

Pride Cometh before a Fall

Daniel 4:1-37

Introduction, Part 1: Applying Scripture Today

Preaching from Scripture entails bridging the distance between two horizons: between the point of the text in its original context, and its application today. Sometimes the text is generic (for example, 'Pride comes before a fall,' which, ironically, is far too generic a maxim to fit the point of Daniel 4). Other times, the modern context is the same as the original (for example, eating food offered to ancestors and idols in Asia). In both cases, the text applies directly and identically today. Other times – as here – the point of the text is somewhat more precise, rather than generic, and yet significant differences separate our particular circumstances from the original context. In such cases, application has to decide how best to remain faithful to the meaning of the original text, while drawing out some point of relevance to the contemporary context.

It can be helpful to conceive of application as a series of concentric circles. The closer to the center, the closer to the author's – and God's – original meaning, so the more reliable and authoritative the application. The further from the center, the further from the author's – and God's – original intent, so the less certain the application. The goal is to be as close as possible to original intent, while still being relevant to contemporary readers. Often these two aims are in some tension. While the intent is always to bridge the two horizons of Scripture, typically sermons are expected to emphasize the contemporary context, while Bible study has the liberty to give more attention to the original context.

Daniel 4 provides an excellent opportunity to illustrate the process of applying Scripture. Toward that end, his week's devotional takes repeated passes at the overall point of Daniel 4, offering several applications, in concentric circles, beginning with those nearest the author's original intent, and moving toward those more relevant to contemporary readers.

Introduction, Part 2: The Original Intent of Daniel 4

The central point ('big idea') of this text is readily apparent: the chapter begins and ends on the same note, and twice reinforces the same theme in between. The chapter begins with King Nebuchadnezzar's retrospective testimony: "It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me... His kingdom is an eternal kingdom; his dominion endures from generation to generation" (4:2). The chapter ends with Nebuchadnezzar testifying: "His

dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth” (4:35). Introduction and conclusion make the same two related points: (a) God – and God alone – is sovereign; and, (b) all rulers owe their appointment to him.

In between beginning and end is the vision of a massive tree cut down, signifying 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” (4:17). The interpretation of the dream anticipates that the king will experience a psychotic break, “until [he] acknowledges that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes” (4:25). Again, the dream and its interpretation make the same two points: (a) God – and God alone – is sovereign; and, (b) all rulers owe their appointment to him.

A year later, the dream is fulfilled. The king surveys the skyline and boasts: “‘Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?’” (4:30). His claim replicates the first half of the thematic pattern by contrast: (a) he is sovereign, and (b) he achieved his position by his own power. Immediately God brings judgment, until the king “acknowledges that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes” (4:32). So God causes him to be psychotic until he renounces his boast and acknowledges that: (a) God – and God alone – is sovereign; and, (b) all rulers owe their appointment to him.

The six repetitions shout out the point of this chapter: God promotes and demotes all kings according to his sovereign pleasure; no king can claim to be self-made; all kings owe their position to him.

What message did God intend this theme to convey to Daniel’s audience? The Jews of his day were a vanquished people, their homeland destroyed and their leaders in exile. Nebuchadnezzar was the emperor of the sole superpower. Appearances indicate that this emperor is ruler of the world, and that arising to such a stature is evidence of his personal superiority. So this chapter sets that straight. Nebuchadnezzar serves by divine appointment, and at God’s discretion, for only so long as he deigns. This offers at least two assurances to the Jews: (a) God is supreme ruler of the world, and controller of their destiny, even in exile; and, (b) God eventually humbles the proud and boastful, including the mighty emperor Nebuchadnezzar, and the mighty nation of Babylon, their conqueror.

Given that this is the original point and application of the text, how does it apply today? In various ways.

Day 1: Daniel 4, primary application

Since American Christians are not in a comparable position today – we are citizens of the world’s one superpower, not the victims of conquest by a godless invader – this text does not apply primarily to us. To whom, then, does this text speak most directly today?

To the Christians of any country where some secular or non-Christian ruler claims abusive authority over the church. To the Christians of Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as China and Laos. To the suffering church of Somalia and Yemen, of southern Sudan and North Korea. To the Shouwang church of Beijing. What does this account say to them? The same things it said to Daniel’s audience. God – no abusive dictator nor any political regime – is supreme ruler of the world; and he will humble those proud rulers who deny him respect and who harass his people, ensuring that the arrogant get what they deserve in the end, if not before.

How is this primary application relevant to us who do not face such oppression? If nothing else, it should prompt us to pray for those churches under persecution and harassment. For prayer information, see <http://www.compassdirect.org>

Day 2: Daniel 4, secondary applications

If that is what Daniel 4 says to those churches and Christians living under oppressive or antagonistic regimes, what does it say to us?

