

The Book of Daniel

Chapter Four



Chapter 4 of Daniel is unique. It is the only portion of the Old Testament written by a Gentile.

Chapter 4 is an open letter written by Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, to everyone on the face of the earth. By God's grace, the Lord allowed it to be included in His Word, thus insuring its perpetuity and publication in the most prolific book of history, the Bible. In Chapters 1 through 3 of Daniel, we see Nebuchadnezzar softened as God performs each miracle before his eyes. In this chapter, we will witness the final blow from the Spirit of God and the salvation of Nebuchadnezzar's soul.

4:1-3 – An Open Letter

“Nebuchadnezzar the king, unto all people, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth; Peace be multiplied unto you. I thought it good to shew the signs and wonders that the high God hath wrought toward me. How great [are] his signs! and how mighty [are] his wonders! his kingdom [is] an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion [is] from generation to generation..”

Letters like this were common to ancient kings. We see Nebuchadnezzar address a similar letter in Chapter 3 when he invites all of the leaders throughout the land to Babylon to bow down before the golden image. What is Nebuchadnezzar's attitude toward God at the writing of this letter?

His heart is in awe of God and His wondrous power. He has seen signs and wonders from God and is rejoicing that God allowed him to see these things.

How is this amazing, given the circumstances that have transpired over the last 7 years of his life?

We are about to read about a 7 year trial that Nebuchadnezzar was about to experience. After all this was said and done, he wasn't bitter or angry at God. His heart rejoiced over the Lord's goodness. This is a fruit of true salvation and sincere repentance.

What is amazing about a king of his stature and prominence writing this letter?

In writing this letter, Nebuchadnezzar is admitting fault. He is taking the blame for his sinful attitude and is giving God the glory for His blessings. This is not common for a leader to do when necessary (like Clinton after the Monica Lewinski scandal) much less when it is unnecessary.

What do we read in Nebuchadnezzar's comments that shows a dramatic attitude change from Chapter 3?

He is extolling the longevity and power of God's kingdom. It endures throughout generations. This is a far cry from his attitude in Chapter 3, when he tried to promote his kingdom's longevity.

4:4-7 – Another Restless Night

“Nebuchadnezzar was at rest in mine house, and flourishing in my palace: I saw a dream which made me afraid, and the thoughts upon my bed and the visions of my head troubled me. Therefore made I a decree to bring in all the wise [men] of Babylon before me, that they might make known unto me the interpretation of the dream. Then came in the magicians, the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers: and I told the dream before them; but they did not make known unto me the interpretation thereof.”

We do not know exactly when the events of this chapter occurred. Some historians place it at the middle of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, perhaps shortly after Chapter 2. Others place it at the end of his reign and date this letter (Chapter 4) at the last year of his life. A likely scenario is that these events transpired between the 30th and 35th years of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, about 20 years after the events of the fiery furnace. Daniel would be in his upper 40's at this point.

The beginning of this passage offers us a glimpse into the situation in Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar's state of mind. Nebuchadnezzar was “at rest” and “flourishing”. What do these words mean?

At rest – **secure, free from apprehension and fear**

Flourishing – **literally “growing green”, prospering like a budding tree**

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At this point in Nebuchadnezzar's reign, Babylon was at the peak of its size and glory. The wars and rebellions that characterized the first part of his reign were past and he was now enjoying a time of peace and prosperity. As we will see later, at this point Nebuchadnezzar was focused on the building of Babylon.

Where did Nebuchadnezzar first seek advice on the interpretation of his dream?

He first looked for any solution that the world had to offer. He is like many of us who first try to resolve difficulties of our own power before we take them to God. It should really be the other way around. Any difficulty we try to resolve without God never truly gets resolved.

Look at the following Scriptures and determine why the worldly counselors were unable to provide an accurate interpretation to Nebuchadnezzar's dream.

1 Corinthians 2:12-14 – “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know [them], because they are spiritually discerned.”

Matthew 11:25 – “At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.”

