

## ***Refusing a Real Opportunity*** ***Daniel 4:1-37***

What's your view of God?

- The big policeman in the sky? He's got His radar gun out, aimed directly at you so He can catch you out in all the things you do wrong – go directly to goal; do not pass go; do not collect \$200.
- The white-bearded, jovial grandfather? His job's to smile at you, sit you on His lap and give you lots of cuddles, and slip a few lollies in your pocket when your parents aren't looking – never go to gaol; always pass go; always collect \$200.

They're two caricatures of God people have. They affect the way people live – even Christian people.

- Those with the policeman figure keep blaming God. Something bad happens to them and they wonder why God's out to get them this time. They try hard to please God.
- Those with the grandfather figure don't bother too much about God. They know He's there. They may go to church regularly. They may ask Him for things. But they don't worry too much about pleasing Him. They don't think God would ever take action against them.

As caricatures, both views are wrong. They're comical figures that demean the real God. In one sense, they're meant to. That way, people can keep God under control. They can keep Him in the comic category. Yet, both caricatures contain elements of truth. The trick is keeping the elements of each in view at the same time – and a whole host of other elements. We need a well-rounded

view of God that maintains both His justice and His grace – and His holiness and faithfulness and power and glory and kindness and wisdom and perfect knowledge and a whole host of other things.

### **God's Lesson**

The point of Daniel 4 isn't hard to work out. In fact, we're told what it is right upfront – and it's Nebuchadnezzar who tells us. Verse 2:

*It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me.*

*How great are his signs,  
how mighty His wonders!*

*His kingdom is an eternal kingdom;*

*His dominion endures from generation to generation.*

And, in case we missed it at the beginning, we're told again at the end. Verse 34b:

*Then I praised the Most High; I honoured and glorified Him who lives forever.*

*His dominion is an eternal dominion;*

*His kingdom endures from generation to generation.*

*All the peoples of the earth  
are regarded as nothing.*

*He does as He pleases  
with the powers of heaven  
and the peoples of the earth.*

*No one can hold back His hand  
or say to Him: "What have you done?"*

This is the great king Nebuchadnezzar who says this. As

far as this world's concerned, he was the greatest man of his time. He had the power. He had the wealth. He ruled over a vast kingdom. People from all nations bowed to him. Yet, he acknowledges he's nothing compared with God.

- Nebuchadnezzar can order round the people in his kingdom; God can do that as well – and also order round the powers of heaven.
- Nebuchadnezzar can rule in his kingdom for many years (he was king for over 40 years); God rules over His kingdom forever.
- Nebuchadnezzar can build a mighty city with magnificent palaces and temples and gardens; God can do things that even Nebuchadnezzar recognises as signs and wonders.

The great king Nebuchadnezzar – this great pinnacle of human achievement – recognises he's absolutely nothing compared with God.

### God's Methods

But it wasn't always like that. That's the lesson – the outcome of a process that Nebuchadnezzar describes in this chapter. The process begins with Nebuchadnezzar both content and prosperous. He's well established in his rule.

- He's conquered his empire.
- He's established relative peace throughout.
- He's finished many of his building projects.
- He's beautified Babylon.
- He's made a name for himself.

Now, he's enjoying the fruits of his labour. He's basking in his achievements. He's proud of what he's achieved.

### The Dream Method

But in the midst of his contentment and prosperity, he's

troubled by a dream. He says it made him afraid. It reminds us of chapter 2. And, like chapter 2, he summons all his wise men – his magicians and enchanters and astrologers and diviners. This time he tells them the dream – but still they can't interpret it. And so, finally, he gets round to Daniel and tells him the dream.

We're not told whether Daniel was left out of the initial summons or whether he just took longer getting there. It doesn't make much difference to what happens. God gives the king this dream. God gives the king its interpretation.

It's worth pausing at this point. Some think we can simply read what God's doing off the events of history. That's not the Bible's view. The events in themselves are capable of all sorts of interpretations. Those interpretations are often coloured by people's point of view. Think of the different perspectives in our own country on the events of 1788. We only know for sure what God's doing in history when He chooses to reveal it to us.

