

Lessons from Daniel 4

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We are confronted with various diseases, among them mental and psychological illnesses. Depression has become a specific problem in our days. In Daniel 4 we read about King Nebuchadnezzar for the last time, and he is suffering from a mental disease.

I. Discussion of the Chapter

A. The Frame

The Aramaic text begins in Dan 3:31 while in English versions that Dan 3:31 is Dan 4:1. We will follow the English verse numbering.

- vs. 1–3 The following report is Nebuchadnezzar’s autobiography. *What do these introductory words reveal about Nebuchadnezzar’s relationship to God?*
- He respects God as the One who is the Most High.
 - He testifies to God’s work in him.
 - He acknowledges God’s universal and eternal rule.
- v. 37 Nebuchadnezzar’s report ends with a doxology.

B. The Dream and the Problem of Its Interpretation

- vs. 4, 5 Having reached the climax of his power, Nebuchadnezzar receives a second dream from God. The dream is terrifying.
- vs. 6–9 The wise men cannot interpret the dream, although this time the dream is related to them (compare with Dan 2). Again Daniel is brought to solve the problem. The phrase “in whom is the spirit of the holy gods” underlines the high esteem Daniel enjoyed. It is strange that people do not rely on God immediately; instead they first try to solve problems themselves.
- v. 8 *What does “according to the name of my god” express?*
- Nebuchadnezzar had somehow acknowledged the true God (Dan 2 and 3) and yet adhered to his own god(s).
 - There was no true conversion.
 - Maybe for him the almighty God was one among many gods.

C. The Dream

- vs. 10–18 The dream refers to a tree that is to be cut down. A heavenly being announces the judgment on the tree. The tree is a symbol, for we hear about a human heart that will be replaced by the heart of a beast. A time span is given for this “beastly” condition.
- v. 17 The main thought of the chapter is that God is the highest authority. He is the Lord of history and the Lord of humankind. This concept appears repeatedly in Daniel (2:21; 3:33; 4:17, 25, 26, 32, 34, 35, 37).

D. The Interpretation

- v. 19 *How does this verse describe Daniel?*
- He does not rejoice over Nebuchadnezzar’s judgment. Instead he feels sorry about what is to happen to him.
 - He cares for the king.

- vs. 20–22 Nebuchadnezzar and his empire are the golden head of chapter 2. He is also the tree of chapter 4. He provides protection and support for the nations.
- vs. 23–26 The verdict will be executed. There is a Lord who surpasses the ruler of the Babylonian world empire. Nebuchadnezzar is accountable to this Lord. Consequently, he may be cast out of human society for seven years. But the judgment has a goal. Nebuchadnezzar is supposed to learn that God is the true Lord. His kingdom is to return to him. The judgment is mingled with grace.
- v. 27 *Daniel turns to the king with a call. What do we learn from this action?*
- The disaster can be prevented, if the king commits his life to God.
 - The judgment is linked to conditions and does not happen automatically. See Jonah and the judgment of Nineveh; see the principle in Jeremiah 18:6–10.
 - Daniel can now address the king in a clearer way than ever before and call him to repentance.
 - In addition to the call the text also contains a promise.
 - Therefore, the dream should be understood as a warning.

E. The Dream is Being Fulfilled

- vs. 28–30 *In spite of the warning, judgment finally comes upon the king. What are the mistakes that Nebuchadnezzar made?*
- Pride and arrogance
 - Self-glorification (see the stress on “I” and “my”; see, however, Dan 2:20–23 as contrast)
 - The desire to be independent of God
 - Bad stewardship
- vs. 31–33 The verdict is executed right away, and the prediction is fulfilled (compare with Acts 12:21–23). God does not always react immediately. In any case, whatever Nebuchadnezzar was unwilling to learn in good times he has to learn under difficult circumstances until he is willing to accept that God is the Lord. Nebuchadnezzar’s insanity may be indirectly referred to in historical sources.

F. Nebuchadnezzar’s Conversion

- vs. 31–34 *What does Nebuchadnezzar express with these verses?*
- He does not blame God for his sickness.
 - He praises God and prays to Him.
 - He acknowledges God as the only sovereign Lord. We are dust, while God is eternal and omnipotent. God does all things right (see Rom 8:28). God loves humility.
 - Nebuchadnezzar is converted to God.
- When the king looked up to God and entered into a relationship with Him, he was healed. In addition, he got back his kingly office. Let us “fix our eye on Jesus” (Heb 12:2), not on humans. Nevertheless, people who love the Lord can be of great help on our journey to God. It is conceivable that without Daniel Nebuchadnezzar may not have found God.

II. Connections to the New Testament

- The great tree with animals living in and under it is used by Jesus in a parable to describe the kingdom of God which surpasses Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom by far (Matt 13:32).
- The fall of Nebuchadnezzar resulting from his pride (Dan 4:30, 31) points to the fall of symbolic, end-time Babylon (Rev 14:8; also chapters 17 and 18). The term “Babylon the Great” is found in both books.
- Compare Daniel 4:34 with Revelation 4:9. We should honor God “who lives forever.”

III. Application

- God is the true and highest Lord. He is the Lord over politics. He is also Lord over dictators who plague humanity. He carries out His plans behind the scenes. Soon He will establish His eternal kingdom from which everything negative will be banned.
- As God revealed Himself to Nebuchadnezzar, so He reveals Himself to us. He does this through answered prayers, experiences, and fellow humans—but especially through His Word, the Holy Scriptures. In some sense we are better off today than people were in the past: we have the full Word of God available to us.
- Just as God drew Nebuchadnezzar to Himself, God does not give up on us in His persevering love. Even when we go through bitter situations and experiences, God’s goal for us is our salvation.
- As Nebuchadnezzar made a decision for God, we too need to decide if God is our Lord.
- We must share our experience with others as Nebuchadnezzar did. Everyone should have the chance to experience the joy of belonging to God, our Savior and Lord.

7/15

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