

Even kings must bend before the King

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 September 2025

Preacher: Brian King

[0 : 00] Let's pray. Sovereign Lord, you spoke to Nebuchadnezzar through dreams and visions, In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Now, many years ago, the famous scholar A.T. Robertson wrote a little reflection in his Denomination's newsletter about a man named Diotrephus. Now, if you haven't heard of him, don't worry. He shows up only once in the Bible, in 3 John 9. And in that verse, he is described in a pretty unforgettable way. A Diotrephus who loves to be first. Well, after that article came out, the editor came back to Dr. Robertson with some news. No fewer than 25 deacons had cancelled their subscriptions. Why? Because they were convinced Robertson was talking about them and attacking them.

[1 : 23] Now, we might chuckle at the thin skin of these offended deacons, but here is the thing. If we are honest, there is a little bit of Diotrephus in all of us, isn't there?

We might not like to be called out on it, but we all love to be first in little ways. So, for example, in conversation with others, don't we sometimes like to steer it back to talking about our own experiences rather than truly listening to others? In our hearts, aren't we sometimes more concerned with how our work builds our reputation rather than how it blesses others or honors God? Or in our heads, don't we sometimes silently grumble that our time and our needs are not met first, as if they are more intrinsically valuable than others? It's easy for us to love to be first. But today God tells us, if you love to be first, your bubble might be burst.

[2 : 45] If you love to be first, you may find yourself cursed. For as the Lord Jesus himself says later in Matthew 23 verse 12, That is certainly the lesson King Nebuchadnezzar had to learn.

You see, so far in the book of Daniel, what has King Nebuchadnezzar discovered? He's learned that the God of Daniel speaks. He alone can reveal hidden knowledge. That's Daniel 2. And he's learned that the God of Daniel saves. He alone can rescue his servants. That's Daniel 3.

But he hasn't yet learned that the God of Daniel rules. Oh, he knows in an abstract manner that God certainly reigns.

But by the end of Daniel 3, he still has zero understanding that God rules, not just generally, but personally.

[4 : 00] God rules over him. But by the end of chapter 4, he will understand. The man who loves to be first will find himself bending before the real king.

This is signaled to us right from the start. In verse 1, we find the king calling for a press conference. He is about to make a public declaration.

He has a testimony to share, and it is for the whole world. We know this, number one, because verse 1 tells us the king is addressing every nation, every peoples, every language.

And we also know this, number two, because of an interesting feature in the book of Daniel that I haven't told you about so far. Did you know that the book of Daniel is written in two languages? In Daniel 1 to 2 verse 3, it is written in the language of the Israelites, the Hebrew language. But in Daniel 2 verse 4, until the end of Daniel 7, it is written in Aramaic, the trade language, the common language.

[5 : 16] So that means the king's testimony here in Daniel 4 is written in a language just about everyone in the ancient world understands.

This is a broadcast for everybody. And the really surprising thing about this broadcast is what the king will declare.

The journalists, after all, are familiar with this king. If he is saying anything, it's usually about some sign or wonder that he has crafted for his glory.

Check out the East India House inscription in the British Museum, for instance, if you ever have the chance to, one day, just to see the kind of things that the king likes to blow his own trumpet about. But this time, verses 2 and 3, he's got a pretty different message. It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me.

[6 : 29] How great are his signs! How mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an eternal kingdom. His dominion endures from generation to generation.

Wow. Now that is a big change, isn't it? Nebuchadnezzar is now praising God. And the key phrase are those two words at the end of verse 2.

For me. Up to this point, Nebuchadnezzar has witnessed some pretty amazing miracles, especially the rescue of Daniel's three friends from the furnace.

And he has said some nice things about Daniel's God. But that doesn't mean he personally trusts God. You see, though miracles can grab our attention and make us pause, they don't by themselves create true faith.

For Nebuchadnezzar to personally encounter God's power and grace, he must have his me-first outlook shattered.

[7 : 45] And it is the same for us. If we want to experience God personally in our lives, we too must be willing to deeply humble ourselves and stop building our little kingdoms apart from God.

Otherwise, we can't say the words of verses 2 and 3 like Nebuchadnezzar. We can't have that experience of God working for me.

So let's listen to the king's testimony. And we'll do so under three headings. Here's the first one. The illusion. The illusion.

