

Hounded by Heaven

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[0 : 00] I'll do turn, if you would, to Daniel chapter 4, and it'll be a great help if you have it before you. The chapter begins in a pretty grandiose sort of way, don't you think?

Nebuchadnezzar, to all peoples, all nations, all languages that dwell in all the earth. Well, it's pretty impressive.

But it reminds us, of course, that we are, in fact, dealing with real history. This man was the greatest man in all the world.

He really did rule the world. He wasn't just some tin pot dictator. He was the leader of the known world. And he could write letters, encyclicals like that, to an empire that stretched right to the end of the whole known world.

I guess, I guess at one time, Queen Victoria could do something similar, couldn't she? Sending envoys to the colonies of the British Empire all around the world.

[1 : 11] But even that pales into significance with comparison to the absolute power of this man, Nebuchadnezzar. He really did reign supreme.

He reigned over a magnificent empire of culture, of reason, of arts and sciences. And, of course, of absolute military might. And so he could write to all the world.

And he could demand to be heard. And no doubt it happened many, many times. And when those words would have been read out by the messengers in the towns and the cities of the empire, no doubt they struck fear into the hearts of all who heard them.

Because often, no doubt, it would be a demand for tribute, money, taxes from his subject lands. Or it might be demands and summons to come and to jump to the emperor's whim.

And remember, at the beginning of chapter 3, he summoned them from all over the empire to come to the dedication of his statue. But what a surprise this time.

[2 : 19] They're all bowing down and they're listening for the emperor's words. And what do they hear? Peace be with you. Can you imagine them all bowed down there, just waiting for the demands to come?

What was that? Peace be with you. I hear right. And then what on earth is going on? Seems like we're getting a sermon. Verse 2.

It seemed good to me to show you the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me. How great are his signs. How mighty his wonders. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom.

And his dominion endures from generation to generation. What's going on? Has the emperor gone completely mad? Well, as a matter of fact, he did.

But we'll come to that a bit later on. But of course, he wasn't mad when he wrote these words. Far from it. Actually, he is saner than he's ever been in his whole life.

[3 : 20] And he's still the emperor. So they're going to have to listen to his sermon. To his personal testimony, which is what it is. They're going to have to listen whether they like it or not.

I must say I rather envy Nebuchadnezzar. Rather nice to have the absolute power to command people to listen to everything he was going to say on pain of execution. A lot of preachers who would quite like that privilege from time to time.

But at any rate, that's what he's going to do. And the rest of the chapter lays out his message. And it's his personal testimony about the Lord, the Most High God.

You could hardly find a chapter to be studying that was more appropriate for an evening when we're admitting new members by profession of faith. At first sight, when we read these words, straight after chapter 3, in that great drama, it looks like for Nebuchadnezzar the penny has finally dropped. He's got the message. He's become a true believer. He'd certainly had plenty of evidence of the truth about the one true God, the God of Daniel and the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

[4 : 29] We've seen that in all the chapters that have gone before. He'd had plenty of evidence. He'd seen his signs and wonders as he rescued these men from the flames. He'd heard from heaven the revelation of God through Daniel.

And he grasped it. What he says here in verse 3 virtually echoes Daniel's words in chapter 2, verse 44, about his eternal kingdom. It seems like he's got the message at the end of chapter 3.

He's grasped it. Or has he? Is he really buying down in true worship at the end of chapter 3? Has he been transformed totally from the man who just a little bit before was challenging God?

Do you remember chapter 3, verse 15? Who is the God who will deliver you from my hand? Has Nebuchadnezzar changed that much? Has the overwhelming evidence that he's seen and heard caused him to buy down to the truth?

Well, the answer is that no, in fact, it hadn't. It ought to, certainly. Verses 1 to 3 here in chapter 4 should have come certainly straight after the story of chapter 3.

[5 : 46] But the truth is that when we've read the whole chapter, we've seen that the first few verses and the last few verses belong together. Nebuchadnezzar has, at last, come to the point of bowing down totally to the one true God.

