

DANIEL

Part 4: "Pride Before the Fall"

Daniel 4–5

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Summary

"Pride Before the Fall" explores the stories of Daniel 4 and 5, which display the disastrous consequences of pride. Observe the cautionary tale of Nebuchadnezzar's madness. Then, as the narrative progresses, we will learn about Belshazzar's prideful feast, which is shockingly interrupted by a mysterious prophecy on the wall. Within these ancient tales, we will discover the dehumanizing impact of pride, its potential for self-destruction, and the better promise of Christ, our high and humble king.

Acknowledgement of Loss

Before we turn our attention to Scripture, I wanted to acknowledge that this week, one of our beloved elders, David May, went to be with the Lord. The picture displayed now is a photograph of David preaching the gospel at the chapel of Faith City ministries.

We grieve David's loss, but because of Christ, we grieve with hope. We rejoice that our brother is reunited with his wife Shelia and that as he welcomed so many people into the doors of this church, he has now been welcomed into his Father's house by his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

May we seek to honor his humble example as we look into God's Holy Word today.

Scripture Reading

"O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty. And because of the greatness that he gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whom he would, he killed, and whom he would, he kept alive; whom he would, he raised up, and whom he would, he humbled. But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he dealt proudly, he was brought down from his kingly throne, and his glory was taken from him. He was driven from among the children of mankind, and his mind was made like that of a beast, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys. He was fed grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, until he knew that the Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom he will. And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven. And the vessels of his house have been brought in before you, and you and your lords, your wives, and your concubines

have drunk wine from them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know, but the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored. "Then from his presence the hand was sent, and this writing was inscribed. And this is the writing that was inscribed: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN. This is the interpretation of the matter: MENE, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; TEKEL, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; PERES, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians" (Dan 5:18–28).

Introduction

For the last few weeks, we've been studying the Old Testament book of Daniel.

Daniel is book set in a dark time when the people of God had been conquered by the empire of Babylon and sent to live in exile. Daniel lived at a time when the powers of this world looked invincible and irresistible. But as a prophet of God, Daniel was given the vision to see what is true and what it means to be God's people, living for his kingdom in a world that is not our own.

As we've seen already, Babylon represents more than just an empire of ancient Near East society. Babylon is a reincarnation of Babel. It is a representation of the pride of all kings and kingdoms of this world.

And just like the people of God during Daniel's time, we will be confronted by the kings and kingdoms of this world. We may be tempted to cower before them in fear or fall prey to their seduction and charms of their power.

But the book of Daniel helps us see how when the kingdom of this world claims sovereignty over life and creation, there is still a God who remains sovereign over all. And there is a day coming when all that is lifted up in pride will be brought low.

Today, the book of Daniel will give us a glimpse of God's absolute hatred of pride.

But what is pride? Here's a quick definition that I think will serve us throughout our time today: **Pride** is a sinful attitude of the heart in which we place ourselves in the place of God. **Pride** says, "I'm better and more important than other people; I don't need help and I don't need to listen to or answer to anyone—even God." **Pride** is a refusal to acknowledge our dependence as creatures upon our Creator.

The section of Scripture we will cover today spans the entirety of both chapter 4 and chapter 5 of Daniel. Those chapters contain 67 long verses, composed of just shy of 1500 words, which we will not have time to read today. These chapters recount two very different episodes in the prophet Daniel's life that are set decades apart from one another. But, as we will see, these two stories are also deeply connected. For they both display one big idea: **"Pride Before the Fall."**

So, for the rest of our time, we will walk through the big movements of this section of Scripture, and as we do so, we will explore several aspects of pride **1.) The Dehumanization of Pride, 2.) The Self-Destruction of Pride, 3.) The Doom of Pride.**

Exposition

1.) The Dehumanization of Pride

Chapter 4 is one of the more bizarre chapters of the Bible. It is written by King Nebuchadnezzar himself; a pagan king and arguably one of the great villains of Scripture. And it is a first-hand account of how he goes mad and briefly reduced to nothing more than a mindless beast.

Like many chapters of Daniel, it begins with a dream. And in this dream, Nebuchadnezzar sees a tree so tall and so glorious that it reaches into the heavens and can be seen from all the ends of the earth. Birds and beasts find their shelter in its shade and are nourished by its fruit. But a mysterious heavenly being comes down and pronounces judgment against the tree, and the mighty tree is at once chopped down.

Nebuchadnezzar has no idea what it all means. Still, he knows Daniel has the proven ability to discern and interpret dreams. So Daniel is called for, but when he hears the dream described, he is struck with fear and trepidation. He cries out to Nebuchadnezzar, “O king, may this dream be about your enemies and those who hate you!” But Nebuchadnezzar presses him for more.

