

DANIEL

Week 11, chapter 4

When we concluded Daniel chapter 3, it was with a proclamation made by King Nebuchadnezzar addressed to (as he modestly puts it) everyone in all the earth. This proclamation essentially ordered all of his subjects (who he reckoned was every last soul on the planet) to show respect for the God of Shadrakh, Meshakh, and Aved-N'go; a god that the king currently called the Most High God.

Most High God is a dynamic English translation of the Aramaic word *illay* that in Hebrew is *el*, which means the highest god in the pantheon of gods and goddesses. So as a result of the king's experience of watching these 3 Jewish lads miraculously emerge from the superheated furnace unscathed, he wanted to honor their god who rescued them by naming him the *illay* god; the most high god.

But as I pointed out last time, just like the ethics, morals, and opinions of politicians change with the weather, so does the pecking order of the many gods of ancient culture. On the day of this proclamation letter from the king, it was the unnamed god of the 3 Jews that Nebuchadnezzar called the Most High. In a few months (probably less), he would drop that and designate another god as Most High.

I also want to point out that some bible versions will put the final 3 verses of chapter 3 as the first 3 verses of chapter 4. I could make a case for it either way. But it doesn't matter; the bible wasn't divided into verses and chapters until hundreds of years after the biblical canon was formulated and closed. And they were created for little more than a convenient way to study the Word of God and communicate it to others. Generally speaking they do no harm.

Let's read Daniel chapter 4.

READ DANIEL CHAPTER 4 all

This is as difficult a chapter as there is in Daniel to properly study and understand. So I would like to again remind you that we are still in the portion of Daniel that was written in Aramaic, the language of the gentile world at that time. And also that the thoughts and speech that we hear from the mouth of Nebuchadnezzar are the thoughts of a pagan, spoken in the context of his pagan, multiple-god worldview. To inject Hebrew thought (or Christian thought) into it is an error from the aspect of how Nebuchadnezzar viewed it. Nonetheless, since this dream/vision was from the God of Israel, we have to look past the way the king thought about it and described it and instead discover what the Lord intended to convey. So getting to the best interpretation without adding too much speculation is a dicey matter. Many bible scholars and especially Christian denominational leaders are used to, and demand, nice neat doctrines drawn with sharp lines; so sometimes we'll read rigid and simplistic commentary on this portion of Daniel that misses the mark substantially. The reality is that on some matters in Daniel 4 we're just not going to be able to be quite as definite as we'd like to be.

Here's what we see: King Nebuchadnezzar has it made in the shade. He explains that he was content, happy, enjoying life and the luxury of his palace, and glorifying himself in the accomplishments of having created the largest empire the world had ever known. His empire was at peace, operating like clockwork. Every race, language, tribe and ethnic group of the scores of kingdoms and nations that formed his enormous and diverse empire had sworn allegiance to the one-world government of Babylon (and thereby to Nebuchadnezzar) by means of the empire-wide ceremony of the dedication of the golden statue (the one that nearly cost Shadrakh, Meshakh, and Abednego their lives). So the idea is that the king was under no stress or particular anxiety because, according to him, things were good. He was relaxed, and then suddenly, from nowhere, comes a troubling series of dreams. But that wasn't all; the dreams were followed up with visions, which means he was receiving this message both while sleeping and awake. He couldn't escape it.

This bothered him and so naturally he called together all of his Chaldean seers to interpret his dream to calm him down. Notice the differences this time versus the earlier time when he sought interpretation about the frightening dream of the statue consisting of 4 different metals. First, the dream about the statue happened early in his reign when his empire was not fully under control. He had governing problems, and wasn't sure if he'd ever be able to achieve the stable empire he sought. So he was no doubt unsettled in his thoughts and agitated in his spirit. Second, as a test of their ability to tell him the truth the king demanded that his Chaldean seers not only tell him the meaning of the dream about the statue, but the actual content of the dream itself. They failed, of course, and if not for Daniel would have been executed.

This time, however, he was peaceful and relaxed in his mood and spirit; and when he called the seers to his palace, he was only too happy to tell them the details of his dream (no tests) and then they would merely be responsible to interpret it. But when the experts in the several different fields of the Chaldean black arts (magicians, sorcerers, seers, etc.) were told the dream, they were at a loss to know its meaning. After their failure, the king called for Daniel. And as we see, he was able to tell the king the meaning of his latest dreams and visions.

