

AWAKENED FROM ARROGANCE

God's Dealings With Nebuchadnezzar

By Steve Zeisler

Tomorrow is the day the IRS expects to hear from everyone who owes money on their taxes. Recent news accounts report that Michael Milken, the junk bond dealer, had an income of more than half a billion dollars in 1987. He has now been charged with various serious crimes, and his lawyers have observed that, given the fact that this man paid himself five hundred and fifty million dollars income, it's going to be hard to convince a jury that he is innocent of all wrongdoing. Can you imagine making the case that your year's labor is worth that much money? He may end up paying the government close to two billion dollars in fines for what they charge are illegal activities. It's hard to even comprehend how much money that is. I don't know that I could write it down correctly if I was asked. Try to picture Michael Milken going into a H. & R. Block office with his shoe box full of receipts and paperwork, trying to minimize the taxes on his half-billion dollar income.

Ours is an entrepreneurial age. Daily we hear stories of individuals buying up airline companies, luxury hotel chains, multi-million dollar businesses. These men become, in a way, folk heroes. They fascinate us. They are, in an economic sense, the modern counterparts of the great pharaohs and kings we read about in the Scriptures. Although they are not involved in politics, at least overtly, they live like the emperors of old. They have tremendous economic power, and they like to think they can rule the world. Their every whim is met; they will not tolerate failure.

THE HEAD OF GOLD

In this vein we are going to look today at the life of one of the most powerful men in history, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. We find his story in chapters 2 through 4 of the book of Daniel. This king was one of the greatest of the ancient potentates. He was richer, more flamboyant, more prominent than any of his peers. Here is what Daniel said about this man, Chapter 2, verse 37:

"You, O king, are the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, the strength, and the glory; and wherever the sons of men dwell, or the beasts of the field, or the birds of the sky, He has given them into your hand and has caused you to rule over them all. You are the head of gold."

How remarkable it must have been to hear a prophet of God say to you, "You are the king of kings, the ruler of all civilization; men and animals all report to you."

Nebuchadnezzar had no trouble believing this. Here is how he describes himself, in chapter 4, verse 30. He is extolling the beauty of the city of Babylon, one of the wonders of the ancient world:

"The king reflected and said, 'Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?'"

But this remarkable king, this "head of gold," in Daniel's description, is shortly going to have an encounter with God.

In this series of messages, we are looking at the lives of various people in the Scriptures who at some point in their lives had a direct encounter with the Almighty. God personally appeared to them, or spoke to them, or involved himself in their lives, and proceeded to overthrow everything in their experience, changing them irrevocably. Today we will look at this mighty king, Nebuchadnezzar, who had a revolutionary encounter with the God of heaven.

Last week we looked at the life of Ezekiel, who was a contemporary of Nebuchadnezzar, and who actually was exiled by him. Nebuchadnezzar, of course, later exiled the entire Jewish nation to Babylon. Many are fascinated by the lifestyles of the rich and famous of our own day. This morning we will have an opportunity to look at the lifestyle of Nebuchadnezzar, a king whose excesses makes today's entrepreneurs look like small fish indeed.

DREAMS, INSECURITIES

Now in the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; and his spirit was troubled and his sleep left him. Then the king gave orders to call in the magicians, the conjurers, the sorcerers and the Chaldeans, to tell the king his dreams. So they came in and stood before the king. And the king said to them, "I had a dream, and my spirit is anxious to understand the dream." Then the Chaldeans spoke to the king in Aramaic: "O king, live forever! Tell the dream to your servants, and we will declare the interpretation." The king answered and said to the Chaldeans, "The command from me is firm: if you do not make known to me the dream and its interpretation, you will be torn limb from limb, and your houses will be made a rubbish heap. But if you declare the dream and its interpretation, you will receive from me gifts and a reward and great honor; therefore declare to me the dream and its interpretation."

It is obvious from this that Nebuchadnezzar was accustomed to running things his way. He did not suffer fools gladly. He was king over a vast empire, the dominant figure of his day, an incredibly rich and powerful despot.

But, as we can see from this account, he had his insecurities, too, as is the case with many who love themselves and their abilities. It occurred to Nebuchadnezzar that he could not control everything in his life. No matter how powerful and rich he was he was still subject to bad dreams, times when he could not sleep, times when he was faced with the fact that there were spiritual realities which he could not control. He was restless and anxious. I have found that these two things, selflove and arrogance, and insecurity and restlessness, almost invariably go together. And this is what we find to be true about Nebuchadnezzar.

