

SLEEPLESS IN BABYLON

Handling Stress & Anxiety | Text: Daniel 2

How do you handle stress? I'm talking about those persistent pressures, those nagging worries that keep you up at night, or on the edge of exhaustion, or somewhere between frayed and frantic. No matter where we live, or how old we are, or how "successful" we've been in certain arenas of life, stress over the future is a natural part of life. That's why I simply want to explore with you today *two different approaches to handling stress* -- and then leave you to decide which one you'd like to try to apply in your own life in the days to come.

I

The first you might call "*the Nebuchadnezzar Approach.*" 600 years before the birth of Jesus, King Nebuchadnezzar presided over one of the greatest, most sophisticated empires the world has ever known. Under his 40-year reign, the kingdom of Babylon systematically conquered the entire Middle East. The aggressive tribute and trade program he imposed on this region brought billions into the national treasury. With these funds, Babylon engineered a gigantic bridge that spanned the mighty Euphrates. They built vast fleets of ships for war and commerce, staffed by 90-man crews. Babylon constructed some 54 temples, scores of magnificent palaces, and even the first skyscrapers (called "ziggurats") -- some of them as many as 65 stories high!

Are you getting the picture? Nebuchadnezzar was no lightweight. He'd have had no trouble running a modern-day corporation or country. He probably played scratch golf - - or the Babylonian equivalent. He ran with the stallions. Yet -- as the old saying goes -- sometimes "*uneasy lies the head that wears the crown.*" Nebuchadnezzar knew what it was to try to go to sleep at night, battling worries about the future. In fact, verse 29 of Daniel chapter 2 -- says that as Nebuchadnezzar lay in bed one night, his "**mind turned to things to come.**"

Now, we don't know exactly what he was thinking about. Human nature being the consistent stuff it is, however, they were probably the sort of thoughts you and I have as we lie awake some nights: How will I pay those bills, or how can I solve that problem at work? Which way should I go on this important decision, or how do I get myself out of the mess created by that bad decision? What should I do about this child or grandchild? Will I ever find true love? Will I get into the college of my choice? Will my marriage survive this desert season? Will this illness be the beginning of the end for me? Should I put my parent or myself into a nursing home? Will the Bears *ever* win again? My point is that Nebuchadnezzar was probably plagued with concerns -- from the sublime to the ridiculous. All of us wonder and worry about "things to come."

So how did such a capable person deal with his stress? Well, according to our Scripture lesson, it was a three-point approach. The Bible says that **"In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind was troubled and he could not sleep."** We get no indication that he wakes up his wife, or prays, or reads some sacred text for comfort. Apparently, Nebuchadnezzar's FIRST response to stress is to toss and turn alone in the night. Have you ever gone sleepless and solo like that? You wrestle with worries too large to let you rest, yet somehow feel unable to let someone else in on them? Have you ever been there?

Then, maybe you can relate too to the SECOND thing Nebuchadnezzar does. Daniel 2:2 says: **"So the king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed."** In other words, and presumably the next morning, he calls in the professional wise men of Babylon. **"When they came in and stood before the king, he said to them, 'I have had a dream that troubles me and I want to know what it means.'"** And then comes this bizarre exchange. Some of the wise men say: *"Vell, tell us vhat da dream vas all about, and ve vill interpret it for you."* But the king says, *"No, you tell me what my dream was about. And, if you can't tell me, then off with your heads!"*

When I first read this, I couldn't figure out why the king responded this way. Why doesn't he tell these guys the details of his dream? And then it hit me. Nebuchadnezzar doesn't really believe they have the answers he seeks. His second response to stress is to half-heartedly seek help from people he doesn't really trust. And for good reason. You see, the Babylonians had whole *textbooks* on dream interpretation. All you had to do was identify some of the symbols in the dream and the book conveniently gave you several options as to what the images meant. A "wise man" could then interpret the symbols in a way that would make the dreamer feel good no matter what. But, in this case, Nebuchadnezzar doesn't want a horoscope, he wants some real help.

Have you ever been in a position of desperate longing for an answer like that? You're dealing with worries for which a pat answer or general advice just won't do. You don't want someone to sort of dance around a subject, looking all the while for clues as to what you really *want* to hear, so that they can say it. You want a message that is authentic and authoritative, even if it's hard to hear. So, when people ask about what's eating you, you only give partial information. You figure that if they were really on the ball, if they were really for you, they'd discern the truth.

And then, when they don't, you and I sometimes employ the third and final stress-management technique that Nebuchadnezzar uses here. It's called "Rage Therapy." The Bible says that the failure of the counselors to give him the answer he sought **"made the king so angry and furious that he ordered the execution of all the wise men of Babylon."** Ahh, it feels good to vent a little stress on somebody else, doesn't it? With the blade of my words, my glare, or my silent fantasies, I've chopped off more than a few heads in my time. How about you?

A lot of us, I think, handle our anxiety in these ways. We toss and turn alone. We half-heartedly seek help from people we're not sure we trust. We engage in a little rage therapy now and then. But how does this work for us? I've got to confess, it hasn't done much for me, nor for the people around me. That's why I'm working these days to employ the "*Daniel Approach*" to stress management instead. Would you like to know what that is? I'm so glad you asked!

