

NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S NIGHTMARE

SERIES: FORTIFIED FOR FAITHFULNESS

By Steve Zeisler

One of Shelley's best-known short poems, *Ozymandias*, reads:

"I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert...Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.'" (1)

Nebuchadnezzar had a dream of a somewhat similar great statue, which is described in the last half of Daniel 2. The statue he dreamed of had a head of gold, a chest of silver, a midriff of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of iron mixed with pottery. It depicted, as did Ozymandias' statue, human authority, and indeed, a succession of empires, none of which was capable of sustained greatness. In Nebuchadnezzar's dream, these were all finally toppled, then pulverized by a stone. This stone was made of no precious metal, and was fashioned by no human hand. The stone grew to a towering mountain, but the great statue was forgotten. "In the time of those kings," Daniel explained, "the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever" (2:44). Nebuchadnezzar's impressive and frightening dream, as interpreted by Daniel, was a great and accurate vision of events to come. It has been the backbone of many studies of prophecy, especially those done in the last 150 years.

For purposes of working our way through the book of Daniel, we are going to wait to examine the content of Nebuchadnezzar's dream until we study chapter 7, where another vision with similar teaching is given. We'll consider both prophecies together.

In the final verses of chapter 2 Nebuchadnezzar responds to Daniel's telling of his dream. There are two other speeches by Nebuchadnezzar at the end of chapters 3 and 4, respectively. We will gather up all three when we get to chapter 4 so we can observe the growth in Nebuchadnezzar's understanding over time.

In this message we'll look at the first half of chapter 2. It is curious that nobody in the text of chapter 2 paid any attention to the predictions that were made in Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Many Bible students today study

this vision very carefully for the things that it predicts. And in similar situations, for example when Joseph was able to interpret Pharaoh's dreams about the future (Genesis 41), the people involved immediately began to make plans based on what they learned. One would think that such a response would have happened here. However, neither Daniel, his friends, Nebuchadnezzar, nor anybody else fastened their attention on the predictive content of Nebuchadnezzar's dream.

That is even more remarkable when you consider that the prediction clearly spoke of the end of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar and of the Babylonian empire itself. It would be succeeded by another empire, and all the empires would end, because there was coming a time when the Lord God himself would pulverize all the kingdoms of men and a mountain would rise up to his glory. Most kings, when told that their reign is coming to an end, do everything they can to fight back. Remember what happened when Herod was told that a king had been born to the Jews in Bethlehem. Herod started slaughtering all the babies in Bethlehem to prevent any of them from growing up to become king.

So why, even though the prediction was clear, didn't it seem to captivate the hearers at that time? It was because the terrifying, dramatic, holy presence of God who gave the dream to Nebuchadnezzar was overwhelming in the moment. God himself had come and was stirring around in Nebuchadnezzar's consciousness and opening the future to the eyes of these boys. They fastened their attention on the God who gave the dream, and that's who we are going to fasten our attention on as well in this study.

A king in trouble

Let's return to where the narrative left off at the end of chapter 1. Four boys from Judah had been captured at an early age. They were in frightening circumstances, made to serve a king who worshiped idols. They would be well educated, but their lives were now to be owned by him for the rest of their days. They received the education and did well at it. Then they were taken into the presence of Nebuchadnezzar and grilled on what they had learned in the toughest Ph.D. oral exam in history. Now in chapter 2 they were still teenagers who hadn't yet accomplished anything beyond success in school. They had no résumé, no standing.

Verses 1-4:

In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind was troubled and he could not sleep. So the king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed. When they came in and stood before the king, he said to them, "I have had a dream that troubles me and I want to know what it means."

Then the astrologers answered the king in Aramaic, "O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will interpret it."

The honorific that these court officials used in verse 4 is a familiar one: "O king, live forever!" But of course, as it's going to turn out, the dream was about the king's *not* living forever, about the end of his kingdom. So there is an irony even here at the beginning.

Verses 5-11:

The king replied to the astrologers, "This is what I have firmly decided: If you do not tell me what my dream was and interpret it, I will have you cut into pieces and your houses turned into piles of rubble. But if you tell me the dream and explain it, you will receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor. So tell me the dream and interpret it for me."

