

Submission, Sovereignty, and Saving Faith (Daniel 4)

A Picture of Conversion?

The application of this sermon depends in large measure upon understanding Daniel 4 as a picture of Nebuchadnezzar's conversion to saving faith in the God of Israel. Not everyone agrees that Nebuchadnezzar was genuinely converted through the events of this chapter, and I must confess that it is not absolutely certain that he was, and it impossible to know for sure. Daniel 4 appears, however, to be framed as a confession of faith. It begins with a declaration of praise to the "Most High God" (אלהא עלהא):

*King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth:
Peace be multiplied to you! It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that
the Most High God has done for me:*

*How great are his signs,
how mighty are his wonders!
His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and his dominion endures from generation to generation. (4:1-3)*

And it ends with a similar doxology:

*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 in 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. (4:34-37)

In between these two acclamations is an account of Nebuchadnezzar’s pride and fall, and of God’s gracious warnings and severe judgment (Nebuchadnezzar’s dream is told in the first person [vv. 4-18]; the interpretation and application of the dream are told in the third person [vv. 19-33]). If you are wondering, “Where is the debate? That seems like a clear confession of faith and evidence of true conversion,” then I’d like to direct your attention to v. 8, in the middle of Nebuchadnezzar’s first-person recounting of his dream. Nebuchadnezzar writes,

At last Daniel came in before me – he who was named Belteshazzar after the name of my god, and in whom is the spirit of the holy gods – and I told him the dream... (4:8)

This is problematic, because it was written after Nebuchadnezzar’s supposed conversion (cf. 4:9, 18). First, Nebuchadnezzar says that Daniel was named Belteshazzar “after the name of my god.” That god is likely Balatusu-usar, a Babylonian deity.¹ Second, Nebuchadnezzar says that in Daniel “is the spirit of the holy gods.” Nebuchadnezzar is still speaking like a polytheist. This has caused some to regard Nebuchadnezzar’s “conversion” as something less than saving faith. It more likely indicates that Nebuchadnezzar added YHWH, the God of Israel, to the pantheon of gods that he worshipped, and that he desired others within his realm to do the same.²

¹ Edward J. Young, *The Prophecy of Daniel: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980; orig., 1949), 43.

² E.g., Tremper Longman writes, “That Nebuchadnezzar still hasn’t really ‘gotten it’ is indicated by the parenthetical comment at the end of verse 8. He refers to Daniel by his Babylonian name, which connects him to the king’s native god. Moreover, he speaks of Daniel as the one in whom the ‘spirit of the holy gods’ dwells. Being a polytheist, Nebuchadnezzar has the intellectual framework to subsume Yahweh into his already existing theology”; Tremper Longman III, *Daniel*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 118. Young argues that Theodotian and

Nevertheless, I am going to argue that it is correct to view Daniel 4 as relating Nebuchadnezzar's true conversion to saving faith in YHWH, the Most High God. Let me give you five lines of evidence³:

First, I detect a progression in Nebuchadnezzar's three encounters with Israel's God. After his first encounter, when Daniel revealed and interpreted his dream that none of the pagan wise men could reveal, Nebuchadnezzar exclaimed,

"Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery." (2:47)

"Your God is God of gods and Lord of kings." *Your* God. Not, *my* God. After his second encounter, when God preserved Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah in the fiery furnace, Nebuchadnezzar exclaimed,

"Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way." (3:28-29)

YHWH is "the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego." He is *their* God. Nebuchadnezzar confesses not that "there is no other god," but rather that "there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way." This once again falls short of true conversion. But here in Daniel 4 we find for the first time personal language in reference to YHWH:

It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me. (4:2)

James Alan Montgomery were correct in regarding the last phrase as a singular – "in whom is the spirit of the holy God"; Young, 99.

³ For a similar argument, see Young, 113-114. Young concludes, "These reasons lead me to believe that, although the faith of Neb. may indeed have been weak and his knowledge meagre, yet his faith was saving faith..."

