

I HAVE (ANOTHER) DREAM

DANIEL 4:1-18 OCTOBER 24, 2018

The world's largest tree was in the news yesterday when, for a *second* time this year, the National Park Service cancelled plans to start a controlled burn in the vicinity around the famous General Sherman tree in an effort to "clear overgrowth and makes room for the next generation of plant life. The plan was for the fire to chew through most of the fuel bed and to knock down dead trees and snags. 'We're giving a prescription the way a doctor gives a prescription of medication,' [one official] said. 'We're trying to work within the prescription to get desired outcomes and effects.'"¹

In our text, Nebuchadnezzar has a dream in which he sees the largest tree in the world. Though it's healthy and strong, spreading and bearing fruit, it is suddenly condemned by heaven, and the prescript is that it be hewn down and left as a battered stump for 7 years.

Nebuchadnezzar would come to find out that this was a prophecy concerning *himself*. It was a warning from heaven of the judgment that was coming. And, once it had all unfolded, he finally relented and became a believer in the God of Heaven. He would then put his testimony into an epistle that he sent all over his kingdom, proclaiming the greatness of Jehovah.

Some suggest that Nebuchadnezzar didn't *really* have a conversion experience. That he simply acknowledged the power of Daniel's God alongside the many gods of Babylon. But I think there is more than enough reason to assume we will see Nebuchadnezzar in heaven. First of all, we can note a remarkable progression in his attitude toward the God of the Bible. In chapter 2 he says to Daniel, "your God knows some secrets." In chapter 3 he says, "there's no other god who can deliver like the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego." By the end of chapter 4, he'll say:

Daniel 4:37 - ³⁷ Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all of whose works are truth, and His ways justice.

And he praises the Lord as King above all kings, accomplishing His will throughout all generations.

Consider as well that clearly *Daniel* and the *Holy Spirit* considered this sermon to be genuine and worthy of re-broadcast here in the book. So, I don't see why we can't see the king as a believer.

We won't have the time to get through the whole chapter. We'll take it in a couple of parts. This evening, as Nebuchadnezzar begins his testimony, I'd like us to consider the **condition** of a person who needs to be converted, the **change** that God brings to their lives and the **character** of the man or woman who believes in God and serves Him.

We begin in verse 1. It is no longer Daniel speaking, but Nebuchadnezzar himself narrating.

Daniel 4:1 - Nebuchadnezzar the king, To all peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you.

The Babylonian empire reached its height under Nebuchadnezzar. I can only imagine the anxiety you might have felt being, say, an Egyptian down in the city of Memphis and seeing a palace horse riding into town with an official message from the man who had conquered your country. There's *some* mail

¹ <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-prescribed-fire-sequoias-20181023-story.html>

that you don't really want to open based solely on who sent it to you, right? The IRS comes to mind. But there you are, gathered up with the rest of your community, and a herald says "Come, hear a message from the king." His opening line? "Peace be multiplied to you."

While this is a common greeting in this day and age, Nebuchadnezzar wasn't the kind of guy who needed to be polite in his communication. The man who dominated the whole region through crushing victories was talking about peace? That by itself should grab his listeners' attentions.

Daniel 4:2 - ²I thought it good to declare the signs and wonders that the Most High God has worked for me.

As readers of the whole book, we can recognize a profound change in the king's attitude here. Just a few verses ago we heard Nebuchadnezzar speak *blasphemous* words, suggesting that there was no god *anywhere*, whether it be Babylonian or Hebrew or any other, that could *possibly* save Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego from the fiery furnace. He graded himself as stronger than any god. Now, he's become a *preacher* for someone he is calling the "Most High God." Not only is the king acknowledging that this God is above himself, but is stating in clear terms, that this God is above *any* god that *any* person in *any* nation or language could imagine.