Daniel then braces to be the bearer of very bad news. He says, “You, O king, are the tree. You have grown great in prosperity and power, but you have also grown great in pride. And now heaven has spoken: you will be cut down, you will be cast out, and you will be made like a beast, until you know where all authority comes from.” Daniel then pleads for his king to repent and turn away from his wickedness and his abuse of power.

Now, as a sidebar, I want to make one issue clear. Nebuchadnezzar’s sin is not that he has power. His sin is that he is abusing his power and allowing his power to puff himself up in pride.

But power itself is not evil. In fact, when God created humanity, he created man and woman in his image and likeness. And part of that image and likeness was to possess dominion over his creation (cf. Gen 1:28). God is the ultimate king and author of creation, but he created man and woman to rule over earth as his representatives (or vice-regents).

But our first parents rejected God’s wise and just rule. In Adam, humankind ate the forbidden fruit in our quest to put ourselves in the place of God. The powers of sin and death were introduced into the world. And now, the good thing that is power has twisted into the evils of abuse of authority, war, violence, murder, oppression, and unyielding pride.

Nebuchadnezzar is guilty of all this. At this time, he is likely the most powerful person on the planet. And he has built his kingdom on the blood of the broken. But despite all of his impressive power, heaven is not blind to his injustice. Indeed, the court of heaven has cast judgment upon the king of Babylon.

But, once Daniel's reveals the terrifying interpretation of this dream, the king does not appear to hear or heed the prophet's words of warning at all. He simply does not think that it is possible that he could ever lose his kingdom—much less turn into a beast.

However, the dream comes to pass. One year later, Nebuchadnezzar walks upon the ramparts of his palace, gazing at the city of Babylon that he has exalted to such glory and power. He says within his heart, "Look at all my glory! My walled city is invulnerable. My treasuries are filled with the wealth of nations. My hanging gardens are a wonder of the world. My ziggurat temples reach into the heavens where the gods dwell!"

But, just then, he hears a voice fall from heaven. It is the judgment of God. The Lord God pronounces, "Nebuchadnezzar, for your pride, your power is now taken from you, your reason is taken from you, you will be driven out, and you will become like a beast of the earth."

And these words are fulfilled in the instant they are spoken. Scripture says, "*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 were like birds' claws*" (Dan 4:33).

The British painter and poet William Blake captures this terrifying scene in a work titled *Nebuchadnezzar*. Blake depicts the once glorious king who had pridefully lifted himself up in as no longer able to stand upright. The king of Babylon is now hunched over on all fours. His thickly matted hair covers his body like a mangy fur. His fingernails and toenails have grown into claws. His beard drags across the dirt in filthy locks.

The texture of his legs matches the bark of the twisted trees behind him, for he now blends into the very creation that he was supposed to rule. Once, he was feared and confident. Now, as you look into his eyes, he is confused and afraid.

Admittedly, this image is visually arresting. It is also weird, mysterious, and disturbing—as is the biblical text that inspired it. But, even more, it is *a haunting vision that this is where pride can lead us*.

Humans were created to have dominion over creation. But because of sin, we have become subject to creation and captive to the idols we serve.

For good or for ill, we *become* what we *behold* in worship.

Psalms 115 tells us that idols are blind and dumb. They have eyes but cannot see, ears but cannot hear, and mouths but cannot speak. And those who make idols and trust in those idols become like them (Ps 115:4–8).

Now, because of history and archeology, we actually know Nebuchadnezzar's idol. We know the name and the image of the false god he served in place of the One True God. After all, Nebuchadnezzar was not just a king—he was the high priest of the false god Marduk, who was the patron god of Babylon and the spiritual embodiment of the empire. Notably, Marduk was symbolized as a lion [show [Lion of Marduk](#)], as seen here, depicted in one of the decorations of Babylon's city gate).

In pride, Nebuchadnezzar has bowed down to the idol of his own power and the power of Babylon. But it is a beastly perversion of true power. The king's pride and idolatry cause him to dehumanize people. But ultimately, that same idol robs Nebuchadnezzar of his own humanity [show [Comparison](#)]. Now, Nebuchadnezzar has become like the beastly god and empire he worships.

This is a vision of warning that we can apply to our own lives and culture. Our idols cause us to dehumanize one another. The idol of greed reduces people to resources or commodities. The idol of lust reduces people to objects of pleasure. The idol of power causes us to demonize those who disagree with our politics and our will to power. But Daniel 4 shows us those same idols dehumanize us as well; we become like mindless beasts that bite and devour one another.

