

SESSION SIX

DANIEL 4:1-37

The Humbling of Nebuchadnezzar

INTRODUCTION

1. Daniel 4 is a great lesson on PRIDE, particularly those who look at their own accomplishments and give themselves all the credit.

2. The Historicity of This Account

There are no historical records which indicate that Nebuchadnezzar ever had such a lengthy mental illness as described in Dan 4, nor do we have any records indicating that he personally came to praise the God of Daniel.

But observe: The Babylonian Chronicles (from which we get much of our historical information) cover the period 605-594 BC, and this is followed by a large gap in the records such that much of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar is missing.

3. Tracing the Spiritual Journey of Nebuchadnezzar in Chapters 2-4

- a. Ch 2 - *Daniel's interpretation of the dream about the great image:*

He learned that the God of the Hebrews was all powerful and all wise and could reveal mysteries no other god could make known.

- b. Ch 3 - *The deliverance of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego:*

He learned that Yahweh was Lord of nature and history and could by his miracle-working power override the will of the mightiest earthly potentates and deliver his servants from death.

- c. Ch 4 - *His humiliation to the state of a beast of the field:*

Finally, Nebuchadnezzar really began to understand his weakness and folly before the almighty Lord of the Hebrews. At last he realized his utter dependence on Yahweh for his reason, his power, and his very life. He saw that he was but an instrument in the hands of the omnipotent God, the true Sovereign of the universe who ordered all history by His own decree. Hence, he came to terms with the primary lesson of the book -- the absolute sovereignty of God and his faithfulness to His covenant people.¹

¹Credit goes to Gleason Archer ("Daniel," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 59) for these observations.

A. INTRODUCTION TO NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S DECREE (4:1-3)

In 4:3b, attention is called to God's kingdom. In Dan 2:44, the revelation was made that history would culminate in a special kingdom established by God rather than man. Now Nebuchadnezzar sees that history centers around the development of God's kingdom, not Nebuchadnezzar's.

Elaboration of the Kingdom theme in Scripture:

1. The Eternal Kingdom

God is always ruling over His creation, so in one sense we can speak of the eternal kingdom of God.

2. The Earthly Manifestation

At a given point in time, the kingdom will be manifested on earth following the return of Jesus Christ. This is when He will reign upon the earth for 1000 years, which is referred to as the Millennial Kingdom (cf. Mt 25:31-34,41).

3. The Kingdom of the New Creation

At the end of this 1000 year reign, the present earth and heavens shall be destroyed, but the kingdom shall continue on eternally in the new creation (Rev 21--22).

B. NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S SEARCH FOR AN INTERPRETER OF HIS DREAM (4:4-9)

1. Verses 1-3 are the introductory words to a decree that apparently is made after the experience recorded in ch 4. In verses 4ff., however, he is backing up to show how the whole thing developed.
2. Verse 4 depicts the king having a false sense of security. The words translated "at ease" in the *NASB* is the Aramaic word *šēlēh* (שְׁלֵחַ) which means to be "happy, carefree." This was probably a time of prosperity for Nebuchadnezzar, when his enemies had been subdued and he could concentrate on the building of Babylon--things seemed to be going well for him.
3. Daniel is characterized as having "a spirit of the holy gods"
 - a. The word "gods" (Aramaic אֱלֹהִים) is best translated in the plural (not Holy God).
 - 1) The adjective which follows ("holy" - קְדֻשָׁתָא) is in the plural. When the Hebrew *Elohim* (pl.) is meant to be understood as the true God, a singular adjective is normally used (cf. Neh 8:6; Ps 7:10 [Heb 9]).²
 - 2) The singular word for god (אֱלֹהִים) is used in the same sentence to refer to Nebuchadnezzar's own patron god.

²A possible exception is Joshua 24:19.

- 3) The queen (5:11) and Belshazzar (5:14) use the same expression (who did not recognize the Holy God).
- b. The expression may be an idiom to mean that he was "very spiritual" (so Baldwin, 111).

