

## Daniel 4 This is my story - Nebuchadnezzar

We all love a good story and it's even better if it's a true story! That's what we have here in Daniel 4 - Nebuchadnezzar tells it like it is, and like it was! From riches to rags and back to riches ... and he pulls no punches, he's candid in what he says. So far as I'm aware, this is the only recorded testimony of a Gentile king in the Scriptures.

### 4:1-3

#### Open confession is good for the soul

This chapter is an official state document that is addressed to one and all. It is comparable to a State of the Union Address delivered by the President of the United States or a speech from a serving Prime Minister. Unlike them, it is compulsive reading. A jolly good read. You start it and you keep on going as you want to finish it! Most of it is written in the first person and is best seen as an autobiography of Nebuchadnezzar. It makes the hair stand on the back of your neck. It shows the lengths to which God is prepared to go so that he may rescue and redeem a lost soul. It's a reminder that none of us are beyond the reach of a God of extravagant grace and magnanimous mercy. Matt Papa's song, 'Our sins they are many, his mercy is more!'

There was a similar intro in the previous chapter (Daniel 3:4), this time it is a tad different for this one is cut from a different cloth. Then he was totally immersed in himself; now he is enthusiastically extolling the wonders of God. Talk about transformation, this is it! As a new man, he wants to tell of the amazing things the awesome God has done in his life to the glory of God.

He was determined that his message would reach out to those *who live in all the world*. Think of the impact it would have in the world of his day. If he were alive today, he would have called a primetime news conference for TV and radio, live-streamed online. He would have used Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. He wanted as many people as possible to know what God did.

Living as we are in a post-Christian culture we need to do what he did and tell the world. As believers, we must take the great commission seriously and seize every God-given opportunity to spread the good news globally of a Saviour who is 'mighty to save.' We have 'a story to tell to the nations.'

#### Starting with the ending

His parting shot actually becomes his opening salvo when he gives us his conclusion in the introduction. Verses 1-3 declare where he came out, and verses 4-37 are his memory in overdrive as he relates how he got there.

The stress in ch. 2 is that God reveals, in ch. 3 that he rescues, and in ch. 4 that he rules. Like a carpenter hammering nails in a piece of wood, the message is repeatedly affirmed that 'the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes' (Daniel 4:17).

#### One man's pleasure

World leaders in the West do not usually 'do God,' as former prime minister Tony Blair's top spin doctor Alastair Campbell famously declared on television. Nebuchadnezzar did, and in the course of his opening remarks, he makes four pulsating

statements that heighten our awareness of who God is.

As a transcendent God, he is the God of the impossible; he is the God who revolutionises for *signs and wonders* are all in a day's work for him; he is the God who always will be for his *eternal kingdom* outlasts and outshines all flimsy, fragile earthly kingdoms; he is the God who never changes since he is famed for his immutability from one *generation* to another.

These words echo the truths found in Psalm 145 that no God is like this God in what he does, and no God is like this God in what he has.

#### 4:4-9

##### Blissfully content until ...

Life was hunky-dory for Nebuchadnezzar at this point in his life. For the best part of forty years he was undefeated on the battlefield. He was in a good place in terms of personal contentment and national prosperity. He had the people under his thumb. To all intents and purposes, the garden was rosy, the sky was blue, and he was living on cloud nine. He ticked all the boxes and seemed to have life by the tail. He was a man at the very top of his profession, sitting on the pinnacle of power. He was master of all he surveyed.

The unease and discomfort returned with a vengeance when he dreamed another one of those nightmarish dreams; upwards of thirty years have lapsed since his last major vision when he saw the statue of the metallic man in chapter two. By his own admission, he was in a cold sweat for he was *terrified*. He has run all of the red stop lights, and now he is caught and arrested. This was God banging on the front door of his life, one

more time. God had spoken loudly to him in ch 2 two, and again a few years later in ch 3. Such is the infinite patience of a grace-loving, sinner-seeking God.