The vision Nebuchadnezzar received was from God. Therefore, it could not be interpreted apart from the Spirit of God. The worldly counselors did not have His Spirit and therefore could offer no useful advice. What an important lesson for us to learn today. We cannot go into the world to find solutions for spiritual problems. Man has a spiritual problem: sin. It manifests itself in many different maladies. The world does not recognize the existence of God or man's root problem. It therefore attempts to resolve man's root issue through useless philosophies and theories that only leave the recipient more empty than ever before. What a call this is for us to learn the Word of God and counsel with it. When men can see the ability that the Word of God has to set us free from the bondage of sin, it will be a fantastic witness to our Savior, Jesus Christ!

What is the difference between the way Nebuchadnezzar relays his vision in Chapter 4 versus Chapter 2?

In Chapter 2, he withholds the vision and requires the wise men to reveal the vision and its interpretation. In Chapter 4, he shares the vision with them and only seeks its interpretation. He is a much older and more mature king now and realizes that threatening his wise men will not profit him at all.

4:8-9 – Daniel to the Rescue

“But at the last Daniel came in before me, whose name [was] Belteshazzar, according to the name of my god, and in whom [is] the spirit of the holy gods: and before him I told the dream, [saying], O Belteshazzar, master of the magicians, because I know that the spirit of the holy gods [is] in thee, and no secret troubleth thee, tell me the visions of my dream that I have seen, and the interpretation thereof.”

What comment does Nebuchadnezzar make about Daniel's name?

In his letter, he calls him by the name Daniel, and explains that he was named Belteshazzar after Nebuchadnezzar's god, Bel (Baal). This is another indication that at the time of the writing of this letter, a change had taken place in Nebuchadnezzar's heart, as he no longer tied that name to Daniel.

Twice in this passage we see Nebuchadnezzar state that the “spirit of the holy gods” dwelt in Daniel. The word “gods” is translated in the plural in the King James Version but the original Aramaic can be translated in either the singular or the plural based on the context. The King James translators chose a plural translation because they did not believe that Nebuchadnezzar, a polytheist¹, would recognize a singular God.

Does Nebuchadnezzar recognize the identity of Daniel's God? How would we know? In this passage, we see Nebuchadnezzar use an adjective to describe Daniel's God: holy. Define the word, “holy”.

¹ Polytheist – one who believes in many different gods

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Holy - Whole, entire or perfect, in a moral sense; pure in heart, and temper; free from sin and sinful affections

It is interesting that Nebuchadnezzar would refer to Daniel's God as holy. The Pagan gods served by Nebuchadnezzar were no more holy than the men who worshipped them. Within the pagan lore, we often find them committing sinful acts and warring against one another. Nebuchadnezzar knew something about Daniel's God. He wasn't like that. He was holy, or without any sin. How did he learn this?

Daniel had obviously sought to witness to Nebuchadnezzar through both his speech and his life. He had been with Nebuchadnezzar for over 30 years at this point and probably had countless opportunities as his head advisor. A man's life will reflect the God he worships.

I believe that if Nebuchadnezzar knew so much about God's holy character, He also knew that He is One God. For that reason, I believe that these passages should be translated as "the Spirit of the Holy God".

How is it that no secret troubled Daniel?

We know from Chapter 1 that Daniel was increased in learning in the things of the world. Most importantly, however, Daniel had a spiritual connection that gave him a Divine perspective on the things of this world. That is a powerful combination that opened allowed him an understanding of many things.

4:10-18 – A Startling Dream

"Thus [were] the visions of mine head in my bed; I saw, and behold a tree in the midst of the earth, and the height thereof [was] great. The tree grew, and was strong, and the height thereof reached unto heaven, and the sight thereof to the end of all the earth: The leaves thereof [were] fair, and the fruit thereof much, and in it [was] meat for all: the beasts of the field had shadow under it, and the fowls of the heaven dwelt in the boughs thereof, and all flesh was fed of it. I saw in the visions of my head upon my bed, and, behold, a watcher and an holy one came down from heaven; He cried aloud, and said thus, Hew down the tree, and cut off his branches, shake off his leaves, and scatter his fruit: let the beasts get away from under it, and the fowls from his branches: Nevertheless leave the stump of his roots in the earth, even with a band of iron and brass, in the tender grass of the field; and let it be wet with the dew of heaven, and [let] his portion [be] with the beasts in the grass of the earth: Let his heart be changed from man's, and let a beast's heart be given unto him; and let seven times pass over him. This matter [is] by the decree of the watchers, and the demand by the word of the holy ones: to the intent that the living may know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will, and setteth up over it the basest of men. This dream I king Nebuchadnezzar have seen. Now thou, O Belteshazzar, declare the interpretation thereof, forasmuch as all the wise [men] of my kingdom are not able to make known unto me the interpretation: but thou [art] able; for the spirit of the holy gods [is] in thee.."

