

Daniel 4

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[0 : 0 0] I very much appreciate the opportunity to be with you this evening, and I'm also very thankful for your generous hospitality, both to myself just in the time that I've been here, but also to my younger sister, who I love very dearly, although we had quite a number of spats in our younger years.

We've grown to love each other, and it's so good to know that she is well cared for, and I definitely have the sense that you all have welcomed her into your family, as well as Jesse and the kids, and I'm very grateful for that.

I appreciate it so much. Tonight, I want to speak on the topic of Nebuchadnezzar, and the title of my message is Keeping Your Sanity in an Insane World, and as you heard from the reading, we're going to be focusing on Nebuchadnezzar, and Nebuchadnezzar is an interesting character in the scripture.

He is often a secondary character, Daniel being the primary focus of the text, usually as it is preached, but today I want to speak on Nebuchadnezzar and focus on his life, and perhaps we can glean some helpful, valuable, and I think very practical information from a very traumatic, very humiliating experience that King Nebuchadnezzar faced that ultimately changed his entire life.

Before I do that, I want to describe a little bit about what I do as a psychiatrist. Usually when I introduce myself as a psychiatrist, I get any number of reactions, some of them good, some of them not so good, but in a nutshell, as a psychiatrist, I work with individuals who are in a great deal of suffering.

[1 : 4 8] And I believe as people who are broken by the fall, who are tainted by sin, that tainting is not just of a spiritual nature, although of course that is extremely important, but when we were cursed, as it were, through Adam and Eve, that tainting spread out across all of our humanity.

And that involves not just our spiritual relationships, but our physical relationships. Our bodies physically began to wither away.

Our minds and the way we think and the way we interpret things were impacted and affected. And so this tainting spreads throughout our entire essence as humanity, and that's why when we teach people about their sinfulness, it's not just that they are acting in a sinful way, it is that the essence of who they are as a person is sin.

And we've all been tainted by it. And when I see clients in my office, I recognize that they are broken people, just as I am a broken person.

And I may not perhaps be experiencing that brokenness in the same way that they are, and yet we have a commonality because of that brokenness, and yet also the possibility of a great hope of redemption.

[3 : 1 5] And some of the clients that I see can be quite fascinating and also quite challenging, particularly in regard to how we understand our faith and how it plays out in our lives.

I think there are many of us who get into the habit of believing that if we just pray hard enough, if we just have tremendous faith that God will rid us of all of our problems, all of our stresses, all of the things that we face in life, and even all of our physical illnesses.

In the States, we call that the health and wealth gospel. And there are many who have made great deals of money within the church by preaching this, what I believe is a false gospel that says, all you need is the faith, and God will bless you with riches, he'll bless you with great health.

And of course, we don't experience that. Oftentimes, it is through the trials in our lives, it's through the pain and the suffering that we face that we are drawn deeper into our relationship with God.

And one of the things that I do as a psychiatrist, but as a Christian, is I work hard to help distinguish between those illnesses of the brain and those trials and struggles that are of a spiritual nature.

[4 : 39] And oftentimes, they manifest themselves in ways that we wouldn't expect. For example, I have a woman who came to my office, who I have been treating, who had brain surgery.

She developed a meningioma right in her frontal lobes, which, if you've studied the brain, you know that the frontal lobes are the executive decision-making parts of your brain, where we sort of discern our emotions and our feelings and then act upon them in a deliberate way.

And when she had this surgery, what I believe happened was that she had some of the nerves in her nose damaged as a result of the surgery. And so when she came out of surgery, she had this very distinct taste and smell that was foreign to her.

And we know when nerves are damaged, you can often sense a burning sensation or smell. And she was very disturbed emotionally by this bizarre, odd taste.

And what ended up happening was she had to develop a reason or an explanation for where this smell was coming from in order for her to feel comfortable.

[5 : 53] And so what she came to conclude was, I think that I have an infection. So, like most people, she went back to the doctor and she said, there is something wrong here.

