



Daniel

דניאל

Chapter 4

AN OBJECT LESSON ON PRIDE

Chapter 4 of Daniel is one of the most remarkable chapters in the Bible. The venerated Jewish Scriptures, the Holy Word of God, the “Tanach” has been penned by the most holy, most godly men of the nation of Israel. Moses. Job. David. Isaiah and many other prophets. Daniel. Now we come to a chapter in this holy book written by a Gentile. Not just any Gentile, but the king of a pagan nation. And not just any pagan nation, but the nation that conquered Jerusalem, took its people as exiles to an ungodly land and completely destroyed the Holy City and its temple. What is it about this man that authorizes him to a place as one of the authors of the Scriptures?

In short, he received an object lesson on pride, and it has changed his heart. Chapter 4 is an affidavit he has published to the entire world as a testimony to the God of Israel.

GOD HATES PRIDE

Pride is just one sin, but in many ways it represents the root of all sin. Not only was pride the first sin experienced by man when Satan tempted Eve and Adam with the desire to be “like God:”

“For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” –Genesis 3:5

Pride was in fact the very sin that caused Satan to be cast out of Heaven. This makes pride the original sin of Satan and of all the sins committed by mankind:

“You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you... You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you... So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God, and I expelled you, O guardian cherub... Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth; I made a spectacle of you before kings.” –Ezekiel 28:13-17

Pride lifts up the heart to place the holder of this sin into a position he doesn’t own, forgetting his place and losing respect and honor for the genuine holder of the desired position. There’s a common saying, “a legend in his own mind” that refers to how we are distorted by pride. The Bible indicates that Satan experienced this:



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“You said in your heart, I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.” –Isaiah 14:13-14

The writer of the Proverbs assigns a special consequence to the sin of pride:

“The LORD detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished. Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.”
–Proverbs 16:5,18

The book of Job also provides an interesting perspective on pride. Job’s fourth friend, Elihu, offers some wise counsel that has an eerie resemblance to the account of Nebuchadnezzar recorded centuries later in Daniel. Notice the reason he gives for God’s purpose in dealing with man through dreams and warnings:

“For God does speak —now one way, now another — though man may not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men as they slumber in their beds, he may speak in their ears and terrify them with warnings, to turn man from wrongdoing and keep him from pride, to preserve his soul from the pit, his life from perishing by the sword.” –Job 33:14-18

Daniel’s fourth chapter is specifically about the pride of one man, but we see in him a lesson for us all. Although Nebuchadnezzar’s punishment for his pride was severe, it serves to tell us that we will all be brought down a notch according to our own position. You know the saying: the bigger they are...

DANIEL 4:1-3

Nebuchadnezzar the king, to all people, nations, and languages that live in all the earth; Peace and prosperity be multiplied to you.

I thought it good to tell you about the signs and wonders that the Most High God has demonstrated toward me.

How great are his signs! How mighty are his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion is from generation to generation.

- Nebuchadnezzar writes an affidavit to the world. His memorandum includes the entire Chaldean Empire; this is not restricted to the province of Babylon.



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- In a nation that was very devoutly committed to a large number of gods with Marduk above them all, it is politically incorrect for the king to put one god, especially the God of a conquered nation, above Marduk and the others. An edict like this has no political benefit to the king, and can be quite risky, especially in light of the story he tells. Clearly his statements are representative of a changed life.
- Unlike the king we saw earlier, the Nebuchadnezzar we see here does not try to force people to serve and honor the God of Israel. He merely tells his story and allows them to take it and use this information as they see fit. Nebuchadnezzar has mellowed in the one or two decades that have passed since the incident with the golden image.
- There is some disagreement over when this edict was written. Many scholars believe it was issued about a year before his death, making it 564-563BC.
- The reference to God's mighty signs and wonders is an understated version of the actual words used. He says they are "stupendous." He is offering a sense of awed wonderment at the miracles of God.
- He describes God's kingdom as everlasting and His dominion as unchanging, quite different from the kingdoms of men that change dramatically from one year to the next (as we will see in the next chapter). Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom didn't change dramatically during his reign, so this is a strong observation.

DANIEL 4:4-5

I Nebuchadnezzar was at rest in my 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.

