God’s Authority Sustains His People

Summary and Goal
After watching Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego walk out of the fiery furnace, Nebuchadnezzar again boasted of his self-importance, inviting the judgment of God. Remarkably, his most offensive expressions of pride followed his giving lip service to the supremacy of our God, which highlights the deceptive nature of a false humility. This session warns us about the dangers of pride while also helping us appreciate God’s willingness to humble the proud.

Session Outline
1. Those who walk in pride are blind to God’s authority (Dan. 4:29-30).
2. God graciously humbles those who walk in pride (Dan. 4:31-33).
3. Praise of God replaces pride in those who have been humbled (Dan. 4:34-37).

Background Passage: Daniel 4

Session in a Sentence
God humbles the proud so that they can recognize His authority and praise Him.

Christ Connection
King Nebuchadnezzar boasted in the city he had built to bring glory to himself, but God humbled him so he could see the glory of the King of heaven. Jesus is the King of kings who humbled Himself by taking on flesh and laying down His life to build a people of God for the Father’s glory.

Missional Application
Because we have been given life through Christ’s humility, we follow His example and walk with humility as we seek to selflessly serve those around us.
EXPLAIN: Share the writer’s illustration about views of success on page 20 in the Daily Discipleship Guide (DDG).

Years ago I heard a story about three business professionals sharing their definitions of success with each other while eating a meal.

“For me,” said the first man, “being called to the White House for a private meeting with the president would be the ultimate achievement.”

“Not me,” interrupted the second man. “My pinnacle of success would be meeting in the Oval Office with the president and watching him ignore his ringing emergency phone in order to talk to me.”

“You’re both wrong,” exclaimed the third man. “Real success is when you’re meeting with the president in the Oval Office and the phone rings, he answers, and says, ‘It’s for you!’ ”

Though we chuckle over the ego of these men, most of us crave notoriety and acclaim. We secretly long to be the center of the universe. While our self-obsession may seem harmless (at least in our eyes!), this sin makes a relationship with God impossible.

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

What is the relationship between success and pride? (successes can make us prideful; we take pride in trying to accomplish our goals ourselves; we want the acclaim for our successes; we can be prideful in our failures when we refuse to learn from our mistakes and refuse to seek the help of others; pride taints our successes)

SUMMARIZE: After watching Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego walk out of the fiery furnace, Nebuchadnezzar again boasted of his self-importance, inviting the judgment of God. Remarkably, his most offensive expressions of pride followed his giving lip service to the supremacy of our God, which highlights the deceptive nature of a false humility. This session warns us about the dangers of pride while also helping us appreciate God’s willingness to humble the proud.

For session-by-session training videos, please visit MinistryGrid.com/GospelProject.
For additional teaching options and other resources, please visit GospelProject.com/additional-resources.
Point 1: Those who walk in pride are blind to God’s authority (Dan. 4:29-30).

READ Daniel 4:29-30 (DDG p. 21).

29 At the end of twelve months, as he was walking on the roof of the royal palace in Babylon, 30 the king exclaimed, “Is this not Babylon the Great that I have built to be a royal residence by my vast power and for my majestic glory?”

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 21) to note Nebuchadnezzar’s failure to heed the warning that he and his kingdom would one day fall, highlighting the extent of his pride.

Despite voicing praise for the authority of Yahweh (3:28-29), Nebuchadnezzar still idolized himself above all others. Daniel pleaded with Nebuchadnezzar to repent of his pride and avoid the punishment. Yet despite the warning that God would humble him like an animal because of his pride, Nebuchadnezzar continued to strut through Babylon. He saw his kingdom as the work of his hands for the glory of his name alone.