The Flourishing Tree

The first part of Nebuchadnezzar's vision is that of a growing, prosperous tree. Describe the characteristics of the tree.

The tree grew so large that it stretched across the entirety of the earth. It was beautiful and strong. It was so prosperous that all the animals dwelt in the shadow of the tree and derived their food and strength from the tree.

What do you think that this tree may represent, given what we have learned so far in Daniel?

Hint: Remember the definition of the word, "flourishing" and re-read Daniel 2:37-38

This tree is Nebuchadnezzar and his empire. His empire was at the peak of its power and glory. As we read in Daniel 2:37-38, God had given the empire to Nebuchadnezzar. It was an empire that either ruled over or affected many of the kingdoms of the earth. People throughout the world depended upon the prosperity of the Babylonian empire for their livelihood through trade.



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Judgment: The Stump

During Nebuchadnezzar's dream, he saw "a watcher and an holy one" come and declare that the tree should be cut down. First, define the word, "watcher" and then discuss who this was that Nebuchadnezzar saw.

Watcher – vigilant, a sleepless watch

Nebuchadnezzar saw an angel. The term "watcher" and "an holy one" are both the description of an angel. A better interpretation might be "a watcher, even an holy one". Easter religious tradition called angels "watchers" because they watched over the affairs of men.

Describe the Watcher's pronouncement upon the tree. Was it simply to be cut down or was there more to it?

Not only was the tree to be cut down, but it was to be stripped of branches, fruit, and leaves. All the animals that dwelt in its boughs or under its shadow would flee. The tree itself would be brought completely to naught.

The Watcher declared that the stump was to be left in the grass with the dew of heaven and its portion (nourishment) was to be the same as the beast's: grass. We know that as long as the root system is preserved, the tree itself is still alive. But, without its trunk, branches, leaves, and fruit, the majesty and beauty are gone. This was the prophecy of the Watcher toward Nebuchadnezzar. The Watcher also stated that a band of iron and brass were to be placed around the stump of the tree. Why?

The purpose of banding a tree stump is to keep it from splitting and preserve its life. God wasn't yet done with Nebuchadnezzar. His life would be preserved to accomplish a greater purpose that the Lord had for him. Some have tried to tie the metals of the band to the third and fourth kingdoms from Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Chapter 2 of Daniel. No clear connection can be made because this dream refers specifically to Nebuchadnezzar and the fulfillment of this dream is seen within his lifetime.

After describing the band, the Watcher leaves the illustration of the tree and states that the heart of a beast would be given to Nebuchadnezzar until "seven times" had past. How long is this?

The most common interpretation is seven years. Seven is the number of perfection or completion in the Bible. The world was completed in six days with a seventh day of rest, forming the basis for our week.

This passages states that the decree of this vision was made by the Watcher and the demand by the Holy Ones. Does this imply that they have authority over men? Make sure to harmonize this passage with Daniel 4:24 and Jude 1:9.

No, they do not have authority over men, but simply herald the declaration of God. When the Holy Angels speak, they carry the authority of God because they only speak that which they hear from the Father.

What is the purpose of the trial that the Lord is going to inflict upon Nebuchadnezzar?

God wanted Nebuchadnezzar to know in the depth of his heart that he was nothing without the blessing of God and that His kingdom was not made of his own power but was given to him by God. By the end of this trial, Nebuchadnezzar would surely know that he was the basest of men.

4:19-27 – The Interpretation

"Then Daniel, whose name [was] Belteshazzar, was astonished for one hour, and his thoughts troubled him.

The king spake, and said, Belteshazzar, let not the dream, or the interpretation thereof, trouble thee.