Interestingly, scholars and bible commentators have had a difficult time with these opening passages because they ask why the king would have called his Chaldean seers first, and then only after they failed would he call in Daniel? Their answers vary, but the most popular one is that several years had passed and the king had forgotten about Daniel and the dream-statue. Others say that the king would not have called his Chaldean seers at all, but would have immediately summoned Daniel, so this is just good storytelling that heightens the suspense and once again elevates the Jewish Daniel. I can't agree with either of these views. I think the answer is clear and logical.

The pagan king had a dream, and although it was somewhat disturbing there was nothing about it that wouldn't have been familiar from his pagan worldview. The use of trees as metaphors for power and for a few other reasons was commonplace. The appearance of an angelic being was usual in Babylonian theology. Further since several years had passed since his famous dream-statue dream, no doubt the king had had many other dreams and these same Chaldean seers had given him satisfactory answers as to their interpretation. Most of the great king's dreams were just dreams like we all have almost every night; but in that era ALL dreams were thought to have meaning. And when a king had a dream that seemed unusually poignant and repetitive his thought was that because of his lofty position the outcome of the dream was especially important as it could affect his entire kingdom and so he needed answers. Thus he had a ready team of folks to call upon who were trained in such matters, and no doubt they were called upon regularly.

What is interesting is that in this matter of the tree-dream of chapter 4, his regular team of Chaldean seers had no answer. Why? What stumped them? I think the matter is clear: this was a true message to the king from the God of Israel and not a run-of-the-mill dream. How would non-Believers be able to make heads or tails of it if it was from God? Thus we can surmise that back in chapter 2 had Nebuchadnezzar relented and told the Chaldeans the content of his dream at the outset they still wouldn't have been able to interpret it since it was a message from Yehoveh. So in verse 5, after his usual seers can't interpret his dream, the king no doubt figures that the source of this tree-dream must be the same as it had been for the statue dream and so he called for the Hebrew Daniel who communed with this particular god who imparts dreams.

Notice something key about chapter 4: we have Nebuchadnezzar doing the speaking in the 1st person. In other words the king himself is being quoted and he is the one telling the story. Thus we are getting this narrative entirely from his point of view, and it will be told in his vernacular and described in terms familiar to him within his pagan Babylonian culture.

So he calls Daniel **Belt'shatzar**, the new Babylonian name in the Aramaic language that Daniel was given several years earlier upon his arrival in Babylon. While the meaning of the name isn't agreed upon, it no doubt is a combination of the chief Babylonian god's name

(which is Bel), and then the word **tshatzar** is attached. Some say it means “Bel protects his life.” Rashi says that **tshatzar** is a Babylonian expression of unknown meaning. Further it seems that the never ending change to the pecking order of the gods had again evolved, and as of now Nebuchadnezzar openly says that Bel is his god. Whether that means his personal god, or that Bel is the national god of Babylon (that is most likely), or that Bel is currently considered the Most High god (the **El**, or in Aramaic the **illay**) isn’t entirely clear. Either way, Daniel had been re-named after the god Bel.

And then Nebuchadnezzar says that Daniel has in him the “spirit of the holy gods”. What does he mean by this? Again, scholars disagree. Some say the phrase is not the “spirit of the holy gods” (plural) but rather it is “spirit of the holy god”. That is, that the king is saying that Daniel has in him the spirit of the God of Israel who gives and interprets these dreams. But that is far too monotheistic and Hebrew of a viewpoint to be ascribing to a gentile king who just pronounced that his own god is Bel. Further the sense of the Aramaic word **kaddiysh** (which is typically translated to English as holy) more has the sense of meaning “divine” than holy because in Babylonian theology the word is equally applied to angels and to gods especially if they are “good” gods. So we don’t want to cloud the matter by using the English word “holy”, which creates a specific mental picture for Christians and Jews and is usually applied exclusively to the Lord and to His activities. Therefore the king’s intent is that he recognizes Daniel as having a special and intimate connection to certain gods that are among the good gods. Gods that look favorably upon Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon.

So in verse 6 the king continues by calling **Belt’shatzar** (Daniel) the Chief of the Magicians. And indeed we learned earlier in the Book of Daniel that the king had put Daniel in charge of his Chaldean seers (at least the ones who lived in Babel), so “Chief of the Magicians” was more or less Daniel’s formal title, and it is not to be taken as a compliment or flattery; just as fact. Thus convinced that Daniel is the one to interpret his dream because Daniel was connected to the right god or gods, the king sets about telling him his dream about the tree.

