

Contrast in Faith?

Daniel vs Nebuchadnezzar, In the face of some clear “God Intervention” we see remarkably different responses.

Here is the run down, taken from Daniel chapters 1-4.

Around the 5-600's BC, Nebuchadnezzar's armies take out Judah and conquer Jerusalem. One of the outcomes of this is a number of Jewish nobles lose their sons (and or daughters) as political captives to the Babylonians, which are taken back to Babylon. Also, some Temple items go with them. This is all very normal behaviour in those times, often hostages were taken to ensure the subdued nation behaves, and there is another very important reason. What we know of the Babylonians and their successor state, the Persians, is that they run a very fragmented sort of government. Since their empires were very large and spanned huge geographic, cultural and religious areas, they were divided up into many small local governance areas to better handle local affairs. This at times led to more peace, and at others more rebellion as areas were less tied to the capital and still retained some of their local identity. By pulling hostages to the capital it gave rulers leverage over the local governors and provided local knowledge to the central authorities, giving them the necessary insights into their subjects. In the book of Daniel we see that they go through a training period after which they should be useful in the King's court (government) .

Some of these next points I will be skimming over as you are all good Christians with great recollection of everything you have read in the Bible. I will be highlighting astounding and amazing things along the way.

Of these captives we learn the names of 4. Commonly known as Shadrach, Meshach, Abed-Nego and Daniel. They refuse the king's food while they are in “training”, which historical religious context tells us this may be due to the fact that often the food was offered to idols before being eaten. This puts them in a tricky spot but God works in the background and their overseer is chill with it. They advocate for veganism which seems to make them healthier. **That is astounding and amazing thing #1, veganism really God!** Bad news for folks like me. God blesses them and they seem to finish their training and are judged to be extremely proficient blokes.

Old king Neb has a dream which sends him into a tizzy and he does the weird thing of demanding that his quote unquote “Wise men” not only interpret it for him but also tell him what exactly it was that he dreamed. If none of them can, they all get the axe. At the news of this death sentence Shadrach, Meshach, Abed-Nego and Daniel all get together and ask for God's mercies, so that they do not perish. God comes to the rescue, giving Daniel the answers which he then relays to Neb (Big image made of different metals and referring to different nations). **This is an absolutely astounding and out of this world thing #2. Being able to recall someone else's dream.** Daniel makes it very clear that it is God and not him who has the power to do this. Neb is blown away and recognises that Daniel's God is the “God of Gods” and is so happy that he promotes Daniel and the others to higher positions.

Now at this point you may think that Neb would have been won over to worshipping and following our God. We would say he had some direct intervention from God, something that many of us could only hope for. We also know it had a lasting impact because Neb then goes and builds a statue of that very image. But instead we don't see a lasting positive change in his behaviour.

This brings us to the story of the fiery furnace. Neb calls together all the big wigs of his empire (for some reason though there is no mention of Daniel), together to one place for the dedication of his image. It is a big statue of gold which we assume is of the image that he recently dreamed about. The order goes out that when

the music starts, everyone is to bow down and worship the image under penalty of death. Death by being thrown in a burning fiery furnace.

The music starts up and everyone bows down but Shadrach Meshach and Abed-Nego. Long story short, the 3 guys say that God who they serve will deliver them. But if he doesn't, they still won't worship any God but him. Nebuchadnezzar is angry and orders the furnace to be stoked super-hot and the 3 guys to be tied up and thrown into it. The furnace is so hot that the soldiers who throw the Israelites in, are killed by the intense heat. Instead of 3 little cocoons of burnt men, **the 3rd astounding and amazing thing happens, Shadrach Meshach and Abed-Nego start walking around in the flames.** The three guys are alive in the midst of flames, proven to kill people, and to top that off there is a 4th man who just appears in there too who Nebuchadnezzar recognises as the Son of God. The end result is that Neb calls the 3 men out of the flames and seeing that not even one of the hairs on their heads is injured is astounded. He proclaims that their God is the true god and that anyone who slanders God is to be cut into pieces, because there is no other God like this. Shadrach Meshach and Abed-Nego get promoted in the kingdom.

Do we see a change in Nebuchadnezzar? Without a doubt Neb has had seen and experienced at least 2 totally undeniable situations where God has intervened quite dramatically in his life. Do we see a lifelong commitment from him to follow God? Well to answer that we must keep going.

Some time later Nebuchadnezzar has another dream, this is one has a big powerful tree that reached to the heavens. It was a beautiful tree with leaves and fruit that provided food and shelter to the beasts and birds. Then a call goes out to scatter the leaves and fruit, chop down the tree and bind the stump in bands of iron. The tree is a symbol of a person who is to graze in the field with the beasts for 7 "times", so that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men. Once again Daniel is called in to interpret the dream and explain it to Neb. Daniel explains that the tree is symbolic of Neb and his power. That what happens to the tree is a foretelling of the downfall that Nebuchadnezzar is headed for. He also says to Nebuchadnezzar to break away from his sins and starts showing mercy to the poor, in the hope of avoiding the calamity.

