

Daniel Chapter Four

Preliminary. This chapter forms the climax of the spiritual biography of Nebuchadnezzar. He has already learned that the true God omnisciently *declares* secrets (Daniel 2) and omnipotently *delivers* His servants (Daniel 3). Now he learns of the God who righteously *disciplines* sovereigns (4.37). In this chapter, two sovereignties collide – the might of the greatest human king versus the power of the ‘most high God’, the ‘King of heaven’ (v.37). The captive Jews must have been encouraged to know that even the apparently limitless power of Nebuchadnezzar was under the control of God.

Period. A time gap of c.30 years has elapsed since Daniel 3. This chapter alone contains a period of *eight* years (vv.16, 29) which likely occurred towards the end of Nebuchadnezzar’s long reign (605-562BC). Peace was enjoyed throughout the empire (v.4) and the great goal or rebuilding Babylon was now accomplished (v.30). Jim Allen proposes a date of 571BC, making Daniel roughly 53 years of age. Interestingly, historians have identified a seven-year period during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar when he engaged in no military activity (582-575BC).

Pride. The simple lesson of the chapter is contained in v.37, ‘*those that walk in pride He is able to abase*’. The teaching is plain yet sobering. When a man worships himself (pride), he is constituted no better than a beast, having no moral compass or consciousness of God. Such a person only looks downward, feeding upon the motives and objects of earth (Psalm 49.20). *MacArthur: Pride is so destructive because it breaks that first and great command that we ought to have no other gods before God Himself. God is to be the first and only God. God is the only one to be worshipped, praised and served. And pride asserts that man is to take a place of superiority over God. Pride places self above God.*

In Hebrew, the concept of pride is often expressed metaphorically with words that literally denote *height*. It refers to an unhealthy elevated view of one’s own personal abilities, achievements or possessions. It involves a vain trust in *self* and denies any dependence on *God*. The book of Proverbs describes pride as one of seven things the Lord ‘hates’ (6.17). It is found in the *heart* (16.5) and affects the *eyes* (21.4). Pride issues in strife, conflict, disgrace, dishonour and shame (11.2; 13.10; 16.18; 28.25). The *antidote* to pride is a lowly, humble and submissive spirit before the word of God (16.19). Its *cure* is the ‘fear of the Lord’ (8.13). Ultimately, all the proud will be humbled (15.25; 16.5). *Pride thrust Nebuchadnezzar out of men’s society, Saul out of his kingdom, Adam out of paradise, Haman out of court, and Lucifer out of heaven.*

Prophecy. First, the chapter foreshadows God’s judgment (humbling) of the nations during the tribulation (cf. v.25) to bring them into subjection to the authority of Christ (Psalm 2; Zephaniah 3.8-9). *Walvoord: The contest between God and Nebuchadnezzar is a broad illustration of God’s dealings with the entire human race and especially the Gentile world in its creaturely pride and failure to recognise the sovereignty of God.* Ultimately, kings and nations will bring their honour and increase to Jerusalem in lowly subjection to the King of glory (Revelation 21.24). Second, Daniel is the book of the ‘most high’ God (x14), a title used *six* times in this chapter alone. It is first used in connection with Melchizedek (Genesis 14.18-19) and emphasises the God who is ‘possessor of heaven and earth’. It is a title particularly linked with the millennial reign of Christ when ‘*there will be no longer a moral chasm between heaven and earth, but complete union. It will be no confusion or amalgam of the two, but a link of most intimate harmony; and the Lord Jesus will be that uniting bond*’ (William Kelly). Third, Nebuchadnezzar foreshadows the proud character of the ‘man of sin’. His beast-like condition points to the one whose actions will be beastly in character (Revelation 13.1).

