

Humiliations Galore

In the name of him who for our sakes humbled himself—even unto death on a cross, dear friends in Christ: This evening's Scripture reading, the fourth chapter of the Book of Daniel, has got to be one of the most unusual sections of the entire Bible, for it consists almost entirely of a declaration made not by the Lord, nor by one of his prophets, nor even by someone who was part of God's chosen people Israel. Rather it's an official statement and testimonial of the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar, who ruled the Babylonian Empire for the first several decades of the sixth century before Christ. Not only is it unique in the biblical record, it's also highly unusual for any piece of ancient literature. As a general rule, kings in ancient times never allowed anything that was in any way uncomplimentary about them to be published. But here Nebuchadnezzar seems quite content announcing to the whole world that he was flagrantly guilty of the sin of pride, and that the Most High God brought him down not just a few notches, but all the way to total humiliation – causing him to lose his mind and behave like an animal. He even praises the Lord for doing it. So, what's up with this strange account? And why is it part of the Bible?

To answer these questions, it will be helpful for us to take a step backward and get a panoramic view of a main theme that is constantly being stressed throughout the Book of Daniel. It's this: that the Lord God of puny little Israel, a nation that is politically insignificant, culturally irrelevant, financially unstable, militarily weak, and that is populated by a people who are known throughout the world for being obstinate, scheming, standoffish, and not particularly faithful or obedient to their one God – *that* God, he is in fact the Lord, King, and Creator of the entire universe. He's the only God there is, and he is in control of all things. Furthermore, he is driving world history, taking an active hand and causing things to happen, raising up kings and kingdoms and toppling empires according to his wisdom and will, all in order to accomplish everything he has planned and promised to do for his chosen people.

Try to understand what a bold and seemingly irrational claim that would have been in ancient times. Again, remember that everyone except for the Israelites were polytheists. They believed in many gods. And each nation and people had their own set of deities. But each group didn't imagine for a moment that their gods were exclusive to the others. No, it was "We've got our gods, and they have theirs. Our gods look out for us (at least they do sometimes), and their gods do the same for them." In fact, the thinking was that you could get a good idea who was who among the gods by measuring the relative success and prosperity of the various nations. If your nation was rich and powerful, it was because your gods were mighty and they were for the moment pleased with you. But if your nation was weak and pathetic, it was because so were your gods – or maybe they were angry with you for some reason.

There are other things we need to understand about these pagan gods. First, they weren't particularly interested or involved in the affairs of mere mortals. Mostly they spent their time doing god stuff with the other gods: throwing parties, feasting, drinking, pursuing their romantic interests, whatever. They were up there doing their thing, not down here with us. True, for a price their favor could be bought, or if you offended them they might cause you trouble; but other than that, they pretty much left you alone. The idea that they were actively controlling and guiding things on earth, or that they had any kind of long term plan—these were foreign concepts. To be sure, the pagan gods were basically like humans with superpowers. They weren't all powerful or all knowing. They didn't know what was going to happen tomorrow,

much less far into the future. Like the people on earth, they were flying by the seat of their pants and reacting to situations as they came up. They were also very territorial. The gods of Egypt stayed focused on Egypt. The gods of Greece watched over Greece; they didn't do things in Persia or Patagonia. So again, the assertion that there was just one all powerful and all knowing God, and that he was present and active in the lives of his people, and that he had a plan that he was carrying out that involved all peoples and nations—most folks in the ancient world simply could not have been able to grasp such ideas.

We saw evidence of this last week as we considered the account of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace. King Nebuchadnezzar simply couldn't understand why anyone who served as an official in his kingdom would refuse to worship the golden image of the god he set up. In his thinking it was: "This is Babylonian Empire. That's an image of chief god of Babylon – the god who made us what we are. Any official of the empire who fails to recognize that is a traitor and deserves to die." Case closed. Thus when these three Jewish men who served him refused to bow down to his idol, he had them thrown into the furnace.