Once more they replied, "Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will interpret it."

Then the king answered, "I am certain that you are trying to gain time, because you realize that this is what I have firmly decided: If you do not tell me the dream, there is just one penalty for you. You have conspired to tell me misleading and wicked things, hoping the situation will change. So then, tell me the dream, and I will know that you can interpret it for me."

The astrologers answered the king, "There is not a man on earth who can do what the king asks! No king, however great and mighty, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or astrologer. What the king asks is too difficult. No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among men."

The last verse is worth underlining. The astrologers had this essential dilemma: There were questions, confusion, dark areas, unknowns about deep, important things that only someone from heaven could answer. Only a divine word can tell us what we need to know at the deepest level. But their gods didn't speak. Of course this all marvelously anticipates the Christian gospel, because what is at the heart of the story of God is that he does exactly what could not happen here: he does come to earth, speak the truth, open the heart of heaven and the knowledge of his love to people like us.

Verses 12-13:

This made the king so angry and furious that he ordered the execution of all the wise men of Babylon. So the decree was issued to put the wise men to death, and men were sent to look for Daniel and his friends to put them to death.

Invasion by the Spirit of God

Nebuchadnezzar had grown increasingly agitated over time, it seems. Night after night he was not only dreaming of the crushing of the statue, which would be bad enough, but it seems clear that he was aware of the presence of God in his dreams. A God who sees and knows, who asks questions, who stirs and challenges, had invaded his life. Every night when Nebuchadnezzar closed his eyes, he was confronting holiness, truth, the terror of the greatness of God. And every day he would rise more distraught than before. He couldn't sleep. The series of events was becoming too hard for him. The searchlight of the presence of God was trained on him. He was dealing with authority and holiness, dreaded insights, and deep inadequacies that he was powerless to be rid of. The questions asked were ones he couldn't answer, precisely because God was asking them.

In contrast to this, in the daytime he went back to being Nebuchadnezzar the great, lord of all, a king with an unrivaled military and virtually infinite economic resources. He faced no human threat and basically no earthly impediment; he lacked nothing that he could imagine or desire. He wanted answers, and if he didn't get them,

he'd kill everybody who failed to answer. Nebuchadnezzar had the authority to do it. He reigned in the same place where the tyrant Saddam Hussein now reigns. His behavior here seems strikingly similar to Saddam Hussein's brutal treatment of people who displease him—unpredictable threats, executions at a whim, and so on.

It's worthwhile to find the circumstance of Nebuchadnezzar in other places. It is really a description of the human dilemma. You have confidence in things you are good at, things you can count on: perhaps your work, your relationships, your skill as a parent, or your imagination. But a problem occurs when God starts asking bigger, tougher, eternal questions that you don't have answers for, when the Spirit invades your heart and mind. And even if you were as great as Nebuchadnezzar, you couldn't trick God. You couldn't refuse to pay attention. How do you ignore God when he comes back night after night determined to make himself known? The Lord God searches the deep things, examines hidden things, and speaks of eternal things. He measures with a righteous measure. And if he has begun to prick your conscience so that you feel more horrible for the things you've done, if you feel more profoundly uncertain of your own ability to control your future, and you realize that what once seemed stable and predictable is not at all, this is actually a time to be grateful. He is determined that you will hear what you need to hear. That's what was happening to Nebuchadnezzar.

Daniel prayed this insightful prayer when God gave him the answers (verses 19b-21):

“Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever;
wisdom and power are his.
He changes times and seasons;
he sets up kings and deposes them.
He gives wisdom to the wise
and knowledge to the discerning.”

God is the Master of history. Kings serve because he says so and fail because he says so. Wisdom and knowledge are his gifts, not our accomplishments. He determines what is true, sets the course of history. Daniel continued (verse 22):

“He reveals deep and hidden things;
he knows what lies in darkness,
and light dwells with him.”

Therein was Nebuchadnezzar's problem. At night in the darkness, when he closed his eyes, God was striding through his life revealing things about him, calling choices into question, requiring answers. No authority Nebuchadnezzar could command in the daytime did him any good at night. He could not make the dreams stop.

