

THE BLESSED BLADE

Making Your Crises Creative

Daniel 4

I

How does God reach a human being when his first and preferred approaches don't produce change? If a human life grows up in such a way that it is resplendent with the fading flowers of this world, but fails -- time after time -- to absorb the nutrients that make that tree abundant with the fruit for which it was planted, what will God do?

I know someone who could tell you – and he does in our lesson for today. At chapter four, the Book of Daniel dramatically shifts from being a third-person narrative about the faithfulness of God's Hebrew servants in a foreign land to being the first-person testimony of one of the most unlikely converts in all of history. The witness identifies himself and his target audience in the first verse. It reads as follows: **"King Nebuchadnezzar, to the peoples... who live in all the world. May you prosper greatly!"** From there, Nebuchadnezzar goes right to the topic of his proclamation: **"It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me. How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an eternal kingdom, (and) his dominion endures from generation to generation."**

Now, if you know anything about Nebuchadnezzar's story up to this point, you have to be a bit amazed at these words. The man who demanded, on pain of fiery death, that everybody in his country worship a 90-foot gold monument to his own eternal administration is now saying, in effect: "Look, what I am and represent is only dust, friends. You want to give your life to something? Make your aim the sovereign and everlasting Kingdom of God." What in the world has happened to this man?

II

Well, he says, it all started like this: **"I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at home in my palace, content and prosperous."** Now, when Neb tells us that he was at ease and prospering in his palace, he's really saying something. Archaeologists and historians tell us that the most imposing of the King's several palaces stood on a low hill with a dramatic view of the ancient "ziggurat" or "tower" of Babel, just 600 yards to its south. The residential portion of this palace had walls made of fine yellow brick and floors of white and mottled sandstone. There were magnificent artistic reliefs done in vivid blue glaze adorning various surfaces of the house, and gigantic basalt lions guarding the entrance. Perhaps no other feature of the estate, however, compares with its famed Hanging Gardens – once known as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

What made these gardens so stupendous is that they were suspended on a succession of concentric, circular colonnades. The topmost terrace -- 75 feet above the ground -- had a rich layer of soil, sufficiently deep to support the growth not only of fragrant flowers and shrubs but also the largest and most deep-rooted trees. But that's not all. Concealed within the massive columns were slave-driven hydraulic engines that drew water from the Euphrates River below up to the highest tier of the gardens. To put it succinctly, Nebuchadnezzar didn't just recreate Paradise -- he lived in the tree-house at the center of it. Are you getting this picture?

III

Now, let me come back to the question I posed at the start. When *gifts of life and luxury, of learning and love* don't produce fruit that really honors the Giver of Grace... When God provides *revelations of his specific plans for the future* -- as he did for Nebuchadnezzar in two vivid dreams, and as He has for many others in this amazing book -- and yet this news doesn't command a genuine reordering of lifestyle... When God dramatically rescues His servants from the fiery furnace as Nebuchadnezzar knew He had -- or when He raises His Son from the dead as a lot of us say He has -- and when even miraculous *demonstrations of saving power* like that don't result in more than a brief season of flowers... what is God to do to produce a more fruitful response?

"I'll tell you," says Nebuchadnezzar, "God can find some way to shake your tree." For the King of Babylon, the shaking came in the form of a nightmare even more disturbing than the one he'd had back in chapter 2: "**I had a dream that made me afraid,**" he said. "**Before me stood a tree in the middle of the land... The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky; it was visible to the ends of the earth. Its leaves were beautiful... Under it the beasts of the field found shelter, and the birds of the air lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed...**" It was a lovely and comforting image, thus far, but the dream continued: "**I looked, and there before me was a messenger, a holy one, coming down from heaven. He called in a loud voice: 'Cut down the tree and trim off its branches; strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the animals flee from under it and the birds from its branches. But let the stump and its roots... remain in the ground.'**"

Now, as he'd done with his earlier dream back in chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar summons his court wise-men to help him understand what all of this means. Just like the last time, however, the Babylonian sages are clueless. It takes Daniel -- inspired by the Holy Spirit -- to give the interpretation, and this is what Daniel tells him: "**Your Majesty, you are that tree, You have become great and strong. Your greatness has grown until it reaches the sky, and your dominion extends to distant parts of the earth.**" But then Daniel drops the other shoe. He says that the heavenly messenger that follows in the vision has come to tell Nebuchadnezzar that he has not been fruitful in the way that counts most

with God. He has been guilty of colossal pride, evident in a self-indulgent, self-glorifying lifestyle and a failure to be **"kind to the oppressed."**

Oh, don't get me wrong; Neb had some decent spiritual bark, even if it didn't go too deep. He greatly admired Daniel, a servant of God. He gave credit to God several times for the miracles He had done. But the fact remained that upon the heart of his tree were carved words like Mussolini once spoke: *"I worship no god save my sovereign will."* Contrast those words to the ones cut into the tree that stood on Calvary: **"Yet not what I want, Father, but thy will be done" (Matt 26:39).**

IV

Now, let me ask you a personal question: Which set of words are written upon your heart? I'll tell you how you can know. If you've given your life over to the One who really belongs on the throne... if you've got His Spirit and will flowing through you, you will bear the sort of fruit we see in Daniel and his friends. Because God is *kind*, you will tend to have compassion even upon your enemies, and will work to address the concerns of oppressed people. Because the Lord is *holy*, you will increasingly shun the defiling mental junk food handed to you and seek instead to ingest that which is noteworthy, commendable, and pure. Because your God is *sovereign*, you will commit every stress and worry to Him in prayer. Because God is the *one-and-only* Lord, you will refuse to bow down to the idols of modern-day Babylon no matter how many other people do so. Because you serve *Daniel's* God, you will regard your position and resources as tools to use in the service of your King.