Confronted with the harsh realities of life and death, his calloused heart was shell-shocked and shattered. Needless to say, he did not like what he saw with every passing image. The carpet was pulled out from under his feet and he felt as though things were crumbling in his own life and, potentially, on the verge of crashing. Another wake-up call from the Most High. Deep down, he knew it. It is no exaggeration to say that the king is a desperately worried man.

As before, the first port of call is his group of paid pagan professionals, so we are not in the least surprised to see the march of the wizards into the inner sanctum of the royal palace. The motley crew filed in to see the king and waited for him to do his bit. It was the same old rigmarole. These veterans have trundled down this well-worn path on numerous occasions. They know the drill. And again, as before, they fail the test.

He sent for Daniel, his go-to guy, but he had not yet learned to plead with Daniel's God. There's a palpable feeling of relief when the king sighs, *at last Daniel came in before me*. The king's face lights up with Daniel's arrival. Daniel is the kindness of God to Nebuchadnezzar.

If nothing else, he knows that Daniel will tell him the truth, like it or not. God communicates, God speaks, Daniel is simply a conduit. His track record on such matters is exemplary. He knew by Daniel's lifestyle and personal godliness that he was a man full of 'the Spirit of the Holy God' (9).

People on the outside know when God's people have a warm relationship with their God; in normal circumstances, they can tell the gaping difference between synthetic saints and spiritual saints, even before we open our mouths to talk about Jesus. There is something attractive, as Daniel displayed, about a Spirit-filled life.

**4:10-18**

### **Learning the hard way**

It was a fairly straightforward vision: it is all about a cosmic tree that was big, beautiful, and bountiful; it stood like a bastion in the middle of the land. Then an angel appeared and the order was given to cut down the tree, leaving only a stump in the soil. In itself, that was harsh, but hopeful.

The postscript did not sound too promising either when it suggested that the person represented in the vision would act like a beast for an extended period of time. Overall, the message is: you have never had it so good, then crash, bang, wallop, and you go from boom to bust within hours.

God always gets his man. He is relentless in his pursuit of individuals, irrespective of who or where they are. The vision is soaked with the age-old truth that the Lord is sovereign. He needed to learn that his tenure on the throne was only at God's pleasure; the same holds true for every human ruler, be they good, bad, or indifferent.

The principle is that God crowns whomever he chooses (Romans 13:1-5). The God who reigns over all is the one who puts them up, he puts them down and, ultimately, he puts them out. How essential it is for us to humble ourselves before God does it for us.

### **The Babylonian dendrophile**

Before we lift the lid on the vision and its interpretation, it is interesting to note that Nebuchadnezzar was an original tree hugger. That is why the vision of the tree is so apt and relevant for the green-fingered king. Ancient manuscripts tell us about his love for the stately cedars of Lebanon. He imported beautiful cedar logs for the cosmetic decoration of Babylonian buildings and skilfully transformed the sun-kissed landscape with all types of vegetation.

**4:19-27**

### **The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth**

This confrontation between Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar is epic when set alongside similar showdowns in biblical history. It ranks with the encounters between Moses and Pharaoh, Elijah and Ahab, John the Baptist and Herod, Jesus and Pilate, and Paul and Agrippa.

For Daniel, the thought of having to divulge the precise meaning of the dream to the king sent him into an emotional tailspin. He was visibly affected to such a degree that the swell-headed king even noticed; it took its toll on God's servant, now a man in his early fifties. Perplexed. He was to be the bearer of bad news, terribly bad news. Daniel's compassion, care, and concern for the king shine through in the narrative. He was known as a man of believing prayer, and there is no doubt that Nebuchadnezzar was probably up there at the top of his prayer list. He must have often prayed for the king's salvation and longed for him to turn in repentance to his God.