- Having completed a number of successful military conquests, Nebuchadnezzar was quite content. Yet his dream made him afraid. We've seen this before, in chapter 2, but this time we see a king willing to admit his weaknesses. A remarkable change for this arrogant tyrant who craves power so much.
- In that part of the world, dreams are thought to come from the gods (even today), so people see a great deal of meaning in dreams. Something about this dream in particular made Nebuchadnezzar deeply concerned about his future. He probably understood part of it, giving him a sense of foreboding.



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DANIEL 4:6-7

Therefore I made a decree to bring all the wise men of Babylon before me, that they might tell me the meaning of the dream.

The magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans and diviners came before me. I told them the dream; but they did not make known to me its meaning.

- Familiar territory for those reading the Daniel account. The wise men are brought in because they are supposed to understand these messages from the gods.
- The Bible doesn't say that they "can't" interpret the dream, as is implied in some translations. It just says they "didn't" interpret the dream. We are about to see a dream that is quite negative about the king and his position of power. If you were a wise man in the kingdom of Babylon, and you had to tell this hot-headed king really bad news with the risk that he would fly into a rage, would you willingly tell him? It is possible that these wise men didn't know the meaning of the dream, but even Nebuchadnezzar appears to have some understanding of its meaning so it seems doubtful that they were clueless about it. Chances are they knew much of what it meant but were too terrified to tell him.

DANIEL 4:8-9

But at the end 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. Before I told him the dream, I said,

"O Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, because I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you, and no secret troubles you, tell me the visions of my dream that I have seen, and its interpretation.

- It is a remarkable sign of respect that the king refers to Daniel by his Hebrew name. When he was first deported to Babylon, he was given a Babylonian name and it would be customary for the king to refer to him that way alone. However, here he refers to Daniel and then gives his Babylonian name as an aside so that everyone familiar with that name knows who he's talking about.
- The king says that Daniel is the "chief of the magicians." Don't take the word magicians too seriously. It comes from the root word "stylus" that refers to the instrument used to inscribe the complex Cuneiform letters. It doesn't mean magicians in the sense we use today, but essentially just means "wise men." Daniel was the head of the entire body of wise men.



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- Nebuchadnezzar says he knows that the Holy Spirit is in Daniel. Clearly Daniel has established a ministry in his position. He has walked the talk during the entire term of his service to the king, establishing himself as someone different from the pack. How much impact is *your* life making on those around you?
- Though the king's statement at first seems to be just a message of confidence in Daniel's ability, there appears to be a challenge implied. The king knows the dream is bad news and may be trying to box Daniel in so he doesn't bail on him as his other wise men did.

DANIEL 4:10-12

These were the visions of my head while I lay in my bed: I saw, and beheld a tree in the midst of the earth, and the height of it was great.

The tree grew and was strong, and its height reached to the sky, and it was visible to the end of all the earth.

The leaves of the tree were fair, and it had much fruit, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field had shade under it, and the birds of the air lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it.

- Trees and plants are common metaphors in the Bible for kingdoms.
- This tree grows to cover the earth with plenty of fruit to feed everyone. In a few verses we'll see that one of Daniel's admonitions to the king is to regard the plight of the poor. There is a clear implication that Nebuchadnezzar is no longer using his kingdom's wealth to look after the needs of the empire. Saddam Hussein also took riches from the country for his own good while his people went hungry. Just the day before American bombs began to fall, his son took \$1 billion in cash from the bank. Many of the Iraqi people were starving during Saddam's reign.

DANIEL 4:13-18

¹³ In the visions of my head as I lay upon my bed, I saw a watcher, a holy one came down from heaven;

¹⁴ He cried aloud, and said, 'Chop 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 birds from his branches.



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¹⁵ But leave the stump of his roots in the earth, 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.

¹⁶ Let his heart be changed from a man's and let a beast's heart be given to him until seven times pass over him.

¹⁷ This matter is by the decree of the watchers, and the verdict by the word of the holy ones so that the living may know that the most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever he will, and sets up over it the lowest of men.'

