

Sermon—December 11-12, 1999
Rich Nathan
Daniel: Thriving in a Hostile World
Daniel 4

The Ultimate Source of our Problems

Well, the political campaign is beginning to heat up as we head into a presidential election year. As I listen to the candidates talk, one of the questions that occurs to me, which I would love to ask each candidate, is “What do you think the essential problem is in America with people? I mean, I know we have lots of problems and we have lots of misery, but Politician A, who thinks you deserve to be in the White House for four years and be the most powerful person on earth, tell me why you deserve this office by sharing with us your perceptive diagnosis – what the ultimate problem is in America. Why aren’t we happier than we are, why aren’t we more at peace with each other? Why is there so much violence? So much drug use? Mr. Politician, what do you think the ultimate problem is?”

To hear some politicians you would imagine that the ultimate problem in America is government is not big enough. That if only we let the politicians, bureaucrats and this particular person take over another area of life – more control of the school systems, more control of physicians, more control of insurance companies or business – to hear some talk you would think that the ultimate problem in America is the small and relatively insignificant size of our government. Just multiply programs by ten-fold or a thousand-fold. Yeah, that’s the ticket.

I would love to have an opportunity to really hear from the people who want to occupy the most powerful office in America what they really believe is at the root of our problems and difficulties. Is the root of our problems the absence of gun control? Too many guns? Too many violent videos? Too many sexually explicit movies? Divorce? Health care? Racism?

These are problems, but are they the ultimate problem?

If you were to turn to the psychologists and the therapists and say to them, “What do you think the ultimate problem is?” you might hear that the problem is unmet needs. That people are walking around like empty cups with unmet needs – a need for affirmation, a need for security, a need for meaningful work, a need for creativity and self expression and self actualization. And it is all of these unmet needs that cause us to be miserable. If people could just realize that they are significant and secure, then everyone would be happy.

Other psychologists would say, “Oh come on now. The issue isn’t unmet needs. The reason why people are miserable is because of terrible patterning in their family of origin. People simply lack the skills necessary to navigate life successfully. What we need is a lot of skills training – parenting skills, marriage skills, life skills.” If the experts could simply train you on how to behave, then you would be happy.

Or perhaps the issue is a wrestling between your unconscious urges and this parental figure in your conscience battling things out, creating neurotic repression. Or the problem is addictions or bad genes. Or bad mothers or fathers. All of these are problems – very serious problems.

Bad mothers, bad fathers, psychological unhealth, bad patterning, unmet needs are nowhere close to being at the root of our unhappiness or misery as human beings. The amazing thing, on the eve of this millennium, is that most Christians could not quickly identify what is at the root of their own unhappiness, or at the root of their marital unhappiness. Most Christians could not tell you why it is ultimately that they have conflicts with other people. Why so much fighting? Why so much irritability? Why so much hurt caused to each other?

The popular view is that Christians think that the ultimate sin is sexual. That at the root of all of our problems is sexual immorality – fornication, adultery, homosexual sin. In some churches you might think that drinking or gambling or cigarette smoking was at the root.

We American Christians have absolutely forgotten what all of the great teachers in the history of the church taught regarding what it at the bottom of all of our misery. If you were to talk to the great Augustine or Martin Luther or John Calvin or Thomas Aquinas or Dante, or the apostle James or the apostle Paul or Isaiah the Prophet, do you know what they would say the root of all of our misery is? They would say the problem is pride. At the core of every human heart is this great sin of pride – the desire to excel over other people. To have your will done, your feelings, your opinions rule the day. Pride. The desire in every human being to establish their own little kingdom. To crush opposition under our reign.

C. S. Lewis, the great English Christian writer, once remarked that pride is the kind of sin that almost everyone hates when they see it manifested in someone else. I hate the fact that that person always demands their own way. They can't acknowledge faults.

They are very demanding, self-centered, self-consumed, self-concerned. Pride is the kind of thing we despise when we encounter it in someone else. Someone else's self-absorption, self-pity – the way they tilt everything for their own advantage. But Lewis astutely observed that pride is the one sin that almost no one confesses about themselves.

