Daniel 4:28-37 *His Name Is: God Most High*

***Pastor Russell’s Guide to Choosing a Baby Name (Part II)***

Naming a child is a tremendous responsibility. When parents choose a name for a newborn child they are choosing a word that child will hear for the rest of his or her life, a word which will come to be associated with that child, a word which—in some ways—may shape that child’s destiny. So, if you are expecting a child and you are in the process of choosing potential names… no pressure or anything.

Actually, this is something I’ve talked about before. About a year and a half ago, when we were doing a series through the book of Exodus, we came to the story of the burning bush where God gives His name: “I AM WHO I AM.” At that time, I gave “Pastor Russell’s Guide to Choosing a Baby Name.” I suggested that you should pay attention to pronounceability, spelling, trendiness, popularity, nicknames, and more. If you were here, you may remember it is a topic I feel strongly about.

Now, I feel compelled to revisit the topic. Only, this time, I’m armed with scientific studies. So now I give you: **“Pastor Russell’s Guide to Choosing a Baby Name, Part II.”**

First, it would appear that you should pay attention to **initials.** Real, serious science has been done on the connection between our names and who we become. Scientists call it “implicit egotism”, the idea that people unconsciously select things, places and other people that resemble them. So, one of the ways this shows up is in the initials of our first name. In 2007 a study conducted by professors at Yale and Cal-Berkeley determined that students with names that began with a C or D earned lower grade point averages than those that started with an A or a B.

**Geography** also matters. If you do not particularly like to visit North or South Dakota, do not name your child “Dakota.” Brett Pelham, a psychology professor at the University of Buffalo in New York, discovered names can affect where a person decides to live. Women named Georgia and Virginia are about 44 percent more likely to move to a state with the same name, according to his [research](http://new.dixie.edu/humanities/File/Implicit%20Egotism.pdf). (Both studies cited in a CNN report: <http://www.cnn.com/2010/LIVING/05/26/naming.names.importance/index.html>)

Then there is the matter of **career.** An article entitled “How Names Affect our Destinies” from the online journal theweek.com says:

Some scientific researchers contend that there are disproportionately large numbers of dentists named Dennis and lawyers named Lauren, and that it's not purely an accident that Dr. Douglas Hart of Scarsdale, N.Y., chose cardiology or that the Greathouse family of West Virginia runs a real-estate firm. To some degree, this has always been true: The Romans had the expression *nomen est omen,* or "name is destiny." <http://theweek.com/articles/477557/how-names-influence-destinies>

Other examples of names which may have affected career choice are: Igor Judge, who became a Lord Chief Justice in England; Rich Ricci, who became a bank executive for Barclay’s; and a weatherman named Storm Field. Perhaps the best example is a girl from California named Susan Yoo who grew up to be a lawyer (you know: Sue Yoo). Also, how many people think it is a coincidence that someone named Usain Bolt became the world’s fastest man? (examples cited by: <https://www.theringer.com/nfl/2017/11/3/16602312/blake-bortles-name-week-9-picks-mailbag-bill-simmons>)

And then, of course, there is **spelling.** This is something I mentioned the last time. I cautioned against choosing a strange spelling of a common name. If you do choose to mess with the spelling, you sentence your child to a lifetime of correcting people who will spell their name wrong. This is something of a pet peeve of mine since, even though my name is the traditional spelling of Russell, people get it wrong all the time by leaving out the second “L”. But now, I have science on my side. An article from Livescience.com says:

Baby-naming advice books and blogs often suggest changing up the spelling of a common, or on-the-rise, name, in order to add some flare. Preliminary results from [a research project] suggest that may not be wise. Children with a deviant spelling of a common name tended to have slowed spelling and reading capabilities.

"That suggests a lot about internalizing," [the researcher] said. “You have the child named Jennifer spelled with a "G" – her teacher says 'Are you sure your name is spelled that way?' That can be incredibly hard on a person's confidence.”

All this parents end up realizing, as [another] study shows: One-fifth of parents in the British study wished they had chosen a name that was easier to spell; 8 percent were fed up with people being unable to pronounce the child’s name; and one in 10 thought the chosen name was clever at the time, but said the novelty had worn off.
<https://www.livescience.com/6569-good-bad-baby-names-long-lasting-effects.html>

***What’s in a Name?***I’m not sure how much credence I give to all these studies. I can think of plenty of people whose life paths have defied what these studies would have suggested for them. Carl Sagan, for example, did pretty well in school. And Aaron Judge became a pretty good baseball player, not a judge.