The CJB says that the tree “grew and became strong” (a past event that was completed), but in fact the grammar is in the imperfect so it means that the dream-tree was still growing and getting taller and stronger. It was located at the center of the earth (where ever that was perceived by the king to be) and had grown so high that it reached the sky (or probably better, to the heavens). The tree seems to have stood apart, by itself, not in the midst of a forest of other trees. I suspect that for Nebuchadnezzar Babylon was the center of the earth, and in later prophecies (including Revelation) Babylon is seen as the center of the earth at least as far as commerce and governmental power is concerned. The idea of every person over the entire planet (or at least throughout the Babylonian Empire) being able to see this amazingly tall and majestic tree means that this tree affects everyone who seeks its shelter, and that at the least everyone on earth is aware of the existence of this powerful and unmatched tree.

Thus we read of those who eat of its limitless fruit and the birds that live in its endless

branches, and the wild animals that use it as shade for protection from the harsh elements. So while the tree and its benefits are available to all, not all creatures avail themselves of it. So far, there isn't anything in this scene to cause fear or disquiet in the king. But suddenly Nebuchadnezzar saw a "holy watcher" coming down from heaven in order for it to pronounce an oracle. It was the subject and content of the oracle that was terrifying, not the enormity of the tree. What is a holy watcher? Once more: do not think in terms of Hebrew or Christian religion. While what the king saw was certainly something brought about by the God of Israel and so in that sense this holy watcher was not only real but divinely sent, the king could only recognize it, think of it, and name it in terms of his Babylonian theology. Let me tell you what I mean by that and why this shouldn't trouble us at all.

In the Book of Revelation John gave us his visions of the future especially that of a period typically called the Tribulation and then the End of Days and Armageddon. And what he tells us, he tells us in terms of the Hebrew culture and world conditions of his day and describes things that he sees in ways that his mind can make any sense of them. For instance Revelation 9 we read these familiar passages:

Rev 9:7-10 CJB

⁷ Now these locusts looked like horses outfitted for battle. On their heads were what looked like crowns of gold, and their faces were like human faces.

⁸ They had hair like women's hair, and their teeth were like those of lions.

⁹ Their chests were like iron breastplates, and the sound their wings made was like the roar of many horses and chariots rushing into battle.

¹⁰ They had tails like those of scorpions, with stings; and in their tails was their power to hurt people for five months.

And a little later in that same chapter:

Rev 9:17-19 CJB

¹⁷ Here is how the horses looked in the vision: the riders had breastplates that were fire-red, iris-blue and sulfur-yellow; the horses' heads were like lions' heads; and from their mouths issued fire, smoke and sulfur.

¹⁸ It was these three plagues that killed a third of mankind- the fire, smoke and sulfur issuing from the horses' mouths.

¹⁹ For the power of the horses was in their mouths- and also in their tails, for their tails were like snakes with heads, and with them they could cause injury.

I think it is close to unanimous in theological circles that what is being spoken of are modern day weapons in some cases, perhaps bio-engineered creatures in another case, and so John may have been envisioning a tank battle or attack helicopters or militarized genetic modifications or even chemical warfare; but how could he possibly make sense of it and find the words for things that wouldn't exist for 2000 years; the strange things that he saw in his vision? So he tells us about it by describing it all using the only vocabulary available to him. He uses metaphors and illustrations of things that reminded him of horses, but they weren't horses. Things that had tails like Scorpions, but they were neither tails nor (probably) were they Scorpions. He's telling us the unvarnished truth as best as his mind could comprehend it in an ancient world only a few decades removed from Christ's crucifixion.

It's the same for Nebuchadnezzar. He sees something that is real and of a spiritual nature in his tree-dream, but the Babylonian concept of the spiritual world is quite different from the Hebrew and biblical concept of the spiritual world. So he naturally uses his own familiar Babylonian cultural terms to sense it and express it, because he has nothing else to go on. So what we have here is essentially a game of inter-cultural (if not interfaith) charades and now Daniel must untangle it, and so must we.

At this point, there is an abrupt change in the narrative. Up to now the king has been explaining what he saw. Beginning in verse 11 he is directly quoting what some kind of strange being in his dream said to him. A being that Nebuchadnezzar called the holy watcher pronounces his decree regarding the tree of the king's dream: cut it down! Remove the leaves and scatter its fruit! Remove the habitat for the creatures that live in its branches and eliminate the food supply of those who depend upon it! But.....the magnificent tree is not to be destroyed entirely or permanently. A stump of the tree is to be left intact so that its roots can live and (now this important) so that the tree can regenerate. The command from the watcher (which in reality is an angel of God no doubt) is not actually to "cut it down", but rather it is a declaration that "it shall be cut down". In other words, the angel is not commanding someone in particular (for instance the king or some other angelic beings) to cut down the tree. Rather it is just a message that the tree will be felled. It is an impersonal message to all who hear it.

