

A Nightmare Fit For a King

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a six-part series

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Daniel 4:19–33 (CEB)

[Nebuchadnezzar, king of all Babylon, sends a letter out to his vast empire. He has had a dream that none of his sages can interpret. So Daniel comes before the king to tell him the meaning of his dream.]

¹⁹ Daniel, who was called Belteshazzar, was shocked for a bit. What he thought about frightened him.

The king declared, “Don’t let the dream and its meaning scare you, Belteshazzar.”

Then Belteshazzar answered, “Sir, I wish the dream to be for those who hate you and its meaning to be for your enemies!” ²⁰ The tree you saw that grew in size and strength, that was as high as the sky, that could be seen from every corner of the earth, ²¹ with its beautiful leaves and its abundant fruit, and that had enough food for everyone, with wild animals living under it and birds nesting in its branches—²² Your Majesty, that tree is you! You have grown large and become powerful. Your greatness is as high as the sky; your rule extends to the edge of the earth!

²³ “Your Majesty, the holy watcher you saw coming down from heaven, who said, ‘Cut down the tree and destroy it, but leave its deepest root in the earth, bound with iron and bronze in the field grass, dew from heaven is to wash it, and it must live with the wild animals until seven periods of time pass over it’—²⁴ Your Majesty, this is the dream’s meaning: It is the sentence of the Most High, delivered to my master the king. ²⁵ You will be driven away from other humans and will live with the wild animals. You will eat grass like cattle and will be washed by dew from heaven. Seven periods of time will pass over you, until you acknowledge that the Most High dominates human kingship, giving it to anyone he wants. ²⁶ And when he said to leave the deepest root of the tree—that means your kingship will again be yours, once you acknowledge that heaven rules all. ²⁷ Therefore, Your Majesty, please accept my advice: remove your sins by doing what is right; remove your wrongdoing by showing mercy to the poor. Then your safety will be long lasting.”

²⁸ All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. ²⁹ Twelve months later, he was walking on the roof of the royal palace in Babylon. ³⁰ The king declared, “Isn’t this Babylon, the magnificent city that I built as the royal house by my own mighty strength and for my own majestic glory?”

³¹ These words hadn’t even left the king’s mouth when a voice came from heaven: “You, King Nebuchadnezzar, are now informed: Kingship is taken away from you. ³² You will be driven away from other humans and will live with the wild animals. You will eat grass like cattle, and seven periods of time will pass over you until you acknowledge that the Most High dominates human kingship, giving it to anyone he wants.”

³³ Nebuchadnezzar’s sentence was immediately carried out. He was driven away from other humans and ate grass like cattle. Dew from heaven washed his body until he grew hair like eagles’ feathers and claws like a bird.

We’ve all had bad dreams. I bet few of us have a dream as bad as this king’s!

I’ve never really known what to make of dreams. When I can remember my own, they nearly always seem like long and involved “adventure dreams” that are quite entertaining in the moment. There have been times when I regretted, just a bit, having awakened; other times, I’ve been very grateful that it was only a dream.

In the Bible, dreams and visions often play a prominent role. Sometimes they are vehicles for God’s messages. Those that arrive in the day are visions; those at night are dreams. Dreams play a major part in the stories of Daniel, just as they did in the stories of Joseph, Jacob’s son. Joseph was able to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams and thereby rose to great prominence in Egypt, enabling him to rescue his own family from a terrible drought.

The second of the Daniel stories, after the story of the king’s rations, tells how Daniel was not only able to interpret Nebuchadnezzar’s dream when called upon, but even knew what the king had dreamed! All by the power of God to whom Daniel had appealed before

appearing before the king. When Daniel was done telling the king the content and meaning of this first dream, Nebuchadnezzar honored Daniel and lavished gifts on him. He also made Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego the administrators of the province of Babylon. We all know how well that turned out!

A second dream

In the fourth chapter of Daniel, after the story of the fiery furnace, we hear a second dream story. This one begins with a letter from Nebuchadnezzar to his people which opens with high praise from the king to the “Most High God,” the God of Daniel and his friends. But has the king truly embraced the God of Israel and acknowledged who is master and worthy of worship and praise? This dream and its aftermath reveal that the king still has much to learn about humility.

