

THE END OF ARROGANCE

SERIES: FORTIFIED FOR FAITHFULNESS

By Steve Zeisler

Kim Jong Il, the ruler of North Korea, celebrated his fifty-ninth birthday last week. The North Korean state press reported without any irony that there were unusual multiple rainbows in the winter sky and that remarkable storms rolled through with unusually resonant thunder. The conclusion was that nature itself was celebrating the birthday of the exalted leader of North Korea.

Throughout history those with great power over nations have imagined that nature bowed to their greatness. They have often believed, as have their subjects, that they were divine in their makeup and authority. One of the oldest and worst of ideas is that you can be like God in defiance of God. This idea was spoken first by the serpent in the garden and has been taken up over and over again in history.

The story we're going to consider in this message is about one such exalted leader who was more impressed with himself than he ought to have been: King Nebuchadnezzar. He is going to drop out of the book of Daniel after chapter 4, which concludes with these words: "Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble." The lesson in this chapter is one of being humbled and of discovering that there is no god equal to the Lord God.

The first three chapters of the book of Daniel have roughly the same outline:

- A. A crisis develops for the isolated young believers.
- B. They turn toward the Lord with hope and act with courage and wisdom.
- C. The Lord answers them in their extremity.
- D. Nebuchadnezzar either acts or remarks about a lesson learned from observing these believers who trust God in extremity.

Let's examine the responses of Nebuchadnezzar. At the end of chapter 1: "The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom" (verses 19-20). They had refused to eat from the king's table, they had trusted God to care for them, and at the end of that story, Nebuchadnezzar credited them for being brighter than all the others, and he called them into his service to make use of what God had done in their lives.

Look at the end of chapter 2. This is the story of Nebuchadnezzar's nightmare and Daniel's courageous prayer. Daniel went into the king's presence with boldness and revealed the mystery: the king's dream had predicted the future. "The king said to Daniel, 'Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery.' Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him" (verses 47-48a). In the first chapter Nebuchadnezzar recognized that God had worked in other people. In the second chapter he spoke well of the God of Daniel, more or less in this tone: "I appreciate and am impressed with your God, Daniel! I wish you and your God well."

Chapter 3 is the story of how Nebuchadnezzar had Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego thrown into the fiery furnace. At the end of that scene he was once more confronted with the power of God to save. Nebuchadnezzar again spoke: "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way" (verses 28-29). Now Nebuchadnezzar finally praised the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and announced that everybody else should treat him with respect.

What is missing from this series of experiences Nebuchadnezzar had is an encounter with God. Each of these acts or words showed that he had been drawn closer to faith, but he had not yet humbled himself before God. The stages Nebuchadnezzar went through are the experience of many people in churches today. There are folks who think well of God because of what they have seen in others. There are people who even praise the God of others. There are some who give to missions, hoping that lost souls in other places come to treat God with respect.

In chapter 4 the pattern changes. This is not the story of somebody else to whom Nebuchadnezzar responds. This is Nebuchadnezzar's own story, a testimony written by a new believer about his salvation. Nowhere else in the Bible does someone come to faith and shortly afterward sit down and write his or her conversion story.

Warning of downfall

Let me highlight three scenes that are marked off by time references. Verse 4: "I, Nebuchadnezzar was at home in my palace, contented and prosperous." Verse 28: "All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. Twelve months later...." And verse 34: "At the end of that time [seven years], I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven...." The middle scene has an odd literary quality to it because Nebuchadnezzar shifts from the first person to the third person. This is when he describes his period of insanity. It's almost as if he can't bear to remember it, or wants to distance himself from the one he speaks of.

Now let's observe the text. Verses 1-18:

**King Nebuchadnezzar,
To the peoples, nations and men of every language, who live in all the world:
May you prosper greatly!
It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High
God has performed for me.
How great are his signs,
how mighty his wonders!
His kingdom is an eternal kingdom;
his dominion endures from generation to generation.**

I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at home in my palace, contented and prosperous. I had a dream that made me afraid. As I was lying in my bed, the images and visions that passed through my mind terrified me. So I commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be brought before me to interpret the dream for me. When the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners came, I told them the dream, but they could not interpret it for me. Finally, Daniel came into my presence and I told him the dream. (He is called Belteshazzar, after the name of my god, and the spirit of the holy gods is in him.)

