

NEBUCHADNEZZAR REVEALS HIS SECOND DREAM TO DANIEL

DANIEL 4:8-18

SCRIPTURE READING AND INSIGHTS

Begin by reading Daniel 4:8-18 in your favorite Bible. As you read, stop and meditate on any verses that speak to your heart (Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:1-3).

In yesterday's reading, Nebuchadnezzar praised God for His awesome signs and wonders, and he summoned the Babylonian wise men to interpret a second, more troubling dream. In today's lesson, Nebuchadnezzar reveals this dream to Daniel. With your Bible still accessible, consider the following insights on the biblical text, verse by verse.

Daniel 4:8-9

Belteshazzar (4:8): When the king originally invited the wise men to interpret the second dream, Daniel was not among them. By now, Daniel was in a position of significant governmental authority. He had risen far above the wise men of Babylon.

Daniel's assigned Babylonian name was Belteshazzar. This name means "Bel, protect his life," or "Bel, protect the king's life." Apparently, Bel had been Nebuchadnezzar's favorite Babylonian deity, because he referred to this deity as "my god." Nebuchadnezzar's continued use of this name indicates that despite Yahweh's open display of miracles, Nebuchadnezzar was still somehow a polytheist.

One wonders why Nebuchadnezzar did not summon Daniel at first. The other wise men of Babylon had a dismal track record. Perhaps the king was hoping to avoid hearing something from Daniel he did not want to hear. He may have expected the wise men to offer a more positive interpretation of the dream. Or perhaps, if the meaning was negative, they would soften it a bit rather than declare the hard truth, as Daniel would likely do.

In any event, our text tells us, "At last Daniel came in." One can almost hear Nebuchadnezzar breathing a sigh of relief. Whether the interpretation was positive or negative, at least the king would now know the meaning of the dream.

In whom is the spirit of the holy gods (4:8): Nebuchadnezzar was not affirming a belief that Daniel was filled with the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. He knew nothing of the Trinity. Rather, based on his earlier encounters with Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar appears to be acknowledging that the true God worked within Daniel, which made him capable of unraveling mysteries.

One must keep in mind that Nebuchadnezzar had recently been chastised in the fiery furnace episode (Daniel 3:24-30), and he affirmed that only Daniel's God was "a revealer of mysteries" (2:47). This being so, it is probably better to translate Daniel 4:8, "the Spirit of the holy God" instead of "the spirit of the holy gods." Some scholars argue against the plural (gods) because no pagans believed their deities were holy. This is something true only of the singular God of Daniel.

Chief of the magicians (4:9): Daniel did not call himself the "chief of the magicians." This was apparently a title ascribed to him by the pagans in Babylon (compare Daniel 2:48).

Another possibility is that Daniel was called "chief of the magicians" not because he was in authority over them but rather because he was wiser and more discerning than any other wise man in Babylon. In the same way, many have referred to Benjamin Warfield as "prince of theologians." Warfield had authority over no one, but he was a powerful theologian. Likewise, Daniel was a deeply insightful wise man.

No mystery is too difficult for you (4:9): Of course, Nebuchadnezzar got it wrong here. The truth of the matter is that no mystery is too difficult for *God*. God communicated the meaning of these mysteries to Daniel.

Daniel 4:10-12

A tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great (4:10): We will focus our attention on Daniel's interpretation of this dream in the next lesson. For now, we simply wish to investigate the details of the dream itself.

Nebuchadnezzar sees a tree of great height. The Bible often describes kingdoms or the realms of kings as trees. For example, we read of Assyria, "Behold, Assyria was a cedar in Lebanon, with beautiful branches and forest shade, and of towering height, its top among the clouds" (Ezekiel 31:3; see also 17:1-10, 22-24; 2 Kings 14:9; Psalms 1:3; 37:35; 52:8; 92:12). (See Major Themes.)

Grew and became strong (4:11): The tree grew powerful, sturdy, and abounding in strength.

Its top reached to heaven (4:11): This is a hyperbole, a purposeful exaggeration to make a point. This tree grew so tall that its top metaphorically reached into heaven. This same type of language was used to describe the Tower of Babel: "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth" (Genesis 11:4).

Visible to the end of the whole earth (4:11): This was another hyperbole, intended to make the point that the tree was so tall that it could be seen from far away.

Food...shade (4:12): The tree not only grew large and powerful but also provided food and shelter for beasts and birds. It had abundant foliage and plenty of fruit.

Daniel 4:13-18

A watcher, a holy one (4:13): This is an angel from heaven, commissioned by God to watch and observe. (See Major Themes.) One of the primary purposes of angels has always been to deliver messages to human beings on earth. The word translated "angel" means "messenger." This angel appears and issues instructions about what is to be done to the tree. The angel's message clearly points to an impending judgment.

Chop down the tree (4:14): The angel instructed that the tree be cut down, its branches lopped off, its leaves stripped, and its fruit scattered. The beasts and the birds were to flee.

