

Daniel Series Part 9

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[0 : 0 0] Heaven rules. This is the big truth of the book of Daniel. It is the big truth that we are to be struck by and pondered on as we are confronted very particularly with Nebuchadnezzar's dream that we've read again and its interpretation. It's the big truth that Nebuchadnezzar himself was challenged with as he tossed and turned on a long and disturbing night in his palace in Babylon. And as we noted last week, Nebuchadnezzar relates to this big truth that heaven rules in three ways, or certainly in three ways that we have identified and are considering. First of all, Nebuchadnezzar attempts to resist the truth. That is what we were thinking about last Sunday morning.

He resists the truth that heaven rules, and he does so in a number of ways. We also noted that he, in due course, experiences the truth of heaven's rule, and that will be our concern this morning.

And then next Sunday, God willing, we'll consider Nebuchadnezzar as he proclaims the truth of heaven's rule. God will not take no for an answer. Nebuchadnezzar resisted the truth of heaven's rule.

He resisted the truth that heaven rules as it was declared to him in his first dream. He resisted the truth as it was played out before his very eyes in the fiery furnace. And he resisted the truth that heaven rules as it was declared to him in his latest dream of this cosmic tree that is then felled by the heavenly lumberjack. He resists the clear message, the clear truth that is being presented to him by God. But his resistance will be broken. God will not take no for an answer. His resistance will be broken as God forcibly and irresistibly demonstrates his rule in the very life of Nebuchadnezzar.

And Nebuchadnezzar experiences the rule of God in two contrasting and yet connected experiences of God in his own life. God casts him down and God lifts him up. Two experiences of God. As I say, they are very much connected, but they are two distinct experiences of God's rule in the life of Nebuchadnezzar, being cast down by God, being cast down and being lifted up by God. Both are acts of divine sovereignty.

[3 : 2 2] Both demonstrate the divine prerogative to cast down and to lift up. True of kings, as the Bible explicitly states, but true of all men, whatever our station in life. So, we want to think of these two experiences of God, of God's rule in the life of Nebuchadnezzar. First of all, Nebuchadnezzar is cast down by God. We've read there in chapter 4 of Daniel and from verse 29 the description of this experience. Nebuchadnezzar declares, Is not this the great Babylon I have built as my royal residence?

And then we read, The words were still on his lips when a voice came from heaven. This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar. And what follows is a description of how he is cast down in this very bizarre and disturbing way. And of course, Nebuchadnezzar's experience is by any measure a very strange one.

And yet, though it is strange, though we might describe it as bizarre, it is not random nor inexplicable. And we can examine this experience of Nebuchadnezzar, this experience of being cast down. We can examine it. And I want us to examine it in the following way. First of all, I want us to notice the cause of his breakdown. I should say that in the course of the sermon, I'll use language in a layman's way in referring to what might be considered a case of mental health breakdown.

Now, I'm a layman. I don't intend to, nor would I be equipped to consider this from that perspective of a mental health professional. So, when I use the language of sanity and breakdown and no doubt other words will be used, I'm using them as a layman. So, that's, I suppose, a caveat or an explanation as we proceed. But as I say, we can examine this experience of Nebuchadnezzar in this way, the cause of his breakdown, the experience itself, and also the purpose of his breakdown, the purpose of him being cast down by God. Well, let's think of these things. First of all, the cause. Verses 30 and 31, we've read them twice now, even this morning, so we won't read them again. But these verses identify two actors whose actions are or have a causal effect resulting in Nebuchadnezzar's breakdown.

Firstly, Nebuchadnezzar himself and his proud boast, is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty? Here is a man consumed and blinded by a sense of his own self-importance. I say blinded as he is evidently quite incapable of recognizing that his boast is not only jarring but manifestly false. Even at a, you might say, a rather trivial level, though not for the people involved, I'm sure the laborers on his multiple building sites would have had reason to believe that they were worthy of some recognition in the building of Babylon.

[7 : 12] As Nebuchadnezzar declares, this is the great Babylon I have built. I can't imagine he did much brick making or brick laying in the whole enterprise. But no, Nebuchadnezzar considers him the sole man responsible and certainly the one worthy of all praise and glory. More importantly, Nebuchadnezzar completely fails to recognize that his wealth and power, indeed his capacity to do what he has done, are God-given. And it is to God that he must render the glory. So, Nebuchadnezzar's sinful pride is presented to us very clearly as a cause of his loss of sanity, of his madness, of his breakdown, whatever language we choose to use. But there is, of course, a second actor, God himself. We are also told very clearly that God is involved. God is the one who casts down. The pride of Nebuchadnezzar can be identified as a cause. But even beyond that, the primary responsible actor in Nebuchadnezzar being cast down is the one who casts him down, God himself. We've read in verse 31 of this voice from heaven interrupting this monologue of Nebuchadnezzar as Nebuchadnezzar seemingly speaks to himself in great satisfaction at all that he is able to see in front of him. And he's interrupted. He's interrupted by this voice from heaven. And the voice pronounces solemnly, to you it is spoken. To you it is spoken.