Belteshazzar answered and said, My lord, the dream [be] to them that hate thee, and the interpretation thereof to thine enemies. The tree that thou sawest, which grew, and was strong, whose height reached unto the heaven, and the sight thereof to all the earth; Whose leaves [were] fair, and the fruit thereof much, and in it [was] meat for all; under which the beasts of the field dwelt, and upon whose branches the fowls of the

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heaven had their habitation: It [is] thou, O king, that art grown and become strong: for thy greatness is grown, and reacheth unto heaven, and thy dominion to the end of the earth. And whereas the king saw a watcher and an holy one coming down from heaven, and saying, Hew the tree down, and destroy it; yet leave the stump of the roots thereof in the earth, even with a band of iron and brass, in the tender grass of the field; and let it be wet with the dew of heaven, and [let] his portion [be] with the beasts of the field, till seven times pass over him; This [is] the interpretation, O king, and this [is] the decree of the most High, which is come upon my lord the king: That they shall drive thee from men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field, and they shall make thee to eat grass as oxen, and they shall wet thee with the dew of heaven, and seven times shall pass over thee, till thou know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will. And whereas they commanded to leave the stump of the tree roots; thy kingdom shall be sure unto thee, after that thou shalt have known that the heavens do rule. Wherefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable unto thee, and break off thy sins by righteousness, and thine iniquities by shewing mercy to the poor; if it may be a lengthening of thy tranquillity”.

Apparently Nebuchadnezzar's newest vision wasn't what Daniel expected to hear. He was so shocked that he could not even speak for a period of time. Surely, his head was reeling at what the Lord was about to bring upon Nebuchadnezzar and how he could convey the interpretation. Why was he shocked by the vision? Daniel had probably prayed for Nebuchadnezzar's conversion for years. Ultimately, it takes the Lord to break the rebellious hearts of the lost. Daniel probably did not imagine this scenario in his wildest dreams. He was seeing the answer to his prayers. God was going to humble Nebuchadnezzar.

What was Daniel's initial response to Nebuchadnezzar? What is ironic about this? Do you do this? Daniel responded by wishing that the dream and its application were given to Nebuchadnezzar's enemies rather than to the king himself. It seems that Daniel initially recoiled at God's answer to his prayer. We can sometimes be taken aback at how the Lord answers our prayers. It is easy to say, "whatever it takes, Lord", but do we really mean it? Ultimately, if it is of the Lord it is for good and not evil. We must learn to trust in Him no matter what.

What was Daniel's hope and advice to Nebuchadnezzar? His advice was for Nebuchadnezzar to repent of his sins and begin to live righteously. Perhaps, God would repeal his pronouncement against Nebuchadnezzar and he could continue his reign in peace. John Walvoord says concerning Nebuchadnezzar, "His concern had been to build a magnificent city as a monument to his name rather than to alleviating the suffering of the poor."

Was this good advice? Read Micah 6:8.
Yes. In order for him to turn from his sins and do righteousness, he must repent. Daniel was exhorting him toward a relationship with the Lord. God summarizes His desires for us in Micah 6:8. They are relationship, righteousness, justice, and mercy.

4:28-33 – One year later....
"All this came upon the king Nebuchadnezzar. At the end of twelve months he walked in the palace of the kingdom of Babylon. The king spake, and said, Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty? While the word [was] in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, [saying], O king Nebuchadnezzar, to thee it is spoken; The kingdom is departed from thee. And they shall drive thee from men, and thy dwelling [shall be] with the beasts of the field: they shall make thee to eat grass as oxen, and seven times shall pass over thee, until thou know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will. The same hour was the thing fulfilled upon Nebuchadnezzar: and he was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles' [feathers], and his nails like birds' [claws]."

Why did the Lord wait 12 months until He brought this vision to pass? Read Revelation 2:20-21.
The Lord gave Nebuchadnezzar space and opportunity to repent of his sins. Nebuchadnezzar interpreted this as inaction on the Lord's part. It was anything but inaction. This is a common lie that many believe concerning the fulfillment of the Lord's judgment upon sin. He is longsuffering, granting opportunity for repentance that as many as possible would be saved and have eternal life.

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What was the state of Nebuchadnezzar's heart while walking on the roof of his palace?