More importantly, he says, "this Most High God has worked signs and wonders *for me!*" This is a *personal* God, who was out to *connect* with Nebuchadnezzar. We've seen this in the previous chapters. It's hard to believe or imagine, but God was *after* Nebuchadnezzar. Not after him to slay him, but to save him. The Lord sent a variety of signs and servants and opportunities to this man, reaching out to him again and again. That's what the Lord does. He did it for you and I as well. He's a God of love, who cares for His own enemies. Who is the *worst* person you can think of? God loves them and wants to save them. The Gospel is *for* them, as much as it was for you or me.

Nebuchadnezzar says here in verse 2, "I think everyone needs to know this story!" Here we see the **character** of a believer. If we *believe* the Gospel, that God has saved us from our sins, that He loves us, then that's something that people need to hear about.

Once, when Paul was preaching, he said, "we declare to you *glad* tidings...here's what God has done. Here's how He raised Jesus from the dead. Here's how you can believe and be justified and be forgiven of your sins."

The world culture around us wants us to keep our religion to ourselves, and it can be hard to speak about the Lord, but we should remind ourselves that this is *good* news. It's a story that needs to be told everywhere.

Daniel 4:3 - ³How great are His signs, And how mighty His wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, And His dominion is from generation to generation.

He's barely getting started and he breaks into a spontaneous song of praise! Think about the **change** in his heart here. Worship is a sign of a **changed** life. In this book we get a few glimpses into the thought process of this king. Usually he's thinking about himself. Nebuchadnezzar was *defined* by pride. He was all about his own greatness. It's what God ultimately judges him for. But now, as we peer into his mind, we see a man thinking about God and it makes him burst into praise. This is a *great* God, a wonder-working God, a *personal* God. A God who cares about the affairs of this world.

Daniel 4:4 - ⁴I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at rest in my house, and flourishing in my palace.

This is the “before” picture. It’s not just the people at rock bottom who need Jesus. This was, perhaps, the wealthiest, most powerful man in all the world, but he was lost and bankrupt when it came to his spiritual life. He was living the good life, he had it all, but coming down the pike was a crisis he couldn’t foresee. Luckily, God loves the rich *and* the poor. He doesn’t send His Gospel to only certain socio-economic brackets and exclude the others.

Daniel 4:5-7 - ⁵I saw a dream which made me afraid, and the thoughts on my bed and the visions of my head troubled me. ⁶Therefore I issued a decree to bring in all the wise *men* of Babylon before me, that they might make known to me the interpretation of the dream. ⁷Then the magicians, the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers came in, and I told them the dream; but they did not make known to me its interpretation.

It had been many years since his dream of the image with the head of gold. Once again, the Chaldean Con Men were unable to give him any help. One of the great contrasts in this book is how, when the *unbeliever* is in crisis, they go to people who cannot give them real answers. All these so-called experts, magicians, soothsayers, none of them had any help for Nebuchadnezzar. But then we see *God’s people* in this book. When *they* are in times of crisis, real life-and-death crisis, they go to the Lord, who reveals the truth to them. That doesn’t mean that we can’t consult doctors or legal advice or those sorts of things. That’s, of course, not what I’m suggesting. But we should have confidence that we serve a God who *speaks* and *directs* and *gives wisdom* to us.

Why didn’t the king go immediately to Daniel? Maybe, at this point, it was a little below Daniel’s pay grade. Maybe Nebuchadnezzar thought, “You know, the *last* dream I had like this Daniel said it was about *me*...and I really don’t want this dream to be about me.” We’re not sure. But, when these other guys failed, Daniel steps into the room.

Daniel 4:8-9 - ⁸But at last Daniel came before me (his name *is* Belteshazzar, according to the name of my god; in him *is* the Spirit of the Holy God), and I told the dream before him, *saying*: ⁹“Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, because I know that the Spirit of the Holy God *is* in you, and no secret troubles you, explain to me the visions of my dream that I have seen, and its interpretation.