While this question is legitimate, we do well to keep it in its proper place. At our core, humans are narcissists: we suppose that the world revolves around us. At its core, Scripture is primarily about God. So we naturally begin by asking, “What does this text say *to me*?” But Scripture calls us to ask, “What does this text say *about God*?” At least sometimes, learning about him should be enough for us, even if a text says nothing about us. Other times, the text is about God’s people elsewhere who suffer far more difficult challenges than we do. They matter to him; they should matter also to us. So sometimes the takeaway is to pray for the church in countries where it suffers persecution. Still, if the question is kept in its proper place, it is legitimate to ask how Daniel’s original point might apply to Christians who do not suffer under oppressive governments.

The arrogance of power is evident in recent political scandals. On an individual level, consider the exploits and exploitations by powerful figures – such as Dominique Strauss-Kahn, Arnold Schwarzenegger – so much that *Time* magazine ran a recent cover story, “Sex. Lies. Arrogance. What Makes Powerful Men Act Like Pigs?”). Journalist Nancy Gibbs notes: “A study set to be published in *Psychological Science* found that the higher

men — or women — rose in a business hierarchy, the more likely they were to consider or commit adultery. With power comes both opportunity and confidence, the authors argue, and with confidence comes a sense of sexual entitlement.” As well as other sorts of entitlement.

The arrogance of political power can also come to expression through governmental bureaucracy and bureaucrats. For instance, when home schooling first gathered steam in the 1970s, teachers’ unions organized to use the courts to block this threat to their jobs. Similarly, before Congress clipped their wings, both the IRS and the INS seemed to go out of their way to make people’s lives miserable. So, too, within the last decade, the MA Department of Social Services has, despite court opposition, used its bureaucratic powers to harass parents for even mild spanking of their children.

These are legitimate applications because they reflect arrogance born of political power. Yet they are secondary applications because the arrogance expresses itself not in the conquest of other nations, but in other forms of victimization or harassment. They are secondary applications also because Nebuchadnezzar merely claimed credit for his personal and vocational success, whereas these powerful arrogant go further, victimizing the weaker. Still, the application is parallel, albeit slightly extended: as with Daniel’s audience, this text assures victims that God humbles the powerful and proud, a truth which Strauss-Kahn, Schwarzenegger and John Edwards vividly demonstrate.

Day 3: Daniel 4, more secondary applications

While the text focuses on – and therefore primarily references – political powers, its application can extend to other forms of power, and to those who suffer under their abuse.

Arrogance can come to expression in the abuse of economic power, whether it is a commercial juggernaut explicitly setting out to bankrupt all competitors for the sheer pleasure of conquest. Economic arrogance is also evident in greedy bankers who victimize customers and deceive investors with high-risk mortgages in the pursuit of quick profits and obscene bonuses. Economic arrogance also commonly characterizes the attitude of a rich elite toward the poor, for example, in impoverished countries like Haiti.

Arrogance also sometimes expresses itself in the abuse of spiritual power. Some spiritual leaders use their position to fleece their followers, in support of an exorbitant lifestyle. Others abuse their position of authority to sexually exploit the vulnerable.

While Nebuchadnezzar's arrogance was born of political power, by extension, any sort of power potentially falls under the purview of this passage, and its assurance to victims that God humbles the proud. A previous generation witnessed this in the falls of televangelists Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart, though those scandals seem not to have dissuaded a new generation of flamboyantly extravagant preachers currently under financial investigation by the IRS. The humbling of the proud was also evident in the collapse of numerous banks, and the jailing of 3,000 bank executives in the aftermath of the savings and loan scandal of the 1980s, though we have yet to see a similar humbling in the aftermath of the subprime mortgage crisis. The promise of this text to those who suffer under the abuse of power is that God rebukes the proud and the abusive, and avenges their victims.

Day 4: Daniel 4, tertiary applications

The intended audience of Daniel 4, as of the book as a whole, is likely not King Nebuchadnezzar or his Babylonian retinue, but the people of God. Since the Jews were victims, not conquerors, and abused, not abusive, the primary purpose of this chapter and the book is not to rebuke the abuse of power, but to reassure those who suffer from abuse. The primary message is not that the powerful should be humble, but that the arrogant will be humbled. It is a message of consolation for victims, not of warning toward elite.

Still, given that original purpose, the consolation for victims can serve conversely as a warning to any elites who read Daniel. That was not its original purpose, but it is a legitimate – albeit extended – function. Given its distance from the original intent of the text, this approach should be considered a tertiary application. Nonetheless, it remains legitimate, and even necessary, in those when primary and secondary applications do not fit the contemporary audience. It remains legitimate, and even necessary, for example, when this text is preached to elite individuals and within elite nations, rather than to the impoverished.

