

The Dream of the Great Tree

Daniel Chapter 4 · March 27, 2013

The Chapter: Nebuchadnezzar's Letter to the Nations

Chapter 4 of the Book of Daniel opens with a remarkable document — a royal decree issued by Nebuchadnezzar himself, addressed to all peoples, nations, and languages dwelling throughout the earth. Uniquely among the chapters of Daniel, it appears to have been written by the king in the first person, after all the events of the chapter had already come to pass.

Nebuchadnezzar the king, unto all the peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth, peace be multiplied unto you. It hath seemed good unto me to declare the signs and wonders that the Most High God hath wrought toward me. How great are his signs, and how mighty are his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion is from generation to generation. — Daniel 4:1–3

The king then recounts a troubling dream: a great tree of immense height, visible to the whole earth, with beautiful leaves and abundant fruit, giving shelter and food to every living creature. But a Watcher and Holy One descended from heaven, commanding that the tree be hewn down, its branches stripped, its fruit scattered — though the stump was to remain bound with iron and brass in the earth, and the one it represented would live as a beast for seven times, until he knew that the Most High rules over the kingdoms of men.

Having gathered his wise men and found them unable to interpret the dream, the king at last turned to Daniel. Daniel was astonished and troubled for a time before answering. The tree, he told the king, was Nebuchadnezzar himself — whose greatness had reached to the heavens and whose dominion covered the earth. But the decree of heaven was that the king would be driven from among

men to dwell with the beasts of the field, eating grass like an ox, until he acknowledged that heaven rules.

Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable before thee, and break off thy sins by righteousness, and thine iniquities by showing mercy to the poor, if it may be a lengthening of thy tranquility. — Daniel 4:27

Twelve months later, as Nebuchadnezzar stood on the roof of his royal palace, boasting of the greatness he had built by his own power and for his own glory, a voice fell from heaven and the sentence was immediately executed. He was driven from men, ate grass as oxen, his body was wet with the dew of heaven, and his hair grew like eagles' feathers and his nails like birds' claws.

At the end of the appointed days, Nebuchadnezzar lifted his eyes to heaven — and his understanding returned. He blessed the Most High and praised the King of the heavens, acknowledging that all whose works are truth, whose paths are judgment, and who is able to abase those who walk in pride.

The Setting: What God Had Already Given Him

To appreciate the full force of this chapter, it helps to recall Daniel chapter 2, where the same king had another dream — the great multi-metallic image. Daniel had given him the interpretation, including these words:

Thou, O King, art a king of kings, unto whom the God of the heavens hath given the kingdom and power and strength and glory. — Daniel 2:37

The very thing in which Nebuchadnezzar took the greatest pride — his kingdom, his Babylon — was the thing God had given him. It was precisely that thing which God would use and then take away to speak effectively to his heart. Not some other affliction, but the very object of his boasting.

There is a parable in Luke of a wealthy man whose land produced abundantly, and who resolved to tear down his barns to build larger ones to hold all his goods

— fully absorbed in what he had accumulated. The Lord said to him, 'Thou fool, tonight thy soul shall be required of thee.' What we hold with pride is often the very thing the Lord uses to bring us low. The question the passage puts to us is simply: what do we have that we have not received?

Three Encounters, One Missing Ingredient

Nebuchadnezzar had now been brought into direct contact with God on three occasions. The first was the interpretation of his own undisclosed dream in chapter 2 — something impossible without supernatural knowledge. The second was the burning fiery furnace so intense that it consumed the soldiers who cast Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into it, where a fourth figure appeared unharmed among them. The third was the present dream and its fulfillment. On each of the first two occasions, the king's response was an acknowledgment that God existed and was powerful — but nothing more. There was no submission of heart.

There is a text in Job that precisely mirrors this pattern:

*For God speaketh once and twice, and man perceiveth it not. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falleth upon men in slumbering upon the bed, then he openeth men's ears and sealeth their instruction, that he may withdraw man from his work and hide pride from man. —
Job 33:14–17*

These words, spoken by Elihu to Job, describe exactly what had happened with Nebuchadnezzar. He had received the word of God through dreams and through remarkable providences — and had perceived nothing. The experience had passed over him like water over stone. In the words of a common expression, it had gone in one ear and out the other.

The apostle Paul makes it clear in Romans 1 that man is without excuse before God because the things that are made bear unmistakable witness to His eternal

power and divinity — yet man, knowing God, glorifies Him not as God, neither is thankful. The natural man looks at creation and sees remarkable things, but does not perceive that God is speaking to him in those things. How much greater, then, was Nebuchadnezzar's responsibility — to whom God had spoken so directly?