It is probably about 20 years after the events of Daniel 3, and we are now well into the golden age of the empire.

The wars are over. The borders are secure. The enemies are defeated. The king has plundered the treasures of Egypt, Tyre, Israel, and beyond, and poured that wealth back into Babylon.

[8 : 56] New buildings arise, temples gleam, and he's even built the famous hanging gardens for his queen, one of the wonders of the ancient world.

The kingdom is at peace. Life is good. Nebuchadnezzar has made it. So no wonder he says what he says in verse 4.

I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at home in my palace, contented and prosperous. After all, from a purely human perspective, he has every reason to be proud and to boast, doesn't he?

He has built a powerful civilization and a magnificent city. By all accounts, he is a competent and effective leader.

Indeed, the dream Nebuchadnezzar has pretty much stays the same. In verses 10 to 12, we are told about a tree which clearly represents Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom.

[10 : 07] And notice what is said about this tree. End of verse 10. Its height was enormous. The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky.

It was visible to the ends of the earth. Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it, the wild animals found shelter and the birds lived in its branches.

From it, every creature was fed. So this tree is grand and even gives life to others.

You know, whenever we look at human kingdoms in the Bible and world history, we tend to categorize them as holy good or holy bad.

But actually, this vision shows it's not so simple. Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom is good in many ways. It has beauty.

[11 : 11] It has abundance. It gives protection and provision to its citizens. And that is true of many otherwise evil human kingdoms, is it not?

So often, even bad human kingdoms can bring some benefit. The Roman Empire developed a sophisticated legal system and a fine road network that persists to this very day.

The Soviet Union provided free education and managed to vastly reduce illiteracy rates in the territories it controlled.

Even kingdoms held by evil men can bring some good to others. therefore, that the kingdom was strong and outstanding and even beneficial in many ways is not in dispute.

That is not an illusion. So what is the problem then? There are some clues. Look again at verse 11 and notice how the tree is described.

[12:32] Its very top touched the sky. Or, you could also translate it as something like its top reached the heavens. That is, once again, the very language of Babel suggesting that Babylon is beginning to overreach itself.

and notice how else the king describes this tree. Remember, this tree represents himself, a fact that he is likely to be aware of, even if he isn't sure of the interpretation as of yet.

In verse 10, he says it is in the middle of the land. And at the end of verse 12, he says, from it, every creature was fed.

Now, these are very strong claims. Claims that make this tree sound almost like the tree of life in Eden itself.

Basically, Babylon is depicted almost as god-like. And this tells us the very heart of the problem. pride.

[13:53] The king has put his kingdom at the very center of this universe, in the middle of the land, and presumed that he is the giver and sustainer of life itself.

Indeed, this becomes very clear when we look at how he speaks later in verses 29 and 30. Look at it with me. Notice the first person pronouns.

Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, 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?

God. But that is an illusion. The illusion isn't the kingdom itself, but Nebuchadnezzar's assumption that he built it, that it stands by his own hand.

It's the assumption he's the reason behind its magnificence. And it is a presumption we all too can easily make as well, can't we?

[15:15] After all, if I am the one who has built my business from scratch, then surely I deserve to take all the credit. Or if I have managed to save wisely, build a good retirement nest egg, and get a little ahead of everyone else, then surely I'm allowed to boast a little in the fruit of my good planning.

Or if I have worked hard to revive a failing ministry, leading and inspiring people, then surely I can look at that same ministry and say in my heart, oh, is not the success of this ministry because of me?

Am I not responsible for this accomplishment? That is the trap we all can fall into alongside Nebuchadnezzar.

You see, the problem isn't that we work hard or achieve something substantial. It is thinking we did it all on our own, taking all the credit for getting the God who gave us the talent, the strength, the opportunity, even the breath in our lungs.

When we do that, we let pride take over. We have bought into the illusion that our hard work or achievements are the entire story.

[16:57] pride. And pride can come in so many forms. Many centuries ago, Gregory the Great helpfully listed some different ways we all can be proud.

He writes, it should be on the screen, on the screen, yep, some people, like Nebuchadnezzar here, consider themselves to be the cause of their achievement and talents.

Others, though acknowledging that these qualities are from God, believe that they deserve them. Then there are those who boast of qualities they do not even possess.

