

Nebuchadnezzar, King Of Babylon, God's Servant

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When I say we are going to do a character study today, I think most people would immediately think that we are going to talk about a hero of faith, a prophet, an apostle, or an individual that displayed strong godly character. You would think that we would go for somebody we should try to emulate to better ourselves. Well, I am here to tell you today that that is not the case at all. The man we are discussing today was in many ways a villain. Certainly, he was carnal and did not have God's Spirit and did terrible things to God's people. Judah would certainly not have nice things to say about him.

And yet, God chose him of all people to be His servant. And oddly, in one particular book of the Bible, he is spoken of quite highly at times. I am here to contend today that with a different perspective, maybe there is more to this man than we would initially assume. I certainly believe that he presents some pretty valuable lessons for us all to learn, as well as showing some of the flaws that we are all very capable of having. After all, despite us having God's Holy Spirit, we are just as human and as imperfect as this man was. The man we are going to take a look at today is Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, God's servant.

Before we really dive into the story of Nebuchadnezzar, I want to do something I have done before and give us a framework scripture, a lens with which we will view the entire rest of the message. So if you would please turn with me to I Samuel 16. We will pick up verses 6 and 7. This is where Jesse's sons are going before Samuel to see which one is to be anointed king. And as usual, this will be out of the ESV.

I Samuel 16:6-7 (ESV) When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is before him." But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of

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his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

This is how I want us to look at Nebuchadnezzar today. Not as Judah sees him, not as he is historically portrayed, but with a godly point of view. Why him? Why would God choose to work with such a man to the extent He did?

To begin, let us take a look at the three scriptures where he is explicitly mentioned as God's servant, to get an idea of how God was working through him, starting in Jeremiah 25, if you will turn there with me. We will just pick up the one verse.

Jeremiah 25:9 (ESV) Behold, I will send for all the tribes of the north, declares the Lord, and for Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these surrounding nations. I will devote them to destruction, and make them a horror, a hissing, and an everlasting desolation.

And then next, a couple of chapters over in Jeremiah 27. We will pick up verses 6 and 8.

Jeremiah 27:6-8 (ESV) "Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him also the beasts of the field to serve him. All the nations shall serve him and his son and his grandson, until the time of his own land comes. Then many nations and great kings shall make him their slave. But if any nation or kingdom will not serve this Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, I will punish that nation with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence, declares the Lord, until I have consumed it by his hand."

And then finally over to Jeremiah 43. We will just pick up verse 10. He is speaking to Egypt here.

Jeremiah 43:10 (ESV) And say to them, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I will send and take Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will set his throne above these stones that I have hidden, and he will spread his royal canopy over them."

From these three instances, we can see that God made Nebuchadnezzar His punisher, essentially. God was the judge and jury, but Nebuchadnezzar was His executioner. And while we are here in Jeremiah, let us get our first little hint that maybe Nebuchadnezzar was not completely without respect for the one who held his chains when we go to chapter 39, just picking up verses 11 and 12.

Jeremiah 39:11-12 (ESV) Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon gave command concerning Jeremiah through Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, saying, "Take him, look after him well, and do him no harm, but deal with him as he tells you."

And we will stop there before I have to read any more Babylonian names.

We will not dwell on this, but it is very interesting how well he treats Jeremiah here, even if it probably was not completely altruistic.

Now, that we have taken a bit of an overview of Nebuchadnezzar, it is time to move to the book where we will be spending the entire rest of the message, as we will get a more personal look at our Babylonian king. This book is, of course, Daniel, where we will get a glimpse of Nebuchadnezzar the person instead of Nebuchadnezzar the conqueror. I could probably go another 30 minutes diving into chapters 1 through 3, but since we do not have that kind of time, I will just pick out some key sections before we get to chapter 4.

We will pretty much skip over chapter 1 in its entirety and start in chapter 2, where Nebuchadnezzar's first dream is. In verses 1 through 16, we see Nebuchadnezzar's temper on display, threatening death for the wise men of Babylon if they cannot interpret the dream, and Daniel volunteers to step up.

God reveals the dream's meaning to Daniel next, which brings us to the section I do want to read in Daniel 2. We will start in verse 31 and pick up 32 and then drop down and get 37 and 38.

Daniel 2:31-32 (ESV) "You saw, O king, and behold a great image. This image, mighty and of exceeding brightness, stood before you, and its appearance was frightening. Verse 32, the head of this image was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, and its middle and thighs of bronze.

Daniel 2:37-38 (ESV) "You, O king, the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, and the might, and the glory, and into whose hand he has given, wherever they dwell, the children of man, the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, making you rule over them all—you are the head of gold."

What a compliment from God! King of kings, and the greatest of some pretty notable empires that would follow, is no small tip of the cap. And that is what makes it particularly interesting to consider Babylon as an empire historically. They really were not anything notable at the time. And then Nebuchadnezzar ascends to the throne, conquers the land, and elevates Babylon to the dominant power. And then within two generations, they are being conquered by the Persians.