• In this passage, Nebuchadnezzar looked out over the magnificence of Babylon and felt great conceit. Remarkably, his outlandish swagger came on the heels of a dream about his downfall, which Daniel interpreted for him (4:4-27).
• Nebuchadnezzar had a previous dream in Daniel 2 and also heard its prophetic interpretation from Daniel: A statue comprised of multiple materials told of Babylon, which was symbolized by a head of gold, and the kingdoms that would come after Babylon, which were symbolized by lesser metals and clay. In Daniel 3, it seems the king defied his dream by constructing a statue covered entirely with gold, as if to declare his kingdom would last and he was the final authority. Nebuchadnezzar’s notion that he could determine his own fate was offensive to the Lord. His presumption that Babylon would last forever and that no kingdoms would follow was perhaps the worst evidence of the king’s ego.

Application: Self-reliant living blinds us to God’s final authority over our lives. We celebrate our achievements, forgetting that every good and perfect gift is from above (Jas. 1:17). Puffing ourselves up is a practical denial that salvation is a gift that leaves no room for boasting (Eph. 2:8-9) and that God has different assignments for every member of His family (Rom. 12:3-8). Rather than see our blessings as from Him and through Him and to Him (Rom. 11:36), we blindly hoard Christ’s glory for ourselves. Promoting our agenda leaves us valuing the gifts of heaven more than the Lord who gave them.

Voices from Church History

“In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that—and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison—you do not know God at all. As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.”

—C. S. Lewis (1898-1963)
FILL IN THE BLANKS: Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 21).

**Sin as Selfishness:** When we sin, we are acting out of a selfish attitude and mind-set that assumes our action will lead us to more happiness than if we were to obey God. Sin is manifested in our tendency to be “curved inward” toward self.

**Essential Doctrine “Sin as Selfishness”:** When we sin, we are acting out of a selfish attitude and mind-set that assumes our action will lead us to more happiness than if we were to obey God. Because sin is manifested in our tendency to be “curved inward” toward self, it is the opposite of love. Love looks outwardly to place others before oneself, operating from the mind-set that others are more important (Phil. 2:3). Where sin selfishly seeks personal gratification and happiness, love works for the joy of others in the hopes of making others happy in God.

**EXPLAIN:** Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 21) to point out how it is possible to live in a way that fails to acknowledge God’s authority over our lives.

Unless we humble ourselves, we will remain oblivious to God’s authority and activity around us. In this scenario, we become our own god, even if we say otherwise. Though we all possess the common knowledge of our human frailty, we will smugly put off until tomorrow what the Lord requires of us today—humble faith and worship. Ultimately, our overconfidence regarding the future is the direct result of an exaggerated view of ourselves. Those who esteem themselves dismiss that life is a vapor that appears briefly before vanishing (Jas. 4:14), as if they were somehow the exception to the rule.

**INTERACT:** Ask group members the following question.

In what ways do we take the future for granted, as if it were ours alone to plan? (we make our plans without any consideration for God's will or timing; we get upset when we are forced to change our plans; we consider ourselves invincible and the supreme authority over our lives; we live as though God did not exist)
Point 2: God graciously humbles those who walk in pride (Dan. 4:31-33).

READ Daniel 4:31-33 (DDG p. 22).

31 While the words were still in the king’s mouth, a voice came from heaven: “King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is declared that the kingdom has departed from you. 32 You will be driven away from people to live with the wild animals, and you will feed on grass like cattle for seven periods of time, until you acknowledge that the Most High is ruler over human kingdoms, and he gives them to anyone he wants.”

33 At that moment the message against Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people. He ate grass like cattle, and his body was drenched with dew from the sky, until his hair grew like eagles’ feathers and his nails like birds’ claws.

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 22) to show how God’s actions toward Nebuchadnezzar were not simply judgment of his pride but an act of compassion to bring him to repentance.

Our inclination is to read these words as an act of judgment wrought by God’s anger toward Nebuchadnezzar. Though the king was deserving of the harshest plight, the Lord’s resolve to humble him is seen more accurately as an act of compassion. By forcing Nebuchadnezzar to roam the earth like a wild animal, the Lord was wooing him toward repentance. Rather than condemn the king for his arrogance, God graciously reduced him to nothing in order to change his haughty heart and ways.

