

Series Daniel

Scripture Daniel 4

Daniel is the most prominent individual in the book which bears his name. However, the central character in the first four chapters is King Nebuchadnezzar. For most of his life, Nebuchadnezzar was unaware that Almighty God had been directing his activities. God had given him and the Babylonian armies victory over both the Assyrian and Egyptian forces. God then used the Babylonians to judge the Israelites for their idolatry and wickedness.

God did not want Nebuchadnezzar to assume that he and his national gods were responsible for the successes of Babylonia, and so, in the first three chapters of the Book of Daniel, the accounts explain how God revealed Himself to King Nebuchadnezzar. In chapter 1, Daniel and his three friends impressed the king with their Godly wisdom and understanding. In chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar learned that Daniel's God could reveal mysteries that none of the pagan gods could make known. In chapter 3, the king learned that the God of Israel was supernaturally powerful, able to override human commands and actions by delivering His faithful servants from a horrible death in the blazing furnace.

Unfortunately, in spite of the unique and significant ways in which God had made Himself known to Nebuchadnezzar, the king did not let go of his cultural and pagan religious background. Even after his gods were discredited and all the wise men associated with the Babylonian religious system were shown to be incompetent, he never completely abandoned them. Even after the incident of the blazing furnace, when God taught him a lesson about humility and the limitations of human authority, he still did not make an unreserved commitment of his life to God.

To his credit, Nebuchadnezzar did not completely close his mind or harden his heart to the God of heaven. He came through each encounter with high praises for the God of Israel. He recognized that the God of Daniel was "the God of gods and the Lord of kings" (*Daniel 2:47*), and "the Most High God" (*Daniel 3:26*). However, for many following years he did not commit himself to Israel's God in a deeply personal way.

That changed in chapter 4. Chapter 4 is the story of how Nebuchadnezzar encountered the relentless mercy of the sovereign God of heaven. Chapter 4 describes the spiritual high point of Nebuchadnezzar's life, but, as we will read, he reached that high point only by being brought to an all-time low. We are now going to read about the radical way in which God dealt with Nebuchadnezzar in order that there might be a radical change in his attitude.

Read Daniel 4:1-19a, 22, 24-27

We have just read the first part of Nebuchadnezzar's personal testimony. This mighty king, who was previously so arrogant that he challenged the God of heaven, who insisted that his subjects worship an image that he had constructed as a memorial to his accomplishments, who was filled with pride over his military exploits and his building programs, here, in the latter stages of his life, publicly praised the Most High God!

Nebuchadnezzar announced the change in his life with a letter sent to "the peoples, nations, and men of every language who live in the world." "It was with pleasure" that he wanted everyone in his empire to know "about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God had performed" for him. His experiences, which he went on to carefully explain, had convinced him that God alone is the source of power and authority, both in the realm of nature and in all human affairs, and that neither he nor any other ruler possessed any authority except by God's permission.

Verses 4 and 5 set the scene for the king's testimony. A dream came to him when he was "at home, ... contented, and prosperous," referring to a time when he was free from worries and fears, and there were no serious disturbances in the empire, no outside forces to challenge his authority.

The wise men of the empire could not, or would not, interpret the dream. The symbolism of the tree was not a mystery. Rulers were frequently compared in ancient writings to stately trees. Several of the Old Testament prophets used the imagery of fallen trees to describe what God would do to rulers and kingdoms which had become proud and worthy of judgment (*see Isaiah 2:12-13; Ezekiel 17:22-24; 31:3-14; Amos 2:9*). The wise men of Babylon understood the implications of the dream, but they did not want to explain it because the dream meant humiliation and tragedy for the king. The king himself admitted his fear and terror about the implications of his dream.

Even Daniel, after he came into the presence of the king and was told the dream, was perplexed and terrified and remained silent for a short time. The best word to describe his reaction is “dumbfounded.” Daniel was not distressed because he was uncertain of the meaning of the dream, but because of what it portended for the king.

Daniel understood that the tree represented Nebuchadnezzar. “You, O king, are that tree!” he declared. “You have become great and strong; your greatness has grown until it reaches the sky, and your dominion extends to distant parts of the earth” (*verse 22*). Daniel was respectful in his dialogue with the king, but he was also honest and direct.

He informed Nebuchadnezzar that he would lose both his authority to rule and his sanity. He would live like a wild animal “until seven times pass by,” an expression assumed to be seven years. The main point of Daniel’s interpretation is in verses 25 and 26. Nebuchadnezzar would remain in these humiliating circumstance “until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes,” and that “Heaven rules.” That statement appears two more times in the chapter (*see verses 17 and 32*), and represented the goal that God had in mind.

Nebuchadnezzar’s opinion of himself was an offense to God. The previous attempts to get Nebuchadnezzar to understand these matters had not been completely successful. Yes, he had acknowledged God as the Revealer of mysteries and the Rescuer of his people, but he had not submitted himself to God, and he needed to learn that he was answerable to the one true God. He needed yet another lesson about the sovereignty of the God of heaven. He needed to acknowledge, conclusively and without reservation, that there was a God who was above all gods and a Lord who was over all kings. He needed to understand that he, like all earthly rulers, held authority only by permission of the Most High in heaven.

Daniel closed the interpretation with the prediction that the stump of the tree would be preserved during the seven years of dementia, after which the kingdom would be restored to Nebuchadnezzar. This would be an incredible miracle among the many other supernatural events that would occur. Typically, any monarch who suffered from insanity would have been quickly deposed and replaced by a successor. The fact that God would preserve the throne for Nebuchadnezzar would be another evidence that God was as sovereign as He said He was.

