



Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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Chapter 4: Nebuchadnezzar's Dream of the Tree

4:1-3, Nebuchadnezzar's Decree

Nebuchadnezzar the king: This chapter is unique in that it recounts the testimony of a Gentile king, and how the God of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah has affected him.

His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom: Nebuchadnezzar – not just in his own estimation, but also according to the dream revealed in Chapter 2 – is a great king, but in this testimony he recognizes that God's and His kingdom is far greater, both in its world-wide reach, and in that it "is an everlasting kingdom".

4:4-9, Nebuchadnezzar Testifies to Daniel's Gift from God

I told them the dream; but they did not make known to me its interpretation: This is not the same dream we learned of in Chapter 2. Notice how in this case Daniel is recognized as "Chief of the Magicians", the promotion he received after revealing and interpreting the dream of chapter 2. This time Nebuchadnezzar told his counselors the content of the dream, but they would not tell him what it meant. This dream was fairly easy to interpret; the wise men probably lacked courage more than they lacked insight.

At last Daniel came before me: Why "at last"? You'd think the king might've sought his help first. Perhaps Nebuchadnezzar is still wanting to test the effectiveness (or courage!) of the Chaldeans and other Babylonian counselors. Here he also lets us know that he holds to "his" god first and foremost.

His name is Belteshazzar, according to the name of my god: Daniel's name contains the name of Nebuchadnezzar's "my god", the Babylonian deity Bel.

Everything that Nebuchadnezzar has experienced with Daniel and his fellow faithful Hebrew young men might've been enough to impress him, but not enough to convert him. Conversion is a change of heart, not just mind. Remember James 2:19: "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!"

4:10-18, The Content of the Dream

A tree in the midst of the earth: The tree in Nebuchadnezzar's dream was noted for several of its great attributes - size, strength, prominence, beauty, fruit, and shelter.

He cried aloud and said thus: The watcher (a "holy one", presumably an angel) explained the fate of the tree. He noted that the tree was to be chopped down, and it would lose those great attributes - its size, strength, prominence, beauty, fruit, and shelter. He also said that the tree represented a man, one who would be changed and given the heart of a beast.

Bound with a band of iron and bronze: Such bands could be seen as being either for the tree stump's *confinement*, or its *protection*. But in either case, the tree would no longer be "free" or "great".

...To the end that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men: Nebuchadnezzar heard these words in his dream. And these words should have made the dream easy to interpret – it clearly pictured the humbling of a great king. It's no wonder, then, that none of Nebuchadnezzar's counselors wanted to interpret the dream for him! Like most kings (ancient **or** modern), Nebuchadnezzar wanted to believe that he ruled and controlled his fate, not God or anyone else.

Declare its interpretation... You are able, for the Spirit of the Holy God is in you: Nebuchadnezzar knew he would get an honest answer from Daniel, even if the truth would be hard to hear. Daniel had always been forthright and honest in his dealings with the king. While Nebuchadnezzar still resisted faith in God, he also recognized Daniel as a man filled with "the Spirit of the Holy God".

4:19-27, Daniel Reveals the Rise and Fall of Nebuchadnezzar

His thoughts troubled him: It seems Daniel genuinely cared for the wellbeing of Nebuchadnezzar, and was clearly affected by the meaning of the dream. It's possible he didn't even want the message of the dream to be true!

It is you, O king: Regardless of the thoughts that troubled him, Daniel the faithful servant of God and the king gets to the point without ambiguity or dilution of the message of the dream.

Commentator Adam Clarke:

Great men and princes are often represented, in the language of the prophets, under the similitude of trees, see Ezekiel 17:5-6; 31:3 and following; Jeremiah 22:15; Psalm 1:3; 37:35.

Drive you from men... make you eat grass like oxen... wet you with the dew of heaven: As Daniel explained these things to Nebuchadnezzar, the king probably couldn't guess just how literally these would ultimately be fulfilled.

...Until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom He will: God will ultimately reach Nebuchadnezzar, but not until after tremendous humiliation.

