

Nebuchadnezzar's Judgment



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Daniel 4.*

Memory Text: “Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all of whose works are truth, and His ways justice. And those who walk in pride He is able to abase” (*Daniel 4:37, NKJV*).

Harry Truman was the caretaker of a recreation lodge on Spirit Lake, five miles north of Mount St. Helens' smoke-enshrouded peak in Washington State, U.S.A. Harry had been warned by rangers and neighbors that the mountain was going to explode. Warnings blared from loudspeakers on patrol cars and helicopters and blinked from battery-powered signs at every major crossroad. Radio and television announcers pleaded with their audiences to flee. Harry Truman ignored them all. He grinned on national television and said, “Nobody knows more about this mountain than Harry, and it don't dare blow up on him.” On May 18, 1980, at 8:31 A.M., the mountain exploded, flattening everything for 150 square miles, including Harry, his cabin, and his cats.

Harry was warned but not forced. In a sense, it's the same with God and us: We're warned but not forced, even if those warnings can sometimes be very forceful. This week we'll take a look at one instance in which the Lord worked in a powerful way to get someone's attention.

The Week at a Glance: What was King Nebuchadnezzar's fundamental problem? What parallels exist between this chapter and Daniel 2?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 23.*

A Royal Testimony (*Dan. 4:1-9*).

This chapter contains the remarkable testimony of King Nebuchadnezzar, the reigning monarch of the world, who now humbled himself before the King of the universe and acknowledged his dependence upon the Lord, “the Most High,” the One who “rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses” (*Dan. 4:25, NKJV*). Over the course of his long reign (605–562 B.C.) he had learned that the Hebrew God is a revealer of secrets (*Dan. 2:28*) and that He saves His faithful followers from the fiery furnace (*Dan. 3:27, 29*). Yet, his heart remained proud and independent. God, therefore, removed him from his throne and humbled him into the dust. After the recovery from his sickness, he submitted fully to God. The “once proud monarch had become a humble child of God.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 521.

Read carefully the king’s words in Daniel 4:3, where he talks about God’s kingdom as an “everlasting kingdom.” Contrast those words with what happened in Daniel 3 and with Daniel’s interpretation of the dream in chapter 2 (*vs. 44*). What did the king seem finally to learn about humankind’s futile attempts at immortality apart from God?

From the earliest times of the great controversy, when Satan first tried to be God (*Isa. 14:12-14*), up through the rise of the man of sin (*2 Thess. 2:3, 4*), and until the final crisis over worship (*Rev. 14:9-11*), humankind in one way or another, has wanted to be God. This trait was seen in Nebuchadnezzar, as well.

Go back through everything we’ve read about Nebuchadnezzar so far. In what ways was he trying to be God or, at least, playing the role of God?

You don’t need to be a proud, powerful monarch in order to fall into this trap of trying to be God. In what ways, often very subtle, can anyone, rich or poor, weak or powerful, be tempted to play God? Why is falling broken before the Cross the only sure remedy against this dangerous spiritual trap?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Key Text: *Daniel 4:37.*

Teachers Aims:

1. To confirm that pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.
2. To affirm that God shall exalt those who humble themselves.
3. To reveal God's mercy and His readiness to forgive and to restore.

Lesson Outline:

I. Nebuchadnezzar's Second Dream (*Dan. 4:10-18*).

- A. After acknowledging God's kingdom as an everlasting kingdom, Nebuchadnezzar receives a second dream from God.
- B. This time God uses an immense tree to symbolize the king, one that spreads its branches across the earth and seems to reach to heaven.

II. Daniel Interprets the Dream (*Dan. 4:19-27*).

- A. Daniel is reluctant to tell the king that the dream means he will suffer insanity for seven years.
- B. The dream serves as a warning to Nebuchadnezzar, who still denies God's sovereignty.
- C. Daniel advises the king to accept his counsel to humble himself in order to avoid disaster.

III. From Humiliation to Conversion (*Dan. 4:33-37*).

- A. One year later, the king's prideful words reduce him from nobility to wretchedness.
- B. After seven years of insanity, Nebuchadnezzar acknowledges the Most High God.

Summary: Nebuchadnezzar says it best: "And at the end of the days I Nebuchadnezzar lifted up mine eyes unto heaven, and mine understanding returned unto me, and I blessed the most High, and I praised and honoured him that liveth for ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation" (*Dan. 4:34*).