The fourth group despise others who lack the quality they possess. They want to call attention to their uniqueness. But whichever way pride shows up, whether it is taking credit for our gifts, thinking we deserve them, boasting about what we don't actually have, or comparing ourselves for the sake of looking down on others and bigging ourselves up, God hates them all.

Because none of those attitudes acknowledge God as the giver. None of those attitudes take a submissive posture before God. And so God has to give the admonition.

[18:32] That is the second of our headings today, the admonition. You see, God says to Nebuchadnezzar through Daniel, you are indeed that tree.

But look what happens to this seemingly mighty tree, verse 14. its branches will be trimmed, its leaves stripped, its fruits scattered.

This tree basically is going to be chopped down. Yes, in verse 15, its stump appears still to be protected, but everything else about it is going to be axed.

Indeed, the vision only gets scarier, verses 15 and 16. 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. So the imagery now suddenly changes from a tree to a person.

[19 : 42] But the terrifying part is that this person's very mind will be stripped away and replaced with the mind of an animal. He wouldn't think like a king, a builder, or even a man.

He would think only of grass to eat and a place to shelter, just like the creatures around him. He has become dehumanized.

And why does God do all this? So that all the living people on earth will know one thing, verse 17. The Most High is sovereign over all the kingdoms on earth. He is the ultimate ruler. He is the one who gives power to anyone he wants.

and he can take it away. We find the same point repeated in verses 25 and 32. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes.

[21 : 07] That is the admonition God wants to give to the king. The repetition makes the point, unmistakable. Even human kings must bend before the king of kings.

Human kings may appear powerful, but they are never ultimate. Thrones and empires rise and fall by his will alone.

No wonder the king is so frightened upon dreaming this dream. Verse 5. Everything he's built, everything he's so proud of, it turns out they can all come crashing down so easily.

And that has always been the way of human kingdoms and inventions, has it not? Centuries of power and culture can come crashing down in one single wall.

steady savings and careful planning can all disappear thanks to a single market crash or scam. Digital platforms that seem so dominant become obsolete overnight.

[22 : 26] The things we build can so easily be here today, gone tomorrow. But the king isn't quite frightened enough yet to truly humble himself.

For did you notice who he first turns to? First of all, just like in chapter 2, he leans on the wisdom of all his Babylonian wise men and sorcerers first.

He doesn't consult Daniel. and when he finally does, he only notes that the spirit of the gods are in him.

Verse 9. It's almost as if he's forgotten all the lessons he should have learned about Daniel's god from the previous two chapters. He might acknowledge that Daniel's god has power of some kind, but he has not yet begun to see him as the one true god.

But the truth is, that is also us, isn't it? We can also take a very long time to learn that God is really to be god in our lives.

[23 : 51] John Calvin, reflecting on this passage, once said something very insightful about human beings in general. he points out that when God is trying to lead us to repentance, he often has to keep sending trials again and again.

Why? Because sometimes we don't respond at all the first time. Other times we wake up for a moment, but then we quickly drift back into our old ways.

God has to keep turning up the pressure, not because he enjoys it, but because he loves us enough to keep shaking us awake.

He has to send us a strong word through people like Daniel so that we will truly pay attention. But here is the thing about God's admonitions.

It is always done with a tender heart. I think we see this in the way God's servant, Daniel, reacted to the message he has to deliver to the king.

[25 : 09] Now, just imagine being in Daniel's place for a moment. you're standing there, hearing about this massive tree being cut down, about a man being driven to live like an animal and a voice declaring judgment, and then it hits you.

Oh, this dream is about the very man standing in front of you himself, the king. Now, wouldn't you have been tempted to cheer inside?

Ah, finally, it's about time. Thank you, God, for letting me live to see judgment fall on this tyrant, the man who crushed my city, destroyed the temple, and dragged us into exile.

That would have been the natural reaction. But it wasn't Daniel's. Instead, the text tells us Daniel was shaken to the core.

He was so troubled that Nebuchadnezzar had to reassure him. But the Shazadon, don't let the dream or its meaning alarm you. For Daniel was so grieved that he said, verse 19, my lord, if only the dream applied to your enemies and its meaning to your adversaries.

