

DANIEL — WEEK 5

DISCIPLINE AND RESTORATION



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is Daniel in the Lions' Den by Peter Paul Rubens

Nebuchadnezzar expects Daniel to interpret his dream, even though his wise men couldn't. Daniel sugarcoats the interpretation, but it's some tough stuff. Nebuchadnezzar finally gets to the point where, in his arrogance, he's confident Daniel was wrong. At that moment, Daniel's interpretation is fulfilled.

But eventually, the king is restored to his throne. That's when he finally gets it.

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Daniel, Week 5 — Discipline and Restoration
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1 Daniel 4:13–18

“I saw in the visions of my head while on my bed, and there was a watcher, a holy one, coming down from heaven. He cried aloud and said thus:

*‘Chop down the tree and cut off its branches,
Strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit.
Let the beasts get out from under it,
And the birds from its branches.
Nevertheless leave the stump and roots in the earth,
Bound with a band of iron and bronze,
In the tender grass of the field.
Let it be wet with the dew of heaven,
And let him graze with the beasts
On the grass of the earth.
Let his heart be changed from that of a man,
Let him be given the heart of a beast,
And let seven times pass over him.
‘This decision is by the decree of the watchers,
And the sentence by the word of the holy ones,
In order that the living may know
That the Most High rules in the kingdom of men,
Gives it to whomever He will,
And sets over it the lowest of men.’*

“This dream I, King Nebuchadnezzar, have seen. Now you, Belteshazzar, declare its interpretation, since all the wise men of my kingdom are not able to make known to me the interpretation; but you are able, for the Spirit of the Holy God is in you.”

This is curious. Why did *all the wise men* decline to interpret the dream? They’re experts in the art of baloney; it’s their day job. Cat got your tongue, guys? Daniel saving their necks the last time must have had immense impact. Oh, to be a fly on the wall! I’d love to hear how they processed that.

Apologetics isn’t normally the key to evangelism, but this is an exception. Something opened their minds.

Nebuchadnezzar’s confidence in Daniel is curious too. Daniel never claimed to be able to interpret all dreams. He gave the credit for the last one to God; he didn’t say that he could do it again. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego also made it clear that they can’t predict what God will do.

This is an essential spiritual lesson that Nebuchadnezzar hasn’t learned—God isn’t our servant. Even though he has a unique respect for the god of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, Nebuchadnezzar still sees Him through a polytheistic lens. He thinks Daniel can just snap his fingers and God will show up like the genie in Aladdin.

He’s not that kind of God.

2 Daniel 4:19–22

Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, was astonished for a time, and his thoughts troubled him. So the king spoke, and said, “Belteshazzar, do not let the dream or its interpretation trouble you.”

Belteshazzar answered and said, “My lord, may the dream concern those who hate you, and its interpretation concern your enemies!

“The tree that you saw, which grew and became strong, whose height reached to the heavens and which could be seen by all the earth, whose leaves were lovely and its fruit abundant, in which was food for all, under which the beasts of the field dwelt, and in whose branches the birds of the heaven had their home—it is you, O king, who have grown and become strong; for your greatness has grown and reaches to the heavens, and your dominion to the end of the earth.”

Oh my goodness, this is so sugar-coated it’s going to give the king diabetes.

For a moment, Daniel is stuck trying to think how to spin this nightmare. Then Nebuchadnezzar gives him a green light. Since Daniel’s last interpretation prophesied the end of his kingdom, this is permission to drop the hammer.

Even so, Daniel butters him up with, *“My lord, may the dream concern those who hate you, and its interpretation concern your enemies!”*

Then Daniel drenches the first half of the interpretation in syrup. *“It is you, O king, who have grown and become strong; for your greatness has grown and reaches to the heavens, and your dominion to the end of the earth.”*

That would have made even the Queen of Hearts swoon.

What Daniel is doing here is not wrong. The Lord told us to be shrewd.

“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” — Matthew 10:16 (NIV)

Daniel is cleverly meeting Nebuchadnezzar where he is. Paul did that too.

Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription:

TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.

Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: — Acts 17:22–23

We should always try to be as winsome as possible, whether presenting bad news or the good news.

3 Daniel 4:23–27

“And inasmuch as the king saw a watcher, a holy one, coming down from heaven and saying, ‘Chop down the tree and destroy it, but leave its stump and roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze in the tender grass of the field; let it be wet with the dew of heaven, and let him graze with the beasts of the field, till seven times pass over him’; this is the interpretation, O king, and this is the decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king: They shall drive you from men, your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field, and they shall make you eat grass like oxen. They shall wet you with the dew of heaven, and seven times shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses.

“And inasmuch as they gave the command to leave the stump and roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be assured to you, after you come to know that Heaven rules. Therefore, O king, let my advice be acceptable to you; break off your sins by being righteous, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor. Perhaps there may be a lengthening of your prosperity.”