His observation, by the way, is quite true. As a pastor for many years, I have had people confess to me adultery, abortion, alcoholism, drug abuse, homosexual affairs. I have people confess to me involvement in witchcraft and the occult and various kinds of crimes. But I honestly cannot remember anyone ever saying to me, “You know, Rich, the problem I think I have with this other person, the problem in my marriage, the reason why I am so unhappy is because I am filled with pride. I always want my own way. I love lifting myself up above everyone else. I very much enjoy stepping on other people. I am extraordinarily manipulative. I am quite self-centered, arrogant, pushy, self-assertive. I bully or use emotional blackmail or cry or use guilt. But it is all bottomed in my overwhelming pride.”

Have you every told anyone that? Gone through a thorough analysis of the cause of your problems, your marital problems, your personal unhappiness, your failures and then said, “As I spin the coin around over and over again, it is quite apparent to me that the problem is that I am one of the most prideful people in this city. I never fail to try to get my own way.”

It is not only the rare person who can confess to pride, it is the rare counselor who will point it out. Because counselors know that you are stepping on a land mine when you say, however gently, “Well, friend, I think your problem is that you are consumed with yourself. You are so full of yourself that you are weighed down. And if you would

become a bit more self-forgetful, less absorbed with yourself, less proud, you would be happier.”

So much of the problem that people have with churches is that they feel the pride of religious people. Very often religion can make us more proud. We parade around as if we are really together, really good people with no struggles, no family problems, no bad habits.

Today what I am going to do is try to take an unblinking, clear-eyed look at the issue that makes us really miserable in life. We are not only going to look at pride, but we are going to look at how pride can be healed in us. Delightfully, we are going to find that it is not going to be healed by pretending, putting on a mask in which we pretend not to be very proud, pretending not to be good at something we are good at. As we continue this series from the book of Daniel, I have called today’s talk, “The Ultimate Source of our Problems.” Let’s pray.

Daniel 4:1-8

“King Nebuchadnezzar, to the peoples, nations and men of every language, who live in all the world: May you prosper greatly! It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me. How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an eternal kingdom; his dominion endures from generation to generation. I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at home in my palace, contented and prosperous. I had a dream that made me afraid. As I was lying in my bed, the images and visions that passed through my mind terrified me. So I commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be brought before me to interpret the dream for me. When the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners came, I told them the dream, but they

could not interpret it for me. Finally, Daniel came into my presence and I told him the dream. (He is called Belteshazzar, after the name of my God, and the spirit of the holy gods is in him.”

This whole chapter is a study of pride and its consequences. And we know that we are probably going to be dealing with pride when we encounter this little phrase in v. 4, “I, Nebuchadnezzar.” This would be a good chapter title for Daniel 4, “I, Nebuchadnezzar.” You see it again in v. 18, “This is a dream that I, King Nebuchadnezzar, had.” And then again in v. 34, “At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar,” And finally in v. 37, “I, Nebuchadnezzar...”

Pride is an I problem. It is the problem of being utterly absorbed with one’s self – one’s own needs, one’s own wants, one’s own desires, one’s own feelings. It reminds me of that telegram that I have referred to on occasion in other talks. There was this contest in the early part of this century by an English newspaper for the best essay in answer to the question, ‘What is wrong with the world?’ The English writer, GK Chesterton telegraphed back a two-word answer, “I am. –GK Chesterton.” I am.

We are getting to the root of the problem when we say I. Nebuchadnezzar says in v. 4, “I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at home in my palace contented and prosperous.” Literally, I was at ease. Nebuchadnezzar is saying, “I was fat and happy with a life so filled with indulgence and busyness and pleasure that I was completely clogged up in my ability to hear from God or be honest with myself.”

Have you ever felt just fat and happy and dull? Like the feeling you have when you have gotten done eating an enormous Thanksgiving dinner? You’ve had two heaping plates of food, and afterward you had to sample at least three of the pies. You walk away

from the table holding your stomach. Not the best condition for being able to hear from God, is it? Or do any deep thinking, is it?