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. And it goes on and on. And so God is identified as the one who is the cause of Nebuchadnezzar being cast down. He is the one who casts Nebuchadnezzar down.

God intervenes personally and directly and brings to effect the announced judgment on Nebuchadnezzar. God casts him down. God delivers him into this state of madness.

What about you? I imagine nobody would be able to identify with such a bizarre experience. This is, in some regards, a very unique example, a very vivid and dramatic example of pride that we are not afraid of. It is not pride on an obscene level. And yet, is not pride the sin that we are all guilty of? Is it not the mother of all sins? Is it not true that as we identify the different ways in which we sin against God, when we dig a little deeper, we can identify that behind it is this sin of pride? We know better. God says that we ought not to behave in such a way, but we know better. God says that this is what we ought to do, but we know better. And so, in a sense, like Nebuchadnezzar, we look to live our lives as we see fit. We look around us and take satisfaction in all that we have achieved, not on the scale as we have portrayed for us here, but not so different to Nebuchadnezzar. We too sin in our self-sufficiency, unwilling to recognize that heaven rules, unwilling to bow the knee before King Jesus, the one who has been offered to us as our King and as our Lord and as our Savior. What does this experience of Nebuchadnezzar say to us? Well, it certainly says this, don't mess with God. Don't mess with God.

God is not one to be messed with. Nebuchadnezzar resisted God. He messed with God, and this is the consequence for him. He is cast down by God, the cause. But let's think for a moment also of the experience itself that is presented for us here. Now, as I've already made the point, I am not a mental health professional, and so cannot examine it from that perspective. I think it's a mute point whether what we have here is a recognizable mental illness. It may be.

[12 : 08] Equally, it may not be. I simply don't know. But I think we can examine the experience of Nebuchadnezzar from the perspective of Nebuchadnezzar's own spiritual condition, and also, and it is related from the perspective of the theological significance of Nebuchadnezzar's loss of reason, because I believe there is a significance to it. It's not simply a random act of judgment on the part of God.

First of all, then, examining his experiences from the perspective of Nebuchadnezzar's own spiritual state. It seems reasonable to suggest that Nebuchadnezzar's breakdown is related to his own self-perception of his spiritual state and associated guilt. If I can unpack that a little or try and explain that a little. Last week, for those who were here, you'll remember that I suggested that the first half of the dream that speaks in very glowing terms of Nebuchadnezzar is this great cosmic tree providing for all the living, that the first part of the dream reflected Nebuchadnezzar's own self-perception, his delusions of grandeur. Though in a measure true, nonetheless, it reflects his own perception of himself. And I wonder if the second part of the dream, though it may seem less likely that it would do so, but I wonder if the second part does not also relate to his own self-perception. In a complex and in a darker way, but reflects his own perhaps suppressed self-perception. Nebuchadnezzar, in the dark and hidden recesses of his own soul, knew that he was in the wrong, and God's voice of judgment acts like a trigger in Nebuchadnezzar's mind and conscience, and his guilt bursts forth in this strange and yet revealing fashion. As Nebuchadnezzar becomes externally for all to see what he knew himself to be internally, he had become bestial.

He wasn't the man he was meant to be. He had lost the dignity that he was intended to have, created just below the angels, as we'll go down to notice in a moment. He had lost that in great measure. Not absolutely, clearly not from what follows, but there is a sense in which he was not where he was meant to be, and he becomes visibly, disturbingly on the outside what he already was on the inside. Let me just think of that for a moment. What a frightening thought it is for us if what was inside were visible on the outside. Just imagine that for a moment. It's a very unpleasant thing to do. Imagine for a moment if everything that was inside you could be seen on the outside. What a dreadful thing that would be. Would we not want the proverbial earth to open up and swallow us if that were so?

And yet there's a sense in this is what happens in Nebuchadnezzar. All the rottenness of the inside becomes visible in this way on the outside. And so the experience reflects his own spiritual condition in this dramatic way. But the experience also does have, and I've already kind of hinted at it, a theological significance. God's judgment on Nebuchadnezzar takes the form of a change from human to animal, certainly to animal behavior. He doesn't become an animal, but he becomes like an animal. He behaves like an animal. And I think this is significant theologically, if you wish. We've sung in Psalm 8, and we can just think about it for a brief moment because I think Psalm 8 does guide us in this matter. Psalm 8, and in verse 5 in particular, just to remind you of what we've already sung and what it says about humankind and our place in the divine scheme of things. What do we read there? The psalmist tells us, you made him, that is, man, humankind, mankind. You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings, a little lower than the angels, and crowned him with glory and honor. And then it says, you made him rule over the works of your hands. So you see, you can visualize this. Where do we fit in in God's scheme of things? Well, we're in the middle, as it were. We're below the angels, but we're above the animal kingdom. That is where God intends us to be. And where we remain in that place, we are intended to be all as well. But what is the problem with Nebuchadnezzar? Nebuchadnezzar is not content to be where God had placed him. He doesn't want to be looking up to God in dependence.

