GOD IS SOVEREIGN

Daniel 4:1-37
Key verse: 4:37

“Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.

Last week, we studied the story of how the three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were saved from the fiery furnace when they trusted in the Most High God more than they feared king Nebuchadnezzar. We learned that God is with those who love him to save them from all kinds of trials. When God is with us we can experience true freedom from fear and we can enjoy trials and hardships, which serve to refine our faith. Nebuchadnezzar was disappointed that the three Jewish friends were not willing to bow down and worship the image of gold he had made. Nevertheless, Nebuchadnezzar recognized the faith and courage of these men, and promoted them in the province of Babylon. In today's passage, Nebuchadnezzar is again troubled by a dream, and turns to Daniel for its interpretation. Daniel had been Nebuchadnezzar’s counselor and shepherd for many long years. Finally, in God’s time, he was given the chance to help Nebuchadnezzar repent and humble himself before the Almighty God. Let’s see how Daniel helps Nebuchadnezzar confess that God is Sovereign. May God help us to know the practical meaning of God’s sovereignty!

I. Nebuchadnezzar’s dream (1-18)

First, Nebuchadnezzar’s first testimony (1-3). Nebuchadnezzar was the king of Babylon for 43 years, from 605 BC to 562 BC. From the very first year of his reign exiles from Judah, Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, had been brought into the king’s service. Daniel in particular was chosen to be the chief of Nebuchadnezzar’s wise men, because of his ability to interpret dreams and his genuine shepherd heart for Nebuchadnezzar and loyal service
to his kingdom. On numerous occasions, Daniel and his friends had shared with Nebuchadnezzar their faith in the Most High God of Heaven, whom the Jews served, usually at great risk to their own lives. Gradually, Nebuchadnezzar had learned to respect their faith and acknowledge their God’s wisdom and power to save. But, Nebuchadnezzar was not willing to serve their God as his God. Although he was known in history as a very religious man, in fact he was a man who religiously sought glory and honor for himself above all else. No one could tell him what to do or how to act, unless he gave them permission. As a result, he was a very difficult person to help or pray for. A look at Jewish literature outside of the Bible shows that he was viewed by the Jews as a heartless, merciless demon who made the Jews suffer beyond description. Nevertheless, Daniel and his friends continued to pray for Nebuchadnezzar, never once despairing or despising him. If anyone was a lost cause, it was Nebuchadnezzar. But let’s look at what happened to him.

Read v. 1 and 2. “King Nebuchadnezzar, to the peoples, nations and men of every language, who live in all the world: May you prosper greatly! It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders the Most High God has performed for me.” Here, we find a most surprising thing. Nebuchadnezzar is writing a testimony of faith and praise about the God of the Jews, the God of Heaven, and he is sharing it with all the peoples of his generation! He wants to tell them about the great things that God has done for him. Most of all, Nebuchadnezzar wants to testify to the world who is the true ruler of heaven and earth. Look at verse 3. “How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an eternal kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation.” Nebuchadnezzar, the greatest king on earth, the head of gold among the empires of world history, confesses faith in God, whose kingdom alone is eternal, and whose dominion endures from generation to generation. It is a miracle of God that such a man could be changed. It is a testimony to the shepherd heart and mind of the man of faith, Daniel.

Second, An enormous tree cut down (4-18). Nebuchadnezzar was a man of endless ambition. He had virtually rebuilt the Babylonian empire which had been destroyed by the Assyrian empire in the
previous century. He built the hanging gardens, which were known as one of the seven wonders of the world, and also the Ziggurat, which reminded its admirers of the tower of Babel, reaching the sky in its builders’ desire to challenge God’s authority and sovereign power. He also attacked and defeated some of the greatest kingdoms of his day, including the Scythians, Cimmerians, the Egyptians and the Phoenicians. He had literally brought the entire world under his sway. Not only so, but legend has it that he had authority over the animal world as well, with many pet lions and snakes that obeyed his command. Look at verse 4. “I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at home in my palace, contented and prosperous.” Nebuchadnezzar was at the pinnacle of his power. There seemed nothing left for him to do except enjoy what he had obtained through 30 or more years of hard labor.