Nebuchadnezzar recognizes that God has been extraordinarily and undeservedly gracious *to him*.⁴

Second, for the first time, Nebuchadnezzar employs a title (“Most High God” [עֶלְיָהּ אֱלֹהִים]) that speaks to YHWH’s absolute sovereignty and dominion over all creation (4:2). The previous titles employed by Nebuchadnezzar (“God of gods and Lord of kings” [2:47]) fall short of such a confession. And yet the title is used five other times in chapter four, including in each of the chapters three central declarations. The first time is in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, when the angel declares,

“The 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.” (4:17)

The second and third times are on the lips of Daniel, who interprets Nebuchadnezzar’s dream:

“This is the interpretation, O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.” (4:24-25)

The fourth time is when the voice from heaven declares,

“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.” (4:31-32)

⁴ “Miraculous demonstrations of God’s power can certainly stop people in their tracks and make them think, but true conversion can only be accomplished by a personal experience of God’s power and grace. That personal experience in Nebuchadnezzar’s life is what we will see in Daniel 4”; Iain Duguid, *Daniel*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 63-64.

The fifth time is when Nebuchadnezzar himself states,

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... (4:34)

In other words, it appears that “Most High” is an expression of divine sovereignty, and that Nebuchadnezzar understood and embraced the lesson these events were designed to impart. The Most High God rules over the kingdom of men and exercises His sovereign authority as He wills. In other words, YHWH is God, and there is no other.

Third, you will remember that last week I mentioned that Nebuchadnezzar appeared to erect his enormous golden statue in direct defiance of God and the dream that God had given him in chapter two. In that dream, Nebuchadnezzar and the kingdom of Babylon were represented by the head of gold, that was then succeeded by three more kingdoms, all of which were destroyed by the everlasting kingdom of God (2:36-45). In defiance of that dream, and of God’s sovereign plan, Nebuchadnezzar erects a massive statue entirely of gold, as if to say, “No god will overthrow my kingdom,” and then he decreed that all nations, peoples, and languages would bow down and worship Nebuchadnezzar’s image. In chapter four, we find Nebuchadnezzar once again drowning in his own pride and arrogance and blinded by his own glory (4:29-30), until God humbles him to the dust. And what is the result? Nebuchadnezzar submits to God’s sovereign plan revealed in his dream of chapter two. Nebuchadnezzar joyfully confesses that “[*The Most High*’s] kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation” (4:3, 34). He furthermore declares that none is able to stand against God’s sovereignty:

*all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,
and he does according to his will in 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?” (4:35)*

Not even Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, can stay God's hand. At the end of chapter four, Nebuchadnezzar gladly and joyfully embraces God and His kingdom, rather than glorifying himself and the kingdom of Babylon.

Fourth, there is the matter of the proclamation. Nebuchadnezzar does not have to send forth this proclamation to "all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth" (4:1), to "show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me" (4:2). It is, after all, a rather humiliating story, from Nebuchadnezzar's perspective. But he does. Why? I think it is because these are the very same people that Nebuchadnezzar had involved in his wanton idolatry in chapter three. When Nebuchadnezzar erected the golden image (which I suggested was an image of his deified self) in defiance of the God of heaven, according to his decree and upon pain of death,

all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. (4:7)

This is the very same "peoples, nations, and languages" to whom Nebuchadnezzar sends the proclamation in chapter four. What is Nebuchadnezzar doing? He is repenting, which necessarily involves confession of sin and restitution of wrongs. He is sending word to all those whom he led into idolatry and blasphemy to tell them that he is not to be worshiped; the Most High God alone is to be worshiped and adored.

