

Series: HOLY COWS: The Idols Nobody Wants to Talk About

June 20, 2010

THE IDOL OF POWER

Daniel 1-4

1. How many of you guys would like to look like Arnold Schwarzenegger? How many of you women look at Arnold and say, **“Too much beef!”** How many of you look at the guy in your life and say, **“Where’s the beef?”**

-Arnold seems to fit what we envision when we think of power. He has the body for it—and it has the persona! ***I’ll be back!*** Kinda makes you shudder, doesn’t it? And now—**Governator**—and in a state like California!

-We humans are **fascinated** with power! Sometimes obsessed with it. Power is a really **good** thing. When power But the reputation of power in our world is not a good one. It gets linked up with dictators and weapons of mass destruction. And when it becomes an idol? Man—it leaves a trail of mangled people and countries—and hatred—in its wake.

2. And that brings us to the story I’d like to tell this morning. It’s about a man who reached a pinnacle of power—ruling the known world—that has only been held by a half-dozen people in all recorded history. His name is Nebuchadnezzar.

-His power was demonstrated by amazing achievements. It takes 126 pages of a book to just list the inscriptions on the buildings he built. Babylon, the city he built, was one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world. The **hanging gardens of Babylon**—would be the technological equivalent of our skyscrapers—only green! In case any army was stupid enough to attack Babylon—he built 20 miles of walls around it—so wide that chariots could be driven, side by side, on the top. This guy **knew** power!

-But his story—personally recorded by him in **our** Bible—is not about his accomplishments; it’s about how the Sovereign of all took him down to humble his pride—and him saying, “I’m **glad** it happened!”

- a. A guy named Daniel is a key player in this story. The only reason he has a part here is because his life was turned upside down when Nebuchadnezzar attacked, defeated and burned Jerusalem and its temple in 605 BC.

-Now, God had warned the Israelites that this would happen because of the counterfeit gods they worshipped—and the way they both oppressed and cheated the poor. As Moses had warned them 800 years before, the idols they worshipped destroyed their nation from the inside out.

- b. As part of the defeat of Jerusalem, Daniel, probably about 15 at the time—was singled out as someone who could potentially serve in Nebuchadnezzar’s court. So, he was separated from his family and deported to Babylon--1000 miles away. Daniel lost **everything**.

-The first sign of distinction is when Daniel and three companions entered a program to turn them into Babylonians—given new names that represented Babylonian gods, given the best education Babylonian culture offered—and fed from the King’s table. At this point, Daniel, probably as an act of devotion to God, requested that they be fed vegetables and water—and then compared to the other guys who got the smorgasbord. And, of course, Daniel prevailed! Daniel excelled in everything. God was clearly with him!

- c. Well, Nebuchadnezzar was not as secure as he’d hoped—given his armies, walls and world-class status. God spoke to him where he was most vulnerable. He had a dream that scared him to death. Dreams were a **big** deal in that culture—a sign that God was talking. This dream was **so** frightening—he knew it had huge consequences. So he told all his magicians, sorcerers, and enchanters that they had to tell him what the dream was, first—**then** interpret it. Daniel, in the power of God, **told** him what the dream was—and then interpreted it.

-This dream was astounding. It was of this immense statue made of materials the decreased in worth as it went from head to feet. Only God could give a dream like this—because it laid out the four kingdoms that would be in power for the next 600 years. Then a stone, cut from the mountains hit this statue and obliterated it. Then Daniel tells Nebuchadnezzar what that stone is:

During the reigns of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed or conquered. It will crush all these kingdoms into nothingness, and it will stand forever...The great God was showing the king what will happen in the future. The dream is true, and its meaning is certain. (Daniel 2:43, 44b NLT)

-Nebuchadnezzar’s response is amazing: He falls down in worship, promotes Daniel as ruler over Babylon, and says:

Truly, your God is the greatest of gods, the Lord over kings, a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this secret. (Daniel 2:47 NLT)

3. Now, Daniel had told Neb that, on this statue, he was the head of gold—where all the other kingdoms—Persian, Greek and Roman were made of inferior metals.