But God sent him a dream to disturb his peace and comfort. Nebuchadnezzar was frightened and even terrified by what he saw while lying in his bed. He called in all his wise men in service to his gods to help him interpret the dream. He told them the dream, but none of them could help. It seems likely that they understood the dream well enough to sense that no one who told the meaning of the dream would be viewed favorably by Nebuchadnezzar. So they pleaded ignorance. Finally, Daniel, called Belteshazzar, came to Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar knew that Daniel served the God of the Jews. Still, he called him Belteshazzar after the name of his god. Nebuchadnezzar told him the dream.

In his dream, Nebuchadnezzar saw a gigantic tree in the middle of the land. It was beautiful. It was so fruitful. It provided food and shelter for all the beasts of the earth and the birds of the air. It touched the sky, and was visible to the whole earth. Then, in an instant, everything changed. A messenger from heaven, an angel, appeared and declared God’s verdict and judgment against the tree. It would be cut down, destroyed and all the creatures that depended on it for food and shelter would be scattered. Only the trunk and roots would remain, bound with iron and bronze. Then the angel’s message changed slightly. Look at verses 15b-17. “Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, and let him live with the animals among the plants of the earth. Let his mind be changed from that of a man, and let him be
given the mind of an animal, till seven times pass by for him. 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.” Nebuchadnezzar was in trouble.
He sensed God’s impending judgment. But his other advisers were too
afraid to face up to it. So Nebuchadnezzar turned to Daniel, for whom
nothing was too difficult.

II. Daniel’s interpretation (19-27)

First, “You, O king, are that tree!” (19-26). Daniel, too, was frightened
when he heard Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. But the reason for his
concern was quite different from that of the other wise men. They had
shut up rather than make the king angry. They were most interested in
preserving their own lives. But look at Daniel’s response, in verse 19.
“Then Daniel (also called Belteshazzar) was greatly perplexed for a
time, and his thoughts terrified him. So the king said, ‘Belteshazzar, do
not let the dream or its contents alarm you.’ Belteshazzar answered,
‘My lord, if only the dream applied to your enemies, and its meaning to
your adversaries!’” Daniel was terrified, but it was for the sake of his
boss, not because of him. Humanly, Daniel had no reason whatsoever
to like or care about what happened to Nebuchadnezzar. But Daniel
was a servant of God. And God had chosen Nebuchadnezzar as his
instrument in that generation. Not only so, God had chosen Daniel as
Nebuchadnezzar’s shepherd, to help Nebuchadnezzar know that he
was in fact God’s instrument in history. Whatever his personal feelings,
Daniel was obligated before God to care for Nebuchadnezzar like his
own son, and to help him in God. Therefore, to Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar’s suffering and difficulties were his very own. We
must understand that no one can help or shepherd another human
being, unless we learn in God how to take others’ sufferings and
burdens as our own.

What did Daniel see in Nebuchadnezzar’s future? Of course, Daniel
understood that the tree in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream was
Nebuchadnezzar himself. Nebuchadnezzar’s power and glory were
matchless. He had become responsible for the entire world. But his
power and glory were not destined to last. Instead, at the time of
God's choosing, Nebuchadnezzar would be brought low, lower than any
men, down to the level of the animals. In the dream, the tree would be
cut down and destroyed, but the stump and the roots would remain in
the ground. Look at verses 24-26. “This is the interpretation, O king,
and this is the decree the Most High has issued against my lord the
king: You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild
animals; you will eat grass like cattle and will be drenched with the
dew of heaven. 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.” Nebuchadnezzar's dream
was the declaration of God's judgment against him. He would suffer for
seven times, until he acknowledged that God is sovereign over the
earth, not men. Nebuchadnezzar was a violent and proud man. But God
had hope for him, if only he humbled himself and acknowledged God as
his sovereign lord. Proud people are hopeless people, because nobody
can tell them anything. But God has a hope for proud people, if only
they can be humbled in God. Therefore, we can have a hope for
ourselves, and for the people of America, when he come to God in
prayer and ask for his mercy on the young people of this nation!

