

HUMILITY REQUIRED

Daniel 4:28-37

Humility has been defined in many ways and I think most of us have a fairly good idea of what it means. One comment regarding how the Bible defines humility reads as follows: “believing what God says about you over anyone else’s opinion, including your own.” Warren Wiersbe wrote “Humility is not demeaning ourselves or thinking poorly of ourselves, it is simply not thinking of ourselves at all.” Both those ideas certainly have merit and are likely equally difficult (maybe impossible) to practice consistently.

We might make a case that the first statement must be the starting point as our guide regarding thoughts about self; however, the destination of our thoughts needs to be more closely aligned with the second statement. We should be moving in the direction that our thoughts, words, and deeds are aligned with Godly principles and practices without our having to make a conscious decision.

In the account we will be examining today, we will see another aspect of humility regarding the source of our condition. Needless to say, Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian Empire that he led had many accomplishments. The city of Babylon was very large – forty-five miles around the perimeter of the city. What he and those in that empire failed to realize was that he was being used by Yahweh (the Most High God) to bring judgment upon the nations of that region including Israel or Judah. The other accomplishments attributed to Nebuchadnezzar were things that he decided to do with the resources that came to him and his empire because Yahweh was enabling his success. These accomplishments such as building palaces and creating canals and even the hanging gardens that some have considered it to be the “eighth wonder of the world” were done to enhance his reputation and admiration of others. Whether anything was done to help the ordinary people of Babylon is apparently unknown. Most of what is known seems to be related to military conquests and rebuilding of cities.

It is no surprise that Nebuchadnezzar held a high opinion of himself. Even though he had been exposed to the reality of Yahweh because of his interaction with some of the Jews who were exiled in Babylon he did not make the connection that the Most High God was the source of his success. God had given Nebuchadnezzar at least two opportunities to “connect the dots” in what was happening in his empire to the fact that he was being used by Yahweh. In both cases (the dream of the great image with the gold head and the deliverance of the three Hebrews from the furnace), Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged the superiority of the God of the Jews above all other gods. However, the realization of this truth did not create a lasting change in his life. It was like the seed that fell into shallow dirt that sprang up but quickly died that Jesus mentioned in the Parable of the Sower.

A third attempt was initiated by God to give Nebuchadnezzar an opportunity to abandon his pride and arrogance and turn to the One True God and that came about in a night vision regarding a large flourishing beneficial tree that was cut down and only a stump was left. Again, Daniel was able to tell Nebuchadnezzar the meaning of the dream and to give him advice as to a possible way he might avoid or postpone the fulfillment of this prophetic vision.

The meaning of the dream was that Nebuchadnezzar would become like an animal that lived outdoors and ate grass as an ox. His hair and finger nails would grow long and he would not associate with people. This condition would last seven time periods and then he would be restored to his sanity.

The advice that Daniel provided is found in verse 27 of Daniel chapter four.

²⁷ 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 4:27 (ESV)

The advice from God through Daniel was related to Nebuchadnezzar’s behavior toward others involving sins and iniquities. These concerns could have been related to how he interacted and responded to people in his own empire and/or how the people in the conquered nations were treated.

Pride Declared – 4:28-30

²⁸ All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar. ²⁹ At the end of twelve months he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, ³⁰ 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?” Daniel 4:28–30 (ESV)

Apparently, Nebuchadnezzar failed to follow the advice of Daniel and one year later, the prophecy of the vision was about to be fulfilled. At the time the problem was beginning Nebuchadnezzar was on an “ego trip” regarding all the accomplishments he could see from the roof of his palace. Not only did he take credit for it all, but he also viewed all of it as a testimony regarding how great and glorious he was. Even though he had been exposed to and on at least two occasions momentarily recognized the superiority of the God of Israel, his focus of adoration and admiration continued to be directed toward himself. The connection of “failure to repent” (the advice from Daniel) seems to be directly related to pride and worship of self. After all, why would a person who was convinced that he was the “greatest ever” be inclined to change? While the well-known poet Robert Burns longed for the power to see ourselves as others see us, we should pray that we might see ourselves as God sees us.

Many of us see the value of making the world around us a better place by having order rather than chaos, having well-kept property, dressing appropriately, and many other attributes that are considered desirable. These are all good things to do and seem to be virtuous. Whether there is any virtue in such behavior depends on our motivation for doing what we do. Matthew 5:16 tells us the way we should approach these things: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”

If we are doing all the right things for the wrong reasons, then we may be helping others but might be doing it in order to have others praise us which would simply feed our pride and would hinder our maturity in becoming who we are destined to become.

