

Exaltation from Humiliation – Dan 4:29-37

Ascension Sunday - 2009

Introduction – Tell the world you believe in Jesus as the Son of God, that you believe that He died for your sins and was raised from the dead on the third day, and you'll get mostly yawns, snickers, and indifference. But say that Jesus Christ rules over heaven and earth, that He is over our President, Lord of our country, even of every family, and not simply over the church, and you'll find yourself in trouble. This was the lesson of Nebuchadnezzar and in that lesson we find the God-ordained direction of humiliation to exaltation, death to resurrection and ascension.

Nebuchadnezzar's Story (Dan 4) – Nebuchadnezzar addresses his story to the nations (v1), a story which produced the kind of praise he gives in v3. God gave Nebuchadnezzar a dream which troubled him, ruining his peace (vv4-5). No other wise man could interpret his dream and so he called on Daniel (vv6-9). In his dream, Nebuchadnezzar saw a great tree which was then cursed by “a watcher, a holy one, coming down from heaven.” The tree was cut down and left as a stump in the ground “in order that the living may know” certain things about the Most High (vv10-17). Daniel declares that the dream is about the king and that the Most High will do this thing “till you know” certain things (vv18-25). Daniel assures him these things will take place and yet warns him to turn from his sins (vv26-27). Twelve months later, while Nebuchadnezzar boasted of his might and mighty kingdom, a word fell upon him and he was driven from men for a period of time identified as “seven times” while the “dew of heaven” fell upon his body (vv28-33). At the end of that time, Nebuchadnezzar in his humility lifted his eyes to heaven and his understanding returned to him; in this resurrected state he proclaimed honor to glory to the King of heaven (vv34-38).

The King of the World – This king's story was the story of the man who thought he had ascended to a place of reign and rule by his own strength. Nebuchadnezzar refused to break himself (v27) and humble himself before the Lord and was broken. Like Adam, he was man-in-rebellion, man who when told not to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, would seek to become his own god, his own law-maker and keeper. Nebuchadnezzar was shown that this leads to insanity, a lack of understanding, and the judgment of God. This man would not, for he could not, humble himself before the mighty hand of God. Jesus teaches us “*whoever exalts himself will be humbled*” (Matt 23:12) and James would quote Proverbs saying, “*God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble*” (James 4:6).

Grace to the Humble and the Humbled – But there is more to this story. This man would not humble himself and so God humbled him. And God's humbling is efficacious, bringing about a death and resurrection, a renewed and remade man. The tree which reached to the heavens (v11) was left a stump in the earth (v15), and it is there where a perfect time (seven – v32) is used to bring true wisdom and cleansing (the dew of heaven – v33). A voice from heaven and dew from heaven, word and sacrament, are used by God to transform a rebellious man. Or consider it this way: Nebuchadnezzar had to undergo a death and resurrection in order to enter into a new covenant and become a new Nebuchadnezzar.

The New King of the World (Phil 2:8-11) – The shadow of the New Creation order, the New Humanity, and the New King of the World was brought to reality and fulfilled in Jesus Christ – in His death, resurrection, and exaltation. The difference is that Jesus did not die because He would not humble Himself; He died humbling Himself, giving Himself away for His people and obeying His heavenly Father while trusting his heavenly Father for His full vindication, resurrection, and exaltation. This the Father fully gave Him. The result is that Jesus rules all of heaven and earth, is Lord over all the nations (Psalm 2) and sits there until all His enemies are made a footstool for His feet (Psalm 110). Each member of His body, the church, having also been humbled – baptized into His death and resurrection – reign with Him forever.

Following Jesus (Phil 2:3-4) – Everyone wants to reign with Jesus, but no one in their flesh wants to get there the way Jesus got there. Jesus had a legitimate reason to exalt Himself, and He didn't. We, like Nebuchadnezzar, do not have a legitimate reason. Jesus voluntarily gave up a position due Him. We must not grasp for a position we are not due. Humility is not external demeanor. It consists of laying aside your glory, veiling what might be yours, and submitting to God without complaint. Of course, this requires that we enter into the humiliation of the cross with Christ, and this is the reason He had to die for us.

Gospel Humility (1 Pet 5:6-7) – The foundation of gospel humility is this: God is God and God is good. The fruit of that kind of humility is not moroseness, but glad-hearted expectation, a song of thankfulness for what is to come. If you believe in the absolute sovereignty of God, you will pray on your knees rather than worry. And then you will find that God will exalt you at the proper time, for He cares for you.

And this is because Jesus did not just die and go away. From His resurrection, God exalted Him to His right hand, and from that place He is King of kings and Lord of lords – over presidents and nations, and over every detail of your life as well.