THE DREAM-TELLER

The book of Daniel begins with the account of four young Israelite boys who were captured in Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem and brought back to Babylon. There they were to be schooled in the literature and language of the Chaldeans before entering the king's personal service as advisers. So when the king became restless and anxious, "when his spirit was troubled," as the text says. and his magicians and sorcerers were unable to help him, Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, were in imminent danger of losing their lives, too. But God revealed to Daniel not only the king's dream but its interpretation, and Daniel asked for permission to see Nebuchadnezzar.

We pick up the account again in 2:26:

The king answered and said to Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, "Are you able to make known to me the dream which I have seen and its interpretation?" Daniel answered before the king and said, "As for the mystery about which the king has inquired, neither wise men, conjurers, magicians, nor diviners are able to declare it to the king. However, there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will take place in the latter days. This was your dream and the visions in your mind while on your bed. As for you, O king, while on your bed your thoughts turned to what would take place in the future; and He who reveals mysteries has made known to you what will take place. But as for me, this mystery has not been revealed to me for any wisdom residing in me more than in any other living man, but for the purpose of making the interpretation known to the king, and that you may understand the thoughts of your mind."

Daniel was in his early teens when he was forcibly taken from his homeland, together with his three friends, and brought to Babylon. Yet, despite this humiliating and fearful initiation, he addresses the most powerful king in the world and declares that God had made known to him the king's dream and its interpretation. Daniel

is fearless. He is calm and has a sense of purpose, although he knows that his life is in danger if the king is not satisfied with what he has to say. The dream, said Daniel, was a revelation about the future, and his God, the revealer of mysteries, had unfolded the dream to him.

What a contrast marks Daniel's frame of mind from that of the king's. The king is anxious and preoccupied. Daniel is calm and unconcerned about personal glory. Nebuchadnezzar is proud and arrogant. Daniel humbly attributes the interpretation of the dream to God, the One who reveals mysteries, and claims nothing for himself. Nebuchadnezzar's interests involved his lording it over the world of his day, the gathering of wealth to himself, the building of beautiful cities, the putting down of any opposition. Yet, here was Daniel, fearlessly speaking of a God and a power that the king knew nothing about. Nebuchadnezzar at last had come face to face with circumstances that he could not control.

HONORING GOD'S MAN

We find Nebuchadnezzar's response to Daniel's words in 2:46:

Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell on his face and did homage to Daniel, and gave orders to present to him an offering and fragrant incense. The king answered Daniel and said, "Surely your God is a God of gods and a Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, since you have been able to reveal this mystery." Then the king promoted Daniel and gave him many great gifts, and he made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon.

The king feels impelled to do something in response to the power of God. But look carefully at what he does. He prostrates himself before Daniel, and says to him, "Surely your God is a God of gods and a revealer of mysteries. You shall receive honors and gifts." He wants Daniel to be the go-between, the God-person in his retinue. Nebuchadnezzar studiously avoids facing God himself. He humbles himself, not before God, but before God's man. He wants God to relate to Daniel, not to himself.

Many of our contemporaries respond to the gospel in the same fashion. They say nice things about ministers. They contribute to Christian charities. They approve of having Christian spokesmen visit their communities. Universities hire chaplains to do religious things on campus while the university goes ahead doing what it is best at doing—promoting itself. Once I read of a shipping magnate who always made sure that a priest was on board all of his ships. Have someone on staff who can represent us to God, is the ticket. This is what Nebuchadnezzar is doing here when he pays homage to Daniel. He can't ignore what he has just heard, but he wants to protect himself. Thus he promotes Daniel, hoping to placate God—and get a little sleep, too.

A COURAGEOUS REFUSAL

Chapter 3 tells of Nebuchadnezzar's efforts to harness spiritual powers.

Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold the height of which was sixty cubits and its width six cubits; he set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon.

Verse 4:

Then the herald loudly proclaimed: "To you the command is given, O peoples, nations and men of every language, that at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe, and all kinds of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king has set up. But whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire."

