

Series Daniel

Scripture Daniel 3

Last week we thought about the interpretation of the unique dream of Nebuchadnezzar. That the dream has importance for all students of the Bible because it provides the broad outline of God's future program for the Gentile nations and Israel in this present age, leading up to the kingdom which will be established at the end of the age by Messiah Jesus.

This present age is identified as "the times of the Gentiles" because the Gentile political powers hold dominion over the chosen people of God, the Israelites. This period of domination began when Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem and took thousands of Jews as captives into Babylonia. The "times of the Gentiles" will end when Jesus returns to earth, destroys all earthly human forms of political power, and establishes the Kingdom of God.

At the end of chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar seemed to be on the threshold of a personal commitment to Yahweh. He had fallen prostrate before Daniel and said, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries." Unfortunately, the enlightenment he received in chapter 2 did not carry over into following years, and therefore God had to teach him a another lesson about humility and the limitations of human authority.

Read Daniel 3:1-30

There is no specific information to help us know when the events of chapter 3 occurred, but the assumption is that it was a few years after the dream. Some commentators have surmised that the background for chapter 3 was a coup attempt against Nebuchadnezzar that occurred at the end of 595 BC. This coup attempt was recorded in the history books of Babylon (*the Babylonian Chronicles*). Other commentators have guessed that the events of chapter 3 occurred shortly after the final conquest of the territory near the Mediterranean Sea in 586 BC. This was when the temple and the city of Jerusalem were destroyed.

The image of gold was, most likely, Nebuchadnezzar's way to commemorate the successes of Babylon in expanding its empire, and, since it was assumed that Babylon's gods were responsible for the successes, the image was probably an acknowledgment of the superiority of the gods of Babylon as well as a tribute to the king. However, specific information about the design of the image and whom it represented has never been discovered. *[It is unlikely that it was of the king himself since the rulers in the Ancient Near East were not considered to be divine and statues were seldom erected in their honor.]*

The best clue we have as to what the image represented is in verses 14 and 15, where Nebuchadnezzar made reference to "his gods" and the "worship of the image of gold." Obviously, in his mind, the image had religious connotations. *[It is possible that the image represented Nebuchadnezzar's patron god "Nebo" (sometimes pronounced "Nabu").]*

The size of the image was impressive; ninety feet tall and very narrow. It is possible that the image was on a base pedestal which would have made it seem taller.

As a result of his military victories, Nebuchadnezzar became the ruler over a vast territory comprised of many diverse people groups. He undoubtedly sought to minimize all possible sources of friction and division between them. He wanted his subjects to be, as much as possible, a cohesive empire. The worship ceremony was his attempt to bring together the many separate groups and to forge a bond between the leaders of the diverse elements of his vast empire.

Verse 2 indicates that all the important leaders from every part of the kingdom were required to attend the dedication ceremony. The government of Babylon was a well-organized bureaucracy. Evidence of this is the eight different levels of public officials which are listed. I can picture the presence of several hundred officials dressed in their finest uniforms on the special day of the dedication.

The herald proclaimed, "As soon as you hear the sound of the musical instruments, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up." Everyone in the official leadership of the nation had to join in this act of worship on pain of death. The roaring furnace was nearby, a grim reminder of the consequences of non-compliance.

The furnace might have been like a brick kiln. During my travels I have seen many such baking kilns. Small ones look like gigantic beehives; large ones are in the shape of a Quonset hut. The techniques for baking bricks have existed for more than 3000 years.

The story implies that the furnace was located close to the image, which suggests that it could have been constructed purposely for the occasion and probably was visible to all those called to worship. The fact that Nebuchadnezzar was prepared to punish those who might be disobedient to his orders indicates that he was not going to tolerate any challenges to his authority. The furnace was there to provide incentive and gain compliance.

The enforced worship of the image was Nebuchadnezzar's way to compel his officials to display loyalty to him and his empire. Their failure to do so would represent to him the repudiation of the Babylonian gods and of him as the leader of the nation. These would be crimes tantamount to treason, and, therefore, crimes worthy of death. Religion, king, and nation. Nebuchadnezzar wanted Babylonian principles about these things to be firmly implanted into the mindset of the people of the empire.

