

Stories of the Promise 2) Nebuchadnezzar – “Repent”

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Don't you get tired of the so-called public apologies offered by some high-profile people? You might be hoping to hear the person say something like, "I was acting like a complete fool. I'm sorry." But instead you only get something more on the lines of "I regret that my behavior was less than exemplary." Or "I'm sorry if my actions were not understood like I meant them to be understood." What kind of apologies are those? "I am sorry" is one of the hardest things to say. Yet those words can be some of the sweetest spoken by anyone. Today we consider how God brought one proud man down to his knees. His story leads us to see the importance of repentance.

The Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II began his reign in 604 BC. It started on a high note: a military success. He had just conquered Egypt. On his return to Babylon he ransacked Judah. He took the throne in Babylon and ruled over 40 years. His empire stretched from Egypt, across Palestine, over the entire Arabian Peninsula, and even on beyond the Persian Gulf. Over the course of 20 years he carried out military campaigns against Judah and Jerusalem. Finally he saw to it that the last ruling King of the line of David was dethroned, taken captive, and tortured for resisting his rule. And the centuries-old dynasty of David came to a sudden halt. Jerusalem fell. Nebuchadnezzar brought tens of thousands of Israelite people off to his home country in Babylon to be his servants. One of those people was the young man Daniel.

Nebuchadnezzar's success included more than military endeavors. He was a great builder and administrator of his empire. Picture the very proud king. He took the Neo-Babylonian kingdom to a new height. He built up the city of Babylon to be one of the wonders of the ancient world. Its famous hanging gardens were described by those who witnessed it hundreds of years later as magnificent, as if it were carved out of the side of the mountain. With its water works and terraced gardens, it must have been quite an impressive sight. The walls of the city were said to cover miles and miles with an imposing height which none could ever scale. He had established a reign over much of his world; today's Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Iraq and Turkey. Few before were anywhere near to his accomplishments. The little kingdom of Judah was nothing to him except another conquered land. What should he care for the God of the people of Judah?

But something happened which brought him great fear. He had a dream. It is described with a great tree which grew up in the middle of the land. The top of the tree reached all the way up into the sky. Its branches could be seen from kingdoms around the earth. Its leaves and fruit were beautiful, and all the creatures of the world came to it to eat its food. But in his dream a messenger from heaven comes and says, *"Cut down the tree; scatter its leaves and its fruit. Let nothing remain but a stump, bound with iron and bronze. And let it be drenched with the dew from heaven. And let him remain among the wild animals and eat grass, let his mind be like that of an animal, until seven times pass by for him. This is decreed so that all the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over all the kingdoms of the earth, and he gives them to whomever he wishes, and sets over them the lowliest of men."*

You can see why this dream would have terrified Nebuchadnezzar. He called on his magicians and sorcerers to give him the meaning. None of them could. The meaning is clear enough. I almost wonder if they rightly guessed it but were too afraid to actually say it to the king. When all the other magicians could not tell the king his dream, Daniel steps out of nowhere and does, by God's working, what they could not. *"You, O king, are that tree. God has given you a kingdom that is great and has placed you in authority. And that messenger decreed that you will be cut down. You will be given the mind of an animal and driven from civilization. This will happen until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes."*

It isn't too hard to imagine what should logically follow. The King knew Daniel to be wise and capable of telling him the truth. Daniel even offered prudent advice: *"Repent... Please accept my advice: renounce your sins."* Like John the Baptist crying out to the people, "The ax is already at the root of the trees," Daniel tells King Nebuchadnezzar, "The ax is already at the root of your tree."

But twelve months later nothing has changed. No repentance. No renouncing of his wrongs. No acknowledgment of the Most High God who is above all kings and all kingdoms. Nebuchadnezzar refuses to follow Daniel's advice. So stubborn the wicked are! But God's people also have a sinful heart. And when it is allowed to rule our lives, we might put off repentance too. Sometimes we think that if enough time lapses, we won't even have to repent, and our sin won't matter.

Repentance is not an easy thing! The Christian who struggles with lust and pornography says he'll repent later. Later never comes. Repentance is absent and sin takes over the heart. The unmarried Christian knows full well that cohabitating with his girlfriend dishonors God's gift of marriage. But he decides that he doesn't need to repent, he'll do that in 12 months, or not at all. He'd rather not change or bend to honor God. He clings to his sin instead. At least that is his first response. He reasons that he can put off repentance. How long before God must humble him? A Christian who has decided in his heart he doesn't want to be a loving husband anymore to his wife, who has given up on his marriage doesn't think he has to repent. At least not yet. So twelve minutes go by, twelve hours, days, twelve months go by. Not a word of apology is spoken. His wife only hears loveless silence and the refusal to repent. God hears the same.

The substance abuser begins with *justifying why* they abuse that drug. So the person who refuses to repent of wrong tries to justify their actions. Anything to avoid changing, turning aside from what they want, and turning to God in humility and seeking forgiveness from him. "Repent? Turn from what I'm doing? Maybe next year." It's an annually broken resolution.