Finally, what about v. 8 (and vv. 9, 18), with its seeming admission of idolatry and polytheism? I admit that it is troublesome, but there is a possible explanation. Most of your Bibles will contain a footnote for v. 8 saying that there is an alternate translation: "Spirit of the holy God." The Hebrew word for "God" is אֱלֹהִים, which contains the Hebrew plural ending. In other words, it is literally, "gods." But we translate it as "God" because it is what is known as a "plural of majesty." Some also think that it is a Hebrew hint at God's trinitarian nature. And so, in Daniel 4:8, when we see the phrase "spirit of the holy gods" (רוּחַ אֱלֹהִין), it could be translated "Spirit of the holy God," without doing violence to the text. But if that is the correct translation, we still have to deal with the fact that Nebuchadnezzar refers to a Babylonian deity (Balatusu-usar) as "my god." This could simply be a reference to the time when Nebuchadnezzar gave the

name Belteshazzar to Daniel, back in chapter one when Balatusu-usar was still Nebuchadnezzar's god. It may be wishful thinking, but I suspect it is more than that.⁵

So that is my case for Nebuchadnezzar's conversion to saving faith in YHWH, the God of Israel.

- Nebuchadnezzar confesses God's mercy to him personally ("the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me").
- Nebuchadnezzar employs the title "Most High God," which is an expression of divine sovereignty.
- Nebuchadnezzar joyfully submits to the everlasting reign of the kingdom of God, rather than trying to glorify himself and his own kingdom.
- Nebuchadnezzar makes a proclamation to the very people he had made to commit idolatry and blasphemy, thus demonstrating the fruits of repentance.
- "The spirit of the holy gods" can also be translated "the Spirit of the holy God."

With it thus reasonably established that Nebuchadnezzar was genuinely converted to saving faith in God, we can now view this chapter as a paradigm for how God brings all sinners to saving faith. There are two main parts to this sermon: the means by which God brings sinners to saving faith, and the way in which true saving faith is made manifest.

The Means of Saving Faith

We begin with the means by which God brings sinners to saving faith in His divine sovereignty. We have already read the opening of Nebuchadnezzar's proclamation in vv. 1-3, so we begin with the relation of his dream in vv. 4-18:

I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and prospering in my palace. I saw a dream that made me afraid. As I lay in bed the fancies and visions of my head alarmed me. So I made a decree that all the wise men of Babylon should be brought before me, that they might make known to me the interpretation of the dream. Then the magicians, the

⁵ Duguid has a different take on this problem, viewing v. 8 as reflective of Nebuchadnezzar's perspective prior to his humbling; Duguid, 65n4. He also suggests that, "The transformation in Nebuchadnezzar's thinking that takes place in the course of the chapter is underlined by the names that Nebuchadnezzar uses for Daniel. In the narrative frame, written after his experience of humbling, Nebuchadnezzar calls Daniel by his Judean name (meaning, 'God is my judge'), whereas in the reported conversations that took place earlier, he called him 'Belteshazzar' (meaning 'Bel, guard his life')"; *ibid.*

enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers came in, and I told them the dream, but they could not make known to me its interpretation. (4:4-7)

One wonders why Nebuchadnezzar did not call Daniel first, but instead called for the same pagan wise men who had earlier failed to reveal the mystery of his dream and its interpretation (2:10-11). The only answer I can give is that sin is irrational; the heart will do anything to avoid the God with whom it has to do. Clearly, as the chapter progresses, Nebuchadnezzar's heart is still hardened and proud. Though he could not deny the power of Daniel's God, he doesn't want anything to do with Him, either. Once again, however, the pagans and their false gods fail Nebuchadnezzar. So he is again forced to deal with Daniel, and with Daniel's God.

At last Daniel came before me – he who was named Belteshazzar after the name of my god, and in whom is the spirit of the holy gods – and I told him the dream, saying, “O Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, because I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you and that no mystery is too difficult for you, tell me the visions of my dream that I saw and their interpretation. The visions of my head as I lay in bed were these: I saw and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. Its 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. I saw in the visions of my head as I lay in bed, and behold, a watcher⁶, a holy one, came down from heaven. He 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. But 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 of the grass of the field. Let 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. The 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

⁶ For a discussion of the meaning of this Aramaic term (עֵיר), see Young, 102-103.

the lowliest of men.' This dream I, King Nebuchadnezzar, saw. And you, O Belteshazzar, tell me the interpretation, because all the wise men of my kingdom are not able to make known to me the interpretation, but you are able, for the spirit of the holy gods is in you."
(4:8-18)

