

THE GREAT TREE

Daniel 4

PLEASE do not read these comments until you have read the Scripture for this lesson. First let the Holy Spirit teach you directly from His Word.

Summary and Historical Background

This chapter is a public document issued by Nebuchadnezzar proclaiming the greatness of the “God of Heaven.” The time of the occurrence of the events recorded in this chapter is unstated, but is normally assumed to be in the later years of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. The probable reason for the insertion of this official document into the book of Daniel is to set the stage for the events of chapter five, i.e., the fall of Babylon. Babylon eventually fell because of the pride of Belshazzar, one of the kings that followed Nebuchadnezzar. But he learned his lesson concerning pride and recorded that experience for public distribution and it is preserved in this chapter of Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar began with the official proclamation and then related the events precluding his pronouncement.

NEBUCHADNEZZAR’S DREAM: THE GREAT TREE

I. Declaration of Nebuchadnezzar – 4:1-3

A. Recipients of the Declaration – 4:1

4:1 – Nebuchadnezzar addressed this statement to all of his subjects in the Babylonian empire. He was the king that made this empire great, not because of his own greatness, but simply because God gave him the ability to do it (cf 2:37, 38). So he addressed this decree in the customary manner (cf 3:29).

B. Reason for the Declaration – 4:2-3

4:2 – Nebuchadnezzar’s purpose in this declaration was to “show the signs and wonders” of God. The word for “signs” means something that is “pointed out.” Nebuchadnezzar revealed some important lessons that God had “pointed out” to him. The word for “wonders” portrays the idea of “astonishment.” God “pointed out” His lessons to Nebuchadnezzar in a way that was “astonishing” to him. This gives the first clue about the contents of his declaration.

4:3 – A further clue about the contents of his declaration is found in the words “great and mighty.” When God revealed Himself to Nebuchadnezzar, it was an encounter that he never forgot. He experienced God’s great and mighty power once again. God’s revelation to Nebuchadnezzar caused him to feel His sovereignty and eternal dominion [cf. 2:44], not merely hear about it. Now he was ready to testify about it to all of his people. When Nebuchadnezzar made this declaration, it is proof of a great change in his life.

II. Dream of a Great Tree – 4:4-18

A. Failure of His Wise Men – 4:4-7

4:4 – Nebuchadnezzar began to record his amazing experience by describing his conditions before this event took place. First, he was “at rest” in his house. “Rest” means he was “free from fear or anxiety.” He had conquered the countries around Babylon and felt very secure. Also, he was not afraid that anyone in his family might attempt to take his kingdom from him. Very often family members would aspire to the throne and plot the overthrow and even the assassination of their ruling kin. Nebuchadnezzar had no such fears. All was well and he was at rest in his public life and in his private life. Second, he was “flourishing” in his palace. “Flourishing” literally means, “growing green” and has the idea of prospering. Not only was King Nebuchadnezzar enjoying peace, but also prosperity. All was well in Babylon. Some

have suggested that these conditions in Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom occurred somewhere between 575-570 B.C., so 572 B.C. is a fairly good guess as to when God gave Nebuchadnezzar this revelation.

4:5 – Once again God revealed Himself to Nebuchadnezzar in a dream. This dream was about 30 years after his first dream. In the first dream God revealed to him a great image representing the great Gentile powers that were going to rule over Israel. In this dream God revealed to Nebuchadnezzar what He was going to do to him because of his pride. The “thoughts” that he got from this dream and the “visions” that he saw in his head were so unusual and inexplicable that he was indeed terrified (“troubled”) by them.

4:6 – As in chapter two, Nebuchadnezzar followed the custom of the day and called in his occult counselors in order that they might interpret his dream.

4:7 – This time the king told his counselors the content of his dream (cf 2:9), but they were still unable to give him the interpretation. Being given the substance of the dream, it could be assumed that these court counselors could have come up with some fanciful interpretation, but they did not. This was God's revelation to Nebuchadnezzar and only God's man would be able to interpret it. No doubt even these pseudo-intellectuals recognized the ominous nature of the dream and hesitated to prognosticate an unfavorable interpretation.

B. Faith in Daniel – 4:8-18

4:8 – Finally, Daniel arrived before the king. Whether this late entrance was planned by Daniel or was simply providential is unstated, but no doubt it was a relief to both the king and the stymied wise men to see him enter the room! Notice in Nebuchadnezzar's record that he mentions both Daniel's Hebrew and Babylonian name (also see v. 19). This served to correctly identify Daniel to the Jewish and Gentile populace of Nebuchadnezzar's empire. Notice also that Nebuchadnezzar still referred to Bel as “my god.” This reference may show that he was still polytheistic in his beliefs at the time of this declaration, or it may be a simple statement to show his former relationship to Bel and explain why he named Daniel as he did. The reference to the “holy gods” could also be translated “Holy God,” since the word for the true God is plural in the Hebrew.