Because what is known of God is manifest among them, for God has manifested it to them. For from the world's creation the invisible things of him are perceived, being apprehended by the mind through the things that are made, both his eternal power and divinity, so as to render them inexcusable. — Romans 1:19–20

There is something telling in how Nebuchadnezzar dealt with the dream of chapter 4. After the remarkable events of chapters 2 and 3, his first instinct was still to call in the same court-wise men who had repeatedly failed him. It was not until they failed again that he summoned Daniel. The natural man has no instinctive affinity for the spiritual man. Daniel was not Nebuchadnezzar's first choice — he was the last resort.

One commentator has remarked that the natural man has no natural affinity for the man of God. The king could appreciate what Daniel could do for him, but he did not appreciate Daniel himself. This has its application today: a faithful testimony for the Lord may not attract — and may even repel — those who are of the flesh. But when every other resource has failed, the truth of God is what remains.

'God of the Heavens' — A Title Full of Meaning

There is a subtle but significant distinction in the titles used for God in this chapter and in the book of Daniel more broadly. In Psalm 47, David speaks of the Lord as 'a great king over all the earth' and 'king of all the earth.' But in Daniel 2:37, and again in Daniel 4:37, the expressions used are 'God of the heavens' and 'King of the heavens.'

This is not accidental. At the time of Daniel, the government of the earth had been committed into the hands of the Gentiles. God was no longer reigning in Jerusalem through His people Israel. The Shekinah glory had already departed from the temple — described in vivid stages through Ezekiel chapters 8 through 11 — and the word 'Ichabod,' the glory has departed, hung over what had once been the dwelling place of the living God. Nebuchadnezzar himself, as we read in Daniel 2:37, was the one to whom God had given that kingdom.

And the glory of Jehovah went up from the midst of the city and stood upon the mountain which is on the east side of the city. — Ezekiel 11:23

The title 'King of the heavens' was therefore the right and fitting one. It was not that God had ceased to be sovereign over the earth — of course He had not. But He had stepped back, in a manner of speaking, from His visible administration of earthly affairs through Israel, and the nations were now the instrument of His providential government. This is one of those places in Scripture where the most precise language carries the heaviest freight.

Daniel's Counsel and the Warning Unheeded

After Daniel had interpreted the dream, he did not simply hand the king a prophecy and step aside. He implored him — showing a measure of care for the king that the king had never shown for him. 'Let my counsel be acceptable before thee, and break off thy sins by righteousness, and thine iniquities by showing mercy to the poor, if it may be a lengthening of thy tranquility.'

There is a New Testament echo in Paul's words, 'Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men.' Daniel, knowing what was to come, persuaded the king. And yet there is no record that Nebuchadnezzar was particularly troubled by the warning. The interpretation had come, and twelve months passed — twelve months in which there is no evidence of repentance, no softening of the heart. And then, standing on the roof of his palace, absorbed in

self-congratulation, the sentence fell.

The natural man does not naturally move from one line of truth to another concerning God. He has no sustained interest in such things. Each of Nebuchadnezzar's experiences had taught him something which he ultimately confessed — but unless forced, he sought nothing more. He was responsible before God nonetheless — as every man is responsible to his Maker, whom he will face at the great white throne.

Restoration and a New Heart

What happened at the end of the seven times was more than the restoration of a king's sanity. Something took place in Nebuchadnezzar that those two prior miracles had not accomplished. He lifted his eyes to heaven — a gesture full of meaning. He was not merely orienting his gaze; he was acknowledging the One above. And in that moment, his understanding returned.

Psalm 49 speaks of 'man being in honour and abiding not, as the beast that perisheth.' The mark that distinguishes man from the beast is the capacity to acknowledge God. The beast looks down at the earth — and Nebuchadnezzar, in his humbled state, had done exactly that, grazing on grass. But when he lifted his eyes to heaven, he did what no beast can do. And the Lord who had sovereignly brought him to that point gave him the heart to do it.

The parallel is plain to us who live in the light of the New Testament. Unless the Lord implants new life in a person, there is no capacity to repent, no ability to look up to heaven and acknowledge God in a true and personal way — not merely as the witness of remarkable things, but as the one to whom the heart submits.

Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honour the King of the heavens, all whose works are truth, and his paths judgment, and those that walk in pride he is able to abase. — Daniel 4:37

For everyone that exalts himself shall be abased — and he that abases himself shall be exalted. The only One who ever truly did the latter was the Lord Himself. And it is to Him, as King of the heavens, that the greatest of earthly kings was finally, wholly brought.

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