If Nebuchadnezzar had truly converted, why does he say here “his name *is* Belteshazzar, according to the name of my god”? Well, we need to remember that this is a message he’s sending throughout his empire. The recipients would understand the original language in a way we don’t. So, when they heard Daniel’s Babylonian name, they would’ve thought, “Oh, that guy’s a servant of *Bel*.” In fact, what we see is Nebuchadnezzar making a distinction: “Listen, I know he has a pagan name, but in reality this man serves a *different* God, the *Holy* God.” Some names just have baggage attached to them, right? That’s why no one is named Adolf or Judas. That’s why when someone changes their name to *Mohammad*, we can usually make some guesses about other things in their lives.

What Nebuchadnezzar points out twice (and will again in verse 18) is that within Daniel is the Spirit of the Holy God. This is the **character** of a converted man or woman. If you are a believer, if you’ve been born again, the Spirit of the Holy God is in you (in a way that even Daniel did not enjoy)! That Spirit is sent not only as a *guarantee* of our eternal inheritance in heaven, but is also sent as the *Helper* to do great things in and through your life. And so, already, we see that a converted individual

is **characterized** by worship, by the preaching of what God has done and by the Holy Spirit indwelling them. Pretty good epistle so far! Now let's get into the dream.

Daniel 4:10-12 - ¹⁰These were the visions of my head *while* on my bed: I was looking, and behold, A tree in the midst of the earth, And its height was great. ¹¹The tree grew and became strong; Its height reached to the heavens, And it could be seen to the ends of all the earth. ¹²Its leaves were lovely, Its fruit abundant, And in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, The birds of the heavens dwelt in its branches, And all flesh was fed from it.

This tree is a symbol of Nebuchadnezzar himself. Daniel says so in verse 22. From *the king's* perspective, his life was pretty good. "I'm a great big, lovely tree! Look at how I shade people. Look at how I feed people. Look at how much people want to be around me." Something tells me the *autobiography* of Nebuchadnezzar would've been a lot different than a biography written by someone else! Before his conversion, he was a brutal tyrant. A murderer. A man who caused immeasurable suffering in pursuit of his own power.

There are a lot of people in this condition, especially in a culture like ours. You want to talk to them about sin and salvation and, in the mean time, they're thinking, "I'm pretty great! I've got nothing to apologize for! You all should *thank* me for how awesome I am!"

But then we see the tree from heaven's perspective:

Daniel 4:13-18a - ¹³"I saw in the visions of my head *while* on my bed, and there was a watcher, a holy one, coming down from heaven. ¹⁴He cried aloud and said thus: 'Chop down the tree and cut off its branches, Strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the beasts get out from under it, And the birds from its branches. ¹⁵Nevertheless leave the stump and roots in the earth, *Bound* with a band of iron and bronze, In the tender grass of the field. Let it be wet with the dew of heaven, And *let* him graze with the beasts On the grass of the earth. ¹⁶Let his heart be changed from *that of* a man, Let him be given the heart of a beast, And let seven times pass over him. ¹⁷'This decision *is* by the decree of the watchers, And the sentence by the word of the holy ones, In order that the living may know That the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, Gives it to whomever He will, And sets over it the lowest of men.'¹⁸"This dream I, King Nebuchadnezzar, have seen.

In coming weeks we'll see the interpretation and fulfillment of all of this. But for now, here's what we note: This tree, as great as it seemed, was *suddenly* judged. Not with a scolding or with a controlled burn that might leave a mark or two but then pass by. No, heaven was going to lay *waste* to this tree. Chop it down, cut off the branches, strip the leaves, scatter the fruit. And what could the tree say or do to defend itself? Nothing at all. But then we also see that in wrath God remembers mercy. Though this tree would be decimated, it would not be fully uprooted. There would still be hope for the stump. After an extended time, there would be another chance for this man, and (praise God) we'll see that by the end he took the chance, he did not waste God's mercy, but turned from his sin to the Lord.