But, like so many of us, all the manifest truth of God's revelation wasn't enough to convince him, to force him to bow down.

God actually had to take everything away from this proud and powerful man before he would face up to a truly life-changing, a truly revolutionary truth.

that, in fact, he, Nebuchadnezzar, was not, in fact, the center of the universe. And, rather, that there is a God who is sovereign and who is majestic and glorious and all-powerful and who, as he says in verse 35, makes all the inhabitants of the earth, even great kings, seem as nothing in comparison with him.

The truth is, you see, that the greatest stumbling block to a man's bowing his whole life to the God of heaven is not actually ignorance. Nebuchadnezzar had all the evidence he needed.

[7 : 18] And we all do. We all have all the evidence that we need that there is a God most high in heaven. We have it in the very creation itself that we see every single day.

We have it supremely in the revelation of God in Scripture and supremely of all in the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Not evidence we lack.

It's not ignorance that's our problem. Actually, it's arrogance. It's perversity. Nebuchadnezzar had the truth, but he suppressed the truth.

But as we see in this chapter, it didn't do him any good at all. Indeed, his perverse refusal of the truth nearly, very nearly ended his reign and ended his life.

It did, quite literally, drive him mad. But, and really, this is the great message of the sermon that Nebuchadnezzar preaches to us, God was merciful to him.

[8 : 21] God was merciful even to this arrogant, powerful king. So let's listen to the king's testimony. Remember, it's an imperial order, so we've got to.

And actually, you know, old Nebuchadnezzar, he's quite a good preacher. You'll see, he's got three points and they all begin with H. It's a story in three acts.

It's about being haunted, first of all, by the hound of heaven. Then it's about being humbled by the judge of heaven. And then it's about being healed by a saviour from heaven.

Act 1, then, verses 4 through to 27, open with a tale of a man who is haunted by the hound of heaven.

It's a tale of haunting and of hunting. Here is a man of power and greatness, but he's haunted by morbid thoughts and fears about his own collapse and downfall.

[9 : 25] But more than that, behind his frail psychology is the ever-present, ever-vigilant power from on high, watching and following and stalking and hunting this perturbed king and refusing to let him escape.

He is the greatest and most powerful ruler on earth, but he cannot find peace. He can't find it. And we already know from reading earlier chapters what happens to this poor man when he can't find peace.

He doesn't sleep well. And despite, verse 4, despite his wonderful prosperity, his houses, his palaces and all of these things, he's dreaming again.

He's having bad dreams. Verse 5 says they make him afraid, they make him alarmed. We know what happens now, don't we? It's bad news for all the court psychotherapists and psychobabblists.

Call them in, he says. We remember chapter 2. Actually, Nebuchadnezzar's mellowed a bit since then. He doesn't seem to threaten them with their heads being chopped off this time. He's really much more polite.

[10:42] Perhaps he's been in therapy. Maybe his quack has given him the Babylonian version of Valium or something like that. But at any rate, as verse 7 says, they're all coming in, the astrologers, the Chaldeans, the Freudian analysts, the psychoanalysts and all that crowd, but are no help.

And so at last, verse 8, at last, the very last resort, they wheel in who? Well, the Bible teacher, the prophet, the one who speaks the truth revealed from heaven because he listens to the truth from heaven.

They bring in Daniel. You'd have thought maybe they'd have learned the lesson from before to perhaps go to him a little bit quicker, wouldn't you? But no, he's a last resort.

And the king admits in verse 9, do you see, he admits that he knows Daniel can speak the truth and can make him understand the truth about himself. He knows that Daniel has something that the others haven't got.

He can't put it in the right language. He says, the spirit of the holy gods is in you. But what he recognizes but can't quite articulate is that Daniel speaks the words of the spirit of God.

[12:03] It's so true to life, isn't it? So often people know that all the mumbo-jumbo of the world cannot help them. They know that the truth of God by contrast is true.