Further the remaining tree stump will have bands of iron and bronze placed around it. There is some issue as to whether this is one band of metal that is made of both iron and bronze, or whether it is two separate bands, one of iron and the other bronze. From a purely logical viewpoint it's hard to argue for one band of mixed metal since bronze is already a mixture of tin and copper. So for me it's hard to make sense of thinking of it as one band. So I surmise that it is two bands. The stump will be left in fertile soil and with water provided from the sky so it will have the nutrients it needs to survive and re-grow. But since it is being left in the

countryside, then the stump will share the same type of wildlife existence as do the animals of the fields.

Verse 13 then says (referring to the stump): 'let HIS heart and mind cease to be human and rather to take on the nature of animal'. I remind you that this is Nebuchadnezzar recounting his dream to Daniel, blow by blow, but he doesn't yet know what it means and we haven't yet been given an interpretation. So for the moment calling the stump "he" is a little strange. And then saying that this stump is going to have HIS mind exchanged for an animal mind also adds to the mystery (which shall shortly be solved).

But then comes another part of the verse that, by the time we're through with this chapter, still will not give us a definitive answer that we can hang our hats on. It says, "And let 7 seasons pass over him". At least that's what it says in the CJB. This is the period of time that the stump's mind will become an animal mind and that the stump will live an animal existence. Other versions say, "Let 7 years pass over him." A couple of versions even say, "Let 7 months pass over him". But the most literal translation is, "let 7 times pass over him". We'll deal with this more in a few more verses but for now just understand that the words seasons or years or months do not appear here; rather those are terms that various modern editors decided that a "time" ought to amount to and so removed the word times and substituted their own term. But also understand that the number 7 DOES matter here in this context. Since this is a vision from God, even though it was given to a non-Believer, and since it is a heavenly messenger delivering God's message, then the use of the number 7 denotes that indeed what is happening is divinely ordered and that 7 means what it usually means: completion in an idealistic way.

This divine messenger, called a holy watcher by Nebuchadnezzar, concludes the announcement by saying that what was decreed was also unchangeable. And that its purpose was so that men (mankind) might be led to recognize the immutable sovereignty of the Most High over all kingdoms and therefore over all kings. This **El**, the **illay** god, controls all from on high and he will give dominion over the earth and its nations and kingdoms to whomever he likes. No king can be a king without his permission; no king can remain a king without his blessing. And no one can decide for the Most High who shall be a king, or what class of society they must come from.

King Nebuchadnezzar says that this is the entire dream, and that none of his Babylonian seers could figure it out, but that he has every confidence that Daniel can because he is spiritually connected to the holy gods who gave the king the dream.

Beginning in verse 16 (verse 19 in some versions), Daniel interprets. But keep in mind that what we have is the king recounting what Daniel said. That is, just like he recounted what the holy watcher told him in his dream, now as the story continues the king is still narrating and so

he is telling us what it is that Daniel said to him. The sentence structure is a little awkward but I have no doubt that it is because some later editor had his hand in this and the fact that we have several ancient Daniel manuscripts that word this passage slightly differently attests to that fact. No matter which version, however, the thrust is the same and there is no disagreement or conflicts among the versions except regarding grammatical minutia.

Daniel is loyal to Nebuchadnezzar and wishes him well. His loyalty stems not only from the fact that he and his Jewish cohorts and the Jewish exile population in Babylon are being treated decently, but also because Daniel knows that this king is God's choice and God has given him dominion over the earth for 3 generations. So when Daniel hears the dream he at once understood, was awestruck, and it shocked him to his soul. It was unexpected and it was not good news; yet he must tell the king forthrightly and honestly the harsh truth: divine judgment upon the king was imminent.

The king instantly saw that Daniel was distressed and told him not to hold back out of fear. This was a wise king who knew that his Chaldean seers typically wanted the king to be pleased with their dream interpretations. They tended to tell the king what they thought he wanted to hear so that they could feel more secure in their lives and in their lofty positions. So in verse 17 Daniel swallows hard and begins to recite what God told him that the dream meant. The gigantic tree is King Nebuchadnezzar. But we also have to remember that in some respects a king and his kingdom are one, inseparable. So the vision of the tree is about Nebuchadnezzar AND Babylon, although as we'll see the immediate impact concerns primarily the king.

