

## Faithful Living in a Faithless World: *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

### Daniel 4

I remember when I was in grade school and went to one of my cousin's high school graduations in Marlinton, WV. I remember thinking, "It will be years until I graduate. I'll never hang in there that long!" But, as you now know: I did! Those of you who have done the same know that you simply take one step after another in the right direction. To do that means you have to show up for class, get your homework done, write your papers and take your tests; day-by-day and school-year after school-year. It's a long journey - always in that same direction of fulfilling what has to happen to become a high school graduate.

One phrase that captures this point is "begin with the end in mind", a phrase coined by Steven Covey in his book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. By that phrase he meant that we should begin each day, task, or project with a clear vision of our desired destination - and then make decisions that lead in that direction.

It seems to me that God is always working in our lives and in this world with the end that he has in mind. God knows what he wants to accomplish - and he says that his end will be good. We find God speaking about this truth throughout the Bible. Today, I want you to see how that plays out in two different lives. In the first, we will see the way God dealt with one of the most powerful men who has ever lived in the world, King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon. And, then we'll see how God used his "Rep in Babylon", Daniel, to further his divine work in the king's life. We'll do this by considering 1) God's work in us (the story of Nebuchadnezzar) and 2) God's work through us (the story of Daniel). Both of those involve long journeys in the same direction.

**God's Work in Us - God has a long-term vision for your life and calls you to entrust our entire life-journey to him.** *Everything the King of Heaven does is right, and all his ways are just* (4:37b).

If you had asked any person in the known world of Daniel's day, "Who is the least likely person in the world to surrender his life to God?" - I think almost 100% would have said, "King Nebuchadnezzar, of course." But, one of the things that has fascinated me in the Book of Daniel is that God had a different view of the king. We see the patience of God -- how episode by episode, Nebuchadnezzar journeys closer to God.

**Chapter 1 - He met God' s people (1:20)** -- Nebuchadnezzar brought these four teenagers from Jerusalem who had rejected his food and wine because of their faith in their God. Then, when he met them personally and interrogated them, *“in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the wise men in his whole kingdom (1:20).”* He must have begun to wonder about what made these boys who were so committed to their own God so different.

**Chapter 2 - He learned of a God who reveals mysteries (2:47)** -- God sent Nebuchadnezzar a terrifying dream so that he might know there is a God in heaven who is in control of all things. Daniel, through God' s provision, was able both to tell the king the dream and to interpret it. Because of that, the king acknowledged that there is a God greater than other gods or, at least, that Israel' s God is a *“a revealer of mysteries (2:47).”*

**Chapter 3 - He experienced a God who saves (3:29)** - When three of these Jewish boys would not bow down to a 90-foot-tall gold statue the king had set up, he became so furious that he threw them into a fiery furnace. But, when he did, they were not destroyed. Indeed, when he looked into the furnace, he saw a fourth man with them, one who looked *“like a son of the gods”* and he declared that *“no other god can save in this way (3:29).”*

**Chapter 4 - He surrendered to the King of Heaven** -- In spite of all that had happened in the first 3 chapters, when we meet Nebuchadnezzar in Dan 4:4, he still has not surrendered his life to God. But, in ch.4, we witness the king' s conversion story. He personally tells us that' s so in vv. 1-3. And, he closes this chapter by telling us, *“Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and glorify the King of Heaven (4:37).”*

What had happened in his life was that about 30-35 years into his reign, God broke into his life again. Over those years, Nebuchadnezzar' s might, influence and wealth had grown exponentially. He had become the most powerful man in the world. He had everything that anyone in his world could ever have wanted. And, there was no one in this world who could oppose him for he had defeated all the armies of the known world.

With all this in his possession, he said, *“I, Nebuchadnezzar, was home in my palace, contented and prosperous (4:4).”* Prosperous? He most certainly was that. But, contented? Maybe he was content with his power and possessions. But, he was not at peace inside. Not at all.

So, once again, God sent him a gift, i. e., another terrifying dream. This dream was not of a huge statue as in ch. 2 but of a magnificent tree that grew to cover the world. The tree had the potential of blessing all creation - including birds, animals and people. But, in the dream, a messenger was sent from heaven to chop down the tree leaving only the stump and its roots, a stump left in the ground being drenched and living as a mindless beast until seven seasons pass by.