Break off your sins...: Nebuchadnezzar was counseled to stop sinning, and to practice righteousness and generosity. The proper, faithful reaction to such a threat of judgment is humble repentance. He was being called to repent like the people of Nineveh in Jonah 3. Unfortunately, Nebuchadnezzar did not do this.

4:28-33, Nebuchadnezzar is Humbled as Predicted in the Dream

At the end of the twelve months: God gave Nebuchadnezzar time (quite a bit of time!) to repent, and he may have even forgotten about the dream during that time – but God, of course did not forget.

Is not this great Babylon: Babylon was indeed one of the spectacular cities of the ancient world, which included the famous hanging gardens built by Nebuchadnezzar.

Commentator David Guzik:

i. Daniel knew that the new Babylon was the creation of Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:30), something previously thought untrue and only verified by recent archaeology. Nobody in the Maccabean period (second century B.C.) thought Nebuchadnezzar had built the new Babylon.

ii. In the British Museum, there are six columns of writing recovered from Babylon which describe the huge building projects of Nebuchadnezzar and his zeal to enlarge and beautify the city.

iii. Most of the bricks found in the excavations of Babylon carry this stamp: "Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, supporter of Esagila and Ezida, exalted first-born son of Nabopolassar, king of Babylon."

They shall drive you from men... eat grass like oxen: This announcement came to Nebuchadnezzar in the very same words he heard in his dream. This showed him that the dream was about to be fulfilled, and he would be reduced to the existence of an animal – specifically, an ox.

Guzik again:

i. The form of insanity in which men think of themselves as animals and imitate the behavior of an animal has been observed. Some call it generally insania zoanthropica and more specifically in Nebuchadnezzar's case, boanthropy, the delusion that one is an ox.

ii. Walvoord quotes a Dr. Raymond Harrison of Britain, who in 1946 had a patient suffering from boanthropy, just as Nebuchadnezzar suffered.

He was driven from men and ate grass like oxen: There is no official secular record of this seven-year ("seven times") bout with insanity, but that's not surprising, considering the customs of that time. It's very likely the Babylonian Empire was effectively ruled by high officials, possibly including Daniel. Greek historian Abydenus wrote in 268 B.C. that Nebuchadnezzar was "possessed by some god" and that he had "immediately disappeared" (cited by commentator L. J. Wood). There is no historical record of any Babylonian governmental activity between about 582 B.C. and 575 B.C. Given how kings and rulers of the period loved to broadcast their achievements – and cover up their embarrassments -- the silence during this period is telling!

4:34-37, A Repentant Nebuchadnezzar is Restored

At the end of the time: Nebuchadnezzar could not be freed from his madness until God appointed the end of that time. Then he had the opportunity to humble himself and “lift his eyes to heaven”.

I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him: Nebuchadnezzar could only see the truth about himself after first seeing the truth about the one true God. This return of reason results in worship and prayer.

I was restored to my kingdom, and excellent majesty was added to me: God *wanted* to restore Nebuchadnezzar all along. The goal wasn't to put him down and leave him down, but to bring him to his proper place before God -- and among men.

The lesson here is something we've read in the New Testament: “God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6).

We also see that God will glorify himself among the nations. When Nebuchadnezzar took some of the treasures of the Jerusalem temple and put them in the temples of his gods, he had reason to believe that his gods were stronger than the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. By the end of this chapter, Nebuchadnezzar knew which God was the true God. And when Nebuchadnezzar knew it, he wasn't shy about telling people what he had learned – he was a true witness, giving testimony to God's great works.

Some commentators find prophetic significance in this chapter. It is true that in Revelation, Babylon is used as a representation of the fallen world, the kingdom of Satan. However, this chapter is about God's dealing with King Nebuchadnezzar and his change of heart and faith. It does not address Babylon in any general sense, and we don't find any good parallels between Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 4 and the modern interpretations of Babylon or even of “Antichrist” in dispensationalist/pre-tribulation millennialist schools of eschatology.