

SESSION FIVE

DANIEL 3:1-30

A Ragtime Band and A Fiery Furnace

INTRODUCTION

And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah; of David and Samuel and the prophets; who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire Hebrew 11:32-34

Daniel chapter three is one of the best loved stories from the Old Testament with its wonderful testimony to God's power to deliver from the fiery furnace for the sake of three Hebrews who refused to compromise the worship of God. Though it is a great "faith chapter" of the Bible, Daniel 3 also serves to further God's divine dealing with Nebuchadnezzar, humbling him until he finally comes to see himself before the one and only creator God who alone is to be worshipped. In this sense, Daniel 2—4 is a progressive account of Nebuchadnezzar's journey to faith in the God of heaven.

A. NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S DECREE DEMANDING WORSHIP BEFORE THE STATUE OF GOLD (3:1-7)

1. Connection with Chapter Two

a. The Intention of the Dream

In chapter two, the dream of the huge statue was intended to communicate the message that God would ultimately judge and destroy the idol-worshipping empires. The interpretation of the dream, however, had revealed Nebuchadnezzar in an exalted way. He was the head of gold, the king of kings, and the empire that followed would be inferior to his.

b. Nebuchadnezzar's Distortion of the Message

Nebuchadnezzar seems to have let it all go to his head. Based on the dream of the statue, Nebuchadnezzar decides to make a statue for his subjects to worship. This statue, however, is all of gold, rather than composed of various metals. This seems to be an egotistical attempt to glorify himself, whereby he took his God-given authority and turned to exalting himself (insulting the God who gave him authority and who was to ultimately establish His own kingdom).

2. The Statue

Most likely, the statue was gold-plated (not solid gold; cf. Isa 40:19; Jer 10:4), although we are not told what it looked like. The height of this was 60 cubits and the width 6 cubits, dimensions based on the number 6 (the *NIV* translates as 90' by 9'). Baldwin

comments, "The Sumero-Akkadian number system was mainly sexagesimal, as opposed to the decimal system rigidly adhered to in Egypt."¹

While the height of this statue is quite imposing, it is not beyond reason. The Colossus at Rhodes (one of the seven wonders of the ancient world) was even higher. Rhodes was an island trade-center in the Aegean Sea. A bronze statue 32 meters high (105') of the sun god Helios was erected at the mouth of the Mandrákion harbor to commemorate the end of Demetrius' long siege (ca. 305 BC).

3. The Music

a. The Instruments: see Charles H. Dyer, "The Musical Instruments in Daniel 3," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147:588 (Oct-Dec 1990), 426-36.

b. The Contribution of Music to the Occasion

Music probably heightened and intensified the occasion. Like a mass football game attended by thousands, the dynamic of the crowd can be very compelling. Music served to sway everyone's emotions--deadening the senses.

4. Purpose of the Statue

The text does not tell us if the King intended this statue to serve as an idol to one of the Babylonian deities. Most commentators do not think so.² The word translated "image" in Dan 3:1 is the same word translated "statue" in Dan 2:31 (צלם). At the very least, the requirement to worship before the statue represented a loyalty check for the subjects of Nebuchadnezzar (which would be particularly appropriate if this were in the early part of his reign).

5. Location

Dura may be the name of an actual place or it may simply be a general word meaning something like "fortress."³

6. The Alternative: A Furnace of Blazing Fire (v 6)

Furnaces would have been quite familiar to the people, as these were used for the firing of bricks which were widely used in the absence of stone. Torture by placement in a burning furnace is referred to in Jeremiah 29:21-22.

7. The Challenge

The faith of the Hebrew youths had been challenged earlier in chapter one. Will they compromise or obey God? Nebuchadnezzar had not forbidden them to worship other gods, even Yahweh. But in addition to their own gods, the subjects had to worship before the statue. This would not have been so objectionable to most subjects who were polytheistic anyway. To the Hebrews, their worship was restricted to Yahweh alone!

¹Joyce Baldwin, *Daniel*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary, 101.

²Gleason Archer, however, contends that the statue would have had a connection to pagan deities: "It is far more likely that the statue represented Nebuchadnezzar's patron god, Nebo (or Nabu). Prostration before Nebo would amount to a pledge of allegiance to his viceroy, *Nabu-kudurri-uşur*, i.e., Nebuchadnezzar" ("Daniel," *EBC*, 7:51).

³For discussion, see International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, 1:996.