What we see in the life of Nebuchadnezzar is God attempting to get through to this fat and happy person. But you know, the Bible indicates that God will often begin his attempts to get through to us with great gentleness. There will be an invitation extended, “Come,” God says, “Let’s reason together. Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Come to the water and drink.” God will begin with us with gentle invitations, gentle pressure, a drawing. He will begin by trying to woo you like a lover.

And if we don’t respond because we are dull, because we are stuffed with busyness and a distracted mind, and a thousand other things to worry about other than the voice of God, then God will become more assertive, more confrontational. He will give us something that will make us uneasy, that will trouble us – a troubling dream, a minor crisis, a clear call to repentance. There will be a shot across the bow.

And if this shaking doesn’t get through to us – the troubling dream, the minor crisis, the confrontation, then what we are going to see in Nebuchadnezzar’s life is that the sky falls on your head. We have to stop and be willing to pay attention and listen, especially when something is disturbing us. We suspect it may be from God.

The problem is that we will get shaken by an event – we will have a troubling thought, we feel like there may be a warning shot fired across our bow, we will experience some type of crisis, and what we do is, instead of pausing and allowing something really deep to happen in our life, we do whatever is minimally necessary to relieve the trouble. Let’s very quickly settle things down and continue to move on with

the way things have always been. Do you understand what I mean by doing what is minimally necessary to settle things down? The husband, who, because he doesn't want to really deal with the problem, says what is necessary in the moment to calm his upset wife, but there is no real change. The student who is a bad student, and does what is minimally necessary to pass the course. I mean the student, who if the bar is set at 2" above the ground is going to step at 2.5". They aren't aimed at excellence. They aren't aimed at learning. They just do whatever is minimally required.

That is the way we are when it comes to the voice of God.

So we feel like something is wrong. We are shaken a bit. What is our typical response? Do we follow that cord of thought all the way down to the place of truth, of meeting with God? Or do we say something is disturbing me and my conscience; I am not sure I did that quite right, so I had better divert myself by turning on the TV or by filling my mind with clutter – maybe clean the house, pick up the newspaper or go to the gym or read a book or go dancing with a friend. Anything other than being honest with God and with ourselves.

And what I mean by being honest with God and ourselves is, again, not just the minimum tip of the cap to God. We are analyzing a relational problem we have with someone else. We feel uneasy about a friendship or our dating relationship or an employment relationship or our marriage or our relationship with one of our children. What I mean by being honest with God and with ourselves is not just the very superficial, "Yeah, well probably the problem I have, in part, is pride. So I confess pride to you, God, in Jesus' Name, please forgive me. Amen." That is the minimalist approach. I just

want the pain to stop. I want my conscience to not bother me, but I really don't want truth and I don't want change.

Nebuchadnezzar was never able to say something like, "Well, as I look at the whole quality of my relationships, I see my manipulateness, the way that I arranged things for my own advantage. I see the fact that I regularly put a spin on this other person's motives and their words that is excessively negative. And I see that by way of contrast, I regularly justify and have reasons for all of my actions and words."

Nebuchadnezzar does what many people do when they experience trouble. He went to the counselors. V. 6-7, "So I commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be brought before me to interpret the dream for me. When the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners came, I told them the dream, but they could not interpret it for me."

Many will go to any counselor without a careful inquiry regarding the basis of this person's counsel. They will let people spin their theories and their interpretive grid regarding what is making you miserable. We turn our kids over to counselors and our marriages over and our futures over, but do we ever ask the question, "Is this counselor a person who hears from God? Is this counselor a person who has deep wisdom? Do they see things and speak from a rootedness in the Bible? Just because they have the name Counselor or even Christian Counselor doesn't mean that they are possessed by deep wisdom or a real interaction with the Spirit. They may tell us that the real problem is our unmet needs or our problem with self-esteem. They may never get around to the really meaningful heart of the matter that connects us with God.

Nebuchadnezzar went through counselor after counselor, who I am sure took a lot of his money, until he called in Daniel. He says in v.8, "Finally, Daniel came into my

presence and I told him the dream. (He is called Belteshazzar, after the name of my God, and the spirit of the holy gods is in him.)”

Fortunately, there are Daniels out there, faithful, biblical counselors who have the spirit of holy God in them. And I am grateful that some of the people in this church are Daniels, faithful, biblical counselors who have the spirit of God, who hear from God.