The wrong kind of help

Nebuchadnezzar turned to his advisors, the “usual suspects,” and told them in effect that this was not like other times. Archeologists have discovered that the astrologers of Babylon had “dream books” that held ancient and established theories of how to interpret dreams. If someone came to an astrologer and asked “I had a dream about a cloud and a fish—what does it mean?” he would look up in his dream book what a cloud and a fish meant and give an interpretation of the dream. These astrologers had magic potions and tricks, and they may have even been able to get in touch with dark powers to some degree. Nebuchadnezzar had used them under similar circumstances. But he was now saying, “I don't want the kind of advice I've always gotten from you! I'm dealing with a holy God who comes to me in dreams every night. I don't just want information about the

content. I am scared of the Giver, the one who is insisting I see things I prefer not to see!" Nebuchadnezzar didn't want the usual pabulum because it wasn't going to work this time. "I am a sinner who has fallen into the hands of an angry God, and I need something better than what you've got in your dream books! And I'll kill you if you don't tell me what I need to know!"

We've seen that the first issue in this story is the issue of Nebuchadnezzar's power and its limits. The second issue is the limit of power the advisors had to help. This world is filled with experts, isn't it? There are experts on the economy, on health, on the direction of the culture, on psychology, on world religion, who know everything, claim everything, and talk incessantly. There is probably some use to some of the advice some of the time. But Nebuchadnezzar was now dealing with God, who declared, "Now is the time for you to encounter what is holy and eternal," and his councils of advisors had nothing to say.

The man who listened to God

The story continues in verses 14-16:

When Arioch, the commander of the king's guard, had gone out to put to death the wise men of Babylon, Daniel spoke to him with wisdom and tact. He asked the king's officer, "Why did the king issue such a harsh decree?" Arioch then explained the matter to Daniel. At this, Daniel went in to the king and asked for time, so that he might interpret the dream for him.

Verse 16 is odd. The king had been losing his grip emotionally and was increasingly threatening to anybody who would come near him. He had just decided to kill an entire cast of advisors, among them Daniel. Yet Daniel, according to this text, simply sauntered in and chatted with the king. Not only that, he asked for more time, which Nebuchadnezzar had just refused the other wise men. "I know what you're doing—you're stalling! You wish me ill! Off with your heads!" Daniel requested, "Give me another day," and the king said, "Okay, fine." Clearly, Daniel, the writer of this book, means us to observe that this encounter was remarkable. It wouldn't happen this way unless Daniel was unlike any other advisor, unless there was some door opened by God in ways we are not told of, perhaps some note in Daniel's voice that was of the Lord, so that Nebuchadnezzar responded differently to this boy.

Verses 17-18:

Then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that he and his friends might not be executed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon.

The next choice Daniel made was to ask for help, and he and his friends spent the night in prayer.

There are some wonderful observations we can make about Daniel. He was, first of all, confident. He went to Nebuchadnezzar and asked for time, *fully assuming he would interpret the dream*. He was confident that he could speak on things he didn't yet know or understand. He had not been told anything yet, but he knew as he went into the presence of the king that he lived his life in the presence of God. Which is the greater thing—going into the throne room of Nebuchadnezzar the emperor, or going into the throne room of heaven and standing before

the heavenly Father? So he was confident when he went into the presence of the king, but he wasn't arrogant. As we will observe, confidence and humility combined are important qualities in Daniel.

Their prayers were answered, and Daniel voiced the beautiful hymn of praise we saw earlier. Verses 19-28b:

During the night the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision. Then Daniel praised the God of heaven and said:

**Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever;
wisdom and power are his.**

**He changes times and seasons;
he sets up kings and deposes them.**

**He gives wisdom to the wise
and knowledge to the discerning.**

**He reveals deep and hidden things;
he knows what lies in darkness,
and light dwells with him.**

I thank and praise you, O God of my fathers:

**You have given me wisdom and power,
you have made known to me what we asked of you,
you have made known to us the dream of the king.**

Then Daniel went to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to execute the wise men of Babylon, and said to him, "Do not execute the wise men of Babylon. Take me to the king, and I will interpret his dream for him."