By all means, we must look up to God in worship and in recognition of his authority. But Nebuchadnezzar doesn't want to look up to God in that way. He wants to be above God.

[17 : 29] And what happens when Nebuchadnezzar tries to usurp his station, as it were? Well, we see the consequences of this foolishness, that privileged place that he and we have been granted, that capacity to know God. That capacity to know God and to rule over the earth as God's representatives. That is what we are meant to do. And that is what Nebuchadnezzar fails to do.

And when he and when we refuse to look up to God as we ought, when we limit ourselves to looking around and to looking at ourselves and to consider ourselves to be at the top of the pile, then in time we become like those we look down upon. Indeed, we become lower than the beasts.

The beasts behave as beasts because that's what they're intended to do. God created them to behave in that way. They should not be criticized for that. But when we behave like beasts, then we behave in a way that we would have never intended to behave. And so, Nebuchadnezzar's experience reminds us of the folly of not recognizing and not gladly accepting the place that God has given us in his creation. It is a dignified and an honorable place and one that we should be rejoicing in recognizing and in occupying.

Something then of Nebuchadnezzar's experience. And by any measure, it is a dreadful experience, which leads us to the third aspect of this. And that is, why did it occur? Not in the sense of the cause, but in the sense of the purpose. What is the purpose of Nebuchadnezzar's experience?

Well, we've already identified God as being the one responsible in the first instance for inflicting this experience on Nebuchadnezzar. And maybe in even saying that, there would be those who might have difficulty or might protest. Why would God do such a thing? What kind of God would treat Nebuchadnezzar in such a way, however rebellious he was? How could God do that? I can't believe in that kind of God.

[19 : 56] Well, such a question, though understandable, betrays a failure to understand the purpose behind Nebuchadnezzar's experience, a purpose that is explicitly stated for us in verse 25, where we read that the purpose is that you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes. You see, the purpose of Nebuchadnezzar's affliction was a gracious purpose. It was to bring Nebuchadnezzar back to the place where he ought to be. God wants the best for Nebuchadnezzar. He doesn't want him to live a prisoner of his own self-delusion. He doesn't want him to suffer the ultimate consequences of such folly. He wants to bring him to where he should be. Now, the means that he uses, the means that are necessary, the means that he determines are dramatic and disturbing and painful for Nebuchadnezzar, but they have a gracious purpose. They are graciously inflicted on him.

And that is something that we do well to remember in our own afflictions. And for a moment, I'm not suggesting that all of our afflictions come into the same category as the one suffered or endured by Nebuchadnezzar. But the general principle remains a valid one, that we do well to ask ourselves the question, what are God's purposes in the midst of my pain and affliction and difficulties, whatever they might be? So, Nebuchadnezzar, in the first place, experiences being cast down by God.

But we also want to notice, more briefly, his second experience of God's rule, and that is him being lifted up. We've already just noted that this was the purpose of him being cast down, that he would be then lifted up. And as we consider this second sovereign act of God in Nebuchadnezzar's experience, we can delve just a little deeper by posing three questions of the experience. When it occurs, how it occurs, and what happens. First of all, when does it happen?

We're told that in verse 34, at the end of that time. There doesn't seem much in those words that introduce Nebuchadnezzar being lifted up, being raised up again. And yet in these words, there is a truth to grasp hold of, at the end of that time, or at the end of the days. In other words, at the time appointed by God. We don't know how long he suffered this affliction that is referenced to seven periods.

Some understand it to be seven years, seven seasons, seven days. We simply don't know. But for our purposes, the important thing to stress is that it reaches its conclusion. And Nebuchadnezzar is lifted up at the time appointed by God. As God had cast him down, so God sovereignly lifts him up at the very time that he determines to do so. This is when it happens. But how does it happen? Or as a result of what is Nebuchadnezzar lifted up and restored to sanity? But we have the words of Nebuchadnezzar there in verse 34, at the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes towards heaven.

[23 : 42] I raised my eyes towards heaven. This is what results in Nebuchadnezzar's return to sanity.

