

Reformation Fellowship Notes • May 24, 2020
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Handout #6
Daniel 4

I. Introduction

- A. This chapter is the third of three in a row about Nebuchadnezzar.
 - 1. Nebuchadnezzar has already had two encounters with the God of Israel.
 - a) First was his vision of the statue.
 - b) Second was when the three were kept unharmed in the furnace.
 - 2. After both incidents, Nebuchadnezzar recognized the God of Israel.
 - a) After the vision, he bowed down to Daniel.
 - b) After he saw the salvation of the three, he blessed the God of Israel.
 - c) But they both appear to have been very temporary changes.
 - 3. In chapter 4, Nebuchadnezzar will have his third encounter with the God of Israel.
 - 4. It is an extraordinary chapter.
 - a) Written from the perspective of Nebuchadnezzar.
- B. Is there extrabiblical confirmation of the events described in this chapter?
 - 1. There is nothing in the Babylonian Chronicle.
 - a) Chronicles break off during the latter part of his reign and don't restart until the reign of Nabonidus (594-556 BC there are no known entries in the Chronicle; 11th-43rd year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign are missing.)
 - 2. There are no contemporary documents that deal with this.
 - 3. Prayer of Nabonidus
 - 4. Berossus, Josephus
- C. Expositor's Bible Commentary says his dream occurred in 583 BC (according to Earle Craig's notes).
 - 1. His illness was 582-575 BC.
 - 2. This was before the end of the siege of Tyre.
- D. What do we know about the life of Nebuchadnezzar after he became emperor?
 - 1. For the first dozen years, there was considerable instability.
 - 2. Babylonians assaulted Jerusalem in 597 BC and took king (Jehoiachin) to Babylon.
 - 3. In 587 BC, Babylonians besieged and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple.
 - 4. Nebuchadnezzar was famous for his building activities.

Nebuchadnezzar's reign was also marked by significant building activity in Babylon and elsewhere. Temple restoration projects were organized throughout southern Mesopotamia. No

fewer than five walls were built to enclose Babylon. The so-called “Summer Palace” was constructed in the part of the city still carrying the name “Babil.” But the S Palace was the most important, not only because of its size, but because it was located near the Ishtar Gate and the Processional Way, one of the many streets that were a feature of the “inner city.” Extensive work was done on the Etemenanki, the ziggurat of Babylon that found its way into the OT as the infamous Tower of Babel. According to the classical sources, Nebuchadnezzar married Amytis, daughter of the Median king Astyages, and constructed the royal gardens near the N palace. These Hanging Gardens were created to remind his wife of her mountainous homeland, and were remembered by later writers as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. (*Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*)

- a) There are numerous mentions of Nebuchadnezzar in ancient documents.

The question, then, that must be addressed concerns the reason for his prominence in these sources. Certainly, one explanation lies in the fact that the Greek mind idolized the monumental. Any famous metropolis that could not easily be visited by anyone was a topic of great interest, and it was incorporated as a noteworthy feature into the historian’s work. Thus it is not surprising to find that Babylon fascinated nearly everyone. Its imposing walls and ziggurat were, literally, unreal. Since the creation itself was extraordinary, the creator of such a marvel had to be extraordinary also. Thus the classical writers characterized Nebuchadnezzar’s building activities in a variety of ways. On the one hand, he emerged (in the writings of Berossus and Megasthenes) as the creator of a monument of imposing size and enduring quality who was given ability by Marduk to restore Babylon and build its walls. On the other hand, writers of the so-called “universal histories” (such as Strabo and Diodorus Siculus) lost Nebuchadnezzar’s achievements among those of several other kings who together constituted an image of a “superfigure” who was either a god or godlike. Actual human achievements were cast in the guise of a superhuman with actual historical names being (if at all) of only secondary concern or consideration. (*Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*)

II. Daniel 4:1-3

¹ *King Nebuchadnezzar,*

To the peoples, nations and men of every language, who live in all the world:

May you prosper greatly!

