

LESSON 16

Daniel 4:20-22

20 The tree that thou sawest, which grew, and was strong, whose height reached unto the heaven, and the sight thereof to all the earth; 21 Whose leaves were fair, and the fruit thereof much, and in it was meat for all; under which the beasts of the field dwelt, and upon whose branches the fowls of the heaven had their habitation: 22 It is thou, O king, that art grown and become strong: for thy greatness is grown, and reacheth unto heaven, and thy dominion to the end of the earth.

Daniel has good news and bad news — and he starts with the good news. (Will the lessons for us in this book never end?)

As we (and the king and the wise men) suspected, the mighty tree represents Nebuchadnezzar in all his military success and genius. His kingdom stretched from what is today Egypt to western Iran and from modern Syria into Saudi Arabia, encompassing many different cultures and language groups.

But, did Nebuchadnezzar's dominion extend to the end of the earth as verse 22 suggests? No, and neither did it reach unto heaven as that verse also suggests. These

phrases are hyperboles intended to describe the incredible extent of his kingdom. We see this elsewhere in the Bible.

Luke 2:1 — *And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Cæsar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.*

And, in Romans 1:8 Paul said “your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.”

When I read people objecting to Daniel with arguments such as this (that verse 22 is in error because Nebuchadnezzar did not literally rule the entire globe), I have to wonder what they think when they get to Matthew 23.

Matthew 23:24 — *Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel.*

Those who study the Bible should not check their common sense at the door. We use hyperboles every day in our own speech — and we find them in the Bible as well. (And if I have said that once, I have said it a million times!)

Daniel 4:23-27

23 And whereas the king saw a watcher and an holy one coming down from heaven, and saying, Hew the tree down, and destroy it; yet leave the stump of the roots thereof in the earth, even with a band of iron and brass, in the tender grass of the field; and let it be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts of the field, till seven times pass over him; 24 This is the interpre-

tation, O king, and this is the decree of the most High, which is come upon my lord the king: 25 That they shall drive thee from men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field, and they shall make thee to eat grass as oxen, and they shall wet thee with the dew of heaven, and seven times shall pass over thee, till thou know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will. 26 And whereas they commanded to leave the stump of the tree roots; thy kingdom shall be sure unto thee, after that thou shalt have known that the heavens do rule. 27 Wherefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable unto thee, and break off thy sins by righteousness, and thine iniquities by shewing mercy to the poor; if it may be a lengthening of thy tranquillity.

Now for the bad news. In these verses, Daniel interprets the ominous part of the dream.

The decree of the watcher, Daniel says in verse 24, is a decree of the Most High. This judgment, whatever it will be, is a judgment from God.

The bad news is that the king is going to lose his kingdom and his sanity until he understands the lesson that God wants to teach him — that God rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whomsoever he will.

The banded tree stump represents Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom during his illness. The stump was protected so that the king would know that his kingdom would not be taken away permanently. Why was this important? If Nebuchadnezzar lost his kingdom while he was out of the picture then that would prove his point. That is, it would show that Nebuchadnezzar was the real power and that it was his genius that kept the kingdom together. God, however, wanted to show him that the opposite was true. Nebuchadnezzar ruled and had his kingdom because it pleased God for him to rule and to have his kingdom. If God could keep his kingdom together while the king was out in the field living the life of an ox then God clearly did not need a brilliant leader to hold a kingdom together. God could put him in power, God could remove him, and God could put him back in power.

In the ordinary course of events, any ruler suffering from such an illness would have been deposed and replaced. History tells us that Nebuchadnezzar's sons were worthless, and indeed were unable to retain power very long after his death. But it was God's will that the kingdom would be returned to Nebuchadnezzar after he recovered — so that is what happened.

There was still a possibility that Nebuchadnezzar could avoid this misfortune if he would amend his ways and acknowledge the absolute sovereignty of God. What did the king need to do? Verse 27 tells us that he needed to adopt two new policies:

- He needed to renounce his sins and do what was right.
- He needed to protect the poor in his kingdom and not allow them to be exploited and oppressed.