When the orchestra gave the signal, all the assembled throng bowed down to worship the golden image. Everyone, that is, except three Jewish men. Their Babylonian names are given in verse 12, but we know them from chapters 1 and 2 as the three friends of Daniel. At the end of chapter 2, they had been appointed as administrators over the province of Babylon. At this point in time they were probably in their late twenties.

They refused to honor a false religious system. If they had bowed down with others, they would have given recognition to a pagan religion and they could not do that. They refused to betray their God even in the light of the certainty that they would die for their attitude.

Their non-compliance was exposed by some malicious men who went to the king to report on their behavior. The word in verse 8 describing these men is "astrologers," but it is best to think of them as Chaldean noblemen, that is, native Babylonians who had high standing in the community.

The text suggests that these Chaldeans had “chips on their shoulders” (*“an axe to grind”?*). Certain Jews had, they said, “paid no attention to the king,” had “not served the Babylonian gods,” and had “not worshiped the image of gold.” Notice how they personalized their statements to Nebuchadnezzar: the Jews, they said, had paid no attention “to you,” not served “your gods,” and not worshiped the image “you” set up.

The Chaldeans probably also had an attitude of jealousy toward the three Jewish men. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were foreign born, yet they were the administrators over the province of Babylon. Hence, they had higher positions than the native-born Chaldean noblemen, which made them the targets of envy.

The three Jewish men understood the will of God concerning their participation in the ritual. God had expressed His will through the law given to Moses. The first words of the Ten Commandments are: “You shall have no other gods before me,” and, after that, “You shall not bow down to an idol or worship them” (*Exodus 20:3-4*).

All of the ethnic groups in the Ancient Near East, other than the Israelites, were polytheistic. The people acknowledged many deities. These ethnic peoples may not have actually believed in the gods of Babylon, but they had no ethical problems of assimilating the Babylonian gods into their own religious systems. Bowing before Nebuchadnezzar’s image of gold was not a cause of conflict in their consciences. This, however, was not the case with the three followers of Yahweh. Their loyalty to Yahweh, the One they knew to be the true God of heaven, prohibited their participation in Nebuchadnezzar’s pagan ritual of worship.

Nebuchadnezzar became furiously angry at Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He was incredulous that they had defied him, especially in the face of the dreadful penalty for disobedience. According to the text, he gave them a second opportunity to do what he commanded. He said he would order the musicians to play again so the three men might prove their loyalty and obedience.

The most telling statement in the story is at the end of verse 15. In spite of his earlier encounter with the God of Daniel in the matter of the dream, in spite of his previous understanding that there was a sovereign God in heaven who was directing the course of human history, in spite of the fact that his successes in battles against the Assyrians and Egyptians had been directed by the God of heaven, and not due to his own abilities, Nebuchadnezzar displayed an arrogance that God could not ignore. Nebuchadnezzar needed to understand that he could not win in a contest of wills against Yahweh. The dramatic incident concerning the three men and the furnace was another lesson specifically directed at Nebuchadnezzar. Yahweh used this occasion to openly challenge the king's egotistical assumption that he was in charge of his own destiny and that the Babylonian gods were the most powerful on earth.

By standing up for their convictions, the three young men demonstrated a loyalty to Yahweh that was stronger than their concern for their lives. They were ready to be burned up rather than betray the God to whom they had dedicated their lives. They were willing to serve the king as far as their consciences permitted, but they drew a line when it came to disobedience to their God. No matter the result, deliverance or death, the three men were determined to not give in to the arrogant evil powers of the world.

In their explanation to the king, the young men did not voice any uncertainty as to God's ability to save them, but only as to His willingness. They were not sure that God would choose to deliver them, but they emphatically stated that their God could do so. They did not make their obedience contingent upon God's doing what they would have preferred. They were ready to obey God, whether He chose to deliver them from the furnace or not. The three men openly challenged the arrogance of Nebuchadnezzar. The king had questioned whether there was any god who could rescue them from his hand, and they had responded, "the God we serve is able to save us from the furnace," and not only that, He is able to "rescue us from your hand, O king."