I can't explain it. I don't know what it is, but I think it may be an infection. Can you help me? And the doctor, of course, said, well, we can run some tests. And he drew her blood and there was no evidence of an infection.

But he went ahead and proactively treated her with an antibiotic just to be safe. And so, of course, she went home taking the antibiotic, thinking that it was going to be helpful to her.

And the smell didn't go away. So she had gotten the sense in her mind that it was an infection, so it must be an infection that is not easily treated.

So she went back to the doctor and the doctor said, I'm sorry, there's nothing else I can do. So what did she do? She decided to go to another doctor who might be able to help her more.

[6 : 50] Why? Because she was now convinced this explanation for her suffering was making sense to her. And so she was seeking out help that she thought was going to make her better.

And as you might imagine, this, what we would describe as a delusion, began to grow within her mind. And the more she engaged her environment and the more she held firmly to this belief that she had this chronic, untreatable infection, the more it began to permeate her entire life and her existence such that she began to think that the doctors were covering up a mistake that they had made.

And that maybe she should take legal action in order to get the help that she desired. So she went to several lawyers. And of course, the lawyers who had no idea what she was truly suffering from reinforced the delusion by exploring the medical records and helping her to discern whether or not a mistake had been made.

And of course, eventually, the lawyers got to the point where they put their hands up in the air and said, we have no idea what to do. And so she went to her minister and talked to her minister.

And the minister was confused. He didn't know what was going on. And so he tried to help her through it. And gradually, over time, she began to develop this delusion to the point where she actually believed now that someone had been hired to follow her around.

[8 : 20] And in the event that she did decide to sue, they were going to be monitoring her every activity so they would have something against her in the event of her taking legal action.

And so when she finally came to my office to see me, it had been 10 years of suffering under this belief system.

And when we define a delusional disorder, we define it as a fixed false belief. And it is something that is impermeable to logic and to reason.

And the more you try to argue with someone, the point that this is fabricated, this is not true, the harder and the stronger they grasp onto it because it's become a part of their life.

And if you try to take it away, you're taking something most precious from them. I describe it often like a pearl that develops in the mouth of a clam.

[9 : 22] How does that happen? Well, a small irritant, maybe a small grain of sand, gets stuck inside the clam. And then what happens? The clam begins to secrete a smooth coating to rid itself of the irritant.

But it doesn't work entirely and so it has to keep secreting and secreting this coat and it becomes this very beautiful pearl. And of course, when you try to remove it, you are now taking that which is most precious from the pearl.

And so interestingly enough, though we would diagnose this woman with a psychiatric illness and in essence say that she was struggling with insanity, her reality was very different from yours and mine, we would say that there was hope for her.

Why might we say that? Well, because it is my belief that the power of God can reach into any reality. And that when the scripture says that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, that nothing is even the realities that may be completely within the context of our own mind.

And her reality was one of great suffering and great pain. But you want to know what was fascinating to me? Is that this woman was a believer in Christ.

[10 : 49] And she had gotten saved when she was very young. And after the surgery, when she came through that surgery, Christ was with her. And what I have come to discover in my work, both in the Christian realm and in the realm of psychiatry, is there are times when God delivers us from the pain of our present reality and places us in a new reality.

But there are also times where Christ steps into the reality where we are and walks with us through it. As he did when he came to earth, and as the book of Hebrews says, He has suffered the things that we suffer so we have a great high priest who can fully identify with the reality of our humanness and minister to us in our suffering.

And this woman's faith has been absolutely incredible to witness. She finds great strength and great courage in her relationship with Christ.

She knows that ultimately God will give her victory over her circumstances. Even though she doesn't fully realize what those circumstances are.

And when she spends time in prayer and she spends time meditating on the scriptures, she finds a sense of courage and strength that can only be found in Christ.

[12 : 18] And the reason I tell you that story is because I think all of us, to a certain extent, greater or lesser, struggle with a little bit of insanity.

And you may be resistant to that at first until I define to you what I believe the true definition of insanity is. And that is this. If you want to be sane as a person, you need something very important.

