Daniel 4

The Most High Rules: A King Humbled

OBSERVATION · INTERPRETATION · APPLICATION

"These were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so."
Acts 17:11

CHAPTER THEME

The proudest man on earth learns the hard way that the Most High rules. God warned him, gave him a year to repent, humbled him to the level of an animal, and then — when he looked up — restored his mind and his kingdom. "He is able to humble those who walk in pride."

Ed Smith · Started 20 October 2026

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00 The Text

DANIEL 4 (KJV), MARKED

▲ Gold God — His character & actions | Green Command / instruction | ⇄ Sky Key repeated word

⚠ Rose Sin / warning | ★ Violet Promise / blessing | ◷ Amber Time / place / contrast

1 Nebuchadnezzar the king, unto all people, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth; Peace be multiplied unto you.

2 I thought it good to shew the ▲ signs and wonders that the high God hath wrought toward me.

3 How great are his signs! and how mighty are his wonders! his kingdom is ▲ an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion is from generation to generation.

4 I Nebuchadnezzar was ◷ at rest in mine house, and flourishing in my palace:

5 I saw a dream which made me afraid, and the thoughts upon my bed and the visions of my head troubled me.

6 Therefore made I a decree to bring in all the wise men of Babylon before me, that they might make known unto me the interpretation of the dream.

7 Then came in the magicians, the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers: and I told the dream before them; but they did not make known unto me the interpretation thereof.

8 But at the last Daniel came in before me, whose name was Belteshazzar, according to the name of my god, and in whom is ⇄ the spirit of the holy gods: and before him I told the dream, saying,

9 O Belteshazzar, master of the magicians, because I know that ⇄ the spirit of the holy gods is in thee, and no secret troubleth thee, tell me the visions of my dream that I have seen, and the interpretation thereof.

10 Thus were the visions of mine head in my bed; I saw , and behold a ⇄ tree in the midst of the earth, and the height thereof was great.

11 The ⇄ tree grew, and was strong, and the height thereof reached unto heaven, and the sight thereof to the end of all the earth:

12 The leaves thereof were fair, and the fruit thereof much, and in it was meat for all: the beasts of the field had shadow under it, and the fowls of the heaven dwelt in the boughs thereof, and all flesh was fed of it.

13 I saw in the visions of my head upon my bed, and, behold, ◷ a watcher and an holy one came down from heaven;

14 He cried aloud, and said thus, Hew down the ⇄ tree, and cut off his branches, shake off his leaves, and scatter his fruit: let the beasts get away from under it, and the fowls from his branches:

15 Nevertheless leave ★ the stump of his roots in the earth, even with a band of iron and brass, in the tender grass of the field; and let it be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts in the grass of the earth:

16 Let his heart be changed from man's, and let a beast's heart be given unto him; and let ◷ seven times pass over him.

17 This matter is by the decree of the watchers, and the demand by the word of the holy ones: to the intent that the living may know that ▲ the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will, and setteth up over it the basest of men.

18 This dream I king Nebuchadnezzar have seen. Now thou, O Belteshazzar, declare the interpretation thereof, forasmuch as all the wise men of my kingdom are not able to make known unto me the interpretation: but thou art able; for ⇄ the spirit of the holy gods is in thee.

19 Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, was astonied for one hour, and his thoughts troubled him. The king spake, and said, Belteshazzar, let not the dream, or the interpretation thereof, trouble thee. Belteshazzar answered and said, My lord, the dream be to them that hate thee, and the interpretation thereof to thine enemies.

20 The ⇄ tree that thou sawest, which grew, and was strong, whose height reached unto the heaven, and the sight thereof to all the earth;

21 Whose leaves were fair, and the fruit thereof much, and in it was meat for all; under which the beasts of the field dwelt, and upon whose branches the fowls of the heaven had their habitation:

22 ⚠ It is thou, O king, that art grown and become strong: for thy greatness is grown, and reacheth unto heaven, and thy dominion to the end of the earth.

23 And whereas the king saw a watcher and an holy one coming down from heaven, and saying, Hew the ⇄ tree down, and destroy it; yet leave the stump of the roots thereof in the earth, even with a band of iron and brass, in the tender grass of the field; and let it be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts of the field, till ◷ seven times pass over him;

24 This is the interpretation, O king, and this is the decree of the most High, which is come upon my lord the king:

25 That they shall drive thee from men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field, and they shall make thee to eat grass as oxen, and they shall wet thee with the dew of heaven, and ◷ seven times shall pass over thee, till thou know that ▲ the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will.

26 And whereas they commanded to leave the stump of the ⇄ tree roots; thy kingdom shall be sure unto thee, after that thou shalt have known that ▲ the heavens do rule.

