

The Tree Dream Interpreted

Dan. 4:18-28

The Lord does not speak to us in dreams anymore, just as He is not sending angels with messages, or giving the gift of tongues or of prophecy, which has been sealed up with the completion of the New Testament.

Our dreams can reveal what is already in our hearts – if we are fearful or anxious or guilty. But these dreams cannot reveal what is in God's heart, as a direction for your life.

We may want that personal direction, but the Lord has given us His wonderful Word, the Bible, where His heart and mind has been revealed authoritatively, clearly, and sufficiently. He has given us His final Word in His Son, who is the Last Word.

To the degree we want Him to speak to us in some other way than He, in His wisdom, has chosen, we depart from His light and chose the misty gray of man's imperfect thoughts.

Our third of four messages in Daniel 4 continues with this visionary dream which God gave as a warning and prophesy to Babylon's great King.

We have seen the Dream introduced after the fact in 1-9 and the Dream Retold in its rich imagery of a tree being cut down to a stump in 10-18.

We come now to the two most important messages with how the Tree Dream is interpreted and, next time, how it is fulfilled.

Verse 18 begins this part with the confidence of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel. And why wouldn't he? He had seen firsthand the wonders of the God of this man and his three friends in chapters 2 and 3.

It is possible that other counsellors had been sought, and found wanting. Everybody, including the king himself, could see that it was something bad, but precisely how bad or in what manner, there is where the prophet of God is needed and, here, is found.

For instance, if we were to guess, we would probably say that the tree was the whole kingdom and not just the king. And likewise, who would interpret the beast part of it literally? How often do men begin acting as cows?

So let us begin with our first of four points centering on the king, and that is **“how to bring bad news to those who are over you.”**

We can feel with Daniel his surprise at the true meaning which God revealed. He is genuinely and righteously appalled. One Hebrew scholar translates it that “amazement seized him”. But still Daniel keeps his composure, answers tactfully and carefully, taking his time.

The King sees this and insists on a direct message, not caring for the consequence. But Daniel does not swerve from his careful way of bringing bad news to the king. His loyalty and sympathy are clearly recognized here.

But why would he care for the wellbeing of Nebuchadnezzar, who had the sons of Israel's king killed before his eyes, before putting his eyes out? The answer to that is Daniel's obedience to an unpopular Scripture. Jeremiah had prophesied:

⁴ "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, ⁵ 'Build houses and live in them; and plant gardens and eat their produce. ⁶ 'Take wives and become the fathers of sons and

daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease. ⁷ 'Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.' (Jer 29:4-7)

Daniel's godly sympathies are here on display. He is, like his God, afflicted with the afflicted. You find no stone-like indifference at the judgment of others.

Though the judgment of God is a necessary part of our faith – the backbone to it, really, when we think of what we are saved FROM – that does not mean we desire to see the wicked judged. Sometimes they must be judged for God's purposes to go forward. But with the Lord, our first impulse is that the wicked would turn from their sins and be saved. If we must tell people of the hell they are going to, let it be with tears. We find this in the Old Testament in Psalm 119:120 - *My flesh trembles for fear of You, and I am afraid of Your judgments.* And we find this in the NT. Paul says, 'Knowing the terror of the Lord, we persuade men.' 2 Cor. 5.

This leads then to our **second point – from standing in the king's shoes to pointing to the King himself in 20-22: "It Is You, O King"**

It is you, O King, and not your kingdom. It is you, O King, you in your health and prosperity, and you will be cut down but not entirely destroyed.

We should admire the frankness of Daniel's message. Calvin remarks on the difficult middle road we must walk here. On the one side is the ditch of how our human nature falls to taking to great bitterness and hatred against failing and falling men, under the pretense of zeal. "See, what a lowly man this King really is." But on the other side, the same human nature will flatter and smooth over the gross sins of others and so dupe miserable men by softness.

Ministers, if they are faithful, will preach and teach the whole counsel of God, and not hold back; yet they will preach it with love as well as holiness; with kindness as well as justice. Andrew Bonar told the story of a Greek artist, whose painting of a boy carrying a basket of grapes was so realistic that it attracted birds to peck at the fruit. When the artist was congratulated by his friends, he repelled the praise. ‘If I were successful, the birds would have been kept away by the presence of the boy!’

There is the balance, the paradox, if you will that is found in Daniel. He is both attracted and repelled, eager and fearful; a love-driven sadness that cringes at the coming judgment, but God-honoring obedience which speaks every Word faithfully.

Here is the question: which do you have more trouble with? Telling the truth frankly, honestly; or fearing people in order to please them? May you stand in the mirror of Daniel who followed His own Lord with that perfect balance.