As in Ch. 2, the kings' interpreters of dreams were called in but, once again, they could not - or, more likely, would not -- interpret the dream. I say "would not" because the dream was not all that hard to understand. But, the dream was bad news for the king. And, he was a dictator who did not like people to say negative things about him. He had chopped off the heads of many who criticized him in his reign. So, Daniel was called in.

You heard in our Scripture reading what Daniel told him, i. e., that the tree was Nebuchadnezzar. The dream meant that he had been put in a position to rule over the entire known world but that he had acted wickedly and had oppressed people. So, the king would be humbled, i. e., would lose his mind and his power living as a wild animal until he acknowledged that it is the God of heaven who rules - yes, even over the king of Babylon.

And, it all happened just as God had foretold it. The king lost his mind and lived as a beast for seven seasons. But, then Nebuchadnezzar surrendered to God. When he did, his restoration began. *"My sanity was restored. My honor and splendor were returned to me... 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 4:36-37."*

Today, I want you to make note of two lessons from the way God worked in Nebuchadnezzar' s life

**Lesson 1: God is long-suffering with us.** *God loved the king - and he loves us all.* He agonizes when we walk away from him, disregard him and live in ways that are selfish and destructive. But, his love the king - and for you and me -- is unrelenting. God always works with the long game in mind. He always stands at the door of our lives and knocks asking us to let him in. He may be doing that in your life today.

**Lesson 2: God alone is God.** *The king needed to surrender to him and we do too.*

In the Book of Daniel, it's evident that God had been working in Nebuchadnezzar's life for a long time. But, there was something that kept the king from entrusting his life to God. It was something he had to own up to and then let go of. What was it? His pride. God had to send him a 2<sup>nd</sup> frightening dream with a clear warning that he had to give up his pride. But, did you notice vv. 29-30? *"Twelve months later, 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 the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?"*

He ignored the dream for 12 months!! He had to confess his pride and then surrender to God as the one and only God. But, he just couldn't seem to surrender his pride fully to God no matter how often God spoke to him! But, even though it took a devastating loss of almost everything in his life, Nebuchadnezzar finally trusted God. Years later, Nebuchadnezzar stood in wonder at God's patient grace and said, *"I was restored (4:36)."*

Is there something in your life you will not give up to God? A bad practice -- like cheating or stealing? Something in your speech - like gossip or deceit? Something in your mind - like a bondage to pornography? God may be speaking to you again today about something you know you must surrender to him. But, perhaps you've been holding on to those things anyway. Isn't it time now to surrender all to him today. Seek whatever help God might make available through your small group, close Christian friends, or counseling. We are ready to support you in this as your church family. And, please know that God is patient and loves you with an everlasting love. But, when he speaks to you, turn to him in repentance and faith. He will restore you too.

**God's Work through Us - The way God works in us shows us how to let him work through us.** *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 (3:19b)!"*

I want us now to consider how Daniel lived as a believer placed by God in Babylon to serve this king. From the day Daniel was taken as a teenager to Babylon, he had remained faithful to God. And, God had blessed his faithfulness. Daniel was in a role of great prominence in the kingdom. Even as he was faithful to God in the way he lived, Daniel was also

faithful to serve his king. Daniel's care for the king comes out poignantly in v. 19: After Daniel had grasped what this dream meant for the king, Nebuchadnezzar said, "Belteshazzar, don't let the meaning of this dream trouble you." And Daniel said, "*My lord, if only the dream applied to your enemies and its meaning to your adversaries (4:19)!*"

Last week, knowing I would be coming to chapter 4 this week, a couple of our church people asked me, "Pastor Greg, do you think that, when the king lost his mind and lived as an animal out in the fields of Babylon, that Daniel went out and served his needs?" I said, "I don't know because the Bible doesn't tell us. But, I think that kind of care would be consistent with the way Daniel had lived his life." Do you agree?

Daniel served this king for many years and had seen how God broke into this king's life again and again. It seems to me that Daniel aligned his own life with the what he saw God doing. Daniel knew what God had given to his forefather Abraham, i.e., that God's people are blessed in order to bring blessing to all people no matter where he put us. So, Daniel gave witness to God whenever he had opportunity - but he was patient with the king and brought blessing to the king as he waited for God to bring about the change that only God can bring. Daniel's life was a life of long and faithful obedience - always in the same direction.

