

The Witness of a Pagan Conversion

Daniel 4

Introduction The public profession of faith by well-known people often gathers much attention. Some of us can remember the traitorous acts of Jane Fonda during the Vietnam war and her marriage to the CNN mogul. Her profession of faith (which seems not to have changed her liberal mindset) rocked the liberal establishment and rejoiced many a Christian's heart. Many college and pro athletes are open about their faith.

But there is nothing quite so startling as this chapter in the book of Daniel. Here, Nebuchadnezzar, that great pagan ruler of Babylon, publicly owns his faith in God.

From history, we know quite a lot about this great ruler of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar, who died in 562 BC, ruled over Babylonia from around 605-562 BC. He was the son and successor of Nabopolassar. During his father's reign he was sent to oppose the Egyptians, who were occupying Western Syria and Palestine. At Carchemish he met and defeated Pharaoh Necho in 605 BC, thus becoming the undisputed master of Western Asia. The sudden death of his father caused Nebuchadnezzar to return home to safeguard his inheritance, permitting Necho to escape to Egypt with part of his army. Three years later (601 BC) Necho defeated Nebuchadnezzar in battle. This event may have encouraged the Judean revolt under Jehoiakim . Jehoiakim died shortly after the siege began and was succeeded by his son, Jehoiachin. In March, 597 BC, Nebuchadnezzar crushed the revolt and carried into captivity the young Jehoiachin and many of his nobles, including Daniel and his three friends. Nebuchadnezzar then placed the puppet king Zedekiah on the throne of Judea. A new revolt occurred (588-587 BC) in Judea. After a siege of about a year, Jerusalem was finally destroyed in 586 BC. Nebuchadnezzar was a splendid builder, and Babylon with its hanging gardens was then the greatest city of the ancient world.¹

Nebuchadnezzar, continuing his father's work of reconstruction, aimed at making his capital one of the world's wonders. Old temples were restored; new edifices of incredible magnificence were erected to the many gods of the Babylonian pantheon (Diodorus of Sicily, 2.95; Herodotus, 1.183). To complete the royal palace begun by Nabopolassar, nothing was spared, neither cedar-wood, nor bronze, gold, silver, rare and precious stones; an underground passage and a stone bridge connected the two parts of the city separated by the Euphrates; the city itself was rendered impregnable by the construction of a triple line of walls. The bridge across the Euphrates is of particular interest, in that it was supported on asphalt covered brick piers that were streamlined to reduce the upstream resistance to flow, and the downstream turbulence that would otherwise undermine the foundations. Nor was Nebuchadnezzar's activity confined to the capital; he is credited with the restoration of the Lake of Sippar, the opening of a port on the Persian Gulf, and the building of the Mede wall between the Tigris and the Euphrates to protect the country against incursions from the North. In fact, there is scarcely a place around Babylon where his name does not appear and where traces of his activity are not found.²

The Declaration of God's Kingship (v.1-3)

The chapter opens with the proclamation sent throughout his kingdom as a letter.

King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you! ² It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me.

³How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders!
His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and his dominion endures from generation to generation.

The Addressee (v.1)

The letter is to all people, tribes, tongues and nations. He is writing, not just to those who are in his kingdom, he is writing to his allies and his enemies as well. He, that most savage and bloody of warrior-kings, wishes them peace.

But this letter is also for all time. We are reading it now, almost three-thousand years later. Across those long ages still rings this stunning proclamation from the greatest Gentile ruler in world history.

The Ascription (v.2-3)

He is now a humbled subject of a greater King. This is a bit hard for us to conceive. This would be something like Hitler, at the height of Nazi power, reappearing after a long disappearance writing a letter to the world, acknowledging himself to be the humbled subject of the God of heaven.

As a king, he has been humbled under an even mightier Sovereign. He has a vast kingdom. But it is nothing compared to kingdom of the most High God – for His kingdom stretches from one edge of the ever expanding cosmos to the other, from the first millisecond of its existence until time flows in the sea of eternity.

³How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders!
His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and his dominion endures from generation to generation.

The Alarm through God's Revelation (v.4-18)

The golden head of the mighty image, the ruler of the known world, this Nebuchadnezzar the great is at ease and prospering, with the sovereign of heaven preparing to invade his life...