Nebuchadnezzar decides he might as well make religion serve his purposes, so he fashions a golden image (perhaps of himself), and demands that everyone worship it. Note the phrase "the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king has set up." He wanted everyone to worship the image that he himself had built. But Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego (evidently Daniel was elsewhere) refused to bow down to this image, as we see in verse 16:

Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego answered and said to the king, "Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

This is very disconcerting to the king. He, like our modern-day, would-be kings, is convinced that every man has his price, and that the power to torture and kill cannot be withstood. This philosophy had defeated the Egyptians and they had run in fear of him. It had worked when he had threatened his magicians and conjurors. He was so powerful that his adversaries always knuckled under to his threats. This was Nebuchadnezzar's philosophy, as it is the philosophy of the rich and mighty today. Everyone has his price. Just name it, and people will knuckle under.

But here the king is confronted by three men who say no to his wishes. They claim to serve the living God, and say that he is able to deliver them from any threats to their life. And even if he does not deliver them, they add, they still won't bow down to the king. They don't know what God will do in their situation, yet they are utterly fearless. They are men of such character that no threat will induce them to do wrong. Once more Nebuchadnezzar's insecurities and anxieties come to the surface. Although he is the most powerful man alive he has no control over this situation. Daniel knows mysteries he knows nothing about. The three men standing before him possess a courage that he finds bewildering. Nebuchadnezzar would have knuckled under to one more powerful than he if such there had been.

So he commands that the furnace be made seven times hotter and that Daniel's three friends be thrown into it. The fire is so hot that even his choice troops, who are assigned to throw these men into the fire, themselves succumb from the heat. But the Lord God, the pre-incarnate Christ, I believe, meets the young men in the fire. When Nebuchadnezzar commands that they be brought out from the furnace, so unaffected are they, even their clothes did not smell of smoke or fire. Once again Nebuchadnezzar the powerful, the self-important, finds that he must respond to the actions of God.

URGING OTHERS TO RESPOND

And he does so, in chapter 3, verse 28:

Nebuchadnezzar responded, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach Meshach and Abed-nego,...

This is similar to the response that he made when Daniel interpreted his dream: "Blessed be your God." He is still holding God at arm's length. He still wants an intermediary to come between him and God.

"Blessed be the God...who has sent His angel and delivered His servants who put their trust in Him, violating the king's command, and yielded up their bodies so as not to serve or worship any god except their own God. Therefore I make a decree that any people, nation or tongue that speaks anything offensive against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego shall be torn limb from limb and their houses reduced to a rubbish heap, inasmuch as there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way."

Once again the king is forced to respect the power of God, and once again he tries to insulate himself from a personal relationship with God. He is saying, in effect, "Your God is so wonderful I want everybody everywhere to respect him. From now on no one will be permitted to say anything against your God. If they do, I will see that they will come to a sorry end. We are going to have more respect for your God around here."

Notice how he carefully avoids the issue himself. Many people today respond to the gospel the same way. At the end of chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar sought to distance himself from the Lord by honoring a man. Here in chapter 3, he responds by urging others to respect the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego. Again, we find the same avoidance among our contemporaries. "Let's send literature behind the Iron Curtain. Those atheists need to hear about God." Or, "Let's send money to build churches in Guatemala. There's been an

earthquake there. This is a good cause." Or, "Every child ought to attend Christian camp. Let's not deprive any one of them this opportunity." Once more Nebuchadnezzar and those like him hope to placate One who is greater than they. They hope to satisfy God and yet keep him at a distance.

TRUE CONVERSION

Finally, we come to the fateful fourth chapter of Daniel, written by Nebuchadnezzar himself. Verses 4,5:

"I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and flourishing in my palace. I saw a dream and it made me fearful and these fantasies as I lay on my bed and the visions in my mind kept alarming me."

The opening verse of the chapter declares that Nebuchadnezzar is writing a document for all peoples. This is the account of a great political figure writing of his conversion--an ancient version of "Born Again." Once more the king has a dream, and once more he becomes restless and tormented. His mind accuses him. Sleep escapes him. He fears he is losing his mind--and that in fact is what is happening to him. This is one of the powerful testimonies that we see repeated over and over again today. People who are committed to controlling externals--wealth, politics, whatever--are often running scared inside because they can't control their own thoughts. When they go to bed at night they are ill at ease and tormented. So was Nebuchadnezzar.