Proclamation: The King’s Decree [vv.1-3]

v.1: The ‘Epistle of Nebuchadnezzar’ is somewhat unique as the record of a state document issued by a pagan king yet retained in the divinely inspired word of God. The record is generally given in the *first* person, but changes to the *third* person when describing the interpretation and fulfilment of the dream (vv.19-33). Nebuchadnezzar includes none of the grandiose titles customary with a greeting in a letter of this sort but writes to *all* in his kingdom as the ruler of the known world (earth). In expressing ‘peace’ there may be a hint of the transforming power of the chastening hand of God upon his life (cp. 2.5; 3.29). This was conversion indeed! **v.2:** He thought it ‘good’ (a pleasure) to share with his subjects the miraculous ‘signs’ and ‘wonders’ God had effected for him. Both are displays of God’s power, but a *sign* directs a person to a divine message, and a *wonder* produces a subjective personal response. **v.3:** Nebuchadnezzar had been brought to appreciate and accept divine authority. He, a ‘king of kings’, was subject to the *timeless* and *boundless* authority of the kingdom of ‘the high God’. The modern equivalent today is an acknowledgement of the lordship of Christ at conversion (Romans 10.9), baptism (Acts 19.5) and gathering (Matthew 18.20).

Agitation: The King's Dream [vv.4-18]

v.4: At the time of his dream, Nebuchadnezzar was at 'rest', i.e. free from apprehension and fear. He dwelt in contentment and security. The word 'flourishing' literally means 'to grow green' as a luxuriant tree. He was relaxing in the peace that often precedes a storm. **v.5:** *Hay: He was content to drift on this tranquil sea when God dramatically rocked his boat. The psalmist was 'brought low' and shaken from his spiritual lethargy before receiving divine help (Psalm 116.6). Imprisonment in Rome brought Onesimus to his senses (Philemon 10). A great earthquake at Philippi shook the jail and stirred the jailer to think about salvation (Acts 16.25-31).* God causes Nebuchadnezzar to dream a second time (Job 33.14-16). The dream itself caused the king to be 'afraid', but his imagination of its possible meaning made him 'terrified'. **v.6:** As before (2.2), the king in his trouble seeks solace in his 'wise men'. How often we are prone to turn to everyone and anything before turning to the Lord! **v.7:** On this occasion the king *told* the dream but the wise men 'did not' make known the interpretation. They knew it signalled impending terrible disaster for the king and thus remained silent for fear of losing their lives. **v.8:** But, enter Daniel. In his role as administrator of the city of Babylon he may have been elsewhere when the wise men were summoned. In any case, he always appears as one who is separate. There is no affinity between the natural and the spiritual man. Nebuchadnezzar recognised Daniel as one 'in whom' was 'the spirit of the holy gods', a statement which can be translated in the *singular*, but is unlikely given the adjective (holy) is *plural*. The polytheistic king is at least recognising Daniel as a man in communion with the supernatural, even if he does not acknowledge the one, true 'holy God'. **v.9:** After 30 years, Daniel was still 'master' (chief) of the 'magicians' and able to solve any 'secret' (mystery) by God's grace (Ezekiel 28.3).

v.10: Nebuchadnezzar's dream concerned a 'tree' – a symbol of his kingdom and dominion (v.22). Its strength, height and location indicate the kingdom's greatness and position of universal and supreme importance. Scripture often uses trees as symbols of great rulers (2 Kings 14.9; Ezekiel 17.22; Amos 2.9), and indeed man in his pride (Isaiah 2.12-13; Ezekiel 31.3-17). *Allen: The godly man is described as 'a tree planted by the rivers of water' (Psalm 1.3); the wicked is described as 'spreading himself like a green bay tree' (Psalm 37.35).* **v.12:** Nebuchadnezzar's function was to act as a 'tree of life' in the garden of Babylon, providing food, security and shelter for his vast empire (John Lennox). Even the 'beasts of the field' are introduced as nature was part of his dominion and protected by his authority (2.38). The 'fowls of heaven' could hint at the prevalent demonic activity within his idolatrous kingdom (Matthew 13.31-32). **v.13:** Suddenly, a 'watcher', *even* a 'holy one' (not two individuals) came down from heaven. The word 'watcher' describes the character of angelic beings who vigilantly observe the activities of earth. These are possibly angels of a special class charged with supervision of affairs on earth. In the NT, angels are often presented as keen observers of the ways of God amongst men (1 Corinthians 4.9; 11.10; Ephesians 3.10; 1 Peter 1.12). *Harry Bell: There is a watcher from heaven to see how Nebuchadnezzar reacts to the blessings of God. Likewise, God is watching you and me; watching our lives to see how we reciprocate the divine blessings He has given – to see how our lives flow out in response to the kindness of God. Are we living to show our gratitude and depth of love for Christ? Many of us rejoice in God's favours but there is very little return to God if at all. In times of prosperity we have forgotten God!*