And they know where they can find the truth of God. But usually it's, if anything, a last resort, isn't it? Only when everything else fails would you think that perhaps you might go to church, consult the Bible, consult God.

But you see, all too often that is the only possible help. Because all too often the problems cannot be solved without the truth of God because so often these issues come down ultimately to being spiritual issues.

And that's exactly what Nebuchadnezzar had to deal with. Nebuchadnezzar's haunting dreams were all down to the fact that he was being hunted by God.

He was alarmed because the incessant constant knocking on his life was a knocking at the door of his heart by the Most High God. His is the restlessness of soul of a man that just cannot be at home and cannot be at peace until he finds his one true home.

[13:29] And that true home is in God, God Most High. And until that happens while he still resists the calling of God on his life and while he's still running and hiding and perversely refusing God's intrusion while he's doing that he cannot have peace even though he has everything else in the world.

Even though he has palaces and houses and hanging gardens and everything else. He's haunted because he's being hunted. He's like an animal fleeing from the hounds.

And he does have a hound on his trail. He has on his trail the hound of heaven. Some of you will know very well these words of Francis Thompson's poem called The Hound of Heaven speaks of someone fleeing as Nebuchadnezzar was the truth which he didn't want to admit to.

I fled him down the nights and down the days. I fled him down the arches of the years. I fled him down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind. And in the midst of tears I hid from him.

And under running laughter up visted stopes I sped and shot precipitated adown titanic glooms of chasmed fears from those strong feet that followed followed after.

[14:57] But with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace deliberate speed majestic instancy they beat and a voice beat more instant than the feet of all things betray thee who betrayest me.

You see it's not just something peculiar to that great king. It's something common to so many many people. people who are being woken up out of their dark refusal of the truth of God but who don't like it and who resent it and who flee from it and flee from him from God.

They may not be conscious of course of what's happening to them. Nebuchadnezzar was confused he was afraid he didn't know what it was but he knew it was something and it was terrifying but it wouldn't stop.

what do you do? Well at last you see Nebuchadnezzar finds Daniel and he finds an answer he finds an answer from above and his true predicament you see can be explained not by psychoanalysts or astrologers or anybody else his predicament can be explained only by revelation that comes from above to the earth it comes from the most high God to him and it comes from the lips of a man who

knows God and who listens to God and therefore who can speak for God it's as simple as that and so the king rehearses his dream to Daniel he's obviously remembered at this time unlike chapter 2 and in verse 18 there he says to Daniel to give him the meaning for the spirit of the holy gods is in you in other words in his confused pagan way what he's saying is this what is the truth that the spirit of

God wants to say to me what is the truth tell me Daniel tell me the word from above that I cannot see without God revealing it to me and in verse 19 Daniel's reaction also is one of great dismay do you see that his thoughts alarmed him and his thoughts alarmed him because the truth of it all is so plain to him the word of the spirit the word of the holy God of heaven is a sharp two edged sword and Daniel saw that it pierces to the dividing of soul and spirit and it's an awesome thing to have to speak that word to a king or to anyone for all that matter because the one who speaks that word knows that the gospel of God is a powerful thing it's a living word as the Hebrews writer says it judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart no creature is hidden from its sight all even great men all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom he must give account and so the bearer of the word of God must be someone who himself trembles at the power of its might don't forget that friends great is the gospel of our glorious

[18:28] God it is a mighty warning from God it is a powerful sword just as much as it is a wonderful offer of grace and no one who really understands the gospel of God can fail to tremble at its implications for the lives of men and women and so Daniel was dismayed at the burden of the message that God called him to give to the king his thoughts alarmed him it's important here to see two distinct sides to the way that Daniel stands as the man who speaks for the God of heaven to earth first of all do you see he loves there's a clear and definite note of affection here I think for the king isn't there verse 19 may this be for your enemies he says I don't want this to be the message for you king I suppose it could be of course that he's just worried about what might happen if