The Giving of the Dream (v.4-9)

⁴ I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and prospering in my palace. ⁵ I saw a dream that made me afraid. As I lay in bed the fancies and the visions of my head alarmed me. ⁶ So I made a decree that all the wise men of Babylon should be brought before me, that they might make known to me the interpretation of the dream. ⁷ Then the magicians, the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers came in, and I told them the dream, but they could not make known to me its interpretation. ⁸ At last Daniel came in before me—he who was named Belteshazzar after the name of my god, and in whom is the spirit of the holy gods—and I told him the dream, saying, ⁹ "O Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, because I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you and that no mystery is too difficult for you, tell me the visions of my dream that I saw and their interpretation.

The Glory of the Dream (v.10-12)

¹⁰ The visions of my head as I lay in bed were these: I saw, and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. ¹¹ The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. ¹² Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the heavens lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it.

Nebuchadnezzar dreams in the night of the spreading glory of a mighty tree. Its branches arch out over the whole earth, providing shade, shelter and sustenance to all life. The beasts and birds sigh in contented satisfaction under its boughs.

The Terror of the Dream (v.13-18)

¹³ "I saw in the visions of my head as I lay in bed, and behold, a watcher, a holy one, came down from heaven. ¹⁴ He proclaimed aloud and said thus: 'Chop down the tree and lop off its branches, strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the beasts flee from under it and the birds from its branches. ¹⁵ But leave the stump of its roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze, amid the tender grass of the field. Let him be wet with the dew of heaven. Let his portion be with the beasts in the grass of the earth. ¹⁶ Let his mind be changed from a man's, and let a beast's mind be given to him; and let seven periods of time pass over him. ¹⁷ The sentence is by the decree of the watchers, the decision by the word of the holy ones, to the end 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.' ¹⁸ This dream I, King Nebuchadnezzar, saw. And you, O Belteshazzar, tell me the interpretation, because all the wise men of my kingdom are not able to make known to me the interpretation, but you are able, for the spirit of the holy gods is in you."

But ominously a watcher, a heavenly being, slopes down from heaven. He hovers in blinding light, a sun over the great tree. His heraldic voice rolls out through Nebuchadnezzar's dream. "Hew the tree with strokes till it falls. Great will be its fall as all who sheltered now flee. Let the stump remain. Encircle it with judgments bands in bronze. But the tree is a man. Convicted, this is his sentence. For seven seasons let him become like a beast, wet with dew, grass in his beard. Let him learn that he is not the Lord, only a mere man. Let him and all the world know that there is only one Most High."

Deep in his heart, the oily ooze of dark and evil depravity seeps out smudging his golden pride. Surely he sees his own shadowy shape in this dream. "O, Daniel, tell me, tell me true. What does this mean?"

The Warning by God's Spokesman

(v.19-27)

Through the dream, God's revelation has been given. Now, God's spokesman must give an interpretation and explanation.

¹⁹ Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, was dismayed for a while, and his thoughts alarmed him. The king answered and said, "Belteshazzar, let not the dream or the interpretation alarm you." Belteshazzar answered and said, "My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you and its interpretation for your enemies!" ²⁰ The tree you saw, which grew and became strong, so that its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth, ²¹ whose leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in which was food for all, under which beasts of the field found shade, and in whose branches the birds of the heavens lived— ²² it is you, O king, who have grown and become strong. Your greatness has grown and reaches to heaven, and your dominion to the ends of the earth. ²³ And because the king saw a watcher, a holy one, coming down from heaven and saying, 'Chop down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump of its roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze, in the tender grass of the field, and let him be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts of the field, till seven periods of time pass over him,' ²⁴ this is the interpretation, O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king, ²⁵ that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will. ²⁶ And as it was commanded to leave the stump of the roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be confirmed for you from the time that you know that Heaven rules. ²⁷ Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity."

By Explaining God's Revelation

(v.19-26)

This is God's way. He gives His Word. But it must be preached, proclaimed, explained. Nebuchadnezzar needs the dream interpreted for him. This Daniel does. The great tree is Nebuchadnezzar in all his power and glory and might. But he will be cut down for seven periods, probably years. He will become like a beast this mightiest of kings. He will eat grass, grow hair like feathers and his finger and toe nails will grow like the talons of beasts. He will become the living copy of the images adorning his temples, throne and palace.

By Exhorting from God's Revelation

(v.27)

God's man must have a "therefore" to his preaching. "This is what God says. This is what God means. This is how it lands on your heads." To this mighty potentate the warning comes by exhortation and counsel.