But this time the outcome is different. In this case his dream concerns an extraordinary tree which reaches to the heavens and gives life to all. Then a watcher from God came down from heaven and said that the tree should be cut down. Nothing was left but a stump, exposed to the elements. Next, the watcher from God begins to talk about a man, not a tree, declaring that the individual in view would lose his mind, for "seven periods of time" (probably seven years). He would begin to think like an animal and lose control of himself.

The king calls in all his magicians and conjurers, and this time he tells them the dream, without threats, so desperate has he become. I'm sure Nebuchadnezzar and all who heard the dream understood its implications. God was telling him a day of reckoning was coming. But his magic men want nothing to do with this the interpretation of this dream, so once more Daniel is summoned. Daniel is appalled at what this dream means. But he informs the king that God would take his mind from him and reduce him to the level of an animal, with all of the indignity that that involved. He departs, leaving Nebuchadnezzar to face the consequences.

A VOICE FROM HEAVEN

We pick up the king's story again in 4:28:

"All this happened to Nebuchadnezzar the king. Twelve months later he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon."

Twelve months went by and nothing happened to the king. He must have hoped that Daniel was wrong--or that somehow he had escaped the predicted events.

"The king reflected and said, 'Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?' While the word was in the king's mouth, a voice came from heaven, saying, 'King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is declared: sovereignty has been removed from you, and you will be driven away from mankind, and your dwelling place will be with the beasts of the field. You will be given grass to eat like cattle, and seven periods of time will pass over you, until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it upon whomever He wishes.' Immediately the word concerning Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled; and he was driven away from mankind and began eating grass like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until his hair had grown like eagles' feathers and his nails like birds' claws."

Evidently, the king came to resemble a bird during this time. His hair became matted and looked like feathers; his nails looked like birds' claws (we can imagine darting eyes and an unintelligible screech). Apparently the

bureaucracy went right on running the empire, concealing the fact that the king had gone mad. He had loved and exalted himself to the point where God came and took his sovereignty away from him.

Verse 34:

"But at the end of that period I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward 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, And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, But He does according to His will in the host of heaven And among the inhabitants of the earth;

And no one can ward off His hand

Or say to Him, 'What hast Thou done?'

At that time my reason returned to me. And my majesty and splendor were restored to me for the glory of my kingdom, and my counselors and my nobles began seeking me out; so I was reestablished in my sovereignty, and surpassing greatness was added to me. Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise, exalt, and honor the King of heaven, for all His works are true and His ways just, and He is able to humble those who walk in pride."

What a different tone is set by these words of Nebuchadnezzar! No longer does he refer to the God of others. No longer is he the God who can be bought off by honoring his servants. The king now addresses the God who had called him to account for his pride and arrogance, the God who humiliated him by turning him into an animal. Now the king exalts not only the Lord of heaven, but recognizes that God is also Lord of the earth, the God who runs the affairs of humanity. He is the God who both makes and breaks the kings of the earth. He is the God to whom Nebuchadnezzar now offers total allegiance and praise: "I praise, exalt, and honor the King of heaven..."

WE HAVE A CHOICE

We live in a world that has two major competing points of view. The first point of view, represented in this story by Nebuchadnezzar, holds that wealth, power, self-promotion and dominance of others are what make life worthwhile and fulfilling. The other point of view is represented in this account by the four young men held captive in Babylon. They had lost everything except their relationship with the God of their fathers. But that was sufficient for them to live lives of courage, hope, and joy. These young men had found the one important thing in life and, like Mary in the gospel story, had chosen it. Mary sat at the feet of Jesus and loved him while Martha busied herself about the house. The four young men in Babylon chose to center their lives in the living God. They had chosen what is best.

On the night before Daniel was to tell the king his dream and the interpretation of it, the prophet and his friends prayed together. As we conclude by reading this prayer, let us resolve to not bow down to the voice of human authority but to a life that is based on the care and love of God. If we do this, we will be able to pray from our hearts with Daniel,

**Let the name of God be blessed forever and ever,
For wisdom and power belong to Him.
And it is He who changes the times and the epochs;
He removes kings and establishes kings;
He gives wisdom to wise men,
And knowledge to men of understanding.
It is He who reveals the profound and hidden things;
He knows what is in the darkness,
And the light dwells with Him.
To Thee, O God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise..."**

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