4:9 – Nebuchadnezzar's faith in Daniel's ability is expressed in his address to Daniel. The term “master of the magicians” is simply titular (cf 2:48) and does not necessarily imply occultism. Notice that Nebuchadnezzar did recognize in Daniel a rapport with deity. The Holy Spirit of the one and only true God was manifest in Daniel's life. Nebuchadnezzar recognized that “secrets” or revelations from God did not mystify Daniel. Thus he fully expected Daniel to interpret his dream.

4:10 – Once Daniel had been properly addressed and the king had expressed his faith in the chief counselor's ability, Nebuchadnezzar began to relate details of his terrifying dream. The main object of the dream was a tree situated centrally in the earth. The height of this tree was very great.

4:11 – The tree was “growing.” This is the first clue to the thrust of the dream, for this is the same word that was translated in verse four as “flourishing.” There it referred to Nebuchadnezzar's prosperity, so this “growing” tree represented the prosperity of Nebuchadnezzar. Great strength also was apparent in this tree, and its height eventually reached “unto heaven.” It was so large that all of the earth's inhabitants could see it. And in verse ten the tree was situated in the center of the earth indicating that Nebuchadnezzar was at the center of world affairs.

4:12 – The tree was not only large, but also healthy and beneficial, for its leaves were fair and its fruit abundant. The tree was so productive that all beasts, fowls and living creatures partook of its fruit for sustenance.

4:13 – The glory of the tree vision is suddenly interrupted by some sort of a ministering creature from heaven. Both terms used by Nebuchadnezzar probably describe the same being, i.e., “a watcher and a holy one.” These were familiar terms used by men of that day to refer to creatures, which the scriptures would call angels.

4:14 – This angelic creature gave a disturbing command to cut down the magnificent tree. Also, the branches were to be stripped from the tree, the leaves shaken off, the fruit scattered and the lodgers dispersed. No wonder the king was disturbed!

4:15 – An even more curious command followed. The stump and roots of the tree were to be left intact in the earth and the stump banded with a band of iron as it remained in the field. The tree, now personified by the third person pronoun, “him,” was to be left out under the dew of heaven with the beasts and the grass.

4:16 – Most astounding of all was the command concerning this personified tree’s change of heart from that of a man to one of a beast. This change of heart was to last for seven “segments of time.”

4:17 – The dream ended with a concluding statement involving two concepts. First, the matter was “decreed.” Essentially that meant the dream would certainly be fulfilled. Second, the intended lesson of the dream was to magnify God and put man in his proper place under God. Notice three things concerning God that are seen in this verse: “. . . to the intent that the living may know that the most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives to whomsoever He will, and sets up over it the basest of men.” One, He alone rules the affairs of men. God has the final word in the affairs of earth (cf Acts 17:26-27; Ps 75:6-7). Two, He alone chooses the men who are leaders on earth. God “removes kings and sets up kings” (2:21). Three, He employs the lowliest (“basest”) of men for His purposes. God lifts up and uses those who are humble and unassuming to do His work, but those who become proud will be put down (1 Pet 5:5).

4:18 – Having related the dream’s details, Nebuchadnezzar once again expressed his faith in Daniel’s ability to interpret the dream, admitting the inability of the rest of his “counselors” to do so. Nebuchadnezzar’s faith in Daniel was based on Daniel’s relationship with God.

III. Disclosure to Nebuchadnezzar – 4:19-27

A. Astonishment at the Dream – 4:19

4:19 – After Nebuchadnezzar had recounted the dream to Daniel, Daniel was astonished and troubled. The term for “one hour” in this context is no doubt a figure of speech for “a short time.” The amazement of Daniel was not a result of his inability to understand the dream, but rather, the colossal implications of the interpretation. Nebuchadnezzar, reading the face of Daniel, understood Daniel’s predicament of interpreting such an ominous dream and encouraged him to speak. The king seemingly knew all along that the dream was not favorable, so he did not want Daniel to be troubled by the interpretation of the dream. But Nebuchadnezzar was anxious to hear the detailed interpretation of this foreboding dream. With this encouragement Daniel honestly told the king that the dream and its interpretation would be good news only to those who hated him. Little Samuel found himself in this same predicament when Eli asked him what God had revealed to him when He called for him one night (1 Sam 3:11-18). Both Samuel and Daniel faithfully gave the message that God had revealed to them.