But the idea that names are important fits with the Bible. In the Bible, names represent a person’s character and reputation. A name is a stand-in for the person him- or herself.

This is particularly true when it comes to God’s name.

I want to give you a verse. It’s a verse that is going to guide our next series of sermons. It’s the first half of **Psalm 9:10.** It goes like this:

**10**Those who know your name trust in you.

This verse is addressed to God, and it carries a simple yet profound idea. Those who know God’s name will trust in Him. That is, the more we know about God’s character and attributes and nature the more that we will put our hope and faith and trust in Him. And one way to know God’s character and attributes and nature is to know the names which God chooses to be known by. His names tell us about Himself. It’s one of the reasons so many of our worship songs talk about God’s great name. His name is who He is.

And so, as we approach Christmas, I thought we could benefit from looking at the names of God. And the first name we are going to look at is **El Elyon: God Most High**.

***An Unusual Story***So, let’s consider this name. *Elyon* is a Hebrew adjective for that which is highest. Its regular usage is to describe the peak of a mountain, or the upper level of some object or thing. When used to describe a person, the idea is that the person is the most prominent or first in importance. *El* is the Hebrew word for God.

When the two words are used together, the idea is that God is the highest and most supreme being in all the universe. The English rendition is usually God Most High, or the Most High God. As a formal name for God, El Elyon, or simply Elyon, appears over 30 times in the Old Testament.

And to get at what this says about God, we are going to turn to a rather unlikely source. We are going to get a definition of “God Most High” from the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar.

Nebuchadnezzar was the king who led the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC. He’s the King who brought Daniel to the city of Babylon and elevated him to a high position after Daniel interpreted his dream about a statue. He’s also the King who threw Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into the fiery furnace, only to be utterly amazed when they walked out again unburned and without even smelling of smoke.

The most noteworthy thing about Nebuchadnezzar, as the Bible portrays him, is that he had an enormous ego. He liked for people to do what he said, and he liked to be told how wonderful he was. That enormous ego is on full display in today’s story, which begins in **Daniel 4:28:**

 **28**All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. **29**Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, **30**he said, “Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?”

There is a pretty impressive historical record of Nebuchadnezzar from non-Biblical sources. There are several archaeological finds with his name on them. The ancient histories testify that under his leadership, Babylon became a very impressive empire. While Nebuchadnezzar was on the throne, his kingdom stretched from Egypt to the west all the way to modern day Afghanistan in the East. Its center was the city of Babylon, in the fertile valley of the Tigres and Euphrates rivers.

Under Nebuchadnezzar’s reign Babylon was also built into a very impressive city. The ancient historian Herodotus counted Babylon as one of the 7 wonders of the world. Perhaps most famously, Nebuchadnezzar is associated with the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. The story goes that his wife Amytiis came from a land that was green, rugged and mountainous. She found the flat, sun-baked terrain of Mesopotamia depressing. So the king built an artificial mountain, and then devised a way to irrigate it so it would support large trees and beautiful bushes. The gardens did not hang as though they were suspended in mid-air, but they did overhang the terraces and made quite an impression on those who visited. Here’s a **16th century painting** of the gardens based on the ancient descriptions.

Given all that he had accomplished, it’s not surprising that Nebuchadnezzar had a bit of a big head. In verse 30 he is busy patting himself on the back, noting his great buildings and his “mighty power” and majestic glory. Basically he’s saying: “Who has two thumbs and just built the coolest city in the world? This guy!”

But Nebuchadnezzar may be just a little too full of himself. **Verses 31-32:**

**31**Even as the words were on his lips, a voice came from heaven, “This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. **32**You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes.”

This is actually a call back to the entire first part of Daniel 4. One year prior to this Nebuchadnezzar had a dream about this very thing. He needed Daniel to come and explain it to him, and Daniel was very clear that if he did not show more humility, he was going to lose his kingdom. Now the voice from heaven is decreeing it is going to happen.

And notice the name for God in verse 32: “The Most High.” That’s Elyon. And that’s the question that this story is all about: Who is higher? Nebuchadnezzar, or the God of the Bible?

Now things get strange. **Verse 33:**

**33**Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like the ox. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird.