The dream seems straightforward enough, so straightforward, in fact, that one commentator said that the wise men's "failure is a bit mystifying because Daniel's later interpretation is not all that surprising."⁷ In other words, the dream seems readily understandable, at least in its broad contours, apart from divine revelation. But perhaps they were prevented from understanding it in order that Daniel would have his second major audience with Nebuchadnezzar. At any rate, even though the pagan wise men may have been able to understand the dream's message apart from divine revelation, they would not have been able to rightly apply its message of submission to the sovereignty of God.

Daniel, on the other hand, understands its message immediately, and it alarms him, which is fascinating, because it indicates that Daniel felt affection for Nebuchadnezzar, even though he was a pagan king who had decimated Jerusalem, destroyed its temple, and carted off its sons into exile.

Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, was dismayed for a while, and his thoughts alarmed him. The king answered and said, "Belteshazzar, let not the dream or the interpretation alarm you." Belteshazzar answered and said, "My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you and its interpretation for your enemies! The tree you saw, which grew and became strong, so that its top reached to heaven⁸, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth, whose leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in which was food for all, under which beasts of the field found shade, and in whose branches the birds of the heavens lived – 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. And because the king saw a watcher, a holy one, coming down from heaven and saying,

⁷ Longman, 118.

⁸ Duguid notes that this is yet another tie to the Tower of Babel, which also was designed to reach to the heavens (Gn 11:4); Duguid, 67.

‘Chop down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump of its roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze, in the tender grass of the field, and let him be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts of the field, till seven periods of time pass over him,’ this is the interpretation O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king, that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will. And as it was commanded to leave the stump of the roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be confirmed for you from the time that you know that Heaven rules. 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.” (4:19-27)

At this point I’d like to pause and begin to unpack the means by which God brings sinners to saving faith in His divine sovereignty. First, God gives sinners a *warning*. That is what Daniel recognizes this dream as: it is a warning from the Most High that He has grown weary of Nebuchadnezzar’s self-exaltation. And thus, He gives Nebuchadnezzar a dream in which Nebuchadnezzar is not only cut down, but humiliated. Not only will Nebuchadnezzar be removed from his throne, he will be cast out amongst the beasts. Not only will Nebuchadnezzar be deprived of his sovereignty, he will be deprived of his sanity. Yet the dream is worthless without its interpretation and application, which only Daniel, a follower of the Most High, could deliver. Daniel’s passionate plea to Nebuchadnezzar to repent in hopes of receiving mercy from God is a picture of the preaching of the gospel, preaching which involves the threat of imminent judgment, the hope of mercy, and a passionate plea to sinners to repent. God does not often give such dreams. I’ve known maybe one or two people in my life who were converted as a direct result of dreams of judgment (I went to high school with one). But God very often gives warnings of His coming judgment through the preaching of His prophets and people. That is His ordinary way of mercy.

It could be that some of you here this morning are like Nebuchadnezzar. Your whole life you have been constructing a monument to your own glory. You regard yourself as a god. Oh,

you would never admit it, unless you were into Wicca or some other neo-pagan religion. But you live as though you were king of your own personal kingdom. You live as though you were master of your own fate. You live as though you make your own destiny, as though you make your own rules, as though you decide what is right and wrong, true and false, good and evil. This morning is your Nebuchadnezzar moment, and I am your Daniel. I declare to you that God has grown weary of your self-idolatry, and He will cut you down in judgment, He will remove from you His image, and you will wallow in misery forever in a place of outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth... Unless you repent, break off your sins by practicing righteousness and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, unless you bow the knee before the Most High and joyfully confess that He alone rules the kingdom of men, and He gives it to whomever He will. I cannot promise that God will grant you repentance, but I can pray for you in that regard (2 Tm 2:25-26). I do know that without repentance, true repentance from the heart, you will face judgment without mercy. And I know that God is merciful to all who call upon Him in sincere faith, trusting only in the blood and righteousness of His Son.⁹

But like many people today, Nebuchadnezzar was unmoved by either the dream or by Daniel's pleas. And so God gave him over to sin and judgment.

