

## Chapter 49 Daniel 4

### Enlarge Your Vision

*“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?’” Daniel 4:29-30*

Living in exile meant embracing the sovereignty of God. To belong to Yahweh meant trusting in the dynamic providence of God for both one’s own personal destiny and as well as the broad sweep of human history. God is in control even when it appears that the tyrant of the hour is exercising free reign. The truths that dominate the Book of Daniel overshadow the larger-than-life personality of Nebuchadnezzar and everyone else who thinks they are in control.

Daniel’s primary reason for denying himself the royal food was a personal and mostly private decision to prove that he belonged to Yahweh rather than to Nebuchadnezzar and that it was Yahweh, not Nebuchadnezzar, who was sovereign over his life. His physical strength and intellectual alertness came from God’s sustaining grace rather than the king’s royal cuisine. Even though he was in exile Daniel could pray, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (Ps 23:5-6).

Daniel’s decision to pursue a quiet course of non-conformity from the inside-out gave him strategic value in God’s Kingdom work, just as it does for believers today who decide not to conform to the pattern of this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of their mind in Christ. This decision also meant that Daniel was able to test and approve what God’s will was—“his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom 12:2). Even though he was immersed in an idolatrous culture, by God’s grace Daniel secured not only his independence but his wisdom by choosing to belong to Yahweh. Nebuchadnezzar dominated everything and everyone in Babylon, but he wasn’t able to dominate Daniel in the royal court or Ezekiel among the exiles. Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, and others like them, refused to acquiesce to the king. They cooperated but did not capitulate. They submitted to the governing authorities but did not surrender their fidelity to Yahweh.

### **Nebuchadnezzar’s Dreams**

Three dreams sum up Nebuchadnezzar’s life: a nightmare he couldn’t explain, a vision of the great society he couldn’t realize, and a self-fulfilling prophecy he couldn’t avoid. All three dreams are best taken together in order to get the big picture of what God did to Nebuchadnezzar and to all those who pride themselves on the imperial self.

In his nightmare Nebuchadnezzar saw an enormous, dazzling statue with a head of pure gold. Its chest and arms were made of silver, its torso was bronze, its legs were iron and its feet a mixture of iron and baked clay. Daniel interpreted the dream as follows: Nebuchadnezzar is the head of pure gold, but each successive kingdom will be diminished, until a rock, cut out of a mountain,

crushes the feet of clay and the whole thing topples over.

In his vision of the great society, Nebuchadnezzar made a golden statue 90' tall and 9' wide, and then ordered, amidst much fanfare, everyone to fall down and worship the image that he had set up. Nebuchadnezzar's vision of the great society, joyously uniting around his spectacular image, didn't work out because Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego refused to worship the golden image.

In his dream of an enormous tree that covered the earth, Nebuchadnezzar heard a messenger from heaven announce in a loud voice, "Cut down the tree. . . .let the animals flee . . . .But let the stump and its roots, bound with iron and bronze, remain in the ground, in the grass of the field" (4:14-15). Daniel was called upon to interpret the dream, which became a self-fulfilling prophecy for the king of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar is the great tree which at first flourishes and then is cut down. The stump symbolizes Nebuchadnezzar's destiny. "You will be driven away from the people," Daniel explained, "and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox 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 on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes" (4:25).

These three dreams, a nightmare, a vision, and a self-fulfilling prophecy, reveal the power of God to expose the weakness of the human condition and the wisdom of God to reveal the redemption of the human condition. America is a nation of little Nebuchadnezzars out to assert their sovereignty. The need has never been greater for servants of God, like Daniel and his friends, to proclaim and practice the Word of God.

The Bible assumes that the reader knows that Nebuchadnezzar (also known as Nebuchadrezzar II 605-562 BC) was a great military leader and a brilliant administrator. He conquered people from Egypt to western Turkey and put a judicial system in place to control his widespread empire. Ancient records indicate that he refused to tolerate bribery and corruption. He sought to rule less oppressively than the Assyrians and to assimilate the best and brightest into his administration. He rewarded working class exiles with wages and professional advancement. From inscriptions on buildings and other archeological records a picture emerges of a highly energetic, restless, innovative leader who stopped at nothing to build Babylon into the greatest city of the world.

