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Truths for Bitter Providences, Part 3

Many of us have taken road trips and have seen what I call a series of progressive billboards. You know what I'm talking about, the billboard series reads something like this:

- Sunny Acres- 200 miles- the largest tree houses this side of the Mississippi.
- Sunny Acres- The best farm fresh produce you'll ever eat!
- Sunny Acres- Home of the friendliest petting-zoo around!
- Sunny Acres- Food, Facilities, Fun for the entire family!

While I've never actually stopped at one of these attractions, I will admit that the advertising is alluring. The book of Daniel is a prophecy giving us a series of progressive road signs posted along the path that God's people would travel as they entered into exile. The road signs that typically accompanied the route to exile in the ancient world involved cruel statements like these:

- Your god is weak!
- Your life is over!
- Your nation and nationality are inferior!
- Embrace the new regime!
- Submission is life!

Or in the words of the sons of Korah:

Psalms 42:10, "As a shattering of my bones, my adversaries revile me, while they say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'"

Those were the messages God's people expected to hear as they travelled to Babylon. Yet in an amazing act of sovereignty and grace, God's people instead, with the book of Daniel, were greeted with glorious words of encouragement, road signs that adorned their route into exile! What were these road signs? Thus far in our study of this book, we've considered two of them:

- *"Be Encouraged! Your God is Great and so Rules Kings and Nations, Daniel 2 — Signed, Nebuchadnezzar"*
- *"Be Encouraged! Your God is Holy and therefore has a Plan that is Beyond your Ability to Understand, Daniel 3 — Signed, Nebuchadnezzar"*

These are the first of eleven such signs which, based on Daniel, God has placed on the path to suffering. So, what ought we to do as we enter into a bitter providence? Chapter 1 says, "Cling to God! Love Him! Worship Him! Serve Him!" The remainder of Daniel, specifically Daniel 2-12 contains profound messages of encouragement to strengthen the pilgrim's faith!

The third billboard sign proclaimed by chapter 4 is this: Our God Reigns and so Holds the Heart of the King in His Hands!

Our God Reigns and so Holds the Heart of the King in His Hands

Daniel 4:1-3, "Nebuchadnezzar the king to all the peoples, nations, and *men of every* language that live in all the earth: 'May your peace abound [this expression was typical of international communications at the time which serves as another time indicator placing this passage in the 6th century BC]! It has seemed good to me to declare the signs and wonders which the Most High God has done for me. How great are His signs, and how mighty are His wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and His dominion is from

generation to generation.”

This is a rather peculiar text as it seems to be written by Nebuchadnezzar. Now Nebuchadnezzar did NOT bear the mark of a prophet, was NOT an inspired writer, and was NOT even saved¹! So how is it that he was allowed to pen this chapter?

The truth be known, he didn't pen this chapter, Daniel did! Accordingly we take this as an inspired recounting of the heart and mind of Nebuchadnezzar, who at the time was the sovereign ruler of the greatest empire this world had ever seen! So what is written here is quite significant, especially when you keep the context of the exile in mind. Because the “cold heart” of God's people that can arise from bitter providence no doubt refused to sing (cf. Psalms 137), God made the rock-hard heart of a pagan king proclaim the message of God's greatness (Christ Himself said that if God's people didn't praise, the rocks would, Luke 19:40!)

This chapter begins with a frightened despot.

A Frightened Despot

Daniel 4:4-8, “I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and flourishing in my palace [Based on v. 30 we know that this occurred in the period of his regency when his great building projects had been completed- which would have placed this toward the end of his regency! At this time, Nebuchadnezzar was able to enjoy the fruit of his 43 year reign]. I saw a dream and it made me fearful; and *these fantasies as I lay* on my bed and the visions in my mind kept alarming me. So I gave orders to bring into my presence all the wise men of Babylon that they might make known to me the interpretation of the dream [We can only speculate as to why Nebuchadnezzar didn't call on Daniel FIRST in light of chapter 2. However, it is clear that Nebuchadnezzar was quick to forget things pertaining to God. Accordingly, 30 plus years later, the events of chapter 2 no doubt had become a distant memory]. Then the magicians, the conjurers, the Chaldeans, and the diviners came in, and I related the dream to them; but they could not make its interpretation known to me. But finally Daniel came in before me, whose name is Belteshazzar according to the name of my god, and in whom is a spirit of the holy gods; and I related the dream to him.”

