

Second Choice

When you're down and out

I wonder how you're doing after last week? Last week we began to look at the problem of pride. We began to explore how pride affected and could be seen in the life of King Nebuchadnezzar. We began to think about how God wants to liberate us from pride. We thought about why God hates pride and why God's desire is to liberate us from it.

God hates pride because it sets us against God and destroys our relationship with Him. God hates pride because it destroys relationship with others. God hates pride because pride is anti-community and anti-love. And because God is love, He wants to liberate us from pride.

We discovered last week that humility is at the heart of the Christian message. God is the most humble being in the universe. In God Himself there is always a movement of love from Father to Son to Spirit to Father. In God Himself is mutual servanthood – the expression of humility from Father to Son to Spirit to Father. When God created us, He created us to invite us to participate in what He already experiences: Love. And that love is expressed in humility and servanthood. We are invited to participate in God. We are invited to participate in humility.

Daniel was the pride challenger for King Nebuchadnezzar. God chose to interrupt King Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel got the job of telling him the truth. God tried one approach with the king. But as we will see, it didn't go well because the king has a hard time with pride. How about you? How are you doing?

God though, has a Plan B, and today we'll see what happens with Plan B. God, in His wisdom and grace and mercy has two approaches with King Nebuchadnezzar. And God, in His wisdom and grace and mercy has two approaches with us – you and me. And here's the rub – it makes a difference which of these two approaches we respond to.

God's Plan A is always the same. God's Plan A is to reason and God always prefers to use Plan A. Isaiah 1:18: "Come now, let us reason together," says the Lord (NASV). God always prefers to reason with us. God of course doesn't have to do that. God could just impose His will. But because He is love, He gives us the freedom to choose a response. And, as we learnt in a different series, God wants and longs for us to become good choosers.

Do you remember the parable of the sower? Jesus told the parable to make the point about different kinds of soil. The sower sowed the same seed on all the ground. What influenced the seed to grow or not was the quality of the soil. Perhaps it was a challenge about the quality of a person's heart. When the seed fell on good soil, it grew a hundredfold! God sows into the lives of His people and then waits to see what will grow. It's the same approach as Plan A. So friends, how's your heart?

God makes it very clear to King Nebuchadnezzar what he needs to learn.

¹⁷ "The decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of people."

Daniel 4:17

This is repeated in verse 25 and again in verse 32. God makes His point, and makes it clearly. Daniel is the wise and spiritual friend who is able to explain the dream to the king. It is vital for us to cultivate wise and spiritual friends who can help us figure out when God is speaking to us. Daniel puts before the king the challenge of the soil.

²⁷ Therefore, Your Majesty, 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."

Daniel 4: 27

"It may be." It depends on what kind of soil is found in king Nebuchadnezzar. It is a question of the heart. Will king Nebuchadnezzar open his heart to God? How about you? How much will you open your heart to God?

²⁸ All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. ²⁹ Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, ³⁰ 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?"

³¹ Even as the words were on his lips, a voice came from heaven, "This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. ³² You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes."

³³ Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like the ox. 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.

³⁴ At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. 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.

³⁵ 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?"

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. ³⁷ 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.

Daniel 4:28-37

For 12 months the king chooses to ignore the dream and its meaning. He just carries on doing what he wants. He avoids thinking about God. How about you? What do you do? In choosing this response, king Nebuchadnezzar proves just how proud he in fact is. So God goes to Plan B.

Plan B is never God's first choice. That's why it's Plan B. Plan B usually involves pain. Sadly Plan B is not uncommon in scripture: Jonah, Pharoah, Adam and Eve! So friends, what has God been sowing into your life that you are ignoring? God is able to speak into our lives in many ways: the voice of a friend; our conscience; the Bible; a talk like this one... Sometimes we think like king Nebuchadnezzar. If I leave it, ignore it, it will go away. What if, friends, God wants to reason with you?

Psalm 32 was probably written after David committed adultery with Bathsheba.

*I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.*

Psalm 32:8

David's reflection is Plan A is good. That's what God desires and wants.

*Do not be like the horse or the mule,
which have no understanding
but must be controlled by bit and bridle
or they will not come to you.*

Psalm 32:9

But David recognises the truth and pain of Plan B: pressure, pain, bit and bridle.

God goes to Plan B with king Nebuchadnezzar and it is going to hurt. King Nebuchadnezzar is interrupted and is forced on a sabbatical from ruling his kingdom. At the same time as Daniel is in Babylon, Jeremiah is a prophet in Israel. And one day Jeremiah went to a potters house to watch a potter working with the clay on his potters wheel. King Nebuchadnezzar finds himself on the wheel.