I said, “Beltshazzar, chief of the magicians, I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you, and no mystery is too difficult for you. Here is my dream; interpret it for me.

“These are the visions I saw while lying in my bed: I looked, and there before me stood a tree in the middle of the land. Its height was enormous. The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky; it was visible to the ends of the earth. Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it the beasts of the field found shelter, and the birds of the air lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed.

In the visions I saw while lying in my bed, I looked, and there before me was a messenger, a holy one, coming down from heaven. He called in a loud voice: ‘Cut down the tree and trim off its branches; strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the animals flee from under it and the birds from its branches. But let the stump and its roots, bound with iron and bronze, remain in the ground, in the grass of the field.

‘Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, and let him live with the animals among the plants of the earth. Let his mind be changed from that of a man and let him be given the mind of an animal, till seven times pass by for him.

‘The decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men.’

“This is the dream that I, King Nebuchadnezzar, had. Now, Beltshazzar, tell me what it means, for none of the wise men in my kingdom can interpret it for me. But you can, because the spirit of the holy gods is in you.”

Here is a story of a great tree, representing a king, that is toppled. The lesson to be learned is that God is in charge, and he can set anyone he wants in places of authority. Even if you’ve never heard this before, you could probably interpret that dream without any sort of divine assistance. But let’s observe what happens.

Caring and truthful advice

Verses 18-27:

Then Daniel (also called Beltshazzar) was greatly perplexed for a time, and his thoughts terrified him. So the king said, “Beltshazzar, do not let the dream or its meaning alarm you.”

Beltshazzar answered, “My lord, if only the dream applied to your enemies and its meaning to your adversaries! The tree you saw, which grew large and strong, with its top touching the sky, visible to the whole earth, with beautiful leaves and abundant fruit, providing food for all, giving shelter to the beasts of the field, and having nesting places in its branches for the birds of the air--you, O king, are that tree! You have become great and strong; your greatness has grown until it reaches the sky, and your dominion extends to distant parts of the earth.

You, O king, saw a messenger, a holy one, coming down from heaven and saying, ‘Cut down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump, bound with iron and bronze, in the grass of the field, while its roots remain in the ground. Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven; let him live like wild animals, until seven times pass by for him.’

“This is the interpretation, O king, and this is the decree the Most High has issued against my lord the king: You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes. The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules. Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue.”

This dream of Nebuchadnezzar’s is different from his dream in chapter 2, though the story is similar. In chapter 2 he was terrified. He knew the dream was from God. The dream was about kingdoms to come, about the end of the age when the messianic kingdom would finally be established. This dream in chapter 4, however, is about insanity-induced isolation. It has only a seven-year horizon. It’s about neither grand-scale outcomes nor great events of history, but about one man.

It says that none of Nebuchadnezzar’s advisers can interpret the dream in chapter 4. This is almost certainly a euphemism. The dream is not really difficult or mysterious. The problem is that nobody wants the responsibility of saying what it means. This dream is bad news. The king once again turns to the one adviser who is different from the others. Daniel alone is courageous enough to speak the hard word of truth.

Daniel’s role is not the focus in chapter 4; nevertheless, it does have something to teach us. What was Daniel called to do in this chapter? What can we learn if we look at his actions from Nebuchadnezzar’s point of view?

Daniel had three responsibilities. The first was to have sympathy (verse 19). We are to be God’s spokesmen in this world, as we saw in the last message (Discovery Paper #4702). We are called to be “the salt of the earth... the light of the world... a city set on a hill” (Matthew 5:13-16), and “stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Corinthians 4:1). But before we speak, a response of sympathy and acknowledgement of hurt is critical. We are not to relish communicating the hard sayings of the gospel to those who have newly come into God’s presence, who are seeing themselves clearly for the first time. The personal concern Daniel expresses ought to encourage us.

The second responsibility that Daniel modeled here is that he told the truth, even though the truth required courageous confrontation.

The third responsibility Daniel had was to call for repentance. Verse 27: “Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins....” What we are telling people is not for our sake but theirs. This truth is not merely theoretical. We need to call people to turn from their sins.

However, the king completely ignores what Daniel had to say. Daniel steps out of the action. Nebuchadnezzar is now about to deal with God at “industrial strength” in the second scene--not mediated by anything or anyone. Nebuchadnezzar is about to learn the lesson that caused him to write this story. As I mentioned, he writes in this scene in the third person, almost as if he doesn’t want to remember this man; he tells us about him, but he doesn’t know him anymore.

