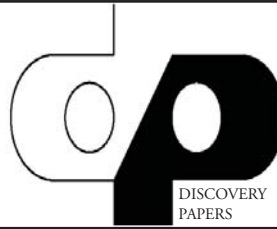


WHEN POWER IS A PARADOX

SERIES: WHEN KINGDOMS COLLIDE



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Everyone wants to be at the top. Everyone wants to be the best. Whatever field you're in, whatever skill you have, there is something in our human nature that drives us to want to be the best.

There's an old story that exemplifies this. The story of Snow White begins, of course, with the evil queen who wants to be the best. Who is the fairest of them all? This is the question that drives everything about the queen. She wants to be the most beautiful. She wants to be the most powerful. She loves what she hears, "Is there no end to your power and beauty?"

I think we can all relate to that desire. We want to be the best. The NASCAR driver Dale Earnhardt says that second place is just the first place loser. Vince Lombardi, the football guru, said "Show me a good loser, and I'll show you a loser." We want to win. We want to be the best.

This morning we are continuing our series in the book of Daniel called *When Kingdoms Collide*. This series has highlighted the two kingdoms that we live among. On the one hand, there is the kingdom of man that mostly defines our everyday lives: our jobs, our families, our money, our stuff. We are all familiar with this world. But then, if you are a follower of Jesus, there is the kingdom of God. Your spiritual life, a whole different set of values, the presence of the Holy Spirit.

These two worlds co-exist, but they are in tension. The first part of the book of Daniel contains six stories that describe collisions between these worlds. Times when they rub against each other and cause some kind of a disturbance.

Our passage today in Daniel 4 tells a story about a man who was the best. He was very much like the evil queen in the story of Snow White. He was at the top of his game; he was incredibly powerful; he had everything he wanted. He ruled over the kingdom of man. His greatness made him challenge the kingdom of God. He didn't just come into conflict with that kingdom. He thought he had conquered it.

He finds out that isn't the case. The king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, experiences a harsh dose of reality. He is

brought low. He finds out that the power he thought he had wasn't real. He experiences a painful moment when he sees that his power is a paradox. In that moment, something changes for him.

If you live long enough, you'll experience moments like this. Moments when whatever power or position we thought we had is shown to be false. How do we respond *When Power is a Paradox?*

Nebuchadnezzar faces a situation where he has to be reminded of how much power he actually has. He has to have his opinion of himself reset. As we read his story, we're going to be asking some questions of ourselves. Do we sometimes think too highly of ourselves? What happens when we are reminded of who we really are? How do we react when we are brought low? Are we aware of what God is doing in those moments?

We will also think about the powers around us. The world of the kingdom of man. If this happened to Nebuchadnezzar, what does that say about other worldly powers? What does that say about the powers that we live under?

Let's read this story and see what happens when the fairest of them all loses that special status.

A Chance to Change

If you remember from last week, Nebuchadnezzar had just witnessed three of his servants survive being thrown into a fiery furnace. He had seen a fourth person in the furnace with them. His reaction to these events was to say that their God was blessed and that nobody was allowed to say anything bad about that God.

This chapter begins much the same way. Nebuchadnezzar actually issues a decree proclaiming the greatness of God to his entire kingdom. The chapter begins with this encouraging note: maybe Nebuchadnezzar really has learned something about God. But then we hear about a story that makes us think otherwise.

It begins in a familiar way: Nebuchadnezzar has a dream that he can't understand. Last time we heard about this, he issued a ridiculous command to his advisors: *Tell me the dream and its interpretation.* This time he is calmer. When his advisors can't help him, he calls in his trusted friend, Daniel.

The dream itself is about a great tree.

Daniel 4:11–17—

The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. ¹²Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the heavens lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it.

¹³**“I saw in the visions of my head as I lay in bed, and behold, a watcher, a holy one, came down from heaven. ¹⁴He proclaimed aloud and said thus: ‘Chop down the tree and lop off its branches, strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the beasts flee from under it and the birds from its branches. ¹⁵But leave the stump of its roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze, amid the tender grass of the field. Let him be wet with the dew of heaven. Let his portion be with the beasts in the grass of the earth. ¹⁶Let his mind be changed from a man’s, and let a beast’s mind be given to him; and let seven periods of time pass over him. ¹⁷The sentence is by the decree of the watchers, the decision by the word of the holy ones, to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men.’**

The dream begins by describing a great tree. This kind of image was not uncommon in ancient times. Many cultures had stories about great trees that ruled their empires. Many of them saw trees as symbolic of prosperity and power. It would have been hard to not recognize this tree as a reference to the kingdom of Babylon. You might even recognize an allusion to the tower of Babel from Genesis 11, built centuries earlier where Babylon would eventually stand.