In the last days of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that filled him with fear. After this, the focus of this prophecy shifts to another Babylonian monarch, Belshazzar. Accordingly, what we have here is the climax of God's dealings with Nebuchadnezzar!

Nebuchadnezzar had a frightening dream; so what did he do? He called upon all his wise men and sages (v. 6). And as before these wise men are stymied in providing a viable interpretation- which brings us to v. 8- which actually is rather humorous. But finally Daniel came in before me; Daniel clearly had a sense of timing. When everything was in chaos around the king, Daniel came in, saw the chaos, and waited for THE moment whereupon God would be most glorified as the prophet stepped forward and proclaimed the interpretation!

Yet that is getting ahead of ourselves. First notice, the dream as Nebuchadnezzar continues:

Daniel 4:9-10, “O Belshazzar, chief of the magicians, since I know that a spirit of the holy gods is in you and no mystery baffles you, tell *me* the visions of my dream which I have seen, along with its interpretation. Now *these were* the visions in my mind *as I lay* on my bed: I was looking, and behold, *there was* a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height *was* great.”

Obviously, Nebuchadnezzar saw a tree whose top reached into the heavens, v. 11 (at this time, Nebuchadnezzar was at the height of his world power and domination; as such, the tree of which he dreamt was enormous). This tree was thick with leaves and fruit. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the air found shelter in its branches (v. 12). Then a “supernatural being” appeared out of heaven (v. 13) and shouted in a strong voice that the tree was to be cut down (in Babylonian culture, it was believed that heavenly beings watched over the world of men; no doubt that is what he had in mind here; but we know better!). Only the stump was to be left in the ground (v. 15a).



The dream then transitioned to describe “the stump” as a person (vv. 15b-16). He was to be chained with an iron and bronze band in the grass (the idea behind this is that while Nebuchadnezzar would go crazy, nevertheless God would protect his throne, cf. v. 26). He was to sleep under the bare sky. And his lot would be with the beasts in the grass of the earth. In fact, his mind would become so confused that he would imagine himself to be an animal. This anticipated insanity would last “seven periods of time,” v. 16b (which could refer to years, months, or seasons; so the length of time is not clear), until this person acknowledged that the Most High has sovereignty over man.



Daniel 4:18, “This is the dream *which* I, King Nebuchadnezzar, have seen. Now you, Belshazzar, tell *me* its interpretation, inasmuch as none of the wise men of my kingdom is able to make known to me the interpretation; but you are able, for a spirit of the holy gods is in you.”

The king asked all the Babylonian wise men for the interpretation of his dream. Again not one of them could provide it. But then a man of God stepped forward and everything changed. In fact, would you notice the phrase — for a spirit of the holy gods is in you. This the third time Nebuchadnezzar used this of Daniel. What does it mean? To use New Testament terminology, it implies that Daniel stood out in his day and time on account of his Spirit-filled life! In other words, Daniel, who by this time would have been in his mid-40s, was a man of God (this was noted also by Belshazzar’s queen [5:11] and Belshazzar himself [5:14]).

Daniel 4:19, “Then Daniel, whose name is Belshazzar, was appalled for a while as his

thoughts alarmed him. The king responded and said [notice the shift from first person to third person; Daniel now is giving the commentary], 'Belteshazzar, do not let the dream or its interpretation alarm you.' Belteshazzar answered and said, 'My lord, *if only* the dream applied to those who hate you, and its interpretation to your adversaries!'" -

When the king told him the dream, Daniel instantly saw its interpretation as it was a revelation of what God was going to do to Nebuchadnezzar!! At first Daniel was beside himself at the horror of the judgment for it concerned a man whom Daniel by this time clearly had come to know and to like! Accordingly, in compassion he sat silent for a while somewhat shocked. Dr. John MacArthur put it this way:

What a compassionate man. It wasn't the silence of perplexity. It was the silence of compassion. He just didn't want to tell him what he had to tell him. And I think in even saying that, he sealed in the mind of Nebuchadnezzar that he loved him. If he had just blurted out the condemnation, Nebuchadnezzar might have questioned Daniel's compassion. But this is what proves again to that man how deeply Daniel cared. (MacArthur, 2014)

