

01-18-09<sup>i</sup>

Daniel 4:4-5, 24-25; 28-32; 34

### **Introduction**

I came across a story this week about a young woman who approached her pastor after worship one Sunday, and she said to him: “Pastor, I have this nagging sin. I come to church on Sunday, and I can’t help but think that I’m the prettiest girl in the congregation. I know it’s wrong for me to feel that way, but I just can’t help it. What should I do?”

- And the pastor replied, “Young lady, you don’t have to worry. That’s not a sin...that’s a mistake.”

Of course, I would never say anything like that. After all, our church is filled with beautiful people. But I think the story offers a point worth pondering: it can be awfully easy to get a little too full of ourselves. In might be in relation to our looks...like the young woman in our story...but we get prideful about other things, too.

- We pat ourselves on the back about how smart or insightful we are...how things would go so much better if only people saw things our way.
- We flatter ourselves with our accomplishments...with the sense that we’ve worked hard and we deserve all the good fortune that’s come our way.
- We even congratulate ourselves about our faith...about how righteous we are because we go to church or how holy we are because we do the right things and don’t do the wrong things.

And don’t get me wrong: It’s a good thing to have a positive sense of who we are...and to take pleasure in the things we’re able to do. Heck, it’s a good thing—even a great thing—to have faith...and to celebrate the confidence and purpose that comes from faith.

- But the danger is—that somewhere along the way—we forget that all these good gifts are just that: gifts. We begin to think that the things we have and the things we achieve and the qualities we possess are somehow the result of our efforts. It’s all because of our skill...our intelligence...our hard work.

But God’s Word is eager to remind us—that’s not the whole story. In fact, God’s Word makes it clear that God is the source of what we have and what we do and who we are. And because these gifts have been entrusted to us—we will be held accountable for what we do with them.

- Maybe that’s why—way back near the beginning of the Bible—just after God has brought the children of Israel out of bondage...he offers them a word of warning:
- “Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands and his decrees... Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” (Deut. 8:11-14)

### **Transition**

Now if there is anyone in our country right now who really needs to take this message to heart, it’s the man who’s poised to become the next leader of our nation. As I’m sure you know—on Tuesday of this week—Barack Obama will be sworn in as the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States... and just in case you haven’t noticed, it’s going to be a big deal:

- 240,000 people will get tickets to attend the inauguration ceremony on the capitol steps...and some estimates say that as many as 2 million more will watch the inauguration from the National Mall.
- Thousands of buses have been chartered to get people to the event...and not just hotels but campgrounds as far as 150 miles away have been sold out for months.
- 5000 Porta-Potties will be set up in downtown DC and along the route of the inaugural parade to handle the needs of the crowds...

- And then, of course, there will be parties. There are no less than 9 “official” inaugural balls—the Neighborhood Ball, the Commander-in-Chief’s Ball, the Youth Ball, the Obama Home States Ball—and who knows how many other concerts and dances and special events.
- If you’re still looking to get in on the celebration...you might want to check out the Ritz-Carlton luxury inauguration package. For only \$99,000 you can have four nights in the Presidential suite, a set of Gucci luggage, two tickets to the parade and an official inaugural ball...and when all the hullabaloo is over, you’ll get a four-night stay at the Ritz Hotel in the Cayman Islands...just to help you warm up after all that time in the frosty D.C. winter.

Now let’s face it: if you were Barack Obama, it would be mighty easy to look out at all that and think, “Man! I am all that and a bag o’ chips!” So if we could write a letter to the next President (which is what we’ve been doing in these first three weeks of the New Year)...if we could call to his attention to an issue that he might want to be aware of and which he might even want to make a matter of prayer...perhaps we could ask him this question: Mr. President, who will call you to account? Who will call you to account?

### **The Biblical Story**

It just so happens that there’s a story in the Bible that shows how important this issue is. It’s found in the book of Daniel, chapter 4...and we heard at least the outline of that story in our scripture lesson this morning.

- To give you a little context: Back in 580 BC, Nebuchadnezzar was the king of Babylon...and he was sitting on top of the world. His armies had conquered most of the Middle East. His capital—which was located in what we now call Iraq—was the largest and most important city in the world.
- And he was surrounded by the most capable team of advisors an ancient ruler could wish for. You see, Nebuchadnezzar had a strategy. When he conquered a nation, he rounded up all the best and brightest—the artists and the athletes, the scholars and business leaders—and he brought them back to Babylon.
- After they’d been taught the local language...and after they’d proven their loyalty...they were given positions of leadership in the Babylonian government. They became members of the cabinet, if you will—which explains how Daniel finds himself serving as an advisor to the king.
- Yes, Nebuchadnezzar had it all. He was—in the words of our scripture reading—“at home in his palace, contended and prosperous” (v. 4)...until he had a dream.

