

Recognizing God

Daniel 4:28-37; 1st John 1:1-10



We gather together to worship God. We join our hearts and lives to place ourselves at the disposal of a God we have never seen. Having never seen God, how do we recognize His presence and activity among us? Do others recognize God in our lives?

Daniel spent his life in Babylon in the service of an idolatrous king, serving God all the while. There were times when his service to God and service to the king came into conflict. It was no simple thing to serve *Yahweh* in the context of the Babylonian court scene. If life had been difficult for the Hebrew prophets back in Jerusalem, idolatry reigned with unrestrained impetus in Babylon. Here Daniel was designated to serve the whims of the king on whom his support depended. He was to serve despite the flagrant polytheistic idolatry and fertility cultus so aversive to Hebrew theology. Daniel was caught between two masters whose aims and motives were at great variance.

Nebuchadnezzar was accustomed to thinking of the gods in much less glowing terms than the Hebrew portrayal of *Yahweh*. He considered the gods little more than larger-than-life humans imbued with special power. The gods could be portrayed in some sense akin to the world of animals and humans. The Babylonian concept of the heavenly beings was just as full of the kinds of intrigue, fancy, and capriciousness of our accounts of European medieval court life or modern novels of espionage. The concept of the divine held little sense of character, morality, or ethical standards for the Babylonian world. Their concepts derived from human character effaced by the drive for power, wealth, and influence.

Oh, the Babylonians held to the elevation of standards of conduct including codes of morality and the just treatment of the powerless. These were ideals held throughout the world of the Ancient Near East, and yet proclamation and practice routinely sounded discordant notes. In a similar vein, the gods reported to demand certain standards of conduct from human subjects, yet often lived by a rule of capricious will and self-absorption.

Such was Nebuchadnezzar's context. It was from this backdrop that Daniel was called to interpret the dream speaking of the king's humiliation. As the king spoke haughtily of his grandeur, majesty, and power, God's judgment came upon him. The mighty king lost his sanity and sovereignty until he should recognize his proper position before God Most High. From a position of riches and power, Nebuchadnezzar was cast down so he might learn the greatness of God.

How different is the picture cast for us in John's first epistle! This is no picture of humiliation of one puffed up by pride. Rather, we find the Sovereign of life taking the initiative to live freely among humanity. Here is no God puffed up by pride. God is supreme by divine nature and character. This is no wanna-be stretching to appear as more than reality allows. Rather, we find God sufficiently secure in identity and character to live at peace in an underprivileged condition—by choice.

Nebuchadnezzar did not know the God of Daniel. He had a false image of God's identity. He had a false view of himself. Until he had experienced humiliation he could not grasp the grandeur and majesty of the Most High. John, however, describes the Most High stepping down into our midst, taking

on human life that we might experience God more fully. Not for the sake of experience alone, but for fellowship.

What neither Nebuchadnezzar nor Daniel had experienced we see in John's witness. The very Word speaking life into existence became visible that we might recognize God's true character and identity. God did not remain aloof and above creation, barricading himself from vile humanity. That may have been the fancy of humans in the quest of power. In contrast, God entered the creature realm to reveal the essential quality of the life of the ages.

John's description is interesting. What we have seen with our eyes, touched with our hands, and heard with our ears regarding this life. He speaks not merely of words, but words that have come into the arena of human experience. Jesus' life and ministry touched the senses as well as the heart and intellect. It was now this very human experience of God's presence and revelation which John reports.

John was apparently concerned with the Gnostic message of a spirit God who could not have any contact with the physical reality. Dashing that failed concept, John expresses the divine reality made flesh so as to interact with the physical sensations of life. John was close enough to experience Jesus sweating on the dusty roads of Galilee, hearing Jesus' words to the disciples and the crowds, and touching the hands of the Almighty clothed in human flesh. If God need not remain aloof from the human condition, neither need we.

Here is God taking on the immediacy of human experience. This is the Creator of life, living with sweat on His brow and blood in His veins. Even in such a human form, however, John notes the grave difference between this Word of Life and the identity of human character. The God of life came to offer fellowship with humanity. Yet this same God is wholly different from our selves.

God's identity is distinct from our own as is light from darkness. The reality of God's character challenges us to allow the divine light to enter our own darkness, creating life where there the void of chaos and death lived unrestrained. Light is not affected by darkness in the least. Darkness has no hope of altering the shining of light. It is the darkness that dissipates with light's arrival.

Many claim fellowship with God. Many claim to enjoy God's presence and blessing. If John's words mean anything, they indicate that fellowship with God shines in the darkness of a human heart, changing our very character and identity. God's presence introduces something in our lives that simply cannot exist apart from that Word of Life and Light. Nebuchadnezzar recognized his true state after he was removed from his position of power. John recognized God to be greater than he had first imagined after experiencing God's incarnation in Christ Jesus.

Recognizing God's full identity and activity is a challenging quest. It is not for the faint of heart. It challenges us to see ourselves for who we really are. When we recognize God fully, we must also recognize our own grave limitations. We must set aside any grand sense of self in the light of God's majesty. If we are to have fellowship with God, our lives must reflect the distinctive character of His presence. Will we have the courage to exalt God as rightful Lord, or will we strive to keep self in a better light? We are called to recognize God, but also to allow the world around us to recognize His presence within us. How shall we allow the light and life of Christ to flow through us?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*