Did he do this? Perhaps he tried, because verse 29 tells us that the judgment was delayed for a year, but he must not have succeeded.

Daniel 4:28-30

28 All this came upon the king Nebuchadnezzar. 29 At the end of twelve months he walked in the palace of the kingdom of Babylon. 30 The king spake, and said, Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?

Daniel may have hoped in verse 27 that the king might change his ways and avert this judgment, but verse 28 gives us the sad news. Everything in the vision came true. From that outcome we know that Nebuchadnezzar ultimately refused to change his ways.

What did Nebuchadnezzar see as he strolled about on the roof of his palace? Babylon contained two of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World: the hanging gardens and the city walls. The location of the hanging gardens is in doubt but the walls have been found. The outer wall stretched for more than five miles and, according to Herodotus, had enough space on top to enable a four-horse chariot to turn around.

During Nebuchadnezzar's reign, Babylon was undoubtedly the most magnificent (and probably the largest) city on earth. Herodotus, the ancient Greek historian, visited Babylon about one hundred years after Nebuchadnezzar's time and was overwhelmed by its grandeur.

As for the hanging gardens, according to the Babylonian historian Berosus, Nebuchadnezzar constructed them for his wife (Amytis) who had left the mountains of her native Media for the plains of Babylonia. Her husband, in effect, built a mountain in the city to remind his wife of her homeland. One text stated:

These were elevated gardens, high enough to be seen beyond the city walls. They boasted many different kinds of plants and palm trees. Ingenious hoists had been contrived by which to raise water to the high terraces from the Euphrates River.

Most of the bricks taken out of Babylon in the archaeological excavations bear the name and inscription of Nebuchadnezzar stamped on them. One of the records of Nebuchadnezzar sounds almost like the boast we see in verse 40. The brick reads, “The fortifications of Babylon I strengthened and established the name of my reign forever.”

How do you suppose the author of Daniel knew about Nebuchadnezzar’s great pride in his building activities if he wrote the book 400 years after the fact?

What was the straw that broke the camel’s back? The king looked out over his kingdom and said “Look what I have done!” Herod suffered a similar fate.

Acts 12:21-23 — *And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them. 22 And the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man. 23 And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost.*

Nebuchadnezzar, like Herod, was filled with pride at his own achievements. He had not given glory to God despite all that he now knew about God.

This is an important lesson for the church. Sometimes we may be tempted to boast about all that we have done and all that we have built in God’s kingdom. But the

church is not “our church” — it is the Lord’s church, and any building that goes on is done by him. God (not us) adds people to the Lord’s church.

1 Corinthians 3:6 — *I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase.*

God deserves all of the glory for whatever is accomplished in his eternal kingdom.

Daniel 4:31-33

31 While the word was in the king’s mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, saying, O king Nebuchadnezzar, to thee it is spoken; The kingdom is departed from thee. 32 And they shall drive thee from men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field: they shall make thee to eat grass as oxen, and seven times shall pass over thee, until thou know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will. 33 The same hour was the thing fulfilled upon Nebuchadnezzar: and he was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles’ feathers, and his nails like birds’ claws.

Notice that the account changes here from the first person to the third person. This makes sense since the king could not have been a sane witness of his own insanity!

God interrupts the mighty king while the words were still in his mouth. As McGuiggan points out, the king was “bragging one moment and munching the next!”

The humor of this incident is hard to miss. Imagine for a moment how the court must have handled the visit of foreign dignitaries. (“The king can’t talk to you right now... He’s grazing.”) (In Chapter 5 we will learn that he was living with wild donkeys.)

Poor Nebuchadnezzar. After all that he did, this is what he is most remembered for. Even Shakespeare mentions this episode. In *All’s Well That Ends Well*, the clown, after being rebuked for his ignorance of herbs, responds by saying, “I am no great Nebuchadnezzar, sir; I have not much skill in grass.”

In verse 31, God says that the kingdom “is departed” from him. So sure was the coming judgment that God speaks of it has already having happened. (We see this in Revelation 14:8 as well with regard to Rome — “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!” — which was written when Rome was still very much in power.)