COMMENTARY

I. You Are Not God.

"First of all," states the Alcoholics Anonymous manual, "we had to quit playing God. It didn't work."—*Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 62, as cited at <http://www.whytehouse.com/big_book_search/book/ch5p62.html>. From Nebuchadnezzar to the present day, people have had an irresistible desire to play God. During all this time, however, it has never worked.

Nebuchadnezzar had the most powerful empire of his day on

Nebuchadnezzar's Second Dream (*Dan. 4:10-18*).

Nebuchadnezzar's second dream was not about an image but about a tree. This tree was so tall that it seemed to reach into heaven and could be seen from any part of the globe. Its immense size and spreading branches displayed its powerful influence.

Read Daniel 4:10-17. What was the dream about? What sequence of events happened in the dream? And what does the dream itself say about the purpose of the dream?

“The tree symbolism was not strange to Nebuchadnezzar. Herodotus tells of the case of Astyages, Nebuchadnezzar's brother-in-law, who had also dreamed of a tree symbolizing his dominion over part of the world. Nebuchadnezzar himself, in an inscription, compares Babylon to a great tree sheltering the nations of the world.”—Quoted by J. Doukhan, in *Secrets of Daniel* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2000), p. 63.

In Daniel 4 the reign of Nebuchadnezzar is symbolized by the tree in the midst of the earth (*vs. 22*), highlighting its importance. Babylon was approximately in the center of the then known world.

The king then sees “a watcher, a holy one, coming down from heaven” (*vs. 13, NKJV*). Throughout history God has been the Holy “Watcher” who cares for His people. The prophet Hanani reminded King Asa that “the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him” (*2 Chron. 16:9, NKJV*). Nebuchadnezzar recognized that the Holy Watcher was “similar in appearance to the One who walked with the three Hebrews in the fiery furnace.”—Ellen G. White, in *Review and Herald*, Feb. 1, 1881.

The stump and the band refer to Nebuchadnezzar's preservation, despite his humiliation. He was to be restored as king after he came to know God. During his madness, he also may have been bound with a bronze chain to restrict his movements. There is some evidence for a Mesopotamian custom of putting metal bands on trees, whether to prevent them from cracking or for some other reason that is not clear. Remnants of a tree with bronze rings or bands were unearthed at Khorsabad, at the entrance to the temple of [the sun god] Shamash. (See J. J. Collins, *Daniel* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993], p. 226.)

Read Daniel 4:17. What do you understand those words spoken to the king to mean? Why must the “living” know these things? What comfort does knowing these things give you? At the same time, what difficult questions does this knowledge raise?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

which to try out his imaginary godhood. We, on the other hand, have only our little lives and realm of influence. Yet, the results of playing God are always the same: chaos and ruin.

In spite of these cautionary examples, why do we try to play God again and again? The first temptation that gave us the world as we know it was rooted in the lie that we could “be like God, knowing good and evil” (*Gen. 3:5, NIV*). So, the human tendency to take God’s place is at the very root of sin.

Texts such as Romans 12:2; Galatians 5:22, 23; 1 Corinthians 13; and 2 Peter 1:3-8 indicate that we are to develop a Godlike character. But we do not achieve this by trying to play God in our own life or in anyone else’s. Rather, this development is brought about by submitting to the Being who really does happen to be God. That, after all, is what God Himself did in the form of Jesus, “who, although he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men” (*Phil. 2:5-7, NASB*).

To the contrary, the more we try to become what we perceive as Godlike, the further away we drift from knowledge of the true God and His will. Nebuchadnezzar demonstrated this quite well when in his efforts to become an object of worship, he succeeded only in becoming something less than human.

II. Useful Quotes About Not Playing God.

“The serpent appeals to the human desire to be like God. This is a right and reasonable desire. The later command, ‘ye shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy’ (*Lev. 19:2*; see also *Matt. 5:48*), makes it clear that man is possessed of the potentiality to become like God—in character. This likeness is to come through submission to God’s will. The serpent in telling the woman that likeness to God is to be achieved by defiance of his command . . . suggests that the likeness which is within human reach is likeness not in character but in power. He suggests that man can make himself the equal of God.”—*The Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1982), vol. 1, p. 505.

“The man and his Creator God are not equals. God asserts his authority over mankind very early in human history. Admittedly, the word ‘authority’ leaves a bad taste in the mouths of many today. We don’t like to be told what to do. We want to decide things for ourselves.