This is different from the last dream in three important ways.

First, the last dream foretold mostly normal events. Kingdom’s come and go. But this time, the dream interpretation is so bizarre that it’s hard to understand exactly what Daniel’s describing.

Second, there’s no way that Nebuchadnezzar can live to see the previous dream fulfilled. This one, though, will happen to him personally—with great emotional impact.

Lastly, Daniel gives explicit instructions for how these events can be prevented. Last time, Nebuchadnezzar invented a nutty scheme of his own to try to change the future.

These three differences combine to make this dream the foundation for better targeted teaching.

We receive similarly better targeted teaching through answered prayer. We pour our hearts out, sometimes in anguish, and thus we pay attention to His response. We learn by seeing, “the footprints of an unseen hand.”

This is where reformed doctrine helps by tying all the pieces together. Our growth in Christ is more important than pain avoidance. Otherwise, why the cross?

God foreordains the trials that drive us to our knees. He has an agenda based on higher purposes. Those purposes are more important than whatever’s commanding our attention.

Adjusting to His priorities can be painful, but it’s helpful to know that they are there. Sometimes we get to see what God is up to; sometimes we don’t.

But He’s always up to something.

4 Daniel 4:28–33

All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar. At the end of the twelve months he was walking about the royal palace of Babylon. The king spoke, saying, “Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power and for the honor of my majesty?”

While the word was still in the king’s mouth, a voice fell from heaven: “King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: the kingdom has departed from you! And they shall drive you from men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. They shall make you eat grass like oxen; and seven times shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses.”

That very hour the word was fulfilled concerning Nebuchadnezzar; he was driven from men and ate grass like oxen; his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair had grown like eagles’ feathers and his nails like birds’ claws.

Notice that, in the end, it isn’t cortisol that drives Nebuchadnezzar mad. He seems to be over all his fear and stress. He might even be thinking that Daniel’s interpretation of the dream was wrong. He’s on top of the world when God lowers the boom.

That’s important. God picks the exact moment that Nebuchadnezzar’s pride is peaking to smack him down. Timing can be the key to a lesson.

And he’s smacked down about as far as it’s possible to go. Imagine all the scorn and pity he’s subject to as he wanders around *with the beasts of the field* and they see him *eat grass like oxen*.

Next to him, the town drunk looks like Socrates.

Between the severity of the smackdown and its precise timing, Nebuchadnezzar should finally get the message.

No one does attitude adjustments like God does attitude adjustments. Notice how He’s both brutal and gentle with Nebuchadnezzar. What God puts him through is reasonably painless in the physical sense, yet emotionally crushing.

This leads to one of my favorite ways to discern the Lord’s leading—look for how things are “finely tuned.” In this case, things are perfectly tuned to humble Nebuchadnezzar. He doesn’t need to limp; that’s what Jacob needed. He doesn’t need a thorn in his side; that’s what Paul needed. He needs to be humbled.

Consider this idea the next time things get irritating (or worse). Is God trying to teach you something? Or maybe just get your attention? What lesson would fit the pattern?

Not every unusual event is a sign from God, but some things are.

5 Daniel 4:34–37

And at the end of the time I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding 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 is from generation to generation.
All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing;
He does according to His will in the army of heaven
And among the inhabitants of the earth.
No one can restrain 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 honor and splendor returned to me. My counselors and nobles resorted to me, I was restored to my kingdom, and excellent majesty was added to me. 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.

Of all the miracles recorded in the book of Daniel, the restoration of Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom might be the greatest. The Lord taketh away and the Lord giveth.

But the key isn’t how amazing and improbable his restoration is; it’s the purpose. It taught the king grace.

This passage is written in the first person; Nebuchadnezzar wrote it. That means he has learned his lesson and is interested in teaching it to others. That’s a lot of progress.

Nebuchadnezzar has finally learned the proper respect for God. God is awesome. God is fearsome. God is good. Those things do go together. CS Lewis teaches this beautifully in “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.”

“Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver. “Don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver is telling you? Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the king I tell you.”

Nebuchadnezzar has learned that God isn’t “safe” because He is good and Nebuchadnezzar isn’t.

Christians often call themselves “God-fearing.” That’s easily misinterpreted. Fear is usually of something bad, or at least of something to be avoided. But our fear of God is not a sense of revulsion at something harmful; it’s a sense of awe. It’s a pleasant emotion.

This is explained more fully in this article by Michael Reeves. It’s only a few pages and worth your time.

<https://www.crossway.org/articles/fearing-god-is-a-matter-of-the-heart/>

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Do people act like they think of God as their servant?
2. What are the keys to being winsome?
3. Have you ever seen God's mercy in His discipline?
4. When have you discerned where God was pushing you?
5. What do most people think of when someone says they're a God-fearing Christian?

Items for prayer: