



STEPS ON A JOURNEY

Complete this sentence: "The #1 need of every human being is ..."

If you're thinking Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs' you might say food; water; sleep. In second-place, health; property; income. In third, family; friends; intimacy; etc. Now don't get me wrong: these are all legit answers. But human beings are more than just material beings. And while material needs like food and water and sleep may be urgent, in the long run they're not the things we'll need the most.

What we'll need is something eternal. But what would it take for the average westerner to realise that?

Daniel 4

This chapter is a record of Nebuchadnezzar's spiritual journey, dictated by the king himself. And like other parts of Daniel, there is both a sequence, and a symmetry:

Prayer
Nightmare
Message
Nosedive
Prayer

Each section has a part to play in a person's journey to faith, but as we'll see, the crucial point lies at the centre: the message.

1) The humblest of prayers. Nebuchadnezzar II, the Babylonian King of Kings, worshipper of the gods of Babylon and destroyer of the temple of the God of Israel, begins this chapter by? Praising the God of Israel! Praising *Eloha Illa'ah*, God Most High. The unknown God of a subject people. And Someone greater than himself.

What kind of king is Nebuchadnezzar? Self-satisfied, self-indulgent, self-important, self-worshipping. So much so, that almost every brick in the walls of Babylon (15 million of them) was baked with his name on it! So, this is a reminder that even the hardest, cruellest, most narcissistic of people can experience a turn-around.

What would it take for that to happen? To King Neb? Maybe to someone you know? Let's keep going ...

2) The scariest of nightmares. The king says, "I was in my palace, contented and prosperous." Isn't that an apt description of the 21st century west? Most of what we put out on social media is saying this, right? "Look at all I have, at all I've done, at all I've achieved – that you haven't." Looks, grades, wealth, holidays, etc.

But life comes with its nightmares, too. Nebuchadnezzar has a dream in which a mighty tree is literally 'cut down to size': reduced to a stump and bound with iron and bronze. And a messenger or 'watchman' says, "So that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men ..."

The point? God will, in His grace, give people fears, worries, concerns, nightmares. Not out of hate, but out of love. To open their eyes. It might not always be obvious. It might be that you need to get to know someone well before you realise it. Before they trust you with it. But we need to be ready for it, when that happens.

3) The kindest of messages. The king summons his wise men, tells them the dream, but only one man – Belteshazzar / Daniel – can interpret it. And what does he say? In a nutshell:

"You've got to turn to God, O King."

Everyone needs to hear that. But the message is not just the words we speak, it's how we speak them. Some see themselves as an Elijah the Prophet type: shoot first, ask questions later. But for most of us, we are called to be a prophetic voice in a *different* way. Daniel's way.

Now what's interesting is that Daniel (whose name means 'God is my judge'), would have had every reason to throw the book at Nebuchadnezzar: he was an evil man, an enemy of God and of God's people. But instead, Daniel recognises that this isn't a war between Israel and Babylon, but between God's Kingdom, and Satan's. And so, he speaks to Nebuchadnezzar with 1) grace, and 2) truth (like someone else we could mention ...).

In the same way, we need to see ourselves at war, not with people, but with Satan. The people around us need salvation, not condemnation. Don't forget.

4) The biggest of nosedives. 12 months on, there's Nebuchadnezzar, admiring his city, and thinking, "What a god you are, Nebuchadnezzar," when the true God strikes him with what psychologists call lycanthropy (the origin of the werewolf legend, by the way). In this case, it's boanthropy, which means he goes from thinking he's a god to thinking he's a cow. For 7 times / 7 years!

But this isn't just a message to the king – it's a message to his people. The Babylonian storm god, Adad, was represented by the aurochs, a huge prehistoric bull (you can see it decorating replicas of the Ishtar Gate, the 8th gate into the inner city, built by Nebuchadnezzar). It's as if God is saying, "You want to worship a cow? Fine. But just so you understand what that means ..."

Some people have to break before they realise the truth. And sometimes it can be the things they wish for, work for and live for that break them. This is no bad thing.

5) The humblest of prayers (reprise). At the end of 7 years, Nebuchadnezzar finds a way out of his madness – and he does it by praying. And the prayer is a mirror of the opening verses. But notice something important:

Who is the focus here? Not Nebuchadnezzar, but *Elaha Illa'ah*, God Most High. As Rick Warren says, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it's thinking of yourself less." You were not created to be the best or have the best, but to *belong* to the best (let's make sure our children know - if enough of us tell them, it might just sink in!).

But it is because of Daniel's witness that there is a sliver of light inside of Nebuchadnezzar's darkness. Enough to pull him out of his madness, restore him to health, and enable him to craft a beautiful prayer, like this.

Grace And Truth

This is the last we hear of Nebuchadnezzar. Did he stay in this better place? Let's hope so. But the lesson here is that the journey from darkness to light is just that: a journey. And if we are to help people find their way, we must be ready to speak God's Word – and embody it.

We must be like Daniel. Better, we must be like Jesus: full of truth, yes. But also full of grace (John 1:14-15).

So, let's bring this home. Who do you know who needs to pray like Nebuchadnezzar? Whose life is riddled with fear? Whose attitude might God need to break? Who can you share Jesus with?

Let's pray for them now.