In our series in Jeremiah we learnt some really important things about being on the wheel which king Nebuchadnezzar is about to learn. A potter made a pot because they had something in mind for it to do. God had chosen king Nebuchadnezzar to be on his side. He had appointed him to rule over a nation,

but the king was not doing it right. Friends, you too are chosen to be on God's side. He has work for you to do. How are you doing?

Every pot a potter made was unique. It was the only pot like it with beauty all of its own. God has work for you that only you, with your unique set of gifts, talents and abilities can do. How are you doing? God invites us to participate in what He is already doing: healing, saving, rescuing, providing, fighting against evil, for life and for heaven. God longed for king Nebuchadnezzar to be useful in this kingdom of the heavens., and he longs that you will be too. How are you doing?

Jeremiah sees a potter re-making a pot that is marred. King Nebuchadnezzar is on the wheel in the hands of the Master Potter. There is great beauty in this picture. God is big enough and loving enough to work with king Nebuchadnezzar even in his deliberate and wilful sin and all his mistakes. When we're on the wheel God is at work – precisely because He loves us too much to leave us as we are. It is hard to be on the wheel. It can be painful and very challenging. But when we are on the wheel we are in the hands of the Master Craftsman.

We could ask God to make it easier for us and lower His standards. But let's not, because, truth is, you matter to God far too much for Him to lower His standards. He creates a pot of great beauty, unique quality and infinite worth. Don't ask for less friends.

God, could, but His own words from Daniel, discard king Nebuchadnezzar, but the potter does not discard the clay. He works with it to make something beautiful from something marred. God, the Master Potter, sees the potential in the clay when the potter and the clay work together. What kind of clay will you be?

Perhaps another way of saying that might be this: how much will you let God love you? King Nebuchadnezzar is on the wheel. He struts around the roof of his palace boasting about all he has done. But while the words are still on his lips, while he is still speaking, God interrupts. God wants him to make the connection between what he says and what happens next. And we are told that immediately (v 33) he comes a creature of ridicule.

Having been the greatest king in the greatest kingdom in the known world, he now becomes like the very people he despised. He didn't listen to God. He

didn't care for the poor. The people who he once ruled over now laugh at him. And he is like this. He is on the wheel for seven times. We've seen that expression before when they made the furnace seven times hotter. There it meant much hotter. Here it means... for as long as it takes.

God will be at work in king Nebuchadnezzar for as long as it takes. How long will that be with you and God I wonder? King Nebuchadnezzar is learning about how it is in the kingdom of the heavens. He needs to see what he's done to his people. He needs to see that all he has is a gracious and generous gift from a loving God. He needs to see that one day he will stand accountable before God. King Nebuchadnezzar needs to learn the truth of chapter 4, verse 17: that God sets over the kingdoms the lowliest of people. He is learning to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, the King of the universe who came to serve and who God exalted (Philippians 2).

The turning point for king Nebuchadnezzar comes in verse 34, when he raises his eyes towards heaven. This is not a reference to his physical gaze – heaven is not in the sky! It's a powerful statement declaring that once he was consumed with himself, and now he is now looking to God. It is a powerful and life-changing statement that king Nebuchadnezzar has faced the truth about himself. He was on the wheel for as long as it took. God will do the same with you! He will!

King Nebuchadnezzar had been a man who was pleased with himself. God, however, saw things differently. What does God see when He looks at you? Whose kingdom are you building? Perhaps king Nebuchadnezzar learnt a very hard lesson. When you're down and out – look up!

When you're on the wheel, raise your eyes towards heaven. For God is waiting, longing, hoping... God is the God of kintsugi. Kintsugi you may remember is the Japanese art of restoring broken pots. By using liquid gold or silver, a craftsman makes it possible for broken pottery to have a new lease of life and become even more beautiful than before. Each restored broken pot has a unique quality and beauty. Each pot is a work of art.

It is in its very brokenness that each restored, broken pot has its own story and beauty. In the hands of the Master Potter, you are loved, with a love that makes you beautiful. Perhaps the question is, how long will it take?

King Nebuchadnezzar's response is to praise the Most High God. Chapter four of Daniel is the king telling his story because he wants people to know about the most high God. What will you do if you find yourself on the wheel? Paul would later write that we have the treasure of the truth about God in jars of clay!

God loved king Nebuchadnezzar too much to lower His standards. He loves you too much too. God always prefers Plan A. But in the hands of the master potter He can work with Plan B. Perhaps our challenge today is to hear God speak through the story of king Nebuchadnezzar. "Come back, it's better that way!"

Preached by Ian Phillips in Crawley Baptist Church 28th June 2020