

Daniel 3

Daniel 3—When Life Heats Up

In Daniel, chapter 2, King Nebuchadnezzar was very impressed by Daniel's revelation from the God of Israel that detailed and interpreted the king's dream. In the dream the king saw a large statue with a head of gold that represented King Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom of Babylon. The king rewarded Daniel with a promotion to be the ruler over the whole province of Babylon as chief prefect. In Daniel 2:49, we read that Daniel requested that his Jewish friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be appointed over the administration of the province as well. Thus through the blessing of God, these young Jewish captives from Jerusalem were suddenly in positions of authority and influence in the Kingdom of Babylon. Because of Nebuch's great proclamation honoring the God of Israel in Dan.2:47, we must ask what effect the dream of the statue with a head of gold had on Nebuchadnezzar

In Daniel 3, King Nebuch erected a huge statue plated in gold. The Greek Septuagint added that this occurred in 587 BC during the rebellion and siege of Jerusalem recorded in 2 Kings 25:8. The story suggests his purpose was to unify all the peoples that he had conquered, and consolidate his universal authority as ruler. It would be doubly important to the king that the Jews obey his order to worship the statue since Jerusalem was in rebellion. The appearance of the great image was very large, awesome, and expensive, so the king was very proud of it. It seems certain that his dream in chapter 2 inspired this image. At this point, the king is impressed by the God of Israel, but has no fear of Him. King Nebuch's attempt to coerce all the officials to worship the statue represents the conflict between worship of the one true God and the use of religion to boost the power of worldly rulers. Interestingly, archeologists have uncovered a large square foundation for a statue in a broad plain located just 6 miles southeast of Babylon.

The Insanity of Idolatry

In Daniel 3:1-6, King Nebuch called all the officials from all over the kingdom to come to Babylon and worship the image. We notice that this event is for the leaders of all the different areas that make up the kingdom. Nebuch had conquered many nations and added them to his empire, and now in a show of unity and submission to his authority he called for all the leaders of those nations to come and worship the idol. This was an important political event that would have terrible consequences for those leaders and their people if they disobeyed. Therefore when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego disobeyed, it would not only mean death for them, but threaten the very existence of all the Jewish people.

Just imagine the insanity of all these great men—distinguished leaders from many countries travelling long distances to Babylon in order to bow down to some man made statue. The prophet Isaiah, over a hundred years before had warned Israel about the insanity of idolatry. In Isaiah 44:14-17, the prophet gave a very humorous description of idolatry. Men plant trees and water them, and years later they grow up and men cut the trees down. Part of the wood is used to make a fire, and part is used to make a chair to sit in. Tools that are man made are then used to carve the remaining wood into an image that the man then falls down in front of and worships and prays to it. It sounds nuts, but that is what people have been doing in all of recorded history, and it seems that people would rather worship created things than the Creator.

I believe that the king's main purpose was to unify all the various parts of his kingdom by requiring that they submit to his authority and his religion. Nebuch was very much like the arrogant guy I once told, "You and I have religious differences, you think you are god and I don't." What was important to the Jewish leaders as captives in Babylon was their witness to the other Jews. Idolatry had gotten Israel in this mess in the first place. The captivity was a discipline from God against idolatry, and if these leaders (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) set the terrible example of going right back into idolatry, then Israel might be doomed.

The Rival's Accusation

No doubt the local Chaldeans of Babylon were furious when these young Jews came in and became their bosses. Therefore, they were observing the Jews closely to find fault in order to bring them down. In Daniel 3:8, the Chaldeans brought charges against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. In verse 13, King Nebuch was furious. You can imagine how their refusal to obey made him look in front of thousands of dignitaries. As an absolute ruler, he had to act swiftly and cruelly to maintain his authority over all these diverse peoples. From Shadrach's perspective, just imagine the peer pressure, and the temptation to

rationalize and just go along, but what kind of witness to the people of Israel would that be, and what would be God's response? Clearly Shadrach et al feared God more than Nebuch.

The Enhanced Warning

In v.13-15, Nebuch allowed Shadrach et al a mulligan or do-over. He asked them to verify, and gave them another opportunity to obey. If they would not fall down and worship the image they would be thrown into the furnace of fire. Then Nebuch asked them a rhetorical question that he did not expect an answer to, "what God is there who can deliver you out of my hands?" Daniel and his friends had served the king well, and Daniel had pleased the king greatly by interpreting his dream in ch.2; but now in his pride and rage, Nebuch prepares to throw them in the furnace. Mark Twain once asked his audience if they knew the difference between a man and a dog. He said, "If you pick up a starving dog, feed him and help him, he will not bite you. This is the difference between a man and a dog." Nebuch was like a rooster who thinks the sun rises to hear him crow.

God is Able

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king that he was wasting his time waiting for them to worship the image. "Our God Whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace, and He will deliver us one way or another; but even if He does not, let it be known to you O king that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the image that you set up." Notice that they distinguished between their occupation under Nebuch and the God whom they serve. God is all powerful and can deliver them, but if He chooses not to, it won't matter because their response is not conditioned on a miracle but on obeying the truth from God. The first commandment was "You shall have no other gods before Me.", and that was the basis of their decision. Their fixed knowledge was that they would not worship idols. Their unfixed knowledge was whether God would deliver them from the fire.

Tied Up and Thrown in the Fire

The text in Daniel 3:20-24 repeats four times that they were tied up securely. Their clothes were left on, and they were thrown in the fire. In v.25 we read that the only thing that was burned up was their ropes that bound them. In order to enhance the rage of the king, and give even more drama to their deliverance, the king ordered that the furnace be heated up seven times hotter. This may have not been possible, but it makes for a better story. The guys who were in real danger are the warriors who were commanded to throw the Jews in the fire. It was so hot that the soldiers who had to get close enough to throw them in the furnace actually perished from the heat. This draws a wonderful contrast to God's deliverance of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Think of it this way—the soldiers of Nebuch were killed on the outside, but the soldiers of God on the inside were unharmed. In verses 24-26, Nebuch had an amazing view of the 3 men walking around in the fire with a fourth guy who had a unique appearance "like a son of the gods". Many theologians believe this was the preincarnate Christ. When Nebuch called them to come out, he had a new name for them and new respect for the God of Israel. He said, "come out, you servants of the most high God". This was a remarkable admission by Nebuch that his gods were inferior to the God of Israel.

In v.28-30, Nebuchadnezzar was amazed and declared it an act of God who sent His angel and delivered His servants. As a result of this incredible miracle, the king sent out a decree to the kingdom to revere the God of Israel. The effect was that Judaism was declared a legal religion, the Jews were exempt from idolatry, and they were exalted in the kingdom of Gentiles.

Why did God Deliver Them? Would He Deliver You?

In the Bible's great passage on faith in Hebrews 11, we read about all the exploits of the heroes in the Bible that responded in faith, and God miraculously delivered them; but in Hebrews 11:35 there is a pivot to a much greater number of martyrs who responded in faith, but they were stoned, sawn in two, and put to death. The nature of a miracle is that it is a rare event done by God for a purpose. We don't obey God as Shadrach did because we expect a miracle. We should do it because it is right. God delivered Shadrach to comfort the afflicted Jews in captivity, to set up Nebuch's conversion in ch.4, to make Judaism legal, and to elevate them to make possible their eventual return to Jerusalem. As for us now it is a great example of what our response to our culture should be. I like what James Boice wrote, "Let us stand with unbowed heads and rigid backbones before the golden statues of our godless, materialistic culture. Let us declare that there is a God to be served and a race to be won. Let us be confident in the presence of God and be strong."

CHARLIE TAYLOR