

Sunday School Notes: God deals with Arrogance (Daniel chapters 2-4)

What was the most important difference between Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar? True, Daniel was just a servant of the king, but there is a bigger difference: Daniel knew that his abilities came from God, whereas Nebuchadnezzar prided himself on being the greatest warrior-king and ruler in the known world and believed that he had done all this through his own efforts. No wonder he became incredibly arrogant.

God was able to use Daniel to help Nebuchadnezzar discover God's greatness.

It began when Nebuchadnezzar discovered that Daniel could interpret dreams. He had had a dream which bothered him so he called all his wise men together, asking them to explain the dream to him. The trouble was that Nebuchadnezzar couldn't remember what he had dreamt. When the wise men tried to tell him that therefore there was no-one on earth who could help him, the king flew into a rage and demanded that all his wise men be killed.

When the chief executioner came to Daniel, Daniel discovered what was wrong and went to the king to ask for some extra time to discover the secret. Then he called his 3 friends together so they could pray about this. And, in the night, God gave Daniel the answer.

Daniel was able to go to Nebuchadnezzar and tell him that the dream had been about a huge statue. The head was made of gold, but the materials used decreased in value and strength throughout the body so that the feet were mainly just clay. Then the statue was toppled by a stone which hit its feet. That stone had not been made by humankind, and, after the statue had become dust, the stone became a great mountain which filled the known earth.

Daniel explained that the dream was explaining that no earthly kingdom can last; only God's kingdom is everlasting. God is greater than even the greatest person. Nebuchadnezzar was thrilled that someone had been able to help him and he commented (Dan 2:47) that Daniel's God was amazing.

Although he promoted Daniel and his friends, Nebuchadnezzar clearly didn't worry too much about messages from Daniel's God. The next thing we hear is that Nebuchadnezzar organised a huge golden statue of himself: 30 metres high and 3 metres wide. This was erected on the flat ground near the city and Nebuchadnezzar arranged for a celebration. He summoned all the leaders (the members of parliament, etc) to gather at the statue. Then he announced that, when they heard the ceremonial music, they must bow down to the statue. Failure to do so would mean that they would be thrown into the fiery furnace. Nobody dared to disobey – except for Daniel's three friends (We don't know where Daniel was.)

Some of the jealous leaders reported these three young men to Nebuchadnezzar. He was furious and sent his guards to round them up. When the young men came to him, he gave them a chance to obey the order, or else ...! But Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego made it quite clear that they were not going to worship the statue or any of the Babylonian gods.

They pointed out that they didn't know whether God would rescue them or not, but that they were prepared to die rather than desert him.

Nebuchadnezzar was so angry, the Bible tells us, that 'his face was distorted' with rage. He ordered that the furnace be heated seven times hotter than normal, and that three young men be tied up fully dressed in their ceremonial uniforms and then be hurled into the fire. He chose his strongest guards to make sure the three did not escape. They didn't even try! The guards, however, died from heat as they threw the men into the enormous furnace.

Suddenly the king sat up! As he watched he saw that there were four men walking around untied and unhurt in the fire! And the fourth man shone like a god. Nebuchadnezzar went as near as he dared and called out to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to come out of the fire and to come to him. And they did. All the leaders gathered round and saw that the men weren't burnt at all. In fact their clothes didn't even smell of smoke.

Nebuchadnezzar realised that their God had sent an angel to protect his followers. He recognised that no other god could have done that and immediately made a law making it illegal to say anything against God. Sadly, although Nebuchadnezzar was saying the right things about God, he still didn't believe. He went on thinking that he was the greatest.

Then one night he had another terrifying dream about a tree which was growing well but which was chopped down. (Dan 4) That doesn't sound too bad – but there was something in the dream that suggested Nebuchadnezzar would no longer be a great king, but would become like an animal. He called Daniel and asked him to explain the dream.

Daniel was terrified by God's message. The first part wasn't so bad: God showed Daniel that the tree represented Nebuchadnezzar – higher and more important than any other king. But then, Daniel explained, everything was about to change. Nebuchadnezzar would be driven away from his home and friends and kingdom and would become like a wild animal, eating grass for 7 years. The only good news was that then things would return to normal. Daniel begged the king to hear God's warning so that he would escape this punishment for his pride.

But nothing changed. One day as Nebuchadnezzar was walking on the flat roof of his palace feeling very proud and satisfied with himself, he heard a voice driving him away and he became completely wild. He ate grass and didn't bother about his appearances so his hair grew as long as an eagle's feathers and his nails became like bird's claws. His son had to rule for him while Nebuchadnezzar lived outside in the gardens.

However, by the time Nebuchadnezzar returned to normality, he had realised that God was greater than he was and the last words we hear from him in the Bible are words of praise for God (Dan 4: 37).

These stories show us the danger of being proud. The only way to avoid pride is to recognise, as Daniel did, that everything you can do is because God has given you that special gift. When we see things from God's point of view, we will quickly realise we are his people, gifted to do his will.