B. Account of the Interpretation – 4:20-26

4:20-22 – Daniel reiterated the description of the flourishing tree (vs. 20-21) and equated it with Nebuchadnezzar and his reign (v. 22). Trees were often used to symbolize the rulers of those days as well as their domains (cf. Ezk 17:7; 19:10; 31:3; Amos 2:9). As this tree grew and was strong (v. 20) so Nebuchadnezzar flourished and became strong. The height of the tree reaching to heaven (v. 20) symbolized the great heights to which Nebuchadnezzar had grown in power, considering himself at times to be a god (v. 22; cf. 3:1). Nebuchadnezzar’s dominion had become a worldwide dominion bringing prosperity and provisions to all men and creatures of the earth. The danger of such greatness lies not so much in the prosperity as in forgetting the source of such prosperity (cf. 2:37-38). God had mandated Nebuchadnezzar’s greatness, a fact which Nebuchadnezzar, along with most mortal men, tended to forget. Instead they felt that they were the source of such prosperity and became proud of it.

4:23-25 – The brighter side of the king’s dream then shaded into scenes of personal disaster. Daniel recounted the message of the watcher (v. 23), but made the fact plain that it was God who decreed it (v. 24). Nebuchadnezzar could blame no one but God for the decree. Ultimately, of course, Nebuchadnezzar himself would be to blame for any judgment he received. The hewing down of the tree (v. 23) obviously meant a sudden end to Nebuchadnezzar’s grandeur. The wetting of the stump with dew and its assigned portion with the beasts of the field (v. 23) delivered the most stunning blow to the great king. He would be driven from among men and actually live like a beast of the field. The phrase, “let his heart be changed” (v. 16) is a further description of this change in his character and mentality, for the heart speaks of the seat of a person’s character and reason. This mental state of animalistic insanity is well known in history (see Walvoord, *Daniel: The Key to Prophetic Revelation*, p. 108ff). The duration of this insanity would be “seven times,” the segments of time seem to refer to years (cf. Dan. 7:25), so he would be insane for seven years. The lesson to be learned by Nebuchadnezzar was the omnipotence and sovereignty of God (v. 25, cf. v. 17) and the collateral importance of being humble before God.

4:26 – Daniel did save one encouraging word of interpretation for the last. The stump and roots of the tree were left intact, so the kingdom and domain of Nebuchadnezzar would still remain his throughout his insanity and they would be reclaimed once his lesson had been learned (v. 26). The fact that iron and brass banded the stump to prevent its death and rotting away (v. 15) is understood in different ways. Some think that an iron and brass band was put on the stump to keep it intact. Others believe an iron and brass fence was placed around it to keep wild animals from destroying it.

C. Advice to Nebuchadnezzar – 4:27

4:27 – Daniel, led by God’s Spirit, used the opportunity to encourage Nebuchadnezzar to repent of his pride and do right. Daniel counseled the king to “break off” his sins (cf. this word is used to describe Esau’s ability to “break off” Jacob’s yoke in Gen. 27:40) and give evidence of it by “acting righteously.” Likewise he was to break off his iniquities by showing mercy toward the poor. God is in charge in the affairs of men (cf. 4:17, 25, 32, 35). Therefore, Nebuchadnezzar was urged to repent. Repent is a change of mind that results in a change of behavior. To our New Testament ears, it may appear that Daniel was suggesting salvation by works, but this is not so. The emphasis in the Old Testament was on the evidences of a truly regenerated heart as shown by its outworking in deeds (cf. Jer. 22:15-16). This thrust is also found in the New Testament when carefully studied (cf. Rom. 2:6-10; James 1:26-2:26) and should probably be emphasized more today than it is! If Nebuchadnezzar would turn from his pride and lack of mercy, perhaps God would extend his prosperity. Some even think that the ominous judgment just foretold would have been averted if he had repented.

IV. The Debasing of Nebuchadnezzar – 4:28-37

A. His Pride Expressed – 4:28-30

4:28 – Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged the fulfillment of this prophecy in his declaration to his empire. This is very unusual. Most people, and especially kings, do not want their faults to be exposed, but Nebuchadnezzar told the whole story. He revealed his sin and God’s just punishment of it.

4:29-30 – God had given Nebuchadnezzar an entire year to heed Daniel’s counsel, but it seems that Nebuchadnezzar had become careless about the message of the dream and Daniel’s call for repentance. Nebuchadnezzar had built his city from one that was about 4 miles (6.4 km) in circumference to one about 10 miles (16 km) in circumference. In it he built 3 palaces and to one of these he attached the famous “Hanging Gardens,” which he built for his wife. She had been born in the hills of the Medes, so the gardens were built to take away the loneliness she had for her native land. He also added a new city west of the Euphrates River. He constructed a large temple area for the worship of Marduk. As he walked about the palace and gazed at the splendid views it afforded, he commented upon the greatness of his domain. And indeed, it was splendid and great. As he viewed the city, which represented his kingdom, he saw the double stone walls, the beautiful gates and temples, the sparkling Euphrates River and the magnificent Hanging Gardens, which were considered by the Greeks to be