Bible Study Tip: When God starts using the past tense, it’s time to watch out! The sky is about to fall on someone, and there’s not a thing that can stop it.

Verse 33 tells us the condition of Nebuchadnezzar during his insanity. He grazed in the field like a beast. His hair, matted and coarse, looked like eagle feathers. His fingernails and toenails became like claws. This description suggests a long period of time, which is further evidence that “seven times” likely means “seven years.” (The thought was likely that “the full cycle of seasons, with all the changes in types of weather involved, would pass over the king seven times.”)

As we mentioned in our introductory comments, some have said that this description of Nebuchadnezzar is too absurd to be true. But is it really that absurd? Not at all. In fact, it is very similar to a known medical condition. It has been given vari-

ous names: insania zoanthropica, lycanthropy (originally just applied to thinking you are a wolf, but now expanded to other animals), and boanthropy (thinking you are a bovine). R. K. Harrison speaks of an encounter he had with such a person in a British mental hospital. He ate only vegetation and drank only water. His health was excellent. The patient wandered about the grounds of the institution eating grass as if he were a cow, and the only physical abnormality noticed was the length and coarseness of his hair and the thickened condition of his nails. Another example that was mentioned in a commentary was that of a man who believed himself to be a cat for a period of over thirteen years and yet was gainfully employed the entire time. (But the commentary failed to tell us what job he had!)

No Babylonian record has been found that mentions any activity by Nebuchadnezzar during the seven year period from 582 to 575 BC. What do you think he was up to? (Perhaps he was “out standing in his field”!)

Nebuchadnezzar’s son, Amel-Marduk, likely reigned while his father was out in the pasture munching grass.

For those who argue the event did not happen because it is not described in any of the Babylonian Chronicles, I have two responses.

First, those Chronicles do not purport to be nor are they an exhaustive description of everything the king did.

Second, and more importantly, this is not the type of thing that Nebuchadnezzar would have wanted preserved for perpetuity in his royal inscriptions. (Think of Roosevelt and his wheel chair.)

Daniel 4:34-35

34 And at the end of the days I Nebuchadnezzar lifted up mine eyes unto heaven, and mine under-

standing returned unto me, and I blessed the most High, and I praised and honoured him that liveth for ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation: 35 And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?

For the third time in as many chapters, King Nebuchadnezzar seems to get the message. His reason returns to him, and he realizes just how inappropriate his pride was.

God deserves all of the glory and praise because he has an everlasting dominion and an eternal kingdom — unlike the king whose kingdom could be taken from him. No one can stay God’s hand — unlike as God had done to the king’s hand. No one can question God’s actions — unlike the way that God had repeatedly questioned Nebuchadnezzar’s actions.

If it is foolish to say to a human king, “What are you doing?” (Ecclesiastes 8:4), how much more foolish is it for a human king to say to the divine king, “What have you done?” (Daniel 4:35).

Daniel 4:36-37

36 At the same time my reason returned unto me; and for the glory of my kingdom, mine honour and brightness returned unto me; and my counsellors and my lords sought unto me; and I was established in my kingdom, and excellent majesty was added unto me. 37 Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment: and those that walk in pride he is able to abase.

As promised, Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom was returned to him and he was returned to power. In fact, he says here that even more greatness was added to him.

Do you think that this is how he would have expressed his increased greatness before he learned a lesson about pride? That his greatness was **added** to him? Added by whom?

Again, the significant part of this account is that Nebuchadnezzar regained his kingdom. That proved to him and to all the people that his kingdom was not his because of his own power or genius. His kingdom was a gift from God — and perhaps at last he understood that. He perhaps finally knew the power of the God of the Hebrews. It sounds like he did — but we have been here before!

History Between Chapters 4 and 5

This is the end of the story as far as Nebuchadnezzar is concerned in the book of Daniel or in the Bible — verse 18 is the last time his name is mentioned in Scripture.