Imagine this: the most powerful man in all the world thinks he is an animal. There is actually a name for this: boanthropy. That’s a psychological disorder in which the sufferer believes he or she is a cow or ox.  He literally started crawling around on all fours, refused to eat anything but grass, and let his hair and nails grow out until he looked like a bird.

This verse doesn’t provide a lot of specifics, but it makes you wonder: How long do you think his advisors covered for him while he went mad in his chambers? How many experts and witch-doctors do you think they brought in to cure him?

The Bible says he was like this for 7 years (and there is actually a 7 year gap in the historical record where Nebuchadnezzar is not credited for doing anything). For 7 years the king lived like a barnyard animal and yet, somehow, the throne did not pass to another. And then, suddenly, Nebuchadnezzar got well again. **Verse 34,** the Bible now records the story in Nebuchadnezzar’s own words:

**34**At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever.

The answer of who is higher has been definitively answered. We can’t say whether or not Nebuchadnezzar becomes a true believer, but he recognizes that he got in a shoving match with God and lost. In the next three verses he touches on 4 things that are true because God is the Most High God. Let me touch on them briefly:

***There is No One Higher***First, **Because God is the Most High…His dominion is forever**. This is the second half of **verse 34**:

His dominion is an eternal dominion;
    his kingdom endures from generation to generation.

There’s a recognition here of the transient nature of human endeavors. Even Nebuchadnezzar, one of the greatest and most successful kings the world has seen up to that point, will only reign for a relatively short amount of time.

This was the point of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in the Daniel, chapter 2. He dreamed of a statue with a head of gold, a chest and arms of silver, a belly of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of clay. Daniel explained to him that each section represented a kingdom: Nebuchadnezzar himself was the head of gold; the empire to follow him was the chest of sliver; the one after that the belly of bronze, and so on. In the end, the entire statue was toppled by a boulder that smashed the feet of clay and then became a huge mountain that covered the whole earth.

The point, as Daniel explained it, was that earthly kingdoms might be impressive in their own way, but they would only last so long. In the end, all will be replaced by the Kingdom of God, which will endure forever and ever.

World empires come and go. Whether the Mongolian Empire or the Holy Roman Empire; Napoleonic France or the Soviet Union; even the United States of America will someday come to an end; but the dominion of the Most High God is an eternal dominion.

Or, again, Because **God is the Most High…people are regarded as nothing**. This is the first part of **verse 35**:

**35**All the peoples of the earth
    are regarded as nothing.

Because God is Who God is, we are utterly dependent on Him. You can be the cleverest person alive at one moment: designing gardens and innovating irrigation pumps; and you can be stark, raving mad the next: crawling on all fours and moo-ing and eating grass. That’s not under our control, that’s under the control of God.

Think of it this way: watch a football game on TV that’s being broadcast from a sold-out stadium. They’ll often show shots of the crowd: close in shots that show two or three people yelling and screaming, or sideline shots that show several hundred people all at once. If it’s a big game, for a conference title or a spot in the playoffs, it can seem like nothing is more important than that moment. Those shots of the crowd give you a sense that there is so much at stake.

But then, think about what it looks like when the camera draws back, to give us a view from a blimp or a helicopter. They do that with just about every big game. From a couple of thousand feet in the sky, the players look like little dots on a field of green and the crowd morphs from a sea of individual faces to a blur of color. Then, imagine what it would look like from a jetliner, 30,000 feet up. The stadium would become just a splash of light. And then, go even further out, to the perspective of an astronaut on the space station. Now the lights of the stadium would be lost in the lights of the surrounding city, and it would all appear as a pinprick of light.

That’s a little reminder of the greatness of God. We can be thrilled with a stadium filled with color and sound. We can be moved to shout and clap at the import of a game. But look again from God's perspective, and compared to his power and splendor, it all becomes a blurry dot on the ground. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing to him.

Or, again, **because God is the Most High…He does as He pleases**. The rest of **verse 35:**

He does as he pleases
    with the powers of heaven
    and the peoples of the earth.
No one can hold back his hand
    or say to him: “What have you done?”

The Most High God cannot be stopped or questioned. The world is His to govern as He desires. He can deploy the forces of heaven where He wants, and He can direct individual lives as He sees fit.

“No one can hold back his hand.” You know how, in movies, there will often be a guy who wants to throw a punch, but some bystanders will grab his arm and hold him back? That cannot be done with God. No one and nothing can stay his hand.