Nebuchadnezzar had been publically defied. He was furious at the insolence of the three, who dared to defy him by placing their trust in their God. In order to not lose face, he had no recourse but to order the execution of the three. In his anger, he insisted that the temperature in the furnace be raised to maximum intensity. (*The phrase "seven times hotter" has the meaning of "much hotter" or "as hot as possible."*) The three were then firmly tied and thrown like logs into the furnace.

God had a specific purpose in letting matters go this far before effecting deliverance. God wanted His deliverance of the three men to have maximum impact on the attitudes of Nebuchadnezzar and the other Babylonian officials who were present. The miracle of being saved through and out of the fire would have that kind of impact.

Paradoxically, the soldiers who threw the three men into the fire fell in death outside the furnace, while the three friends who were thrown into the midst of the flames continued to live without harm.

Nebuchadnezzar was apparently positioned so he could see inside the furnace. What he saw was not what he anticipated. First came his realization that the three men were walking around in the furnace, and then, even more incredibly, realized that they were in the company of a fourth being. The dumbfounded king described the fourth one "like a son of the gods."

In response to the shouted command of the king, the three men climbed out and allowed themselves to be inspected by the king and his officials. To everyone's amazement, neither their bodies nor their hair nor their clothing showed any effects of the fire. There was not even the smell of fire. Yahweh had indeed been able to deliver them, just as they had affirmed. Yahweh had triumphed gloriously over the arrogant king who had questioned His (Yahweh's) sovereign authority. In this way, God, for the second time, conclusively demonstrated to Nebuchadnezzar His power and authority over both human monarchs and false gods.

FYI, there has been a debate among Bible commentators through the centuries about the identity of the fourth figure in the furnace. Many of them have claimed that it was Jesus, the second Person of the Trinity, in a preincarnate appearance. Other commentators think the fourth figure was an angel. There are other instances in the Old Testament in which a supernatural emissary tangibly demonstrated God's presence at a crucial moment in someone's experience. For examples, a heavenly being appeared as the Angel of Yahweh to Abraham (*in Genesis chapter 18*) and later to Joshua as the "captain of the host of Yahweh" (*in Joshua chapter 5*). There are a few other examples.

Was it Jesus or an angel in the furnace? Whatever the case may have been, Nebuchadnezzar recognized that the rescue of the three men was the work of the “Most High God.” This indicated a remarkable change from his conceited attitude a few moments earlier. The amazing demonstration of the power of Yahweh had convinced him of the existence of a God who was over all. The king had wanted the most influential men of his realm to witness how he dealt with recalcitrant citizens, but instead he and the officials received a lesson about the undeniable supremacy of the Judean God.

The king was humiliated in his own eyes and in the eyes of all the officials who were present. He had come up against the God he had challenged in verse 15 and been put in his place. Everyone had to accept the fact that the God of the three men had done something that was beyond the power of any Babylonian or other pagan god.

As a result of the awesome display of heavenly power, Nebuchadnezzar was moved from anger to surprise to praise toward Yahweh. He not only acknowledged the greatness of Yahweh, he confessed his admiration for the courage and fidelity of the three Jewish men.

Verse 29 is a typical Nebuchadnezzar kind of decree. He honored Yahweh by decreeing death and destruction for everyone who said anything against the God of Israel. Even when he did something right, he backed it up with a strange threat. The decree of Nebuchadnezzar did not require universal worship of Yahweh; it only prohibited anyone from showing disrespect to Yahweh. The king did not go so far as to command people to worship the Judean God, nor did he promise to do so himself. However, the decree made Judaism a recognized religion with the rights of toleration and respect.

This story raises an important question for us to consider: How strong a stand for Jesus Christ would we be willing to take if our faith was challenged? Believers in some areas of the world face the possibility of this question on a regular basis. I have read that there were more Christian martyrs in the 20th Century than in all the previous 19 centuries.

Two questions: If the religious police arrested you for being a believer, would there be enough evidence to convict you? And if you found yourself in a situation when you would be killed for affirming your faith in Jesus Christ, what would you do?