

## HEAVEN RULES



Daniel 4:1-37  
 Fourth Message  
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SERIES: ONE KING TO RULE THEM ALL

"I'm the king of the castle." This was a popular playground taunt in my childhood. "I'm the king of the castle and you're the dirty rascal." It didn't matter how small the mound, whoever was on top claimed to be king. And everyone else would try to depose him and claim the title of king.

That was a childhood song, but real life isn't much different. Kingship arose in the third millennium BC in the city-states of Mesopotamia, each ruled by a king. The size of the king's mound, his castle, was the city. The first empire emerged around 2300 BC when Sargon ruled all Mesopotamia. Being king over a city or over an empire was a powerful but precarious position. You could claim, "I'm the king of the castle," but there were always others eager to depose you and claim the crown themselves.

In Shakespeare's play of the same name, Richard II, who has just been deposed by his cousin Bolingbroke, Henry IV, laments the fate of kings in what has become known as his Hollow Crown speech:

...let us sit upon the ground  
 And tell sad stories of the death of kings:  
 How some have been depos'd, some slain in war,  
 Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed,  
 Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping kill'd,  
 All murdered—for within the hollow crown  
 That rounds the mortal temples of a king  
 Keeps Death his court... (*Richard II* 3.2)

The hollow crown: all earthly kings must die. The BBC made a film adaptation under this title *The Hollow Crown* of Shakespeare's history plays—all the Richard's and the Henry's in all their parts, 8 plays in all. In one way or another all kings die. No matter how big the mound they stand on, all will be deposed by death or by more nefarious means. But it can be a hard lesson for a king to learn his finitude, whether his castle be a city, an empire, a business, or even a church. It often takes a hard fall, for pride goes before a fall.

In Daniel 4, mighty King Nebuchadnezzar tells of his hard fall that taught him his finitude. He does so in the form of a letter addressed to the whole world. Again, this chapter is too long to read in its entirety, so I will read only some verses.

**King Nebuchadnezzar,**

**To the nations and peoples of every language, who live in all the earth:**

**May you prosper greatly! (Dan 1:1 NIV)**

Nebuchadnezzar was king of Babylon 605–562 BC, a reign of 43 years. He was the greatest king of Babylon and the greatest king of his day. He was a warrior king. During the reign of his father Nabopolassar who established the neo-Babylonian Empire, Nebuchadnezzar was out in the field winning military victories, defeating the Assyrians and the Egyptians. He was a builder-king who made Babylon into a resplendent city, as we'll hear later. He was "king of the castle" supreme. He was the head of gold of the enormous statue seen in his dreams in chapter 2. In chapter 3 he had

made an enormous gold statue and commanded all nations and peoples of every language to fall down and worship it, else be thrown into the blazing fiery furnace.

Now he writes to all nations and peoples of every language throughout the earth with a quite different message, a message that he had to learn the hard way. It's a message about the Most High God in whose presence he isn't most high anything.

**It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me.**

**How great are his signs,  
 how mighty his wonders!  
 His kingdom is an eternal kingdom;  
 his dominion endures from generation to generation.**

(4:2-3)

Six times in this chapter he refers to God as Most High. What he has come to learn about the Most High God is that "His kingdom is an eternal kingdom; his dominion endures from generation to generation." To drive home the point he will repeat this statement at the end of his letter: "His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation" (34). Dominion or sovereignty is the key theme in this chapter. "Dominion" and the cognate word "ruler" occur four times each. Who is the ruler whose dominion is eternal? Nebuchadnezzar must learn that it is not himself on earth but God in heaven.

Israel already knew this. Our call to worship, a psalm of praise to the Lord, ended with similar language:

**Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,  
 and your dominion endures through all generations.**

(Ps 145:13)

Israel clung to this truth during the exile. But Nebuchadnezzar had to learn this truth the hard way.

It is the hope of every monarch that his kingdom endure from generation to generation, that dynastic succession hold. But this is a vain hope. No earthly kingdom lasts forever. As Shakespeare wrote, "within the hollow crown that rounds the mortal temples of a king keeps Death his court." Death comes to all.