v.14: In the estimation of the 'watchers', Nebuchadnezzar had failed to acknowledge God. He must be 'cut down', even 'destroyed' (v.23), i.e. spoiled. **v.15:** But the 'stump' of the tree was to be left (suggestive of *hope* and *life*), not completely removed. The 'band of iron and brass' probably tightly encircled the stump symbolising the on-going preservation of the king. The tree could not grow but would be protected. **v.16:** Nebuchadnezzar's 'heart' (mind), i.e. the seat of *reason* (not emotion) would be changed from that of a man to an animal. He would *think* and *act* like a beast, eating grass and dwelling in the open field. Psychological afflictions such as *lycanthropy* (wolf-man) and *boanthropy* (cow-man) have been documented in modern times. Raymond Harrison (1946) reports of a man in a British mental institution: *'He spent the entire day from dawn to dusk outdoors wandering around the magnificent lawns plucking and eating handfuls of grass. He never ate institutional food with the other inmates, and his only drink was water. The only physical abnormality noted consisted of a lengthening of the hair and a coarse, thickened condition of the finger-nails.'* The spiritual lesson is plain. The systematic denial of God constitutes men no better than the beasts (Romans 1.25, 28). *Bell: Nebuchadnezzar was made outwardly what he was inwardly – a beast that lives for food and pleasure but has no consciousness of God. In the Christian life, we become outwardly what we are inwardly. The thoughts and emotions of our hearts show themselves sooner or later.* Proverbs 23.7. His judgment would last for 'seven times' or 'heptads', i.e. complete periods of time, likely a period of seven years (rather than *days* or *months*), cf. 7.25.

v.17: The sentence upon Nebuchadnezzar came from an executive council of 'watchers' acting on behalf of God (v.24, cf. Job 1.6; 2.1). The intention of the decree was to teach *both* Nebuchadnezzar and his subjects that the most high God rules *from* heaven *over* earth (cf. v.26), not merely *in* heaven alone. The kings and kingdoms of men are ordained of Him, allowing even the 'basest' (lowliest) of men to rule as He will.

Interpretation: The King's Danger [vv.19-26]

v.19: The compassion of Daniel for the king is evident. He was 'astonied', i.e. 'astounded' or 'stunned' for an 'hour' (an idiom for a brief period of time). He felt the weight (grief) of the message in his own soul. Let us not traffic in unfelt truth! Though Daniel's thoughts 'troubled' (alarmed) him, he faithfully communicated the interpretation to the king (vv.20-26). See above notes for the dream's interpretation. Ezekiel speaks of the kingdom of Christ in similar 'tree' language. *Ezekiel 17.22-24: Thus saith the Lord GOD; I will also take of the highest branch of the high cedar (royal house of David), and will set it; I will crop off from the top of his young twigs a tender one (Messiah), and will plant it upon an high mountain and eminent (Zion): In the mountain of the height of Israel will I plant it: and it shall bring forth boughs, and bear fruit, and be a goodly cedar: and under it shall dwell all fowl of every wing... And all the trees of the field shall know that I the LORD have brought down the high tree (Babylon), have exalted the low tree (Israel), have dried up the green tree (Egypt), and have made the dry tree (Israel) to flourish.*

