation” (*Dan. 4:34, NKJV*).

2. Nebuchadnezzar also confesses the creatureliness of humankind: “All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing” (*Dan. 4:35, NKJV*). The king no longer recognizes divine power at a merely theoretical level. He confesses that even the greatest of men (and he had been in his own eyes and, arguably, in the eyes of his subjects, the greatest) are nothing before the majestic Lord. Such recognition is always a mark of the subdued heart; the creatureliness of individuals and their dependence on God is evident. Man is not autonomous; he is dependent and creaturely. His true joy is found only when he has come

to recognize his true dependence upon the divine.

3. Nebuchadnezzar confesses the truthfulness and righteousness of God, “all of whose works are truth, and His ways justice” (*Dan. 4:37, NKJV*). God has dealt with him severely, but he acknowledges how true and righteous God’s judgments have been. They were appropriate to his sins.

4. “Finally, he came to recognize that God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble (*compare with Prov. 3:34*). His life was a portrayal of the application that Peter made of the following principle: ‘Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time’ (*1 Pet. 5:6, NKJV*).”—Sinclair B. Ferguson and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *The Preacher’s Commentary Series*, vol. 21 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1988), pp. 96, 97. The pattern of His saving grace always rests upon this precept of humility.

Part III: Life Application

- 1. How do you evaluate your own accomplishments when compared to those of others? How do you tell the difference between pride and a high self-esteem?**

- 2. In your opinion, how can we show and experience genuine humility? What is the difference between humility and a low self-esteem?**

- 3. What is the place of humility in church leadership? Do you think a humble leader can be respected and followed? Explain.**

- 4. In what ways has Jesus taught humility? On what occasion of Jesus’**

ministry did He exemplify humility in the most powerful way? What, and how, can you learn from Him?

5. What do you perceive to be the relationship between humility and forgiveness? How difficult is it for you to forgive someone who offends you?

6. This week's lesson opens the possibility for some self-examination. Ask your class members to reflect on the following: Try to put yourself in the shoes of Nebuchadnezzar, and ask yourself:

- Do I tend to take credit for certain accomplishments more than I deserve? In what ways do I tell my personal stories? Do I tell them to look better or more successful than I really am?

- What steps must I take in order to attain humility?

- Have there been any situations in my life in which I was humbled in ways that helped me to understand my limitations and hence to honor God? If so, how?

- How often do I remember to give God the glory for everything that I may have accomplished? What can help me remember always to give the glory to Him?

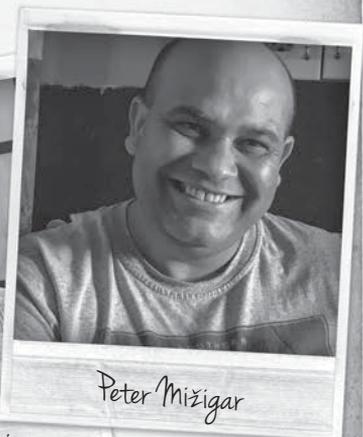
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