So Daniel sat in silence for a time. Yet he was brought to his senses by a word from the king in essence, the king said, "Daniel! Wake up! Snap out of it! What's the interpretation?" (v. 19b) Accordingly, Daniel gave the interpretation in which it was clear that the king was going to be humbled NOT by a "heavenly watcher" (v. 13) BUT by "the Most High- THE LORD- Himself" (vv. 17, 24, 25)! Notice how Daniel ended his interpretation:

Daniel 4:27, "Therefore, O king, may my advice be pleasing to you: break away now from your sins [there is an ethical twang here as "break away" denotes the idea of breaking old habits] by *doing* righteousness (the idea which the LXX picks up on here is that of almsgiving for the poor and needy), and from your iniquities by showing mercy to *the* poor, in case there may be a prolonging of your prosperity."

Because of his relationship both with God and the king, Daniel pleaded with the king to break with his self-exaltation and in humility to be merciful to the oppressed, needy, and poor (once again, and in line with most of the prophets, notice the emphasis on the covenant ethic of caring for the poor and needy). In fact, Psalms 72:4 indicated that a mark of a true king was that they brought, "...justice to the poor of the people; [they] save[d] the children of the needy, and [broke] in pieces the oppressor"! This Nebuchadnezzar neglected and so Daniel made an appeal that the king engage in "undefiled religion in the sight of God"- specifically the "visiting of widows and orphans in their distress and keeping oneself unstained by the world" (cf. James 1:27).

A More Unthinkable Providence

Daniel 4:28-30, "All *this* happened to Nebuchadnezzar the king. Twelve months later [God is patient, isn't He?] he was walking on the *roof* of the royal palace of Babylon. The king

reflected and said, 'Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?'

It is important to note that all the building projects for which Nebuchadnezzar took credit were funded and executed on the backs of the poor and weak of his kingdom! So while Nebuchadnezzar gloried in his accomplishments, these accomplishments cried out to God for justice! Consider Daniel's own commentary speaking to Belshazzar about Nebuchadnezzar:

Daniel 5:18-19, "O king, the Most High God granted sovereignty, grandeur, glory, and majesty to Nebuchadnezzar your father. And because of the grandeur which He bestowed on him, all the peoples, nations, and *men of every* language feared and trembled before him; whomever he wished he killed, and whomever he wished he spared alive; and whomever he wished he elevated, and whomever he wished he humbled."

Clearly if you weren't in the upper class, life under this dictator wasn't good! The wealth of the nation cost the nation much! Yet Nebuchadnezzar was blind to all of this. All he saw was a testimony to his greatness, and in that he rejoiced. From an earthly perspective, there was much over which to be impressed when it came to Babylon; the city which Nebuchadnezzar had built truly was magnificent! Let me give you some of the details:

- Babylon was the largest and most powerful city of antiquity.
- The city was a perfect square, 15-miles a side. There were wide streets, strong fortifications, numerous public buildings, and sufficient land for farming and pasture. In fact, the population has been estimated at 1.2 million.
- The city was surrounded by a deep, wide moat filled with water and a city wall that was 87 feet wide and 350 feet high. In fact, on the wall of the city that surrounded it chariots could be driven four abreast!
- The streets intersected throughout the city and ran to 12 different gates.
- The Euphrates River ran through the city. As such there were tremendous levees in the city.
- There also were incredible palaces which dotted the city throughout, as well as multiple temples. In fact, during Nebuchadnezzar's regency over a dozen of these temples were renovated!
- And then there were the Hanging Gardens which were the first that we know of in ancient times of an air-conditioned structure. The technology was that of a swamp-cooler.
 - Nebuchadnezzar constructed the hanging gardens on a 400 foot mountain which he had built in the city!
 - On top of the mountain he erected the Hanging Gardens. It was a structure on which greenery was placed from top to bottom with moisture dripping down the walls to water the plants.
 - Accordingly any breeze would be cooled by the water providing a temperate



- environment in which to read, relax, pray, etc.
 - In the middle of the garden, Nebuchadnezzar built a huge ten-foot wide staircase which led to a sitting area where his Median wife could soak up the environment.
- We could go on and on talking about the gold which overlaid much of the city structures, the brass, the opulence, etc...