What he saw then astonished him. He discovered that the God of Israel – a God he would have assumed was a rather minor character in the wider pantheon of divine beings owing to the relative piteous condition of his nation and people – that God had a long reach. He could operate here in Babylon. Just as astonishing to him was that this God *was willing* to save three of his own from the fire simply because they refused to acknowledge any God but him. Nebuchadnezzar was intrigued and impressed with this unusual God. Thus it was that he promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to positions of higher authority, and he issued a decree that no one in his empire was to speak against the God of Israel. But his overall thinking was still very pagan and polytheistic. To him the Lord was still just the God of Israel.

What we saw last time, though, was that the Lord God of Israel was working his will in all of this. It was he who raised up Nebuchadnezzar and set him as king over the most powerful empire in the world. And the reason he did this was because he intended Nebuchadnezzar to be his instrument to inflict his judgments on his faithless people in the land of Judah. They were practicing all kinds of evil and idolatry, and they were placing their trust for the security of their nation in their ability to negotiate political deals rather than trusting in the Lord. So the Lord used Babylon as his scourge to discipline his people and bring them to repentance and back to faith in him. Twice they took a beating: once in 604 BC when Daniel and his friends were taken into captivity along with several hundred others, and then again in 597 BC when a much larger group – some 15,000 people – was taken into exile.

The episode with the three men in the fiery furnace coincides with this second wave of exiles. This was also part of God's plan. The people taken into captivity would have been utterly demoralized. They could look forward to nothing but misery, suffering, and hunger in a foreign land. It would have seemed to them that Lord had abandoned them. They might have begun to believe that the gods of Babylon were stronger after all. For these exiles then to hear of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, how they put their trust in the Lord and refused to worship the gods of Babylon, and how the Lord was with them and saved them in the midst of the fire—what an encouragement that would have been! If the Lord was with them in their trial, surely he'll be with us too as we keep our hope and confidence in him. More than that, because the three men got promotions, they were in positions to help alleviate the suffering of their countrymen. So in all of this the Lord was using Nebuchadnezzar to serve his people and build up their faith.

Well, the Lord had one more important mission for Nebuchadnezzar. It turns out that God's people in the land of Judah were not getting the message. They weren't repenting and returning to the Lord. Sure, when the Babylonian army came putting the heat on them, they were all apologetic. "We're sorry, O Lord. We've sinned; please forgive us." But as soon as the pressure was off, it was back to business as usual with the idolatry and all the rest of it. That's what happened the first two times. The Babylonian army would come. They'd lay siege to Jerusalem, and eventually they'd broker a deal. The Jews would agree to pay more tribute and hand over hostages to be taken into exile; but the city itself remained intact, and most of its citizens weren't affected that much. "Hey, it's too bad about those people who were taken away; I'm sure glad I wasn't one of them."

And there was a certain twofold smugness about it. First, the people who remained in Jerusalem assumed that the ones who were taken into exile were the worst of the lot. Obviously the Lord was punishing them for their sins. They must have been particularly wicked. Not like us. We're the good ones. God likes us, that's why he let us stay. Second, they thought they had an ace in the hold. The Temple of God stood in the center of Jerusalem. His holy presence hovered above the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. And they thought God would never allow his Temple to be defiled. So the thinking was that the city could not fall. The Lord wouldn't permit it. No matter how far we stray from him, no matter how much we ignore his commands, no matter how much we worship other gods, for the sake of his name the Lord will never allow the walls of Jerusalem to be breached or his Temple to be sacked. It just can't happen.

They were wrong. They were abusing God's grace and mercy. And through the prophets, Jeremiah in particular, the Lord told his people that if they rebelled again, this time he would allow the Babylonians to wipe them and their city off the map. But they didn't listen. They didn't believe it. They put Jeremiah in prison for speaking blasphemy against the Temple, and they listened instead to the false prophets who told them what they wanted to hear. They continued in their sin and their rebellion against the Lord. And counting on support from Egypt, they also tried once again to rebel against Babylonian control.

