

TO WHOM MUCH IS GIVEN

Today's Text: Daniel Chap. 4

Extracts:

At the end of the twelve months [Nebuchadnezzar] was walking about the royal palace of Babylon. The king spoke, saying, "Is not *this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal dwelling, by my mighty power and for the honour of my majesty?*" While the word was still in the king's mouth, *a voice fell from heaven: "King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: the kingdom has departed from you! And they shall drive you from men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field... until you know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses"* [Dan. 4: 29-32]

I used to have a boss in Nigeria who enjoyed making life difficult for his subordinates. For my daring to question his arbitrary management style, he refused to approve the annual work plan for my division, to the extent that my competence was doubted by my own subordinates. In despair, I went on my knees in prayers with help from close family and friends. One day, one of them gave God's word that I would be invited to a meeting and that I should say nothing except so-and-so. I became more scared because what I was required to say could cost me my job. In deed, the following week, my boss invited me to a meeting. As soon as I entered his office, he went on his usual tirade. But close to the end of his outburst, he sounded conciliatory and invited me to speak. In obedience to God's word, I told him, "I don't know how to work with somebody who thinks he is bigger than God!" He sprang up from his chair as if to pounce on me. Then, the pen dropped from his shaky hand and he slumped into his chair. A few minutes of silence later, he drew out a file, signed something and handed it to me. Could that be my dismissal? No, it was approval for my long- delayed work plan! From that point on, my boss's life took a downward turn. Not quite long after, he was disgraced out of office. Soon after, he died.

You may be experiencing a person like that on your job or in your home, school, church or business this moment. You could even be that kind of person to others! You may be a rising star in your chosen field of human endeavour. In the process, you have a boss or you are a boss to others. What do you do with that leadership opportunity? Does God have any purpose for granting you the privilege? After all, to whom much is given, much is expected. Do you use your leadership position to glorify God or yourself? Those and more are the issues that we shall examine in today's lesson.

1. The ladder is a two-way street!

You may be familiar with the story of Jacob after he had stolen his brother, Esau's birthright. With Isaac, their father's approval, Jacob's mother sent him away to her brother, Laban, in Syria [Gen. 28: 1-5]. On the way, at Bethel, he became tired and decided to rest. He soon fell asleep and dreamed. He saw that "a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven." He saw that "the angels of God were *ascending and descending on it*." Standing at the top end of the ladder was the Lord God who spoke to Jacob about God's plan for him [vv. 11-13].

Of interest to us in respect of today's lesson are the following:

- It was God that made the initial contact with Jacob. At the time, Jacob was still a trickster and not yet surrendered to the ways of God. The Lord did so because He had a purpose for Jacob's life that He needed to let him know.
- The angels of God were said to be "ascending and descending" on the ladder. To ascend before descending suggests that the ladder originated from the earth. We know that was not so because the top of the ladder was said to reach heaven. Who on earth could have determined the height of such a ladder? Therefore, a more plausible interpretation is that the angels that Jacob saw *ascending* up the ladder were the ones that God had sent to set up the ladder of contact with him. The angels ascended up the ladder to draw Jacob's attention to his path to the Lord who stood at the head of the ladder. In like manner, the ladder on which we climb up in life has been put there by God Himself to lead us in the direction of His own purpose.
- The angels ascended and descended on the ladder, implying that it was a double-carriageway. That is, our steady walk on that ladder depends on our ability to look up to the Lord at the head of the ladder while obeying what He asks us to do along the way. Sometimes, we may be required to step back before going up. Sometimes, the going back may be God's reaction to our disobedience. Therefore, just as the ladder enables us to climb up the path of influence and affluence, it also serves as the pathway to our downfall or setback. After all, promotion comes from God and "He puts one down and exalts another" [Ps. 75: 6-7].

The foregoing suggests that we should not be in a hurry to throw away the ladder with which we have climbed to greater heights because, if we are not careful, we shall need it on our way down! The case of Nebuchadnezzar is a good illustration.