² *It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me.*

³ *How great are his signs,*

how mighty his wonders!

His kingdom is an eternal kingdom;

his dominion endures from generation to generation.

A. Introduction to the chapter

1. It is in the form of a decree to the people of Babylon.
2. It is the testimony of the ruler of the world.
 - a) To all the peoples, nations, and languages
 - (1) May you prosper greatly!

3. Nebuchadnezzar wants to announce to his people what happened to him.
 - a) Signs and wonders God did for Nebuchadnezzar
4. Nebuchadnezzar sings the praises of YHWH.
 - a) YHWH is the producer of marvelous signs and wonders.
 - b) YHWH's kingdom is eternal—
 - (1) By contrast with Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom.

III. Daniel 4:4-7

I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at home in my palace, contented and prosperous. ⁵ I had a dream that made me afraid. As I was lying in my bed, the images and visions that passed through my mind terrified me. ⁶ So I commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be brought before me to interpret the dream for me. ⁷ When the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners came, I told them the dream, but they could not interpret it for me.

- A. Nebuchadnezzar was comfortably, self-satisfiedly, resting in his palace.

In one of the inscriptions in which Nebuchadnezzar praises himself for rebuilding and refurbishing twenty temples, a vast system of fortifications and large shipping docks, he says, "The fortification of Esagila [the temple of Marduk] and Babylon I strengthened, and established the name of my reign forever." There is also a prayer to Marduk, "O Marduk, lord of the gods, my divine creator, may my deeds find favor before thee . . . Thou art indeed my deliverer and my help, O Marduk; by thy faithful word which does not change, may my weapons advance, be sharp and be stronger than the weapons of the foe!" In addition, at the time of Nebuchadnezzar's becoming king, he wrote a hymn to Marduk "I am the prince who obeys you, the creation of your hand. You are my creator, and the sovereignty over the hosts of men you have entrusted to me. According to your mercy, O Lord, which you have extended over all of them, incline unto compassion your exalted power, and set the fear of your godhead in my heart. Grant that which may seem good to you." (EBC)

- B. He had a dream.
1. It made him fearful.
 2. He kept being alarmed.
- C. He called the wise men to interpret the dream.
1. They could not interpret it.
- D. This starts out a lot like chapter 2.
1. But this is late in his reign.
 - a) He is secure in his position.

IV. Daniel 4:8-12

⁸ *Finally, Daniel came into my presence and I told him the dream. (He is called Belteshazzar, after the name of my god, and the spirit of the holy gods is in him.)*

⁹ *I said, "Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you, and no mystery is too difficult for you. Here is my dream; interpret it for me. ¹⁰ These are the*

visions I saw while lying in my bed: I looked, and there before me stood a tree in the middle of the land. Its height was enormous. ¹¹ The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky; it was visible to the ends of the earth. ¹² Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it the beasts of the field found shelter, and the birds of the air lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed.

- A. Eventually Daniel came to see the king.
 - 1. His Babylonian name is Belteshazzar.
 - a) Named after the god of Nebuchadnezzar
 - 2. The spirit of the holy gods is in him.
- B. The king told him about his dream.
 - 1. No mystery stumps him.
 - 2. Nebuchadnezzar asks Daniel to interpret it.
- C. In the dream, Nebuchadnezzar saw a great tree in the middle of the earth.
 - 1. The tree was high and large.
 - a) Reached to the sky
 - b) Was seen throughout the earth
 - 2. The tree was beautiful and fruitful.
 - a) Plenty of food for all flesh
 - b) Birds and animals made their homes there.

V. Daniel 4:13-18

“In the visions I saw while lying in my bed, I looked, and there before me was a messenger, a holy one, coming down from heaven. ¹⁴ He called in a loud voice: ‘Cut down the tree and trim off its branches; strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the animals flee from under it and the birds from its branches. ¹⁵ But let the stump and its roots, bound with iron and bronze, remain in the ground, in the grass of the field.