1 year later Nebuchadnezzar is walking around his city and starts boasting about all the great things he has accomplished and how amazing and powerful he is. BOOM there is a voice from heaven and within the hour Neb has lost his mind and is in the fields with the animals eating grass and growing hair. **To me this is the 4th time there is something totally unexplainable, a voice from the sky.**

After some time (derived to be 7 years) Nebuchadnezzar looks to the heavens, his mind is restored and he starts to bless and praise the Most High God. His kingdom and power is restored to him and from that point on he starts to praise, extol and honor God.

Nebuchadnezzar's story ends here, but there is so much that I think we can learn from this.

We see in the first 4 chapters of Daniel, which I have briefly covered, time and time again that both Daniel and/or Neb are involved personally in what I would call a miraculous encounter with God. Neb has a constant reminder in the form of Daniel and his associates, people he promoted to very visible and prominent positions in his kingdom, of what exactly God did. But we see time and time again that he has no Faith in God. His actions are those of a proud arrogant man. There is not change in his attitude or behaviour, not until the very end do, we see, that he has a true transformation of the heart.

Contrast this to Daniel. He is involved in nearly all the same situations to Nebuchadnezzar. Every time he has the chance, he points those around him to God. He never seeks to take any of the credit for these miraculous events and would seem to stay faithful the whole time.

When Elizabeth and I were reading through these passages over the last month or so I have begun to contemplate a couple of questions.

One - What is this story really about?

Two - Why were there such different responses by Daniel and Neb so similar situations?

And Three - How is my faith mirrored in their stories?

In answer to the first one "What is this story really about?", I think that you have 2 options. Is it a story of God's miraculous power? Or one of God's faithfulness to Daniel in a tough situation. I don't really know, but I can see aspects of both.

If it is about God's miraculous power to predict, enlighten and even alter the elements that make up our physical and mental world then we have a perfect example of them here. He has done so at the top of the social and political setting, where his acts will be recorded and influence people with real power to make a difference. It is a fantastic setting for God to make himself known, impact the most powerful king in the world.

Maybe this is a story of God's faithfulness to Daniel and his friends in the face of some tough situations. He rewards their refusal to compromise on their faith in the face of certain death. He meets them in their time of need as they call out to him. At every opportunity they are publicly announcing his sovereignty and lordship on earth. For the situations that they were in, that takes real courage. And maybe we see God responding to that faith by preserving and even advancing their life and position in the world through letting them be tools in miraculous events.

There is the second question of "Why were there such different responses by Daniel and Neb to such similar situations." The answers I present here came about due to a chat with a work colleague of mine. On Thursday we were talking about our Mother's Day plans and he mentioned a brunch. I jokingly said that it meant he would be unable to listen to my sermon this week then. To his credit rather than pass over a potentially awkward conversation he asked what I planned to talk about, and I mentioned what I have shared so far. Without missing a beat, he dived right in and we shared perspectives. So, shaped by that conversation, I have come to think that the different responses by Daniel and Neb make sense.

Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar were at extremes of the power spectrum. Daniel was a captive from a small nation, while Neb was the most powerful man on the planet. When presented with absolute divinity Daniel, a man in an already humble position recognises the power and responds with a subservient and unassuming approach, paying homage God and reinforcing his commitments and growing his faith. In contrast, Nebuchadnezzar, in the short term, recognises the power, but long term has no change in his behaviour. This could be due to in the Ancient world, his position was near divine, and the acts done by God were construed to reinforce his position at the highest point of power. That a life of near worship by people created a barrier to him believing that anything could hold more sovereignty than him. It wasn't until God stripped power and prestige from him for 7 "Years", that Neb then comes to a place of seeing his true humanity. Once he has accepted that, he looks to heaven, understands his place with God and is then able to move forwards with the correct mind frame. Maybe this explains the vastly different responses by Daniel and Neb for such a long time.

The final point to discuss is “How is my faith mirrored in their stories?” Well to be honest, it does not feel like I have had such “Cool” God moments as Daniel. It really feels hard to relate to the guy. But I have had opportunities given, some I’ve taken and others I have shied away from, to make a stand, not in the face of death, rather humiliation or awkwardness, and rely on God to come through. Proposing to Elizabeth springs to mind!

No no, more like conversations with some work colleges around sexual purity in relationships, or when I worked with “At Risk” kids and trying to coach them in their actions with others. Standing strong in the face of temptation or choosing to value your enemies is hard. They all require some level of help beyond us to come out on top. All too often, this comes in remembering the example of Jesus. Jesus is there for me in my toughest moments, and he always comes through. And by following the lead of Daniel, I need to give God the credit in these moments. When these moments come along, I should not be afraid, no matter the outcome, I am an ambassador for Christ.

When I compare myself to Nebuchadnezzar, I do not have the excuse of near absolute power, for my lack of faith and obedience. And I certainly am motivated not to get to the point of disregarding God so that he makes me like “a beast of the field” before I am humble. In this story though I am heartened that God never gave up on Neb. There is always an opportunity to respond to God’s invitation to him.

I will leave you with Paul’s words from Galatians 2, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

Go, be encouraged by Daniel’s example, take lessons from Nebuchadnezzar’s responses, and surround yourself with friends strong in faith like Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego. Reflect on the passages, challenge my statements and conclusions, and test them for truth, be assured that God is so powerful and present then, now and for all time.

Heoi anō tāku mō nāianeī

Michael