And so on that fateful day, perched high on a balcony overlooking the city, Nebuchadnezzar found himself in awe of himself, and so began to congratulate himself on account of all that he had done! It was at that very moment that v. 31 took place:

Daniel 4:31, “While the word *was* in the king’s mouth, a voice came from heaven, *saying*, ‘King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is declared: sovereignty has been removed from you.’”

This verse begins to point us in the right direction! Nebuchadnezzar wasn’t a Sovereign King. He had sovereignty which he used to exalt himself. Yet he wasn’t sovereign. All that it took was a simple word from God, a withholding of grace, and Nebuchadnezzar became an animal enslaved to his passions! Again, Nebuchadnezzar wasn’t sovereign; only God is!

The Field

Daniel 4:33, “Immediately the word concerning Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled; and he was driven away from mankind [n.b., from an impulse within] and began eating grass like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until his hair had grown like eagles’ *feathers* and his nails like birds’ *claws*.”

Nebuchadnezzar is brought quite low! He suffered what today would be called lycanthropy (from the Greek, *lukos*, meaning “a wolf,” and *anthropos*, meaning “man”) or boanthropy (from the Greek, *bous*, meaning “ox” or “cow” and *anthropos*, meaning “man”). In these cases the individual believes that they are a cow/bull and so eats grass as their primary diet!

What an important example for the people of God entering exile! If you will serve the Lord regardless of your circumstances, you will be fine; you will be “more than conquerors”! BUT if you ignore the Lord and live for yourself, you will become an animal on account of your sin! Again, notice the Daniel’s commentary on Nebuchadnezzar:

Daniel 5:21a, “He was also driven away from mankind, and his heart was made like *that of* beasts, and his dwelling place *was* with the wild donkeys. He was given grass to eat like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he recognized that the Most High God is ruler over the realm of mankind, and *that* He sets over it whomever He wishes”

Brothers and sisters, ignore God and you will become an animal. Just look around, you see this in our culture today: homosexuality, the increasing use of drugs, violent crime, pornography,

fornication, serial marriage, murder, rape, broken families, and so on and so forth.

Psalms 12:8, “The wicked strut about on every side, when vileness is exalted among the sons of men.”

What a sober description of the times in which we live! Well, so it was with Nebuchadnezzar- which brings us to his restoration.

His Restoration

Daniel 4:34a, “But at the end of that period I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven [IOW, he acknowledged the Sovereignty of God and His ultimate superiority], and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever...”-

After the designated seven periods of time, Nebuchadnezzar’s senses were restored. He came to see reality: that there is a God who reigns over this world and that God wasn’t Nebuchadnezzar! Danna Fewell observed:

A man who thinks he is like a god must become a beast to learn that he is only a human being. (Fewell, 1991, p. 101)

Psalms 111:10, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom!...”

With this newfound fear of the Lord, Nebuchadnezzar set out to “...bless the Most High” which was the genesis and inspiration for this chapter! And so we read...

A Most Shocking Proclamation

Daniel 4:34b-35, “I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever; for His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom *endures* from generation to generation. And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and *among* the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, ‘What hast Thou done?’”

Listen, if it is foolish to say to a human king, “What are you doing?” (Ecclesiastes 8:4), how much more foolish is it for a human king to say to THE Divine King, “What have you done?” (v. 35)?! This was the realization of Nebuchadnezzar! Take the strongest and most powerful earthly king, and he truly is nothing before the Lord! Again, God could speak a word and the king would be snuffed out!

Once again, bear in mind that this message was sent out to his entire kingdom (v. 1)! And so by this all the world and more importantly, God’s People- would know that Yahweh, the Lord, God Almighty, ruled NOT just over Kingdoms BUT also Kings! And so as great and powerful as was

Nebuchadnezzar- as glorious and opulent was his kingdom- nevertheless Nebuchadnezzar/Babylon was as dust in God's hand! And with that, we are brought to the point of this chapter the glory of God realized and proclaimed.