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?" 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 like birds' claws. (4:28-33)

⁹ For another application, this time to the saints, see Duguid's description of God's "shots across the bow" in Duguid, 68-69.

In this passage we see the second and third means by which God brings sinners to saving faith. Not only did God give Nebuchadnezzar a warning, He gave him *time* to repent, an entire year to change his tune.¹⁰ But it was to no avail. Nebuchadnezzar continued in his self-idolatry and blasphemy – “Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?” (4:30). Take caution of ascribing to yourself glory that belongs to God alone. God is jealous of His glory (Ex 34:14), and He does not take kindly to those who steal it, as Herod Agrippa found out when he was eaten by worms (Acts 12:22-23).

But Nebuchadnezzar did not repent. His eyes could not behold the glory of God because they were too captivated with the glory of Babylon and its king. Babylon was objectively stunning; the head of gold (2:37-38) was an apt image for the kingdom and its king. What did Nebuchadnezzar see from the roof of his palace? He could see one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the magnificent hanging gardens of Babylon, which Nebuchadnezzar had built for his Median wife who to remind her of her mountainous homeland. He could see the brilliant system of walls and moats that protected the city from invasion (though, as we will see in the next chapter, they did not prove impenetrable). Stephen Miller (Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at MABTS), writes:

Babylon was a rectangularly shaped city surrounded by a broad and deep water-filled moat and then by an intricate system of double walls. The first double wall system encompassed the main city. Its inner wall was twenty-one feet thick and reinforced with defense towers at sixty-foot intervals while the outer wall was eleven feet in width and also had watchtowers. Later Nebuchadnezzar added another double-wall system (an outer wall twenty-five feet thick and an inner wall twenty-three feet thick) east of the Euphrates that ran the incredible distance of seventeen miles and was wide enough at the top for chariots to pass. The height of the walls is not known, but the Ishtar Gate was forty feet high, and the walls would have approximated this size. A forty-foot wall would have been a formidable barrier for enemy soldiers.¹¹

¹⁰ “Sadly, the warning of the dream went unheeded by Nebuchadnezzar. A whole year went by, during which Nebuchadnezzar had plenty of opportunity to live his life differently. Instead, he mistook the merciful delay of God’s judgment as a sign that the threat could safely be ignored”; Duguid, 69.

¹¹ Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 140; quoted in Dale Ralph Davis, *The Message of Daniel*, TBST (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 64.

Nebuchadnezzar would have seen a four-hundred-foot-long bridge spanning the Euphrates, connecting the east and west portions of the city.¹² And he was standing atop a palace built with the cedars of Lebanon and over fifteen million bricks, each bearing his name and royal titles, surrounded by six walls and a 262-foot moat.¹³ It was truly spectacular. But it doesn't matter how spectacular your life is; you did not build it by your mighty power or the glory of your majesty. As Paul reminded the Corinthian Church:

What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? (1 Cor 4:7)

Immediately upon uttering the fateful words, a voice from heaven thundered down the sentence. His sanity was removed, and he spent “seven periods of time” (שבעה עדנים) living like a beast. This is the third means by which God brings sinners to saving faith. He *gives them over* to their sin, to live as the beasts, far beneath the dignity which God bestowed upon mankind in creation. It is a fitting judgment, is it not? If you do not act like man, who was made a little lower than the angels, and crowned with glory and honor, given dominion over the works of God's hands (Ps 8:5-6), and instead act like unreasoning animals who act according to instinct rather than wisdom and righteousness and do not recognize their Creator (2 Pt 2:12; Jude 1:10), then God will give you over to a beastly lifestyle that is far beneath your created dignity (read Romans 1:18-32 for a description of this living judgment). Just like the prodigal son, God will give us over to the pigs if that is how we decide to live. But sometimes (not every time – do not dare to presume upon the grace of God), God does so in order to bring us to our knees that He might show us mercy. And that is precisely what He did for Nebuchadnezzar.