2. Nebuchadnezzar learns the hard way!

The analysis is based on the fourth chapter of the book of Daniel. The story sequence is as follows:

a) *God made Nebuchadnezzar a world power*

Babylon and Assyria were Gentile kingdoms that were built on idolatry. Yet God gave their rulers power to conquer Israel and Judah. In particular, Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the temple built by King Solomon and carted people and holy objects to Babylon [**2 Kgs 24: 1-2; Dan. 1: 1-2**]. Why would God throw the ladder of power to wicked people like Nebuchadnezzar to destroy His holy places?

The answer lies in His purposes. Through several prophets, such as Jeremiah, God had warned His chosen people to repent of their sins or face humiliation and exile. With specific reference to Nebuchadnezzar, God said through Jeremiah [**Jer. 25: 8-13**]:

Therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, "Because you [Judah and its kings] have not heard My words, behold, I will send and take all the families of the north," says the Lord, "and Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, My servant, and will bring them against this land, against its inhabitants, and against all the nations all around...and this whole land shall be a desolation and an astonishment, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years."

So, the Gentile rulers were battle axes used by God to deal with His recalcitrant people, to provoke repentance in them as a basis for their restoration [**Is. 10: 5-6**]. The same way that God used Nebuchadnezzar to punish the unrepentant people of Judah, He also used others like Cyrus to rebuild. God called Cyrus His anointed "whose right hand I have held" to perform God's will, namely, to "build My city and let My exiles go free not for price nor reward." God called Cyrus by name and so named him even though the Gentile king had not known the true God [**Is. 45: 1-13**].

There are many people known to you that God has taken the initiative to bless with a good family and children, or power or promotion or long life. Some of such people may already be close to God, that is, they fear Him. Many others are well known evil people who do not appear ready to change their wicked ways. Unless God gives us the privilege to know His purposes, we (the admiring or the envious) and they (the blessed) could be misled.

b) *But power went into Nebuchadnezzar's head!*

Rather than glorify God, Nebuchadnezzar continued in idol worship. For example, we already knew from an earlier study how he tried to kill Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego for refusing to bow to his golden image [**Dan. Chap. 3**]. The Lord warned him in a dream about the danger of being intoxicated with power. Daniel the prophet interpreted the dream

for the king, the kernel of which was for him to “break off (his) sins by being righteous, and (his) iniquities by showing mercy to the poor” so that God might lengthen his prosperity [**Dan. 4: 4-27**]. He did not heed the warning. Instead, he was power-drunk and attributed his success to his own effort, saying, “Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal dwelling *by my mighty power and for the honour of my majesty?*” [**Dan. 4: 28-30**].

People in positions of authority do receive God’s warnings everyday concerning their attitude to power or money. The warnings come in the form of laws, rules and regulations, advice from family and friends, or prophetic messages or dreams. Nevertheless, some people persist in corruption, immorality, injustice or other evil practices. Like Nebuchadnezzar, their heads become too swollen to hear the truth of God. They arrogate their success to themselves. They disrespect their mentors and distance themselves from true friends. Instead, they surround themselves with praise singers, hangers-on and comrades-in-lawlessness..

The word of God says, “the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of skill; *but time and chance happen to them all*” [**Ecl. 9: 11**]. Time and chance belong to God. Therefore, you cannot say in your heart, “my power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.” Rather, you should recognize that God gave you the power in order to fulfill His covenant concerning you [**Deut. 8: 17-18**].

c) *Nebuchadnezzar was dethroned!*

As Nebuchadnezzar was walking about the royal palace in Babylon, beating his chest on his achievements and power by his own effort, a voice fell from heaven, saying, “King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: the kingdom has departed from you!” He lost his sanity and was driven away from the palace and from his people “and ate grass like oxen; his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair had grown like eagles’ feathers and his nails like birds’ claws. He lived in that state for a period of seven years [**Dan. 4: 31-33**] !