C. THE DISCLOSURE OF THE DREAM (4:10-18)

1. The Bountiful Tree (vv 10-12)
 - a. The metaphor of a tree as representing a kingdom is rooted in Hebrew tradition (Ezek 31:3; cf. Isa 2:12-13).
 - b. Christ's parable of the mustard seed (Matt 13:31-32)

The point of the parable can be deduced from the intended contrast between the starting size and the final product. Messiah's kingdom, though its beginning was small and obscure, would become large and significant in due time. It began with a handful of common fishermen, but spread through all the earth to include men & women from every tribe and people and tongue.
2. The Removal of Blessing (vv 13-18)
 - a. Identity of the "watcher" (v 13) *NIV* = "messenger"

Note: the word "angelic" is not in the Aramaic text, but we should probably understand that an angel is in view. The word occurs only here in the Bible, but it appears later in the Genesis Apocryphon from Qumran cave 1, where it is used as a term for an angel.
 - b. "*Let his mind be changed from that of a man*"

The word translated "mind" is the Aramaic word *l^ebab* (לבב) meaning "heart." Archer summarizes the meaning of the term:

"the word for 'mind' is *l^ebab* (lit., 'heart,' a term that in Scripture refers to the inner self as the seat of moral reflection, choice of the will, and pattern of behavior). It includes not only the mental processes but also the feelings, affections, and emotions, along with all the motivational factors leading to decisions and responses to life situations."³

His heart (including his mental reasoning) was the very source of his pride, and it is there that God touches him.
 - c. Length of punishment: "*seven periods of time*" (vs 16)

This is expressed in Aramaic by two words, *šib'āh 'iddānîn* (שִׁבְעָה עֲדָנִין). This is probably meant to signify a period of seven years.

³Archer, "Daniel," Expositor's Bible Commentary, 61.

- 1) The word translated "period of time" is the plural of *'iddān* ("time"). Although this word can be used in a general sense for *time* (2:8; 3:5), it can also mean a specific period of time such as a year.
 - 2) The context (in which the interpretation is given in v 32) argues for an understanding as "years." Hartman points out that in giving the explanation of the dream in verse 32, Daniel would have used the unambiguous word for "years" if *'iddānîn* did not also have this meaning.⁴
 - 3) The Greek translation of the OT (LXX) translated this as seven years.
- d. The Main Lesson (v 17b)
- 1) "*the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whom He wishes*"
Point: Nebuchadnezzar needs to humble himself before the One who granted him the authority to be king.
 - 2) "*And sets over it the lowliest of men*"
 - a) "*lowliest*" - this word does not mean the most unworthy but the most humble. Truly God has a special regard for humility (Ps 138:6). God is never impressed by those who deceive themselves into thinking they are something (cf. Isa 57:15).
 - b) Future tense?
This can be translated "*And shall set over it the lowliest of men.*" This seems better, because the translation in the text makes it sound like a general principle (which is not really true). In the future, however, God will establish a ruler over the realm of mankind who is indeed the lowliest of men, i.e., the Lord Jesus Christ (Zech 9:9-10; Mt 11:29; Phil 2:8).

D. DANIEL'S INTERPRETATION (4:19-27)

1. The Interpretation of the Bountiful Tree (vv 19-22)
"reached to the sky" - pictures Nebuchadnezzar at the peak of his political power, dominating the world scene.
2. The Interpretation of the Tree Chopped Down (vv 23-26)
An appropriate punishment: he lost control of his kingdom because he lost control of himself (he became like a beast).
"This prolonged humiliation would teach him to respect God's sovereignty over the affairs of men and to realize that he, like all earthly rulers, held authority only by permission of the Almighty in heaven above." [Gleason Archer, "Daniel," 63]

⁴Louis F. Hartman, *Daniel*, Anchor Bible Commentaries, 172.