Nebuchadnezzar built magnificent palaces and constructed more than twenty canals and an extensive water defense system around Babylon. He built a ten-mile long wall north of Babylon as a defense against nomadic incursions from the north. He prided himself on his royal gardens where he planted all kinds of fruits and vines to provide temple offerings. He "embellished the streets of Babylon, especially the Procession Way, the route along which the images of the gods Nabu and Marduk were drawn" (D. J. Wiseman, *Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon*, Oxford University Press, 1983, 62). He prided himself on building elaborate temples, with silver, gold and precious stones. He used cedar beams overlaid with gold and supplied the temples with "sumptuous and regular daily offerings" (67). Nebuchadnezzar turned Babylon into an impressive international center, the administrative hub for his empire and the "holy city" for the gods (80).

Pastor Joel Osteen articulates a Nebuchadnezzar philosophy of life in his book, *Your Best Life Now*. From what we know of Nebuchadnezzar's accomplishments and his dreams he would fit right in at Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas. Pastor Joel Osteen has built the largest church in America on a Nebuchadnezzar philosophy of life. Osteen preaches that you'll never live in a bigger and better home unless you imagine yourself achieving it. You'll never win the beauty pageant unless you imagine yourself walking down the runway. You have to envision your success if you expect to realize your success. "As long as you can't imagine it, as long as you can't see it, then it is not going to happen for you" (3). Unless you enlarge your vision, you'll "never achieve significance, do something meaningful, or enjoy the good things in life that you've seen others enjoy" (4). If you do not perceive it, you will not receive it. Osteen's challenge is to raise your level of expectancy.

Nebuchadnezzar would feel right at home, because no one had a higher level of expectancy than Nebuchadnezzar. If Osteen is right, when he says, "You will never rise above the image you have of yourself in your own mind" (56), then Nebuchadnezzar should be his hero, because Nebuchadnezzar could not have had a higher self-image of himself. He was the ancient prototype of the Osteen philosophy of life. When Nebuchadnezzar dreamed his dreams he was from a human point of view the most powerful human being on the planet. He foreshadowed Nietzsche's sentiment, "If there is a God, how can I bear not to be that God?" (Ferguson, 71).

American novelist Tom Wolf has made a career of describing the modern American Nebuchadnezzar. In *A Man in Full*, the contemporary Nebuchadnezzar is Atlanta real estate typhoon Charlie Croker. In *Bonfire of the Vanities*, he is New York stockbroker Sherman McCoy, and in *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, he is university basketball star Jojo Johanssen. These modern day Nebuchadnezzars all suffer from ego fed dreams of greatness. They believe in themselves to such an extent that there is no room for any other kind of belief. Yet they remain haunted by the possibility that there may be more to life than their egos and their achievements. The ghost in the machine may be a soul after all. Wolf's novels help us see through the Master of the Universe facade into the dark uneasy feelings of inadequacy and insecurity and the nagging desperate nightmares of a pending downfall.

### **A Bad Dream**

Following the nightmare that he couldn't explain, a troubled Nebuchadnezzar summoned "the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers to tell him what he dreamed" (2:2). But instead of describing the dream, he insisted that they first tell him what he had dreamed, presumably in order to prove the validity of their interpretation. The astrologers insisted that was impossible. "There is not a person 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 human beings" (2:10-11).

An outraged Nebuchadnezzar ordered Arioch, the commander of the king's guard, to execute the wise men of Babylon—all of them. This is when Daniel intervened. He is a picture of wisdom, composure, confidence and courage. He spoke first to Arioch and then to the king. He promised

to interpret the dream, but he needed time. Daniel returned home “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” (2:17-18). That very night “the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision.”

The point of the whole story, as well as Daniel’s prayer of praise to God (2:20-23), is that “only God’s wisdom can reveal the mysteries of life” (Longman, 73). Human wisdom alone is inadequate to explain the fallen human condition and God’s provision of redemption. All the magicians and mentors, sorcerers and scholars, fortune-tellers and therapists, astrologists and academics, enchanters and psychiatrists in the world cannot reveal the ultimate mystery of life. We would never know that the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of God in Christ, apart from the revelation of God. Daniel’s reply to Nebuchadnezzar sums it up: “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” (2:27). The destiny of the four kingdoms, gold, silver, bronze and clay, described in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream is destruction. The “rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands” will break the kingdoms to pieces and “the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed” (2:44-45).