Thirdly, then, in 23-26, we learn What Is to Come upon the King.

He is to be driven from mankind to dwell with the beasts of the field. Not only will he join them but be like them, eating grass like cattle. We will touch on this more fully next time. He will be without roof or cover, drenched with dew for seven unspecified periods of time.

In short, this all speaks of the predicted loss of his sanity and with that, his power. Knowledge, a sound mind, a thinking mind, is a gift of God. What a sad misuse of such a gift we see all around us! An old writer quipped that Man is called a rational creature, but he deserves that title for the possession of reason rather than the exercise of it. When we abuse our thoughts, our minds, and are puffed up in knowledge, exalt our heads to the heavens over everyone else including God, the Lord has a right to take it away. He may lop off our

heads, or show us to be no better than silly beasts, since we act like them.

Since we will have much to say about this actual affliction in the next message, this disease and condition, let us save our remarks for next time.

But here we must not miss the purpose of all this, the why and wherefore. The king is arrogant, and he is about to be humbled. And he will be humbled until he recognizes the Most High God rules over mankind. He will have his kingdom restored only after this purpose is fulfilled.

Doesn't this show, as the great Reformer in Geneva said: "This disease is cured with difficulty..." Calvin

So we come to our **4th and Final Point: the Advice to the King in verse 27.**

Break away or break off your sins, by doing righteousness, or right, and showing mercy to the poor. In this way, prosperity will be lengthened or prolonged by God's hand.

It seems that the sins of despotism, tyranny, selfishness, are here in heaven's sights. Don't the twin sins of pride and cruelty go hand in hand? When the Lord exalts a man, a ruler, a king over his fellows, it is to ascend in order to his neighbor good, and not be a vulture to prey upon the weak.

Such men, in a godly society, will be cast out themselves – for who can dwell with them? Rulers are often bitten with this pride – who if they acknowledge they rule by God, do not act like it; and if they do not acknowledge it, still despise the protection and provision they receive from His hand.

Then, if they are, as they suppose, in these heights by their own doing, what hinders them from trampling under foot those who are beneath them?

So, negatively and positively, break off your sins of doing your own thing and tyrannizing the poor, and act according to righteousness and show mercy. Here we find what Fyall calls: “The link between divine judgment and human responsibility; the decree is certain but the king’s response can avert judgment.”

And yet known by God are all of his works from eternity. This too reflects the place of a sovereign God, who had set him up as king, as that head of gold, which may have gone further to his head.

We will return to see how he falls and is restored next time. But before we conclude, let us drive home a few points of application:

1. First of all, learn about God's government here. God rules, not just up there, but down here, as Wallace observes. He sovereignly chooses when and where to inflict his **just** rule; while at the same time He is very **gracious** in all. We should never doubt the rule of God, His providence and His Word that extend everywhere and every time. There is no God-forsaken age or place.
2. Second, He is especially grieved by pride and harm done to the poor. These wicked attitudes of men, which translate into ways and policies of sinners, should be resisted justly and strongly. The mistreatment of the poor is demeaning to the dignity of others, and the glory of God. Is it not beast-like, robbing men of their sanity who make men grovel in the dirt? No wonder revival preachers of the past referred to our sinful natures, in original sin, as half beast and half devil. Some of you know the name of John Gerstner, the mentor of RC Sproul. He was preaching at a conference on the topic of sin and depravity, and likened men to rats. During the question and answer period, he was asked if he didn’t go too far with his comparison. And

so he replied that the comparison was really not fair, and so he deeply apologized for his remark ----- to the rats!

3. Third, there is a civil righteousness recommended here by the Scriptures, commanding all men everywhere, believer and unbeliever alike, to break off from sin. This is a command, an obedience to the moral law which is not necessarily Godward but manward; a common grace repentance, if you will, which leaves the heart unchanged. Yet God takes notice and may (or may not) relent for a season. The Ninevites under Jonah are another instance of this, as is the remorse of wicked Ahab at the news of the destruction of his household. To say that only those who are converted and have a new heart by grace can put off outward sins is Arminian, which says we can expect men to do only what they are freely inclined to do.

4. Lastly, our repentance and obedience as believers needs to be better than this, if it is evangelical and of the heart. It is always right to repent, and to turn away from sin. Jonathan Edwards once noted, that the souls in hell spend much of their time wishing they had committed just one less sin! It is always right to turn from sin because it is sin, even if there were no remedy for it. But since there is, and we know it, who have found full forgiveness from a bleeding Savior, we should very gladly be willing to change.

As one godly fellow from the past spoke on his death bed: I was born to repent. And what is this repentance?

Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, does, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience. (WSC 87)

May that be found in you by Christ who came to turn the nations to Himself. Amen.