

“Saving a King”

Daniel 4

July 29, 2007

(N.T.: Luke 16:19-31)

For those of you who are Christian – who have received Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior – what did it take? Think for a moment about the time you made a decision to commit your life to Christ. I grew up in a Christian home. I did not have the Damascus road experience Paul had or a long wild story of hedonism. Instead, my experience of committing my life came while I was going through a confirmation class at Westminster Presbyterian Church in West Chester.

I was preparing to meet with the session. For years, I had been the guinea pig for my parents as they put together their Sunday School lessons, so I knew the stories. I had been sitting in church regularly – my parents did not give us the option to not attend. I knew a lot about Jesus, but until that point of being required to make a confession of my own, I had just presumed that I was a Christian.

I was a pretty good kid. I did not get into a whole lot of trouble; probably because I was the youngest. From my perspective, I took pride in thinking that I was reasonably savvy about not getting caught. However, as it came close to time to meet with the session and I faced the requirement that I had to make a personal confession of faith, I woke me up and realized I needed to have a *personal* relationship with Jesus. This was not something just “to do.” If the words came out of my mouth, I wanted to mean them. So, I remember, I was in my room at home, got on my knees, and prayed, “Lord Jesus, I give my life to you.”

Looking back, I can see the seeds that were planted long before I got to the place of committing my life to Christ. I can see the ways that God worked to guide me to that confession.

Others of you have a different story. Perhaps, for some of you, you were a little harder to convince – or, perhaps better stated, convict. There may be some here today who are still not convicted.

Our Scripture lesson today talks about a hard case. Nebuchadnezzar’s second recorded dream and its fulfillment are an incredible conversion account. Actually, it is remarkable that this is included in Daniel; some scholars believe this is the only portion of the Bible written by a pagan. Here, we get Nebuchadnezzar’s account of what happened.

Daniel 4

The first three chapters of Daniel report on events that happened fairly early in Nebuchadnezzar’s reign. Daniel 4, on the other hand, seems to refer to a time much later in his life. There are some sources outside the Bible that seem to vaguely allude to the

seven year illness that would place this passage in the thirty-fourth year of his forty-three year reign. It is not surprising that the king's insanity would be kept quiet.

Nebuchadnezzar was a powerful man. As we have noted previously, he was not a particularly stable personality. Power and money do not always yield virtuous, peaceful lives – one only need look at our tabloid headlines chronicling the collapse of teen idols Lindsay Lohan, Paris Hilton, and Britney Spears to see this truth. Nebuchadnezzar was more than a teen idol, though. It is entirely likely that the prideful statement that brought judgment occurred as he was looking out over the “hanging gardens” of Babylon.

From a human perspective Nebuchadnezzar had accomplished a great deal. He was a military success, having conquered vast lands and a number of people groups. He was a political success – we have all indications that Daniel, one of the conquered exiles from Jerusalem, served him faithfully and liked him. The duration of his reign is remarkable. He was a builder and could see the tangible results of the projects he directed. These hanging gardens were considered to be one of the seven great wonders of the ancient world.

Wealth, power, success, adventure – Nebuchadnezzar seemed to have it all. And here's where the problem sets in. Nebuchadnezzar believed he had earned it all.

God is sovereign over everything.

The lesson of this passage is given in the judgment, “...until you learn that the Most High has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals and gives it to whom he will.” (Verse 32).

This is one of those lessons that makes more sense in theory than in practice. It is not particularly offensive to suggest that God owns everything until we realize that “everything” includes our stuff. Whose house do I live in? Not mine, not the bank's; it is God's house. Whose money do I manage? Not mine, not the bank's; it is God's money. Whose children am I raising? Not mine; they belong to God. Whose church am I serving? Not mine, not yours; this is God's church.

Conceptually, we get it. What does it mean practically?

It means the same thing practically as it means conceptually. Everything is God's. All of it. The things we have received, the things we are able to control and use, everything is God's. How do we know? The king, looking out over what he has been able to do, experiences the suddenness of it all being taken away from him. That is a scary thought and it is a scary reality.

We call those “come to Jesus” moments. There you are, minding your own business, when everything else is stripped away. Things outside of your control have put you in a situation where everything you have held secure cannot save you. You are faced with the reality of being helpless in the presence of the eternal God. There are many “second chance” stories out there: how someone was going along, suddenly had everything stripped away, then realized what was truly important. The wildfires a few years back made this point. Many

of the survivors talked about how – after getting over the shock of loss – how relieved they were to unload the weight of stuff they were carrying. They were liberated to focus on the things that were really important.

Again, practically, knowing that God is sovereign over everything means we hold things differently. When you are given the responsibility of holding a treasure that belongs to someone else, you hold it with much more care and deference. You are careful to follow the instructions for how to take care of it. Think about how we carefully write instructions for how to take care of our pets when we go on vacation.

Another example: consider the spiritual gifts that God has given us. You remember in our series about the gifts given by the Holy Spirit; those gifts are given to be exercised for the common good. They are not just for our own private enjoyment – God has given the gifts with instruction to share for the common good.

Remembering what is really important is part of the reason why God calls us to tithe. It is all God's anyway; requiring us to return to God a tenth is for our benefit – to remind us that we belong to God. God does not need our money in order to be God; we need to give to remind ourselves that *we* are not God.

Remembering that everything is God's means we cannot take things for granted. There's a great line in Paul Simon's song, "Diamonds on the Soles of her Shoes," that says, "You're taking me for granted because I please you." This has been brought home to me by our brothers and sisters in the Adoration service; who are grateful for things I do not even think about – a place to meet and worship, time to study.

The right response to God's blessing is gratitude, not pride.