“ ‘Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, and let him live with the animals among the plants of the earth.

¹⁶ Let his mind be changed from that of a man and let him be given the mind of an animal, till seven times pass by for him.

¹⁷ “ ‘The decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men.’

¹⁸ “This is the dream that I, King Nebuchadnezzar, had. Now, Belteshazzar, tell me what it means, for none of the wise men in my kingdom can interpret it for me. But you can, because the spirit of the holy gods is in you.”

- A. This idyllic scene was interrupted when a holy watcher descended to earth and made an announcement.
 - 1. Chop down the tree and limb it.
 - 2. Let everything flee.
 - 3. But leave the stump in place.

- a) Put a band of iron and bronze on it.
 - (1) Not a known horticultural practice
- B. There is a shift in the vision here.
 - 1. It was talking about the tree and the stump.
 - 2. Now it switches and talks about an animal among other animals.
 - a) This animal will experience life like a beast.
 - (1) He will be completely at the mercy of the elements.
 - (2) He will be given the mind of a beast.
 - (3) This will be true for 7 periods of time.
 - (a) It is not clear whether this is symbolic or literally 7 periods.
 - (i) If it is literal, it is not clear what those periods are.
 - 3. This decision has been sent down by the holy watchers.
 - a) The purpose for this punishment is so that mankind will know that God is the ruler over mankind.
 - b) God bestows power on whomever he chooses.
 - (1) He places even the lowliest of men over the realm of mankind.
- C. Nebuchadnezzar related this dream to Daniel and had him interpret it.

VI. Daniel 4:19-27

Then Daniel (also called Belteshazzar) was greatly perplexed for a time, and his thoughts terrified him. So the king said, "Belteshazzar, do not let the dream or its meaning alarm you."

Belteshazzar answered, "My lord, if only the dream applied to your enemies and its meaning to your adversaries!"

²⁰ *The tree you saw, which grew large and strong, with its top touching the sky, visible to the whole earth, ²¹ with beautiful leaves and abundant fruit, providing food for all, giving shelter to the beasts of the field, and having nesting places in its branches for the birds of the air—²² you, O king, are that tree! 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.*

²³ *"You, O king, saw a messenger, a holy one, coming down from heaven and saying, 'Cut down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump, bound with iron and bronze, in the grass of the field, while its roots remain in the ground. Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven; let him live like the wild animals, until seven times pass by for him.'*

²⁴ *"This is the interpretation, O king, and this is the decree the Most High has issued against my lord the king: ²⁵ You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes. ²⁶ The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules. ²⁷ Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue."*

- A. Daniel was alarmed.
 - 1. Prophets appear to have fully experienced their visions.

- a) They are much more affected than those around them. They experience it a long time, and they feel the import more fully than anyone else.
 - b) The king encourages Daniel to not be alarmed.
 - (1) He is clueless about what had been revealed.
2. Daniel expresses his wish that this vision had been given to Nebuchadnezzar's enemy rather than to him.
- a) I think Daniel has genuine affection for Nebuchadnezzar.
 - (1) Nebuchadnezzar is not depicted as a Stalin-type.
 - (a) He is just an empire builder.
 - (b) That is ultimately a foolish, dangerous and counterproductive undertaking.
- B. Interpretation of the vision
1. The tree represents Nebuchadnezzar.
- a) It is a depiction of the kingdom that Nebuchadnezzar has established.
 - (1) It is huge.
 - (a) Reaches the sky
 - (2) It is world famous.
 - (3) Its economy is extremely productive.
 - (a) Plenty for all
2. A decree was issued with respect to him.
- a) A holy watcher came down.
 - b) He commanded that the tree be chopped down.
 - (1) And it be destroyed.
 - (2) And let the stump be banded and left in the elements for seven periods of time.
3. Nebuchadnezzar will be driven away from people and join the beasts—
- a) Until he recognizes that God rules over mankind.
 - (1) God gives power as he chooses.
 - (2) Nebuchadnezzar will live among the animals for seven periods.
 - b) But his kingship will await his return.
 - (1) That will not be taken away.
 - (2) He will get his kingship back when he recognizes that God rules mankind.
4. Daniel offers advice in light of this vision.
- a) Break away from your sins.
 - (1) Do righteousness.
 - (2) Show mercy to the poor.
 - b) Maybe God will have mercy on your soul.
 - (1) Maybe he will not carry out this punishment.