The king’s dream is straightforward:

1. A tree grows to massive size and strength.
2. A watcher from heaven orders that the tree be cut down, preserving only its deepest root.
3. The “human mind” of the tree is changed to that of an animal, which is condemned to seven years of wandering. But that deep root is spared.

When Daniel is called upon to interpret the dream, he tells the king this:

1. The massive tree represents the Babylonian king himself.
2. The cutting down of the tree and the giving of an animal mind is what will soon befall Nebuchadnezzar. He will be reduced to an animal-like existence for seven years.
3. But the deep root that is spared represents the restoration of the king. The kingship will be his again.

However, Daniel tells him that this restoration depends upon the king’s sincere acknowledgement that God is master. In addition, Daniel urges the king to take this advice: “remove your sins by doing what is right; remove your wrongdoing by showing mercy to the poor.” Then, Daniel says, the king’s safety will be long-lasting.

But kings are kings. And it all came to pass.



William Blake. Nebuchadnezzar. ca. 1800

Another doxology from the king’s lips

In the end, Nebuchadnezzar praised God, acknowledging that even he was one of God’s creatures. And the king offered up yet another majestic doxology to the king of heaven. But

was it sincere? That is the question. Ancient rabbis didn't think the king was sincere, drawing parallels between him and the pharaoh of the Exodus. The rabbis didn't even get into the question of whether the king took Daniel's advice to "tear way" his sins like branches of a tree; whether he showed mercy to the poor and the oppressed, providing for their physical needs. Whether he no longer acted like the one who destroyed Jerusalem but, instead, like the one pursuing God's justice.¹

The greatest philosopher in the history of Judaism was Maimonides (ca AD 1136-1204). He presented charity to others and its motives in terms of eight levels. I think you might find it interesting . . . and challenging:²

1. A man gives, but is glum when he gives. This is the lowest degree of all.
2. A man gives with a cheerful countenance, but gives less than he should.
3. A man gives, but only when asked by the poor.
4. A man gives without having to be asked, but gives directly to the poor who know therefore to whom they are indebted, and he, too, knows whom he has benefited.
5. A man places his donation in a certain place and then turns his back so that he does not know which of the poor he has benefited, but the poor man knows to whom he is indebted.
6. A man throws the money into the house of a poor man. The poor man does not know to whom he is indebted but the donor knows whom he has benefited.
7. A man contributes anonymously to the charity fund that is then distributed to the poor. Here the poor man does not know to whom he is indebted, neither does the donor know whom he has benefited.
8. Highest of all is when money is given to prevent another from becoming poor, as by providing him with a job or by lending him money to tide him over a difficult period. There is no charity greater than this because it prevents poverty in the first instance.

"What does the LORD, your God, require of you?" (Deuteronomy 10:12)

The book of Daniel is an Old Testament writing and it can help us to read the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures better. Many Christians get lost in all the Old Testament talk of priests, temples, and sacrifices. So much so that God's desire for his people gets lost. But verse 24 of today's story can help us in this. God wants justice and mercy and caring – the strong for the weak, the rich for the poor. Moses spells it out in Deuteronomy 10: "Live in his presence in holy reverence, follow the road he sets before you, love him, serve GOD, your God, with everything you have in you. Obey the commandments and regulations of GOD" (from Peterson's *The Message*).

Even the rite of circumcision, the sign of the covenant given to Abraham, is only a signpost to the heart. "Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart," Moses tells them. God doesn't play favorites or take bribes. God looks after the widows and orphans. God even takes care of the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. God's people are to love strangers in the same way. For the Jews, life is to be one long training class on loving as God loves. This was what Nebuchadnezzar failed to grasp or was unwilling to embrace, as he was stunned by God's power.

But how is this love to play out in practice? As Jesus would teach more than a millennia later, true love is lived out – it lies in the doing, not the feeling. Here are some "love-practices" that Moses spells out in the sermon called Deuteronomy – yes, Deuteronomy!