It starts with a right understanding of yourself in relation to God and to others. True sanity is a right understanding of self in relation to God and to others.

And I find often that we have a certain perspective about ourselves and our circumstances that can often be distorted. And we need a proper understanding.

We need someone to come into our lives and help us to see what true reality is in the context of a relationship with Christ. And when we do that, we experience the fullness of a sane, healthy life.

[13 : 34] It doesn't mean we are always completely rid of our suffering. I treat many believers who still go through depression. They face extreme anxiety.

They face diagnoses like bipolar disorder and schizophrenia and, as in the circumstances of this lady, delusional disorders as a result of a true physiological change that has taken place in their brain.

And yet God has the power and the ability to bring truth into their world, as he does for us.

And so my question to you tonight, as we look at this man, Nebuchadnezzar, is what is your struggle? What are you in the midst of? And what is your perspective on your suffering?

What is your perspective on yourself in the midst of your suffering? The perspective of God as you go through your trials and how you see him in the midst of your suffering.

[14 : 42] And I'd like to give you some practical things that you can use in your day-to-day life, even this week, to have that proper perspective, to give you true sanity in your existence and ultimately victory over the pain in your life.

You know, often there's the expression that perception is reality. Well, I don't agree with that. I don't believe that to be true. I believe there is an absolute reality that is defined by our creator God.

But what I do believe is that your perception of reality can define you. And so I would ask all of us to challenge ourselves as we look at Nebuchadnezzar to ask ourselves, what is my reality and how am I allowing it to define my existence, my life, and my day-to-day activities?

So let's look at Daniel chapter 4 and see what happens to this man. Reading in verse 1, it says, King Nebuchadnezzar, this is obviously a letter or a proclamation that King Nebuchadnezzar is making to the people, and it's actually a letter to all of the nations that were under the Babylonian kingdom at the time.

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 that the Most High God has performed for me.

[16 : 18] That is probably one of the most profound statements in Scripture. And it strikes me so greatly because of what happens to Nebuchadnezzar.

And here he is saying, it is my pleasure to tell you what happened in my life. Why would it be King Nebuchadnezzar's pleasure to talk about probably one of the most humiliating circumstances of his entire existence?

And yet he wants to tell people about it. It's fascinating. We will understand why, hopefully, by the end of this message. Let's take a step back a little bit and look at King Nebuchadnezzar and who he actually was before we jump to who he became as a result of his suffering.

If you read through the text, the entire first four chapters of Daniel, you realize that King Nebuchadnezzar was a fascinating character. First and foremost, he was extremely powerful.

In fact, the Babylonian kingdom during that day was the most powerful kingdom that had ever existed up until that point. And Nebuchadnezzar was the king of that entire kingdom.

[17 : 37] And as many kingdoms during that time, Nebuchadnezzar had absolute power. He was essentially like a god king.

He was worshipped as a king. And so he had this absolute power that allowed him to do whatever he pleased. And people had to fall before him and his will.

And you would think that because he has all this power, he would be a happy person. But as you read the text, you realize he was not.

In fact, Nebuchadnezzar was a very troubled man. If you read in chapter 2, you read that in the second year of King Nebuchadnezzar's reign, so very early on in his reign, he had dreams.

And the text says that there was not just one dream. It wasn't just he woke up in the middle of the night one night. But he was having series of dreams.

[18 : 42] He was struggling with these dreams for an extended period of time. And it says his mind was troubled and he could not sleep.

I wonder if any of us have ever been there before. Facing the stress of life and we are troubled so greatly that something as natural as sleep that you think should come easily when you're fatigued and you're tossing and turning in your bed and your mind cannot shut down because of the anxieties and the stress of life.

That's where Nebuchadnezzar was at this point. He was troubled by dreams. He was extremely stressed. And if you go back and you study the history, King Nebuchadnezzar's father was actually the man who had conquered the Assyrians who were the most powerful kingdom before Babylon.