Well, let me take a little rabbit trail here for a moment, especially for those of you who are counselors, who are put in the position of having to speak into the life of another. You may be a kinship leader, a woman’s group leader, you may be one of our peer counselors. The book of Daniel is a marvelous book describing what biblical counsel sounds like. It doesn’t sound like warmed-over, secular themes regarding needs, conflicting expectations, and mere observance of family patterns. Daniel’s wisdom is a deeper wisdom. We see in v. 19 that Daniel is in no way self-reliant, but he is listening to God. It says, “Then Daniel (also called Belteshazzar) was greatly perplexed for a time, and his thoughts terrified him.”

His thoughts terrified him. He didn’t know what the dream was for a period of time, but he didn’t shoot from the hip or from common experience. He listened to God and the king said, “‘Belteshazzar, do not let the dream or its meaning alarm you.’ Belteshazzar answered, ‘My lord, if only the dream applied to your enemies and its meaning to your adversaries! The tree you saw, which grew large and strong, with its top touching the sky, visible to the whole earth, with beautiful leaves and abundant fruit, providing food for all, giving shelter to the beasts of the field, and having nesting places in its branches for the birds of the air—you, O king, are that tree. You have become great and strong;

your greatness has grown until it reaches the sky, and your dominion extends to distant parts of the earth.””

You, O king, are that tree. Here is a lesson for counselors and I would say for Bible teachers. Don't just speak in general truths way up here. Here, let's talk about justice rolling down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Daniel is brutally frank, directly confrontational. You, O king. You, my friend, have this problem. Like Nathan the prophet with King David, you are the man.

And he says, “You, O king, saw a messenger, a holy one, coming down from heaven and saying, ‘Cut down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump, bound with iron and bronze, in the grass of the field, while its roots remain in the ground. Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven; let him live like wild animals, until seven times pass by for him.’”

He doesn't just confront, he focuses Nebuchadnezzar's eyes upward toward God. “This is the interpretation, O king, and this is the decree the Most High has issued against my lord the king: You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle 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 men and gives them to anyone he wishes.”

Counselors, what a lesson here. Daniel is not a problem-centered counselor. He doesn't spend all of his time analyzing Nebuchadnezzar's troubles. He is thoroughly God centered. He says the problem is in your relationship with God.

Well, pride has made Nebuchadnezzar spiritually dull, and pride has made him unable and unwilling to acknowledge God's ultimate control. This whole book of Daniel is a

book about the sovereignty of God, the control of God, even over hostile rulers. If you look back at Daniel 1:1-2 we saw that it was the Lord, in v. 2, that delivered Johoiakim king of Judah into Nebuchadnezzar's hand, along with some of the articles from the Temple of God. The king wins victories that God gives him. We see in chapter 4, just as we saw in chapter 2, that the king understands dreams only when God reveals their meaning. And we saw in chapter 3, regarding Daniel's three friends, that the king can't ultimately even kill one of the people of God, if God doesn't permit him.

The book of Daniel is a book about the sovereignty of God, his ultimate control of life, even life in Babylon. And many people don't get this. They say, "Well, God does exercise control, but his control is over the heavens. Or God's control will be in the next world, in the millennium kingdom. Or maybe God exercises control now, but his control is regarding spiritual life and spiritual things, things like the Bible, prayer and good character traits. Or even maybe God's control is restricted to Christians and to the church."

It is the rare person who understands that God's control is over all things including all things that happen in Babylon. And this is what the dream was about. It was a dream about God's control over the king of Babylon. Now the king of Babylon was like this great tree that grew up, but was taken down for period of time by a messenger from God. And the king of Babylon was caused to lose his mind as a judgment from God. And why did all of this happen?

Look with me at v. 25, "You will be driven away from people and you will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle 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 men and gives them to anyone he wishes. 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.”

Where is God sovereign? Simply in the heavens? Is God sovereign simply over the spiritual realm? Is God sovereign simply over the church, over Christians, over the millennial kingdom? V. 25 tells us that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men. God is sovereign over Babylon. God is in control of the affairs of America and the American president and the American government. God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and women – the kingdom of Ohio State and the state government and Nationwide Insurance and Bank One. He is in control of every authority that rules in your life – your husband, your mother, your father, your boss, your pastor, emotions, financial situation, health, your ability to get pregnant or not, and your finances.