- Here, he gives the king a dream to tell him beforehand what's going to happen.
- Then, He gives the king a person who can tell him what the dream actually means.
- Then, God carries out the steps He said He would carry out.

But without God telling us that, we wouldn't know what God was doing.

It was like that with Israel being in Babylon in the first place. The Babylonians had no trouble interpreting the events of history. They said: Our gods are better than your God and that's why we won and why you're our

captives. They were wrong. God told the real story to Israel's prophets. This was God's judgment on Israel's sin. This was God using another nation to punish His people for their wickedness. And when He finished punishing His people, He also punished the Babylonians. But that's not how the Babylonians saw things at all. You only know the truth about what God's doing when He reveals it.

Anyway, Nebuchadnezzar tells Daniel his dream. And we also eventually get to hear it after all the build up. The climax of the dream comes in verse 17:

*The decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone He wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men.*

It's the same lesson again: God is sovereign. God puts the kings of this earth in place – even the great emperors like Nebuchadnezzar. They're not exempt from God's sovereignty. And just as God puts them in place, so He can remove them if He wants. Nebuchadnezzar may bask in the glory of his great achievements and tell himself he does it all by his own great power – yet, ultimately, it's God calling the shots. God put Nebuchadnezzar in place. God gave him this power. That's the import of what this messenger from heaven says in Nebuchadnezzar's dream.

Daniel gives Nebuchadnezzar the interpretation.

- The tree is Nebuchadnezzar himself. He is a great and strong king. He rules a far-reaching empire. Many people are provided for under his rule.
- But – and you know Nebuchadnezzar's just waiting for that *but* – the king will lose his kingdom for a

time. He'll be like an animal. He'll live with the animals. He'll experience some form of madness. Why? What's the anticipated outcome of this? Verse 25: *Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone He wishes. The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules.*

It's the same lesson again.

Daniel concludes by appealing to the king – verse 27:

*Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue.*

Again, I want us to pause. Think through what we know of Nebuchadnezzar's experience to this point.

- In chapter 1, he recognised Daniel and his three mates as the wisest among this batch of his trained advisers.
- In chapter 2, he discovered Daniel was the only one able both to tell him his dream and interpret it. And Daniel could do this, not because of any special cleverness in himself, but because God revealed it to him. Daniel's God alone has those capabilities.
- Moreover, the substance of the dream and its interpretation spoke of God's great sovereignty. Human kingdoms would come and go – even kingdoms as great as Nebuchadnezzar's empire. But God would establish His kingdom that would replace them all – and it would last forever.
- In chapter 3, he learned God was quite capable of

rescuing people from human kings such as himself. He threw Daniel's three mates into a blazing furnace and not even their hair gets singed.

God gave him some impressive signs. And now God warns him in a dream that he's about to become sub-human. And Daniel tells him of a possible way out. What's the obvious thing to do? What would you do?

What he actually does is nothing. He just continues on as before. He enjoys his contentment and prosperity. He basks in his personal glory. He rests on his self-assured power. And you ask: How come? How could he be so dense? God warns him directly – and he does nothing?

Yet, if you know your own heart, this isn't so surprising. It's like the grandfather view of God.

- God gives out good gifts.
- God's nice to us.
- God may tut-tut every now and then – tell us that we're going off track.
- But He won't do anything about it. He just loves to forgive and forget and give us a cuddle.

When you read in the Bible of something that displeases God – something God says is wrong – how do you react? How do I react? Do we treat it really seriously? I'm good at finding excuses.

- It's not really all that bad – I mean, it's not as bad as murder or theft or cheating on my taxes.
- It's commonly accepted in this country – everyone does it – so it can't be too serious.
- I'm already better at this than most Christians – why should I try any harder when all my brothers and sisters are getting away with it?