He was full of pride and self glory. The very words of his mouth showed what he felt inside. He really believed that the credit for what he enjoyed was his. He completely forgot the lessons he had learned from the Lord. As Proverbs 16:18 says, "Pride [goeth] before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall."

What happened to Nebuchadnezzar is rare but it has actually been observed before in other humans. It is a mental disorder called lycanthropy. Under this condition, a man's mind becomes like that of an animal. The biblical scholar R.K. Harrison recounted this personal experience:

"A great many doctors spend an entire, busy professional career without once encountering an instance of the kind of monomania described in the book of Daniel. The present writer, therefore, considers himself particularly fortunate to have actually observed a clinical case of [lycanthropy] in a British mental institution in 1946. The patient was in his early 20's who reportedly had been hospitalized for about five years. His symptoms were well developed on admission, and diagnosis was immediate and conclusive. He was of average height and weight with a good physique, and was in excellent bodily health. His mental symptoms included pronounced anti-social tendencies, and because of this he spent the entire day from dawn to dusk outdoors, in the grounds of the institution...

His daily routine consisted of wandering around the magnificent lawns with which the otherwise dingy hospital situation was graced, and it was his custom to pluck up and eat handfuls of the grass as he went along. On observation he was seen to discriminate carefully between grass and weeds, and on inquiry from attendant, the writer was told the diet of this patient consisted exclusively of grass from hospital lawns. He never ate institutional food with other inmates, and his only drink was water...

The writer was able to examine him cursorily, and the only physical abnormality noted consisted of a lengthening of the hair and a coarse, thickened condition of the finger-nails. Without institutional care, the patient would have manifested precisely the same physical conditions as those mentioned in Daniel 4:33"²

Why do you think the Lord used such a drastic measure to reach Nebuchadnezzar.

He had to destroy every ounce of misguided pride within him. This meant that he had to learn that EVERYTHING he had was from the Lord. This included his health and mental stability.

4:34-37 – Seven years later...

"And at the end of the days I Nebuchadnezzar lifted up mine eyes unto heaven, and mine understanding returned unto me, and I blessed the most High, and I praised and honoured him that liveth for ever, whose dominion [is] an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom [is] from generation to generation: And all the inhabitants of the earth [are] reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and [among] the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou? At the same time my reason returned unto me; and for the glory of my kingdom, mine honour and brightness returned unto me; and my counsellors and my lords sought unto me; and I was established in my kingdom, and excellent majesty was added unto me. Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, all whose works [are] truth, and his ways judgment: and those that walk in pride he is able to abase."

Nebuchadnezzar's last coherent statement before losing his mind is completely the opposite of his first recorded statement upon the return of his mental faculties. What was his new view of God and man?

He couldn't say enough good things about God, His power, His wisdom, and His dominion. In short, God reigns! He also describes man as "nothing". Gone are his self-righteous feelings of pride and self-sufficiency. He now seems himself as totally reliant on God for all things and a very blessed recipient of high power and position, chosen to use those resources as a steward for God.

To what extent did Nebuchadnezzar regain his kingdom?

It appears that things were even better than they were before. He regained his throne, and his majesty. He also regained the respect of his counselors. Since he could now handle it, he was given more than before.

² Introduction to the Old Testament, Harrison, R.K., Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1969, pp. 1116-17

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What is Nebuchadnezzar's final statement about the Lord in this chapter? Is that a conciliation to you?

His final statement is that God is able to abase anyone who walks in pride. Essentially, the Lord can give and He can also take away. I liken it to the feeling you have after you recover from a major illness. Every easy breath and restful night's sleep are a distinct blessing. Even being able to drink a glass of water or eat a simple meal seems wonderful. He is able to bring all things into a Divine perspective. Woe is man who deeply drinks of the blessing of God and never raises his head to utter a simple and heartfelt "Thank you" to the one giver of all good things. It is a great conciliation that there is no soul that He can't humble and save. God is good!

If Nebuchadnezzar had to pick a new theme song out of our song binder, what would it be?

"I can't even walk without you holding my hand."

Items for Discussion:

Have you witnessed the Lord using a circumstance to break the pride of the lost?