The "stump" - The tree is not completely removed. This is an assurance to Nebuchadnezzar that his authority will be restored once he has learned his lesson.

3. Advice for Nebuchadnezzar (v 27)
 - a. God is quite willing to lift judgment in the presence of repentance (cf. Jonah 3). God is not so *puny* as to stoop to a game of "getting even"; He simply wants to foster a change of heart.
 - b. In his efforts to build Babylon into the world's premier city (a monument to himself), he no doubt had inflicted great pain and suffering on other people in the process, either through forced labor, heavy taxation, etc. Rather than abusing people to build his own monuments, God called upon him to have compassion on the needs of individuals under his authority.

A Lesson for our Life

There are some people who use positions of authority to serve their own interests, but a true leader is concerned for the needs and interests of those whom he/she represents.

E. NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S PRIDE AND THE DREAM'S FULFILMENT (4:28-33)

1. "12 months later" (v 29) - there had been time to repent and to act on Daniel's advice.
2. The King's Reflection (v 30)
 - a. Man in his pride thinks he builds something of eternal value, that he has some might and that he is deserving of glory.
Where is the beautiful city of Babylon today? In ruins! Only what is done for Christ can last and have eternal value!!
 - b. Psalm 49:10-12 - Man in his pomp!

3. The illness: zoanthropy

This is a mental disorder in which a patient imagines himself to be a beast and acts like one.

Illustration:

R. K. Harrison reports that he observed a young man with this affliction in a British mental institution in 1946. His behavior is described as follows: "His daily routine

consisted of wandering around the magnificent lawns with which the otherwise dingy hospital situation was graced, and it was his custom to pluck up and eat handfuls of the grass as he went along. . . . He never ate institutional food with the other inmates, and his only drink was water. . . . The writer was able to examine him cursorily, and the only physical abnormality noted consisted of a lengthening of the hair and a coarse, thickening condition of the fingernails. Without institutional care, the patient would have manifested precisely the same physical conditions as those mentioned in Daniel 4:33."⁵

F. NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S RESTORATION (4:34-37)

1. One of man's greatest failure is the failure to comprehend the magnitude and greatness of God (v 35).
see Isaiah 40:15,17
2. "*surpassing greatness was added to me*" (v 36)
This is God's abounding grace. He takes no delight in punishment, but He is incredibly enthusiastic about bestowing grace. Nebuchadnezzar reigned for 43 years from 605-562 BC. Cf. Job 42:10ff.
3. Grasp the Full Lesson (v 37)
This chapter does not simply teach that pride is wrong, but that God humbles the proud.
4. The Question of Nebuchadnezzar's "salvation"???
Scholars are divided on this issue, and although we cannot be absolutely certain, it is quite possible he came to true saving faith in the God of Heaven.

Lessons for our Life

1. The problem with Nebuchadnezzar was that he tended to measure himself by himself (rather than by God's standards). He added up his monumental architectural accomplishments and the extensiveness of his empire and concluded he was really great and worthy of glory. What folly!
2. Pride is basically a failure to see ourselves in proper perspective before God. Pride is self-applause . . . attributing one's success to his own efforts, and leaving God out of the picture (thereby robbing Him of His glory).
3. Suggestion

⁵R. K. Harrison, Introduction to the Old Testament, 1116-17.

Take some time this next week to sit down with a piece of paper and write down several areas in your life where pride is either manifesting itself or where you are being tempted to have pride. In large letters, write across the page "GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD." Pray for humility in each of those areas, and then destroy the paper.

4. A Lesson from 1 Peter 5:5-6

We can make a choice between grace and God's opposition. Humility keeps *grace* coming down the pipeline. Pride not only cuts off the flow of grace, but causes God to stand opposed to us.

FINAL THOUGHT:

Are you wrapped up in building your own kingdom, or do you see the true goal for your life as the furthering of God's Kingdom?