And this went to his head, it would appear.

Nebuchadnezzar has this 90 ft statue of gold made—and orders everyone, in this dramatic crescendo of music, to bow to it. Or **die** by burning to death! Well, Daniel’s 3 companions refuse. They tell Nebuchadnezzar:

“If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty. But even if he doesn’t, we want to make it clear to you, Your Majesty, that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up.” (Daniel 3:17-18 NLT)

-Well, Neb lost it. The text even says that his face was distorted with rage. He heated his furnace so hot that the soldiers who threw them, bound, into the thing were killed by the heat.

Nebuchadnezzar, who's watching, sees something amazing. These three guys are walking around in the furnace—and someone who appeared like the Son of God—was with them! And once again, Neb worships this amazing God—and orders everyone else to—***or else!*** And he promotes Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

-It's at some point after this that Nebuchadnezzar sends a letter—as he puts it, ***...to the people of every race and nation and language throughout the world.*** And then he tells his story:

I, Nebuchadnezzar, was living in my palace in comfort and prosperity. But one night I had a dream that frightened me; I saw visions that terrified me as I lay in my bed. (Daniel 4:4-5 NLT)

- a. Interesting, isn't it, that once again the most powerful man in the world of his day—living in comfort and prosperity—has a vision that ***terrifies*** him as he lays in the security of his own bedroom.

He can escape a lot—but he can't escape God! Along with his other magicians and soothsayers, He calls in Daniel—his most worthy friend--and tells them what he saw:

-It was a dream of this immense tree that kept growing until it filled the earth—and it offered shade, fruit and shelter for the entire world. All good so far. But then a he saw a messenger from the Holy One:

The messenger shouted, “Cut down the tree and lop off its branches! Shake off its leaves and scatter its fruit! Chase the wild animals from its shade and the birds from its branches. But leave the stump and the roots in the ground, bound with a band of iron and bronze and surrounded by tender grass. Now let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, and let him live with the wild animals among the plants of the field. For seven periods of time, let him have the mind of a wild animal instead of the mind of a human. For this has been decreed by the messengers; it is commanded by the holy ones, so that everyone may know that the Most High rules over the kingdoms of the world. He gives them to anyone he chooses—even to the lowliest of people.” (Daniel 4:14-17 NLT)

- b. When Daniel hears the dream—he turns white. He can barely stand up—which gives you some idea of the kind of relationship he has with this man. And when Nebuchadnezzar prompts him.

Beltshazzar (Daniel) answered, "My lord, if only the dream applied to your enemies and its meaning to your adversaries!" (Daniel 4:19 NLT)

-And then he tells him: Sir, you're that tree! You will be driven away from culture—and you will take on the persona and mannerisms of a cow.

Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the 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.

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." (Daniel 4:25-27 NLT)

-The way Daniel responds here takes *unbelievable* love, grace, relational intelligence—*courage!* It would appear that only a man like Daniel did could get away with saying, **Renounce your sins—by doing what it right!**

Renounce your wickedness by being *kind to the oppressed.*

Here's what I believe; as much as he disagreed with all that Nebuchadnezzar stood for—Daniel *loved* him, treated him with respect, and remained loyal to him. Because of that, he had an opportunity to speak truth when no one else dared.

-And the truth was that all Neb had accomplished—including the amazing city he'd built—had been done through ruthlessness and oppression. Daniel knew—he was a victim of that. But instead of hatred and contempt—Daniel showed love and grace. He knew that God is God--that He knew how to get through to this guy. The first dream God gave was philosophical—that He runs history. That didn't work, so God got *very* personal!

4. As I read the narrative, I got the feeling that when this dream first came, Neb tried to stifle his worship of power—and his own immense ego. But then he can't stand it any longer.

Twelve months later he was taking a walk on the flat roof of the royal palace in Babylon. As he looked out across the city, he said, 'Look at this great city of Babylon! By my own mighty power, I have built this beautiful city as my royal residence to display my majestic splendor.' (Daniel 4:29-30 NLT)

-The words weren't even out of his mouth when God said, "It's all over, Nebuchadnezzar! I'm taking your kingdom—and you will have the mind of a beast until you understand who you are—and Who I am.