In the dream, Nebuchadnezzar sees a tree...but not just any tree, an enormous tree: “Its top touched the sky; it was visible to the ends of the earth. Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all.” And a messenger comes down from heaven and calls out: “Cut down the tree...and strip off its branches; strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the animals flee from under it and the birds from its branches. But let the stump and its roots—bound with iron and bronze—remain in the ground.”

- Nebuchadnezzar is perplexed (to put it mildly). So he calls his magicians and enchanters—astrologers and diviners—he even calls the Psychic Help-Line...but no one can tell him what the dream means.
- And so he sends for Daniel (who had already interpreted one dream for him back in chapter 2...kinda makes you wonder why the king didn’t call him first) and he says: “Belteshazzar (that’s what he calls Daniel) I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you...and no mystery is too difficult for you. Here is my dream; interpret it for me.” (v. 9)

So Daniel listens...and he says to the king: Your Majesty, the tree you saw, which grew large and strong, with its top touching the sky...you are that tree. You have become great and strong; your greatness has grown until it reaches the sky, and your dominion extends to the distant parts of the earth.

- But the messenger you saw...the one who came down from heaven and said, “Cut down the tree” ...well here’s what that means:

This is a decree that the Most High has issued against the king. You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals. You will eat grass like the ox and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of the earth and gives them to anyone he wishes.

- But there is hope! The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules. Therefore, your Majesty, accept my advice. Renounce your sins by doing what's right. Renounce your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed...and maybe your prosperity will continue.

You can't help but wonder how history might have been different if Nebuchadnezzar had taken Daniel's advice. But let's remember the position in which the king finds himself. He is the top dog. He's got position and power...wealth and women. People fall over themselves to do his bidding.

- And then this slave—a wise slave, a respected slave, but still—a slave—comes and tells him that God is sovereign? Well guess what?! He conquered God. He—Nebuchadnezzar—when he invaded Jerusalem and destroyed the temple...he showed who's boss. Why should he change his ways because of some dream?

The Bible doesn't tell us what Nebuchadnezzar felt about Daniel's message. Maybe he laid awake at night thinking about it. Maybe he tried to mend his ways. Maybe he just ignored it.

- But what we do know is this: one year later, ol' Nebuchadnezzar is walking around on the roof his palace. He's looking out over the city and he's thinking about all that he's accomplished. And he tells himself, "Is not this the great Babylon...that I have built as the royal residence...by my mighty power, and for the glory of my majesty?" (28-30)
- And even as the words are on his lips, a voice comes from heaven: This is what is decreed for you, Nebuchadnezzar. Your royal authority has been taken from you. You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals. Seven times will pass for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of the earth and gives them to anyone he wishes. (31-32)
- And immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. (33)

Do you remember the images that filled the news late in 2003? The first phase of our war with Iraq had been completed...and after much searching, Saddam Hussein was found...hiding in a hole in the ground. And this once proud ruler—who defied the US and the UN...who boasted that we'd be face the 'mother of all wars' if we were foolish enough to attack—turned up defeated and dirty and unshaven...with doctors checking his hair for lice and his swabbing his throat for a DNA sample. I suspect it was kind of like that for Nebuchadnezzar.

You see: leadership is a stewardship...and not just the leadership of nations, but the leadership of life—the way we lead our families...the way we lead our jobs...the way we lead our money and our time and our talents. It's all a gift, given to us by a sovereign God. And we will be held accountable.

### **Our Letter to the President**

So if we could write a letter to the next President, perhaps we'd be doing him a favor if we asked him, "Mr. President, what about your leadership? Who will call you to account?"

- After all, you're a remarkable man. You grew up in a single-parent household and were more-or-less raised by your grandmother. You lacked the economic advantages that many others enjoy...and yet, you worked hard. You went to Harvard and graduated near the top of your class. You rocketed to the top of the political pile...and defeated opponents who were far better known and much more experienced than you.
- And now people hang on your every word. Not just our nation, but our world waits to see how you're going to respond to the challenges of our time. But pride goes before the fall, Mr. President...and it would be so easy to be proud. Who will call you to account?

- Will it be the voters who put you in office? Obviously, you owe them a lot...and there's no doubt that you want to satisfy their expectations. But voters are a fickle bunch—the ones who love you today may hate you tomorrow. And besides: Do voters really vote for what's right—or what's personally beneficial? Will you be accountable to them?
- Will it be other leaders—leaders of Congress, or of nations or of industry? You've got a lot of noble goals, Mr. President...but you can't accomplish them alone...and some of your potential partners won't care that much about the needs of others. They'll be seeking approval and power—profit and position. Will they be the ones you answer to?
- Or will you answer to a higher power? Will you be accountable to the Most High God, who is sovereign over the kingdoms of the earth and who gives them to anyone he wishes? Will let His Word be your guide and look to the interests of others? Will you constantly remind yourself—not how good you are—but how great He is? Will you be a good steward of this incredible gift that you've been given?