Turn, O turn from your sin. Do righteousness and show mercy. Become a man different than you are. Repent. Hear this Word and this warning. Disaster awaits a heart that continues in pride and rebellion. Do so, not to demand that God change what He has determined. Do so, casting yourself upon the "perhaps" of God's mercy. Turn, turn...

The Humiliation under God's Judgment (v.28-33)

²⁸ All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar. ²⁹ At the end of twelve months he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, ³⁰ and the king answered and said, "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?" ³¹ While the words were still in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, "O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you, ³² and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. And you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will." ³³ Immediately the word was fulfilled against Nebuchadnezzar. He was driven from among men and ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair grew as long as eagles' feathers, and his nails were like birds' claws.

God had warned Nebuchadnezzar through the giving and explaining of His revelation. Now, God moves to humble him. Two terrible scenes unfold: one terrible in the eyes of God and one terrible in the eyes of man.

The Sinful Heart of Pride (v.28-30)

Twelve long months pass. The words have faded into dimness. No longer does the dream seem vivid. See him strutting around on the rooftop swelling with pride as he surveys the magnificence of what he has accomplished.

Hear the pride of his heart in announcing his power and acclaiming his praise. All that has been accomplished was for the purpose of his personal greatness and glory. He is the center of the world and it is a good and grand thing!

The Stricken Heart in Destruction (v.31-33)

At that very moment the voice, the Word speaks and the judgment falls. God causes him to become the beast he was. The next morning, his attendants search for him and find him in the yard. There, on hands and knees, his clothes wet from the fallen dew, he grazes in the grass. He looks up curiously at the astonished men. Eyes once bright with brilliance now fasten on them with a thoughtless beastlike gaze. In horror, he is driven from the palace, from his family, from his throne.

Pride and rebellion, sin itself is a form of madness. It takes truth from God and the gifts of reason and curves them inward. In self-proclaimed wisdom, sinners have become fools, exchanging the glory of God for beasts (Romans 1). The winged and beclawed griffons that decorated the mighty battlements of Babylon had the face of Nebuchadnezzar on them. Now, cut down, he grazes as a tattered likeness of their might.

Turn, O turn lest some greater befall you...

The Submission to God's Sovereignty (v.34-37)

This devastating judgment is not unto Nebuchadnezzar's destruction and damnation, it is unto his salvation. Humbled, he gladly submits to and savors the sovereignty of God.

His Converting Repentance (v.34-35)

³⁴ At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever,

for his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;
³⁵ the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,
and he does according to his will among the host of heaven
and among the inhabitants of the earth;
and none can stay his hand
or say to him, "What have you done?"

Seven long years passes. Think back, seven years – eating grass, outcast, beast-like, insane. Then he lifts his eyes to heaven. His mind is restored. In those first moments of true sanity, he does not denounce the God who so judged him. He blesses such a good, wise, great and sovereign God.

Now, as he writes surely having sat at the feet of Daniel, he sings his doctrine in a doxology. This Gentile worships God, not just as one among many, but as the sole sovereign over the universe. God does what He wills. What He ordains, comes to pass. His kingdom will grow. It is over all the universe in the sway of His power. His kingdom comes where His will is done on earth.

He refuses to challenge the wisdom or might of God. No one can stop God's hand and no one can say to Him, "What do you think you are doing?" Having felt God's mighty hand pressing him down to his knees, he there finds it a sweet place of submission.

His Transforming Restoration (v.36-37)

³⁶ At the same time my reason returned to me, and for the glory of my kingdom, my majesty and splendor returned to me. My counselors and my lords sought me, and I was established in my kingdom, and still more greatness was added to me. ³⁷ Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble.

Having now brought Nebuchadnezzar to faith and repentance, God is pleased to restore him. In an amazing transformation and restoration, he returns to the kingdom, assumes the seat of authority and his acclaimed. But he has learned his lesson. While his might, power and glory are returned to him, his pride does not.

In these words, he kneels before Lord God, "Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble."

Reflect and Respond

God's kingdom comes where God the king is acknowledged.

God is able to humble the proud.

You must bow to the sovereign God.

The terms of salvation have not changed. We must lift our eyes to heaven in believing faith. We must bow our knees to Christ in humble submission.

Notes

¹ Nebuchadnezzar." The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition. 2008. *Encyclopedia.com.* (February 4, 2009). <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1E1-Nebuchad.html>

² Various sources, compiled. See Wikipedia.org at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nebuchadnezzar_II_of_Babylon.