However, this great tree is chopped down. It is stripped and dismantled. Then all of a sudden, in the middle of the dream, the subject has changed from a tree to a man without warning. That's how dreams work, so it's no surprise. This man seems to go crazy and becomes an animal. The purpose of this transformation is so that *“the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men.”*

Here's the funny part. Nebuchadnezzar asks his advisors what this dream means. Imagine yourself being called in to describe to the most powerful man in the world what this dream means. It's not a very hard dream to figure out. But you'd probably still say, “Gee, I don't know—that's a tough one to figure out.”

The advisors were afraid to tell the king what this dream meant. But Daniel is not afraid. He tells the king that it refers to him.

Daniel 4:22—

It is you, O king, who have grown and become strong. Your greatness has grown and reaches to heaven, and your dominion to the ends of the earth.

Daniel is courageous enough to state the obvious. Daniel continues to apply the rest of the dream to Nebuchadnezzar. He will be chopped down. He will go crazy. All so that the Most High God can be known.

After Daniel finishes interpreting the dream, he becomes really upset. He finishes his speech with a desperate plea.

Daniel 4:27—

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 is begging Nebuchadnezzar to change so that he won't have to go through this. As we read his words, we realize something incredible: Daniel, a kidnapped exile from Judah, likes Nebuchadnezzar. He genuinely likes the king.

It may not seem like a big deal, but it is. This is the guy that destroyed the temple. He conquered Jerusalem. He is not a friend to the people of God. But Daniel likes him. He feels genuine affection for Nebuchadnezzar.

Do you know what this means? It means that even though you live in the kingdom of God, you can like the kingdom of man. That's OK. Sometimes Christians forget this. I'm actually concerned that talking about the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man like we've been doing can result in this. Anytime you draw a line like we've been doing, it's easy to form teams, to choose sides. To say that only the people on my side are OK.

So I find it refreshing to see how much affection Daniel has for Nebuchadnezzar. Particularly because I like a lot of things about the kingdom of man. And I like a lot of people who adamantly refuse to acknowledge the kingdom of God. Daniel's example shows us that it's even OK to like Nebuchadnezzar.

Because of Daniel's affection for Nebuchadnezzar, he begs the king to change. Daniel sees that the path the king is on is taking him to a bad place. This is a big opportunity for the king. God has revealed something to him through a dream. His friend, Daniel, has helped him to understand it, even when nobody else would dare. Daniel is asking, because of their friendship, for him to change.

Moments like these are precious, but you don't often realize it. Someone who feels genuine affection for you works up the courage to warn you about your life. Have you ever had chances like this? Do you recognize the opportunity? As readers, we want Nebuchadnezzar to listen to Daniel. We want him to take his advice. We can do the same thing. We can recognize when people who love us give us chances to change. Recognize the chance to change.

The problem is that these chances are often painful. We don't like it when our actions are questioned. We usually don't like it when people encourage us to change. I am the way I am because I want to be. Why would I change?

The area in which I've experienced this the most is in marriage. My wife is fortunate enough to have a husband who always gives her loving encouragements to change. Actually, it's mostly the opposite. I've shared before that my wife and I went through a period of huge struggles in our marriage. One of the patterns that made things really difficult was how we handled anger. In my case, I never really allowed myself to be angry. Or I told myself that I didn't get angry.

I remember so many conversations with my wife where she would say, "Why are you so angry?" And I'd respond vehemently, "I'm not angry!" I thought that being angry was a sin, so her asking about my anger was an accusation. I couldn't allow that to be true, so I had to deny it. I had to defend myself.

It took a long time and the help of a counselor for me to see my own anger. To help me realize that anger is ok, but you have to figure out how to express it well and what to do about it. With some practice, I started realizing that when my wife asked, "Why are you so angry," I could really consider that question. Why am I angry? What is going on that I'm reacting this way?

In those conversations, I used to feel like my wife was attacking me. I gradually realized that she wasn't.

I'm not sure what Nebuchadnezzar felt. We aren't told anything about his feelings. All we see is Daniel, who genuinely cares for him, taking a risk to warn him that the path he is on won't take him where he wants to go. Whether or not Nebuchadnezzar realized it, it's clear to us that Daniel was on his side. He was acting as a friend.

When the people who love us confront us, this is usually the case. Most of the time, they want the best for us. Nobody enjoys conversations like these. If someone has taken the time to talk to you about something difficult, it's because they care about you. It might not feel that way. Your first reaction might be that they are out to get you. But that's usually not the case. Conversations like these are acts of love.

Nebuchadnezzar was given a chance to change. What do you do when you have chances like this? Do you recognize them? Do you respond?