- The Israelites are to set apart a tithe of all their agricultural production. Some is to be used for the benefit of the Levite priests who have no land or livestock of their own. Further, "the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake." (Deut. 14:22-29)
- Every seventh year is to be a Sabbath year in which debts are to be forgiven. The people are always to be open-handed with those in need and willing to

¹ From Daniel Smith's commentary in the *New Interpreter's Bible*, Abingdon Press, 1996.

² Louis Jacobs, *The Book of Jewish Belief* (West Orange NJ: Behrman House, 1984), 185.

lend. God cautions them that they are not to get stingy as the Sabbath year approaches when debts will be forgiven. They are always to give liberally and ungrudgingly. Remember – this was more than 3,000 years ago. (15:1-11)

- Slaves are to be freed in the seventh year and given a head start on their new life. (15:12-18)
- Judges are to be appointed. They are to judge fairly and honestly. They are not to play favorites or twist the law. “Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue . . .” (16:18-19).
- If they see their neighbor’s livestock wandering away, they are to do something about it, not turn a blind eye. This is about the pro-active caring for others. (22:1-4)
- They are to lend without interest. If they make a vow, they are to keep it. They can eat the grapes or corn from a neighbor’s vines or field – but only what they need on the spot. There is sharing and there is stealing. (23:19-25)
- If a poor person pledges their cloak as collateral for a loan, the cloak is to be returned to them at sunset so they don’t have to be cold at night. A widow’s garment is never to be taken in pledge. (24:12-13).
- The wages of poor and needy workers are to be paid each day. (24:14-15)
- If some of the harvest is accidentally left in the field, it must stay there so it can be picked up by the “alien, the orphan, and the widow.” Likewise, some olives are to be left on the trees and grapes on the vines. (24:19-22)

Love large and small

One of the most striking things about this list is that some of these compassionate acts are big, like freeing slaves, but others are so small, such as returning a poor person’s cloak at night if they’ve pledged it as collateral. It may be hard to imagine living in the brutal world of the ancient near east, but it isn’t very hard to see in this brief list a challenge to us in our own day and world. The particulars may have changed, but the call to justice and generosity in all aspects of our lives and toward all people -- neighbor and stranger, near and far, friend and enemy, strong and weak – is undiminished. We are to lovingly care for those who are least able to care for themselves, while always remembering that God cares for us in just this way. Thanks be to God!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What do you think it must have been like to be reduced to a grazing animal after being king of the world? How well do you think you would cope? Would it drive you to true repentance? Do you think the king’s doxology was sincere? Did he embrace God’s justice? Could such an experience cause you to love God?
2. What do you imagine the ancient world to have been like? How do you imagine it was most different from our own experience? When we read these Old Testament books how might we better understand the world in which Daniel, Moses, and the rest lived?
3. Read over the list of “love-practices” that I culled from Deuteronomy. What are three themes that you find common to these teachings? Which of the teachings would be most difficult for you to follow? Why would the “big” stuff be intermingled with the seemingly “little” stuff? Is the “little” stuff really little?
4. How could we translate these practices into our own lives? You might go down the list one by one and see if you could create a teaching suitable for our world that would flow from these ancient instructions.
5. Finally, this week’s story is a good occasion to ask ourselves how we are doing on the outward dimensions of our discipleship. Looking back over the last years, in what meaningful ways have you served others, fed or clothed the needy, cared for the marginalized and oppressed, and pursued justice? Many of us realize that we fall pretty far short of doing what we could. How could we do better?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Daniel 4 The entire story of Nebuchadnezzar's dream and humiliation.	Tuesday, Esther 9:20-32 After the Jews are saved, God institutes the festival of Purim. See esp. 9:22 and the gifts to the poor
Wednesday, Job 31:16-22 Looking after the poor	Thursday, Psalm 72:18-19 Nebuchadnezzar offers up a doxology. Here's another of many across Scripture.
Friday, Psalm 10:16-18 God will do justice – period!	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own.
This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.
On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can
check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class

We are studying Paul's letter, 1 Corinthians

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Judges

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

The current series:

***Making Sense of Revelation:
The Theology of John's Apocalypse***

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just
go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's
recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at
www.scottengle.org

Sermon Notes