The Manifestation of Saving Faith

Just as the prodigal who “came to himself” while in the pigpen of sin, so Nebuchadnezzar, in a moment of God-given clarity (because no man “comes to himself” apart from grace), lifted his eyes to heaven:

¹² Davis, 65.

¹³ Paul Ferguson, “Nebuchadnezzar, Gilgamesh, and the ‘Babylonian Job,’” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37.3 (1994): 321-331; cited in Davis, 64n7.

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 in 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. (4:34-37)

We have seen the means by which God brings sinners to saving faith. I want to conclude this message by pointing out the manifestation of saving faith. When saving faith comes, what does it look like? How is it recognized?

The primary manifestation of saving faith is a submission to the sovereignty of God. I hope you have seen by now that the sovereignty of God is the main theme of this chapter. In fact, the chapter is structured as a battle between self-sovereignty and divine sovereignty. Nebuchadnezzar imagined that he was sovereign, that he was king, that he was glorious, that he was majestic. He built an image to himself in defiance of God and decreed that all peoples, nations, and languages should bow down and worship it (Daniel 3). He stands atop his royal palace, beholding the splendor of Babylon, and imagines that he built all that. Babylon is great, because Nebuchadnezzar is great (4:29-30). But God cuts Nebuchadnezzar down to size in a moment, removes from him his sanity, and has him crawling around eating grass like an ox, as if to demonstrate that the only reason man is great is because he bears the image of the great God.

Remove the image, and man is nothing more than a beast. This was a battle over sovereignty, and that is a battle that God always wins. He will either win it in judgment on the day of judgment (Phil 2:9-11), or He will win it in mercy on the day of grace. But when God wins the battle over sovereignty, it always results in a submission to His sovereignty. Notice the recurrent theme of this chapter.

“The 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.” (4:17)

“[T]his is the interpretation, O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king, that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.” (4:24-25)

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.” (4:31-32)

And when Nebuchadnezzar is converted, what does he confess?

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 in 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?" (4:34-35)*

The point is that submission to the sovereignty of God is of the essence of saving faith. At its core, the repentance that saves is a turning from self-sovereignty to God's sovereignty. It is ceasing to think and act like I am my own god, ruling my own kingdom, making my own laws, determining my own fate, believing my own truth, and instead submitting to YHWH as God and His sovereign rule, submitting to His laws, bowing before His providence, believing He predestines all things after the counsel of His own will (Eph 1:11). Saving faith believes that the LORD is God and I am not.

But it is more. Saving faith is not the bitter, begrudging submission to the sovereignty of God that will be elicited from every sinner on the day of judgment when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:9-11), it is the glad, the willing, the joyful submission to the sovereignty of the God who is good and wise and merciful and just. It is *delighting* in God's sovereignty. That is precisely what we see from Nebuchadnezzar in the opening verses.

*King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth:
Peace be multiplied to you! It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that
the Most High God has done for me:*

*How great are his signs,
how mighty are his wonders!
His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and his dominion endures from generation to generation. (4:1-3)*

Nebuchadnezzar is thrilled with the sovereignty of God. And so is everyone who trusts in Him with saving faith.

Saving faith manifests itself in joyful submission to the sovereignty of God. That is the point of this chapter; that is the point of this sermon. And so I call upon all of us, inveterate little Nebuchadnezzars that we are, trying to be our own god, trying to rule our own kingdom, trying to make our own laws. Cease doing battle with God. You cannot win. Lift your eyes to heaven, and bow your soul before God. Embrace His sovereign power, and delight in His omnipotent rule. Receive His sovereign mercy, a mercy purchased for you by Christ at the cross.¹⁴ You will be glad you did. For in the sovereign mercy of a good and glorious God is fullness of everlasting joy.

¹⁴ Duguid reminds us that neither suffering nor submission is meritorious. The only reason those who have been humbled by God may receive mercy from God is because Christ secured that mercy through His atoning death on the cross; Duguid, 74-76.