

Pride Goes Before the Fall

Daniel 4

6/2/2013

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis has some choice words to say about the sin of pride:

There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which everyone in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty themselves...I have very seldom met anyone, who was not a Christian, who showed the slightest mercy to it in others. There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others. The vice I am talking of is Pride or Self-Conceit: and the virtue opposite to it, in Christian morals, is called humility...According to Christian teachers, the essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride...Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind...If you want to find out how proud you are, the easiest way is to ask yourself, "How much do I dislike it when other people snub me, or refuse to take any notice of me, or shove their oar in, or patronise me, or show off?" The point is that each person's pride is in competition with everyone else's pride...Pride is *essentially* competitive...People are not proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking. Rather, they are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others...A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you...If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed.

Well, what C.S. Lewis said about pride is certainly true of Nebuchadnezzar. He was in a competition...a competition with God. The problem with being in competition with God is that God wins such competitions every single time. There are two options: raise yourself up and wait for God's destruction to come upon you, tearing you down; or secondly, humble yourself in order that God may raise you up. This is a very vertical story. What goes up must come down, but if you humble yourself by God's grace, then He will lift you up. The way God looks at things is that what goes down will come up. That is the message of this chapter. Let's look at some of the details.

Nebuchadnezzar had some disconcerting dreams, and the result of what happened in these dreams seems so important to him that he decides to write a letter to his whole kingdom to tell them about the God of Israel, and all the things that God has done for him. This time, in his dreams, Nebuchadnezzar is dreaming about himself. And again, none of his astrologers can tell him what the dream means. There are two interpretations of why this is so. One says that the astrologers simply did not know what the dream meant. The second interpretation, and the one I believe, is that the astrologers did in fact know what the dream meant, but they were too chicken to tell the king, since it was not a good dream, not a good interpretation for Nebuchadnezzar. Ancient kings often had an unfortunate habit of doing away with those who said anything unpleasant about them. So it is quite possible that the astrologers did not want to take the fall. So Nebuchadnezzar had to call for Daniel again.

The dream itself was of a tree, gigantic and fruitful, giving shade to lots of animals and

birds. The tree represented Nebuchadnezzar himself, of course. However, the tree was arrogant, since it tried to reach all the way up to heaven. Here is that competitive nature of pride kicking in here. Nebuchadnezzar wanted to be God himself. So he reached up as far as he could. But God does not allow that kind of thing. Every man who has ever done such a thing, from Adam all the way up to Saddam Hussein, is eventually cut down. That is what the watcher from heaven, or angel, says. However, there is grace involved in this dream, since the cutting down is not permanent, but only temporary. As we will see, this action of God is an action of grace, not of judgment, since Nebuchadnezzar is going to be converted to the true faith as a result of what God did.

Now, as Daniel hears this dream, he becomes quite alarmed. Some people think that his alarm is because he is afraid to tell the king, much like the other astrologers. However, I think the reason is that Daniel is genuinely concerned for the king, and has a love for the king, and does not want to see bad things happen to the king. However, it did take some reassurance on Nebuchadnezzar's part to get Daniel to tell him the dream.

When Daniel does tell him, the substance of it is that Nebuchadnezzar has been proud, and needs to humble himself before God, or else God will humble Nebuchadnezzar. Notice that it is conditional. Daniel gives advice to Nebuchadnezzar in verse 27 which, if Nebuchadnezzar had followed, would probably have saved Nebuchadnezzar from a significant amount of discomfort later on. This is true of much of Old Testament prophecy of judgment, actually. Much of it is conditional. If the people refuse to repent, then judgment will come. Even if it doesn't always look conditional, most of the time it is.

In Nebuchadnezzar's case, the judgment was insanity: he would become like a beast. There is actually a clinical name for this mental disorder: it is called lycanthropy. A man thinks he is a beast. Again, recall what C.S. Lewis said: "A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you." Nebuchadnezzar was looking down on everyone else as being a beast, and could not see God above, nor could he see the fact that he was actually acting like a beast. Therefore God made him see that he was acting like a beast by changing his mind to that of a beast. Literally, the text says "Let the mind of a beast be given to him." So, the punishment fits the crime very accurately. This insanity is probably what is meant by the iron band that goes around the remaining stump. Insane people were usually bound with iron bands.

