

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. Jonathan Hughes

Lowliness or self-assertiveness – Daniel 4

I guess if Nebuchadnezzar had been a fan of pantomime, then his favourite might have been an adaptation of Snow White: "Mirror, mirror on the wall who is the greatest king of all?"

"You, O king, on your glorious throne, above all others you reign alone."

As we come to Daniel 4, we arrive at the point where Nebuchadnezzar has reached the pinnacle of his power. In the previous chapter we were introduced to him as the head of gold, the greatest ruler in the history of world empires. His word was absolute. Though he might have been advised by ministers, all the decision making lay in his hands alone. His word was law.

It is remarkable that in the stories of a long dead despot from an empire far removed from us geographically and by time, there are so many lessons that are of importance to us in the 21st century. But before we try to draw these lessons it is worth just taking some time to familiarise ourselves with the story of chapter 4. The story starts in verse 4 with Nebuchadnezzar at peace in his house. The empire he had built was secure, and internal dissent had been dealt with. Then one night he has a disturbing dream; "I was looking, and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. The tree grew and became strong; its height reached to the heavens, and it could be seen to the ends of all the earth. Its 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. I saw in the visions of my head while on my bed, and there was a watcher, a holy one, coming down from heaven. He 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. Nevertheless 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. Let 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. 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.'"

This dream obviously troubled Nebuchadnezzar. He had summoned his advisers and wise men, but they had utterly failed to interpret the dream for the king. Finally, he calls for Daniel, remembering how he had previously interpreted a dream for him. We might have thought that experience would have made Nebuchadnezzar call for Daniel first, but we ought not to be surprised. Spiritually dead people have no regard for those who have a living relationship with God. Nor should it surprise us that the combined wisdom of the Babylonian empire, the world's greatest superpower at that time, could not make head or tail of the dream. Spiritual truths can only be understood by spiritual people as revealed by the Spirit.

So it is that Daniel comes again before Nebuchadnezzar. On hearing the dream, Daniel wishes that the truth of it was concerning some other person, but true to God, he makes known its meaning. The great tree was none other but king Nebuchadnezzar. His power and influence truly spread throughout the then known world. But God was going to cut him down to size, until he lived in a way no different from the beasts of the field. That divine judgement was for a limited period, as evidenced by the stump being left in the ground, before the kingdom would again be returned to Nebuchadnezzar.

Daniel then gives the king some sound advice: "Therefore, O king, let my advice be acceptable to you; break off your sins by being righteous and your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor. Perhaps there may be a lengthening of your prosperity" (or a stay of execution – verse 27). With such a solemn warning we might have thought that Nebuchadnezzar would indeed mend his ways, but as we follow the chapter we find that he completely ignores the advice that Daniel had given him. In this he is no different from the average person today. Here we are standing on the brink of a fixed eternity, which for many will be away from God, and people are more interested in the price of a pint at the local, or who is top of the premiership, than the message of an eternal God for today!

So in verses 30-32 we read: "The king spoke, saying, 'Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power and for the honour of my majesty?' While the word was still in the king's mouth, a voice fell from

heaven: 'King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: the kingdom has departed from you! And they shall drive you from men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field.'