• Jesus taught that there is no profit in gaining the whole world at the expense our souls (Mark 8:36). Yet strangely we look at Nebuchadnezzar with pity because God stripped him of all worldly acclaim. This king seemingly had the whole world, but God took it all from him in order to give him what mattered most—a relationship with the God of the universe. If the Lord’s methods seem too severe, it likely indicates our failure to grasp the damning consequences of living for ourselves.

INSTRUCT: Ask group members to use the scale in their DDG (p. 22) to examine how they typically respond to divine interruptions in their lives.

How do you tend to respond to God’s interruptions in your life?

Anger  Irritation  Tolerance  Humble Receptivity
**EXPLAIN:** Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 22) to emphasize that God orchestrates humbling circumstances for us for our own good that we would come to the humble Christ with humility.

Our wickedness notwithstanding, the Lord is not eager for us to perish (2 Pet. 3:9). Even more astounding, our heavenly Father is aggressively patient as He actively shows kindness to us (Rom. 2:4). In the end, His efforts to bring us low communicate His passion to lift us high as His own children through faith in Jesus. Our humiliation, brought about by God’s work and our response, will always precede our exaltation.

- In addition to being the fountainhead of most, if not all, sinful acts, pride is also egregious to God because it prevents us from appreciating the full beauty of Christ’s character and work. Jesus emptied Himself, became a servant, and was obedient to the point of death (Phil. 2:7-8). Before receiving the name that is above all other names, He depended entirely upon the will of His Father. Forfeiting His riches (2 Cor. 8:9), experiencing the judgment of God (Mark 15:34), and tasting death for every man (Heb. 2:9) were just a few sacrifices borne out of the humility of Jesus. Is it possible to cherish this Savior if we despise the humble path He walked? Can we, living for ourselves, really celebrate a Messiah who put everyone’s needs before His own?

**Application:** Consider the multiplicity of commands instructing us to emulate the example of Christ’s meekness: we are to want (Mic. 6:8), wear (Col. 3:12), and walk in humility (Eph. 4:1-2). After a dispute broke out among His disciples about who would be the greatest in the kingdom, Jesus declared that the least among us is the greatest in order to reinforce the significance of servant leadership (Luke 22:25-27). These few examples remind us that we can never sincerely treasure Christ nor become like Him unless we come to him in humility.

**INTERACT:** Ask group members the following question.

What are some ways God might humble people to lead them to faith in Jesus Christ? (hearing the gospel shared or preached; consequences of sin; sickness; failure; broken relationships)
Point 3: Praise of God replaces pride in those who have been humbled (Dan. 4:34-37).

FILL IN THE BLANKS: Provide group members with the answers for the blanks in the table in their DDG (p. 23) to present the contrast between Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, and righteous King Jesus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NEBUCHADNEZZAR / BABYLON</th>
<th>JESUS / KINGDOM OF GOD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forced subjects to serve him (Dan. 1)</td>
<td>Became the servant of all (Phil. 2:7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demanded honor by means of his strength and threat of death (Dan. 3)</td>
<td>Humbled Himself before God the Father exalted Him (Phil. 2:8-9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proud of his greatness as the king of Babylon (Dan. 4)</td>
<td>Taught the least are the greatest in the kingdom of God (Luke 9:48)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SAY: Nebuchadnezzar did not deserve God’s intervention in his life to thwart his pride—and neither do we. Yet the God of grace longs to transform proud sinners into faithful worshipers.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read Daniel 4:34-37 (DDG p. 23).

34 But at the end of those days, I, Nebuchadnezzar, looked up to heaven, and my sanity returned to me. Then I praised the Most High and honored and glorified him who lives forever:

   For his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation. 35 All the inhabitants of the earth are counted as nothing, and he does what he wants with the army of heaven and the inhabitants of the earth. There is no one who can block his hand or say to him, “What have you done?”