### Our Letter to Us

Of course, if we're going to ask this question of our next President...then we probably need to ask it of ourselves as well. We may never occupy the highest position in the land...and people may never open the newspaper, hoping to find out what we said or did that day. But we've still been given a gift. We've been made the 'leaders' of our time...and our relationships...and our resources. Who will call us to account?

- Will we live for the sake of ourselves...focused on our agenda and our happiness? Will we live for the approval of others...always seeking to earn the praise of our friends or neighbors or teachers or bosses?
- Or will we live for the Most High God? Will we seek first His kingdom and His righteousness? Will we love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength? Even when it's inconvenient...and requires sacrifice...will we take up our cross and follow—because we know that only the way of the cross leads to abundant life?

It's not easy, you know. As I wrote this message, I struggled with just how hard it is to live in the awareness that there is One who will call us to account. I try not to be proud...and thankfully, I usually screw-up just enough to keep my pride in check. But still—if I stop to think about my life...to realize how richly I've been blessed...and then to consider what I've done with those blessings...

The economy is looking pretty bleak these days...but has provided for me abundantly. I've got a house to live in, and food to eat, and enough income to meet my needs and more. But it's scary...how much of that abundance ends up getting spent on me and mine...and how little of it ends up being spent on others.

- I don't aim to be greedy...but I get some stuff...and then, of course, I get the stuff that goes with my stuff. And then my stuff needs to be stored and cleaned and repaired. And pretty soon the truth of my life is that "I'm being blessed to consume blessings" ...instead of, "I'm being blessed to be a blessing."
- Who will call me to account?

I've got a wonderful wife and a beautiful little girl... and I get to be the pastor of a awesome church. And right here in this congregation, I've got friends and encouragers and people who care. And you'd think that it would be the easiest thing in the world to give all that love back... to be a good steward of those relationships by looking out for the needs of others and making time to listen and to serve.

- But it is so easy to blow it...to get so focused on my 'to do' list that I miss the needs of others...to get so tired that I don't make time for anyone else...to get so discouraged—that instead of challenging myself & others with what's true and what's possible, I'm tempted to settle for what's acceptable and doable.
- Who will call me to account?

I like to think that I'm a Christian. And that means that I have been given the most wonderful gift of all—the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ my Lord.

I've been entrusted with the good news that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself and no longer counting our sins against us. And you'd think that I would be OVER-FLOWING WITH JOY...eager to tell others about Jesus and his kingdom and the life that God offers.

- But without my even noticing, my faith can become a private thing...where I read my Bible and I pray my prayers and I go to church...and I never get around to taking my light out from under that bushel. The Bible may say that I am the 'salt of the earth,' but when do I ever get out of the salt-shaker.
- Who will call me to account?

Well for starters...I hope you will. I hope that you'll affirm me and challenge me and correct me...not just so that I can be a better pastor, but so that I can be a better person. But even more than I hope that you will hold me to account, I know that God will. I know that He is Lord...and I am not. I know that he discerns the thoughts and intents of our hearts. And I know that Heaven rules...and we will be held accountable.

### **The Rest of the Story**

That can be a scary thought—this idea that God will hold us accountable for the way we handle the leadership of our lives. But the good news is that the One who calls us to account is the same One who loved the world so much that He gave His only begotten Son. The Most High God is our judge...but He is a gracious and compassionate judge...slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

That's why the story of Nebuchadnezzar doesn't end with him running around in the forest eating grass like an animal. Instead, after he's been humbled, he raises his eyes to heaven, and his sanity is restored. And in what is truly a remarkable speech to come from a pagan ruler, he says this:

- Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation...He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth...everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble. (4:34-37)

Of course, just like Nebuchadnezzar, our story can end in restoration, too...because the God who calls us to account is always more eager to give than we are to ask. He's always more ready to forgive than we are to confess. As one pastor put it, "Christ sends none away empty but those who are full of themselves."<sup>ii</sup>

This Tuesday, our nation will inaugurate a new President...and I hope that each of us will be faithful to pray for him and his administration...because he will be held accountable...and so will we.

- Together, let us pray and live in such a way that God's purposes will be accomplished through us...so that one day, He can say to us all: Well done my good and faithful servants.

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<sup>ii</sup> Donald Gray Barnhouse in Revelation. *Leadership*, Vol. 1, no. 2. Cited at [www.PreachingToday.com/17243](http://www.PreachingToday.com/17243).