-In an instant, Nebuchadnezzar starts his remedial training—that power doesn't come to those who claim it and claw their way to the top of the heap. All power comes from the *All-powerful One*. *Everyone* is accountable to Him! And if He has to, he will pry it from the cold, stiff fingers of the little people on this planet who abuse it. Listen to this incredibly powerful man's final words:

After this time had passed, I, Nebuchadnezzar, looked up to heaven. My sanity returned, and I praised and worshiped the Most High and honored the one who

lives forever. His rule is everlasting and his kingdom is eternal. All the people of the earth are nothing compared to him. He does as he pleases among the angels of heaven and among the people of the earth.

No one can stop him or say to him, ‘What do you mean by doing these things?’ ...“Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and glorify and honor the King of heaven. All his acts are just and true, and he is able to humble the proud.” (Daniel 4:34-35, 37 NLT)

5. That’s an amazing story, isn’t it? It would be very easy to read this and think, “Good for God! Nailed that big shot bully—and put him in his place!” When we think of people who worship power, we think of people like him, don’t we? The world leaders or dictators; the impregnable bosses of big corporations—like **Neutron Jack**—who come into companies and make heads roll! The fat cats who get paid obnoxious salaries—and still get their bonuses when the company goes belly up. Right now, the CEO of BP is the scoundrel du jour!

-How many of you think you may someday hold the power of a Nebuchadnezzar—or be the CEO of a giant corporation that affects the ecology of the planet? Not many of us, right? And yet...**and yet...**when you think about what **defines** power—and what **defines** an idol—it runs closer to home than most think. See, power is about **control**. It’s about doing what you have to do to control everything within the range of your will. And we **all** have power. Sometimes we use it for the good of others. But when we’re afraid of losing control in some arena of our lives—the power we wield gets deadly. Just like Nebuchadnezzar, we pull tantrums.

-Think of how an idol is defined in our lives. It’s not a giant statue, like Nebuchadnezzar made; it’s where we look to solve our problems, get what we want, and stay secure. **Control**. And even though that might not be the word we’d choose to label our actions, the things we say, the way we sometimes manipulate truth, people and circumstances—that’s what it really is. And it’s fed by insecurity. We’re afraid of what might happen, what people might do or think—and being in control—or getting others to do what **we** want—being **right**—is how we solve the problem. Does it work? Well, not usually.

-And when we **lose** control—we get angry; depressed. Enraged—because we’re afraid. We can only feel secure and sleep well when **we’re** in control. And when we do that, sometimes the only way God can protect us and others is to either totally put us on the shelf—or **humble** us. God **loved** Nebuchadnezzar. God’s plan is always to redeem—not replace—if possible. So. God took him down.

-There’s another human being in this story who also has **incredible** power—more than Nebuchadnezzar, really. He’s lost everything because of this ego-maniac—and yet his respect and love is **amazing!** And it’s consistent—from asking to eat only vegetables, to telling him that his kingdom—like all human kingdoms—would disintegrate—finally--to urging Neb to repent of his injustice and wickedness, or he would go insane.

-And Daniel’s influence survives the Babylonian regime—into the next one of the Medes and Persians. In fact, it could be that the Magi who followed the star to

Bethlehem 500 years later to meet the new King, Jesus—the stone that would replace all earthly kingdoms, were influenced by the legacy and writings of Daniel.

6. Power is a **good** thing. One of God's gifts. You have power. You do. Some of you **know** you have power—some of you don't. If it turns into an idol—the place we turn to stay in control of our world—well **then** it gets ugly and destructive. And there's a single word that describes the way power has to be used to keep it from turning ugly and destructive. Anyone know what that word might be? It's **love**. Love for God—ultimate respect for Him and His authority over everything. And, of course, love for others. **Love**—love for God and love for others—is what makes power safe. In the hands of a person who uses power to love and protect themselves—power is **very** dangerous.

