

DANIEL - PART 3

Standing for God

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Preaching passage: Daniel 3
Subject: What God did for the three Hebrews who refused to bow down to the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up and were thrown into a fiery furnace
Complement: He delivered them.
Exegetical idea: God delivered the three Hebrews who refused to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's golden image and were thrown into the fiery furnace.
Homiletical idea: **God will deliver all those who stand for Him.**
Purpose: To remind my hearers that God will deliver all those who stand for Him and to encourage them to stand for God, no matter what the cost.

Introduction

The first verse of Daniel chapter 3 is rather shocking. Just a few verses earlier, at the end of Daniel chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar has declared to Daniel, "Surely, your God is the God of gods, and the Lord of kings." (Dan 2:47) He has been shown an image of gold, silver, bronze, iron, iron and clay. He has been told that the only kingdom that will last forever is the kingdom that God will set up.

And now, at the beginning of Daniel chapter 3, we read, "King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, ninety feet high and nine feet wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon." What is the matter with this man? Does he have Alzheimers? Is he losing his short term memory? Has he so quickly forgotten that his kingdom is only the **head** of gold? Not the whole image. Why is he acting this way?

Well, let's begin by stating that we are not given an exact date for the events of Daniel chapter 3. It's obviously later than the events recorded in Daniel 2, which are at

the beginning of Nebuchadnezzar's reign. But how much time has passed. A few months? A few years? A few decades? From my study, I have come to the conclusion that the events recorded in Daniel chapter 3 occurred approximately 8-10 years after the dream of Daniel chapter 2. Here's the evidence. In 1956, a cuneiform clay tablet at the British Museum was translated which yielded some important information about the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. (Chronicles of the Chaldean Kings (626-556 BC) in the British Museum, by Donald Wiseman). This clay tablet recorded a serious uprising in Nebuchadnezzar's army in December 594 BC. That was the 10th year of his reign. According to the record of this clay tablet, Nebuchadnezzar crushed the revolt and, I quote, "slew many of his own army. His own hand captured his enemy."

This rebellion in December 594 BC may have been the catalyst that caused Nebuchadnezzar's decision to order all of his officials to gather in Babylon, on the plain of Dura for a demonstration of loyalty.

Let's pick up the story in Daniel 3:1. "....." Some have wondered about the dimensions of this image. It's obviously very tall. 60 cubits. You may be interested to know that the numeral system in Babylon was based on the number 60. It's called the sexagesimal numeral system, and it originated in Sumeria in around 2000 BC. It's from this numeral system, based on the number 60, that we get 360 degrees in a circle, 60 minutes in an hour, 60 seconds in a minute.

So it makes sense that this golden image on the plane of Dura would be 60 cubits tall. Now a cubit is the distance from your elbow to your finger tips. So 60 cubits

is about 90 feet tall.

Ninety feet_ That's tall. But wait. The golden image is only 6 cubits or about 9 feet wide. 90 feet by 9 feet. That's a ratio of 10:1. That doesn't sound right. That's like making a model of a 6' tall man and making it only a little over 7 inches wide. 10:1? If that ratio for the human form was correct, I should only be 6.5 inches wide. I don't think so_ An average human form is more like a ratio of 3.5:1, not 10:1.

So is this golden image more like an obelisk as some scholars suggest? Perhaps. But there is another option. This golden image may actually have been mounted on a tall platform, with a total height of 90 feet. The actual image would have been 9 feet wide and, to be proportionate, perhaps 30-35 feet tall. That's still as tall as this sanctuary. And set on its base, it would stand 90 feet above the plain_ I'm told that there are date palms on the plains surrounding Babylon that can grow to almost 90 feet. So the head of this huge golden image is up among the tree tops_

Daniel records that this huge golden image was set up on the plain of Dura. The word Dura means "walled place" and suggests that this plain was in close proximity to the city of Babylon, where all could witness this demonstration of loyalty to king Nebuchadnezzar.

Let's read on in Daniel 3:2. "He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up." Notice. This is not primarily a religious ceremony. Religious leaders are not mentioned. Just government leaders.

This makes sense in the light of the recent rebellion in Nebuchadnezzar's army.

If representatives of Nebuchadnezzar's government came from near and far, that would mean that King Zedekiah of Judah was also present on the plain of Dura that day. And the prophet Jeremiah records in Jer 51:59 that King Zedekiah did indeed make a trip to Babylon in 594/593 BC. This trip would have been right after Nebuchadnezzar crushed the uprising in his army. Do you see the pieces of this story coming together?

Reading on, in Daniel 3:3-6. "So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it. Then the herald loudly proclaimed, "This is what you are commanded to do, O peoples, nations and men of every language: [5] As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. [6] Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace."

The command is clear. When the music plays, bow down in an act of obedience and loyalty to King Nebuchadnezzar. The penalty for disobedience? Death. In Daniel 3:7, we read, "Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up." Everyone bowed down_

Well, almost everyone. Read on, in Daniel 3:8-12. “At this time some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. [9] They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, _O king, live forever_ [10] You have issued a decree, O king, that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, [11] and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. [12] But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon--Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego--who pay no attention to you, O king. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up._

Only 3 individuals in that massive crowd of government officials refused to bow down. Only three. The astrologers referred to them by their Babylonian names-- Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These were none other than Daniel three friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. Only these three refused to bow down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Which means that King Zedekiah of Judah was bowing down. He should have been willing to stand for God. He knew the commandment about not bowing down to an idol. He knew that one should only the God of heaven was worthy of worship. But King Zedekiah bowed down.

And where was Daniel? Did he bow down too? I believe that we can say with certainly that Daniel did not bow down. But where was he? Was he off on royal business? I doubt it. Was he sick that day? Possibly. Did the King give Daniel an excused absence because he knew of Daniel’s loyalty, and also of Daniel’s conviction

to worship only the God of heaven? That's what I think is most likely. But that's a question we'll have to ask when we meet Daniel in the kingdom of heaven_

Everyone present on the plain of Dura that day bowed down to the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Including Zedekiah, king of Judah. Everyone, that is, except for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Now, about 8 years have passed since Nebuchadnezzar interviewed these three young Hebrews, along with their friend Daniel. And while Daniel has been serving in the court of the king, these three Hebrews have been serving the king in less direct ways. Perhaps King Nebuchadnezzar has forgotten the names of Daniel's three friends. Remember, at first, they were called Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

So when the king hears that three of his officials have refused to bow down to his image, he is furious. He is reminded of the uprising that he has just dealt with in his army. Such an act of rebellion must be dealt with, and swiftly. We can read of Nebuchadnezzar's response in Daniel 3:13-15. "Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, [14] and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up?

There's something strange here. Why did Nebuchadnezzar ask a question of these three rebels? Why didn't he execute them immediately? I'll tell you why. I think he recognized them. "Oh. These are Daniel's 3 friends. I remember them now." But now Nebuchadnezzar has a problem. He is surrounded by onlookers. All of the other

government officials are watching . Nebuchadnezzar must deal with the situation in a decisive way. And yet he doesn't want to kill Daniel's three friends. And so Nebuchadnezzar decides to give them a second chance. Now that would not have made any sense at all if he hadn't recognized them. Would it?

And so Daniel records these words of Nebuchadnezzar, no doubt reported to him by his three friends. Nebuchadnezzar said, "Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?_"

I want you to notice how Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego respond. They have given careful thought to what they will say. There is nothing impulsive about their response. I have no doubt that they have been in prayer, in preparation for this moment. They remembered how the God of heaven gave wisdom to Daniel when they were facing an earlier threat of death. And I'm certain that they have been praying again. Listen to their response to the angry monarch, recorded in Daniel 3:16-18. "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "_O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. [17] If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. [18] But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up._"

Now, Scripture records, Nebuchadnezzar's attitude toward Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego changed. "He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual." I don't even think that's possible_ A normal charcoal-fueled brick kiln, like those that were common in and around Babylon, would fire bricks at around 800-900° F. You can't increase the temperature to seven times hotter—5,000-6,000° F_ But Nebuchadnezzar isn't thinking rationally at this point. He's saying, "Turn the heat up to the maximum setting_" And it was hot_

Listen to what happened next—Daniel 3:20-23. Nebuchadnezzar "commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. [21] So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. [22] The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, [23] and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace."

