The Hope In a Tree Stump

**Daniel 4:4-18**

Dr. David G. Barker

Last time, I returned to our study of Daniel where we left off, and that was at the beginning of chapter 4. Some time has apparently passed during the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar; for the account we have here appears to be a testimony and proclamation the king wishes to make to all peoples everywhere, of something which has, itself, taken some time not only to experience but upon which to learn and reflect. In writing this testimony, we noticed, that Nebuchadnezzar both began and ended with a doxology of praise ... unto *Yahweh* – not unto any of the idols of Babylon or to himself - but unto the God of the people of Judah whom he had conquered some time ago. What could have made Nebuchadnezzar do this? What has he experienced and learned that compels him not only to write out this testimony but to give such credit to Yahweh alone?

King Nebuchadnezzar has had another dream, another vision. This is not the same dream as was told to us back in chapter 2. This is another dream – one that seems to have taken place later in the reign of Nebuchadnezzar – perhaps even toward the end of his life. But also, it is not a dream that is meant to be isolated from that earlier one - or, for that matter, kept separate from the incident with Daniel’s friends in the furnace – all of which we have already studied. The dream of Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 2 had a purpose for Nebuchadnezzar – a purpose that came from the one who gave him that dream. That purpose was to demonstrate to the king that his so-called wise men were not, as it turned out, all that wise. He would also learn, to his surprise, that the one he had conquered in Judah – Daniel – who was now standing in his presence as a result - was there for a divinely appointed purpose as well – to introduce to the king the one who actually was the real one, true, & living God. In the same way, the fiery furnace was not merely a contest of wills and consciences, but was an episode ordained to give Nebuchadnezzar a vision, a glimpse - for just a moment - of one who appeared to him as the son of God.

And now comes the dream or vision before us here. So, before we ask ourselves the meaning of this dream, let us ask first what purpose this dream will serve? When you stop and think about it, seemingly random circumstances swirl all around us all the time. And things that seem to be very important and major at the moment do not always turn out to be that way in the end. Two things that appear completely unrelated, unconnected, can, somehow, come together in order to accomplish the most remote, unimagined result. For instance, we know that the time had finally come for the Lord God to bring judgment upon the nation of Judah - that is abundantly clear - and that was a major event. And when you study the history leading up to that time, you understand how the nation of Judah had deteriorated morally, spiritually, militarily, and economically. At the same time, the savage nation of Assyria to the north - which had earlier gobbled up the northern 10 tribes of Israel – had finally collapsed; and that it gave way to the more advanced nation of Babylonia. Is it really thinking and going too far to suppose that the timing for all of this – even the movement of nations and kingdoms - might deliberately also include bringing young Daniel into the presence of King Nebuchadnezzar - just so the king, himself, might be confronted and even won over to the God of the Jews? to the gospel itself?

Isn’t that what the prophet, Isaiah, tells us in Is. 40?

*Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; … He will tend his flock like a shepherd;*

*he will gather the lambs in his arms; …*

[while, at the same time, he says]*, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, (Is. 40:10, 11, 15, ESV)*

I also think of the book of Esther. That account takes place in the later period of the exile and at a time when the fate of all the Jewish people in captivity hung on the one act of a young girl. As her uncle, Mordecai, tells her:

*who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14, ESV)*

Christians should always be aware that God is acting providentially in their lives and that his ways and designs are going to be different than our ways and designs. We should always be challenging ourselves not to get discouraged when things do not seem to go well for us; to make the most of every opportunity the Lord gives to us; and keep Mordecai’s question before us: have I come to this choice, this opportunity, this challenge for such a time as this?

**Nebuchadnezzar Begins His Testimony**

In writing his testimony, Nebuchadnezzar begins by telling us that, at a given time, he was at ease in his house and prospering in his palace. We will not get the full effect of this until we read of Babylon’s prosperity down in verse 30. But it is enough to note that Nebuchadnezzar was in high and in comfortable spirits and not even that he was asleep when “fancies and visions” came upon him and which alarmed him. Something came to him that ruined his high and comfortable spirit.