among the Seven Wonders of the World. Yes, he had “built” them all for the “royal residence” of the kingdom, but pride had blinded his understanding. Nebuchadnezzar stated that the source of this magnificence was “the might of my power.” He had truly forgotten God’s omnipotence and sovereignty as the real source of his greatness (cf. 2:37-38). Nebuchadnezzar also misunderstood the purpose of this glory. He believed the glory was for himself (“the honor of my majesty”) rather than glory for the God of heaven. Once a man loses sight of the source of his abilities, he also misunderstands the purpose of his abilities. All of life then becomes self-centered rather than God-centered. Though he had been thoroughly warned and wisely counseled, Nebuchadnezzar continued in his pride and the predicted judgment of God was fulfilled.

B. His Pride Judged – 4:31-33

4:31 – While the words of pride were yet in Nebuchadnezzar’s mouth, God spoke to him. God used this specific moment to relate in Nebuchadnezzar’s mind the direct relationship between his gross pride and the coming judgment. The great tree was about to be hewn down, for God said, “The kingdom is departed from thee.” At that instant, the dream which the king had experienced a year earlier probably came flashing back into his memory.

4:32 – His memory was then refreshed as to the impending judgment for nearly the exact words of verse 25 are repeated here. The time element and ultimate lesson were once again reiterated to the haughty monarch, and then the judgment fell.

4:33 – “*The same hour*” or, within a matter of minutes (cf. 3:6) the pronounced insanity overcame Nebuchadnezzar. He was probably only given enough time by God to reflect on the cause of the judgment before it actually fell. There, standing in the palace of great Babylon, the highest monarch among men suddenly fell to the ground and ate grass as a cow or ox. For seven long years he was shut away from humanity, eating grass and taking on the very appearance of a beast. His court officials were empowered by God to continue the affairs of the kingdom and cover his illness from the public during these seven years so that his kingdom would be spared for him. Probably Daniel was one of the most important leaders caring for Nebuchadnezzar’s empire while he was insane. The disease that he had is called “boanthropy” (bo [bovine for cow or ox] + anthropy [anthropos for man]). It is a disease that causes a person to act like a cow or an ox.

C. His Pride Abandoned – 4:34-37

4:34 – When the allotted time period was passed (“at the end of the days”) Nebuchadnezzar lifted his eyes up to heaven and his reason returned to him. The lifting up of his eyes to heaven signified his submission to God and his dependence upon Him for it was only then that his rationality was restored. When his senses returned to him and he viewed his bedraggled condition, he most certainly was aware that the judgment, which God had pronounced, had been fulfilled. Immediately, then, he blessed God. That is to say, that he thanked God for bringing him to this proper perspective of understanding. He praised and honored the God whom he had previously overlooked. Now he confessed the greatness of this Sovereign One whose dominion is eternal.

4:35 – Nebuchadnezzar also confessed the “nothingness” of all mankind, including himself, before this great and mighty God Who rules both heaven and earth. Then he conceded willingly that God’s hand of judgment was unstoppable by even the mightiest of men, and that once performed no man could ever question His dictates and purposes.

4:36 – With the abandonment of his pride God restored his kingdom as He had promised (cf. 4:26). All the glory, honor and splendor which he had experienced before were restored to him. His counselors and other high officials once again sought his leadership which also evidenced God’s protective “band of brass and iron” for commonly a throne once abandoned, especially due to insanity, was usurped by power-hungry family members. But God fulfilled all of his word, and King Nebuchadnezzar was “established” once again as supreme monarch and his majesty became even greater (“added”).than before.

4:37 – Nebuchadnezzar closed this account of his experience by lauding (“praise and extol and honor”) the Sovereign of heaven. Nebuchadnezzar had learned some valuable lessons in the school of God’s judgment!

These words are participles: praising, extolling and honoring. This was unlike his former praise of God in chapters 2 and 3. There it was temporary worship; here it is continuous, permanent worship.

Nebuchadnezzar praises, extols and honors God for three reasons. First, it is for His truthfulness in dealing with him, even though it was a difficult experience. God had warned him about the judgment that was to come by giving him the dream and then sent Daniel to him with the correct interpretation of the dream. Second, it is for His justice, when He cut him down like a tree. He did not complain and accuse God of injustice. He did not accuse God of being too hard on him. God did deal drastically with him but was very just in doing so. God knew that cutting off a few limbs from his “tree” would not change his heart. God knew that Nebuchadnezzar’s whole “tree” needed to be cut down and Nebuchadnezzar accepted God’s action as just. Third, it is for His power, even when it was used to cut him down.