27 Wherefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable unto thee, and ▮ break off thy sins by righteousness, and thine iniquities by ▮ shewing mercy to the poor; if it may be a lengthening of thy tranquillity.

28 All this came upon the king Nebuchadnezzar.

29 ◷ At the end of twelve months he walked in the palace of the kingdom of Babylon.

30 The king spake, and said, ⚠ Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for ⚠ the honour of my majesty?

31 While the word was in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, saying, O king Nebuchadnezzar, to thee it is spoken; ⚠ The kingdom is departed from thee.

32 And they shall drive thee from men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field: they shall make thee to eat grass as oxen, and ◷ seven times shall pass over thee, until thou know that ▲ the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will.

33 The same hour was the thing fulfilled upon Nebuchadnezzar: and he was driven from men, and ⚠ did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles' feathers, and his nails like birds' claws.

34 And at the end of the days I Nebuchadnezzar lifted up mine eyes unto heaven, and ★ mine understanding returned unto me, and I blessed the most High, and I praised and honoured him that liveth for ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation:

35 And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and ▲ none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?

36 At the same time my reason returned unto me; and for the glory of my kingdom, mine honour and brightness returned unto me; and my counsellors and my lords sought unto me; and I was established in my kingdom, and excellent majesty was added unto me.

37 Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment: and ▲ those that walk in pride he is able to abase.

Marked in the text

- **v2** ▲ signs and wonders
- **v3** ▲ an everlasting kingdom
- **v4** at rest in mine house
- **v8** the spirit of the holy gods *(every occurrence)*
- **v10** tree *(every occurrence)*
- **v13** a watcher and an holy one
- **v15** ★ the stump of his roots
- **v16** seven times *(every occurrence)*
- **v17** ▲ the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men *(every occurrence)*
- **v22** ⚠ It is thou, O king
- **v26** ▲ the heavens do rule
- **v27** break off thy sins by righteousness
- **v27** shewing mercy to the poor
- **v29** At the end of twelve months
- **v30** ⚠ Is not this great Babylon, that I have built
- **v30** ⚠ the honour of my majesty
- **v31** ⚠ The kingdom is departed from thee
- **v33** ⚠ did eat grass as oxen
- **v34** lifted up mine eyes unto heaven
- **v34** ★ mine understanding returned
- **v35** ▲ none can stay his hand
- **v37** ▲ those that walk in pride he is able to abase

Marks are drawn on the KJV text. KJV "seven times" is the NASB95's "seven periods of time"; "the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men" is "the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind." Hebrew Bibles number vv1–3 as 3:31–33.

01 Observation

WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY?

KEY VERSE · DANIEL 4:17 (KJV)

17 This matter is by the decree of the watchers, and the demand by the word of the holy ones: to the intent that the living may know that ▲ the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will, and setteth up over it the basest of men.

Setting

This chapter is written in the first person by Nebuchadnezzar himself — a royal proclamation "to all the peoples, nations, and men of every language that live in all the earth" (v1). It is his testimony, written after the events, looking back. He starts with the end of the story: "It has seemed good to me to declare the signs and wonders which the Most High God has done for me" (v2). (In Hebrew and Aramaic Bibles, vv1–3 are numbered 3:31–33.)

Structure

- vv1–3 — **the testimony:** "How great are His signs and how mighty are His wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom and His dominion is from generation to generation" (v3).
- vv4–18 — **the dream of the tree:** "I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and flourishing in my palace" (v4) when a dream frightens him (v5). The wise men can't interpret it (v7); "finally Daniel came in before me" (v8). The dream: a tree in the middle of the earth, reaching to the sky, visible to the ends of the earth, with abundant fruit, shade for the beasts and nests for the birds (vv10–12). "An angelic watcher, a holy one, descended from heaven" (v13) and cried, "Chop down the tree" (v14) — but leave the stump with a band of iron and bronze around it (v15). "Let his mind be changed from that of a man and let a beast's mind be given to him, and let seven periods of time pass over him" (v16). The purpose: "that the living may know that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whom He wishes and sets over it the lowliest of men" (v17).
- vv19–27 — **Daniel's interpretation and plea:** Daniel "was appalled for a while as his thoughts alarmed him" (v19). "It is you, O king" (v22). He will be driven from men, live with the beasts, eat grass like cattle, and be drenched with dew, "until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it on whomever He wishes" (v25). The stump means his kingdom will be restored "after you recognize that it is Heaven that rules" (v26). Daniel's counsel: "break away now from your sins by doing righteousness and from your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor, in case there may be a prolonging of your prosperity" (v27).
- vv28–33 — **the boast and the fall:** "Twelve months later" the king walks on the roof of the royal palace (v29): "Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?" (v30). "While the word was in the king's mouth," a voice from heaven: "sovereignty has been removed from you" (v31). "Immediately" it is fulfilled: he is driven away, eats grass like cattle, "until his hair had grown like eagles' feathers and his nails like birds' claws" (v33).