Well, this judgment came upon Nebuchadnezzar. At the very moment of Nebuchadnezzar competing with God, saying that he had built Babylon, the judgment came. The irony was that Nebuchadnezzar had done a very great deal to build Babylon. The hanging gardens was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The wall that Nebuchadnezzar built around the city of Babylon was so wide that you could drive a team of horses and a chariot on the top of it, and that means 4 horses side by side! It would certainly have been easy for Nebuchadnezzar to boast that he had done all this. Implicitly, of course, Nebuchadnezzar is saying that God had no part in it, nor did Nebuchadnezzar need to give God the glory in all of this. A very similar thing happened to Charles Colson, whom many of you might know from the radio. He was special advisor to President Richard Nixon. He was at the top of his field. He had unlimited access to the Oval Office. He could walk in anytime. He was proud that he had access to where no one else could go. And then, one day, June 17, 1972, a security guard at the Watergate Complex spread the alarm that the Democratic National Headquarters had been broken into. There was a cover-up, but the cover-up was

detected. The scandal went all the way to the top, and Charles Colson wound up spending time in federal prison. He went from the very top to the very bottom, just like Nebuchadnezzar. It was the best thing that ever happened to him, however. Because, as he was at the very bottom, he lifted up his eyes to God, just as Nebuchadnezzar lifted up his eyes to God. If, as Lewis said, pride prevents us from looking higher than ourselves, true humility allows us to see the grandeur of God, and the grace that He has for us. It allows us to see our own sin. You see, in addition to being the worst sin in and of itself, pride has the additional liability of making us want to cover-up all our other faults. Sometimes it takes losing everything in order to see the grace of God. Otherwise, we would never think that we needed God's grace.

This grace shows up in a particularly forceful way in Jesus Christ. If anyone had reason to boast of His accomplishments, Jesus was that person. He had built the heavens and the earth, after all, not merely Babylon. Instead, He took upon Himself the nature of a servant, and humbled Himself, as Philippians 2 tells us. He came down, because He could see His Father. He was not arrogant, but humble. He humbled Himself. No need for someone else to do that for Him. Can we then see that Jesus' humility is part of being God? If we want to be like God, then we need to look at the humility of Jesus. As Paul tells us in that passage, we need to have the same mind that Christ Jesus had. We need to have the same kind of humility towards God, and towards one another.

There is a false kind of humility. This is the kind of humility that is always reminding people of how humble they are. In fact, they are proud of the fact that they are more humble than their neighbor. Again, that competition of pride manifests itself all over the place, doesn't it? I'm sure you know of these people, who think that they are too lowly to receive grace. Well, that is just pride in reverse. It is not biblical humility. Biblical humility starts with recognizing one's own pride. So, if you think you are not proud, that is a fair enough proof that you are proud. Start with recognizing your own pride, and then recognize the humility of Christ and be humbled by it. A true knowledge of God and of ourselves is always best. We need to see just how much more glorious God is than we are, for He is the Creator, and we are but the creature. We need to recognize also how worthy of condemnation we are because of our sin, and because of the pride of Adam. Pride was the first sin, after all. Satan fell because of it, and so did Adam. They both wanted to take God off His throne and put themselves there in God's place. We must know that we cannot do that. God is on His throne. No one can take that throne away from Him. The question is, will you make your heart into God's throne? Will you humble yourself so that God will lift you up on the wings of grace? Stop competing with God! Stop competing with your neighbor! Instead, love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself. For God's dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures forever, and no one can say to God, "What have you done?"

So, whatever you do, and whatever you have, God gets the glory. This is the one essential point. If you take out the garbage, do it because you want to please God. If you get a windfall of money, use it in a way that will please God. Whether the item is big or small, that does not matter. What matters is how you see God and your relationship with God in Jesus Christ. Everyone will be humbled. The only question is this: will you humble yourself, or will you be humbled by God? One or the other will happen. That is God's guarantee.