Reality Defined – 4:31-33

³¹ 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, ³² 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 that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.” 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. Daniel 4:31–33 (ESV)

There were several interactions of “spiritual” entities with King Nebuchadnezzar. He had dreams and visions that were out of the ordinary. This incident was not a vision nor a dream but he heard a voice that he identified as coming from another realm.

Nebuchadnezzar had heard someone identified as a “watcher” talking to him in the vision he had twelve months prior to this incident. The term “watcher” was apparently common in terminology used in Mesopotamia regarding certain spiritual beings. This term is also found in the Book of First Enoch which is included in some versions of the Apocrypha. Daniel and other writers of Scripture were familiar with such terminology. Today, we tend to group all “spiritual

entities” under the broad category of “angels” which is an over simplification. “The watchers” was Enoch’s term for the “sons of God” mention in the Genesis 6:2 account regarding their interaction with the daughters of men. Along this same line, parts of the book of Daniel (chapters two through seven) are of Aramaic language origin and the remainder is from the Hebrew language. While we are considering literary characteristics, chapter four (verses 1-18 and 34-37) appear to be authored by Nebuchadnezzar (written in the first person) while the rest is written in the third person.

The voice from heaven essentially repeated the same message that he had heard in the vision from a year before this time. Some translations state “they shall drive you away” and others “you shall be driven away.” It is generally thought that it was his loss of contact with reality that was the driving force for the separation rather than the people around him making him leave. Those of his royal court and his family members were likely very concerned about him and were more or less helpless to do anything to change the situation he was going through.

Someone had to come forward and continue to give direction to the operation of the empire. Some commentators suggest that those in administrative positions in the government simply continued with their assignments and could have been given leadership by Daniel. Another likely possibility was that a family member such as a son or grandson who had been in training to succeed Nebuchadnezzar provided leadership. We know from the incident recorded in chapter five of Daniel that his grandson Belshazzar did eventually rise to power and was the leader of Babylon who saw the “hand writing on the wall.” Another authority figure that shows up in chapter five is the “queen.” This was likely the queen mother who would have been the wife of Nebuchadnezzar and would have likely had significant influence on how Nebuchadnezzar would be dealt with during his disabled condition. It is just speculation but I would think that someone was assigned to keep watch over Nebuchadnezzar during this time. Just think how we might respond today if one of our family members had such a condition as Nebuchadnezzar was going through.

It is unclear how long Nebuchadnezzar suffered from what is clinically known as “boanthropy.” This disorder apparently is a condition that some are said to experience today in which a person believes he or she has become a bovine animal and behaves that way. We are told that his condition would last seven time periods. Scholars have speculated that this could have been time periods of months, seasons (winter - summer), or years. When it was finished, Nebuchadnezzar would know that Yahweh (the God of Israel) reigns over the kingdom of mankind and He decides who will be used to serve His purposes.

Honor Given – 4:34-37

³⁴ At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, 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; 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?” ³⁶ 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. ³⁷ 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. Daniel 4:34–37 (ESV)

The narrative of this epic saga has switched back to “first person” with Nebuchadnezzar relating what happened at the end of the seven time periods. It is impossible to know if Nebuchadnezzar had any awareness of what he was doing during this time. Was he aware of who he was but could not control the impulses driving him to eat grass and live like an animal?

The reason for the question is the “order of the sequence” given in verse thirty-four. The first step was that he lifted his eyes to heaven. This statement sounds as if he had some sense of what was going on. The implication of his sanity returning after he looked (up) for divine help is that all of us who are without “the divine connection” can be prone to unreasonableness in our thoughts and behavior.

The first response of Nebuchadnezzar after his “reason returned” to him was to acknowledge the Most High God. Using words that remind us of Isaiah 40:15-24 we see the soaring praise of Yahweh that recognized His eternal uncreated nature, His omnipotence and His sovereignty.

When it was realized that he had regained his sanity, those who were government officials quickly acknowledged him and his position as king. Apparently, everything returned to some semblance of normality and Babylon continued to grow.

We might question whether or not Nebuchadnezzar abandoned all allegiance to other gods as he learned lessons from the experience of prideful arrogance that led to his temporary insanity. The last words of his first-person account of these events indicate that he had learned that humility in dealing with God is beneficial while pride results in ruin. There is nothing in the records of those who followed him as king that would indicate that they had learned from his ordeal.

As a historical note: writings entitled *The Prayers of Nabonidus* found in the cave of Qumran have a very similar account of this event happening to Nabonidus (the son of Nebuchadnezzar). It is likely that those involved in transcribing old texts for their libraries may have confused the names which points to the difficulty of being adamant about details of such accounts. The most important question is “did we learn what the account was intended to teach us about pride versus humility and how that God is in control of all the affairs of mankind?”