God warns us about all sorts of things – things He says are wicked and evil; things like pride and lust and greed and envy and laziness and hate and selfishness. We have His direct word on it. How seriously do we take His warnings? Or do we think:

He hasn't done anything about them yet. I've had these attitudes for years and nothing bad's happened. I'm comfortable. I'm prosperous. I've got life under control. Why change now?

Do we presume on His grace?

### The Madness Method

Anyway, the dream method doesn't work with Nebuchadnezzar – so God moves to method #2. What God says will happen does happen. God gives him twelve months to change his attitude – twelve months to acknowledge truly the one true God of the universe – but he doesn't. He continues to rejoice in his sovereignty and achievements – verse 30:

*Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?*

From what's been discovered in history, this seems typical of Nebuchadnezzar. Part of the inscription on the Ishtar Gate reads:

I laid the foundation of the gates down to the ground water level and had them built out of pure blue stone. Upon the walls in the inner room of the gate are bulls and dragons and thus I magnificently adorned them with luxurious splendour for all mankind to behold in awe.<sup>1</sup>

Nebuchadnezzar was not known for self-effacement.

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia article on Nebuchadnezzar.

And so, verse 31:

*The words were still on his lips when a voice came from heaven, "This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone He wishes."*

Is God the policeman? Was He just sitting up in heaven carefully watching Nebuchadnezzar's every move – waiting for him to step out of line so He could zap him? It's not the picture here, is it?

- On the one hand, Nebuchadnezzar had plenty of warning. He's not one of God's covenant people – he's not a Jew. Yet, God dealt gently with him. He provided him a genuine prophet. He sent him dreams. He gave him wonders. He even told him beforehand that this would happen. He gave him twelve months to change. Still, Nebuchadnezzar went his own merry way.
- And on the other hand, what God does here has a purpose behind it. This isn't simply a punishment – it's not zapping him for the sake of zapping him. It's designed to bring Nebuchadnezzar to his senses. It's designed to teach Nebuchadnezzar the truth about God. It's designed for Nebuchadnezzar's own good.

If your leg's amputated to stop the gangrene spreading, do you complain the doctor's got it in for you? If the surf lifesaver cuts your arm in the process of pulling you from

a shark's jaws, do you grumble about how he's against you? Our problem is we're paranoid. We've convinced ourselves that God's working against us. He wants to make life difficult for us. He tries to trip us up. He robs us of all our fun. He won't let us do the stuff we want to do. And you can look at things that way. You can interpret your own personal history that way. Or you can listen to what God reveals about what He's doing in your life. He says He works for your good. He has your best interests at heart. Sure, it's how He defines your best interests – but who's really the best judge of that: you or Him? God acts towards Nebuchadnezzar in grace.

And so Nebuchadnezzar goes through this animal experience that he may learn something of vital importance. He learns that God is sovereign. God rules. God sets up kings. God dethrones kings. God raises up empires. God destroys empires. Nebuchadnezzar thought he was in control.

- He'd carved out his empire.
- He'd built up Babylon.
- He'd constructed magnificent buildings.
- He ruled over people.

That all changed in the blink of an eye. He couldn't even determine whether he remained sane or not. He couldn't control whether he ate roast pork or grass. He learnt his settled thoughts about self-determination were an illusion. He wasn't in control.

Do we know this? Is this how we live? It's what we saw in James a couple of months back. The merchants made their plans about what they'd do and how they'd travel and make a profit. James called them arrogant – not for making plans, but for leaving God's sovereignty out of

the equation. He corrected them (James 4:14-15):

*you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."*

### **God's Lesson Today**

What should we take home from a passage like this? First, we should be encouraged. Our God is big beyond our imaginations – and our God rules. When we look at our governments, it's easy to get discouraged. They argue back and forth. They go one way and then another. They mess things up. And, on top of that, they're scandalised by stories of corruption. It's rather depressing at times. And we have relatively good governments. Think of our brothers and sisters in countries where governments actively persecute followers of Jesus – throw them in gaol, torture them, destroy their families, execute them. That's far worse than depressing.