¹⁸ This is the dream that I, king Nebuchadnezzar, have seen. Now you, O Belteshazzar, tell me what it means. None of the wise men of my kingdom are able to tell me its meaning. But you can for the spirit of the holy gods is in you."

- The term used to describe the angel is "watchman." One other reference has been found among the scrolls of the Dead Sea caves using the phrase "watchman angel" implying that this may be a special class of angelic messenger.
- Note the reference to the tree being called a man. Nebuchadnezzar probably understood the kingdom metaphor and understood that this was a reference to himself. No wonder the dream terrified him with its talk of cutting him down and turning his mind to that of an animal!
- Seven times mean seven years.
- Why is the verdict declared about this fall from greatness? To tell the world that God is sovereign. The watchman angel explains that this edict is the fulfilment of the entire purpose of the events described in the dream!

DOES DANIEL 4:17 CONTAIN A MESSIANIC PROPHECY?

There's an interesting reference in verse 17 that God sets up over the kingdoms on earth the "lowest" of men. What exactly does this mean?

The King James Bible interprets this as "basest" while other translations refer to "lowest" or "lowliest." Bible commentaries skip right past the suggestion here that this might be an Old Testament reference to Jesus Christ as the One -- indeed the "lowest" of men -- whom God will set up over all the kingdoms of earth after the great and glorious Day of the Lord. While Daniel contains a number of Messianic prophecies, what makes this one (if it exists) interesting is that it was actually given by an angel to King Nebuchadnezzar.



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Let's take a closer look at the potential meaning inherent in Daniel 4:17.

- The word used here is the Chaldean/Aramaic word “Shphal” שָׁפַל. The exact same word is also used in Daniel 4:37, 5:19, 5:22 and 7:24. What makes it interesting is that except for its use in Daniel 4:17, the word always means “lower” in the sense of being humbled or reduced in position or esteem. This would fit with a Messianic prophecy, while an interpretation meaning “basest” would not.
- The King James Bible interprets the identical word differently in 4:17, claiming that it means “basest” of men, a term that means low in the sense of crudeness or inability to perform the duties involved. This would mean the angelic watchman is implying that God gives kingdoms to men who don't deserve to be king, perhaps even representing a put-down of Nebuchadnezzar himself.

STRONG'S DICTIONARY

- Because of the King James Authorized English interpretation, James Strong's Hebrew Chaldean Dictionary used as a primary source for translation work applies a separate entry to this word (8215 vs 8214) for Daniel 4:17, even though the spelling and context are identical to the other uses of the word. Why would the KJV apply a different meaning here? Was it because of the bias of King James himself, as he was a member of the translation team working on that translation and would have taken an interest in this particular story?
- There appears to be no good reason why the KJV would interpret “shphal” differently here than its meaning in other places. All other translations use a consistent interpretation.
- If the watchman really did mean Nebuchadnezzar was one of the “basest” of men, this would appear to conflict with Daniel 5, where Daniel himself praises King Nebuchadnezzar's reign as being a reasonably good one overall (in a human sense) except for the unfortunate time when he filled himself with pride and God humbled him through seven years of madness. He certainly doesn't put down the former king here.

SINGULAR, NOT PLURAL

- The Chaldean/Aramaic text used by Daniel in his account does not actually refer to the “kingdoms” of men in the plural, but to the “kingdom” of men in the singular. The plural version of the Chaldean word “malkuw” ends with a thawv character (“malkuth”). This is significant. While it may refer to Nebuchadnezzar as the “king of the world” (the empire covered most of the known world of that time), it seems even more likely that it refers to the ultimate worldwide kingdom that will be ruled by the Messiah.



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- An interlinear translation of the passage says “the Most High (is Master) in the kingdom of men; and to whomever He wishes He gives it, and the lowliest of men He sets up over it.”
- The angelic messenger in the dream says that God sets up over all the kingdoms on earth the “lowest” of men. There is no guarantee that the Chaldean word used includes in its meaning a Messianic prophecy, but it appears that the KJV translation of “basest” is not an good rendering of “shphal” either.
- The Chaldean word used here may mean nothing more than God’s control over the world of men by setting up as kings men who don’t necessarily deserve to be kings. However, there is a strong possibility that this is also a double reference, including the concept of the Servant-King -- the lowest of men -- who will ultimately be set up over all the kingdoms on earth, the one and only kingdom that will exist. Jesus Christ, the servant of all, born in a manger, beaten and crucified, is the humblest of men in this sense. How remarkable that the king of a pagan empire, writing a chapter in the Hebrew Tanach, may include a Messianic prophecy.
- Daniel has just heard a deeply disturbing dream described to him. Even the king appears to have understood that its meaning was not good news. No wonder none of the wise men were interested in interpreting this dream for the king!