Arioch took Daniel to the king at once and said, "I have found a man among the exiles from Judah who can tell the king what his dream means."

The king asked Daniel (also called Belteshazzar), "Are you able to tell me what I saw in my dream and interpret it?"

Daniel replied, "No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come."

Daniel's courage and humility, the word of praise he sang with his friends the night before, and the confident assertions he made in Nebuchadnezzar's presence are all extraordinary when we remember that this was just a boy talking. He would become a great man eventually. The day would come, over the years, when he would stride in and out of Nebuchadnezzar's throne room all the time as Nebuchadnezzar's most valued advisor. He was none of that at this point, yet he was a young man who listened to God and who could answer the questions God raised.

There is some application we might draw from this.

Stewards of the mysteries of God

First, are you impressed with people in authority? We probably are too much, aren't we? Those at the pinnacle, whether in business or government or entertainment or whatever, who "have it all," are successful, powerful, commanding people. But if God enters their dreams at night, they will be as frightened as anybody else. The day will come when they will have to answer questions they can't answer.

Remember the parable Jesus told about the rich man who had so much he didn't know what to do with it all. He spoke to himself saying, "This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry!'" But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" (Luke 12:18-20).

People at the pinnacle need to answer these questions as surely as everybody else does. How will you speak to God when he speaks to you? What claim will you make for intimacy with him? What hope do you have that you might live beyond death? Where do you derive meaning that lasts? We are too impressed with people who do well in this world, as if such success had real meaning.

Second, we are too impressed with the advisors of the world, the experts, the givers of opinion, the folks who explain, describe, and give shape to events. Now, there are good advisors and good advice is sometimes required. But the advisors of the world have only this world's wisdom to draw on. For example, you might be told, "If you are having a hard time sleeping at night, maybe you ought to change your diet and start exercising. Whistle a happy tune, and everything will be fine." Or, "If you are worried about your portfolio, just reinvest in other things." Or, "You seem on edge, you need to take something that will calm your nerves." We should give credit where it's due to advice that has its limits. But we shouldn't think that smart, educated, well-acquainted people know more than they really do. They don't know what lies in the darkness and they don't know where the light dwells.

Third, if you take Daniel's story to the end, he became the greatest of the experts, the senior advisor. Presumably he gave Nebuchadnezzar good counsel on the economy, on military affairs, on dealing with refugee populations in the empire, on everything. He was one of the smartest guys around. And it's a good thing if God gives us those opportunities. It's a good thing to serve on school boards and give good advice from a godly perspective on what should happen in worldly places. It's a good thing to have a say in the direction your company takes, or to be called on to help out in your neighborhood. Whatever it is, it is good that godly people with insight from knowing Scripture should help the world succeed in its affairs.

But there is something we can say that goes beyond that: we can tell people how to be rightly related to God. We have been given, as Daniel and his friends were given, insight about mysteries that comes only from God. When people are terrified and are losing their way, when they feel spiritual longing, we have something to say about those things that no one else does. We shouldn't stop at just being good advisors. We need to be witnesses. We need to be disciples who talk about how to know God when people long to know him and can't even articulate what their problems are.

Paul said that we are "stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Corinthians 4:1, NASB). And it is required of stewards that they be faithful. The richest of riches has been placed in our hands, the mysteries of God: who he is, what he is like, how to know him, how to find peace, how to find purpose. Are you giving away what God has given you?

In 2 Timothy Paul made a remarkable statement at the end of his life: "This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1:9b-10). Before time grace was given, and in time through the appearance of Christ it was revealed, and we have been given the news! About what—playing ball, getting someone elected, being nice to our neighbors? No, we have been given news about the abolition of death and the coming of immortality. Those are the things we get to talk about that no one else can. And he goes on to say, "Guard the gospel, this extraordinary treasure. Don't lose it."

Looking back over this chapter, I think of an excerpt of a poem by James Russell Lowell that Ray Stedman often quoted. May it encourage us to be faithful witness:

"Though the cause of Evil prosper, yet 'tis Truth alone is strong, ...
Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne, —
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own." (2)

Notes

1. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Ozymandias*, 1817.
2. James Russell Lowell, *The Present Crisis*, 1844.

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