The consequences of pride

Verses 28-33:

All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, he said, “Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?”

The words were still on his lips when a voice came from heaven, “This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. You will be driven away from your people and will live with wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle. Seven times [years] will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes.”

Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird.

Nebuchadnezzar had a year to repent, but he grew more arrogant, and so the dream was fulfilled as it had been spoken. He lost his mind. He thought himself to be an animal and lived like an animal for seven years--perhaps naked, disheveled, with matted hair and claws, a wild subhuman creature.

Not all those who are proud are well known, beautiful, or very accomplished, but all proud people are self-impressed. They bask in their own glory to some degree, believe their own compliments. They enjoy the pride that keeps them from acknowledging the Lord. But every one of those things is fragile. God can take away not only their riches, their high station, and their widespread recognition, but he can take away their mind--the very instrument they use to exalt themselves against God.

If God needs to break us by destroying our emotional well-being and our ability to think in defiance of him, he is perfectly able to do it. If you think getting sick or losing your fortune is bad, try having your personality taken away! Ignoring a word from heaven is dangerous business, especially if you have been warned and given an opportunity to repent. Will God go to that length for you? Yes, he will. We all need to be warned of the seed of pride within us.

A new heart of humility

The third scene is in verses 34-37:

At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored.

What a succinct and beautiful sentence that is! “I finally learned the lesson of everything lost, and I raised my eyes to heaven, crying for mercy.” Perhaps he acknowledged who is God and who is not. “And God answered my prayer.”

Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever.

**His dominion is an eternal dominion;
his kingdom endures from generation to generation.
All the peoples of the earth
are regarded as nothing.
He does as he pleases
with the powers of heaven
and the peoples of the earth.
No one can hold back his hand
or say to him: "What have you done?"**

At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honor and splendor were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisers and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.

What can we take away from this story that might be helpful? First, we can recall the role of Daniel. He is not the key figure in this story, but he did do what he was responsible for. He loved Nebuchadnezzar, spoke the truth, and called for a response. That is a good model for ministry in the world we live in.

Second, this chapter ought to expand our expectations regarding the ways of God. Commentators dispute whether Nebuchadnezzar came to saving faith. Based on his words of praise and gratitude, I find it hard to imagine that he did not. However, after his conversion we don't see him meditating over the Torah or asking questions about the messianic plan for the ages. He didn't free the Jews and send them back to Israel. He didn't even return the implements he stole from the temple (they're referenced in the next chapter)! He clearly enjoyed being king again: "I'm back in charge, and I have even more than I used to have!" There may be a slight undertone of humility there, but it's certainly not dramatic. So if he really was made new, why didn't he look more like all the other people we know who have come to faith? We do have a responsibility to instruct new believers in godly discipleship, but we should also acknowledge that the Lord of heaven and earth will often surprise us in giving himself away--his ways are not our ways.

Finally, let me ask you to examine yourself in reviewing Nebuchadnezzar's self-disclosure in this chapter. Are you most like him in verse 4? "I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at home in my palace, contented and prosperous." What if you could be like Nebuchadnezzar at that moment--comfortable, prosperously content at home, untroubled, peaceful, easy? Would you settle for that?

Are you most like him in verse 30? "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?" Isn't there something too attractive to us about absolute success, dominant power, and gaudy riches?

Surely that is more attractive to us than the man depicted in the third stage (verse 37), who has been insane for seven years and has only just returned to his sanity, saying, "Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just." He speaks of his knowledge of God as being the most important thing of all.

If we are honest with ourselves, many of us pursue peace, prosperity, comfort, luxury, and power, and would rather have either of the first two stages of Nebuchadnezzar than the one who has learned the hard way to know God and his greatness.

Perhaps this story in Daniel 4 has reinforced your faith--what you believed all along has been made a little clearer. But maybe you are someone who was meant to have a new encounter with God through this study. Nebuchadnezzar became a man who had a wonderful testimony to the grace of God. New life in Christ is available to all who will respond to his invitation: "I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly" (John 10:10, NASB).

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Catalog No. 4703
February 25, 2001
4th Message
Daniel 4:1-37
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