And his father created this vast empire that Nebuchadnezzar then had to step into and he had some very large shoes to fill. And when you read the history books, you realize that during that time, the kingdom became so vast that the outlying communities began to rebel.

And so there was a lot of infighting and battles and rebellions taking place that Nebuchadnezzar was responsible to quell and put down. And it was a stressful experience.

[20 : 14] And we see the result of that stress because Nebuchadnezzar was very rageful.

And often when we face tremendous anxiety in life, when we are stressed, some of you would raise your hand if I asked you to. I'm not asking you to. But you would say, I have the tendency when I'm stressed to lose my temper, to get angry, to be irritated.

We have a term in the psychiatric world that we displace our anger. We use displacement. So if my boss yells at me, what am I going to do?

I'm not going to yell at the boss because I could lose my job, right? So what do I do? I go home and I yell at my wife. And I accuse her of something.

And then what does she do? She turns around and yells at the kids because she's frustrated. And then the kids go and kick the dog. And so we displace our anger and emotions and we turn it on others and we lose our temper.

[21 : 19] We lose control. And that's exactly what King Nebuchadnezzar experienced to an extreme. You can imagine the most powerful man in all the earth having explosive rage and the destruction that it caused.

So much so that as a result of these dreams that Nebuchadnezzar was having, he called all his wise men together and he said, not only do I want you to interpret my dream, but I can't even remember the dream.

I'm so stressed out. So you tell me the dream and then you interpret it for me. And here's the thing. If you don't, I will kill every single one of you. You can imagine the fear that these men experienced.

And ultimately they tried to reason with him and his rage became so great that he was completely irrational in his anger and he literally started to have these wise men slaughtered.

And it wasn't until somebody basically ran to Daniel and said, look, these men are coming for you. You're on the chopping block. You're going to be killed. You better do something.

[22 : 26] That Daniel went to the king and said, I think I can help out. And he interprets King Nebuchadnezzar's first dream. So this man was extremely troubled.

He was explosive. He was irrational. And they were frightened. Frightened to death. But we see something very interesting because as you read through Nebuchadnezzar's life, you see that he calmed down a little bit as he got older and as he began to quell the rebellions and establish a kingdom for himself, maybe fill the boots, fill the shoes that he was trying to fill.

He tells us in chapter 4 that he was at home in his palace, verse 4, contented and prosperous. Something changed.

For Nebuchadnezzar. And all of a sudden, that rage, that nervous anxiety transitioned into a pride that often comes when we get into a position of complacency, when we are prospering, when all is going well, we sit back and we think, ah, look at all that I've done.

You know, all that stuff that I was going through, yeah, I had it all together all along. I'm in control. I know what I'm doing. And that pride, that arrogance, sets in to begin to start believing you're something that you're really not.

[23 : 54] And it's interesting that Nebuchadnezzar's life is bookended by dreams. He has this dream early on in his reign, and then in the latter part of his reign, when he's ready and hoping that he can sit down and relax in the prosperity and the power that he has, another dream pops into his life.

And we see that he experiences, as a result of his dream, a humility that transforms his life. One other point that I want you to recognize here is what was that experience?

It wasn't just a dream. And we can tell that because of something that is very subtle in the text. But as you read through the passages, you see Nebuchadnezzar always referring to the God of Israel as being a God other than his own.

When he talks to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and he witnesses this powerful, miraculous event where the Son of God is walking with these three men in the fire, what does he notice?

He says, your God has delivered you. But something happens to Nebuchadnezzar where this God that he knows becomes his God.

[25 : 14] And it's through tremendous suffering that God's power and that personal relationship develops. In verse 34, I'm jumping ahead and giving you the punchline here.

In verse 34, after Nebuchadnezzar comes out of his madness, he says, at the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven and my sanity was restored.

Then I praised the Most High God. 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? At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honor and splendor were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom.

[26 : 25] And my advisors and nobles sought me out and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before. But here's the catch. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of Heaven.

Because everything he does is right. This is a man who just spent seven seasons, we don't know exactly how long that is, but it was a long time, a great deal of suffering to be completely insane, and yet he says everything he does is right.