Exhortation: The King's Decision [v.27]

v.27: Unlike his interpretation before Belshazzar (5.17-28), Daniel offers Nebuchadnezzar some counsel and hope. The *revelation* of God's word presented him with a *responsibility* to change his ways. His *sins* must be substituted for righteousness, and *iniquities* for shewing mercy to the poor. This is not, of course, salvation by works, but indisputable evidence of true repentance towards God – *a change of mind that leads to a change of life*. Such repentance could 'lengthen' Nebuchadnezzar's 'tranquillity' in the sense of *potentially* suspending the divine sentence of judgment. God's servants are often bold to rebuke even the loftiest of men (cf. 1 Kings 18.18; Isaiah 39.6-7; Mark 6.18).



Humiliation: The King's Discipline [vv.28-33]

v.28: Evidently, Nebuchadnezzar did not change his ways. **v.29:** Perhaps he made a superficial effort to 'break-off' his sinful pattern of life, but any apparent repentance was not genuine. God gave him twelve months of grace yet walking 'upon' (Newberry) the rooftop of his palace in Babylon, his heart was lifted up in pride once again. **v.30:** There is no doubting the greatness of the city of Babylon. The city was reputedly 15-miles square with a population of approximately 1.2 million. It was accessed via eight gates (including the elaborately decorated Ishtar gate) situated in walls that were 80 feet thick, 320 feet high and 56 miles long (Herodotus). The hanging gardens comprised a 300-foot, seven-level, air-conditioned ziggurat with running water from top to bottom. A 400 feet long bridge spanned the river Euphrates which ran through the city dividing it into east-west sectors. Most of the bricks excavated from the ruins of Babylon bear the name and inscription of Nebuchadnezzar and read: 'The fortifications of Babylon I strengthened and established the name of my reign forever'. Fatally the king celebrated his *own* achievements, lauded his *own* strength and exalted his *own* glory. He had forgotten that all his glory derived from God (2.37). He failed to recognise that human beings are vessels for His praise and glory alone! Let us remember, everything God has *done* (built) through me is for His glory. Everything I *have* and *am* is for His glory (1 Corinthians 6.20; 10.31). **v.31:** The very moment the king spoke in pride, the judgment of God fell (cf. Psalm 78.30-31; Acts 12.21-23). A 'voice from heaven' declared the verdict of the angelic council. The kingdom, in the purpose of God, was already departed from him.

Restoration: The King's Deliverance [vv.34-37]

v.34: At the 'end of the days' (seven years), Nebuchadnezzar 'lifted up' his eyes. He had spent so many years looking at himself and his achievements but now he recognises the glory of the God of heaven. It is as we appreciate the *grace* and *glory* of God in Christ Jesus we see ourselves in the right perspective (Job 42.6). Nebuchadnezzar lifts his voice to 'bless' (praise) God, speaking of His *supremacy* (v.34) and *sovereignty* (v.35); His *ways* and *walk* (v.37). **v.35:** He once regarded himself as 'something', now he recognises himself as 'nothing'. He appreciates the sovereignty of God as one who does 'according to His will' whether amongst the angelic inhabitants of heaven, or human inhabitants of earth. *AW Tozer: Man's will is free because God is sovereign. A God less than sovereign could not bestow moral freedom upon His creatures. He would be afraid to do so.* **v.36:** It is remarkable that the grace of God restored Nebuchadnezzar to the 'glory' of his kingdom. It is possible that his closest counsellors, possibly influenced by Daniel, cooperated to take care of the king, keeping him confined in the palace gardens away from public scrutiny. He can still speak of 'honour' (as given from men) and 'brightness' (splendour) as well as 'excellent majesty' – he became even greater than before. **v.37:** But with this significant difference – **God** was honoured and glorified as the sovereign of his life. He had learned a painful lesson, 'those that walk in pride He is able to abase'. What a contrast to Christ. He walked in humility, even to Calvary, and God has highly exalted Him! **Jeremiah 9.23-24.** Galatians 6.14.