So, for example, Daniel 4 could arguably rebuke America's geopolitical ambitions over the last couple of centuries. We are not used to viewing our country as under divine warning, because we naturally buy into the cultural myth of American exceptionalism (a myth our political leaders happily reinforce). So when we support guerilla movements, they become 'freedom fighters'. But consider, for example, the interventionist practices of American foreign policy in the 19th and 20th centuries, with especially frequent interference in the national politics of Latin America, on the

grounds of defending democracy, or, more recently, ‘national interest’. Some – rightly or wrongly – perceive the South-East Asian wars of the 1960s similarly. Some even argue that the the second American-Iraq war should be viewed in similar light.

This is tertiary application because it brings the text to bear not on the victim, but on the victor. At the same time, given that it entails the arrogant use of political power, it still falls under legitimate application of Daniel 4.

Day 5: Daniel 4, more tertiary application

Also two steps away from the original point of the text, but still a legitimate application, and closer to our own situation, Daniel 4 also warns against the sorts of pride which sometimes beset people like us, graduates of elite schools and professionals in respected occupations.

So far, we have focused on two traits in Daniel 4: (a1) arrogance born of geopolitical preeminence, and, (b1) the word of reassurance to victims. Nonetheless, we have argued that it is legitimate to apply the text also to (a2) arrogance born of other forms of social power, and (b2) a word of warning to victimizers. Today we go one step further, in order to personalize the text directly to us, and to people like us. We consider the application of Daniel 4 to the sorts of more circumscribed power base that we enjoy.

None of us is ever likely to attain to the political status of King Nebuchadnezzar or Presider Obama. Nor are we likely to attain to the economic power of Dominique Strauss-Kahn, or a Wall Street bank executive. Still, in our own more modest way, we can develop a certain pride in our status or achievements, as graduates of elite universities, or professionals in high-paying, respected occupations. At the same time, legitimate application requires a significant link to the text. The arrogance in view in Daniel 4 is found in Nebuchadnezzar’s claim to have attained such accomplishments on his own, denying God any credit, and in his inference that this success makes him superior to other people.

So Daniel 4 would not rebuke those who simply take pleasure in having graduated from a prestigious university, or in securing a well-paying job in a respected field. Instead, it would apply to those who assume either: (a) that they made it on their own, rather than by the grace of God and with the help of supportive parents and excellent schools, or, (b) that such spiritually inconsequential achievements render them superior to those with weaker academic qualifications or lesser vocational achievements. Some who graduate elite universities and secure solid jobs in prestigious

fields nonetheless struggle with a sense of inadequacy; no matter how successful any of us may be, most of us know others who are even more successful. Daniel 4 does not rebuke those who, despite notable success, still consider themselves inferior. So the text does not apply across the board to those who attain such achievements. But for those who have attained much, and have become proud because of it, both assuming all the credit for their success and looking down on those who have attained less, this text offers a warning: God humbles the proud; so, better that we first humble ourselves.

Day 6: Daniel 4, New Testament applications

Whenever we draw a lesson from the Old Testament, it is helpful to confirm its legitimacy from the New Testament. The relationship between the testaments is largely one of continuity. Nevertheless, the coming of Christ instituted a revolution, so it is always helpful to confirm that any particular Old Testament lesson transfers into the New. At least two New Testament passages reinforce Daniel 4, and its assurance to victims as well as its warning to the elite.

In its warnings to the arrogant economic elite (see day 3), Daniel 4 finds confirmation in James 5:1,6:

“Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you” (5:1-6).

In James, as in Daniel, while these verses address the arrogant elite, they are more likely assurances to the impoverished victims: the very next verse appeals to believers to wait patiently for divine intervention (James 5:7). In either event, the warning against the arrogant and abusive elite is similar.

In its warning against intellectual and social arrogance (see Day 5), Daniel 4 finds support in 1 Corinthians 1-4. In 1 Corinthians 3:18, for example, we read: “Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become ‘fools’ so that you may become wise.” In 4:7, Paul undermines any basis to their claim of superiority: “For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you

have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?” Even stronger, in 4:8-13, Paul engages in biting sarcasm to rebuke Corinthian arrogance:

Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have begun to reign—and that without us! How I wish that you really had begun to reign so that we also might reign with you! For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena... We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored!

Rebuke of the arrogant is not restricted to the Old Testament, but is also part of the New Testament gospel, and serves as a warning to us, not to let success go to our heads.

Conclusion

In its original setting, this text is a word of comfort and assurance to those who suffer under the abuse of power. At the same time, it can also function as a word of rebuke to the proud, those who credit their success to themselves and think that success makes them superior. Daniel 4 prods them to humble themselves, so that God need not humble them.

While in its original setting, this text focuses on a particular expression of arrogance – political arrogance by the ruler of a superpower, drunk with self-importance, and claiming credit for his success – its point is secondarily applicable to those inebriated by other sorts of power and at lower levels of power: all are accountable to God, who humbles the arrogant.

At the same time, this passage does not rebuke the accomplished who avoid pride, who do not claim a sense of superiority from their own success, and who do not use their attainments to humiliate or exploit others. God opposes the proud; he does not oppose the successful. Pride has no place in the lives of Christians; accomplishment does.