VII. Daniel 4:28-33

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?"

³¹ *The words were still on his lips when 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 cattle. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes.”*

³³ *Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle. 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.*

- A. The action that follows came after a delay of one year.
 - 1. Nebuchadnezzar apparently did not break away from his sins.
- B. This section is in third person.
- C. Nebuchadnezzar was admiring all that he had accomplished.
 - 1. There was an extensive building project under his rule.
 - a) Babylon was a monument to his greatness.
 - 2. At the very instant he was basking in his glory, God spoke to him.
 - a) God repeated what Daniel had said one year earlier.
 - (1) Nebuchadnezzar’s power was removed.
 - (a) He had been told earlier that his power would be restored.
 - (2) He will be removed from mankind and live like a beast for 7 years.
 - 3. This was fulfilled.
 - a) He lived like a beast for 7 years.
 - (1) Like those oppressed by his rule

VIII. Daniel 4:34-37

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

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

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.*

- A. After seven years, Nebuchadnezzar raised his head and looked upward.
 - 1. The narrative switches back to first person.

2. His reason returned; he snapped out of it.
 - a) He blessed God and praised him.
 - (1) He could have been bitter.
 - (a) But something great had been accomplished!
- B. Nebuchadnezzar voices a song of praise.
1. God is the king of an eternal kingdom.
 2. By comparison, human beings are completely insignificant.
 - a) We are significant only in so far as he loves us and gives us value.
 3. God does what he wants in heaven and on earth.
 - a) No one can resist his will.
 - b) No one can second guess his decisions.
- C. Nebuchadnezzar's power was fully restored.
1. He became king and ruled just as he had before.
 2. Surpassing greatness was added to him.
 - a) His glory was increased.
- D. But now Nebuchadnezzar gave glory and honor to God.
1. All that God does is true and just.
 2. God is able to humble the proud.

IX. Conclusion

- A. Did this really happen?
1. I assume it did.
 - a) This story comes from the Bible.
 - (1) My confidence in the Bible has only been strengthened over time.
 2. It is an overt act of God.
 - a) There are several in Daniel—
 - (1) An important time in the history of God's people;
 - (2) A time when God acted overtly to reassure them that he was still there and in control of history.
 3. What was his illness?
 - a) A mental disorder called lycanthropy or boanthropy.
 - (1) A known malady
- B. Are we to understand that Nebuchadnezzar was actually fully converted?
1. Most commentators either avoid this question or conclude that we cannot know.
 - a) Calvin tends to think that he was not converted because it is not explicit that he "put off his errors."
 2. It is difficult to know.

- a) This is made all the more difficult by the fact that he has twice made remarkable statements that turned out to be less than lasting realizations.
 - (1) Is this just another fleeting, superficial acknowledgement?
 - (2) Or, did the first two incidents just prepare him for this final, real conversion?
- 3. There are three things that incline me to view this as a real conversion.
 - a) A subtle hint of a shift in thinking

The transformation in Nebuchadnezzar's thinking that takes place in the course of the chapter is underlined by the names that Nebuchadnezzar uses for Daniel. In the narrative frame, written after his experience of humbling, Nebuchadnezzar calls Daniel by his Judean name (meaning, "god is my judge"), whereas in the reported conversations that took place earlier, he called him "Belteshazzar (meaning "Bel, guard his life"). In the same way, prior to his humbling, Nebuchadnezzar describes Daniel in pagan terms as one "in whom is the spirit of the holy gods" (Dan. 4:8). See Tremper Longman III, Daniel, New International Version Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 118. (Duguid, p. 65)