-The word for power when it's moving in the opposite direction from love—is the word **control**. Anyone here who knows a control-freak? What's interesting is that the Sovereign One who rules history doesn't try to control **us**. You know, force us, or intimidate us, guilt us, or manipulate us like little robots into doing what He wants. He will stop us, if He has to—but in working with humans—God allows us to **not** choose Him. He makes Himself vulnerable to rejection.

-Can I be polite—but straightforward? Being a controlling person doesn't just annoy people who have to deal with you; it's **dangerous**. You can't do that and have a meaningful part in God's mission—where **Jesus is Lord!** And you can't do that and maintain healthy relationships. There are four ways we can handle power—and only one of them is good.

- a. Like Nebuchadnezzar—and others—you can **ABUSE** power. This is Nazism. This is dictatorship. It's power at its worst. This is when people take the power they've been given—or received—and use it for their own agenda, no matter who it oppresses or kills or harms. And when power is abused, blood runs freely—and the hatred and resentment it causes are profound! When power is abused, the most vulnerable people on earth suffer most.

-If you want to put yourself on God's, **Must be humbled** list, abuse power. God hates it! This was precisely what brought on the conquest and exile of the Israelites. God spoke and spoke and spoke—and finally had had enough. To abuse your power—and have to give a final accounting to God is a **terrifying** thought.

- b. Power can also be **MISUSED**. This is a little more tricky. Power is misused when people use it to manipulate others—mainly to get something for themselves. When people try to control their employees or their children or their spouses or friends—it's a **misuse** of power. Sometimes it's through manipulating what the people around them think or do—through anger, criticism, or just hovering and trying to manage all the details of someone's life. To be honest, this happens a lot in families.

-I think a lot of unforgiveness and grudge-holding fits into this category. When you refuse to just let something go—forgive—and you hold onto the pain--

what's that about? It's about fear and insecurity. "I've got to control what happens; I have to keep myself from getting hurt—so I will keep this in my back pocket—**just in case I need it** to put this person in their place!

-Lying or shaping the truth—controlling the information about yourself—is a way of misusing power. Using your money or success to control the circumstances or people or organizations you're a part of is a **misuse of power**. Sometimes power gets misused in churches—where people shine up their gifts and reputations—and use that to control what a gathering like this does. Misuse of power—makes it all about me and my will—and the little kingdom I'm building!

- c. My guess, though, is that in most cases where power goes wrong—is where it is simply **dis-used**. It's where we have the chance, like Daniel did, to make a difference—and we just never get around to it. We're busy, you know, with work, kids, life, vacations—and instead of lovingly using the influence we have to see people—and the world we live in transformed—we just never engage! If we do, it's out of fear and insecurity—and it's about **us**, not others.

7. Loving God with all we are—and loving others as ourselves—is power at it's best. We let Him be Sovereign over history. And we stop trying to control things to make life safe.

-Loving others means treating them the way **we** want to be treated. Anyone here who likes it when someone jerks you around and tries to control you? Jesus says, **Treat others just like that!**

-One of the amazing ways that Daniel lovingly uses his power and influence is by risking his life to tell Nebuchadnezzar the truth about how his wickedness and oppression had affected the helpless. And God is **still** looking for prophets—will use power lovingly and wisely!

-I find it fascinating that when Daniel tells Nebuchadnezzar how it will all end, it's in the form of how all these kingdoms that have set themselves up as the ultimate idol of history—are obliterated by a Kingdom created—and ruled by God.

-Specifically, Jesus Christ—who **emptied** Himself of all his power and prerogatives as God—and took on the form of a servant in the likeness of man. The power behind His life—and His death on a cross—was love. And love was...and has been...the driving force behind genuine followers of Jesus. In following Jesus—they just kept marching forward, sacrificing their lives, their egos, their money—and all earthly power for a different kind of power. Love. And their love ultimately took down the most powerful empire the world has ever seen.

-If you want to win. If you want **real** power—you need to know that **love wins!** It's not the Terminators of the world; it's not the control freaks; it's not with ones with the biggest weapons—or the strongest arms. **Love wins.**