When it comes to you and me reaching people with the truth of the gospel, vulnerability, tears and pleading go a very long way. It is good for us to feel the impact of the message in our own hearts before we open our mouths and speak of mercy and judgment to others.

Daniel exhorted the king to do what was right and to do what he knew to be right. It was a message which the king did not want to hear, but it was one that he needed to hear. Daniel implored him to forsake his sin and turn from his wicked ways. In gospel-speak, he urged him to get right with God.

### **The first tree-man**

In the space of twelve to fourteen lines in the average Bible, Daniel talks about its height and its foliage and its fruitfulness, it provided shelter for the animals and nesting places for the birds.

Pictorial language, but when taken at face value, it is quite an exhaustive list of accomplishments. Without pausing for breath, Daniel then quipped, ‘... you, O king, are that tree!’ (Daniel 4:22, NIV).

### **The divine lumberjack**

Nebuchadnezzar would soon make a name for himself for a very different reason. It is scary how fast a man in his prime can be so humbled and humiliated, one minute on a throne, next minute in a trough. From the peaks of glory to the pits of despair. Pride puffs us up, God brings us down.

The heavenly lumberjack calls out, ‘Timber!’ and in no time at all the giant tree topples to the ground. When God is on the move he does not drag his heels. The stump and its roots is an example of judgment tempered with mercy. The banding of the tree may suggest that he was

marked by God and protected by him until his purposes for him were fulfilled.

Having been exiled to seven years detention in the open field, he will have an opportunity to make amends and seek God. If he does, then God will recompense him and his sunset years will be his best years. So all is not lost, there is a ray of hope, but only if and when he finally submits to the sovereign purposes of God.

Having used the big stick, Daniel then dangles a carrot in front of him when he offers to him the prospect of light at the end of the tunnel for there is a divine *perhaps* at the end of his message.

There is a way out, a way back. Judgment can be averted, but only if he gets things satisfactorily sorted between himself and the God of heaven.

### **4:28**

### **A gap year – a missed opportunity**

In a matter-of-fact, one-line report, we read all that had been prophesied came to pass in the king’s life. There was, however, a delay of twelve months before anything actually happened. A patient God gave him a breathing space to gather his thoughts, sort out his life, and repent of his sin. God was not in a rush to teach the king a lesson he would never forget.

Just because the Most High did not slam the door in his face there and then did not mean that a righteous God had forgotten all about it. Unlike us, the omniscient Lord has no problems with amnesia. Grace at its finest when man is at his foulest.

As the weeks slipped by, the chances are the king thought he had gotten off scot-free. He put the whole experience down to a bad dream. At one

point, twelve months earlier, he was scared out of his wits but, alas, that fear and dread has given way to a complacency fuelled by a sense of pride, he firmly believed he was untouchable.

In his heart, he really felt that he was bigger and brighter than the great God of heaven. Sadly, and tragically, he is not the last man to feel like that for there are many in today's world who feel exactly the same. Given time, the Spirit's promptings become less frequent and such individuals feel a sense of immunity from the wrath of a holy God. They no longer hear with clarity the hammering voice of a redeeming God on the anvil of their hard hearts. Not a good place for any man to be!

**4:29-30**

#### **A one-sided conversation**

Twelve months have slipped into eternity. One morning Nebuchadnezzar is out on the palace roof getting some fresh air and exercise. He is prancing around on top of the palace and on top of the world. Alone, in the hanging gardens (one of the seven wonders of the ancient world) he is talking to himself. Most of us have done that at one time or another!

He proudly surveys the landscape as far as the eye can see and he starts gloating over his magnificent achievements down the years. He rants and raves about his accomplishments and ambitions. His world revolves around himself and all that he has done. To be fair, and to give credit where it is due, that was an amazingly long list! All the archaeological evidence gathered to date supports that claim. You can check it out in a good encyclopaedia.

No wonder he is crowing with pride about his own greatness. We hear him say in triumphalist tones in verse 30, 'I did it. I built it by my mighty power. I built it for the glory of my majesty.'