And all his ways are just. If that is not a testimony of a changed man, I don't know what is.

And those who walk in pride, he is able to humble. You see, sometimes I think that we need to go through suffering in order to develop that proper perspective that ultimately brings sanity into our lives.

You see, Nebuchadnezzar's insanity did not start the moment he was cursed and sent out into the wilderness to be like an animal eating grass and covered by the dew, and that's often what we think about when we think about an insane person, right?

[27 : 59] We think about those scary stories that we hear about the psychiatric wards with all these crazy people wandering around, clawing at the walls and screaming out to unintelligible things, and that's our definition of insanity, when in reality there may be someone sitting here today who is suffering from insanity because they have an improper understanding about who they are in the context of their relationship with God and who they can be to other people.

and they may look like us, they may talk like us, they may feel like us, and yet be in the midst of the deepest insanity possible because their perspective is wrong.

That's where Nebuchadnezzar was, and that's what God took him out of. And so how do we change our perspective?

I wish I could spend time talking to every single one of you today to hear your story. That's what I love about my job, what I do as a psychiatrist is I love to learn about people and to hear their stories, and yes, it's difficult, it's challenging because you often hear the burdens and the stresses and the struggles that people are facing, but it's also a tremendous joy because you get to be there as a witness when they experience redemption in the process.

And I know each of you have a story to tell. Each of you have faced some trial in life. None of us escape it.

[29 : 48] None of us will avoid the inevitable pains of life, whether it's rejection or periods of deep loneliness, failures, death, loss of some kind, whatever it may be, I know you've been there, I know you've faced it, and you have a story to tell.

My question is how do you tell that story? What is your perspective on the experiences that you're having? So here's my assignment for you for the week.

I would like you to read through the first four chapters of Daniel four times. Four times. And the first time when you read it, I want you to read it through as if you were a Babylonian subject.

And place yourself in their situation and immerse yourself in their experience and imagine what their perspective must have been like as they worshipped this god-like king who was extremely volatile and could fly off the handle at a moment's notice the dread that they must have suffered, the abject fear.

Now I don't think many of us know what it is to experience true dread in our lives. We've all experienced fear, I'm sure. Dread is another matter.

[31 : 14] There's a story that stands out in my mind of a man about 50 years old who was sitting in my office and he explained to me what real dread is like.

As a five-year-old boy he had a father who was a severe alcoholic. And every night after work his father would return home and the beatings would ensue.

And it would start with this man's mother. And the young boy at five years old knew instinctively that if he wanted to avoid a beating when he heard his father's car pulling into the driveway he would run upstairs to his bedroom, crawl under the bed, put his face in his hands and stay as still as possible.

And sometimes he'd avoid getting those beatings. And one night in particular he remembered the screaming and the yelling of his mother had died down and all was quiet.

And he thought to himself the coast is clear, I'm safe. All of a sudden he was laying there under his bed with his hands, with his face in his hands and he began to smell something.

[32 : 27] A familiar smell. The smell of alcohol. And as he slowly turned and looked out underneath the bed there was his father's face staring at him, breathing on him.

And as soon as they made eye contact the father grabbed him and pulled him out from under the bed and proceeded to give him the beating of his life. We can't often imagine an experience like that but perhaps there may be someone here who has had that kind of suffering.

But that is dread. That is fear. And I don't diminish by any means our suffering. I believe that the pain that hurts most is the pain that hurts right now.

And I recognize I can tell you a story like that but that doesn't comfort you necessarily because you're suffering and you're fearful of the future and you're not sure what to do and maybe you're looking at life from the perspective of the Babylonians and terrified.

terrified. So don't stop there as you read. I want you to read these chapters again but I want you to read them from the perspective of the Israelite captives.

[33 : 46] Think about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and Daniel who stood up to this powerful king and they said no I'm not going to eat the king's food. No.