By any measure, Nebuchadnezzar was one of the most towering figures of human history, and certainly one of the most powerful rulers ever to walk the earth. But was he in charge? Was he in control? Or was he just a tool in the hand of God? And when parents choose names for their sons today — do they choose his name, or do they instead consider the name of a Jewish exile that, from a human perspective, would have been considered utterly insignificant when compared with the mighty Nebuchadnezzar? We must learn to see things as God sees them! That is a central message of this book.

Before proceeding to Chapter 5, it will be helpful to briefly consider the history that occurred between the events in these two chapters. Without any warning or explanation, the narrative leaps from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar in Chapter 4 to the very end (very last day!) of the Babylonian empire in Chapter 5.

Note: It is clear here that a large break in time occurs between these two chapters. Later we will see other large breaks in time that likewise occur without warning — but they should not come as a surprise to us since we now know that such breaks occur in the book.

Nebuchadnezzar died in 563. He was succeeded by his son Evil-Merodach (Amel-Marduk or man of Marduk), who released Jehoiachin from prison and gave him an honorable place in the court (2 Kings 25:27-30). (Perhaps when you name your son “Evil” you have only yourself to blame when he turns out bad!)

Two years later, Evil-Merodach was assassinated by his brother-in-law, who died four years later. He was succeeded by his son, who was murdered nine months later. When the dust cleared, Nabonidus was on the throne. He most likely married a

daughter of Nebuchadnezzar to legitimize his claim to the throne. Belshazzar, whom we will meet in the first verse of Chapter 5, was the son of Nabonidus.

The final year of the Chaldean empire was 539 BC. The ruler who defeated them was Cyrus the Great. The ruler who takes charge of the city of Babylon under Cyrus is Darius the Mede. So there is a big jump in time between Daniel 4:37 and Daniel 5:1.

CHAPTER 5

Daniel 4 focused on Nebuchadnezzar's pride, Daniel 5 will focus on Belshazzar's pride. The major difference between Chapters 4 and 5 is in the response of the king. In Daniel 4, Nebuchadnezzar ultimately repents of his arrogance and is restored to his former position. In Daniel 5, Belshazzar does not repent and is killed.

We will see Belshazzar's sins in this chapter — and we have seen those same sins before: arrogance, blasphemy, and idolatry.

The theme of Daniel 5 fits into the theme of the whole book: In spite of present appearances, God is in control. This theme is important in the context of the oppression of God's people at the hands of arrogant pagan rulers such as Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. Do we face oppression today from arrogant pagan rulers? Remember the theme of Daniel — in spite of present appearances, God is in control!

Daniel 5:1-4

1 Belshazzar the king made a great feast to a thousand of his lords, and drank wine before the thousand. 2 Belshazzar, while he tasted the wine, commanded to bring the golden and silver vessels

which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem; that the king, and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, might drink therein. 3 Then they brought the golden vessels that were taken out of the temple of the house of God which was at Jerusalem; and the king, and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, drank in them. 4 They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone.

If you are looking for controversy in Chapter 5, you don't have to look any further than the first word of the first verse — Belshazzar. The transition from Daniel 4 to 5 is an abrupt one, and Belshazzar is thrust onto the stage with no indication of the passage of time or the death of Nebuchadnezzar.

In this chapter, Daniel tells us that Belshazzar was king of Babylon, that Belshazzar was the last Chaldean king, and that Nebuchadnezzar was his father. In fact, Nabonidus was the last king and Belshazzar's father. How do we explain that?

For many years, liberal critics said that Belshazzar was a fictional character invented by the author of Daniel. But, as with so many attacks from the liberal critics, archaeology has now confirmed the Biblical account. (Both they and we should remember this when we get to Darius the Mede at the end of this chapter!) Never bet against the Bible!

Thirty-seven archival texts dated from the first to the fourteenth year of Nabonidus now attest to Belshazzar's historicity. We now know both from the Bible and from

extra-Biblical history that Belshazzar existed, that he was the son of Nabonidus, that he was reigning as co-regent at this time in history, and that he was in charge of the city when it fell to the Persians — all exactly as Daniel told us.

We do, however, have some questions we need to consider.