What are the ways you have seen idols dehumanize yourself or others?

The solution to pride is repentance. For that reason, when Jesus began his ministry, he began with the royal announcement, "Repent the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"

In Christ, we are offered a new kingdom, a new way of life that is refreshingly different than the prideful kingdoms of man. In this way, the invitation into the way of Jesus is the invitation to become truly human.

And no matter what you have done or how hopeless you might feel, as long as you draw breath, there is time to repent. Today, you can turn away from the sin that seeks to harm you and toward God who is able to save you.

In fact, for as weird and scary as it is, this chapter ends with hope. Nebuchadnezzar repents and humbly praises God. He proclaims, *"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 among 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?'"* (Dan 4:34–35).

Now, I doubt the King of Babylon would have solid enough theology to pass an ordination exam just yet. He likely has no clue about the history of Israel, the law of Moses, or the promises of God. He's probably still a polytheist who believes in multiple gods and goddesses. But he now knows, without a doubt, that the God of Daniel is the Most High God—the God above all gods.

2.) The Self-Destruction of Pride

There is zero transition between chapters 4 and 5 of Daniel. We go right from the words of King Nebuchadnezzar's praise into, "*King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand*" (Daniel 5:1).

This is not sloppy writing. Rather, this is an intentional choice that shows the connection between these two chapters. Nevertheless, the events of chapter 5 occur years—even decades—later than the events of chapter 4.

So, what is Daniel 5 about? It is a scene that we can call "Belshazzar's feast."

And who is this Belshazzar? Belshazzar is the new king. But by the time of Belshazzar, Babylon was a late-stage empire in the very twilight of its former power. But that will not stop the king from throwing an opulent and wasteful party.

Whatever lesson King Nebuchadnezzar had learned about humility before the Most High God had been long forgotten by the time of Belshazzar's Babylon. Now, Babylon is no longer defined by ambition for glory. It is instead defined by crude indulgence and unrestrained gratification. It is an empire drunk with power and pleasure.

Like the decadence of Rome just before its fall, Babylon's craving to consume overpowers the motivation to build and govern and rule. Disordered desire has not curved inward upon itself until it starts to consume itself by its own pride. This how empires folded and fallen throughout all of time.

But the catalyst for final judgment comes, oddly enough, from the king's choice of dinnerware. If you recall from chapter 1 of Daniel, when Babylon conquered Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar had forcibly taken holy vessels from the temple in Jerusalem. For years, these holy vessels had been stored away. But now, Belshazzar will defile them and use them to entertain his dinner guests. He will what belongs to God and use it to worship his own idols!

Immediately, a hand appears and begins writing mysterious words on the wall where the feast is being held. This exact moment [show "*Belshazzar's Feast*"] was memorably portrayed in a painting titled *Belshazzar's Feast* by the Dutch Baroque master Rembrandt Van Rijn.

Rembrandt captures the shock and terror that King Belshazzar and his guests experience as the hand appears. The startled king rises to his feet as his eyes open wide.

Others clasp their hands and flinch backward. Multiple people spill their goblets of wine on their fine clothing.

But it is also notable that the feast takes place in utter darkness. In fact, the only source of illumination radiates from the light of God's word. But none present at the feast have eyes to see what the words of God reveal.

The biblical text goes on to say that the queen (more likely the queen-mother) in this environment of confusion suddenly remembers the stories of a man named Daniel, who once served the kingdom. This Daniel was said to have possessed the wisdom and understanding of the gods. Now, by this time, Daniel is a much older man, but the new king will call him out of retirement to solve the mystery of the writing on the wall.

When Daniel arrives at the scene, the king tries to motivate him by telling him that he will give him power and wealth if he can discern the meaning of the words. But upon looking at the words of the wall, Daniel tells the king that he can keep his gifts. All the honor and glory that Babylon can give will soon no longer be a currency that matters.

Instead, Daniel begins to issue a word of stern correction and rebuke. Though an exile in a foreign land, he speaks truth to power. He recounts the tale of Daniel chapter 4, which he just studied; he recounts how the king's predecessor, Nebuchadnezzar, had been humbled by God for his pride and later restored when he repented. He says, "You knew this story and you knew the lesson it taught. But you neglected the warning, and now you will bear the consequences."

The message written on the wall is, "*Mene Mene Tekel Parsin.*" Daniel immediately recognizes these words and he immediately knows what they mean.

"Mene Mene" means "your days have been numbered. There is a finite limit to your power and a finite number of days you will live."

"Tekel" means "You have been weighed; you have been judged, evaluated and found lacking."

