



Irresistible Grace

Nebuchadnezzar proves that no one is beyond God's reach

However we explain the declining influence of Christianity in Australia at present — whether we attribute it to the failure of church leaders to fashion a meaningful and compelling message in the modern world, or the overpowering influence of secularism, or the cumulative effect of scandal and sex abuse — the result has been that many Christians have lost confidence in the power of Christianity to change people's lives.

Often this loss of confidence is reinforced by preachers who paint such a hopeless picture of secular society that believers are led to think that evangelism is a doomed exercise because the secular mind is so resistant to spiritual truth.

If you have ever been on the receiving end of a hostile response to your Christian witness, you will know how such an encounter can dent your confidence that God can transform a person's heart. I still have vivid memories of a bruising pastoral experience shortly after I became a minister. While I was visiting a man in his home I endured an agonising hour of tirade on everything that was wrong with Christianity and the Presbyterian Church. I left his house feeling thoroughly dejected.

Sadly, in my immaturity I gave up on him at that point. I was wrong. Although I saw no significant change in his attitudes throughout the following five years, some time shortly after that God renewed his heart and left him a thoroughly changed man. He joined the church and subsequently served as an office-bearer. His conversion taught me an important lesson. As a Christian I should never doubt the miracle of grace. No one is beyond the reach of God.

I think this is one of the most important lessons of the book of Daniel. The fourth chapter of the book is a reminder of the irresistible nature of God's grace and his love for sinners. Daniel 4:1-33 is in the form of a tract written by King Nebuchadnezzar. It is substantially recorded in the first person. The tract describes how an ancient tyrant came to know the true God and it outlines the various spiritual processes through which he passed before he was truly converted. It is the record of how a tremendously proud and self-centred man was brought to repentance and a saving knowledge of the Lord.

What spiritual lessons does this tract teach us? I think Nebuchadnezzar's testimony serves to remind the modern church of God's long-suffering mercy and love for sinners. God's grace is not restricted to one nation. It reaches out to everyone. The Lord saves sinners in Nineveh, Babylon, and even hard-bitten secularists in modern Australia. There is no person, race or culture that is beyond God's reach. Because this is so, God's love reaches even the worst of sinners for "*where sin abounds, grace abounds even more*" (Romans 5:20).

The amazing thing about Daniel 4 is that it describes how the grace of God super-abounds to the most wicked of men. God shines a light in Nebuchadnezzar's soul so that his heart is transformed. He becomes a new man who delights to tell others what God has accomplished in his life (Daniel 4:2-3). This glorying in the Lord is a characteristic of everyone whose heart has been touched by God's grace (Rom. 11:33).

The extraordinary thing that occurred to me as I read this tract is that God extends His grace to a vile man such as Nebuchadnezzar. There seems little doubt that he is one of the most violent and cruel men known to the human race. He lacked a due sense of self-restraint. When he was angry, his disdain for others knew no limits. His cruelty was legendary.

He was prepared to slaughter his entire royal court because they could not fulfill one of his whimsical demands (Dan. 2:5). Again, he gave not a moment's hesitation to cremating three loyal Jewish subjects in an oven not too different from a blast furnace (Dan. 3:19). He did the same to some other Jews, Zedekiah and Ahab (Jer. 29:22). He added to his acts of notoriety by blinding King Zedekiah after he had first slain his two sons before his very eyes.

Nebuchadnezzar was no less heartless than many modern dictators. He was engaged in the same sort of ethnic cleansing and state-sanctioned violence as Robert Mugabe, Slobadan Milosevic and Saddam Hussein. And yet to this man, the worst of sinners, God extended mercy. That is why this tract is a remarkable example of how God's sovereign grace reaches down and touches the hearts of people who least deserve it.

Mind you, the process by which God changed Nebuchadnezzar's heart was rather painful. Elihu, in the book of Job, reminds us that God often confronts us in traumatic ways when He wants to reform us.

"For God does speak — now one way, now another — though man may not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night he may speak in their ears and terrify them with warnings to turn a man from wrongdoing and to keep him from pride, to preserve his soul from the pit."

Job 33:14-18

The book of Daniel records that God first humbled Nebuchadnezzar with a number of terrifying dreams and then afflicted him with a prolonged period of mental suffering (Dan. 4:31-33). When people won't heed dreams, visions and direct rebuke from God, He often brings something worse into their lives. It may be a sickness or a mental condition. Whatever it is, God can reach down into His bag of afflictions and produce something that will completely unnerve us — a stock market crash, a health crisis, a hurricane, a tsunami, or a terrorist bombing. God knows what is necessary to bring us to our knees.

In Nebuchadnezzar's case, he was deeply troubled by mental affliction. He tells us that his mind suddenly snapped and he lost his sanity (Dan. 4:34). In his case, he suffered from a disorder known as lycanthropy, in which he thought of himself as a beast. Incurable pride can do strange things to us. In Nebuchadnezzar's case he was emotionally and psychiatrically unhinged.

Fortunately, that is not the end of the story. When he had passed through a dark night of the soul for a little over seven years (Dan. 4:25), God was finally pleased to restore his sanity. He did it at the moment that Nebuchadnezzar turned from his self-obsession and focused his thoughts on God's sovereignty. From that moment he underwent an extraordinary recovery. It seems that his new spiritual perception of God's sovereignty and grace played a significant role in his return to health. Interestingly, he completely overcame his mental disturbance and loss of personal identity when he yielded himself to God and confessed His absolute sovereignty.

His tract makes it clear that he reached new heights of personal accomplishment and happiness when he abased himself and came to the point where he could glorify the one, true and eternal God. A profound change came over him which freed him to confess God's majesty with gladness. His sense of exultation — *"I blessed the Most High and praised and honoured Him who lives forever"* — is of a kind reminiscent of Jonathan Edwards, who wrote: *"But I have often times, since that first conviction, had quite another kind of sense of God's sovereignty, than I had then. I have often since, not only had a conviction, but a **delightful** conviction. The doctrine of God's sovereignty has very often appeared an exceeding pleasant, bright and sweet doctrine to me: and absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God."* Nebuchadnezzar concurred: *"I praise, exalt and honour the King of heaven ... For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation"* (Dan. 4:34, 37)

Nebuchadnezzar's conversion is a significant account for Christians who are working on the frontline in evangelism. It serves to remind us that each person's conversion is a miracle and that only God can change the human heart.

Nebuchadnezzar represents humankind in a state of hopeless spiritual bondage. He stands for every self-made man who is secure in his own conceit. Yet while such a person may give the impression of being unreachable for Christ, in Daniel 4 we learn that God has His own terrible disciplines that bring recalcitrant sinners to heel. The Lord did something in this dictator's soul that opened his heart in joyful praise. This memorable account of Nebuchadnezzar's conversion should breathe new hope into every Christian that there is no one beyond the pale. Even a hardened atheist can be brought to the Lord. It gives fresh poignancy to Paul's words: *"Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, for you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain"* (1 Cor. 15:58).

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