Jesus said: You will know the health of a tree by the fruit it bears (Matt 7:16, 20). And I see a lot of it around here. But if a tree is not really bearing much of the fruit God longs to see, then -- said Jesus -- the Gardener will take measures to address the problem. He'll do it the same way He did with Nebuchadnezzar.

FIRST of all, He'll try to shake your tree. Is it possible that God is doing that with some of us right now. Could that crack in your health, be God's way of reminding you that you're going too fast, or of making you think more carefully about how you want to use the time that you have left? Might that tremor being felt in some branch of your family life, be God's call to you to invest more deeply in the precious relationships around you? Could God be using some wind of change in your social or vocational life to stir an examination of your core values? Could the loss of luster on some of the leaves of your lifestyle be God's urging to you to begin putting your roots down deeper into the soil of a spiritual security that no termite or tempest can touch? In one way or another, God is probably trying to shake some of us into making some needed changes right now.

If so, there is very likely a SECOND measure He'll take: He'll bring before you some Daniel who will help to interpret the shaking. Maybe it's a spouse or another family member. Perhaps it's a friend or someone you think of as an enemy. Maybe it's a

work or right here at church. Chances are that whoever his messenger is, it will be as tough for you to listen as it was for Neb to hear what Daniel had to say. You'd have to be a masochist to enjoy having someone point out some rotting limb or hollow trunk in your life. Yet I know I've later felt a fool when I've failed to hear what the various "messengers" God had sent to me were trying to say.

Maybe the shaking has already happened. Perhaps someone has tried to help you hear God's call to repent or -- as Daniel puts it to Nebuchadnezzar -- to **"renounce your sins by doing what is right."** But of this THIRD truth I'm absolutely sure: God will give you and me a chance to respond. For even when ours isn't, *God's "love is patient and kind."* It **"bears"** and **"believes"** and **"hopes"** and **"endures."** Why the scriptures say that even after He'd done so much to capture the attention of the King of Babylon, God still waited one whole year more for the man to change. But Nebuchadnezzar himself tells us that **"twelve months later,"** God found him **"walking on the roof of the royal palace,"** saying to himself: **"Is not this the great Babylon I have built by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?"**

V

It was only then that the Gardener did what had to be done -- paradoxically -- if there was to be any hope for that tree: He cut it down. While the King's prideful words were still in the air, a voice came from heaven: **"This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals. Seven [years] will pass by for you, until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes."**

As near as historians can figure it out, Nebuchadnezzar had a complete nervous breakdown. If you've seen the film, *The Madness of King George* -- the story of a similar episode of temporary insanity in the life of the monarch of England -- then you'll have a vivid mental picture of the collapse I'm talking about. But, then, maybe you don't need a film to color the picture for you. Perhaps you have gotten to a place -- or will soon be in a place --- where the tree of your life as you knew it comes crashing to the ground, and you're no longer sure who you are anymore either.

Let me leave you with one final thought to ponder in relationship to such painful changes, should they ever be upon you. Please listen carefully: Sometimes God purposely cuts people down or allows them to be cut down because He knows that for some of us, only a breakdown will bring about a breakthrough. What looks and feels like God's utter abandonment of us is actually God moving to bring about the total improvement of us.

As I've shared with many of you, during my senior year in high school I experienced a season of cutting. Up to that point I'd staked much of my sense of *identity* on having a father who was an influential politician, much of my sense of *security* on being part of an All-American happy family, and much of my sense of *prosperity* on living in a 30-room home on a 10-acre estate. And then -- in the space of a few short months -- the congressional race was lost, the family was split by divorce; the palace was burned in a fire. Chop, chop, chop. The tree on which my sense of identity, security, and prosperity hung came crashing down.

But what I want you to understand is that, by the grace of God, that *breakdown* became a *breakthrough* for me. That season of madness led to a new identity as a servant of the kingdom, a new security as a child of the King, a new prosperity as an heir of the mansions of heaven. Out of the old stump of my former life, God grew the tree of a far more abundant life.

I conclude with the question with which we began: How does God reach a human being when His first and preferred approaches don't bring about the change he seeks? Someday in eternity, you'll hear the answer from a saint who was once merely the King of Babylon. But until that day, take it from a sinner: The Savior will shake your tree. He'll bring you a Daniel. He'll wait as long as He can. And when all else fails, should the watchword for your life suddenly become "Timberrrrr!" -- please consider the possibility that the cut you feel is not the ax of anarchy after all, but rather the blessed blade of God, pruning you for a greater harvest (John 15:2).

Let us pray...