None of those governments escapes God's rule. God puts them there. God removes them. We don't understand all the reasons – God hasn't revealed them to us.

- Sometimes it's God's judgment on a country – a country rejects God and turns to evil and He gives them the government they deserve.
- Sometimes it's God's judgment on another country – He raises up one government to intervene in the affairs of another country and bring some measure of justice there.

We can guess, but we don't know. But what God has revealed to us is that He's sovereign – and He's far, far above our puny earthly governments. They don't escape

Him. They don't threaten Him. They can't overthrow Him. They won't defeat His purposes. Rather, He uses even the most wicked to achieve His good purposes.

God calls all governments to submit to Him – to recognise His sovereignty. Most don't. It's like Adam and Eve back in the Garden. God placed them there to rule under His authority. They rebelled. They took themselves from under His authority and tried ruling without Him. That's what most governments still do. Yet, God continues to rule and direct human history towards the goal He set before creation. For disciples of Jesus, that goal includes eternity in His perfect kingdom. And nothing the governments of this world do can prevent that.

God appointed Nebuchadnezzar to punish His people. He didn't ask Nebuchadnezzar's permission. He didn't tell Nebuchadnezzar to do it. Nebuchadnezzar simply chose to build an empire – and achieved God's purposes. And God also dealt with Nebuchadnezzar – as this chapter demonstrates. And when it was God's time, He removed the Babylonians from power altogether. God still does that today. He rules His world.

Secondly, we should be challenged. Very few, if any, of us are involved in government. We don't have that sort of authority. We don't prance round the world stage boasting of our great achievements. But most of us have some level of authority – even if it's only in our homes. And all of us prance round our own little kingdoms, working to achieve our own comfort and prosperity.

If God's capable of doing this to the most powerful man on earth to drive home His point, don't you think He can

do the same with you? And if God thought it important for the most powerful man on earth to know this lesson, don't you think He wants you to know it too – and not just to know it in your head as some fact, but to actually live on the basis of it? Can you be sure you'll retain your sanity tomorrow? Can you be sure you'll still be breathing?

So, who runs your life? We build this illusion that we're in control – that we call the shots – that we exercise authority in our own right. We need to acknowledge

*that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone He wishes*

And that includes the puny little kingdoms of our own lives. Do you live under God's rule? Does your life show that you live under God's rule?

### God's Ultimate Lesson

One final thing we should note: Jesus alludes to this picture of the tree in Matthew 13:31-32

*The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.*

Jesus is the lowly one of Daniel 4:17. He didn't exalt Himself. He didn't push Himself forward. Quite the opposite. He didn't hold onto His rights as God. Instead, He humbled Himself and became a man – an ordinary person, a lowly peasant, an unassuming servant. He didn't go to the heart of the Roman Empire – the seat of power. Rather, He wandered around a backwater, impoverished country. What He did looked insignificant – as insignificant as a tiny mustard seed. Why would anyone pay attention?

Yet, God chose Him as King – not a king on a par with Nebuchadnezzar, but a king far above any human authority this world has seen. From those tiny, insignificant beginnings in first-century Palestine, His kingdom has spread across the ages and across the earth. People from all nations flock to its branches and shelter under its shade. It's the one kingdom worth belonging to – for it's a kingdom that's totally good and continues forever. But it is a kingdom. It's ruled by a King. And its subjects must submit to the rule of that King.

Jesus made it quite clear. People fall into one of two camps:

- Those who give up running their lives their own way and willingly submit to His rule – they freely enter His eternal kingdom.
- Those who refuse to give up running their lives their own way and refuse to submit to His rule – in the long run, they'll be forced to acknowledge the authority and power of Jesus, but it will be from a position of being subject to His eternal judgment.

It's pretty obvious really. But the desire for the illusion of control is strong within us. It's so strong that people make up false caricatures of God that are easy to dismiss – rather than face the reality of the greatness and majesty and absolute power of the real God. In the long run, none can resist His power. The wise person recognises that now, and humbly submits to Him in everything.