“Nevertheless, Genesis asserts that God lays down rules with regard to what the first man and woman can and cannot do in the garden. According to Genesis, humanity is not autonomous [self-governing; sovereign].”—David R. Helm and Jon M. Dennis, *The Genesis Factor* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001), p. 53.

“The knowledge of good and evil—discerning, determining,

Daniel's Advice (*Dan. 4:19-27*).

Compare Daniel 2 with Daniel 4:1-9. What are the parallels between the two events?

Though they share much in common, a few crucial differences exist between the two stories. One of the most striking is that, in Daniel 4, the king doesn't threaten anyone with death. Though he has a long way to go spiritually, perhaps what we see here is a bit of the sanctifying process of God working on him. He no longer wants to kill those who don't satisfy his every whim.

How did the dream affect Daniel, and why was he so reluctant to speak?
Dan. 4:19.

Daniel was troubled because of the gravity of the situation. How do you tell the king that he will become insane for seven years? Yet, he had to tell him the truth, whatever the consequences. The counsel that Daniel eventually gave indicates that the king could still avoid the threatened judgment. God intended the king to learn a certain lesson from this dream; or, if not from that, from the experience it forecast. Then, when the lesson was learned, his kingdom would be restored to him.

What was it God wanted the king to understand? *Dan. 4:25*. Why would the Lord want him to know this?

God's rulership was the lesson God had been seeking to teach the king from the beginning. Some thirty years earlier Daniel had told the king, "the God of heaven has given you a kingdom" (*Dan. 2:37, 38, NKJV*), but Nebuchadnezzar had set up an image of gold to declare his independence from the Most High. In other words, he had refused to accept God's sovereignty. Now he was given another opportunity to learn this lesson, but again he failed.

The king was someone given great privileges yet who flouted those privileges, someone whom the Lord had touched in a miraculous way and yet who still continued to defy Him. And yet, in all this, God wasn't going to give up on the king (*see Dan. 4:27*). What does this tell us about our God (*Exod. 34:6; 2 Pet. 3:9, 15*)? What hope does this offer to you, who in your own sphere might be guilty of the same thing as Nebuchadnezzar?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

controlling, and prescribing right and wrong, morality and immorality, salvation and perdition, life and death—is the unique attribute and the exclusive prerogative of divinity. . . . To have this awesome knowledge and responsibility—to be like God in this sense—and not be God, is man’s undoing. . . . Alienated from the Creator who made him, cut off from the God who sustains him, and incapable of bearing the burden of the knowledge of good and evil, man can only die.”—Charles C. Cochrane, *The Gospel According to Genesis* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), p. 41.

“We want to ‘play God’! That’s exactly the way sin is described in Genesis. The serpent tempts Adam and Eve to ‘be like God’

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *Isaiah 14:12-14, Daniel 4, Revelation 14:6-12.*

- ① In this week’s lesson God again uses the dreams of an ancient king to highlight values He prizes. What are some of these values? Why are humility and personal responsibility as important as the rise and fall of nations? How should the words of Micah 6:6-8 apply to world leaders and to us personally? Explain.
- ② In every age God uses different means to communicate with His people. In Daniel’s time it was dreams (among others). In Jesus’ time it was parables. *Read Hebrews 1:1, 2.* What are some unique ways God communicates with His people today? How are these ways different than in times past? How are they the same?
- ③ What words did Daniel use to indicate he was reluctant to proclaim God’s judgment message against Nebuchadnezzar? (*See Dan. 4:19.*) In one sentence, describe the relationship between Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar. Did that relationship make it easier or harder for Daniel to “tell it like it is”? Explain your answer.
- ④ Is pride ever justified? Explain. What makes pride so dangerous to our spiritual health? What was Paul’s antidote to pride? *Read 2 Cor. 12:7-10.*
- ⑤ Daniel 4 is Nebuchadnezzar’s “testimony” (written in his own words) about how God rescued him from spiritual destruction. Although it probably was not a pleasant experience at the time, Nebuchadnezzar came to appreciate what God had done for Him. What might you be going through now that will eventually yield positive results? How does knowing that God is in charge make it easier for you to persevere?

The King's Humiliation (*Dan. 4:28-33*).