As an aside, I have been studying this guy for the better part of a year, and it is really interesting how historians actually view him as a builder king, instead of a conqueror. I mean, he supposedly built the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and the Ishtar Gate and made that city very luxurious in that time, which is a pretty cool thing to consider, especially considering how he is portrayed in the Bible by the other prophets. The last thing I want to mention is how at the end of the chapter, that is the first time Nebuchadnezzar praises God. We will go ahead and just pick that up really quick in verse 47.

Daniel 2:47 (ESV) The king answered and said to Daniel, "Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery."

A good sign, right? We will not be making any stops in chapter 3, but this chapter really illustrates Nebuchadnezzar's poor qualities, namely his temper again, but also his pride and his arrogance. There really is not a good frame of reference for how much time has passed between the end of chapter 2 and the start of 3. I would imagine it is a decent amount of time, but it is also the first occurrence of Nebuchadnezzar backsliding after he has acknowledged God, which we will see again.

Chapter 4 begins with the conclusion to chapter 3. Nebuchadnezzar once again praises God and seemingly makes a giant leap in the right direction towards the truth. Then we take our first real glimpse into chapter 4 and the first thing that should jump out at you is that verse 4 is in the first person. This is the first of two spots where that happens. Did Nebuchadnezzar himself write these sections? Why would God allow such a man to write in His Word?

Well, I will tell you it certainly is not by accident. All we have to do is read II Timothy 3:16, where it pretty much says as much, you know, "All scripture is breathed out by God." (I am paraphrasing.) God wanted this here and allowed Daniel to put these accounts in place. We will pretty much skip over the dream and interpretation. But I want to read a couple spots showing Daniel's reaction to get an idea of what their relationship was like.

In Daniel 4, we will pick up 19 and 27 individually.

Daniel 4:19 (ESV) Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, was dismayed for a while, and his thoughts alarmed him. The king answered and said, "Belteshazzar, let not the dream or the interpretation alarm you." Belteshazzar answered and said, "My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you, and its interpretation for your enemies!"

Daniel 4:27 (ESV) "Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity."

Daniel clearly has immense respect for the king. Enough to be upset upon hearing the interpretation and even urging him to turn towards God. We will see another glimpse of his regard for him a little later. But finally, we get to the climactic moment, and the second of Nebuchadnezzar's backslides after making steps towards acknowledging God. Let us go ahead and read what he says in Daniel 4.

Daniel 4:28-31 (ESV) All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar. At the end of twelve months he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, and the king answered and said, "Is this not great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?" While the words were still in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, "O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you."

God finally says, enough is enough. It is time to show you who is really in charge here—and brings Nebuchadnezzar to the lowest of lows. I can only imagine the humiliation of not only the act itself here, but returning to Babylon after all that time when his reason returns, the shame he must have felt seeing those people that he knew that used to serve under him, welcoming him back.

Let us go ahead and read that section, starting in verse 34.

Daniel 4:34-37 (ESV) At the end of the days, I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?" At the same time my reason returned to me, and for the glory of my kingdom, my majesty and splendor returned to me. My counselors and my lords sought me, and I was established in my kingdom, and still more greatness was added to me. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven,

for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble.

Finally, Nebuchadnezzar completes his character arc and gives praise to God as the one who rules over all. Was he converted after this? I cannot say I know the answer to that question. I am not sure it really matters. That is something that is between him and God. I would, the optimist in me would like to say yes, but that is not for me to judge.

Nebuchadnezzar really reminds me of us in a lot of ways, saying the right things after having God's power demonstrated to us again and again only to backslide into those very same sins. How many of us are guilty of the same? I know I am.

As we conclude, I want to read one final passage in Daniel, just a chapter over, where we can see Daniel, and by extension, God's consideration of Nebuchadnezzar after his rule, and immediately before Babylon was delivered to the Persians.

Daniel 5:18-22 (ESV) "O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty. And because of the greatness that he gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whom he would, he killed, and whom he would, he kept alive; whom he would, he raised up, and whom he would, he humbled. But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he dealt proudly, he was brought down from his kingly throne, and his glory was taken from him. He was driven from among the children of mankind, and his mind was made like that of a beast, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys. He was fed grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, until he knew that the Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom He will. And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this."

The end of verse 21 is really a summation of my entire point today. God works through whomever He pleases. He does not require our approval, and it certainly does not have to make sense to us. I think of Paul and what we

would have thought about him around his conversion if we were present. We would have thought of him as the enemy. Why would God choose an inquisitor like Paul as His servant? I think of how much faith Ananias showed, trusting God and going to Paul after his conversion, knowing that if it was not true, he was going to his death.

Who are we to think that we understand the affairs of the world better than God? He can work through anyone and can make even the greatest of disbelievers bend the knee to Him. And He can even choose those who persecute us. The Almighty God is on His throne, and He is working with those we consider sinners. Yes, even great and flawed men like Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, God's servant.