The furnace was so hot that the soldiers burst into flames. Either that or they were killed by the superheated air. Oh, but I love to read what happened next. Nebuchadnezzar may have forgotten the words of Daniel eight or nine years earlier. But he is about to be reminded that there is a God in heaven. Isn't that right, brothers and sisters? There is a God in heaven. Satan may rage. He may roam around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to destroy. He may use heathen kings to try to accomplish his purposes. But there is a God in heaven_

And Scripture records in Daniel 3:24-16, “Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, ‘Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?’ They replied, ‘Certainly, O king.’ [25] He said, ‘Look, I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.’

[26] Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, ‘Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out. Come here.’

So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire. At this point, all of the government officials are gathering as close as they dare. They notice that the fire had not harmed the bodies of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. The hair of their heads was not singed. Their robes were not scorched. There was not even the smell of fire on them.

The crowd of government officials, and soldiers is amazed. And as they stand there, gazing at Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, Nebuchadnezzar exclaims, “Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants. They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. [29] Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way.”

Perhaps Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego remembered the words of Lord spoken through the psalmist Asaph, over 400 years earlier: “Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you and you will honor Me.” Their greatest joy that day was not the fact that Nebuchadnezzar promoted them to higher positions in the province of Babylon. Their greatest joy that day was not even that they were delivered out of the fiery furnace. Their greatest joy that day was that they were able to honor God by standing true to Him_

And they knew, deep in their hearts, that God always delivers those who stand true to Him. Sometimes He delivers us out of the fire. Sometimes He delivers us through the fire. Sometimes he delivers us after the fire. But either way, God always delivers those who stand true to Him.

Some years ago, I heard a true story that moved me to tears. It happened in what was then Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. One day, some freedom fighters came to a village and ordered all of the villagers out into the center of the village. They took one man, brother Abel, and ordered him to renounce his faith in Jesus. “Say, ‘Down with Jesus.’” Brother Abel said, “I cannot say down with Jesus_” And so they began to beat him in front of the crowd of onlookers.

It began to rain heavily, and so they took brother Abel and locked him in a building near the center of town. While brother Abel was there alone in that building, I’m sure that he was talking to his heavenly Father. He was alone, but he was not alone. Because the Lord declares, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” “Be strong

and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid of them, for the Lord your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you.” The Son of God was with brother Abel in the midst of his fiery furnace just as surely as He was with Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego in their fiery furnace. Brother Abel was not alone. And while brother Abel was there in that building, he wrote a note to his son.

When the rain stopped, the freedom fighters returned. They dragged brother Abel back into the center of the village. “Say, ‘Down with Jesus_’” they demanded_ “I cannot say, ‘Down with Jesus,’” was brother Abel’s reply. So they shot him three times in the head and he died in a pool of blood. He chose to stand for God, no matter what the cost. Even if it meant death, like it did for John the Baptist, and Stephen the deacon. Brother Abel had made up his mind, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that he would stand for God, no matter what the cost. And whether God delivered him from the freedom fighters, or not, he knew that God would ultimately deliver all those who stand true to Him.

The note that he had written to his son was later recovered. This is what brother Abel wrote. “My son, I have prayed for you all of my life.” And then brother Abel quoted this text: “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you a crown of life.”

I have never forgotten that story, even though I heard it many years ago. I pray that I never will forget that story. Or the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. I don’t want to be like King Zedekiah, bowing down to the pressure of the moment. Fitting in with the crowd. I want to stand for God. How about you? I want to settle that

now, so I don't have a great struggle when the crisis comes. I want to be able to say like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, "The decision has already been made. I'm going to stand true to God." And we can stand afraid, we can stand with joy in our hearts, because we know that God will deliver all those who stand for Him.

And on that great resurrection morning, Shadrach, and Meshach and Abednego, and brother Abel, and by God's grace you and you and me, we will all rejoice together and give thanks to the God of heaven that He delivers all those who stand true to Him.