8. Application

Our mission in life is not simply to tell others that we worship Jesus; it is also to say that He alone should be worshipped. It is not o.k. to worship Jesus and also worship any other god or even ancestors.

Illus. - Bahai friend at Dallas bank (cf. John 14:6 & Acts 4:12)

B. THE SLANDER OF THE JEWS FOR DEFYING THE KING'S ORDERS (3:8-12)

1. Anti-semitism in Nebuchadnezzar's Court

In Dan 3:8, we are told that "certain Chaldeans"⁴ brought charges against the Jews. The phrase "brought charges against" (*NIV* "denounced") literally means "to eat the pieces of them." This idiomatic expression has the idea of *slandering*. Not only did they inform Nebuchadnezzar of these Jews who failed to participate, but they were maliciously motivated.

Application. Antisemitism is prejudice against Jewish people, and is an age-old problem. It was manifest in Daniel's day, it was carried to an extreme under Hitler's Nazi Germany, and sadly enough it lives on even today. To our shame, it has often in history characterized even the church (e.g., Martin Luther).

As Christians, we should be careful of how we act and what we say about Jewish people. We are called to love them (just as we are called to love all men), and we have the responsibility to take the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to them (Rom 1:16). Of course, this does not mean we should condone all that is done by modern-day Israel. They have a responsibility to act righteously, and we as Christians have a responsibility to support the cause of justice. They need to be held accountable for their actions, just like any other country of the world. But we are not to hate them, or act maliciously against them. We should realize that in the Tribulation, Satan and the Antichrist will have a particular hatred for them.

- a. During the Tribulation period, Israel will be the particular target of persecution by Satan and the Antichrist (Rev 12:1-2,13; Dan 7).
- b. God will eventually lift the "blindness" from Israel, and will deliver them at the 2nd Coming of Christ (Rom 11:25-33).

2. The Charges Against the Jews (3:12)

- a. They do not worship the gods of Nebuchadnezzar.

⁴The *NIV* translates this as "astrologers," although the word is literally "Chaldeans" (Aramaic ܫܚܘܘܢܝܢ). Archer ("Daniel," *EBC*, 7:53) argues against the view of "astrologer-priests" in favor of the idea that these were Chaldean nobles. The term "Chaldeans" can mean those who functioned as astrologers in the court (see Dan 2:2), and some commentators prefer that even here (so *NIV*).

- b. They do not worship the golden statue.

Notice the point the accusers try to make from this: "These men, O king, have disregarded you." The real issue was obedience to God, not a lack of respect for the king.

3. Motivation for the Charges

In Dan 2, these three Jewish fellows had been appointed to high positions in the administration. The prejudice against them was fired by envy.

- a. Envy only hurts the one who indulges in it.
- b. John Chrysostom (one of the great biblical expositors at Antioch in the early church): "As a moth gnaws a garment, so does envy consume a man."

C. INTERROGATION BEFORE AN ANGRY KING (3:13-18)

1. Observations

- a. Nebuchadnezzar's temper: "in rage and anger" (vs 13)
- b. The question in verse 15: "what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?" Notice the arrogance as Nebuchadnezzar even places himself above the Babylonian gods.

2. The Faith of the Three Jews (vv 17-18)

- a. God is free in His sovereignty to decide as He pleases, and He is under no obligation to prove that to anyone. Whether He chooses to demonstrate that or not, our role is to be obedient.

Acts 12: James was slain, whereas Peter was freed

- b. God does allow His children to die for their faith

ILLUSTRATION

"When the Communists invaded a Korean village, they found a young man with a vigorous Christian testimony who, regardless of their edicts to the contrary, continued to witness for Christ. Determining at last to make him a public example, the soldiers commanded the entire village to appear in the town square. A Communist soldier led the young Christian to the center of the crowd, put a pistol against his head, and shouted, 'Denounce Jesus Christ and embrace Communism, or die!' The young man hesitated, looked around the gathered crowd, and saw some he had brought to faith in Christ. Then quickly he raised his gaze to heaven and cried, 'I believe in Jesus Christ! I believe . . .' Crack! And he was dead, inspired by a courage and faith similar to that of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego." [Reported in Donald Campbell, *Daniel*, 43]

- c. Application

Our part is to obey God and leave the results to Him. Part of the Christian life is giving up our right to life (Acts 20:22-24).