How about you? When someone tells you that you have done or are doing something wrong, is it always your first reaction to repent? Or is it sometimes to stubbornly resist renouncing your sin and turning aside from it? Who likes to admit they are wrong? Even more difficult is to change your actions and turn aside from the wrong. What things do you find you have trouble repenting over? People are hoping to hear you say something like, "I was acting like a complete fool. I'm sorry. Please forgive." But instead you might do thing and only go so far to say, "I regret that my behavior was less than exemplary." That's not repentance; it's putting it off. Repentance is turning aside from what is evil and hating it.

What prevents us from repenting? Pride in ourselves. Pride in self always leads to scorn towards God. Pride in our own greatness leads to the proud and stubborn heart that refuses to repent. Instead of "I was wrong" it is "I'm never wrong. I might make mistakes. I might be unaware and unintentionally cause a few mishaps. But I'm the greatest thing that ever walked before mankind." Nebuchadnezzar swelled in pride, "How can Daniel, this servant from Judah, tell me what I should do? I'm the king." So the temptation comes up for God's people. "How can my dad tell me that it's sinful for me to dishonor marriage and live with someone outside of marriage! I need to repent? I'm the greatest thing that has ever happened to this family. How dare he tell me what to do!" Or "My wife says I'm wrong? She ought to be grateful an awesome guy like me is still with her!" "My pastor says I have to love my wife and tell her I'm sorry? How can he tell me that! He's only been married 14 years! What does he know anyways?" "I don't have a tempter problem, I'm surrounded by people who do dumb things. I'm a successful doctor who has a high paying job. Repent!? I've done nothing wrong." Pride also comes between neighbors. "I've been in this community for 20 years. Now this guy comes along and says I can't burn leaves today! Who does he think he is! This is my neighborhood!" It's a foolish heart that refuses repentance because of personal pride.

But dare we stand proud when the call to repentance comes rightly and is based on the will of God? Are we above his will? Dare we ever think that God will just make an exception for our stubborn unyielding refusals to repent? Should he overlook my sin as if I'm too important to repent? Should he overlook any of yours when you refuse to repent of any sin?

God is gracious. But he won't tolerate stubborn refusal and rejection of his grace. For Nebuchadnezzar that time was now up. Nebuchadnezzar has not even finished relishing the thought that he got away with everything, when the voice from heaven spoke. "*This is what was decreed for you... your authority will be taken from you now.*" Everything was fulfilled in his dream. The mighty tree was cut. His mind was taken from him, and he wandered among the wild beast, driven from civilizations like one who has gone insane. He literally lost his mind and all he was so proud of.

The Most High God wanted Daniel and all his people to know that he was still in control over all kingdoms. He is able to bring down the proud. But as he also showed Nebuchadnezzar that he is also the God of mercy and grace. The vision included a stump which was bound with bronze and iron. It would be restored. Nebuchadnezzar did finally after a time acknowledge that the Most High is God over all. It is unfortunately not a lasting confession. But he did acknowledge God. And he was restored to power once again. His mind became sane again. God is able to humble the proud. But he is also able to lift up the lowly.

That's the real story of Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar. The king was proud, but "*the Most High gives kingdoms to whomever he wishes, and places over them even the lowliest of men.*" Nebuchadnezzar may have thought he cut down the line of Judah till nothing was left but a stump. The line of David was like a stump. But a shoot would come from the line of David. A branch was prophesied to come out of that broken and fallen line. The branch would be the lowliest of all men. Born in a manger he would not appear a king. But the Son of God was prophesied to come in human flesh in lowliness to save us all. He would come preaching a message of repentance and forgiveness of sins. He himself would be a king free from wrong. Yet in greatest humility he would lay down his life and die in place of us all. And his kingdom would never end. He would be lifted up from the depths of the grave and restored to the highest throne. He has been lifted up to glory! He has promised to bring into his kingdom all who look to him with repentance and faith. That includes every proud sinner -even you and me. Jesus our King! He is the lowliest who was lifted up to be Lord of all! Repentance means turning away from our pride and sin to look at him who made himself nothing to take away our sin and give us all.

Nebuchadnezzar had torn down God's temple, had insulted his people, and had been an instrument of destruction. God warned him to repent. He gave him twelve months to do so. God is mercifully patient. He restores those who look to him.

The worst thing that can happen to you if you are an unbeliever is that God has to humble you. But for the believer the best thing that can happen is that God humbles you. There is no greater joy than being down on your knees in godly sorrow over your own sin. Why? God lifts up the lowly. The Spirit convicts us of our sin, the new self is grieved by it. And the heart of faith rejoices in the fact that though we are deserving to have our mind, our wealth, and our health taken away from us the Lord will not. But God, in mercy takes away our sin. And then he lifts us up. The story of Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar is one of the promise for all who repent. So, your Lord tells you today: remember the story of Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar, "Repent." The Lord brings down the proud but lifts up the lowly.