Nebuchadnezzar is swept out of the way and another even worse dictator comes maybe he feels the devil you know is better than the one you don't I suspect there are probably folks in Iraq in present day Iraq who are perhaps thinking well maybe we would have been better off with Saddam after all but I think there's more than that here I think the way that he pleads with the king in verse 27 definitely speaks of a real personal care and if that's true it's remarkable isn't it that this Israelite this captive should have such loyalty and such concern for his captor especially when we've seen the way he behaves especially when we know what he's like but Daniel has a real concern for this man but of course you see when the Lord commands his people to love their enemies he's not asking us is he to have sentimental feelings that come naturally of course not he's commanding us to overcome our feelings isn't he and to actively love even pagan opposers of the gospel that's what Daniel's doing the man who speaks from heaven to earth must be a man who loves the people he speaks to but it's not contradicting that in fact it's part of that love to note the second thing that Daniel exhibits here and that's very clear he tells the truth in all its fullness doesn't he it's so tempting to leave out of our proclamation of God's message the difficult stuff the unpopular things the unpalatable things the things people won't like isn't that right especially if you hear that the reputation of the person you're speaking to is that if you say something he doesn't like he's very likely to murder you immediately requires a fair bit of courage but even if your hearers are just people today your friends and mine whose thinking is so far away from

God's revealed truth that they are actually outraged that your gospel message might dare to accuse them of wrong behavior or wrong thinking or may even threaten them with God's judgment if they refuse to repent you may not get murdered for saying that in our country but you certainly will be despised even in the church establishment and who knows how long it will be before we do face the long arm of the law some of you were reading as I was of a 70 year old man who was arrested in London just recently his crime to stand on London bridge with a sandwich board saying repent turn from your evil ways and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ he was arrested and charged with breach of the peace but Daniel the real prophet the real messenger from God who loves God and who loves the king must speak the truth in that love verse 22 you see he says yes oh king that great tree is you in many senses you have it all you're great you're powerful you're glorious you're like a beautifully abundantly fruitful tree there's no irony there he's he's not getting at the king like many talented people king nebuchadnezzar had made much of his life he'd had huge creativity he'd achieved he'd been successful he'd graced society with so many things but the point is this that even man's greatest achievements even his best if it's trying to reach up to heaven if it's challenging

heaven it's really seeking to deify himself and it's defying the God of heaven it mocks the God of heaven it scorns the God of heaven it proclaims to the world I am the center of the world I'm certainly the center of my world that's true isn't it of so many able and talented people so many driven people achieving people even if it's only unconscious but that's the truth isn't it we're setting ourselves up and really we're deifying ourselves and Daniel says to the king king it's all true these great achievements of yours I don't mock them but you cannot escape the eye of the most high God God is watching you there are watchers in the heavens God's eyes go throughout all the earth they see into the darkest corners they penetrate into the depths of your being oh king and because you ignore him and you refuse him and you will not bow to him he is going to humble you he's going to lay you so low that you have no idea what's going to have hit you and he says in verse 26 until such time that you humble yourself and you acknowledge [25 : 11] God and you acknowledge his kingdom you're going to be like one of the beasts of the field imagine delivering that message it's extraordinary it's terrifying no wonder Daniel was alarmed and dismayed but he loved and so he did convey the truth in all its clarity in all its starkness he spoke the truth in love the apostle Paul would have put it it's not unloving to tell God's truth it's not unloving to give God's warnings it's utterly unloving not to give God's warnings real love confronts sin it does what Daniel does in verse 27 it calls to repentance before it's too late break off your sins he says and show it's real show it's a real change of heart by a changed life practice righteousness show the mercy of the one who has been shown mercy o king do it before it's too late you see love speaks the truth and it confronts sin and it calls people to turn from sin and be saved from sin before it's too late it's so important that we understand that take for example the current pressure in our denomination as in most to condone the blessings of gay relationships do do you see do you see how unloving such a thing would be it would be saying don't repent it's not sin don't seek righteousness don't change your life it would be to have