**4:31-33**

#### **A man out standing in his field**

Nebuchadnezzar's few minutes of boasting on his lofty perch came to an abrupt end when God interrupted the one-way conversation. God broke into his life like a thunderbolt and spoke directly to him; he told him that his time was up. He was going out to pasture. No comments. No questions. No more chances.

A longsuffering God gave Nebuchadnezzar one year to repent. He frittered that away. None of us knows if we have forty minutes, never mind forty days or more. Hence the urgency of the situation. He then gives him a further seven years to rethink and refocus, to come to his senses and acknowledge that the sovereign Lord is bigger than he is and that he alone rules and reigns.

Nebuchadnezzar was smitten with an illness which resulted in him walking on all fours, eating grass like an ox, living with animals in an open field, alienated from society, abandoned to the elements of high and low temperatures in summer and winter. Within a period of time he was unkempt and unrecognisable for his matted hair and non-manicured nails were bird-like. He looked like an ox, and he ate like an ox; the grand and glorious king became a repulsive animal.

There has been much speculation among commentators about the nature of what afflicted Nebuchadnezzar's mind. I chatted with a couple of friends, both of whom are psychiatrists. They

describe it, in medical terms, as ‘an extremely serious delusional (psychotic) disorder.’

An analysis of the biblical facts corresponds with their specialist diagnosis and explains the bizarre behaviour of Nebuchadnezzar when he believed himself to be an animal. On that hugely significant note, the prophecy of his dream was thus fulfilled (Daniel 4:15-16).

**4:34-37**

### **Sanity restored**

The first thirty-three verses of Daniel 4 illustrate that God resists the proud, these last four verses demonstrate that he also gives grace to the humble. For Nebuchadnezzar, hubris must give way to humiliation.

A total of eight years since he first dreamed that dream, the king is now in a much better place. His eyes are opened. The mental fog has lifted. In the palace he was looking around like a fool, then he spent seven years in the field looking down like an animal, and now he is looking up for salvation.

**His reason was restored; his reputation was restored; and his reign was restored.**

He learned the lesson, and in the process, he discovered that the God who disciplines is the God who delivers. ‘We have a choice between being humble and being humbled,’ writes C H Spurgeon. That is what Nebuchadnezzar proved.

**The king does justice to the sovereignty of God because he sings about it. He first ponders this magnificent truth, then bursts forth in eloquent praise for it. His soul delights in it, he is resting on it. His ascription of joyous praise to the Most High is beautiful in every way as he acknowledges the Godship of God. God does what he does**

**because he is who he is. *Heaven rules* is his anthem of worship.**

He recognised the eternity and covenant faithfulness of God. He respected the ongoing sovereign rule of God on earth and in heaven for God reigns down here, not merely up there. He realised the nothingness of sinful man and his total dependence upon God. He rejoiced in the matchless grace of God to salvage every situation to his glory. He found out that there was stability in God’s truth and ability in his higher throne.

**The closing words of his most moving testimony show the reality of what he actually experienced. With more than a sprinkling of undiluted joy in his God and King, he realises that the God whose works and ways are perfect is the same God who gets it right first time, every time (Deut. 32:4).**

He continues to affirm that God gets what he wants when he humbles all those of us who are consumed with pride. That is a sovereign work of grace, a ministry in which our God is the divine specialist. God did it, not by boosting him up, but by knocking him down. The way up is down.

**The God who felled him, flattened him, and floored him, is the same God who freed him, and forgave him.**

He admitted that the worst, most humiliating experience in his life was the best thing that ever happened to him. Can it be that when we realise God is so big, we finally see how small we are?

**One of the biggest challenges we all face is to finish life’s race, and to finish well. He did. The final words recorded on the pages of Scripture from this Babylonian king give praise to the God of Israel. Amazing grace. Awesome God!**