- vv34–37 — **eyes up, reason back:** "At the end of that period, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High" (v34). "All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing … and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?'" (v35). His kingdom is restored with even greater majesty (v36). "Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise, exalt and honor the King of heaven, for all His works are true and His ways just, and He is able to humble those who walk in pride" (v37).

Repeated words

the Most High (vv2, 17, 24, 25, 32, 34); the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind (vv17, 25, 32); seven periods of time (vv16, 23, 25, 32); tree (vv10, 11, 14, 20, 23, 26); beasts of the field (vv12, 21, 23, 25, 32); dew of heaven (vv15, 23, 25, 33); driven from men / mankind (vv25, 32, 33); kingdom / dominion / sovereignty (vv3, 17, 25, 26, 31, 32, 34, 36); everlasting (vv3, 34).

Contrasts

"at ease … flourishing" (v4) ⟷ driven out to eat grass (v33). A tree reaching to the sky (v11) ⟷ chopped to a stump (v14). "Babylon the great, which I myself have built … by the might of my power" (v30) ⟷ "the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind" (v32). A man's mind ⟷ a beast's mind (v16). Eyes on himself on the palace roof (vv29–30) ⟷ eyes raised toward heaven (v34). "The glory of my majesty" (v30) ⟷ "I … praise, exalt and honor the King of heaven" (v37).

Chapter theme (my words)

The proudest man on earth learns the hard way that the Most High rules. God warned him, gave him a year to repent, humbled him to the level of an animal, and then — when he looked up — restored his mind and his kingdom. "He is able to humble those who walk in pride."

02 Interpretation

WHAT DOES THE TEXT MEAN?

KEY VERSE · DANIEL 4:30–31 (KJV)

30 The king spake, and said, ⚠ Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for ⚠ the honour of my majesty? 31 While the word was in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, saying, O king Nebuchadnezzar, to thee it is spoken; ⚠ The kingdom is departed from thee.

A king's testimony (vv1–3)

This is unique in Scripture: a chapter written by a pagan emperor, telling the world what God did to him. Guzik: telling what God has done is good — the devil would rather God's works go unspoken (Ps 107:2). Nebuchadnezzar now calls God "the Most High God" and confesses His "everlasting kingdom" — language that echoes Daniel's own song in 2:20–22. Chapter 2 gave him the truth; chapter 3 showed him its power; chapter 4 finally brings it home.

At ease (vv4–9)

The danger came when life was good. "At ease … flourishing" (v4) — prosperity, not crisis, set up the fall (Deut 8:11–14; Prov 30:8–9). Again the wise men fail, and Daniel comes in last. Guzik suggests the dream wasn't hard to interpret — the wise men may have lacked courage more than insight. The king still calls Daniel "Belteshazzar, according to the name of my god" (v8) and speaks of "a spirit of the holy gods" in him: he respects Daniel's God without yet bowing to Him.

The tree (vv10–17)

A great tree was a familiar picture of a mighty ruler (Ezek 31:3–14; compare Ezek 17:22–24). Guzik cites Wood: "Both the Assyrian and the Babylonian kings thought of themselves as rulers over all the earth." The "watcher" is an angel — the only place in the Bible this title is used — an observer who carries out heaven's decree (v17). The stump with a band of iron and bronze is grace inside judgment: the tree will be cut, but not uprooted. "Seven periods of time" is most naturally seven years.

The key verse of the chapter is v17: "the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind … and sets over it the lowliest of men." Repeated in vv25 and 32 and confessed in vv34–35, it is the lesson of the whole book of Daniel.

Daniel's courage and compassion (vv19–27)

Daniel is "appalled" — not because the meaning is unclear, but because he cares about the king. He wishes the dream were about the king's enemies (v19). Then he says it plainly: "It is you, O king" (v22) — like Nathan to David, "You are the man!" (2 Sam 12:7). And he doesn't stop at the warning; he pleads for repentance (v27). Daniel's counsel is specific: break with sin by doing what's right, and show mercy to the poor — the very people a proud king exploits (Prov 14:31; Isa 58:6–7). Repentance might lengthen his peace, as it did for Nineveh (Jonah 3:10).

Twelve months of grace (vv28–30)

God gave him a full year. Then, on the palace roof, looking out over the city, he says it: "Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built?" (v30). Guzik notes that archaeology confirms Nebuchadnezzar as Babylon's great builder — bricks stamped with his name, inscriptions boasting of his building. The sin isn't that he built it, but that he took the glory: "I myself … by the might of my power … for the glory of my majesty."