Daniel's revelation and to say to the king don't worry king God loves you just as you are you don't have to change it'll be alright don't worry in fact celebrate it of course it wasn't alright was it and the king should have been warned because as act two shows he was going to meet his downfall at God's hand he was going to be humbled by the judge of heaven and verses 28 to 33 face us with the stark reality don't they of hubris king's arrogance and pride and humbling verse 28 all this came upon king Nebuchadnezzar what follows is written in the third person you'll have seen that it's not part of Nebuchadnezzar's own reminiscence you could read straight from verse 27 to verse 34 if you knew the story and what it was being spoken about but the narrator has added this section for us it's rather reads like civil service prose he's giving a calm account of the intervening time you see verse 29 tells us a whole year had passed the king seems to have forgotten all about his dream and its warning indeed indeed it's a picture isn't it of hubris of arrogant pride look at verse 30 is not this great

Babylon that I have built by my mighty power for the glory of my majesty does he think he can avoid judgment does he think that the more time that passes from when he listened to God's word the safer he is I suppose he does and I guess many people think just like that don't they what a colossal mistake God is patient God is very patient he knocks and he knocks and he knocks but in the end he might have to actually knock you down that's what happened God won't be mocked he humbles the mighty and before the words were out of his mouth bang a voice comes from heaven and there's no interpretation needed this time it's very clear verse 31 it's all over you've lost it you will be humbled and it happened what verse 33 describes there is a recognizable condition used to be called lycanthropy it's probably a very severe untreated psychotic depression full of wild delusions of someone who thinks they're an animal it's very rarely seen today in the developed world but it's not entirely unknown hardly seen because of the advent of antipsychotic medication and so on some of the scholars of course scoff at this because they say well there are no great records in Babylon of anything like this but we all know don't we that leaders and rulers are pretty good at suppressing embarrassing information in fact there are extra biblical records with various stories and tales of

Nebuchadnezzar and his madness some scholars give the objection that a man of this brilliance and power could never have got where he did with such mental frailty we know that's just preposterous don't we history is littered with hugely achieving and adventurous men who have had terrible troubles with their mind just think of the madness of King George III think of Hitler you think this picture of this man with his long hair and his long nails is ridiculous just remember those

television pictures of Saddam Hussein when he was pulled out of that hole in the ground no this is real alright and what's more we're told God was responsible for it God did it and God can and sometimes does cause these kind of things illness even mental illness to bring us to see that we are not the center of the world and sometimes it's because we just can't learn that any other way this didn't happen to

Nebuchadnezzar because he was an especially bad man or especially wicked tyrant of course he was a tyrant no it happened to him because he resisted he continually resisted the word and the warning of the living God he refused God's mercy and grace that's the only way to destruction in this world to refuse the mercy and grace of God does it shock you that God could take such drastic action here the thought that God could even cause madness the awful degrading mental breakdown here to turn the glory of a man into something bestial the truth is that sometimes it's only by flooring us that God can bring us to our senses and that's even true for Christian believers remember what

[32 : 50] Hebrews 12 says the Lord disciplines those that he loves and sometimes it even has to be as severe as things like this to make us listen sometimes people have to be humbled terribly by the judge of heaven but you see what this chapter teaches us is that even this is not final judgment in this world God's judgment are still often perhaps even always for the sake of mercy God's judgment is his strange work but it serves his great work his great work of salvation and that brings us to the final act to act three where Nebuchadnezzar tells us in his own words that at last he is healed he is healed by the savior from heaven isn't there a wonderful simplicity about his testimony in verses 34 to 37 how how was this once great emperor now like a beast in the gutter how was he saved verse 34 i lifted my eyes to heaven and salvation comes doesn't it in the recognition of a true state he looked to heaven and he saw at last the truth that he was not the center of the world even if in earthly terms he had been just that he sees at last that there's a god far far greater than he is and vastly more important than his little life was however spectacular it was and he sees verse 35 that this god is sovereign that he does according to his will in heaven and he does according to his will in earth and therefore he saw that just because this god is sovereign then i am responsible i am responsible and accountable to him the sovereign god with no right to question his rule no right to say to this god verse 35 at the end what have you done no only the responsibility to bow down before him to praise him to extol him nebuchadnezzar tells us in verse 36 that in recognizing this and only in recognizing this his reason is restored because it's only in coming to terms with the truth of the god of heaven and the demands that he makes upon our little human lives that god can heal and that god can restore a sense of balance and priority in our life and you see for nebuchadnezzar all the haunting and huntedness of his life all the paranoia the sleeplessness all the grandiose desires all the hubris was because of his refusal to recognize and to submit to what he did at last see and accept the awesome truth of the god of heaven and he was the god who was hounding him in order to heal him nebuchadnezzar was looking for cure for satisfaction for peace for glory but he was looking for it where it simply can never ever be found and the truth was that at last he found it that he found it in the very one he'd been fleeing all that time he found that the hound of heaven was the healer from heaven that he was the giver that he himself who had been hounding him and tormenting him was in fact the savior the one who held in his hand everything that his