36 At that time my sanity returned to me, and my majesty and splendor returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisers and my nobles sought me out, I was reestablished over my kingdom, and even more greatness came to me. 37 Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise, exalt, and glorify the King of the heavens, because all his works are true and his ways are just. He is able to humble those who walk in pride.

EXPLAIN: Reference the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 23) as you address how the Babylonian king praised the God of Israel.

After a long time living as an animal, Nebuchadnezzar finally acknowledged God’s sovereign authority over his life, and he could not help but praise the God who was so patient with him in his pride. Realizing that Yahweh had unlimited authority, Babylon’s once fearless leader now feared the one true, transcendent God over all creation.
• As Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged God’s eternality (v. 34) and strength (v. 35), he also recognized how small he was in comparison. Because the king finally considered himself as nothing, God lifted his burden and restored his reign over Babylon the moment praise filled his lips. As magnificent as his empire was, Nebuchadnezzar realized how fortunate He was to be a witness to the reality of God’s kingdom.

FILL IN THE BLANKS: Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 23).

God Is Transcendent: God is distinct from and independent of His created world. He is transcendent over us in regards to His greatness and power as well as His goodness and purity. Understanding God's transcendence evokes awe and wonder at His goodness and power.

Essential Doctrine “God Is Transcendent”: God’s transcendence refers to the fact that He is distinct from and independent of His created world. He is transcendent over us in regards to His greatness and power as well as His goodness and purity. The implication of this doctrine is that God is inherently superior to humanity; His thoughts and ways are higher than ours (Isa. 55:8-9). When God saves us, He restores us so we can fulfill our human purpose; this does not mean that we become God or that distinctions between God and humanity are obliterated. Understanding God’s transcendence evokes awe and wonder at His goodness and power.

APPLY this passage to your group members with the following two points:
• Humility: Without humility, we might read this passage and lament the arrogance of a man who lived thousands of years ago. Like the Pharisee who went to the temple to pray, we might be guilty of reading the Scriptures in order to thank God that we are not as sinful as those we study (Luke 18:11). Instead, we should recognize our own pride when we read about Nebuchadnezzar and humble ourselves before our good, transcendent God as a result.

• Praise: Because continual praise reflects our realization that no one is like the Lord, our worship is a good indicator of whether or not we grasp how blessed we are to be part of God’s kingdom. If we live to make much of ourselves, praise will seldom cross our lips. If the world is our playground for personal glory, worship will be absent in our hearts. But if we believe in the God who opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (Jas. 4:6)—and that He has given His Son for our salvation—how can we not love and praise Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength?

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

How has God worked in your life to bring you to faith in Jesus, our humble, sovereign King? (be prepared to give an answer of your own to jump-start the conversation)
**My Mission**

**EXPLAIN:** Praising God is not natural to us because, apart from grace, we live for ourselves. Dying to our need for recognition will not come easy, but celebrating God’s authority over us, along with emulating the life of our Savior, will be the first steps toward overcoming our pride. If we do not choose to humble ourselves, the Lord will graciously intervene, even through painful means, if necessary. Jesus became a bondservant of His Father in order to seek and save that which was lost. We too must be willing to serve those around us in the name of the Lord. Doing so will provide the gospel witness to others that is essential for their salvation, but it will also allow others to see our good works so that they might glorify our Father who is heaven (Matt. 5:16).

**READ** the following missional application statement in the DDG (p. 24), and encourage group members to choose at least one of the options below as a way to respond to the truth of God’s Word.

Because we have been given life through Christ’s humility, we follow His example and walk with humility as we seek to selflessly serve those around us.

- **How do you need to address the pride in your life?**
- **What are some ways your group can serve those around you and make a contribution to God’s kingdom?**
- **How do you need to reset your priorities in order to serve others in the name of Christ in an effort to reach them with the gospel?**

**CLOSE IN PRAYER:** Father, You resist the proud and give grace to the humble. Thank You for humbling us to the point of repentance and extending grace and forgiveness to us through Christ, who though equal with God, humbled Himself to the point of death and was later exalted. Help us to live in humility by the power of the Holy Spirit as we seek to love our neighbor and serve others. Amen.