Leave the stump of its roots (4:15): The stump of the tree was to be left, with its roots still in the earth. This indicates that the tree, though stripped of its size and its greatness, is still alive and would one day be revived.

A band of iron and bronze (4:15): This protects the stump to ensure the tree's survival. The tree's "portion" would now be "with the beasts in the grass of the earth."

Let his mind be changed (4:16): The metaphorical nature of the tree now becomes clear. The tree is a man who will lose his sanity. His mental ability will not exceed that of an animal. Some scholars have suggested that Nebuchadnezzar's judgment involved the disease boanthropy, which causes a person to believe he or she is a bovine and to act accordingly.

Let seven periods of time pass over him (4:16): This state of being was to last for "seven periods," or seven years. Note that in the Bible seven is the number of completeness. Nebuchadnezzar would suffer a complete and thorough chastening from God through this experience.

The sentence is by the decree (4:17): Though the judgment is by the decree of the angels, one must not forget that the angels are here as representatives or ambassadors of God, who alone is the sovereign King.

That the living may know (4:17): The purpose of this judgment on Nebuchadnezzar is stated plainly: "That the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men." More to the point, Nebuchadnezzar is finite and weak—the lowliest of creatures when compared to the unfathomable greatness of God. God can raise kings up. God can bring kings down.

Tell me the interpretation (4:18): Nebuchadnezzar no doubt suspected bad news, but he was bold enough to ask.

MAJOR THEMES

1. *Watcher angels.* Daniel 4:13 refers to angels who are called "watchers." Apparently these are angels who have been sent by God specifically to observe what is transpiring on the earth. The term suggests that these angels are especially vigilant. (The Aramaic word translated "watcher" communicates the idea of making sleepless watch.) We might consider the watchers to be God's reconnaissance agents. The watchers may relate

to certain angels said to have many eyes. The cherubim, for example, are “full of eyes all around” (Ezekiel 1:18). The angels in Revelation 4:6 are “full of eyes in front and behind,” and “full of eyes all around and within” (verse 8).

2. *Large, cosmic trees.* The idea of a large, cosmic tree at the center of the earth was common in ancient times.

In the Myth of Erra and Ishum, Marduk speaks of the meshu tree, whose roots reach down through the great subterranean ocean to the underworld and whose top rises above the heavens. A sacred tree appears in various forms of Assyrian art.¹

The Bible refers to a great tree in Ezekiel 17, 31, and Daniel 4. In the next lesson, we will see that trees can also represent evil people. As we have seen, apocalyptic literature—including the books of Daniel and Revelation—often contains dreams, visions, and symbolic imagery.

DIGGING DEEPER WITH CROSS-REFERENCES

General appearances of angels—Genesis 18:2; 22:11; Exodus 3:2; Daniel 8:15; 10:5; 12:5; Matthew 1:20; 2:13; 28:2; Luke 16:22; 22:43; Acts 5:19; 12:7; Hebrews 1:14; 13:2

Angels specifically coming down from heaven—Genesis 28:12; Zechariah 14:5; Matthew 25:31; Jude 14; Revelation 19:14

LIFE LESSONS

1. *The indwelling spirit.* Nebuchadnezzar referred to Daniel as one “in whom is the spirit of the holy gods” (Daniel 4:8). Though Nebuchadnezzar was not referring to the New Testament doctrine of the filling of the Holy Spirit, this is a doctrine we need to be aware of. Ephesians 5:18 instructs us, “Be filled with the Spirit.” The word “filled” here is a present tense imperative verb. The present tense indicates continuing action. Moment by moment, you and I as Christians are to be filled with the Spirit. The imperative means it is a command from God. Being filled with the Spirit is

not merely optional. As we are filled with the Holy Spirit, we will manifest the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

2. *God deals with prideful leaders.* God knows what is in the human heart: “I the LORD search the heart and test the mind” (Jeremiah 17:10). “I am he who searches mind and heart” (Revelation 2:23). God “will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart” (1 Corinthians 4:5). Looking into Nebuchadnezzar’s heart, God saw unrestrained pride. The king could issue as many decrees as he wanted to (Daniel 2:13, 15; 3:10, 29; 6:7-13, 15, 26), but what really matters are heaven’s decrees (Daniel 4:17, 24; 9:24-27). Nebuchadnezzar was about to be humbled by the Almighty (see Psalm 103:19). God humbles you and me, too, if we maintain an attitude of pride (James 4:6).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Daniel was named Belteshazzar—a tribute to Nebuchadnezzar’s favorite god, Bel. You and I are called Christians, which means “belonging to Christ.” Is it obvious to other people that you belong to Christ?
2. Do you have a healthy relationship with the Holy Spirit? Is it your goal to be controlled by the Holy Spirit in your day-to-day living?
3. Daniel 4:17 tells us that God “rules the kingdom of men.” Are there any areas of your life right now that you are not submitting to God’s rule?