life had searched for but couldn't find he discovered the truth that's true for every single human being on this earth that if we flee him the god of heaven we're actually fleeing the one who alone can give us all that we seek listen to the last verse of Francis Thompson's poem God speaking whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee save me save only me all which I took from thee I did but take not for thy harms but just that thou might seek it in my arms all which thy child's mistake fancies is lost I have stored for thee at home rise clasp my hand and come halts by me that footfall is my gloom after all shade of his hand outstretched caressingly ah says the

Lord fondest blindest weakest I am he whom thou seekest I dravest love from thee who dravest me and Nebuchadnezi you see like many of us maybe all of us found that glorious truth only the hard way why can't we ever learn anything the easy way and so friends as always there is great encouragement in this chapter and great warning first of all be encouraged God does and he can and he will humble even the arrogant scourges of God's people look at Nebuchadnezi think of Saul of Tarsus many others beside no one is beyond God's grace if they will lift their eyes to heaven so don't fear the tyrants and the opposers of God's grace but don't give up on them either love them pray for them and speak the truth to them in love in trembling and with warning

God will not be mocked he will do according to his will and we must speak the truth in love to such people but God will convert great men he'll do it where there are Daniels who speak the truth in love who reveal the true gospel from heaven to earth and friends God will restore mad men those who are lost in self destruction of their bodies and their minds sometimes living like animals in the gutter destroying themselves with drink and with drugs and with other things God can and he will restore men and women like that they will lift their eyes to heaven he does it and he loves to do it he's that kind of

God and you know such were some of us says the apostle Paul that we were washed we were sanctified we were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the spirit of our God the most high God the God of Daniel don't ever forget that God will save and does save the great and he will save and he does save and lift up those who are in the gutter don't forget this either be warned God does humble and lay low don't presume ever on God's grace don't scorn his warnings if the hound of heaven is pursuing you don't wait to respond he may have to floor you in ways you could never begin to understand and even then you can't be sure that it's not too late just read on to chapter five of

[41 : 11] Daniel read about another king who found to his eternal cost that at last it was too late don't ignore Daniel's warning listen to him break off your sins show fruits of righteousness before it's too late that's the ever present message of this chapter two just listen as I close to the words of a poem that I found in a letter to the times some years ago apparently it's inscribed in the wall of Chester Cathedral it's called Times Paces When as a child I laughed and wept time crept When as a youth I waxed more bold time strolled When I became a full grown man time ran When older still I daily grew time flew Soon I shall find in passing on time gone O Christ wilt thou have saved me then that's really the only question in life that matters so don't leave it too late because as the very last verse of our chapter says those who walk in pride he is able to humble let's pray how

God great and gracious we acknowledge before you your greatness and our smallness we acknowledge the hardness of our hearts and the way that so often we are unwilling to learn we resist your voice again and again and again help us we pray to lift our eyes and our ears to heaven and to hear your word of grace and of mercy and may we all hear this evening clasp it with hands and with hearts for we ask it in Jesus name Amen well we sing number six we let's and we out