So, should we never take pleasure in our accomplishments? Do we feel guilty the moment we enjoy achievement? No, that's not what the text is saying.

A few months ago, Abby's class did a musical program for parents and the other kids in the school. As I sat and watched, I was moved emotionally. I was (and am – but for the point of the story, "was") so proud of her. I had a television kind of moment – waiting for the cameras to point at the proud parent so I could give that, "Yes, she *is* my daughter" look.

As I re-tell that story, I know that God has blessed me with good girls. I have loved them and tried to be the best father I can for them. I enjoy when I hear compliments about them. Yet, I cannot take credit for them. First of all, I am not the only one who has had a hand in training them, right? Jen, their grandparents, their friends, our friends, our neighbors, their teachers, the people in the communities people I do not even know – all sorts of people have made an impression on them that has shaped who they are. Further, *they* have had a lot to do with who they are. And, ultimately, it is God who has grown them. I do not think God condemns us for that momentary sensation of pride if the tendency and trend in our lives is to remember that it is God who has blessed us. Even as the program

finished, I found myself praying, with tears in my eyes, thanking God for allowing me the joy of sharing this time with her and reflecting on how quickly this time goes.

Nebuchadnezzar had an entire year from the time of his dream to get things straight. This powerful leader who had everything was rebuked and encouraged to see things in the right way. Daniel told him that this dream was a message to him, that judgment would come upon him “until you have learned that the Most High has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals, and gives it to whom he will. Then, Daniel urged him to repent. “Atone for your sins with righteousness, and your iniquities with mercy to the oppressed.”

A year later, the king still had not heard. Maybe he thought judgment would not come; more likely, he did not think about it at all.

Judgment happens in God’s time, not ours.

God did not immediately smite the king. God gave Nebuchadnezzar the dream as a warning. He waited patiently for a year for Nebuchadnezzar to change his ways. Then, though it seemed sudden to Nebuchadnezzar, but when the time was ready, God did exactly what had been foretold.

The timing of God’s expression of sovereignty by means of judgment frustrates us. We do not understand it. When we perceive that an injustice has been done to us, we want God to fix it right now. We have that sitcom or movie expectation that things will be wrapped up neatly and we, the heroes, will have the benefits of justice soon.

God does not work that way. God works God’s way – in God’s time.

The Hebrews were slaves for 400 years. The latter years got progressively worse, but people prayed for years before Moses was commissioned to lead them out of Egypt. Then, in the wilderness, the people wandered for 40 years. Again, it was not a straight line from point A to point B.

Why does God allow people to escape judgment for so long? Why doesn’t he just smite people when they do wrong? In Romans, Paul responds this way, “Do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.” (Romans 2:4-5).

That warning is for all of us – not simply those whom we think are bad. Paul was writing to the Jews in Rome who were feeling superior and more righteous than the Gentiles.

In Luke 16, Jesus tells of the rich man who ignored Lazarus, the poor man at his gate. When he died, the rich man was in torment and looked up to Father Abraham and begged for relief. Being granted none, he asked Abraham to go back to his household to warn the others. Consider this exchange:

Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.” “He said, “No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” Abraham said to him, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

As Jesus tells it, the rich man realized that God’s judgments were real only after his death; though, as Abraham had pointed out, the rich man had Moses and the prophets. For Jesus’ listeners and us today, someone did rise from the dead – will we listen? Do we have ears to hear the warning?

God’s judgment is real. God’s judgment is perfect. God’s judgment will come in God’s time. God’s patience is meant to lead us to repentance.

God is worthy of all of our praise.

God gave Nebuchadnezzar the dream and the interpretation of the dream with a call to repentance. It was a call to the right relationship. The banishment and judgment given by God was actually a blessing – it brought Nebuchadnezzar to his senses and put him into that right relationship with God.

The judgment God imposes on Nebuchadnezzar was to drive him away from the things in which he had taken pride. He seems to have suffered from “monomania,” a specific form of insanity that comes on suddenly and resolves just as suddenly. There is no treatment nor human understanding of the mechanism – there is no way to predict how long it will last. He was made to live an existence lower than the animals.

Yet, given the potential for political upheaval and disruption of the kingdom, the royal family would work to keep the illness as secret as possible. They would have rejoiced and been greatly relieved when it passed.

Upon learning the lesson, “the Most High has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals and gives it to whom he wills,” (the third time that specific lesson has been repeated), Nebuchadnezzar does a series of things:

- a) he lifts his eyes to heaven (recognizing that God is greater than any mortal being);
- b) he blessed and praised God for who God is;
- c) he declares God’s sovereignty; and,
- d) his notes his reason has been restored to him.

Then, after God had acted to restore him, the kingdom was restored to him and “still more greatness was added to me.” Note: Nebuchadnezzar is very clear: he did not earn it, it was given to him.

From the highest of high to the lowest of low, the lesson is the same, “What is the chief end of man?” To glorify God and enjoy him forever.

Conclusion

What did it take to get you into a right relationship with God? Are you in a right relationship now?

It does not matter how much or how little you have. Our circumstances are temporary, God is eternal. God’s judgment is real and his standards are holy. Our righteousness comes only from one place – the grace of God we have received through the blood and victory of Jesus Christ. How do you stand with him today?

God is calling you and calling me to be in a right relationship with him.

“I lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me. I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored the one who lives forever. For his sovereignty is an everlasting sovereignty, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation. ...I praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are truth, and his ways are justice; and he is able to bring low those who walk in pride.”

Won’t you lift your eyes to heaven today – and praise the Lord for He is good, his steadfast love endures forever.

Amen? Amen.

8:45 prayer/offering

10:00 offering