Appreciate Being Humbled

We don't actually find out how Nebuchadnezzar responded to Daniel. But when we catch up with him a year later, it seems like nothing has changed. He certainly doesn't seem to have dealt with the issue of his pride.

Daniel 4:28–30—

All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar. At the end of twelve months he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, 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?"

This is a great scene. It's the queen standing before her mirror asking "who is the fairest in all the land?" It's King David, centuries earlier, walking on his roof when he should be at war and noticing a beautiful woman bathing. It's Caesar, enjoying the power of his kingdom just before Brutus assassinates him. It's us when we forget who we are and who God is.

I've been here. I've strutted around the roof of my life and marveled at the glory of my majesty. Honestly, sometimes I can be very impressed with myself. Haven't you spent moments like this, feeling like maybe you are the best?

Nebuchadnezzar had reason to be impressed. His kingdom was absolutely impressive. Babylon had two of the seven wonders of the ancient world: the hanging gardens of Babylon and the great city walls. He had conquered massive empires and managed to consolidate them fairly effectively. He must have been a brilliant military and political leader.

Even if there are reasons for it, this is a dangerous place to be. Nebuchadnezzar finds that out.

Daniel 4:31–33—

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, 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." 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.

This is one of the most bizarre stories in Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar seems to turn into an animal, literally. What is going on here?

This story seems really far-fetched. But there are some interesting supports of this story. First, there is an actual medical condition that could be what Nebuchadnezzar is experiencing. It's called "lycanthropy." It's a psychological condition where someone believes and acts as if they are an animal.

Second, there is an interesting historical account similar to what is described here. A fascinating Aramaic document called the Prayer of Nabonidus describes a king of Babylon by that name. He goes crazy for seven years, abdicates the throne during that time, and then returns after exalting the name of the Most High God. There is considerable debate about whether this account refers to Nebuchadnezzar or not, but it is at least a remarkable similarity.

At any rate, the story describes Nebuchadnezzar being humbled. From the king of the world to a beast in the field—can you imagine what it must have been like to go through that?

Some of don't have to imagine. We've experienced similar situations. Maybe not the fingernails like claws, but

the same kind of humbling. We lose a job. Our marriage falls apart. A friendship crumbles. We don't get into the school we want. Our parents mistreat us or our kids rebel. Some of us have felt like wild animals in the middle of nowhere.

How do we respond when this happens? We talked about recognizing chances to change. What about when we've run out of chances? It helps for us to see that God was at work in this moment for Nebuchadnezzar. Maybe when this happens to us, we can appreciate it. We can know that something good will come of it. Appreciate being humbled.

That is really easy to say. It's really easy to put it up on a PowerPoint slide at church and talk about how we can react when everything falls apart. But it's really hard to do. Incredibly difficult to put into practice.

Just ask Snow White. Her queen didn't exactly appreciate being humbled. In fact, she did everything in her power to destroy the person responsible for her humbling. That's a lot closer to how many of us tend to respond. How can we possibly appreciate those moments?

Everyone talks about the value of humility. Not just Christians anymore. The whole world seems to recognize that there is something great about being humble. I've heard of several businesses around here that promote humility as one of their corporate values. Politicians need to be humble if they are going to get elected. We want our movie stars to respond to fame with humility. We get mad when the famous people we worship are prideful.

If you ask the average person whether they want humility, most of them would say yes. If you ask that same person whether they want to be humiliated, most of them would immediately say no. Why? We vote for humble politicians, but not humiliated politicians. We cheer for humble athletes, but don't want them to be humiliated.

We want to be humble on our own terms. We want to be in control of our own humility. But that kind of humility is often false and manufactured. Often, times when we are brought low become chances to develop humility.

That's what happened for Nebuchadnezzar. He became too elevated. So God had to remind him what was true of himself. One of the commentators put it this way, "A man who thinks he is like a god must become a beast to learn that he is only a human being" (Fewell).¹

Sometimes we need to be reminded that we are human beings. So we can appreciate being humbled. We probably won't get there right at first. It doesn't have to

be our first response. Or even our second. But eventually, somewhere down the line, if we look for God in moments of humiliation, we will find him.

We may even find that he has been there waiting for us. Paul describes the path of Jesus in Philippians 2:6–8 like this,

[Jesus], though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Jesus was humiliated. More so than you or I have ever been. And he didn't even need it. He didn't think too highly of himself. He wasn't confused. But he suffered the worst humiliation possible.

So when we are knocked down, we can remember that Jesus is right there with us. He knows what it is like. He has suffered unjustly. Whatever it is that we experience, we can trust that Jesus has been through it. We can find comfort in his companionship. We are not the first to walk this path. We won't be the last.