## 1. Nebuchadnezzar's Dream (4:4-18)

How did Nebuchadnezzar learn that he is not the ultimate sovereign? It came in a dream, which he tells us about in verses 4-18.

**I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at home in my palace, contented and prosperous. I had a dream that made me afraid. As I was lying in bed, the images and visions that passed through my mind terrified me. (4:4-5)**

Life was good for the king. He had defeated all his enemies. His reign was secure. He had built Babylon into a magnificent city. He was content and flourishing in his palace in Babylon. But there was a problem, the same problem he had in chapter 2. In bed at night his

sleep was troubled by a dream. Fantastic images flitted through his mind and terrified him.

He did the same thing he had done in chapter 2: he summoned his team of magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. This time, unlike before, he told them the dream. But, as we might expect by now, they could not interpret it. At last Daniel came in. The king had confidence in his ability:

**“I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you, and no mystery is too difficult for you. Here is my dream; interpret it for me.” (4:9)**

Three times the king acknowledges that “the spirit of the holy gods” is in Daniel (8, 9, 18), and therefore he has unique ability to interpret his dream. The king tells Daniel his dream. There are two components: a mighty tree and a heavenly messenger with a disturbing message. First, the tree:

**“I looked, and there before me stood a tree in the middle of the land. Its height was enormous. The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky; it was visible to the ends of the earth. Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it the wild animals found shelter, and the birds lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed.” (4:10-12)**

Next a mysterious messenger delivering an ominous message:

**“I looked, and there before me was a holy one, a messenger, coming down from heaven. He called in a loud voice: ‘Cut down the tree and trim off its branches; strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the animals flee from under it and the birds from its branches. But let the stump and its roots, bound with iron and bronze, remain in the ground, in the grass of the field.**

**‘Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, and let him live with the animals among the plants of the earth. Let his mind be changed from that of a man and let him be given the mind of an animal, till seven times pass by for him.**

**‘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.’” (4:13-17)**

Nebuchadnezzar may not yet know the meaning of the dream with its tree and life among the animals. But the lesson is already clear: “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.” There’s the key word “sovereign,” cognate with the earlier word “dominion.” This is a lesson for the living, for all people to learn. Two more times this lesson will be stated, specifically for the king: “until *you* acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign” (25, 32). Which of course means that Nebuchadnezzar is not ultimately sovereign, no matter how great he be. There is a higher throne.

Having told him his dream, Nebuchadnezzar again appeals to Daniel, using his Babylonian name Belteshazzar, to interpret the dream (18). His wise men cannot do so, “But you can, because the spirit of the holy gods is in you.”

## 2. Daniel’s interpretation (4:19-27)

In the next section of the letter (19-27) Nebuchadnezzar writes of how Daniel interpreted the dream to him.

Daniel was hesitant to speak at first because he understood the dream only too clearly, and was alarmed at its implications for the king. He was perplexed, or better, he was appalled. Nebuchadnezzar urged him on, to not be afraid to tell him the interpretation. But Daniel wished the dream’s meaning were true for the king’s enemies instead, so awful were the implications.

Daniel repeated the vision that the king had earlier told him. The tree grew strong. It was rooted in the earth but its top reached the heavens, and it was visible to the ends of the earth. This is the cosmic tree, the *axis mundi*, the axis of the world. The axis between earth and heaven runs through this tree. In this tree all creatures find sustenance and safety for a flourishing life. Daniel gives the interpretation of this first part of the dream, saying to the king, “You are the tree”:

**“Your Majesty, you are that tree! You have become great and strong; your greatness has grown until it reaches the sky, and your dominion extends to distant parts of the earth.” (4:22)**

Nebuchadnezzar was the world ruler, the great king. One of his titles was King of the Universe. This title had been used for 1500 years already, since the earliest days of empire. But it came closer to reality for him. His empire encompassed not just all of Mesopotamia but the whole Levant, the eastern end of the Mediterranean. His was a large dominion.