Further, in verse 19, Daniel agrees with the king that the king's greatness is unapproachable on earth, and that the entire earth is under his rule. But this is a spiritual, heavenly viewpoint and not a physical earthly reality (such as the viewpoint that the king holds). There is much more on earth than the Babylonian Empire, which, of course, is what the king rules over. However at this moment whatever happens anywhere on earth the Lord is harmonizing with the rule and dominion of Nebuchadnezzar. So from that aspect, everyone on the planet is affected by Nebuchadnezzar who is the tree in the dream.

But now the bad news: since he is the tree, he is about to be chopped down. He is going to lose his power and his dominion, and after a brief repeat in verse 20 of the king's dream, in verse 21 Daniel makes clear something that the king had misunderstood in his dream. The king seemed to think that the holy watcher was not only a messenger but the one who had created the decree. In Babylonian theology angels were more independent from the gods than they are in biblical Hebrew theology. Angels indeed could decide upon a mission and carry it out on their own. But not so with the angels of Yehoveh. So Daniel tells that king, "It is the decree of the Most High that has come upon my lord the king". Or adding in an Aramaic word, "It is the decree of the *illay* that has come upon my lord the king".

Before we close for today I want to make a point that is thorny and not necessarily popular because it steps on a lot of traditions. It is to give you food for thought and one we all need to contemplate and consider as until recently it didn't seem all that important. Throughout chapter 4 we see constant mention of the term Most High (Hebrew **el**, Aramaic **illay**). **Belt'shatzar** (Daniel) uses the term, and Nebuchadnezzar uses the same term. But I promise you that the mental picture that each man had of the Most High, and just who that is, is different. That is because **illay**, Most High, is a title and not a personal name. It is like our term president or prime minister or king or even Mister. These are titles for an office, not the name of the office holder. We don't know who, exactly, we are talking about until we add the person's name that holds that office. As anyone who has lived past 20 years knows, all presidents and prime ministers and kings are not the same. They have different sets of attributes, strengths and weaknesses. They adhere to widely varying ideologies, morals and ethics, and operate on differing principles. So to refer to the **illay**, the Most High, is incomplete. In a certain respect Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar were talking right by each other. Daniel probably realized that, but I can't imagine that Nebuchadnezzar did; he was oblivious.

That is why I tell you (and anyone who has the ears to hear) that there are only two ways to know God: His name and His attributes. God is a title and an office, like president or king; God is not a name. The correct response to someone who says "God", ought to be which God? What's His name? Today, especially, we can add to that: what are His attributes and characteristics and if He has a holy book, what is it? I'm sorry to say that so many Christians (and Jews) are oblivious to the reality that within modern mainstream Judeo-Christianity especially, is a movement to accept any name and any set of characteristics for who it is that holds the office of God. The catalyst seems to be an exaggerated and out of balance desire to evangelize Muslims. That desire is so great among many denominations and missionary organizations that just like with Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel; both sides accept talking to one another concerning the Most High but really only wind up agreeing that there exists an office of "The Most High". Who, precisely, occupies that office is talked **around**, and His characteristics are generally either disregarded or so reduced to over-simplicity (such as God is love) as they can be assigned to any number of possible office holders.

That is why in what is loosely called the emergent Church, which is really just a new name for the liberal church, that the term Muslim-Christian has gained acceptance and seems to go almost unchallenged. A Muslim-Christian is defined as a Muslim who remains loyal to Islam at one level or another but who also has a belief in Jesus and has expressed a commitment to follow His instructions (at least from a philosophical aspect). However, this person does not believe in the deity of Jesus, does not believe that Jesus died and rose from the grave, and does not believe that Jesus is the Messiah and saves. The 2 holy books of the Koran and the Bible as seen as co-equal. Jerusalem, therefore, ought to be the co-capital of both Islam and Judeo-Christianity. And foundation of the problem is this: many Christians and most Jews no longer want to give a name to the officeholder of the office of God, or to expound upon His well-defined attributes and characteristics. Because if that happened there would be no way to have such thing as a Muslim-Christian. Such supposed middle ground suddenly disappears, because it is a mirage to begin with.

I could go on and on about this issue, but what I want you to leave here with today is the importance of knowing the difference between a name and a title, and why God's name and His attributes are so terribly important for us to know and understand, and for us to be able to explain to others. And it is why as Believers we must not allow any other name or set of attributes to be assigned to the office of God, the Most High, regardless of personal cost.