Look for Transformation

The example of Jesus also teaches us the very thing that Nebuchadnezzar learned. Something good comes out of these moments.

Daniel 4:34–37—

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; 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?" 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. 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.

Nebuchadnezzar finally learned and appreciated that the Most High God is able to humble those who walk in pride. This is the last we hear of Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel. His story ends on a positive note. Along with Daniel, I think we find ourselves liking this guy. We have seen him go through a lot. In each of his four stories, he seems to realize more and more about the Most High God. It may or may not be the case that he started actually worshipping uniquely the God of Israel. But he has gotten pretty close.

That is so encouraging because it gives us hope for transformation. The king of Babylon has grown to recognize the God of Israel. That's like Coke and Pepsi. Windows and Mac. Giants and the Dodgers. Who could have ever foreseen this?

Stories like this give us hope that real change is possible. Things don't have to stay the way they are. People change, sometimes dramatically. God can work powerfully in the hearts of anyone to bring about change. We can look for God to work through these kinds of situations. We can look for transformation.

This is true in our own lives. Sometimes we feel stuck where we are. Life just keeps on going and we don't know exactly how we got to where we are. We don't like it, but we don't seem to be able to do anything different either. Don't underestimate the power of God to transform you. It may not be easy. It may involve some humbling or even some humiliation. But all of it is motivated by love.

We can look for transformation in our own lives, but we can also look for change in the world around us. Think of how this story must have felt to Jews living under Greek rule in the second century BC. Nebuchadnezzar makes the people that are in charge of your kingdom look like weaklings. They have nothing on him. So if God could transform the powerful king of Babylon, what could he do in your day and age?

If Nebuchadnezzar could change, then maybe the Greek leaders could change. Maybe Roman emperors could change. Maybe Silicon Valley engineers and entrepreneurs could change. Maybe there is no limit to who God can change.

That's an encouraging thought.

It's easy to become pessimistic about the culture that we live in. It's easy to look around and say that the church can't possibly change things. After all, people have heard about Jesus. They know about Christianity. Many of them have already walked away. Those that haven't think

religion is outdated and irrelevant at best, dangerous and destructive at worst. Jesus seems quaint and kind, but his followers seem ridiculous. How could this area ever see people coming to faith in Jesus? People don't really change that much.

But if Nebuchadnezzar could change, maybe anyone can.

That's one of the things that I've appreciated about being part of this movement called *Transforming the Bay with Christ*. It has helped to remind me that God can work in powerful ways in our area. Even in the Silicon Valley. If God can change Nebuchadnezzar, God can change anyone.

Do you believe that? Do you believe the gospel of Jesus Christ can transform the Bay Area? Think about the people that you interact with on a daily basis. The people that fill up your kingdom of man. Do you believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ can transform them?

One of the ways that we help each other to look for transformation is by sharing our stories. I grew up going to church. My faith hasn't always been strong, but it's always been there. So sometimes I forget that people change, that people come to faith. Sometimes I don't look for transformation because my own was so gradual.

But when I hear stories of God working in amazing ways, that reminds me that everyone's process is different. That's why it is so important to tell each other when we see God. Our stories encourage us. We need to hear them if we're going to look for transformation and be hopeful about our culture.

Conclusion

The queen was the fairest of them all. Her mirror reassured her of that. But she still wasn't happy. Because being at the top meant there was nowhere to go but down. It meant that she had to expend all her effort to hold onto her position. That's what she tried to do, but it didn't work. She didn't recognize anything, didn't appreciate anything, and certainly wasn't transformed.

I wonder what happened when Snow White stopped being the fairest in the land. We're never told that story. How did she respond? We'd like to think she accepted it gracefully.

Most of us have some kind of competitive drive. We want to be the best at something. Occasionally, my children will tell me that I'm the best father in the whole world. That's a really kind thing to say and I appreciate it, but it's a very confrontational statement. It means that all you other fathers out there who are trying—you are only fighting for second best.

What do we do when we realize we aren't the best? when we see that we are unique individuals, created in God's image, who struggle with sin, accept God's forgiveness, and are gradually growing in relationship to Him? What do we do when we realize that none of us are all that? But that God, along with many of the people in our lives, loves us and values us.

How do we respond when we are humbled? When someone we love warns us about our decisions? When we are brought low and everything falls apart? When we've been humiliated or left alone?

We can recognize the chance to change. We can appreciate what God does when we are humbled. And we can look for transformation: in ourselves and in the world around us.

And we can share these stories with others. Along with Nebuchadnezzar, we can celebrate and proclaim that "the Most High God is able to humble those who walk in pride." Even if that's us.

NOTES

¹Danna Nolan Fewell, *Circle of Sovereignty* (Abingdon Press, 1991) p. 72.