

DANIEL LESSON 12 NOTES (R)

Daniel 4: 19-27

Review (4:1-18)

Chapter 4 begins with a letter from Nebuchadnezzar, written to all those peoples, nations and languages that he had previously commanded to fall down and worship his golden statue in 3:1-7. Now in 4:1-3, the king declares his desire to tell what the Most High God has done for him, praising His everlasting kingdom and dominion. Nebuchadnezzar then begins to tell the story that prompted such an amazing declaration of praise of God (4:4-18). Nebuchadnezzar is once again troubled by a dream which his wise men cannot interpret, even though this time he has told them the dream in detail. As in 2:26, he turns to Daniel to tell him the interpretation of the troubling dream.

Daniel Interprets the Dream

Verse 19 uses both names of Daniel, the Hebrew name recognizing that he is acting as a servant of Israel's God, and the Babylonian as his official name. Daniel is described as being *dismayed for a while* and *alarmed* by his thoughts. Commentators offer various explanations about both the length and the reason for Daniel's hesitation. It is unlikely that he kept the king waiting for an hour, as some translations suggest, but John Walvoord states that the phrase is best translated that "he was dismayed for a while," or "was perplexed for a moment" about how to address the king's request. Carl Keil summarizes Daniel's situation: "As Daniel at once understood the interpretation of the dream, he was for a moment so astonished that he could not speak for terror at the thought which moved his soul. This amazement seized him because he wished well to the king, and yet he must now announce to him a weighty judgment from God." Walvoord adds that Daniel was not only troubled by the content of the dream, but by the need to tell Nebuchadnezzar the interpretation in an appropriate way. (104) H.A. Ironside further explains Daniel's hesitation: "It is plain that Nebuchadnezzar's character had in it much that was noble and admirable, and this appealed to the

prophet. Daniel had also been highly favored by the king, and the thought of the solemn judgment that was soon to fall upon his royal master saddened him.”

Some commentators seek to explain Daniel’s willingness to tell Nebuchadnezzar his dream in Ch. 2, in contrast to this hesitation in Ch. 4. Dwight Pentecost states that Daniel was dismayed this time because “the first dream exalted Nebuchadnezzar as the head of gold (2:38), but this second dream debased him.” Stephen Miller adds that Daniel’s alarm is not just because he respects the king, “but also because of the effect this situation could have had on others, particularly the Jewish people. Nebuchadnezzar had evidently treated the Jews well throughout most of his reign. If he were deposed, there would be no guarantee of a like-minded ruler.”

Nebuchadnezzar must have discerned the anxiety and sorrow in the face of his minister, for he speaks in a way to give Daniel confidence to proceed with the interpretation. Ironside explains: “It was not smooth words made up for the occasion that were wanted. Little as he (the king) realizes what is coming, he yet desires to know the truth.” Thus Nebuchadnezzar helps Daniel to speak, urging him not to let the dream trouble him. This statement by the king shows respect for Daniel, and indirectly assures him that “he need not fear the king regardless of what he reveals.” (105)

That Daniel knew immediately the significance of the dream is clear by his next statement, to wish that the evil foretold might be directed toward the king’s enemies. Some commentators criticize Daniel’s comment as mere flattery, but Walvoord recognizes his comments as typical oriental courtesy. Daniel respected Nebuchadnezzar, and genuinely wished the interpretation of the dream could have been different.

After the king encourages Daniel not to be alarmed about sharing the meaning of the dream with him, Daniel first repeats the description of the enormous tree, then reveals that the enormous tree represents Nebuchadnezzar: ***It is you, O king.*** “The image of a cosmic tree, the center of the universe, pictures Nebuchadnezzar, who had become great and strong... His kingdom had become greater than any kingdom up to that time.”(H.D.M. Spence) Like the tree,

Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom had afforded prosperity and protection to the peoples of the earth, as pictured in the tree's beauty, abundant fruit, food for all, shade, and branches where the birds of heaven lived... Then comes the bad news. Daniel explains in verses 23-25 that the cutting down of the tree, as Nebuchadnezzar saw ordered by **a watcher, a holy one, coming down from heaven**, is a decree of **the Most High**. This statement is Daniel's interpretation that the decree clearly came from God. "Although Nebuchadnezzar's description did not immediately specify divine agency, or God as the source of this dream, it is clear that this is the interpretation according to Daniel in verse 24." (105)

Miller adds the observation that "in the Old Testament the tree figure is employed elsewhere to speak of man in his pride, as in Isa 2:12-13; 10:34; and Ezek 31:3-17. The cosmic tree which **reaches to the heavens** is also reminiscent of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:4). "Such hubris inevitably ends in disaster, and the divine lumberjack would bring the mighty tree crashing to the ground, removing it from its place of influence and glory. Nebuchadnezzar would not only lose his power and glory but also his rationality (which distinguishes him as human) so that he would behave like the wild animals. The one who thought of himself in godlike terms would become beast-like so that he could learn that he is merely human after all." (ESV 1715)

Pentecost goes on to explain this "demented state," in which Nebuchadnezzar will exist for seven years. It may be, he states, "a mental illness known as zoanthropy or lycanthropy, a rare mental condition observed in modern times." In this mental derangement, a person actually thinks of himself as an animal and acts like one. Miller adds the observations that the king will be driven away from people because of his strange behavior and will live with the cattle or animals of the field. He may not subsist solely on grass, for "the Aramaic word *asab* also includes vegetables and other herbs...He may be under the delusion that he is a bull or an ox... At night Nebuchadnezzar would not come inside like a man but would remain in the open field. Consequently in the mornings he would be **wet with the dew of heaven.**"

Spence, however, disagrees with the interpretation of most other scholars: “If we are to take the words of Daniel strictly, even in the Massoretic,* much more if we take the Septuagint* text, he seems to have understood the dream to point, not to lycanthropy, but to an overthrow at the hands of his enemies, when they would compel him to eat grass in his distress, and, by depriving him of every shelter, force him to be wet with the dew of heaven. There is nothing to indicate that the compulsion should work within, and that by these inner scourges the messengers of the Most High would drive Nebuchadnezzar forth to the fields.”