D. THE KING IN WRATH HAS THE THREE THROWN INTO THE FURNACE (3:19-23)

1. The Testing of Their Faith

As the three marched toward the furnace, only God knew that they would not be burned alive. As with Abraham (Gen 22), God must give us situations where our faith will be tested.

2. Notice how Nebuchadnezzar's wrath is running out of control (v 19)

- a. ". . . he lost his temper! That is always the mark of a little man. His furnace was hot, but he himself got hotter! And when a man gets full of fury, he gets full of folly. There is no fool on earth like a man who has lost his temper." [Walvoord, 90]
- b. Principle: For a wise man, there is greater value in self-control than in conquest (Proverbs 16:32; cf. James 3:2).

E. GOD'S DIVINE PROTECTION IN THE FURNACE FOR DEFYING THE KING'S ORDER (3:24-27)

1. Nebuchadnezzar's Identification of the 4th Person

KJV/NKJV = "the fourth is like the Son of God"

NASB/NIV = "the fourth is like a son of the gods"

The latter translation is probably better:

- a. It is doubtful that Nebuchadnezzar would comprehend this apart from prophetic insight.
- b. The Aramaic form with the plural (בְּרִאֲשֵׁי הַיְיָ) should probably be translated as plural. In chapter 2, most of the references to God were in the singular (אֱלֹהִים).⁵
- c. Nebuchadnezzar refers to the figure as an "angel" (v 28).

2. The True Identity of the 4th Person

- a. Either Christ Himself or a mighty angel
- b. Theophanies in the Old Testament

⁵The Hebrew word *Elohim*, although in the plural, is most often used in reference to the one God. Regarding the parallel term in Aramaic, Dr. Walvoord notes, "The Aramaic form *elahin* is plural and whenever used in the Aramaic section of Daniel seems to be a plural in number, as the singular is used when the true God is meant" (*Daniel*, 91).

- 1) A theophany is a visible manifestation of God during the OT period.
- 2) Jesus Christ (who has always existed) would appear at times prior to His birth at Bethlehem as "the angel of the Lord" (cf. Joshua 5:13-15).⁶

"Whenever His children are in the fiery furnace of trials for His name's sake, He is there. Christ never sends forth His sheep unless He goes on before them."⁷

-Charles L. Feinberg

3. Nebuchadnezzar's Remark: "servants of the Most High God" (v 26)

"Nebuchadnezzar was not disavowing his own deities but merely recognizing on the basis of the tremendous miracle which had been performed that the God of Israel was higher" [Walvoord, 92]

F. NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S DECREE TO HONOR THE GOD OF HEAVEN (3:28-30)

1. The King is forced to reverse himself (comp. 3:15 & 3:29)

He is greatly impressed, but this does not mean that he has come to the point of faith in the God that has so remarkably demonstrated His power. The chapter begins with one decree and ends with another.

2. The Testimony of believers (v 28)

Their faith had not been overlooked. Nebuchadnezzar not only marvels at the power of God, but at the trust in Him by His devotees. Even if God had not delivered them, there still would have been glory to God because the unbelieving world would have been confronted by the love of the believers for their God.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE TRIBULATION

Just as Nebuchadnezzar erected a statue and demanded his subjects to worship before it, so the "beast" (the Antichrist) will do in a similar way during the Tribulation period prior to the 2nd Coming of Christ (see Rev 13:15). Like Shadrach and his friends, the believers of that time will stand true to God and refuse to participate in the worship of the image (Rev 14:9-11).

⁶Wick Broomall points out that the deity of this unique angel is proved by the facts that He (1) is identified as God (Gen 16:7,13); (2) is recognized as God (Judges 6:22-24); (3) is described in terms befitting the Deity alone (Joshua 5:15 comp. with Ex 3:2-6; (4) calls Himself God (Gen 31:11-13); and (5) speaks with divine authority (Judges 2:1-5) [*Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, 520].

⁷Charles L. Feinberg, *Daniel: The Man and His Visions*, 47.

A Lesson for Our Life

1. Who we worship is one of the fundamental questions of history. God alone is worthy of our worship, and He is very jealous of this matter (Ex 20:3-5a; 34:14). Satan's ultimate strategy is to not only turn us away from worshipping God, but to get our worship for himself (Mt 4:8-10; Rev 13:4; 14:7).
2. Is there anything in your culture or family situation where you might be compromising your worship of God? Will you pledge before God (with His help) to be true in this area of your life from now on, no matter what it will cost you?