But there’s the second part to the dream: the decree announced by the heavenly messenger (23). The decree to cut down this mighty tree, leaving just the stump of its roots. This stump remains in the field among the wild animals. Daniel next gives the interpretation of this second part of the dream (24-26).

**“This is the interpretation, Your Majesty, and this is the decree the Most High has issued against my lord the king:” (4:24)**

There is a higher authority than Nebuchadnezzar the great king. The ruler in heaven has issued a decree against the ruler on earth. Now the metaphor changes from a tree to a deranged human.

**“You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox and be drenched with the dew of heaven. 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. The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules.” (4:25-26)**

The lesson Nebuchadnezzar has to learn is clear: “until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes...when you acknowledge that Heaven rules.” The Most High is sovereign; Heaven rules. “Sovereign” and “rules” are actually the same word in the original, with “Heaven” used as a circumlocution for God. Nebuchadnezzar is not the ultimate ruler. There is a higher throne. Heaven rules, not Babylon. Four times we are told that it will take “seven times” for Nebuchadnezzar to learn this lesson, probably seven cycles of the seasons, seven years. This is not an easy lesson to learn: that you are not sovereign, not the king of your castle, not the ultimate ruler.

Daniel ends his interpretation of the dream with some advice for the king:

**“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.” (4:27)**

Daniel urges the king to change his behavior from earth’s model of a king to heaven’s model of a king. Attention to the poetic parallelism helps clarify what he is saying. Daniel urges the king to discontinue his old behavior, his sins and his wickedness, and to replace this with new behavior: doing what is right by being kind to the oppressed. The OT vision for a king is that he do justice and righteousness, the Hebrew word pair *mishpat* and *tsedaqab*. We tend to hear “practicing righteousness” in terms of justification before God; we hear it in legal or forensic terms. But this word pair really applied to the proper functioning of society so that all flourish, including especially the poor, the weak, the vulnerable. Doing righteousness means showing favor to the oppressed so they be included in the flourishing of society.

In building his vast empire Nebuchadnezzar had run over lots of people. This is what tends to happen in building any human empire: lots of people, big and small, get crushed. But a wise ruler will care for the little people. He will be like that large tree in which all find sustenance and safety, so that all flourish.

Who are the oppressed in Nebuchadnezzar’s empire? Certainly the Jews. Some of them remain in the Land, in what is left of Jerusalem, but the Land is now part of the Babylonian Empire. Many of them are in exile in Babylon, trying to flourish in a foreign land. They are a traumatized, displaced people.

If Nebuchadnezzar, the great king, will deal compassionately with the last, the least and the lost, then perhaps his prosperity can continue, the prosperity he had while sitting contentedly in his beautiful palace (4). How can he sit there at ease and look out upon the suffering of the oppressed and not do something? Daniel is urging a different idea of kingship, a kingship more in line with the heavenly model than the earthly model. It’s a vision of kingship which Israel’s kings were supposed to practice but rarely did. Their failure to do justice and righteousness was another of the reasons for exile.

**3. The Dream Fulfilled (4:28-33)**

The final major section is an account of the fulfillment of the dream, referring to Nebuchadnezzar in the third person.

**All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, 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?” (4:28-30)**

The king had indeed built or rebuilt Babylon into a magnificent city. He restored the beautiful Ishtar Gate that is now in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. He restored the Processional Way, lined with beautiful tile-work lions that are now in various museums around the world. I’m using one of these tile-work lions as the image for this series. Daniel himself would have seen these. The king restored the temple of Marduk, and the ziggurat, the mighty tower at the center of the city, the axis between heaven and earth in their cosmology. Nebuchadnezzar the builder made his city great: Babylon the Great. It was a fitting residence for Nebuchadnezzar the Great. It was the center of the world, the world city.

“Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” But as soon as he said these words, a voice came from heaven, “Your royal authority has been taken from you...until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them

to anyone he wishes” (31-32). And it was so. He became like an animal.