Why did God punish Nebuchadnezzar when he exclaimed, “**Is not this the great Babylon I have built?**” (After all, it was true that he had built large parts of the city.) *Dan. 4:30, NIV*

Babylon covered an area of approximately two square miles. The total length of its inner and outer walls was about thirteen miles long; the double wall fortifying the city measured more than ninety-six feet in width. (See *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 795.) It was a religious center without rival. “A cuneiform tablet of Nebuchadnezzar’s time lists 53 temples dedicated to important gods, 955 smaller sanctuaries, and 384 street altars—all of them within the city confines.”—Page 797. The center of Babylon’s glory was the famous temple tower Etemenanki, dedicated to the god Marduk, which was 300 feet square at the base and more than three hundred feet high. In ancient times it was only surpassed by the two great pyramids at Giza in Egypt. Nebuchadnezzar’s reputation as a builder has been preserved in the writings of the Babylonian priest Berossus. (See Josephus, *Against Apion*, 1.19.)

As soon as the boastful words, “Is not this the great Babylon I have built’ ” (NIV), had left the monarch’s lips, judgment was meted out, and he became insane. What do we know about the sickness with which Nebuchadnezzar was afflicted?

Nebuchadnezzar possibly suffered from a form of insanity in which a man thinks that he is an animal. It could have been lycanthropy, which is the wolf-man syndrome, or boanthropy, in which a person thinks he/she is an ox. A Babylonian cuneiform text, published in 1975, may refer to Nebuchadnezzar’s madness. The text states that the king gave contradictory orders, refused to accept counsel, showed love neither to son nor daughter, neglected his family, and no longer performed his duties as head of state. (See Siegfried H. Horn, in *Ministry*, April 1978, p. 40.)

Read carefully verses 28-33 of Daniel 4. The exact thing that Nebuchadnezzar boasted about was the exact thing that he lost. What spiritual principle is seen here? What lessons can we, on a smaller scale, learn from this incident? Contrast what happened here with the story of the rich young ruler (*Matt. 19:16-23*). What differences do you see here in how the Lord dealt with these two people?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

(Gen. 3:5). We want to be Number One; indeed, sin is ‘looking out for Number One.’ But that place is already occupied. To covet it is to put ourselves where God alone belongs. When we make ourselves the center of the universe, we have put the creature in the place of the Creator. What else is that but worshipping an idol instead of the true God?”—Dorothy and Gabriel Fackre, *Christian Basics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), p, 20.

Witnessing

Picture this: You are at work, minding your own business, when halfway through the morning you become aware of a fair amount of noise (banging of file cabinet drawers, spurts of low-volume mumbling, occasional pacing, etc.) invading the office. You are a bit curious, but you have tons of work to do. You attempt to banish the disturbance from your mind in an effort to concentrate on your own long-overdue projects. However, the noise continues and, frankly, it is getting annoying—not to mention it is breaking your concentration. Eventually you move your chair just enough so that you can get a clearer picture of the source of the noise—the cubicle across the hall. You catch a glimpse of your co-worker pacing, hands jammed in his pockets. Next thing you know, he runs them through his hair and mutters to himself. To say he is agitated would be a *major* understatement!

You are fully distracted now. You get up from your chair and pay him a visit. It turns out that the boss has just had a little “chat” with your co-worker; he has been told that if he does not immediately pick up the pace at work he will be joining the ranks of the unemployed. You are not quite sure what to say. You make some sympathetic gesture, then quickly rush back to your own office. Before long you notice that your own pace has dramatically increased and you are feeling more industrious than you have in a long time.

Sometimes God must grab our attention in much the same way. He may shake us up a bit by allowing us to face a defining moment in time. It is then that we know we must find Him, hold on to Him, and follow Him. How blessed we are that He cares so very much about our salvation that He will make every effort to redeem us.

God depends on us as His ambassadors to help Him attract the attention of those around us, whether it is family, close friends, neighbors, or strangers, so all will be exposed to His love and offer of salvation. So, think long and hard about specific ways you can partner with God this week to attract attention!

Nebuchadnezzar's Conversion (*Dan. 4:34-37*).

Royal conversions are unusual but not unknown. King Agbar of Edessa in Mesopotamia, it is said, became a Christian when the gospel was preached to him.

What were the important points of Nebuchadnezzar's "sermon" after God restored him to his throne? *Dan. 4:34, 35, 37.*

The return of reason is said to have come to the king with his recognition of the true God. "The once proud monarch had become a humble child of God; the tyrannical, overbearing ruler, a wise and compassionate king. He who had defied and blasphemed the God of heaven, now acknowledged the power of the Most High and earnestly sought to promote the fear of Jehovah and the happiness of his subjects. Under the rebuke of Him who is King of kings and Lord of lords, Nebuchadnezzar had learned at last the lesson which all rulers need to learn—that true greatness consists in true goodness. . . .