QUESTION 1

Why doesn't Chapter 5 mention Nabonidus (Belshazzar's father)?

We know that Daniel was aware of Nabonidus because of what is recorded in verses 7, 16, and 29 of this chapter. In those verses, Belshazzar promises to make someone the *third* ruler in his kingdom. Why the third? Because Belshazzar and Nabonidus were the first two rulers in the kingdom.

Why not mention Nabonidus by name? Because he did not play any part in the events described in this chapter. For all practical purposes Belshazzar was the only king the people served. Belshazzar may not have been the *de jure* king, but he was definitely the *de facto* king.

QUESTION 2

Why is Nebuchadnezzar called the father of Belshazzar four times in Daniel 5 and Belshazzar is called the son of Nebuchadnezzar once in that chapter when Belshazzar was actually the son of Nabonidus?

The answer to this question hinges on the meaning of "son." One scholar has listed **seven** ways in which the term "father" was used in the time of Nebuchadnezzar and **twelve** possible meanings for "son."

"Father" and "son" can simply mean "ancestor" and "descendent." (For example, Jesus as the son of David, the Jews as the sons of Jacob with Abraham as their father.) It is possible that a genetic relationship existed between Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. If Nabonidus married a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar to legitimize his rule, then his son by her would be the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar. This view is

strengthened by the fact that Nabonidus named one of his sons Nebuchadnezzar. Also, an earlier king (Neriglissar) is known to have married a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar.

It is even possible that Belshazzar was the literal son of Nebuchadnezzar. Only six or seven years elapsed between the death of Nebuchadnezzar and the accession of Nabonidus to the throne. It is possible that the new king married a wife of Nebuchadnezzar who had a son by Nebuchadnezzar, and that Nabonidus then adopted that son. I would not call this explanation likely, but it is possible. The most likely explanation is the previous one — that Nabonidus married a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, which means that Belshazzar was a grandson of Nebuchadnezzar.

Another explanation is that “by ancient usage the term son often referred to a successor in the same office whether or not there was a blood relationship.” This may have been the usage in Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 27:7 — *All the nations shall serve him [Nebuchadnezzar] and his son and his grandson, until the time of his own land comes; then many nations and great kings shall make him their slave.*

In the Assyrian text commonly referred to as the “Black Obelisk” of Shalmaneser III, Jehu is called the “son of Omri,” although Jehu was not a descendant of Omri. He was of another lineage altogether. There “son” is used to mean “successor.”

QUESTION 3

Why does Daniel say that Belshazzar was king of Babylon when his father was the actual king?

Archaeology has shown that Nabonidus took up residence at Teman in north Arabia and left his son Belshazzar in charge of the northern frontier of the Babylonian empire. Thus, Belshazzar became the *de facto* king of Babylon.

Further, tablets dating from 543 BC have been found which imply that Belshazzar and his father were on equal footing. Daniel knew what he was talking about!

Some of the ancient evidence suggests that the leader of the assassination plot against the previous Babylonian king, Labashi-Marduk, had been Belshazzar himself. It suggests that Belshazzar profited financially by the previous king's death and even suggests that it was Belshazzar who proposed his old father, Nabonidus, to the conspirators as the new king, evidently reasoning that his father would soon die, and he would then become the new ruler.

QUESTION 4

Why not just call Belshazzar the “son of Nabonidus?”

Nabonidus was a very unpopular king. This may explain why he was absent from the city of Babylon for 14 years.

Also, inscriptions have been found that show Nabonidus claimed to have authority from Nebuchadnezzar to administer his kingdom. Thus, it is quite likely that Nabonidus' sons were required to be addressed as sons of Nebuchadnezzar to stress this connection. (Belshazzar and the Queen both refer to Belshazzar as the son of Nebuchadnezzar in this chapter.)

Once again we have evidence for an early date for this book. Knowledge of Belshazzar seems to have faded by the time of Herodotus (fifth century BC) and Xenophon (fourth century BC). If the book had been written in the second century, the name “Nabonidus” would have been used rather than the then-forgotten “Belshazzar.”