To say that the Most High is sovereign and that you must acknowledge that Heaven rules is a very humbling doctrine for men and women. This is one place that our pride comes directly into conflict with God in heaven. There is something that rises up within every man and woman, there is an anti-God rebellion that says, “No, you don’t rule. You are not sovereign, I am. I must be in control of a little bit of the world. My will must win the day. My plans, my strategies will secure my future.” The absolute sovereignty, the absolute rule and control of God is one of the most humbling doctrines to the pride of man.

But do you know when we are willing to acknowledge God’s absolute control and sovereignty? When God puts his fingers on our lives and we suddenly find ourselves fragile, weak and desperately in need. See, we are all for asserting our capacity to control

life events, boasting of our plans and our strategies, until life puts us in touch with our fragility. Like Nebuchadnezzar, we are so profoundly weak and can be taken down so quickly.

Some of you may have seen the article in the paper just the other day about a Dallas couple who has lost everything because of the growth of an unusual mold in their home. This couple in Dallas had the world by the tail. He is a 33 year old, fast track executive, I think, in some computer firm. He and his wife just built a 12,000 square foot house. It is a fairly good sized home. But he had at least enough room for a child or two. They showed a photo of the house and it was apparently filled with expensive furnishings.

About a year ago, they had just moved into this house, the wife and child began to get sick. They had some nosebleeds. But the husband became really sick. He began to have dizzy spells and problems with his short term memory and speech became slurred. People at work found that he was acting really weird. They couldn't rely on him for any major projects. He no longer was the go-getter, 70 hours a week, can do anything, take charge kind of guy.

He lost his job. And then they discovered that their home had these little tiny molds growing in it. As a result of these little molds growing in the wood, they now have a worthless house, no job, poor health. The tiniest thing, a mold – look how fragile we are. Something as small as a mold or virus.

There have been a number of news reports of the next deadly epidemic, which they say may be larger than the AIDS epidemic – Hepatitis C. About 4 million Americans are infected with it and many don't know it. It is four times as common in the US as the virus that causes AIDS, and it is a leading cause of chronic liver disease. Scientists

believe that the number of deaths attributed to Hepatitis C is going to triple in the next decade. We are so fragile that this virus, which is infinitely smaller than anything you can see, is killing thousands of people.

Some of you, like me, were saddened by the death of Walter Payton, who was otherwise known as “Sweetness”. He was an extraordinary football player, and he died recently at the age of 45. He used to stiff-arm and barrel over tackles as often as he dodged them. Mike Ditka, the football coach, called him the best player he had ever seen. The NFL commissioner said he was one of the greatest players in the history of the sport. He was absolutely awesome at every point in his career. He set nine school records when he was in college at Jackson State. He once scored 46 points in a college football game. That is a lot of points. Walter Peyton broke Jim Brown’s career rushing record. He is the all-time NFL leader in rushing. He holds the single game rushing record. He was voted several times the most valuable player in football. When he got out of football, he was a really bright guy and he went on to become a highly successful man. He owned and operated several companies and was a multi-millionaire. He was the founding director of a bank. He owned and operated an Indy car team. He was a wonderful person, extraordinary athlete, very bright, very wealthy and he had a rare liver disease and when they were treating, they discovered that he had liver cancer. By God’s grace, Walter was converted shortly before his death, and I believe he is now with Christ in heaven.

Do you understand the fragility of your body? A tiny blood clot in an artery, and we have a stroke. A tiny virus, and our liver is destroyed. A brief moment of inattention, and we have a car accident. But sadly, we don’t allow thoughts of our fragility to humble

us before Almighty God. We might fear, but then we sink back into the illusions popularized by all the health magazines and all the drug companies that our technology, our wisdom and our works can eliminate our fragility. We are so weak. Like Nebuchadnezzar, at the height of our success we can easily be felled.