DANIEL 4:19

Then Daniel, who was also called Belteshazzar, was puzzled for one hour, and his thoughts troubled him. The king said, “Belteshazzar, do not let not the dream or the meaning of it trouble you.” Belteshazzar answered, “My lord, if only the dream applied to those who hate you, and its meaning to your enemies!”

- Daniel is not perplexed because he doesn’t understand the dream. He’s upset and troubled because he does. He doesn’t know how to tell the king this ominous, deeply disturbing news. He doesn’t know what impact this will have on his people, the Jews. Will this event usher in civil or political unrest that will affect the Jewish captives? And how can he even begin to tell this hotheaded tyrant such news?
- It is obvious that Daniel is very transparent about his troubled heart. How else would the king know how he’s feeling? It takes a lot to transmit feelings of fear or concern to others. Even though these two are probably quite familiar with one another, there is a sense that Daniel’s response is dramatic.



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- Nebuchadnezzar knows the message is bad news. But notice the nature of the relationship. We see a strong bond here between these two men. The king loves Daniel and is willing to accept the message because he knows that Daniel cares for him from the heart, unlike the pretense from other advisors.

DANIEL 4:20-26

²⁰ The tree you saw, which grew and was strong, whose height reached to the sky, visible to all the earth;

²¹ Whose leaves were fair and the fruit plentiful, providing food for all; under which the beasts of the field lived, and upon whose branches the birds of the air had their nests --

²² that tree is you, O king! You have grown and become strong; for your greatness has grown to reach the sky, and your dominion to the end of the earth.

²³ You, O king saw a watcher, a holy one, coming down from heaven saying, 'Chop the tree down and destroy it; yet leave the stump of the roots of it in the earth, with a band of iron and brass, in the tender grass of the field. Let him be wet with the dew of heaven and let his portion be with the beasts of the field, till seven times pass over him.'

²⁴ This is the interpretation, O king, and this is the decree of the Most High that He has issued against my lord the king:

²⁵ That you will be driven from men, and you will live with the beasts of the field, and you will eat grass as oxen, and you will be wet with the dew of heaven. Seven times shall pass over you, until you acknowledge that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men and gives it to whomever he will.

²⁶ Whereas they commanded to leave the stump of the tree roots; this means your kingdom will be restored to you after you recognize that Heaven rules over you.

- Daniel cuts to the chase fairly quickly. The bad news is that the king will go insane for a period of seven years. The good news is that God is gracious enough that he will restore the kingdom when the king understands who is really in charge.
- The message is conditional. When Nebuchadnezzar recognizes the authority and dominion of God over his kingdom, then and only then will his sanity and his kingdom be restored to him.



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DANIEL 4:27

Therefore, O king, let my advice be acceptable to you: Break off your sins by doing what is right and by showing mercy to the poor. It may lead to a lengthening of your peace.”

- Daniel asks the king to look after the poor (although some Bibles use the word “oppressed,” the Chaldean word actually refers to poverty more than oppression). This suggests that one of the wicked things Nebuchadnezzar is about to be punished for is his insensitivity to the poor.
- There is scriptural precedent for repentance of a king overturning a prophetic judgement. This happened a number of times to Hebrew kings, and to the king of Nineveh as described in the account of Jonah.
- Daniel isn’t implying that the prophecy won’t come true. He knows better than that. He is merely trying to hold off the sentence. If Nebuchadnezzar changes his ways, God might wait a little longer. He did spare the Assyrian city of Nineveh for its repentance after declaring that it would be destroyed because of sin, but eventually it did lay in ruins.

DANIEL 4:28-30

All this came upon king Nebuchadnezzar.