[26 : 36] It's so striking, isn't it? God's Yes, he knew the dream had to be explained and he would do so faithfully, but he did it with reluctance, with a tender heart.

He never gloated. He couldn't take pleasure in the downfall of the wicked. And in doing so, I believe he is faithfully reflecting God's own heart.

God doesn't want to see you fall. He takes no pleasure in you stumbling over your sin.

And yet at the same time, Daniel had to tell the truth. Yes, the king of Babylon is powerful, but, verse 24, he is not so powerful that he can keep defying the decree of the one more powerful than him.

For king Nebuchadnezzar must learn, verse 26, that heaven rules, not him. Even human kings must bend before the king of kings.

[27 : 49] And so Daniel does not shrink back from giving the God-given interpretation of the dream. But then Daniel does something even more risky.

Look at verse 27. Therefore, your majesty, be pleased to accept my advice. Now, remember, Nebuchadnezzar has not asked for any.

He just wants the dream interpreted. But Daniel knew how God works. God never gives a warning without a corresponding call to repentance.

repentance. And so that's exactly what Daniel did in verse 27. 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. Daniel. And sometimes God sends Daniels into our lives to present us with a similarly direct message.

[28 : 59] Maybe it's a spouse who lovingly yet honestly points out a blind spot. Could be a friend who challenges our pride when we're taking all the credit for our success.

perhaps it is a sermon that feels like it was written just for you, or even a book that confronts a comfortable belief that you hold.

And the question for us today is, how do we respond to our Daniels? Do we listen with an open heart, ready to accept the painful truth, or do we shut down?

Do we see them as annoying critics, or as messengers sent by God to save us from ourselves? It's tempting to dismiss them, to say, you don't understand my life, or I didn't ask for your opinion.

But just like Nebuchadnezzar, we need to hear the truth. God isn't just trying to humble us, He is trying to save us from the pride that will eventually lead to our downfall.

[30 : 17] He's calling us to a life of repentance, not just a change of heart, but a change of action. He wants us to move from our me-first kingdom to His, where justice and kindness are the foundation.

are we willing to accept the admonition and advice even when it's unasked for and hard to hear?

And this takes us to our final heading for this morning, the lesson. The lesson. You see, what happens if we don't take this call to repentance to heart?

Nebuchadnezzar, it appears, didn't. He had a good 12 months to reflect on his words, but there seemed to be no change. Instead, as we have already seen, he simply doubles down in verses 29 and 30 and boasts in his kingdom.

But his proud words barely leave his mouth before heaven answers back. God's voice cuts him down, overruling him on the spot, and in an instant, the most powerful man on earth is stripped of his power.

[31 : 47] And it happens just as God said. Nebuchadnezzar is driven out of the palace and into the fields. The man who once dined on the finest food now chills grass like an ox.

The man who once walked in royal robes now sleeps under the open sky, soaked with deal. The one who once sat crowned in splendor now has hair grown long and tangled like eagle's feathers, his nails twisted like claws.

The mighty king has become a pitiful sight, reduced to an animal. sometimes the commentators try to figure out exactly what medical condition he might have had, but that is besides the point.

The point is this. The man who thought he ruled the world is shown just how weak, small, and helpless he really is before God.

At the funeral of King Louis XIV in France, he had requested the entire cathedral of Notre-Dame be darkened except for a single candle on his casket.

[33 : 10] I think the candle is meant to represent him. But when the preacher rose to speak, he walked over to the casket, snuffed out the candle, and began his sermon with these words, only God is great, only God is great.

That is the lesson Nebuchadnezzar had to learn the hard way. Only God is great. And that is the lesson we all need to learn.

There is only one to whom we are to lift our eyes, God himself. That's literally what Nebuchadnezzar does in verse 34. After all his pride and self-reliance, he finally looks up. He turns away from himself and seeks God, and in that very moment, his sanity is restored. And with his mind restored, his testimony begins.

By the end of the chapter, he can say what we all must learn in verse 37. Those who walk in pride, God is able to humble.

[34 : 35] You see, why is this lesson so important? Because, I am convinced, it is a lesson that is absolutely critical to what it means to be a Christian.

You see, if you confess with your mouth today, you are a Christian, what are you really confessing? You are confessing, number one, that you have come to recognize that God is God, and you are not. And number two, you are confessing that you have lived as though you are God, and he is not. If we cannot say that, then whatever else we might be, we are not Christians. But that is not the end of it.