He lifts up his eyes to heaven. And this should not be understood so much as a cry for help. We might think of it in those terms. Oh, he's afflicted, he's suffering, and so he looks up to heaven and cries for help. But this is not the main import of this looking up to heaven. Not so much a cry for help as a recognition of God's rule. This is the importance of these words of Nebuchadnezzar or the action that they describe. He raised his eyes towards heaven, finally recognizing that heaven rules. This was the purpose of his affliction, and the purpose had been fulfilled. He recognized God's rule. Nebuchadnezzar, finally, and thanks to God's gracious act of judgment, is brought to the place he was created for, the place of humble and liberating recognition that heaven rules.

Now, while it is true, as we are stressing, that Nebuchadnezzar's lifting of his eyes to heaven is in response to God's irresistible grace in bringing him, kicking and screaming to his knees, it is nonetheless something that Nebuchadnezzar has to do and that Nebuchadnezzar does. He must lift up his eyes to heaven as an act of unqualified surrender to the God of heaven, an act of surrender that far from being a humiliating experience is a redemptive one for Nebuchadnezzar. And so he lifts up his eyes to heaven and his reason is returned to him. What about us? What about you? Are we often too proud to lift up our eyes to heaven? Too afraid of what may happen as we also engage in this act of unqualified surrender to the God of heaven? This is what Nebuchadnezzar had to do, and this is what Nebuchadnezzar, by God's grace, was enabled to do. If God is humbling you, what must you do? Well, you must lift up your eyes to heaven. When does it happen? How does it happen? But finally, what happens when he does lift up his eyes to heaven? We're told, I raised my eyes towards heaven and my sanity was restored. It's quite a remarkable statement that we have here. For sanity to be restored, Nebuchadnezzar needed to discover who he was and where he was meant to be in God's order. For sanity to be restored, Nebuchadnezzar had to recognize he was but a creature subject to his Creator. For sanity to be restored, Nebuchadnezzar had to submit gladly, and I imagine with a huge sense of relief to God's authority to heaven's rule. And when he does, my reason returned to me.

But there is a further revealing feature to this return to sanity, and that is how his sanity or his return to sanity is evidenced. How might we have imagined, or how might we imagine that you would be able to recognize that Nebuchadnezzar had his reason restored? Well, we might imagine, well, his loss of reason was accompanied by very visible evidence of it. You know, he's crawling around in the grass and eating the grass like the cattle of the field.

You know, his hair like the feathers of an eagle, his nails like the claws of a bird. That was the visible evidence of his loss of reason. We might say, well, what is the visible evidence of his return to reason? Well, all of these things would no longer be true. He would act once again in a reasonable way like a normal human being, and no doubt he did.

[28 : 14] No doubt he did. But the evidence that we are given in the passage, the evidence that reason has returned to the return is, I think, hugely significant. What is the evidence we are given? Well, what are we told immediately after being told that his sanity was restored? My sanity was restored, and I praised the Most High. I think it would be more helpful, really, if there wasn't a full stop there and the start of a new sentence. Rather, my sanity was restored, and I praised.

You see the connection. Sanity is evidenced by the praise of God. Reason is evidenced by acknowledging and worshiping God. Nebuchadnezzar worships God, and there is no greater evidence of sanity, of a sound mind, than worshiping the living and true God. We ought not to be intimidated by the secular propaganda that would identify belief with emotional or mental weakness, that would qualify worship, what we're doing this morning as we gather here, as irrational. The reverse is the case. To worship God is the most reasonable thing a man or a woman can do.

We're reminded of the words of Paul in his letter to the Romans, in Romans chapter 12 and verse 1. What do we read?

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies, your lives, as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. This is your spiritual or reasonable act of worship. For you to hand over your God in unqualified submission is not evidence of losing your mind. Rather, it is evidence of sanity.

It is evidence of a sound mind. It is the reasonable thing to do for us as creatures who are invited by a loving God to come to Him and to trust in Him and to be part of His family as He provides us the opportunity to do so. And so I ask you this morning, do you worship God? Do you worship His Son, Jesus Christ?

[30 : 37] Do you worship the One who was sent into this world that He might die on Calvary's tree in your place for your sins, that you might be forgiven, that you might be welcomed into the family of God as you put your trust in Him? Worshiping God begins as we recognize who we really are. We recognize that we are creatures, that we are sinful creatures, and as we recognize that God has provided one who can answer the problem of our sin, the one who can provide forgiveness for our sin, His Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Nebuchadnezzar experienced the truth that heaven rules. He experienced it as he was cast down by God, and he experienced it as he was lifted up by God. May we also know what it is to experience God's rule as He would when He sees it necessary cast us down, but also, and with this intent and this purpose that He would then lift us up, lift us up to this place, the place that we were created to be in, the place of humble recognition of heaven's rule, the place of worshiping the living and true God.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father,