"While the word was in the king's mouth" (vv31–33)

Judgment comes instantly. His mind is taken, and he lives like an animal for seven periods of time. Guzik notes a rare recorded mental illness in which a person believes he is an animal (sometimes called *boanthropy* when he believes he is an ox), and cites ancient writers such as Abydenus who preserved traditions of Nebuchadnezzar's strange end. The point Daniel makes: pride is a kind of madness, and God showed the king outwardly what he had become inwardly — a beast who never looks up (Ps 49:20; 73:22).

Eyes up (vv34–37)

Restoration begins with one act: "I … raised my eyes toward heaven" (v34). His reason returns the moment he looks up — the opposite of v30, where he looked out over his own works. His praise is a real confession: God's dominion is everlasting; the inhabitants of earth are "accounted as nothing"; no

one can stop His hand or question Him (v35; Isa 40:15–17; Rom 9:20). Spurgeon, in Guzik: "The God whom we serve not only exists, but reigns." He ends with the lesson of his life: "He is able to humble those who walk in pride" (v37; James 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5–6). Many believe Nebuchadnezzar came to genuine faith here — it is the last we hear of him in Scripture.

Word study (Aramaic)

- **signs — *ʾath* (H852):** a sign, miraculous token.
- **wonders — *temahh* (H8540):** a wonder, marvel.
- **at ease — *shelēh* (H7954):** at rest, secure, carefree.
- **flourishing — *raʿanan* (H7487):** green, luxuriant, prospering.
- **tree — *ʾilan* (H363):** a tree.
- **watcher — *ʿir* (H5894):** a watcher, a wakeful one — an angel who keeps watch.
- **holy one — *qaddish* (H6922):** holy, a holy one.
- **stump — *ʿiqqar* (H6136):** the root-stock, stump.
- **mind / heart — *lebab* (H3825):** heart, mind, inner man.
- **times — *ʿiddan* (H5732):** time, a set period (here likely a year).
- **ruler — *shallit* (H7990):** having mastery, ruler, sovereign.
- **lowliest — *shephal* (H8215):** low, humble, base.
- **break away — *peraq* (H6562):** to break off, tear away.
- **mercy — *chanan* (H2604):** to show favor, be gracious.
- **majesty — *hadar* (H1923):** honor, splendor.
- **reason — *mandaʿ* (H4486):** knowledge, understanding.
- **humble — *shephal* (H8214):** to bring low, abase.

Cross-references

Deut 8:11–18; 1 Sam 2:6–8; 2 Sam 12:7; 2 Chr 26:16; Ps 49:20; Ps 73:22; Ps 75:6–7; Ps 103:19; Ps 107:2; Prov 16:18; Prov 29:23; Isa 14:12–15; Isa 40:15–17; Isa 47:7–10; Ezek 31:3–14; Jonah 3:10; Luke 1:51–52; Luke 12:16–21; Acts 12:21–23; Rom 9:20; 1 Cor 4:7; James 4:6–10; 1 Pet 5:5–6.

03 Application

HOW DOES IT CHANGE ME?

KEY VERSE · DANIEL 4:37 (KJV)

37 Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment: and ▲ those that walk in pride he is able to abase.

Command to obey — "break away now from your sins."

Daniel didn't just warn; he called for change — do what's right and show mercy to the poor (v27). Repentance isn't only feeling bad; it's turning around. Where is God asking me to break away *now*, not someday? For the men I disciple, this may be the one step they keep putting off — the call, the meeting, the confession, the amends.

Sin to confess — "which I myself have built."

I am a builder: books, websites, apps, ministries. The danger is the roof of the palace — standing over my work and saying "look what I made." I'll confess every place I've taken credit for what God has done through me (1 Cor 4:7) and give Him the glory out loud.

Warning to heed — prosperity sets up the fall

Nebuchadnezzar was "at ease … flourishing" when the dream came. Good seasons are dangerous seasons. And the warning came with twelve months of grace — which he wasted. If God is warning me about something, the time to respond is now. "Pride goes before destruction" (Prov 16:18).

Promise to trust — the stump remains

The tree was cut down, but the stump was left with a band around it (v15). God's judgment on His creature had restoration built into it. For the man who has lost everything — family, freedom, reputation — the stump is hope: God can bring life back from what was cut down (Job 14:7–9).

Example to follow — "I raised my eyes toward heaven."

The turning point was one look up. For a man stuck in the mire, the first step back is to lift his eyes to the God who rules.

Worship

The Most High rules. He gives kingdoms to whom He wishes; He sets the lowly up and brings the proud down; no one can stop His hand. Nebuchadnezzar's last recorded words are worship.

Prayer

Most High God, You rule over the realm of mankind. Forgive me for every time I've stood on the roof of my own works and taken the glory. Humble me before You have to humble me. Lift my eyes to heaven, clear my mind, and let my life end, like this king's testimony, in praise of the King of heaven. Amen.