

Daniel – Chapter 4

New International Version of the Holy Bible

The news of this past week tells us that the Mid-east is still as unsettled as ever. It reminds us of the ancient proverb which says: “It is ordained that trees shall not reach heaven.” No doubt this saying arose among people who were acquainted with the Book of Daniel for the subject of this 4th chapter is a king who learned the relentless truth of this divine rule. Daniel gives us the written confession of Nebuchadnezzar, no doubt drawn up by Daniel himself, as part of the inspired book. It thus becomes for us the Word of God and gives us instruction, pointing to the significant truth that “trees shall not reach heaven”. No matter how tall trees may grow, though the earth beneath them is rich and wide and the sky above them unlimited, the almighty God will never allow them to reach but so high, as high as a tree ought to reach.

We are not afraid of trees but we are afraid of people and nations trying to growing too tall. We are in danger today, not of succeeding where Nebuchadnezzar failed, but of trying to succeed and then being cut down. This danger threatens our nation as a whole and each one of us personally. Let us then seek to learn this lesson and teach it to others, that God has put a ceiling on trees.

I

Putting a “ceiling on trees” applies first of all to human governments and is the direct lesson of our scripture lesson in Chapter 4 of the Book of Daniel. Our lesson concerns Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, not so much as an individual but as a head of state. In Nebuchadnezzar’s dream there is a large tree – its height reached toward heaven and it could be seen from the ends of the earth. According to Daniel’s interpretation, this tree represented Nebuchadnezzar and his dominion - for the king was the government.

By the grace of God, divine Providence had let the sun of good fortune shine and the rain of prosperity to fall and Nebuchadnezzar’s empire had indeed become a mighty one. But on one dreadful day, suddenly nothing but the useless stump of authority was left. We cannot rejoice when a great government is humbled in the dust. Human government, as Scripture teaches, is ordained by God himself. It has a high and sacred purpose, a duty and a trust. We are taught by the Lord to pray for government and for all who are in authority. Under the government we are to lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. But still, government is only a tree and cannot grow beyond a certain limit. Also there is a Watcher, a Holy One, who sees that it does not (even if it is Nebuchadnezzar) grow too tall. This Holy One also sees to it that it must eventually be cut down to a stump.

The king rated his empire and himself above the ceiling set by God. What he actually thought about his government is revealed in the

dream that served as God's warning. In verse 11 and 12 we hear how Nebuchadnezzar pictured himself as monarch: **"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 beasts of the field found shelter, and the birds of the air lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed."** **Daniel 4:11-12** That is indeed a beautiful picture of a kingdom, yet the dream is far too beautiful and leaves room neither for God or heaven. This dream-kingdom supplies all the needs and hopes of men and is a heaven on earth, a paradise. In such a kingdom sin is a forgotten issue and the curse of sin is hidden. There is no one left to pray: **" . . . but deliver us from the evil one"** **Matthew 6:13** Nebuchadnezzar had built a mighty kingdom and all is well and peaceful - so said the dream.

Long before any civil-government-tree can become too tall, it is cut down to stump size. Within 24 hours Nebuchadnezzar (who does not heed the warning but struts about as though he were God in his own heaven) becomes like a beast in the field among the oxen and cattle. For a long time he could not understand the voice that spoke from heaven saying: **"Be still, and know that I am God."** **Psalms 46:10**

There is and will ever be only one Kingdom on earth that reaches unto heaven – that kingdom is in this world but not of this world. Jesus told us a parable of it in **Matthew 13:31-32**: **"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is**

the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.” This is the Kingdom of God where our Lord and Savior reigns and where there is true peace because he shades us from the wrath of God, having borne our sins and carried our sorrows. This tree must fill all the sky for us. It bears us upward and onward - under the God who loved us and gave himself for us. He is the Watcher and the Holy One who sees to it that no earthly tree grows beyond the ceiling.

Government has its appointed place and is a source of great good to men. Let it serve men; but let it not seek to make a heaven on earth. Let it not try to take the place of God in the affairs of men. This lesson should have been learned by the people of earth quite thoroughly as recently as a generation ago. But alas, the stump that was Hitler has merely turned into the looming menace of the godless Soviet power. One day the Watcher will have to cut down that government-tree as well. We need not fear that any such tree will grow beyond the appointed bounds. Rather, we should be on our guard against the dreams of empire which we ourselves are being taught to dream. Our own country has come to believe that we must fill the sky and reach unto heaven, to be the savior and rescuers of all the earth – of both man and beast. This menace lies behind much of the political thought of our day. Men are being driven by the ambition to provide a heaven here on earth. More and more, government boasts of its increasing ability to supply all the needs of men. The dream of a perfect world through the union of science and governmental authority is once again

the danger of our civilization. Even the churches have been encouraged to pitch into the work of making this a better world and some have thereby been diverted from the tasks of saving souls to the preaching of a social gospel. They are more interested in the United Nations than in the Truth of God's word in the Bible. Already the branches of Nebuchadnezzar's tree are hiding the sky. BEWARE!

II

God has put a ceiling on trees. Let us not fail to make a personal application of this important truth as well - for king Nebuchadnezzar was involved personally in the tragedy which befell his kingdom because he himself had grown too tall and did not heed a warning. While his empire was saved from destruction at this time, he went through a real valley of the shadow of death which was 7 years long. During that time he was not fit to live among men. All his glory was dead, his mind was gone, and the only thing that grew for him now - his hair and his nails.

Governments are not the only things that try to fill the earth and shut out God. Sometimes this happens in the private life of an individual. We remarked once before in our studies in the Book of Daniel that individuals can and do set themselves up in a little kingdom of their own. They feather a life-nest and they land a good job or acquire a patch of soil. They are able to surround themselves with a fine family with a two-car garage and the cars that belong to it. God, who lets his sun shine on the evil and on the good, who sends rain on

the just and on the unjust, does not pass them by with his bounty! They prosper by his Grace. But suddenly we find them on the balcony of their little palaces saying proudly: **“Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” Daniel 4:30**

A strange thing begins to happen – the people no longer need God. Their tree has grown into heaven, or so they think. No long do they say with Paul: **“I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far . . . “ Philippians 1:23** They do not want to depart; they want to stay, always, and not hear about death. They begin to speak about “good luck” they have had rather than of the goodness of God. They talk about the hard work that has gotten them all their success. Their muscles or their brain, or both, fill all the sky for them. This person will find a little empire has grown so big that heaven seems undesirable. The daily mercy of God upon the poor sinner seems unimportant - but this person ought to call a halt before it is too late.

Let no one think that God is on the side of the one who has prospered. Let him look at Nebuchadnezzar and learn that, while his Babylon may be paved with gold - the axe is already laid at the root of the tree.

Our little kingdom must not get too big to serve its one primary purpose. That one purpose is a growing ability to serve the Lord Jesus Christ and to use the earthly equipment as a profitable member of his eternal kingdom. When your kingdom stops building the Church of

God, when it gets in the way of your struggling feet trying to cover the rocky path to heaven, when it fails to provide your children with the best available system of training for citizenship in the Kingdom of Jesus - then may God show you the mercy he extended to Nebuchadnezzar.

If we find ourselves one day, by our own folly, reduced in size and on hands and knees in the field of ruin and loss, then we will have learned the hard way that “trees shall not reach heaven”. Let us not wait for that experience. May the sky above us ever be open so that we may look upward and know that our home is there – on the Throne of Grace.