Because if you confess with your mouth today, you are a Christian, then number three, you are also confessing to God that you cannot do anything by yourself to rescue yourself.

[35 : 49] you are telling him that you cannot build anything by yourself. You are agreeing with him that everything comes from him, and that includes mercy and grace.

To be a Christian, you see, is to have our pride absolutely broken. Humility is a prerequisite to following God.

And the reason it is a prerequisite is because a humble God lies at the core of our Christian faith. You see, the book of Daniel has been telling us that there is only one eternal kingdom that will outlast all human kingdoms. But what kind of king will head this kingdom?

verse 17 gives us a clue. Look again at what God says. The most high is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of people.

[37 : 05] Did you notice who, according to God, is going to take charge of this eternal kingdom? It will actually be someone who is the lowliest of the low. It will be someone who will not be proud like Nebuchadnezzar, but his opposite.

It will be someone who is willing to submit himself in obedience to the Father. It will be someone who has no place to lay his head even though foxes have dens and birds have nests.

It will be someone ready to humble himself even to the point of a shameful death on the cross so that he might lift others up.

And God makes good on his word for who is the king of God's kingdom? It is Jesus who left the air of heaven, breathed in the dust of earth, died to take our curse, all so that he can lift us up.

And you know what? The way God deals with Nebuchadnezzar is also a pattern for how he deals with us. For what happens when Nebuchadnezzar genuinely humbles himself, he is restored.

[38 : 38] He becomes authentically human again. He is able to properly reflect the image of his creator. And he is now able to worship his creator just as he was designed to do.

And that's exactly what happens when we put our trust in and follow Jesus. And at the end of the day, you can't really separate worship from humility.

To worship means to bow before God, to acknowledge his greatness, and that is exactly what humility is.

As Eugene Peterson so beautifully puts it on the screen, worship is the strategy by which we interrupt our preoccupation with ourselves and attend to the presence of our great God.

So my friends, let us learn that lesson, humble ourselves, don't think that we have built everything ourselves, but bend the knee before our king, acknowledging all good things come from him.

[39 : 59] Whether we consider ourselves a Christian or not today, it is the same lesson. For the heart of human sin is setting ourselves up as though we don't need God. And that is the kind of posture we need to keep turning away from if we are a Christian.

And we need to turn away from it for the first time if we are not a Christian today. Every single day. And you know, pride can be very subtle, can't it? It is not always loud or obvious, sometimes it is quiet and hidden.

Think about it. Pride is so sneaky that it can even show up in our humility, can't it? You know, we can actually be proud of being humble. We can even make self-deprecation a subtle way of drawing attention to ourselves.

Or, we can be proud in the way we are very independent and don't ask for help. We rely on our own wisdom and resources. You know, there's so many ways we can be proud without realizing it.

But whenever God's word does point out our pride back to us, then let us repent and ask God to humble us.

[41 : 11] Because if we leave pride unchecked, it will strangle the life of the soul. But if we humbly follow God, here is the good news.

We will be on the right side of history. You see, there is one other lesson Daniel 4 teaches us. And that is, if God can humble the arrogant Nebuchadnezzar whenever he chooses, he can humble whatever other proud ruler turns up next.

If he can force a powerful but oppressive Gentile king to acknowledge his sovereignty, he can do it to anyone who oppresses God's people in the future.

As verse 37 says, those who walk in pride, God is able to humble. So take heart if we ever find ourselves under such a leader in the future.

endure, stay humble, and God will lift you up. Let's pray. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we come before you now and we pray that we will come with humble hearts, hearts that acknowledge that we are just creatures creatures, and you are the creator.

[42 : 47] We are just humans. You are the almighty God. So we pray, Lord, that we will come with that attitude. Help us to come with the same attitude as Christ Jesus, who indeed did humble himself all the way to the cross.

And help us to cling to that same Jesus, knowing that he is the one who can lift us up. so we pray today that if we recognize any kind of pride in ourselves, please help us to repent of that, to turn away from that, to give that to you, and to celebrate the pardon that Jesus has won for us, and help us to resolve to keep living humbly before you day after day, giving you all the glory.

We pray all this in the name of Christ. Amen.