Do we not see this over and over again in the world of business? Corporations greater than any single human being, with assets sometimes totalling more than whole nations, have been swept away into the dust bin of history. I recently got done reading a wonderful book that is a lesson in humility for the business person. The book was called "When Giants Stumble: Classic Business Blunders and How to Avoid Them" by a man named Robert Sobel. It talks about all of these great companies that no longer exist. Companies like Pan Am and Eastern and RCA and Woolworth's and Montgomery Wards. Some of them employed tens of thousands of people and had billions of dollars of assets. Life in this world is so fragile.

What is true of individuals and companies is true of countries. The Soviet Empire is no more. Communism has disappeared from most of the earth. There is no longer an East Germany. Albania, the most closed country in the world, now has gospel teams flocking to it.

Friend, do you understand that we live in a world of forces over which we have no control, none. We have no control over someone buying out a company that we are working for, or selling off some divisions. We get a new boss and we are suddenly out of work or thrust into a much higher position, but we are not in control. You work for the state government and there can be an election that utterly changes your job situation. Your office is reorganized, you are given new assignments. Your job is relocated. Your

child gets into drugs. You miscarry in pregnancy. Your spouse wants a divorce. Your parent shows signs of Alzheimer's.

God is trying to get through to us Nebuchadnezzars. He is saying, "Stop living with your illusions that you rule when you don't. Acknowledge that there is only one who is sovereign." Must we be taken down by the fragility of our own life in this world before we say that there is someone who is greater than us, someone bigger?

And it is not only God's rulership that humbles us, but God's grace. Nebuchadnezzar is confronted, he is challenged, and there is an offer of grace even then. "Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue."

Even now you can keep the sky from falling on your head by repenting. God wants to be gracious even to you, pagan king.

V. 28, the king doesn't listen. "All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. Twelve months later [twelve months of warnings], as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, he said, 'Is not this the great Babylon I have built as a royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?'" Nebuchadnezzar had no understanding of grace whatsoever.

As many of us do in our pride, we believe that success in life is mainly the result of our own hard work. We regularly look over our accomplishments and say the reason things are going as well as they are is because of our wise decisions, our great choices, our piety, our prayers, our faithfulness. And even if we acknowledged that what is good in our lives is the result of the gift of God, there maybe a secret thought that perhaps God

gave this gift to us because we are the kind of people that God really prefers. We respond to him. There is something about us that he likes more than he likes the qualities in others. Even if we say that God is the one who has given me success in business, in ministry, in family life, in marriage, we often think that it is probably due to something in us.

Pride, again. Not only is the sovereignty of God a doctrine that humbles us, but so is the doctrine of the grace of God. The reality that our success is due to the absolute mercy of God. That there are many who are equally good, better than us, smarter than us, more prayerful than us, more holy than us, more responsive than us, who have not fallen into the same kind of blessing.

Walter Payton got it right. A reporter visited him at his home just shortly before his death. He had lost 65 pounds and weighed less at his death than he did when he was in 6th grade. The reporter asked Payton if he ever yelled at God and got angry that he had been stricken with a deadly liver disease when he had so much to offer. Walter Payton said, “I am not angry at anyone, especially God. I know something good is going to come out of this, I just haven’t figured out what it is yet. The bottom line is God has blessed me. I have lived a truly blessed life.”

Do you want a cure for pride, for putting on a mask of false humility and pretending that you are less successful than you are? It is getting down on your knees and saying, “Thank you to God for blessings that I don’t deserve, for gifts that I haven’t earned.” One thing that strikes a fatal blow to pride is a thankful heart.

But Nebuchadnezzar didn’t get it. He looked around at all of the success in his life and he attributed it to himself, and so God removed the blessing. He said, “Let’s see

what you are like on your own.” And what Nebuchadnezzar was like on his own, when all the privileges were stripped away, he was like an animal.

It says, “He was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird.”

Imagine if God totally lifted his hand off your life. No Holy Spirit. No help, no conviction. Just you by yourself, in all your glory. What would we be like? Irritable, bitter, vengeful, fearful, and paranoid. Apart from the blessing of God, we would be like animals, clawing at each other for food, fighting for survival, fearful and paranoid. And in this position, when Nebuchadnezzar was at his lowest, God visits him again. V. 34, “At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes towards heaven, and my sanity was restored.” V. 36, “At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honor and splendor were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisers and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before.”