The Glory of God Realized and Proclaimed

What is the "food" with which God intended to feed the faith of His exiled people here?

In answer to this note that to this point, we have seen the attitude and arrogance of Nebuchadnezzar who now on two occasions recognized the greatness of God, but in an arrogant and self-serving way.

- When Daniel interpreted his dream, Nebuchadnezzar said, "God is the God of gods!" (Daniel 2:47)!
- When Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were delivered from the fiery furnace, Nebuchadnezzar said, "God is the Most High God!" (Daniel 3:26)!

Both responses were given on the part of a man who vaulted himself above God in that both confessions reflected the belief that this "chief god" was on his side and so at his beckoned call!

So what is the point of Daniel 4? If chapter 3 stressed the Transcendence of God's Sovereign Rule, chapter 4 stresses its Imminence; the fact that in His sovereignty God is intimately involved in all things of life, He truly holds the heart of the king in His hand. So it is not just kingdoms, but individual kings that God controls! We see this stressed no less than four times in this chapter we read of Nebuchadnezzar's dream and his humiliation:

Daniel 4:17, "This sentence is by the decree of the *angelic* watchers, and the decision is a command of the holy ones, in order that the living may know that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whom He wishes, and sets over it the lowliest of men."

Prior to this we learned that God is ruler over the entire world. Here that rule is said to involve the individual parts/elements in the realm of mankind! Now after repeating this verbatim in v. 25, God references this truth again in:

Daniel 4:35, "...all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and *among* the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What hast Thou done?'"

What an incredible realization on the part of Nebuchadnezzar! From personal experience he knows that God controls even the insignificant thoughts and deliberations of the heart, that is how great God is! Yet Nebuchadnezzar doesn't arrive at the climax until:

Daniel 4:37, "Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise, exalt, and honor the King of heaven, for all His

works are true and His ways just, and He is able to humble those who walk in pride.”

What an important message for the people of God entering into exile! It truly is one and the same as this:

Proverbs 21:1, “The king’s heart is *like* channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes.”

Whom ought God’s people to fear as they enter into the Valley of the Shadow of Death? Nothing on this earth! Their God still was on the throne reigning supremely over vast kingdoms and individual tyrants!

This is such an encouraging message to all facing a bitter providence!

- God controls all things and so controls any and every despot we might face- whether that be a king, a criminal, or a crippling disease- Daniel 2!
- God is a Transcendent King who rules over this world in ways we cannot know today. He is a good God and so we trust Him- Daniel 3! Yet we must also know that God is intimately involved in the things of this life such that He holds the king’s heart in His hands! Tremper Longman put it this way:

This account of his dream and madness rips away the facade and shows the reality of who is in control- not Nebuchadnezzar, but God, who calls the shots... the overarching concern of the chapter [is] that God protects his faithful people in spite of the odds. The purpose of the story is to encourage their confidence in the light of their helplessness before a seemingly all-powerful human ruler. (Longman, 1999, pp. 122-123)

Accordingly it is with hope and confidence that we face any inconvenience, trial, or difficulty in life: *This too is subject to a Good God who is ever present in times of need!* With this, may God give us the grace boldly to serve Him in whatever valley we find ourselves!

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End Notes

¹ It is obvious from this chapter that Nebuchadnezzar does NOT become a follower of Yahweh. For example, notice v. 8 and the expression, "...according to the name of my god..." It is clear that even AFTER this ordeal, Nebuchadnezzar still worshipped a false god. Then in v. 9, Nebuchadnezzar utilizes one of God's names, *'ēlōhîm*, yet he uses a plural verb indicating that to him Yahweh was just another god. Note, when *'ēlōhîm*, is used by Biblical writers, the verb that is used to modify this plural noun is always singular (cf. Neh. 8:6; Psalms 7:10 (Heb. 9)! Furthermore, Nebuchadnezzar's last statement in this chapter concerning God uses the impersonal title, "God of heaven." In the words of Joyce Baldwin, "This impersonal reference to God keeps him at a distance, and this last word of Nebuchadnezzar in the book, while formally acknowledging the power and justice of God, appears to fall short of penitence and true faith." (*Daniel*, TOTC, vol. 23, p. 129)

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About the Preacher

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