At the end of the seven periods, Nebuchadnezzar finally looked up to heaven and he was restored. Here at the end of his letter, he writes again in the first person as he did at the beginning. He praised God in a doxology, also echoing the letter opening:

**“His dominion is an eternal dominion;  
his kingdom endures from generation to generation.  
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?’” (4:34b-35)**

Nebuchadnezzar closes his letter with a happy ending. He was restored:

**“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. 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.” (4:36-37)**

“Those who walk in pride he is able to humble.” Many take this away as the primary lesson of this chapter. “Pride comes before a fall” is the proverbial saying, drawn from Proverbs: “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov 16:18). This is indeed true, but surely it’s not the primary lesson of Daniel 4.

This chapter is about a very specific form of pride. The chapter is a contest between Nebuchadnezzar, king on earth, and the Most High God, king in heaven, over who really rules. Nebuchadnezzar does indeed rule on earth over a vast empire. But dominion belongs to God in heaven. Heaven rules.

This is the sort of message that the Jewish exiles in Babylon needed to hear. They may have been awed by the king’s splendor and Babylon’s greatness. But they are reminded that Babylon is not an eternal kingdom. God’s kingdom is. All four of these chapters about Nebuchadnezzar encourage resistance to the claims of Babylon and its greatest king. They encourage loyalty to God Most High, for Heaven rules. They enable Daniel and his three friends and all the other Jewish exiles in Babylon to seek to flourish in a foreign land while remaining true to the one true God. Under Babylonian rule, Persian rule, Greek rule, Roman rule, and beyond.

My title for this series on Daniel is “One King to Rule Them All,” with obvious allusion to a certain book and movie. Chapter 4 is about conflicting claims to sovereignty: who is the one king to rule them all? There’s a claim on earth and a claim in heaven. But really the whole book is about this. Who is the one true king? The aspiration of any empire-builder is to be the one king that rules the world. Nebuchadnezzar encapsulates that, but he is by no means the only claimant to earth’s throne. Chapter 5 will be about Belshazzar, chapter 6 about Darius. Chapter 7 is a vision about multiple kings and kingdoms.

All human rulers must learn that God is sovereign. He has appointed over his kingdom the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Nebuchadnezzar gloried in his greatness before God humbled him. God

has appointed as the true King of kings and Lord of lords one who humbled himself to begin with. As we heard in our Scripture reading (Phil 2:5-11) about Christ Jesus,

Who, being in very nature God,  
 did not consider equality with God something to be used  
 to his own advantage;  
 rather, he made himself nothing  
 by taking the very nature of a servant,  
 being made in human likeness.  
 And being found in appearance as a man,  
 he humbled himself  
 by becoming obedient to death—  
 even death on a cross! (Phil 2:6-8)

Therefore: because he took this downward path of self-humbling, of making himself nothing, of becoming like us, entering into human history, taking the form of a servant. Therefore, God has exalted him to the highest place as King of kings and Lord of lords. The Lion has conquered by being the slain Lamb. We now give our allegiance to a King who gave himself for his people.

In the Book of Revelation, which our women will be studying starting next month, in the center of the book we hear this cry that goes up: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ and he shall reign forever and ever” (Rev 11:15). There are two implications of this. Firstly, Babylon must fall. Babylon the Great, mentioned five times in the book. Babylon the Great, the city of the world’s kings, must fall. Secondly, the heavenly city

must descend to earth so God and his people can dwell together, as heaven and earth are joined.

In *Paradise Lost*, John Milton has Satan say, “Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven.” But when we surrender our attempts to be king of the castle, when we bow down and give our allegiance to Christ, the King of kings, and serve him, we find our true freedom, for he is the one “whom to serve is perfect freedom.” Under his rule all flourish. The path to flourishing is not to climb to the top of the mound and say, “I’m the king of the castle,” but to bend the knee to the heavenly sovereign, for Heaven rules.

Jesus is “the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth” (Rev 1:5). May God grant us the grace to bow down, come into his kingdom and flourish. He knows our weakness. Jesus on earth cared for the weak, the poor, the outcasts, the vulnerable, and is able still to empathize and sympathize with those who feel that way. So, if that’s how you are feeling, we have One who knows our weakness and understands and can lift us up. For of such is his kingdom made.

*To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.*  
 (Jude 24-25)

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