Exactly as God had said through Daniel! Throughout the history of mankind, humanity has gone on with the idea that God does not really do what He says or mean what He says. Too late! Nebuchadnezzar reaps the fruit of his vanity filled harvest. He looked out on great Babylon and thought that it was all because of what he had done. Puffed up with pride in what he mistakenly thought were his own achievements, he utterly ignored what God would have to say to him. So he would learn the hard way that God really does mean what He says, and always does exactly what He has promised. God takes away the kingdom from him. The medic in me would love to know exactly what the medical condition was that afflicted him, but the once great king is reduced to living and looking like an animal. The one to whom God had given everything was brought to the position where he had nothing. It was not until he turns to God that there could be any change in his position. As we come to the end of the chapter, in verses 34-37 we read: "And at the end of the time I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the Most High and praised and honoured Him who lives forever: For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom is from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; He does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, "What have you done?" At the same time my reason returned to me, and for the glory of my kingdom, my honour and splendour returned to me. My counsellors and nobles resorted to me, I was restored to my kingdom, and excellent majesty was added to me. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, all of whose works are truth, and His ways justice. And those who walk in pride He is able to put down." His spiritual transformation is complete. From recognising that God was able to help His people in chapter 1, then acknowledging that Daniel's God was best in chapter 2, to actively protecting the rights of this God, Nebuchadnezzar arrives at a point where he personally acknowledges the authority of the eternal God in his life. Though we may do so in different ways, we all need to make this journey, coming to the point where we acknowledge His authority, as revealed in His word, in our lives.

Having looked at the pattern for our instruction, I now want us to look at the lessons that we also can learn from Nebuchadnezzar. I believe that there are at least three ways in which we can understand Daniel 4, and each has its own message for us in the 21st century.

- Firstly, we can understand the chapter on a personal level. It was what actually happened to an individual at a definite point in history.
- Secondly, we can look at the chapter on a political level and see the way in which God is still at work in the world today.
- Thirdly, we can look at the chapter as a prophetic message, and end up seeing what God has planned for His beloved Son.

The personal level.

More than any of us, Nebuchadnezzar had reason to be proud of himself and what he had achieved. And yet he had to learn that he was responsible to One who was infinitely greater than he. He believed that what he had was as a result of his own efforts. His attitude stands in stark contrast to the great scientist, Isaac Newton who was a Christian. On the outer edge of the £1 coins used to be his words: "standing on the shoulders of giants". In effect, Newton was saying that all that he achieved was entirely built upon those who had come before him, and were greater than he. This is the spirit that we need to capture and cultivate in our own lives. That all that we have, whether in terms of abilities or possessions, is because of what He has done for us, often through the sacrifice of others. It is not that Christianity precludes us from occupying positions of power, or from achieving great things. Indeed, the opposite may almost be true. Nebuchadnezzar did not return from his spell as a beast of the field to become a humble hermit. No, indeed, he had his kingdom returned to him, and excellent majesty was added to him. But in that position he was to humbly acknowledge that all that he had, he had because it was given to him by God. As a believer on the Lord Jesus Christ, all that I have, and all that I will one day possess is due to the One who "loved me and gave Himself for me." If I have achieved anything at home, at work or in terms of spiritual service it is because He has enabled me to do so. Two inescapable truths permeate the New Testament. On the one hand Jesus said, "Without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5); on the other hand, Paul said, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). But if it is through Him, then there is nothing left for me to boast in. After all, we do not tend to boast in the achievements of others. As Isaac Watts could say in his famous hymn:

*"My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

*Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the cross of Christ my God"*

What achievement can possibly compare to that of the cross!

That we are to learn lowliness and humility from Nebuchadnezzar is undeniable. That does not mean to say that we are to be a door mat! I ought to be prepared to suffer loss, to forgo my rights, where only I am concerned. But that does not mean that I stand idly by whilst allowing others to do wrong. So, for example, if I was being bullied at work, my lowly spirit should remove all thoughts of personal vengeance from me, but my righteous faith ought to give me the courage to stand up and ensure that it does not happen to another!

The political level.

One of the inescapable lessons from the book of Daniel is that God is in control of the governments and empires of this world. He uses Nebuchadnezzar and the might of the Babylonian empire to punish the idolatry and half-heartedness of Israel at that time. Israel had to learn the lesson that without God they were no different to the nations around about them. In his pride, Nebuchadnezzar thought that he alone was responsible for all that he had achieved. He had no idea that God had enabled him to become so great, and was using him to achieve His purposes. This was the lesson he had to learn in chapter 4. God has not changed! In our world today He is still working to achieve His ultimate purpose. Very often we may not recognise this. That only highlights how little we know Him, or understand His ways. So, for example, the rise of China, and other far eastern nations, should come as no surprise to us. The Bible clearly speaks of a time when an army of 200 million would march on the middle-east from the East (read the book of Revelation). God is working world wide to achieve His purposes, using whomsoever He will.