Second, “Renounce your sins” (27). Daniel could have told
Nebuchadnezzar the dream and stopped. He had no obligation and only
great risk to share with the king his personal advice. But we can only
imagine how long Daniel had prepared and waited for his chance to
encourage the king to humble himself before the Almighty God. So, he
followed God's lead, and risked himself to lead his sheep
Nebuchadnezzar to repentance. Look at 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.” God had declared his
judgment on Nebuchadnezzar. But Daniel wanted Nebuchadnezzar to
know that the God of heaven is a merciful God. God judges sin and
condemns wickedness, but God forgives those who repent and turn
from their wickedness. Daniel urged Nebuchadnezzar to repent, and to
depend on God's mercy so that neither he nor his kingdom might suffer
as the dream foretold. Humanly, Nebuchadnezzar deserved to suffer. But God wanted him to repent and believe. Not only so, God wanted Nebuchadnezzar to know that even if he did suffer such a terrible shame, it was to lead him to repentance and life. Proud people are terrified of repentance, thinking that if they lose their pride, they will die. But that is Satan's deception. God will rescue proud people who humble themselves and submit to God's sovereign will for their lives.

III. Nebuchadnezzar's trial and repentance (28-37)

First, Nebuchadnezzar's fall (28-33). One year later, the dream was fulfilled. Daniel's advice had obviously helped Nebuchadnezzar to humble himself a little bit. Perhaps he even instituted some small reforms in his empire. But once again Nebuchadnezzar's glory seeking desires began to pop up here and there. At first, he fought them, remembering God's impending judgment. Gradually, however, he let down his guard. Then, one fine day, he took a stroll along the roof of his palace. Look at verse 30. "He said, 'Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?'

Look at verses 31 and 32. "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.'" And immediately everything that had been told to Nebuchadnezzar happened to him. He lived in the wild, eating grass like cattle, letting his hair grow longer than eagles' feathers, and his nails longer than their talons. His mind became the mind of an animal. But he would not submit. He hardened his heart and preferred to live as an animal rather than serve the Creator God. He is the exact picture of unrepentant mankind (Romans 1:18-32).

Second, Nebuchadnezzar acknowledges God's sovereignty (34-37). Nebuchadnezzar received the punishment he deserved. There is some controversy over whether the seven times refer to weeks, months or years. However long it took, Nebuchadnezzar finally humbled himself
and remembered God’s promise to him through Daniel’s interpretation of the dream. Like the prodigal son in Jesus’ parable, he came to his senses and realized that his rebellion against God was foolish and pointless. He overcame his proud mind, and looked up to God for help. At once, his sanity was restored. He had suffered so much. But now, he was really happy, because for the first time he knew who God was, and he knew who he really was in God. Look at verses 34 and 35. “At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored 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?’”

Why was Nebuchadnezzar so happy to know that he was nothing, and that his power and authority were nothing, compared to the greatness of God? It is indeed hard for self-glory seeking people to understand. It is the mystery of knowing the difference between the false glory of men and the real glory of heaven. When our eyes are opened to see God’s true greatness, and our mouths can express glory to God, our souls are happy. Our souls are not happy to serve our ever-demanding egos and glory seeking desires. But we are really happy to know that no one, not I, not anyone else, is worthy of all our worship and praise, except God alone. In fact, we are so happy, that we are happy to die in God. This reminds us of Mary’s song, when Elizabeth recognized her as the mother of her lord, “My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on, all generations will call me blessed, For the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.” Luke 1:46-48. We are happy to know the true greatness of God, because God who humbles us is also able to exalt us more than our wildest dreams. Look at verse 37. “Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.”

Human pride, according Bible truth, is the root and source of all human mental illness and suffering. Who can help the proud? We are all too
proud to really listen to or help another human being. But there is hope, because God who is sovereign over men is able and willing to humble the proud. And those who are humbled in God can live in peace and joy under God's tender mercy for ever and ever. Praise be to the Most High God! May God bless each of you to humbly acknowledge God's sovereign will for you and your lives. May God bless America to repent of her pride, and submit to God’s perfect will for us to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation!