

PRIDE AND PUNISHMENT

Theme: This chapter illustrates how God asserts Himself as the sovereign over the nations of this world. (Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from The Holy Bible, New King James Version; copyright 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc.)

This chapter reveals to us the grand intention of God with respect to the Gentile kingdoms. Nebuchadnezzar, as the greatest of the rulers in all of 'the times of the Gentiles', stands as an example of the work of 'humbling' that God intends; and shows how He seeks to demonstrate the reality of the repeated phrase in this chapter: that "the most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses" (v. 32; see vv. 17 and 25; and also vv. 26, 35 and 36).

As the apostle Paul once told the Athenians; "... He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him . . ." (Acts 17:26-27). Nebuchadnezzar's story is an illustration of the appeal in Psalm 2:10-12; "Now therefore, be wise, O kings; be instructed, you judges of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and you perish in the way, when His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him."

I. NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S GREETING (vv. 1-3).

Something of the humbling work that was done to Nebuchadnezzar is demonstrated in the fact that he himself tells this story. It may be that another wrote it at his dictation; but God led Daniel to include it in his book of prophecy. This is a remarkable chapter; because it was written by the greatest earthly monarch of the greatest Gentile world empire at his greatest point of majesty.

He speaks these words to all the Gentile world--"to all peoples, nations, and languages that dwell on the earth". We can take his words to have application to us today in our own nation. And his greeting is one of peace--not just political peace, but true peace that comes from a right relationship with the God of all the earth through His own appointed King (Luke 2:8-14). He says that he thought it good to "declare the signs and wonders" that God had worked for Him. Note that he calls God "the Most High God", praises Him, and affirms that His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom" (Psalm 145:10-13). In saying this, he has fully embraced the vision that God had given him earlier (2:36-44; especially v. 44). He writes this greeting from the standpoint of having experienced all that he is about to relate.

II. THE STORY OF NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S HUMBLING--IN THREE ACTS.

A. ACT ONE: THE DREAM OF THE KING (vv. 4-27).

The king has a troubling dream (vv. 4-7). The story begins with the king at rest and flourishing in his palace. His peace is interrupted by a dream that made him "afraid". It so troubled him that he resorted to a policy he had used before--that of calling for the officials of his palace to interpret it for him (2:2). They did not make the interpretation known to him, though. It may be that, because of past experiences, he didn't expect to really get one from them; and perhaps, because of those same past experiences, they thought it wise not to try! It was only until afterward that Daniel came into the scene. Perhaps his late arrival was meant to demonstrate the incapability of the other of the king's counselors to provide an interpretation (giving Daniel's appearance in the story something of a divinely appointed 'dramatic entrance').

The king describes the dream to Daniel (vv. 8-18). The king had confidence in Daniel's interpretation because "in him is the Spirit of the Holy God" (or, as some translations have it, "gods"--the

word being translatable either way). The king calls him by his Babylonian name because the story is meant for the people's of the Babylonian empire. He describes the dream in detail to Daniel in terms that were common symbols for a great king (see Ezekiel 17). Perhaps the dream was particularly disturbing to the king because of the warning that its outcome was a “decision” by “the decree of the watchers, and the sentence is by the word of the holy one” (v. 17). The closing warning would have particularly gotten the attention of the king!

Daniel gives the king the interpretation of his dream (vv. 19-26). Once told to him, the dream caused Daniel to be “astonished for a time, and his thoughts troubled him” (v. 19). It would be hard to imagine the tension this would have created for the king. In spite of Daniel's astonishment, the king assures Daniel that it is safe to tell it to him. Daniel's love and respect for the king is demonstrated in the fact that he wishes the dream on the king's enemies. The dream described God's intention to humble the king--though also promising that his kingdom would be restored to him.

Daniel appeals to the king, on the basis of the dream, to repent (v. 27). This would be the third time that Nebuchadnezzar was presented with a situation that called for his humility before the God of Israel. Daniel now appeals to him to respond with genuine repentance and submission to God, in the hopes that the humbling event promised by the dream might be postponed.

B. ACT TWO: THE HUMBLING OF THE KING (vv. 28-33).

The king glories in pride over his own accomplishments (vv. 28-30). The events promised in the dream occur one year later. The king had ample time to humble himself before God; but apparently, he did not do so. He was found, instead, boasting in pride over the many building programs for which he is historically famous.

God issues judgment upon the king (vv. 31-32). Even as he spoke, the words of judgment were issued. No doubt, hearing them would have immediately brought the dreadful realization to him that the dream was about to come true. It involved the judgment that his kingdom would depart from him, that he would be driven away from men as a madman, would dwell with the beasts of the field and eat grass as an ox, and would remain in this condition for seven years until he learned that God--not he--was the true sovereign.

The king is humbled for a seven-year period (v. 33). The kingdom's continuation may be explainable by the fact that Nebuchadnezzar had developed a well-run government. It may also have been because of the faithfulness of Daniel, who loved the king and knew from God that his kingdom would be restored. Many scholars identify Nebuchadnezzar's madness with known mental illnesses in which men act like animals; such as *zoanthropy* (a man believing himself to be an animal), or *lycanthropy* (a form of 'werewolf'-like behavior), or *boanthropy* (a disorder in which a man acts like a bovine; noting that we're told Nebuchadnezzar ate grass like oxen). It may have been a known mental illness like any one of these; but its onset was clearly a direct act of judgment from God; and it left the king in a pathetic and humiliating condition. What a terrible judgment it was!

C. ACT THREE: THE RESTORATION OF THE KING (vv. 34-36).

The king lifted his eyes to heaven and regains his understanding (v. 34a). Something of the mind of the king must have still been sound enough for him, at the end of the seven-year period, to look up to God and to remember the call to humility.

The king, having been humbled, blesses God (vv. 34b-35). He recognizes that God lives forever, has an everlasting dominion, and a kingdom that is from generation to generation. He is over all the inhabitants of the earth, does according to His will “in the army of heaven”, and has a mighty hand that no man can restrain. This is a testimony from a truly humbled king.

The king is fully restored to his kingdom and excels (v. 36). At the time of the restoration of his reason, the glory and honor of his kingdom is not only restored but is even caused to excel. God gave him much more than He took away.

III. NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S CONCLUSION (v. 37).

It's best, here, to let the king speak for himself: "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 put down." This will one day be the testimony of all people (Philippians 2:10-11).