That is such a familiar theme and yet, it always bears repeating. How many times have you heard someone tell you “What do I need God for? I’m doing great.”or “No, I don’t pray anymore. Why pray? I just go out and get whatever it is that I want.” Prosperity, Scripture warns us, is always a great and terrible distraction. Why is it, for instance, that it is so hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven? It is not because of any physical obstacle in his way. No. It is because a man of prosperity is constantly assured by his wealth and possessions that he does not need to be concerned about his soul. His present sense of self-satisfaction will often turn a rich man away from God rather than toward him in humble thanksgiving. It always seems to take that wake-up call - that earthquake in a man’s life, before he will come to grips with his need for God – before he will admit there is something he must have that he cannot get on his own – something that makes him see the truth – that everything he has in life is actually dulling his senses.

**Nebuchadnezzar Seeks the Meaning**

**of His Dream**

And so, as before in chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar seeks the *meaning* of his dream. He thinks that, by understanding the meaning of the dream he will, somehow, gain control of it, prepare for it. But the book of Daniel will teach us one lesson clearly: the *meaning* of a dream or vision or prophecy is not necessarily the same thing as its *purpose* – nor is the meaning *necessarily* as important! Now, if you remember, back in chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar approached his wise men about this with great suspicion. Nebuchadnezzar was not convinced these advisors were really capable of supernatural thought at all; and when none of them could tell the dream to the king he did not want to hear from them their explanation or guess as to what the dream meant. But Daniel stepped forward and did both – by the power of the Holy Spirit, he did what they could not. He told the king the dream and its *meaning*; but the *purpose* was to put Daniel in the forefront.

This time, Nebuchadnezzar reacts differently. In fact, I think he is really hoping that one of these other wise men can interpret this dream so that he will not have to turn to Daniel – because he already knows what Daniel will say. This dream is not so obtuse that its meaning cannot be readily surmised. And, therefore, it could be that when the wise men hear it they only pretend to not be able to explain it so as not to incur the king’s wrath upon them. And, also, knowing of their jealousies against Daniel, it could be that they pretend ignorance so that Daniel might be called upon that he might possibly receive the king’s royal anger himself.

And so, when the others will not help, Nebuchadnezzar reluctantly allows Daniel to speak. But as he gives Daniel audience, his resistance to Daniel and his gifts only gives way slowly. First, he claims Daniel, calling him Beltashazzar – that is the Babylonian name assigned to Daniel when he was new and just a boy – a name which means: “May Bel protect his life.” It is a gracious name, to be sure, but it is still just a way to draw his attention and focus away from the one, true God and toward the dead idol of Babylon. In our culture, more and more children are given names that seem to be virtually meaningless - even just syllables creatively put together – because uniqueness is often prized more than anything else today – no one else in the world shares this name. Now, that is the opposite of our Christian heritage which has always linked names of new children to their ancestors, their heritage in order to tie families together – to track a record of the generations – identify with grandparents and great grandparents - all who have faithfully passed on not just a family name and history but also a family faith. Daniel’s name means “My judge is the living God.” and Daniel resisted taking on his new Babylonian name and held on to that Jewish name in order to keep that link to his own heritage and faith even though his own family line had been erased.

Second, Nebuchadnezzar also praises Daniel. Even though he turned to the others first he now calls Daniel “chief of the magicians” because he already knows the truth – that Daniel’s God *will* tell Daniel the interpretation – but that he still wants to hear happy news. And so, before Daniel even speaks, Nebuchadnezzar makes this confession in vs. 9:

*I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you and that no mystery is too difficult for you, (Dan. 4:9, ESV)*

This is the same, hard-sounding argument that the apostle Paul teaches in Romans 1:

*For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. (Rom. 1:21-23, ESV)*

When Paul writes those words, he is thinking of unbelievers in the midst of their active rebellion against God. Nebuchadnezzar seems beyond that here. He is beginning to realize he cannot avoid God even though he will not yet confess his name.

**The Dream’s Two Stages**

So, when Nebuchadnezzar explains his dream or vision he states that it was revealed to him in two stages. The first stage is of glory and peace. He sees before him a great tree – a tree to which no other tree can be compared for its size and strength. It is healthy and luxurious. It cares well for all who have come to depend upon it and the contentment of all the living seems ultimate. The second stage is, in contrast, disastrous. He describes a watcher or holy one in verse 13, who, as it states in verse 17, is among a company of others.