After the interpretation was completed, Daniel volunteered words of counsel. This was a courageous step for him. Daniel was concerned about the king's welfare. He wanted the king to deal with the causes behind the impending judgment. He wanted the king to take stock of himself and his attitudes and to do so with urgency.

Therefore, in verse 27, Daniel urged the king to change his behavior in three ways: First, the king needed to "renounce his sins." The meaning in the Aramaic language is "break with" or "pull away from." In other words, Nebuchadnezzar needed to cease from committing sin, to cease from doing things which were displeasing to God. According to the context of this chapter, his principle area of sin was pride.

Second, the king needed to start doing "what was right." A different pattern of behavior was required. In other words, the king needed to repent. Repentance represents a reversal of evil ways and the adoption of new ways of righteousness. Nebuchadnezzar needed to break from his past and move in a new God-pleasing direction.

Thirdly, and specifically, Nebuchadnezzar needed to start "being kind to the oppressed" or, more literally, "Show mercy to the afflicted." A powerful king like Nebuchadnezzar was undoubtedly so far removed from the lives of ordinary people in the extended territories of his kingdom that he would be both unaware and unconcerned about their well-being. He was, in fact, notorious for confiscating the wealth of conquered people and using the booty for his own purposes. If the king was to become more righteous in his behavior, he would have to have a new sensitivity to the plight of the poor and disadvantaged people under his authority.

At the end of verse 27, Daniel suggested that the king might avert judgment if his counsel was followed. There might be the "lengthening of the king's prosperity." Now let's read what happened next.

Read Daniel 4:28-37

I'm sure that Nebuchadnezzar was eager to avoid judgment, but he still maintained his pride. An entire year passed in silence. This was the time in which Nebuchadnezzar could have adopted the changes recommended by Daniel. He did not, however, as the story makes clear. His old patterns and attitudes were too engrained for him to change, but the necessary changes in Nebuchadnezzar were not too hard for God to bring about.

What God did for Nebuchadnezzar was a combination of divine sovereignty and mercy. Very early in the history of Israel, God described His character to Moses. He declared, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (*Exodus 33:19*). The sovereign God was determined to break the pride of Nebuchadnezzar, and through the dream He had warned the king about how He was going to do it.

And so, twelve months later, while the king was on the roof of his palace looking about him at the splendor of the city, reveling in the glory of his achievements, congratulating himself on his greatness: 'Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?' (*verse 30*), at that moment God moved into action.

The works of Nebuchadnezzar were indeed very impressive. The city of Babylon was at its height of glory under his rule, being one of the largest and finest cities of the known world. It was surrounded by a system of double walls; the outer one wide enough for a horse-drawn chariot. The city had 8 gates. The most celebrated was the Ishtar Gate which gave access to a beautifully decorated street 1000 meters long which led to the grand temple of Marduk, the top god of Babylon. There were more than 50 temples dedicated to Babylonian gods within the city walls. The "Hanging Gardens" within the city were considered to be one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Nebuchadnezzar lived in an impressive palace.

There was nothing intrinsically evil about his success, his power, or his wealth. But something was drastically wrong with his attitude toward his prosperity and his use of his position and power. According to the dream, the tree did not exist primarily for its own greatness or glory. It was to provide shelter and food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the field. In similar fashion, Nebuchadnezzar had been brought to power to protect and provide for the people of the Ancient Near East, in particular the exiled Jews. Nebuchadnezzar had failed to grasp the purpose for his life and his kingdom. He regarded his kingdom in terms of how well it promoted and displayed his power and glory, not in terms of the purposes for which God had ordained it.

All that happened to the king during his seven years of insanity was not for his ultimate destruction, but for his deliverance and restoration. The basis for his restoration was his acknowledgement of the sovereignty of the Most High God of heaven, the One who both raises up kings and puts them down. The seven years were really years in which God's mercy was hard at work on a very stubborn proud man.

At the end of the appointed time, the king did the only thing that he, in his beastly condition, could do. The word order indicates that he first lifted his eyes toward heaven and then, as a result, experienced the return of his understanding.

From that point on, Nebuchadnezzar was ready to praise, honor, and glorify God as the eternal, omnipotent Sovereign over the whole universe. His words indicated an awe and respect for the "Most High who lives forever."

He acknowledged God's unending existence and everlasting power as Ruler of the universe, whose kingdom, unlike human empires, would never end. He had learned how utterly dependent the creature is on the Creator — that apart from God, humans have no significance and are regarded as nothing. Nebuchadnezzar recognized that God had the ability to control everyone, that He (God) was not accountable to anyone, and that no one was able to overrule His power.

The concluding statement of his testimony was very significant: "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."

The story of Nebuchadnezzar's elevation, humiliation, and restoration was included in the Book of Daniel to give hope to the exiled Jews at that time and to us today. God's severe mercy, which was unleashed on Nebuchadnezzar, and must sometimes be directed to us, was a demonstration that our God is alive and active and that He controls all the circumstances of our lives. Just as Nebuchadnezzar was put down and later restored to great glory, so the Jews could hope to be restored from their exile, and we can have hope for a secure future.

Generally speaking, non-believers don't understand the responsibilities of power and authority. Scripture makes it clear that God places men in authority so that they may serve those under them. Leadership is not characterized by status but by service and self-sacrifice.

On one occasion, Jesus said to His disciples: "You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." (*Mark 10:35-45*).