**INSTRUCT:** As your group departs, encourage group members to read and respond to the **Daily Study** devotions in their DDG (pp. 25-27), which build and expand upon the group study. Also advocate for small groups or families to use **Encourage One Another** (p. 28) for mutual accountability and fellowship grounded upon the foundation of God’s Word.

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**Voices from Church History**

“No penitent sinner, who now turns to do the works of God, may despair of mercy, however foul his life has formerly been.”

—John Mayer (1583-1664)
Daily Discipleship

Throughout the week following the session, use the ideas below to remind and encourage your group members to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. The Daily Study devotions in the DDG (pp. 25-27) will help group members get into God’s Word and study it for themselves. Encourage One Another (p. 28) will help group members and families fellowship with one another with purpose.

Daily Study

Brief daily devotions in the DDG (pp. 25-27) will help group members take initiative in their own discipleship.

- Make sure all group members have access to a Bible to read. Have some Bibles available to give to guests who may need one, or offer to get one and arrange a time to meet to give it and show how to navigate it for the devotions.

- Share the following idea from the devotion for Day 3 as a part of point 2 in the session: We can rejoice knowing that God compassionately interrupts our temporal lives in order to reward us eternally.

Consider leading by example and reading the daily devotions yourself with your own DDG. Based on your study, use brief messages throughout the week (group text, email, social media) to encourage your group to keep up with their daily time in God’s Word and to live it out. Here are a couple of examples you can use:

- Day 1: “Unless we humble ourselves, God’s greatest blessings in our lives can actually become stumbling blocks that foster sinful arrogance.”

- Day 4: “God is more than willing to remove the hindrances that cause us to glory in our personal resumes rather than the praise of our heavenly King.”

Visit www.GospelProject.com/Blog for additional content and resources you can use to help group members gain more insight into their daily studies. Send group members a link or a portion of a blog post or other content that you believe will be helpful and encouraging for their time in God’s Word.

Encourage One Another

This brief plan for fellowship and accountability in the group member’s DDG (p. 28) will help groups of 2-4 people to meet sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and they are responding. It could also be used for family discipleship with students and children who are using The Gospel Project in their groups.

- Encourage group members to affirm one another in areas where they see humility being expressed.

- See yourself as a member of the group who also needs encouragement in the faith, and participate in such a group this week.
Additional Commentary

**Point 1: Those who walk in pride are blind to God’s authority (Dan. 4:29-30).**

“The narrative does not tell us Nebuchadnezzar’s response to Daniel’s advice. But a year later we encounter him walking on his rooftop and admiring the city he has built. Historical sources record his many building projects, including the city’s double walls and elaborate gates. The city was so grand that two centuries later Alexander the Great would make it his capital. Looking over it all, Nebuchadnezzar makes an arrogant observation about his accomplishments, power and glory (4:28-30). This was Nebuchadnezzar ‘touching the sky’ (4:11,20). The issue is not the greatness of the city but who should receive the credit for building it.”

“Nebuchadnezzar had no less than three palaces in the city of Babylon. He was walking on the roof of one of them when he was overcome with the glory of the city and was consumed with pride. In his exclamation Is this not Babylon the Great that I (lit. ‘I, myself’) have built … by my vast power and for my majestic glory?, Nebuchadnezzar proclaimed himself the source of majesty. He failed to give God the credit and glory as the ultimate giver of all good gifts. Many years later, the apostle Paul scolded the Corinthians for their pride by asking, ‘What do you have that you didn’t receive? If, in fact, you did receive it, why do you boast as if you hadn’t received it?’ (1 Cor. 4:7).”