### **A Wish-Dream**

Nebuchadnezzar’s vision of the great society which he tried to accomplish by rallying everyone around a golden statue became for him not only frustrating and humiliating but an eye-opening revelation. Apparently the king took the first vision of the golden head to heart, but he failed to grasp the meaning of the message of the kingdom of God. Instead of being humbled, he was emboldened to live out his imperial destiny. The immense golden statue on the plain of Dura, the summons of every authority figure in the land, the dire penalty for disloyalty, and the musical extravaganza were all meant to culminate in a grand celebration of Babylonian society. (Note the interesting contrast between the “wise men of Babylon,” the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers, and the officials of Babylon, “the satraps, prefects, governors, advisors, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and all other provincial officials.” The tendency to list (the wise men, officials, musical instruments) itemizes the culture in contrast to the stories of Daniel and his friends ). But in spite of pouring everything he had into this wish-dream, the event proved to be a failure. The event reminds us of the Tower of Babel and a similar effort to unite people in a single cause. We don’t know what the image represented. Was it an image of Nebuchadnezzar or of one of the Babylonian gods? In any case it was an idolatrous image, a symbol of “ultimate concern” that was designed to build solidarity and pledge loyalty to something other than Yahweh.

If only Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego had gone along with the celebration everything would have been okay, but they didn’t. Their quiet, low-profile resistance would have gone undetected if some astrologers had not come forward and denounced them. Once again the conflict between human wisdom and God’s wisdom is evident. Like Daniel, they may not have gone out to the plain of Dura on the outskirts of Babylon, but unlike Daniel, they may have been perceived by the wise men of Babylon as easy targets for denouncement. In any case, Nebuchadnezzar, the

supreme leader, the master of the universe, and the self-acknowledged king of kings, could not let such blatant insubordination and disloyalty stand.

If Daniel's prayer of thanksgiving is the highlight of the first story then Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego's response to Nebuchadnezzar is the highlight of the second story. Their calm and resolute courage in the face of life-threatening intimidation ought to inspire all believers. They answered Nebuchadnezzar with respect and dignity, but without equivocation or even a hint of insecurity.

“King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If the God we serve is able to deliver us from the blazing furnace and from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up” (3:16-18).

The penalty for their resistance was to be thrown into a fiery furnace heated seven times hotter than normal. Historian D. J. Wiseman explains the presence of such furnaces. “Massive furnaces must have been used to fire the estimated fifteen million kiln-fired, as well as glazed, bricks required for Nebuchadnezzar's numerous building operations. These were usually fired to about 850-950 centigrade but a higher temperature could be obtained by the use of wood fires or the equally available bitumen from Hit” (112). News reports showing oil rig fires in Texas or oil pipeline fires in Iraq may help us to visualize a fire so intense that even the soldiers who cast Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego into the fiery furnace were overcome by the flames. But nothing would have prepared us for seeing what Nebuchadnezzar saw. “Look!” he shouted, “I see four men walking around in the fire unbounded and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods” (3:25).

### **A Scary Dream**

The third dream story comes to us largely in Nebuchadnezzar's own words. The dream of the dazzling statue and the vision of the great society culminate in the dream of the magnificent tree that touched the sky and could be seen from the ends of the earth. The first vision showed Nebuchadnezzar that Daniel's God is none other than the God of gods and the Lord of kings. The second vision showed Nebuchadnezzar that the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is the Savior of all those who put their trust in him. The third vision showed Nebuchadnezzar that the Most High God “is sovereign over the kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes.” Yahweh can cut down to size any master of the universe no matter how great. Everything in the Book of Daniel is God-centered and no one, not even Nebuchadnezzar can overshadow God.

For the third time, Nebuchadnezzar's emotional state is described. The great military commander, conqueror, administrator, and city planner, is described as being afraid because of a dream. Behind the demeanor of the most powerful human being in the world lies the insecurities and fears inherent in the human condition. He lies awake terrified by the dream of a great tree, cut down to a stump, with the stump representing a dehumanized being acting like an animal. None of the wise men of Babylon either could or would interpret Nebuchadnezzar's dream. This is the third time that the wisdom of the world has failed Nebuchadnezzar proving the point that

“only God’s wisdom can reveal the mysteries of life” (Longman, 73). Only Daniel, as God’s agent, knows the meaning of the dream, and has the courage to interpret it for Nebuchadnezzar. He is the tree, in all its glory, but he is also the stump that will be left out in the wilderness. Daniel spells it out for the king, “You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox and be drenched with the dew of heaven.” Three times it is re-iterated that “the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes” (4:25; see 4:17, 32).