The year was 589 BC, by which time Daniel and his friends had been in Babylon 15 years, and the exiles from the second wave had been there 8 years. Nebuchadnezzar dispatched an army to besiege Jerusalem. This time there would be no deals. He realized he needed to make an example of a city that rebelled against him one time too many. It's kind of like a loan shark who has a lot of clients. Sometimes you have to break a leg so that everyone gets the message: you pay me the easy way or the hard way. The siege lasted several years. The city didn't fall until 586, and it's hard to imagine the suffering that went on in the city before it fell. About a third of the population died due to starvation, disease, and the deprivations of the siege. Those who survived up to that point were reduced to cannibalism. They also ate pigeon droppings, the leather from their sandals, and even gnawed the bark off of trees in their desperation to find something to put into their stomachs. When the Babylonians finally breached the walls, another third of the population was slaughtered by the sword. It was a bloodbath. Those who survived weren't taken into exile; instead they were sold as slaves and scattered throughout the empire. And the Lord allowed the unthinkable to happen: his holy Temple, the place where his glory dwelled among his people, was defiled and torn down. It was leveled to the ground along with the rest of the city. The Lord allowed himself to be humiliated in front of the whole world. Because of the sin and rebellion of his people, he allowed himself to appear to be weak and unable to defend his holy place – which, of course, foreshadowed another day when a different Temple of God (by which I mean the body of Jesus) would also be destroyed for the sins of God's people. Then too the Lord would appear to be

weak and helpless – he'd allow himself to be humiliated – while he himself carried the penalty of our sins.

Well, if the inhabitants of Jerusalem were surprised when the Babylonians sacked their city, even more surprised and devastated were the Jews who were already in exile – the ones who had been carried off years before. You see, the one hope they clung to was the idea that one day they would be allowed to return home – to return to Judah, their homeland, and to Jerusalem the city of God's abiding presence. Now it was gone. And it is impossible for me to overstate how deeply hurt and disillusioned they were by these events. The only parallel I can think of would be to imagine what the disciples felt when Jesus died on the cross. Then all their hopes and dreams came crashing down. Everything was over. And they couldn't understand why the Lord would allow such a thing to happen. If these captive Jews in Babylon felt abandoned by God when they began their exile, now things were a thousand times worse.

And this, more than anything, explains the reason the Lord humbled king Nebuchadnezzar as we heard in this evening's lesson. The Lord needed to remind his people that despite all appearances, despite the all things they'd suffered and the fact that now Jerusalem was gone, he was still very much in control of all things. By humbling Nebuchadnezzar, the man most responsible for humiliating him and his people, the Lord let them know that even the most powerful king on earth still answers to him and performs his will. He let his people know that he still had a plan for them, and that he was carrying it out. And his plan was this: the proud abusers of his grace in Jerusalem were never going to repent. He had no choice but to eliminate them. He used Babylonians to do it. And in the fullness of time he was going to bring back the captives Jews, the ones who had suffered humiliation and been made repent and to rely on God's grace, and let them rebuild the nation. He was going to resurrect them as people and a kingdom in his Promised Land.

And as an added benefit in all of this, the Lord brought one very proud pagan king to his knees in repentance. Nebuchadnezzar came to understand that he too was a subject of the Most High God, and that he was totally dependent upon him for everything.

And these are the chief lessons for us this evening: that we too are totally dependent upon the Lord for everything. And in all circumstances we can be certain that he has a good and gracious plan for us, and that he is carrying it out. This is true regardless of what happens. In his mercy, there are times when he must bring us low, inflicting various trials and hardships. He does what's necessary to knock the pride out of us and bring us to repentance and to complete reliance upon him. He did it for Daniel and his three friends. He did it for the Jews in exile. He even did it for king Nebuchadnezzar. Therefore you can be certain he will do it for you because of his infinite love which he showed you in the humiliation of his Son, Christ Jesus our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!