And no one can second guess God either. One of the reasons I like sports so much is because I enjoy debating strategy. After a football game it is fun to talk about whether the team should have gone for it on that 4th down, or if the coach should play a different quarterback, or if the team should pass more. We have 24 hour sports radio and 24 hour sports TV that is pretty much dedicated to second guessing coaching decisions.

But there is no armchair quarterbacking with God. No one can say “What have you done?” The pottery has no right to question the potter (Romans 9:20-21). No one can challenge the decisions of the Most High God.

And then, fourth, **because God is the Most High…everything He does is right**. **Verses 36 and 37:**

**36**At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honor and splendor were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisers and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before. **37**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.

It’s somewhat of a circular argument to say that everything the Most High God does is right; because if you are the Most High then you get to make all the rules. And yet, when the Bible affirms that everything God does is right, it’s not just because He is the rule-setter, but also because his actions adhere to a standard of righteousness and justice and goodness that is objectively right and just and good.

Nebuchadnezzar acknowledges here that God was just in humbling him. Nebuchadnezzar really had let his pride get out of hand, and he deserved the humiliation he received. It shows a certain depth of character that he was willing to admit as much after what he went through.

And we also need to acknowledge that God is the Most High, and that means He never makes a mistake and He never commits a sin and He never does the wrong thing. Even when we do not understand why certain things happen the way they do, or what good can come out of a situation, we believe that God has things under control and is working all things for good.

God’s name is El Elyon. God Most High. That means He sovereign and He has perfect control of all that happens in this world and nothing happens that He does not permit.

There is nothing and No One Higher.
There is nothing and No One Greater.

***Humble Praise***So, now, how shall we respond to this Most High God? What is the application for us this morning? I think the lessons we learn should be the lessons Nebuchadnezzar learned. There are two.

For one thing, God’s name as the Highest should humble us. **We should humbly consider others better than ourselves.**

This was the primary lesson Nebuchadnezzar was meant to learn. He was nearly dislocating his shoulder in his efforts to pat himself on the back and accrue glory and praise for himself. His pride was running amok. So God reminded Him of Who was really in charge. He put Nebuchadnezzar in his place by reminding him of who really belongs at the top of the mountain.

And, by the way, this is where we need to think about Christmas a little bit. Because the remarkable thing about the God Most High is that at Christmas He became the God Most Low. The truly remarkable thing about all of the Old Testament reminders that nothing and no one is higher than God, is that at the beginning of the New Testament this God comes to earth as a helpless baby, wrapped in rags, and laid to bed in a manger full of straw.

And that’s why, as followers of Jesus, one of our calling cards should be self-denying, other-blessing humility. The Apostle Paul puts it like this, in **Philippians 2:**

**3**Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves.

Then Paul goes on to say that our example should be Jesus Christ, who even though He was in very nature God (that is, The God Most High) He made himself nothing so that He could love and save us. That’s the Christmas story. It’s also our challenge. To walk in the steps of this God who laid aside his glory in order to value others ahead of Himself.

And then, second, God’s name as the highest should move us to praise. **We should respond to God with heartfelt worship.**

This is the other thing that Nebuchadnezzar did. He praised God. History doesn’t tell us, and the Bible isn’t really clear, if Nebuchadnezzar became a true Believer in the God of Israel. But he certainly got the idea of praising the God Most High.

That’s the first thing it says Nebuchadnezzar did when his sanity was restored. He raised his eyes toward heaven and praised the Most High. He honored and glorified him who lives forever (34). And then, the last verse, he says that he will praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven (37).

Likewise, our attitude this Christmas should be one of heartfelt worship. Outside of Daniel, the place where the name El Elyon is most often used is in the Psalms. And when the Psalmist uses this name for God, it is usually a call to worship. So, for instance, **Psalm 7:17:**

**17**I will give thanks to the Lord because of his righteousness;
    I will sing the praises of the name of the Lord Most High.

And, again, in **Psalm 9:2:**

**2**I will be glad and rejoice in you;
    I will sing the praises of your name, O Most High.

There can be a lot of music at Christmas time. A lot of extra church going, and caroling, and music playing at the mall. But don’t let it just be tradition, or nostalgia, or words that you mindlessly hum along to. Let your heart be moved to worship this God whose name is high above every other. Let your heart be moved to praise the God Most High, who became the God Most Low.