**Point 2: God graciously humbles those who walk in pride (Dan. 4:31-33).**

“While the boastful words were still coming out of the king’s mouth, a voice from heaven pronounced judgment upon him. Evidently this was an audible announcement (at least to the king). The voice, probably of an angel, declared that heaven had ‘decree’d’ his judgment. It was as good as done. Nebuchadnezzar would live with the wild animals and eat grass like the cattle for seven years (‘seven times’) until he finally repented of his pride and gave glory to God. Immediately the horrible sentence was carried out. Nebuchadnezzar fell under the strange delusion and began to act like an animal. Because of this bizarre behavior, he ‘was driven away from people.’ He lived outdoors with the beasts, ‘ate grass like cattle,’ and was exposed to the weather (‘drenched with the dew’). The king’s ‘hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird’ … How ironic that the king who felt himself superior to other men had now sunk to a subhuman level.”
“Nebuchadnezzar may have suffered from boanthropy, a rare mental illness in which people believe they are actually cattle. One modern case of boanthropy resulted in the patient growing long matted hair and thickened fingernails, much like Nebuchadnezzar, whose hair grew like eagles’ feathers and his nails like birds’ claws. Critics contend that secular history has no record of Nebuchadnezzar’s mental illness. However, it is questionable as to whether an ancient Near Eastern despot would mention his bout with insanity in official court records which were typically devoted to highlighting his accomplishments. Silence about an embarrassing episode is understandable. Moreover, the church historian Eusebius cited Abydenus, a third-century BC Greek historian who referred to a time when Nebuchadnezzar was ‘possessed by a god.’ Also, the third-century BC historian Berosus possibly referred to these events when he spoke of an illness that befell Nebuchadnezzar just before his death.”

Point 3: Praise of God replaces pride in those who have been humbled (Dan. 4:34-37).

“At the end of God’s appointed time of judgment, Nebuchadnezzar raised his eyes to heaven and his reason was restored. Once brought low by God, he was brought back to the heights and restored to control of his kingdom, demonstrating that the Lord is able both to humble the proud and to exalt the humble. The great and mighty persecutor of Israel, the destroyer of Jerusalem, was humbled by God’s grace and brought to confess God’s mercy. He blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever. God used Daniel’s faithfulness to bring light to this Gentile.”

“Nebuchadnezzar, I think, finally got the message, because at the very end of Daniel 4 he confesses that the God whom earlier he had called Daniel’s God is now his God as well. Notice verse 34: ‘My sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever.’ Then verse 37, which contains the very last words we hear from Nebuchadnezzar: ‘Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.’ God is not only able to humble them; he does humble them. But as we humble ourselves, we find ourselves exalted in the role God has called us to fill, that of light bearers, reflectors of the glory of God. We find that God uses people as inconspicuous and unimpressive as ourselves to bring people, even like Nebuchadnezzar, to the knowledge of himself.”

References
Think about the encouragement people often share to help others through times of adversity. We might hear someone speak of how pressure is required to transform coal into a diamond; thus, pressure can be good for us, transforming us into someone better. Or we might be told of the hatchling that has to work to break through its eggshell, and that struggle is good for this creature—even necessary—so that it grows strong. Likewise, adversity strengthens us and positions us to be who we were meant to be.

While these illustrations might provide encouragement, they reveal something quite important about the world’s view of adversity. The world sees adversity as an opportunity for a person to dig deep, gaze within their soul, and discover who he or she truly is. But the gospel tells a different story—a better story. The gospel sees adversity as an opportunity for a person to look high above, gaze upon Christ, and see who He truly is. For it is Christ, not ourselves, who carries us through all trials and suffering. Adversity positions us to rely on Christ’s power, not an inner human strength that has been lying dormant.

In this volume we pick up the story of Scripture with the Jews living in bondage in a foreign land, the result of their rebellion against God. But even in the midst of judgment, God’s faithful love still shines forth brightly. We will witness God continuing to guide, strengthen, and protect His people in their time of great adversity, not to help them discover who they were but rather to understand who He is. At the same time, we will see God continue to drive the events of history toward the fulfillment of His ancient promise to provide the Rescuer, the One who would free people from an even greater bondage, that of sin and death.