Let him do whatever he wants to us but we're going to remain faithful to our God. Think of these three men who stood up to king Nebuchadnezzar and said we don't care if you kill us because we believe that our God has the power to rescue us and even if he doesn't do your worst.

And with great courage they looked at the potential suffering that they would face and they would say it was nothing compared to the power of God that could be manifested in their life through their trials.

As painful as they may be. Well I don't want you to stop there even because there's a further perspective that I'd like you to have and it is the perspective of Daniel himself.

And I find it extremely interesting. Jesse read the passage where Nebuchadnezzar calls Daniel to himself for the second dream and he says he says look help me understand this dream.

[35 : 05] And when the king tells him the dream the Bible says that Daniel was troubled. And when I read that at first I thought is Daniel scared? Is he afraid to tell king Nebuchadnezzar the dream?

I don't think that is borne out in the evidence when you look at Daniel's life and how he responded to king Nebuchadnezzar in previous experiences.

No I think the troubling that Daniel experienced was an actual compassion for this man Nebuchadnezzar. Can you imagine having compassion on a horrific person like Nebuchadnezzar?

And yet Daniel says oh king if only this was something that was going to happen to your enemies but it's going to happen to you if you don't change.

And Daniel's compassion led him to plead with the king to change his ways to turn things around if he could and if he would and of course we know he doesn't.

[36 : 13] But Daniel's compassion for the king was because Daniel is the example in this passage of true sanity. You see because Daniel had a right understanding of himself and his relationship to God and how that affected his relationship with other people.

Even someone as terrible and terrifying as Nebuchadnezzar so that he could not only have courage in the face of a horrific king he could have compassion for him and see him not as a god but as a broken man just like you and I.

And it was Daniel's compassion that drove his actions and his behavior in his relationship with the king. And then finally my hope is if you fulfill the exercise you will read Daniel for a fourth time and read it from the perspective of Nebuchadnezzar.

Because any one of us could be like him given the opportunity. And all of us as I've said at times have an improper perspective about who we are and what our mission in life is and what our purpose is to be and we need a wake up call.

We need to recognize the change that must take place. In psychiatry we talk about primary and secondary emotions.

[37 : 58] And if you look at the Babylonians they felt dread. Well we would call that a secondary emotion. the captives the Israelite captives experienced boldness or courage we would call that a secondary emotion.

Daniel felt compassion again a secondary emotion and Nebuchadnezzar was awestruck as a result of his experience again a secondary emotion.

Now what is a primary emotion? This is key. A primary emotion is an emotion that we feel that says something about our identity as a person.

So why would the Babylonians experience dread? Well they would only experience dread if their primary emotion was I am weak.

I am unsafe. I am subject subject to Nebuchadnezzar. Statements that say something about their identity as a person.

[39 : 08] Why were the Israelite captives able to stand with courage and boldness in the face of Nebuchadnezzar? It's because their primary emotion their primary identity was in their God.

I am a follower of God. I am a servant of the Most High God. I am safe in Him.

And so they could speak to the identity that they held to and that was what influenced their actions and their behaviors. And so I ask you today what is your struggle number one?

what is the situation in your life that you feel stressed, anxious, overwhelmed by? And ask yourself as an individual, ask yourself as a church, what is my identity?

How am I defining myself in this moment and how is that influencing what I feel, what I think, and what I do?

[40 : 20] And I guarantee you that if you are in the midst of a circumstance where you feel horrible, you feel terrible, you feel frightened to death, aside from there being a very specific physiological problem in your brain, the second possibility is that you are defining yourself in a way that is not consistent with what God says that you are.

and that is why the Bible says that we should be renewing our minds, that we should be transformed by the gospel and place our identity in Christ so that when we go out and we confront those difficult people on a day-to-day basis that we will inevitably confront, that proper perspective can allow us to be more like the captives and have courage and boldness to speak and be like Daniel who could have compassion and care for those who might mistreat him and ultimately be like Nebuchadnezzar who would be so awestruck by the power and the magnificence of God in his life that he would praise him through his suffering and find grace and mercy and redemption in the end.

Amen.