The grace of God. How often do we see people betray God, betray their friends and families, totally mess up their lives, violate their principles and their supposed convictions, hit bottom and then amazingly start experiencing success again in business, in family and marriage? How many of you, at some point in your life, absolutely betrayed God, did what you know he hated for you to do, violated one of your fundamental convictions, and yet still after that experienced success and blessing – so much so that you end up shaking your head and going, “Why, God? How did I ever fall into this?”

God sometimes lets us fall for a time so that we see what we are really like. We are revolting against him and rebelling against him. God says, “OK, let me lift my hand off your life for a little while so that you can see what life is like when you are on your own.” And then he puts his hand back on our life with blessing so that we can see what the source of real success is.

How do we explain God picking people up at their lowest point and restoring blessing to them? How can we explain it? I love the Message version of the Bible. In Titus 3:4-5 here is what the Message version reads: “It wasn’t so long ago that we ourselves were stupid and stubborn, dupes of sin, ordered every which way by our glands, going around with a chip on our shoulders, hated and hating back. But when God, our kind and loving Savior, when God stepped in he saved us from all of that. It was all his doing. We had nothing and we had nothing to do with it.”

God showed his love to Nebuchadnezzar when Nebuchadnezzar was at his lowest point. And so if you are sunk down today, if the bottom has dropped out of your life for a time, if you have been exposed to your own depravity or your own fragility, do what Nebuchadnezzar did, lift up your eyes to heaven and ask God to save you through his son, Jesus Christ. And if you have done that before, but then again sunk back down in the mud, know that the grace of God is available for you. Sometimes the people who have the hardest time believing in the grace of God are Christian believers.

We say, “Yes, I know that grace is available for the pagan kings, the Nebuchadnezzars, who don’t know God. I understand that Christ’s death on the cross will pay for the sins of the man or woman who doesn’t know him, but I, as a believer,

should know better. I shouldn't have done what I did. I can't expect to go back to Christ and be forgiven.

You, believer in Christ, who have fallen into the muck, you need the grace of God. God's grace is for you and not just for the world. But you have to lift up your eyes away from yourself.

So Nebuchadnezzar lifted up his eyes and his sanity was restored. It says, “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. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: ‘What have you done?’ Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.”

Friends, we must come to a place of honesty with God and honesty with ourselves, where we really recognize that our ultimate problem, the thing that makes us miserable, is our pride. The reason why you have fights with people and get irritated and upset, and you struggle, is not unmet needs, confused expectations, lack of skills. Those things are a part of it. But the root is always pride. I want what I am not getting and mostly I want to play God and have my will done.

Let me finish with an illustration from my own life. I have watched Marlene and I at times struggle in our relationship. After a busy day at church, maybe I will preach three messages and then have newcomers' class in the afternoon where I have to talk for another three hours, then I pray for people – after I get done with a day like that I have

one thing in mind, something that I want – to go home and to stop talking and just sit. Marlene has perhaps been alone all day. She will come to newcomers' class and pray for some folks and she will see me afterwards talking with people, laughing, very patient and very biblical. She has one thing in her mind, personal connection with me. There is nothing wrong with what I want, to rest and be left alone. And there is nothing wrong with what she wants, personal connection. But if you take those two desires and you put them on the same train track, then they are two trains heading in opposite directions, just waiting for a collision.

What is the solution? Well, we could clarify our expectations. We could speak to one another without accusatory words. We could not use “you”s and “but I”s and we could repeat back what we hear. What I hear you saying is... We could count to ten before speaking. We could watch our body language. We could do all of that. And when we are done, the train wreck still would not have been prevented unless we give up what we want and don't insist on our own way. Unless pride in our hearts is put to death.

Do you know the good news of the gospel? The good news of the gospel is that you do not have to demand that your wants or needs get met to live a happy life. The good news of the gospel is that if you humble yourself before God, he will exalt you, he will fulfill you, you will be happy. The way to joy is not to grasp, but to let go. God blesses the humble.

Let's pray.