

CHAPTER 4

Context

This chapter concludes the account of Nebuchadnezzar's reign. Unusually it includes first hand testimony from a Gentile and recounts an apparent conversion to worship the true king. It stands in stark contrast to the way God humbles the succeeding king in ch. 5.

Purpose

The declaratory nature of the opening and the theme of God ruling over the kingdoms of the earth suggests the purpose is for the widest possible audience: Worship and make known the sovereign God, who can humble and save the proud.

Structure

4:1-27: Opposing God's sovereignty brings judgement

4:1-18: Verdict given so the Most High God is acknowledged

4:19-27: Judgement given so the Most High God is acknowledged

4:28-37: God's judgment brings humble repentance

Notes on the Text

4:1-27: In 1-18 Nebuchadnezzar speaks in the first person. 4:1-3 act as a headline to the whole chapter. We are told this chapter will be an account of how and why the king now worships God - he is sovereign: his kingdom is eternal; a enduring dominion. 4:1-3 is full of rich detail: The mention of the nations and peoples of every language repeats chapter 3, extending to all who live in the earth. This underlines the all-encompassing nature of God's sovereignty. He is not a local deity of the Jews but the only God in heaven who should be praised by all.

In verse 2, Nebuchadnezzar describes what has happened to him as God's "signs and wonders" that God has performed for Nebuchadnezzar. This suggests God's grace but is also a striking way of describing something that has been so awful (so awful that even Daniel is terrified of these signs and wonders that are to happen to the king, 4:19). Yet, the king describes it as "his pleasure" to tell of God's work.

The account proper continues in 4:4. It has the shape of a conversion narrative with reference to his previous belief: the king still resorts to magicians (4:7); we are told that Daniel was renamed after

Nebuchadnezzar's god, and Daniel's power is the generic "spirit of the holy gods" (4:8). Unlike the previous dream, there is an explicit message from a holy messenger (4:13). There is a great tree that will be cut down with the stump and root preserved. Although the king needs the dream interpreted, its intent has been declared: "the decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over all the kingdoms of the earth and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of people." As the true sovereign ruler, the 'decision' here is God's rightful verdict on the tree in 4:14-15. This judgment is for the purpose of everyone knowing that God, the Most High is sovereign. In God's grace, he has announced what he will do before hand, so that all might be able to repent and that the king will rightly interpret what will happen to him. The addition of God setting a lowly people over the kingdoms of earth foreshadows 7:27, and ultimately Jesus' blessing on those in his kingdom: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:5 cf: Matt. 5:3).

In 4:19-27, Daniel interprets the dream, but is himself terrified of it. It is clearly an awful judgment - and would be better if it applied to the king's enemies (4:19). Daniel goes on to tell the king of the

verdict (4:17); the decree is against him (4:24). This is God's sovereign judgment for failing to acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all the kingdoms of the earth (4:25). The root of the tree however will remain - this means the judgment won't be total. Acknowledging God's rule is what God requires of the king. God's intention is underlined a second time - he will restore the king when he acknowledges that "heaven rules" (perhaps the shortest summary of the book of Daniel!). As with 4:17, God's judgment intends for restoration. In light of this, Daniel advises the king to repent.

4:28-37: Here we see the outworking of the dream and the end result. If the reader is in any doubt over the justice of God, Nebuchadnezzar's pride is shown in its blatant self aggrandisement, attributing kingdom success to himself (4:30). We are also pointed to the fact he has not repented, even after a whole year. Nebuchadnezzar is then sentenced to a time of insanity and is driven from his throne.

Nebuchadnezzar concludes in first person - he is led from being unrepentant to repentance and God is praised. This is amazing considering the king's pride and terrifying judgement, but God has restored him. In 4:35 he underlines God's right to act in any way

he chooses: "he does as he pleases" and "no one can hold back his hand." God's justice is also highlighted - no one can question God saying to him "what have you done." This is high praise considering what God's punishment entailed. The king continues to praise God - because everything he does is right and all his ways are just" (4:37, cf: Deut 32:3-4). Not only has God justly humbled the king's pride, but God has not left him there. The king is graciously restored - not merely in resuming his reign, but in salvation - exhibiting the signs of someone saved from his sin and pride to acknowledge the Most High God. God's sovereignty has worked in Nebuchadnezzar's life so that he is known as the Most High sovereign God - as he should be. God is the one who is supremely king. Not only is this to be known by God's people in exile, it is to be known by all the earth.