"Parsin (or Peres)," simply means "Persia." It is the name of the kingdom that will conquer Babylon. Belshazzar's authority will be taken from him and given to another.

And unlike the end of chapter 4, chapter 5 ends with no evidence of contrition or repentance or fear of the Lord on the part of Belshazzar. As far as we know, the party went on. But Scripture tells us, "*That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed*" (Dan 5:30).

The Babylonian Empire was ended in an instant and replaced by the new power of Persia.

And from historical records, we know that when Persia sacked the city of Babylon, it was a relatively bloodless event. The Babylonians apparently didn't resist, and some

residents even welcomed the rule of the Persians upon their arrival because they were so dissatisfied with the rulers of Babylon. In other words, Persia did not destroy Babylon from the outside—pride had already destroyed Babylon from within.

The tale of Belshazzar's feast reminds us that we have one and only life. Our days are numbered, and there is wisdom in knowing this truth. One day, we will be held accountable.

So, are we using gifts that God has given us for his worship? Or are we using those gifts for our own pleasure and glory?

Are we walking in the light of God's word and living for what is eternal? Or are we feasting in the dark on emptiness and chasing temporary trinkets and toys?

Like the gold chain and purple robe with which the king wanted to bribe Daniel, anything the world can give us will one day be useless. But a life that is hidden in Christ is eternal (cf. Col 3:3).

Prideful self-indulgence leads to self-destruction. But humility is the path to life. Or, as a rabbi from Galilee would later famously teach, *"Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it"* (Luke 17:33).

3.) The Doom of Pride

These two stories relate universal truth: *"...God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble"* (James 4:6).

If you are determined to pridefully assert your own independence against any limitation; if you feel compelled to live by the myth that you are self-sufficient; if you are convinced that you have nothing to learn, that you are better than most people, and more important than most people; if you use whatever power or influence you possess to only to benefit yourself and indulge your desires, you are setting yourself in direct opposition to an infinitely powerful God who will bring forth justice.

And it is not going to work out well for you. The pride of men is doomed.

A day will come when those who stiffen their necks in pride will be broken beyond healing.

But there is also a day coming when the humble will be exalted, the poor in Spirit will be given a kingdom, and the meek will inherit the earth.

Now, some of you may say, "Okay, that sounds nice, preacher: But that is not the *real* world."

In the real world, power is what matters. Power is what gets things done. In the real world, the prideful win and get all the attention, and those who choose humility, simplicity, charity, and integrity are often taken advantage of and forgotten.

And I agree that what the Bible says about the powerful and the weak, and the proud and the humble, seems like an upside-down view of reality. It seems unrealistic and impractical.

But it is in fact our sin-fractured world that is upside down. And a kingdom is coming that will set the world to rights. And that kingdom is more real than our world could ever be.

For this reason, I love the words Psalm 37. It is a word of exhortation and encouragement for the weak, the weary, the oppressed, and the victims of those who have abused power and endured injustice. It is a Psalm that shows us the true nature of power that the prideful cannot see, and it is a Psalm of promise that gives us hope.

It reads: *“Fret not yourself because of evildoers; be not envious of wrongdoers! For they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb. Trust in the LORD, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness. Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday. Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices! Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil. For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land. In just a little while, the wicked will be no more; though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there. But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace”* (Psalm 37:1–11).

The good news is one day, all evil will end. Despite all the havoc the pride of evil men has brought upon this world, justice will come because our just and righteous king is coming.

Conclusion

Every king and kingdom of this world who has exalted themselves in pride will one day be humbled. But Jesus is the king who humbled himself to the point of death on the cross. And that is the reason he is now forever exalted as the resurrected Lord of all.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we rightly beware of the trappings of pride and embrace the better way of dependence upon a God who gives grace to the humble. May we fix our eyes upon our King Savior who is gentle and lowly, but who has been given the name above all names. May we humble ourselves in the sight of the Lord that he may lift us up.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Community

- 1.) This discussion will cover the narratives of chapters four and five of the book of Daniel. These passages may be too long to read out loud in a discussion group. So, you may want to email or text your group members and encourage them to read these passages before your gospel community meets. Begin the discussion by recounting these stories in your own words.
- 2.) Reflect on instances in your life where unchecked pride may have led to negative consequences. How can you learn from Nebuchadnezzar's and Belshazzar's stories to avoid similar pitfalls?
- 3.) Explore the idea of idols in today's society. How do modern-day idols dehumanize individuals and communities, and what steps can be taken to break free from their influence?
- 4.) Discuss the concept of humility and its impact on personal growth. Share examples of individuals or experiences that embody humility and its positive outcomes. How does Christ display his power and greatness through his humility?