In the light of the prophecy, Daniel advised the king respectfully, “Therefore, Your Majesty, 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” (4:27). But twelve months later the dread of the dream and its fearful interpretation had worn off. Nebuchadnezzar was content and proud as he surveyed his city from the roof of the royal palace of Babylon. He boasted to himself, “Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” Immediately a voice came from heaven and repeated the prophecy. The Bible does not elaborate, but apparently Nebuchadnezzar suffered a total mental breakdown. “He was driven away from people and ate grass like the ox” (4:33). He lived like an animal for a period of time. Later, we are told that he came to his senses and expressed praise toward God. The last word we hear from Nebuchadnezzar bears witness to God’s justice: “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” (4:37).

### **Pictures of Power**

Nebuchadnezzar is a picture of a powerful person who is repeatedly exposed to the truth and in some ways strongly attracted to God, but who never seems to go all the way in making a commitment to God. He reminds us of the rich, young ruler who wanted to come to Jesus, but not enough to give up his love for wealth and power. In the end, Nebuchadnezzar confirms the truth that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10-11). Nebuchadnezzar was impressed with the God of Daniel, but he probably never turned away from his imperial image nor relinquished his master of the universe ideology. He was in the world and of the world.

Daniel and his friends are also a picture of power, but their power was completely different from Nebuchadnezzar’s power. Their God-given power became more apparent in their human powerlessness. They were in the world, but not of the world. Humanly speaking, Nebuchadnezzar held all the political and the material power, but within his own soul he was a picture of insecurity and fear. Daniel had the power and the courage to intervene in order to save lives. He had the strength that comes from total dependence upon God. Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, had the courage of their convictions and the boldness to take a stand even if it cost them their lives. Against the principalities and powers and the rulers of this dark world they had the strength to rely on God for deliverance.

In the power struggle with Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel's willingness to understand and communicate God's will led to his secular advancement, public honor and worldly success. It doesn't always happen that way, but in the providence of God it did in Daniel's case. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, put their lives on the line and Nebuchadnezzar ended up promoting them. Ironically their persecution led to their promotion. Like Daniel and his friends we have to be ready for the Cross, but willing to advance in the world. Daniel and his friends lived in exile without developing a persecution complex. Whether their faithfulness meant sacrifice or success they knew their lives were in God's hands.

### **The Hidden Christ**

Nebuchadnezzar dreamed a bad dream of a golden headed, clay-toed statue, crushed by a rock. He envisioned his own wish-dream of a great society bowing before his golden statue. And in spite of being warned, he fulfilled his own scary dream of a magnificent tree cut down to a stump. In each dream God got Nebuchadnezzar's attention with a twist in the action that the king couldn't explain. In the first dream it was the rock cut out of the mountain, but not by human hands, that smashed the kingdoms and paved way for the kingdom that will never be destroyed. In the fiery furnace ordeal it was the fourth person, standing with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who looked like "a son of the gods." In the dream of the chopped down tree it was "a holy one, a messenger, coming down from heaven," who called out the message of judgment.

Scholars debate the meaning and identity of all three, the rock, the fourth person, and the holy one, coming down from heaven. Perhaps it is the very nature of the hiddenness of God that preserves the mystery that surrounds their identity. Nebuchadnezzar is the high profile king of Babylon, who builds huge images out of gold, but the Lord of the Universe is concealed in somewhat vague images and metaphors. For those who believe in Jesus, the Incarnate One, all three are suggestive of God's personal intervention in establishing his Kingdom, saving his people and judging the proud. Jesus himself made a clear reference to Daniel 2 in his parable of the wicked tenants (Lk 20:9-18). He ended the parable by quoting from Psalm 118, "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" (Ps 118:22). Then he added a final thought that comes right out of Daniel, "Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but anyone on whom it falls will be crushed."

Even though early Christians had no trouble identifying Jesus as the fourth person in the fiery furnace, we tend to be reserved about making a direct identification. But surely this was a case of Immanuel, "God with us," intervening to save and bring victory over death. Who better than the second member of the Trinity to be present in the fiery furnace?

This is what it means to dream big and expand our vision—to see Christ in the battle for history, in the salvation of souls, in the judgment of the world. We need to learn the difference between striving to become a little Nebuchadnezzar and daring to be a Daniel.