So, I've thought about how Daniel 4 might speak to many of us at LAC. Over my years here, so many of you have shared with me how much you want your child to come back to God - or your parent to come to know Christ - or your work colleague to come to faith - or your roommate at college to acknowledge God. You want this to happen quickly; sometimes you would like a foolproof way of convincing that other person to change his or her ways. Perhaps God is saying to you today that you need to learn to develop the patience of God and to align your own witness to the one you care about with the way God is working.

I think Daniel teaches us about how to do that? Let me suggest several things:

### **Characteristics of Patient Witness to Those We Care About**

**#1: Always want the best for the other person.** Sometimes, we live as if the main thing we have to do is to win an argument about what is right or wrong, about what is good or bad. It surely is important to stand for what is good and right. But, I think the starting point is that we need to deeply desire

true blessing for the other person. The king thought he was content with all his power and wealth -- but, Daniel knew that faith in God was the only way to lasting contentedness and blessing. Daniel didn't want the king's demise. Daniel cared about the king! He wanted God's best for the king. That should always be our starting point.

**#2: Be ready to speak truth when you have the opportunity - no matter what it might cost.** The angst created by the king's dream of the tree led to the king asking Daniel to speak into his life. In other words, Daniel wasn't a man who preaching to his king day after day. Then, one day, when God provided an opening for a real conversation, Daniel seized it. But, it wasn't easy, was it? The other people around the king cowered away from telling the king the truth. They knew it could cost them their lives! But Daniel, though he too felt the fear of the king's volatility and rage, spoke truth to the king when he most needed it. Pray that God will open doors for you like that too.

**#3: Find the courage to call the other person to a different way of life.** I don't want you to miss the point that, after Daniel told the king the bad news about his dream, he then called the king to change his ways and have his kingly leadership reflect God's ways. It's in v. 27: *"Oh 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 (4:27)."*

For some of us, this "change your ways now" is where we want to start. When we start there, what usually happens? I've found that usually the only thing that happens is that the other person gets mad. But, when we have consistently longed for the best for other people and sought to bring blessing to them, then, in times of their distress, God often gives us opportunity to speak greater blessing into their lives -- like he gave Daniel. Essentially, what Daniel told the king was that he had to quit being so self-centered and start caring about others - like the poor and the oppressed. So, Daniel was patient before he shared this with the king - but he also needed to let the king know what a life surrendered to God would look like. It would be a life more beautiful than one of lopping off people's heads. So, Daniel needed to be convinced personally that putting God first was good - and then courageous enough to call the king to follow the Lord.

**#4: Keep loving and serving even when you see no change happening in the other person.** Daniel took the time it takes to discern how God deals with people. Daniel saw God's patience. Then, Daniel aligned the way he gave

witness to Nebuchadnezzar with the ways of God. God had not given up on this self-centered king. So, Daniel did not either. But, when God broke in and called Nebuchadnezzar definitively to repentance and faith, Daniel became the one God used to lead a king to faith and to a life that was restored.

Today, do you see things in your life that might be like Nebuchadnezzar? Are there things you know are wrong, but you hold on to anyway. God was longsuffering with Nebuchadnezzar, but the time came when he needed to get right with God. Maybe this sermon today is like the dream God sent to the king. Maybe God is saying to you, "Today is the day to get right with me!" Eventually God had to remove every earthly thing that mattered so that he would learn that nothing else matters - except to be right with God. God had something much greater for Nebuchadnezzar, but he was stuck in his pride. Is there something you are stuck in? Is God speaking to you today? Are you ready to say? "Yes, Lord. I give all that I am to you, Lord."

Or, maybe the situation in your life is more like Daniel. There are people in your life who seem to be as far away from God as Nebuchadnezzar was. Maybe God is saying, "Love them. Want the best for them. Be a blessing to them. It may be a long journey - but stay on it. And, as you love and serve, look for an opportunity to tell them of my grace, my unrelenting love shown most clearly in Jesus dying for them, and of the new life I am longing to give them if only they will come to me through faith in my Son."

Doing so will be to your joy - and to his glory. Amen.