How many proud people have been so dethroned and disgraced when humility and obedience could have made the difference? Pharaoh lost a mighty kingdom because he was too proud to let the children of Israel out of his bondage. See the case of king Uzziah of Judah who “when he was strong his heart was lifted up to his destruction.” He went against God’s command and entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar of incense, a duty reserved only for the priests. The Lord struck him with leprosy and “king Uzziah was a leper until the day of his death. He dwelt in an isolated house, because he was a leper; for he was cut off from the

house of the Lord.” His son, Jotham, took over the throne while his father was still alive and when Uzziah died, they buried him as a commoner because he had died a leper [2 Chron. 26: 16-23].

Let us take a recent case in California, USA. Antonio Villaraigosa, the Mayor of Los Angeles, is regarded as one of the top Hispanic elected officials in America.¹ A rising star in national Democratic Party politics, he is a key supporter of Hillary Clinton, the front runner for the Democratic Presidential ticket in the 2008 Elections. Elected in 2005, Villaraigosa projects a public image of a charismatic leader that could one day become the first Hispanic Governor of California (in the modern era), if not President of America. Such blessings could only have come to him from God for the Lord’s purpose.

Recently, however, stories surfaced that Villaraigosa’s 20-year old marriage had collapsed because of his marital infidelity. In fact, his girlfriend, an anchor woman on the Spanish language television station, *Telemundo*, was actually the reporter on his marital problems while she was the other woman! Suddenly, the Mayor’s well crafted political ambition has become questionable. Reporters are digging into his private life for more hypocritical acts. For example, *LA Times* has just reported that, contrary to his public campaign to conserve water, he actually uses three times more water than his neighbours! His political future has been dealt a fatal blow.

d) *But merciful God restored Nebuchadnezzar!*

After seven years of humiliation and shame, God restored Nebuchadnezzar to the throne. Hear the story in the king’s words [Dan. 4: 34-35]:

At the end of the time I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the Most High and praised and honoured Him who lives forever: for His dominion is from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; He does according to His will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, “What have You done?”

That is a remarkable turnaround for a proud man! His glory, kingdom and honour returned to him, so did his counsellors and nobles and “excellent

¹ Story based on the following sources: “Antonio Villaraigosa,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonio_Villaraigosa; “Mayor’s Girlfriend Reported On His Marital Woes,” http://cbs2.com/local/local_story_184212037.html; “Report: Mayor, City Officials Use Too Much Water,” http://cbs2.com/local/local_story_222124628.html

majesty was added” to him. He was then able to warn “those who walk in pride” that God was able to put them down [vv. 36-37]! Are you listening?

3. Conclusion: You can still win even after losing!

Possibly, God restored Nebuchadnezzar because he had come to his senses and repented of his pride or God still had use for him. After all, God chooses on whom to show mercy and we are not qualified to question His judgment. Whatever may be the reason, we have hope that if we can appreciate that we have offended God and others by our empty pride and repent, the God who restored Nebuchadnezzar will also restore us. He will restore us so that we can glorify Him *from now on*. Therefore, you can still win even after losing.

Try out the following:

- *Learn humility* for “everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” [Lk 18: 14]. That high position that you currently occupy will not be yours for ever or even for much longer. For example, some Nigerian governors who were untouchable up to May 2007 (by virtue of constitutionally-guaranteed immunity from prosecution while in office) are either languishing in jail or facing criminal prosecution for official corruption, barely two months after leaving office. Their hangers-on have disappeared and the culprits are bearing the shame alone.
- *Use your position to glorify God because He put you there for His own purpose*. Promote justice and helpfulness to the needy for whatever good you do for the least of the needy around you, you have done for Christ [Matt. 25: 40]. Otherwise, He will dethrone you and give what you have accumulated to those who are good before Him [Eccl. 2: 26].

God has given you much more than you deserve. It has nothing to do with your effort or accident of birth. He does not mean your blessings for your self-aggrandizement or show of empty pride. It is an opportunity for you to glorify Him before the needy, the oppressed, the poor and unbelievers. To whom much is given, much is expected.

<p>A related study: “Managing your blessings,” <i>Weekly Bible Study Series</i>; Vol. 2, No. 4: 11 Feb. 2001</p>