At the end of twelve months, as he walked in the palace of the kingdom of Babylon, the king spoke and said, “Is not this the great Babylon that I have built as the royal residence by the might of my power, and for the glory of my majesty?”

- We don’t know if 12 months was early or late. Did the king perhaps make an effort to change some of his ways, staving off sentencing for a year? There are no records that shed light on this, but the watchman angel was ready for the exact moment that Nebuchadnezzar’s heart would be puffed up with pride.
- Although the king had reason to be proud of this great city, he gives all the credit to himself. Through his earlier vision 35 years before, God has already told him that his mighty powers were a gift from God. In the vision he refers to, given just one year earlier, the angels told him that God sets up whomever He wishes as kings.



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DANIEL 4:31-33

While the words were still in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven saying, "O king Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is decreed; The kingdom is taken from you.

And you will be driven from people, and will live with the beasts of the field. You will eat grass as oxen. Seven times will pass over you until you know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever he wishes."

That very hour what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven from men and ate grass as oxen. His body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hair had grown like eagles' feathers and his nails like birds' claws.

- Imagine the scene: a proud king filled with pride as he surveys his kingdom, then a voice from heaven reciting very familiar words. Was there dread? Was there fear and trembling? How much time did he have to ponder the words that came from the air before the madness set in?
- The specific mental derangement that hit Nebuchadnezzar is called "Lacanthropy" which refers to a belief that the person is actually an animal. Though Lacanthropy generally refers to a wolf (we get our werewolf legends from this disease) it can mean any kind of animal. Some would say this particular form experienced by Nebuchadnezzar should more accurately be called "Boanthropy," which is a belief that the victim is an ox. There was a documented case of Boanthropy in England in the late 1920's.
- There is a tradition in the Jewish Talmud that during this seven-year period of madness, Nebuchadnezzar was cared for by Daniel. From what we know of this man, that would certainly be in character for him.
- There is a seven-year period in the life of Nebuchadnezzar when nothing is said about him historically.

DANIEL 4:34-35

At the end of the days, I Nebuchadnezzar, lifted up my eyes to heaven, and my sanity returned unto me, and I praised the Most High, and I glorified and honoured him who lives forever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation:

All the people of the earth are reputed as nothing. He does according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the people of the earth. Nobody can hold back his hand or say to him, "What are you doing?"



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- First, Nebuchadnezzar recognized God as being in charge. That's the first step to salvation for all of us. Then he praised and glorified God for two unique qualities: his eternal existence (the "I AM") and his unchanging nature. Unlike the kingdoms of men that change 180 degrees in a day (we'll see just how fast in Daniel 5), the kingdom of God remains unchanging forever.
- Note that the Aramaic text includes a reference to "the army" of heaven (some Bibles do not make this clear). Obviously Nebuchadnezzar gained a deep understanding about the reality of spiritual warfare.

DANIEL 4:36

At the same time my reason returned to me. For the glory of my kingdom, my honour and splendor returned to me. My advisors and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before.

- How humble Nebuchadnezzar has become since lifting his eyes to Jehovah! He is clearly a changed man. He recognizes that his honor and splendor aren't his doing but given to him by God, saying that they were "returned" to him. This is only possible if someone else owns and controls them.
- Note how he now refers to his magicians, astrologers, diviners, and other wise men as his "advisers and nobles." He appears to see them now as people, not as tools for wielding power over others.
- He was restored to his throne and "became even greater than before." Even the most rapid restoration process would take months. This decree was not written a day or two after his sanity was restored, but must have been many months later. The changes in Nebuchadnezzar were not short-term changes but lasting ones.

DANIEL 4:37

Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and lift up and honour the King of heaven, whose works are truth, and his ways just. And those that walk in pride he is able to humble.

- Nebuchadnezzar doesn't try to force his faith on others but acts as a witness and tells people that he has decided to praise, lift up and glorify God. He has also grasped the purpose of his ordeal. Every indication suggests this was a true conversion.
- We often look at acts of judgement by God as punishment. In fact, it is always a form of discipline, designed to bring us closer to God. A careful study of the Bible shows that God always disciplines those he loves. He must have loved Nebuchadnezzar and seen within him a man very much worthy of salvation.