That holy one gives two commands and then states the consequences that will come as a result of those commands being executed. The first command is to chop down the tree. And the stated implication of that in verse 14 is that the beasts and birds will flee. But then, beginning with verse 15, that implication is filled out more specifically: “He” will be driven outside and exposed to the elements, “his” portion will be with the beasts, “his mind” will be changed and made like an animal’s mind. Now, it does not take a rocket scientist to figure out what and who this dream is about and how things will go for Nebuchadnezzar. But the dream does raise some questions that, I am sure, Nebuchadnezzar desperately wants answered; and for that, he will beseech Daniel.

For now, however, let me close by drawing your attention to the second command of the holy one:

*leave the stump of its roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze, (Dan. 4:15, ESV)*

The vision of Nebuchadnezzar ends with those words which do not overtly promise that there will be any sense of restoration of that tree. But leaving the stump in the earth, with its roots in tact, does give the indication that, while the loss of the tree is devastating, there is still hope – sometime yet to be – for new growth. That is the reason why the prophet, Isaiah, also speaks of a stump:

*There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. … for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. (Is. 11:1-2, 9, ESV)*

Isaiah foresaw the judgment of Judah into exile – that was the tree of Jesse that the Lord cut down. But Isaiah promised a shoot to grow from the stump and the promise, clearly, is of that shoot - which will be in the form of the Messiah, the one who brings the gospel of peace. There is even a 16th century German Christmas Carol about this:

*From Jesse’s stock upspringing,*

*On tender root has grown:*

*A rose by Prophet’s singing*

*To all the world made known.*

*This rose then of my story*

*Isaiah did proclaim.*

*What God ordained in glory*

*By blessèd Mary came.*

*True Man, yet very God,*

*From sin and death He saves us*

*And lightens every load.*

I think this vision of Nebuchadnezzar is deliberately linked to that prophecy of Isaiah and that is another reason that I am convinced that the conversion of the king was real - that the Lord God had a purpose for giving Nebuchadnezzar this specific vision. And so, this is truly a vision for everyone. The tree of your own glory, the life of your own making, is not going to last; it will, one day, be cut down – the judgment of God will come to all men. And so, your hope, your trust must be in the one who gives life even to a stump – who can bring not only restoration but resurrection. Jesus calls us soberly to remember this in Mt. 16:

*For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? (Mt. 16:25-26, ESV)*

*My Own Thoughts*

**Studies in the Book of Daniel**

**The Hope in a Tree Stump**

*Daniel 4:4-18*

(see also: Is. 11, 40; Esther 4:14; Mt. 16:25-26; 19:24; Rom. 1:21-23)

The dreams and visions in the book of Daniel

a) are easy peasy to understand.

b) are known only unto wise and learned men.

c) have purposes as well as meanings.

**I. Nebuchadnezzar begins his testimony.**

Why is it so hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God?

**II. Nebuchadnezzar seeks the meaning of the dream.**

Does the king know who it is that will tell him this?

**III. The dream’s two stages**

#1:

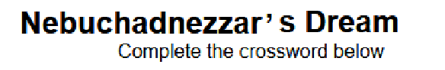
#2:

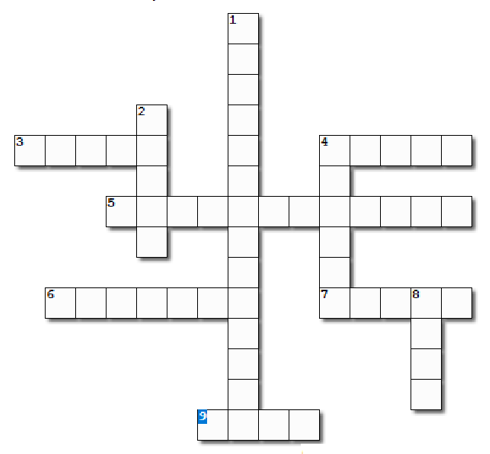
Command #1:

Command #2:

Will you save your life or will you lose your life?

New Covenant Presbyterian Church, PCA, Abingdon, MD (410) 569-0289





Word Count:

(Count how many times you hear these words)

dream

purpose

rich man

stump

Color the King telling his dream