Well, we may not be able to do much about the rise and fall of nations. But there are two vital applications for our lives today. Like Nebuchadnezzar, we need to learn the humility that he learned the hard way. There was a time when we spoke of the sun never setting on the empire. Even today there is an ingrained belief that we expect England to win, no matter the sport or the opposition! During the 18th and 19th centuries, God raised up the British empire for His purpose. It was not because of our superiority. If as a nation we want to prosper, we need, we must truly humble ourselves before God. It will take more than just a national day of prayer, though that would be a good place to start. From the government down to the manager in the workplace, from the highest paid superstar to the most menial worker, there must be a recognition of His authority, and a simple obedience to His word. As a nation we have become morally corrupt, with an attitude that if others are doing it, or we can get away with it, or if it is not downright illegal, then why not? Only by a return to biblical standards of righteousness will we see our nation prosper again.

Just as God raises up nations, He raises up individuals to fulfil His purposes. In whatever sphere I may hold influence, I must exercise that before God. When I am promoted at work, do I view that as something that I have achieved by my hard work, or as an opportunity to represent the interests of God? Too often we view ourselves as better than someone else simply because our paycheque is fatter! So whether in the family, in the workplace, on the council or in parliament, the believer ought to recognise the responsibility they have to exercise the trust they have been given by God.

The prophetic level.

In chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar had had a vision of the empires of the world, throughout the history of time. His had been the head of gold. So in our current chapter the judgement of God upon the head, can be seen as a judgement upon the whole. Whichever empire may rise, at whatever time in history, God will bring it to nothing so that, at the time of His appointing, His Son, Jesus Christ, will reign alone. John speaks about Him coming into the world, and being rejected by the world (John 1:10). But God has not rejected Jesus. He has set a day when every knee will bow to Him and acknowledge Him as King of kings and Lord of lords. This being the case, then, Paul speaks about the believer as being an ambassador for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20).

Last time I was in London, I was waiting to cross the road near Tower Bridge. The traffic seemed endless, until a car stopped to let me cross. I was amazed to see the flags of a particular country on the bonnet of the fancy car. I immediately thought well of that country. Now I don't know whether the ambassador was actually in the car at the time, or not, but the point was that even the car in some measure represented the country. Its polite actions represented favourably the country it belonged to. The question that each Christian must ask himself is: Do my actions represent the Lord Jesus Christ favourably? To be an ambassador is a strange job. On the one hand, he is just a servant, doing only what he is told to do by his master, speaking only what he is told to say. But on the other hand, when he does act, he acts with all the authority of the nation he represents. As ambassadors for Christ, we ought only to do what He gives us to do each day. What clothes I buy, what holidays I take, the state of my garden, or the standard of my work in employment should be as directed by Him. The ambassador is never really off duty, for his actions will always represent his country. Perhaps you have never asked yourself what the state of my house says about His kingdom, or what the TV programmes I watch say about His values. Perhaps we ought to! Every moment of every day, we are to represent Him in this world. It ought to be a matter of great shame that so often He is spoken badly of because of the actions of those who claim to be Christians. One day, perhaps soon, Jesus will visibly take up

the reigns of all human government, and reign alone in this world. This glorious world view ought to affect every sphere of my life now, as I seek to represent His interests now.

So we have seen that in the mighty monarch Nebuchadnezzar, the lessons on lowliness and humility were vital. All that he had, all that he had achieved was as he had been helped by God. There was no room in his life for self assertiveness and pride. These are lessons that still resonate in 21st century Britain, and in the lives of all who would claim to believe in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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