There's an interesting statement there in verse 17. The heavenly creature says that God sets the *lowest* of men in power. That was heaven's assessment of this earthly king. We think of some of the people who have been world leaders, who have run or currently run countries. The Bible speaks the truth. Now, it's election time. There are a lot of candidates and issues and decisions that need to be

made. Remember what the Lord has said: *Righteousness* exalts a nation. Our hope is not in princes or presidents, it's in the Lord. Vote, be involved, be used by God in whatever way He asks you, but don't assume some man in an office is going to fix the world. In many cases, the lowest of men are found in those offices.

A person who needs conversion is in a terrible **condition**. They're just *moments* away from judgment and they may not even realize it. They may think they're the General Sherman of their community. But heaven's standard is absolute. Those who don't believe desperately need forgiveness. Luckily, there's a God who actively pursues them and tries again and again to reveal Himself that they might be saved.

Once they believe, their lives are forever **changed**. Blasphemers no longer blaspheme. Now they preach. Killers no longer kill. Now they give peace. The proud no longer boast in themselves, but they boast in the Lord. And these believers are **characterized** by worship and evangelism and having a Spirit-filled life and *because of that* they are able to do things unbelievers *cannot* do. They can share truth and give insight and be used to change other people's lives. This is a great start to a great little epistle here in the book of Daniel.

But, as we close, I'd like us to give attention to two terms that are brought out of this text.

First of all, pay attention to the phrase there in verse 17: "Let seven *times* pass over him." This way of describing time is significant. Scholars generally accept this as referring to 7 years. And this terminology is not only going to come up later in chapter 7 and chapter 12 of Daniel, but is also found in *Revelation* 12. In those cases it refers to a portion of the Tribulation. You've probably heard the phrase, "Time, times and half a time." It refers to a specific, literal, three and a half year period before the second coming of Christ. It is also lined out as 42 months and elsewhere 1,260 days. It is clearly meant to be understood as a literal period of time.

The second term to notice is there in verses 13 and 17. Who are the "watchers"? We're quick to say, "Oh well, it's just an angel." And, certainly this is some sort of angelic being. But don't move too quickly off of what we learn here. We see that, in *this* case, they are described twice as being *holy*. We also notice that they are able to *decree* things. Verse 17 does not say that *God* decreed that the tree be cut down, but that it was the decision of the *watchers* themselves. That they had passed judgment on Nebuchadnezzar, and he was being sentenced like a criminal. They had decided to act so that the world would know that the Most High God rules.

Dr. J. Vernon McGee describes them as "an order of created intelligences that God has. The watchers are the holy ones that administer the affairs of this world. They see all, hear all and tell all."²

Dr. Michael Heiser writes extensively on this topic. He identifies the watchers as members of the Divine Council, which we read about in Psalm 82:

Psalm 82:1 (ESV) - ¹ God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:

Here's what Dr. Heiser says, "The term divine council is used by Hebrew and Semitics scholars to refer to the heavenly host, the pantheon of divine beings who administer the affairs of the cosmos."³

² J. Vernon McGee Thru The Bible Podcast Daniel 3-4

³ Michael S. Heiser, "Divine Council," in Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings

Why bring this up? Well, mostly because we don't want to be the kind of people who just breeze past what the text of the Bible really says. I tend to read Nebuchadnezzar's story here and think, "Ok an angel comes down, get to the part where you become an animal!" When we read like that, we potentially miss *significant* things the Bible is trying to tell us. In this case, Daniel declares that there is a group of heavenly beings called "the watchers." What exactly they are, we're not sure. How many there are, we're not sure. But there's a lot of study we can do on something that is *very* easy to skim right over. We want to be students who take care to listen.

What do we see in the testimony of Nebuchadnezzar? We see that God tried hard to reveal Himself, over many years to this man and that he missed a lot. Later, at the end of the book, we'll see Daniel saying to us, as a very old man, "Oh, I finally realized something from the book of Jeremiah that I had never noticed before!" And that's that the exile would last 70 years and that those 70 years were almost over!

So, let's take care to read deeply and pay attention as much as we can to this wonderful, life changing message from a tender, loving, powerful God.