"God's purpose that the greatest kingdom in the world should show forth His praise was now fulfilled. This public proclamation, in which Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged the mercy and goodness and authority of God, was the last act of his life recorded in sacred history."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 521.

How does Nebuchadnezzar's hymn of praise indicate that he had experienced a true conversion? *Dan. 4:34-37.*

There are a number of indicators to show that this conversion was genuine. (1) His desire to give God publicly the glory at the expense of his own humiliation shows that the once proud monarch no longer thought himself to be the greatest king on earth. (2) In chapter 3 he had defied the God of the Jews; now he acknowledged Him as the true God of heaven who held the king's destiny in His hand. (3) His selfishness and self-glorification gave way to concern for the glory of God.

True repentance and sorrow for sin denote that inward change of mind, affections, convictions, and commitment that leads to the outward turning from sin to God and His service.

Notice carefully the language of Daniel 4:34-37. See the sense of the king's utter dependence upon God. Why is that attitude so crucial for anyone who seeks to serve the Lord? How does the Cross help us understand our total dependence upon God, especially for salvation?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

III. What the Bible Says About Human-kind in Relation to God.

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (*Gen. 1:27, NIV*).

“ ‘You will not surely die,’ the serpent said to the woman. ‘For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil’ ” (*Gen. 3:4, NIV*).

“ ‘Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy” ’ ” (*Lev. 19:2, NIV*).

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: Our lesson this week focuses on crisis prevention: How important it is for us to listen to the admonitions of God and to heed His warnings in order to prevent calamity—in both our temporal and spiritual lives.

Thought Questions:

❶ Mark 7:21-23 shares with us that pride comes from within, pride is evil, and pride defiles humanity. However, is all pride bad? Is it evil to have pride in one’s country or to be proud when your aunt finishes college at the age of 65 or when you pick the very first tomato of the summer from your garden? If this is not pride you are feeling, how else might you define it?

❷ Nebuchadnezzar is an example of one who wished to play God. What are some ways today’s society plays God? Do you believe some of these actions are necessary because of the sinful environment in which we live?

Application Questions:

❶ Ellen White tells us that dreams are one of “God’s own appointed mediums of communication.”—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 683. God sent dreams to Nebuchadnezzar in order to convey prophetic messages to him. From this we know that God can use dreams to warn us and show us the future. We are, however, warned in both the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy to be wary of false dreams and visions, since they may be the work of Satan. How would you respond to someone who is concerned over the significance of a dream, and how would you help him or her to know whether or not it came from the Lord?

❷ The next time you hear thrilling church-growth statistics, take a moment and ask yourself the following: “What can I do to ensure that these precious souls truly have the thrill of conversion in their lives?” Share now how you plan to start!

Further Study: Read the chapter entitled “True Greatness” in Ellen G. White’s *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 514–521.

“King Nebuchadnezzar, before whom Daniel so often honored the name of God, was finally thoroughly converted, and learned to ‘praise and extol and honour the King of heaven.’”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 1170.

“God’s judgments against men may be averted by repentance and conversion (see Isa. 38:1, 2, 5; Jer. 18:7-10; Jon. 3:1-10). For this reason God announced the impending judgment upon Nebuchadnezzar but gave him a full year in which to repent, and thus avert the threatened calamity (see Dan. 4:29). However, the king did not change his way of life, and accordingly brought upon himself the execution of the judgment. . . . God forewarns peoples and nations of their impending doom. He sends a message to the world today, warning of its rapidly approaching end. Few may heed such warnings, but because adequate warning has been given them men will be without excuse in the day of calamity.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 792.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In the eyes of humankind, Nebuchadnezzar was one of the greatest kings in the ancient world; but in the eyes of God, what really constitutes greatness?**
- 2 Conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit on the hearts of individuals. Is there anything we can do to help a person who is under conviction to yield to God’s Spirit?**
- 3 A theme seen in this chapter, as well as in some preceding it, is the sovereignty of God. Why is this such an important topic to understand? What role does the Sabbath play in helping us understand this crucial truth?**

Summary: The experience of Nebuchadnezzar in this chapter is an illustration of the truth of Proverbs 29:23, “A man’s pride will bring him low” (NKJV). Yet, his public confession and his desire to give God the glory indicate that he had a true conversion experience.