(*Note: The Massoretic Text is the authoritative Hebrew and Aramaic text of the 24 books of the Hebrew Bible in Rabbinic Judaism. The Septuagint Text is a Greek version of the Hebrew Bible adopted by early Christian Churches.)

However these details are interpreted, it is clear that God has decreed that Nebuchadnezzar would be removed from his position of authority in the kingdom, driven away from the palace to live like an animal until seven times have passed by. “The word ‘times’ is used again in 7:25 where it also means a year... Thus Daniel predicted that Nebuchadnezzar would live in a demented state for seven years.” The phrase *seven periods of time* also suggests completion, giving further support to this interpretation.

Daniel then interprets the stump with its bands of iron and brass as foretelling that Nebuchadnezzar will retain control of his kingdom and that it will be protected and restored to him when he comes to his senses. Regaining his senses without regaining his kingdom would have been intense punishment, but, in spite of his pride, God will show him graciousness. Miller indicates that “During his period of mental incapacitation, Nebuchadnezzar’s son Amel-Marduk evidently ruled the country so that the government continued to function normally.”

Daniel explains the purpose of this fearful experience, as the messengers had announced in the dream. Nebuchadnezzar will come to **acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone He wishes**. The fact that the stump was to be secured and left in the field rather than being uprooted indicates that the king would be restored to the throne.

“However, that restoration would not take place until Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged God’s sovereign right to rule.”

Walvoord adds that the expression “***that the heavens do rule***” (4:26b) is of particular interest, for “it is the only time in the Old Testament where the word **heavens** is substituted for God.” Ellington also observes that the text here is a unique Old Testament euphemism for avoiding the name of God. This practice became more common in the New Testament times, as in the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:18, 21), where heaven stands for God, and in Matthew, the only Gospel where the phrase *kingdom of heaven* is equivalent to the *kingdom of God*. Most English translations of Daniel 4:26b do retain the euphemism “**heavens**,” sometimes beginning with an upper case letter. Walvoord clarifies, however, that when Daniel uses the expression ***the heavens do rule***, he is not accepting the Babylonian worship of heavenly bodies, as he makes it clear in 4:25 that ***the most high*** is a person. He is likely, Walvoord continues, contrasting heavenly rule with the earthly rule of Nebuchadnezzar, whose sovereignty was much less than that of ***the heavens***. (106)

Having interpreted the dream clearly, Daniel now, as a prophet of God, gives a solemn but courteous exhortation to the king. “Daniel, a Jew who believed in the one true God, was willing to tell Nebuchadnezzar (a pagan king) that he should conform to the moral standards that Daniel had learned from God. This appeal to repentance implied that the fate depicted for Nebuchadnezzar in the dream was not inevitable, and it provided Nebuchadnezzar with an opportunity to repent of his pride. If Nebuchadnezzar humbled himself, God would not need to humble him further. Even pagan rulers are accountable to the God of the Bible.” (ESV Study Bible, 1716) See also Prov. 31:1-9; Mark 6:18; and Acts 24:25.

Pentecost observes that this exhortation points out the principle that any announced judgment from God may be averted if there is repentance, as in the Book of Jonah. “Daniel urged Nebuchadnezzar to turn from his sinful pride and produce fruits of righteousness, acts which stem from a heart that is submissive to God. Had Nebuchadnezzar done so, he would have averted his seven years of insanity.” Miller considers that, “while the king may not have treated others

cruelly, he probably did what many people do today, practicing an indulgent lifestyle and simply ignoring the misfortunes of others.” Other commentators agree that Nebuchadnezzar was relatively good to those he conquered. Walvoord, however, states that Nebuchadnezzar had likely been morally wicked and cruel to those he ruled, being more interested in building a magnificent city as a monument to his name than alleviating the suffering of the poor, as Daniel suggests by his exhortation in this passage. However one evaluates Nebuchadnezzar’s treatment of his captives, it is clear that Daniel is calling him to repentance, demonstrated by righteousness instead of sins and mercy rather than oppression.

This passage has generated controversy due to a mistranslation in the Vulgate, the principal Latin version of the Bible, which was prepared mainly by St. Jerome in the late 4th century, revised in 1592, and adopted as the official text for the Roman Catholic Church. In this translation, Daniel 4:27 reads: “Cancel thy sins by deeds of charity and thine iniquities by deeds of kindness to the poor.” This has led to the misconception on the part of some that salvation could be obtained by good works and was a center of controversy at the time of the Reformation. This is clearly not what was recorded in the book of Daniel. “Nebuchadnezzar is not promised forgiveness on the ground of good works or alms to the poor; but rather the issue is that, if he is a wise and benevolent king, he would alleviate the necessity of God’s intervening with immediate judgment because of Nebuchadnezzar’s pride.” (106)

Thus this passage concludes with Daniel’s counsel of repentance, with suggestion of the possibility that the king might *perhaps* enjoy a longer period of *prosperity*, sometimes translated “tranquility,” if he repents of his pride and humbles himself so that God will have no need to humble him further. The conclusion of the chapter will tell the rest of the story, and will come full circle to explain the opening verses of this amazing chapter.

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