- (1) It is as if Nebuchadnezzar gives Daniel his name back.
- b) This is a public decree to the people of his Empire.
 - (1) It would have taken great humility to publish it.
- c) There is no indication that this last event was less than transformative.
- 4. Think about the evolution of his thinking.
 - a) His first contact with YHWH was when he took tribute from Jerusalem.
 - (1) Judah was just another second-rate kingdom.
 - (2) YHWH was just another second-rate god.
 - b) In chapter 2, he received the vision of the statue.
 - (1) This is a god who can make himself known to man.
 - (2) He can empower people to interpret his communications.
 - (3) He learned two things.
 - (a) He was the beginning (and best part) of this process toward Empire.
 - (b) Empire is ephemeral.
 - c) In chapter 3, he tried but failed to execute Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.
 - (1) The three undermined his efforts to bring into being a unified, eternal Empire.
 - (a) So he sentenced them to death.
 - (b) But they were miraculously saved.
 - (c) Nebuchadnezzar was amazed.
 - (i) He blessed YHWH.
 - (ii) He commanded that no one bad-mouth YHWH.
 - d) In 587 BC, he besieged Jerusalem and then tore it down.
 - (1) He even destroyed the temple.
 - (a) YHWH can't be anything special.
 - e) He solidified his control over his empire.
 - (1) He built a very impressive capital.
 - (a) Three walls of defense

- f) The events of chapter 4:
 - (1) He was reduced to the life of an animal until he recognizes that YHWH is the God Most High—
 - (a) The one who grants power to earthly rulers.
 - (2) He eventually prayed to God and was fully restored.
- g) A positive response was not automatic.
 - (1) He could have emerged defiant.
 - (2) There was a responsiveness in Nebuchadnezzar that could be seen all along.

C. So what?

1. One of God's most important virtues is patience.
 - a) Often noted in OT
 - b) He wants to bring people along.
 - (1) Anyone who has even the potential of a tender heart
 - c) He is constantly looking for (creating) the opportunity to *persuade* us to bend our knee to him.
 - d) But he wants to persuade us.
2. Empire is not all bad.
 - a) Gives shelter to many
 - b) Food for many
 - c) But at its core is a wicked desire for God-likeness.
 - (1) In its ideal form, it is the sinfulness of man writ large.
3. Even the most arrogant, powerful, cruel emperor is just a son of Adam.
 - a) God is at work in his life like he is in everyone's life.
 - b) Even he can be humbled by God.
4. We can count on God to work to bring us along, also.

It is worth noticing where Nebuchadnezzar's eyes are directed at the beginning and end of his time of judgment. At the beginning of the episode he is on a lofty perch, the rooftop of his house, from where his eyes roam sideways and downwards, comparing his glory to that of other men and glorifying himself. He thought of himself as the center of the universe, the tree from which everything else receives its sustenance. This is exactly what pride does: it locates the self at the center of the universe, glorying in its own achievements, and putting everyone else in second place. Its eyes are always directed sideways and downwards, comparing ourselves with others, and endlessly trying to outdo them. In its very nature, pride has to be cleverer than someone else, or more attractive than other people or a better cook, or a faster runner, or a more skillful gardener, or whatever. Pride is never satisfied in what has been accomplished because its essence always lies in defeating others, not in achieving the thing itself. The eyes of pride are thus always fixed on myself and my performance, in a way that leaves no room for looking upwards to God. (Duguid, p. 70)

This is an important point for us to recognize in our own experience. Discontent and disaster, or at the least profound personal discomfort, are very often the necessary precursors of spiritual growth and change. As long as we are comfortable and at ease in the world, we are not normally ready to examine our hearts and institute deep changes. On the other hand, when God disturbs the calm waters of our lives, we begin to be ready to seek different paths to pursue. (Duguid, p. 64)