Implications

Like God's people in their original exile and subsequent time under foreign rule, we are to be encouraged by God's sovereignty even over the world's most powerful. However, this chapter might have been challenging. Here is a Gentile, a former tyrant and oppressor of God's people now declaring God's praises. It's not

hard to imagine that many would welcome God's punishment, but feel it should have been left at that. Yet here there seems to be a miraculous conversion. We should see - and marvel - that God is both just in his judgement, and justified in his pleasure to save people, after all: "no one can hold back his hand, or say to him 'what have you done?'" We mustn't question God's judgement or his grace - are there times when we might be tempted to do this? Such acts of God remind us of his insistence that he be known as the Most High God. This is both a right obligation and a blessing to us, as we are rightly orientated to our creator.

Most believers however, will treasure God's grace and here is an occasion to see that no one is beyond it, despite how opposed and proud they may be. This should encourage as we speak to others. We also may be reminded that as God disciplines us as children, we can be hopeful and expectant that God will show us more of ourselves, and who he really is. The question is whether we'll repent when God works in this way in our lives. This chapter highlights the depths of pride: it is a deep and offensive sin, seeking to usurp God's rule.

Like Nebuchadnezzar, as we look up to heaven rather than to ourselves, we are restored. Moreover, in our struggle and

failing against pride, we not only look up, but look to Jesus. Here is a king who chose to be humbled, even to death on a cross. This was not a judgement deserved of him, but of us, so to work a gracious justice that saves sinners for his kingdom. Rightly, he is the king to whom everyone in heaven and earth should bow (Phil. 2:6-11). Such news is not only to be known by God's people but should be broadcast to all nations and languages. Nebuchadnezzar does this, despite the shame of admitting sin, recounting embarrassing discipline and

The LORD is a God who humbles the proud and exalts the humble. In particular with Nebuchadnezzar, God is humbling someone who has achieved a great deal and is attributing that success to himself. However, the lesson that Nebuchadnezzar needs to learn is twofold: firstly, his achievement is from God, and secondly the nature of his achievement (kingdom rule) is not greater than God's. This chapter however, is one of great joy and grace - it is a high point in Daniel so far. Before we reflect on the grace in this chapter it worth reflecting on the overlap with the specifics of academic life.

showing repentance. This is the normal Christian life: brought into the kingdom of God as we relinquish our own sovereignty; declaring that miraculous wonders and true sovereignty are really seen in God's justice and gracious salvation. Should it not also be our pleasure to worship him and unashamedly tell of this God to those who live in all the earth?

Daniel 4 in the academy

In academia, high achievement is hard won and is often held in high esteem and it would be easy to see how pride creeps in. We may need to both wrestle with our own temptations in this regard, but also have the right perspective to pride when we see it. In refusing to acknowledge God's transcendence, Nebuchadnezzar's behaviour becomes increasingly ego-centric. In his punishment, we see his pride revealed as something beastly: the punishment fits the crime. One of the dangers in neglecting to operate under God's eternal rule is that positions of achievement - and therefore status and authority can often result in the oppression of others. This is not something that is alien to the world of academia.

Remarkably, God's attitude is one of grace - even within judgement. Unlike Nebuchadnezzar's threat to destroy those under him, God's power is shown to be both righteous and transformative. We might want to think about this when we see it around us as exhibited by those in greater positions than our own.

The Lord's grace is shown not only in Nebuchadnezzar's turning to worship God, but in God restoring to him his position. We might be reminded that when we seek to flourish in our own pursuits, we must pursue that in submission to God's rule rather than try to achieve it apart from it.

Discussion Questions

Interpretation Questions

- How would you compare and contrast Nebuchadnezzar's use of power and God's use of power in this chapter?

What is the effect and significance of Nebuchadnezzar speaking in the first person?

> How might this encourage us to be humble under God's rule?

> How does this change your attitude to the godless pride in the academy?

Application Questions

- Where might we see pride in academia? How can we heed the warning for ourselves and the emphasis on what "I" have achieved? For any in high positions, we should remember that God can take away - these positions are not untouchable.

- There is freedom in knowing God's rule endures forever. It is a good and gracious rule above our own.
- What Fiefdoms/mini-kingdoms seem all-encompassing to us in academia? How does Jesus' kingdom encourage us in the midst of them?
- God is graciously persistent with the restoration of Nebuchadnezzar. How does this encourage us in our attitude toward the people we work with? What about the people who are a 'big deal' in our fields? Are we expectant that God can work in them? How might he use you to do so?
- There is a focus on Nebuchadnezzar praising, not just 'believing'. How might this challenge us in intellectual fields in terms of how we understand the gospel or what we hope for when witnessing to colleagues?