II

Daniel definitely knew something about stress too. He had already been marched in chains hundreds of miles from his home in Palestine, separated permanently from his family, forced into a Babylonian indoctrination program, and robbed -- at least publicly -- of his own name. Now, because Daniel was considered a trainee in the King's corps of wise-men, he'd also been put on the "cut list," if you get my drift. That would stress anybody out. What is striking, however, is how Daniel chooses to handle his worries about his future. Let's see what the scriptures tell us *his* approach.

FIRST, the Bible says Daniel went to "**Arioch, the commander of the king's guard**" and asked "**Why did the king issue such a harsh decree?**" In other words, instead of tossing and turning alone... instead of just wiggling out at the news that he'd been given a death sentence... Daniel deliberately sought out one seasoned person to help him identify the specific source of the stress. He understood that there can be no saving solution till you've narrowed down and named the particular problem -- until you've reduced that wild worry cloud that's got you frantic down to one or two specific issues you can focus on. Are you in the habit of doing that?

SECONDLY, you'll notice that *unlike* Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel didn't half-heartedly seek help from people he only partially trusted. The Bible says that "**then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah,**" In other words, Daniel actively shared the particular problem with friends in the faith. He went to his small group, to his fellowship, to his stretcher-bearers -- and poured out his heart. Have you got a circle of trusted confidants like that -- that you can turn to, and for whom you can be there, in a stressful time? Can we help you start one, or to join such a group already present in the life of our church?

THIRDLY, Daniel asked his friends to pray with him about the problem. You may remember that the Babylonian wise men told the king that what he demanded was humanly impossible since "**not a man on earth**" could know the dreams of another person. Only the gods, they said, could help, but "**they do not live among men.**" Daniel knew they were wrong on both counts. You see, although he lived 600 years before God literally came in Jesus Christ to dwell in the flesh with men and women, Daniel nonetheless understood that the one true God does care intimately about human

worries and stresses. And, moved by that care, God can and does give human beings transcendent capacities to conquer the sources of stress in their life.

God can renew that relationship. He can open doors that are closed to you today. He can provide you with piercing insight. He can restore your flagging strength. He wants to do those things. But the conduit through which he often pours that power is prayer. I quote the Scriptures again: **"[Daniel] urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that he and his friends might not be executed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon."**

Having committed himself in that way, FOURTHLY, Daniel trusted God to act. He did all that was humanly possible, and then he went to sleep. What a contrast there is between the restless sleeplessness of Nebuchadnezzar and the trusting sleep of Daniel. Sometimes I think God just waits for us to let go and let him -- so there'll be no doubt that it is God and not us that is at work. And the Bible records that **"during the night the mystery [of the King's dream] was revealed to Daniel in a vision."**

You know, I think more of us than dare to admit it, have been given visions from God. Maybe it was in a dream like Daniel; perhaps it was through a sermon or song we heard; maybe it was just as we were driving or going along; when all of a sudden we felt an impulse to say or do something, and we just pushed that impulse away. We wrote it off as wishful thinking or maybe just the spaghetti we ate last night. But it was something more. It was God urging us to act.

That's what makes Daniel's story so amazing, and it's the FIFTH step in his approach to handling the stress in his life: Daniel actively responded to the leading of God. He was perfectly obedient to the vision God gave him, and it was a risky one indeed. At a time when most of Babylon's wise men were trying to get a ticket out of town, the Scriptures say in verse 24, that **"Daniel went to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to execute the wise men of Babylon, and said to him, 'Take me to the king, and I will interpret his dream for him.'"**

And so he did. From that one courageous response to God's leading came the rescue of Daniel's friends and the others; the release of at least one source of haunting worry for the king; the elevation of Daniel to the position of ruler over the whole province of Babylon; and, most importantly, the glorification of God.

III

So, let me ask you -- which approach to stress reduction are you going to try to practice in coming weeks? Will it be Nebuchadnezzar's -- toss and turn alone in the night; half-heartedly share your concerns with people you don't really trust; indulge in a little execution therapy to vent some of the tension? Or will it be Daniel's? If the latter, then first, find one person who can help you narrow and name the principle source of your

stress. That's what pastors and spouses and parents and Stephen Ministers and best friends and bosses are for. What a gift we can be to each other in that way.

Once you've done that, share your concern with a circle of trusted Christian friends. If you don't have one, come to any one of the midweek activities of our church or let a pastor know of your interest and we'll help you make some connections. Thirdly, ask some faithful people to pray with you over your concern. Then, once you've done all that is humanly possible, let go and let God -- trust Him to act. Someone once told me: *"When you are stuck between a rock and a hard place, turn to the Rock and ask him to help you with the hard place."* But when God starts to help, to tug at your soul, respond to it, act on it, no matter how risky the vision may be.

And finally, when the problem starts to give way to blessing -- as every source of stressing truly surrendered to God will -- indeed, even before you see the final result, do as Daniel did here: Give glory to God, will you? Say "praise be to the name of God... [for] wisdom and power and his." For the truth is that He deserves the glory, and -- as Daniel's life shows us in spades -- God has this gracious habit of taking someone who lifts him up, and lifting that servant too.

May it be so with you and me. Amen.