

Faith Before the Fire Daniel 3

Introduction

The irony of the third chapter in Daniel is that even though Nebuchadnezzar had a prophetic dream that Daniel was clearly able to interpret without the king ever making know the dream (see Daniel 2), is that instead of worshiping the God who revealed the coming kingdoms, he built a statue to be worshiped instead. It was clear that the point of the prophetic dream that God gave to king Nebuchadnezzar was that there was only one God who, “**changes times and seasons...**” and who, “**removes kings and sets up kings...**” (Dan. 2:20). It is only the God of Daniel who sets up kings.

If you remember, the image in the king’s dream represented four kingdoms: The head of gold represented Nebuchadnezzar and his empire Babylon. The chest of silver represented the Mede and Persian kingdoms, the waist and thighs of bronze represented the Greek Empire, and the legs of iron represented the Empire of Rome. The first sentence we read in the very next chapter is this: “**King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold whose height was sixty cubits and its breadth six cubits.**” The gold image Nebuchadnezzar set up was 90 feet high and six feet wide. We are not told if the gold statue was one of the gods the king worshiped or a statute of himself to be worshiped. Blair Kamin, a leading architectural critic in Chicago, described the role of architecture in a way that helps us make sense of Nebuchadnezzar’s statue: “Every building is a new piece of evolving metropolis... an unflinching record of who we are and what we do. It connects us in time and space to those who went before us even as it represents our legacy... to those who come after.”¹

The point of the king’s statue is that although God said one thing, the king will do his thing. Nebuchadnezzar set up an image to make a statement on earth and to any god that might be paying attention: Only the king of Babylon sets up kingdoms and only Babylon will last forever.

The Spirit of Babylon Demands Our Allegiance (vv. 1-7)

The goal of the spirit of Babylon is the allegiance of all the nations. We see this as early as in Genesis 11 with the building of the tower of Babel, when the people assembled when they should have been filling the earth with Yahweh worshipers, and said: “**Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth**” (Gen. 11:4). We have seen this happen throughout history. It was attempted under Rome, it was attempted under Napoleon, it was attempted under Nazi Germany, under the Empire of Japan, under ISIS, and it will continue to be attempted by other nations and tyrants. It also happens subtly and individually by deceiving people into buying into the creed of the Spirit of Babylon. How does this happen?

¹ David Helm, *Daniel For You* (The Good Book Company; 2017), p. 45.

² *Ibid*, p. 48.

³ John Piper. *O, That You Knew the Terms of Peace* (April 12, 1981; preached at Bethlehem Baptist Church)

The Bible tells us how it happens: **“In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God”** (2 Cor. 4:4).

So Nebuchadnezzar built his 90 foot gold statue and gathered all of his leaders for the purpose of enforcing his policy that all the people, nations, and languages bow to it. The same thing that happened in Daniel 3 is happening today, just different dress. Anyone who does not buy into the agenda or believe the creeds of the Spirit of Babylon is immediately considered an outsider and met with hatred. This is why Jesus said to all who follow him instead of Babylon: **“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you”** (John 15:18–19).

The Spirit of Babylon Expects our Worship (vv. 8-12)

Bowing to the giant gold statue was not enough for Nebuchadnezzar, for what the king expected was for all people to worship it; this is why the word “worship” is repeated eleven times in relation to what the king expected and demanded all people to do before the image. The 90’ statue was a statement to the entire world that the only enduring kingdom would be Babylon; even though God informed the king that another kingdom was coming that was not earthly, but heavenly, and eternal. Nebuchadnezzar made his intentions very clear: there would be no kingdom besides Babylon. This is one of the reasons Babylon will always be associated with mankind’s intention to dethrone God.

All of Babylon was assembled before the giant statue for the purpose of worshipping it. It is possible that well over 200,000 people were gathered to worship the statute made of gold. The king had his professional herald proclaim to the thousands of people assembled:

“You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace.” (Daniel 3:4–6)

Listen, the difference between the God of Daniel and every idol in the world is simple: Idols always promise what they cannot give and rob you of the joy and life that the true God intends for you to know and enjoy. The spirit of Babylon motivates its devotees with fear, while the God of the Bible invites you into a relationship where life is found and experienced. Babylon makes promises that are dependent upon the worshiper’s ability to fulfill those promises. The God of the Bible assures you that the promises he offers are beyond your ability to make a reality but guarantees you of this: **“For all the promises of God find their Yes in him [Jesus]”** (2 Cor. 1:20).

Nebuchadnezzar assembled a preacher (herald), a topnotch worship team, and assembled the first mega-church of thousands to gather in his name as the savior of the world of that time. Guess what? This still happens today! In North Korea, Christianity is illegal and the worship of Kim Jong and his dead dad, Kim Sung, is forced upon the nation that includes books and songs written, read, and sung in their honor. In China today, the state religion is the state of China, and

if you do not make the Chinese Communist Party the center of why you do what you do, there are consequences.

We are not told where Daniel was at the time, but his absence indicates that the king probably sent him away because he knew that Daniel would not bow to his 90' golden statue. What Nebuchadnezzar did not know was that Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, could not bow for the same reasons Daniel could not bow. It is ironic that the Chaldeans (astrologers) were quick to point out that of all the people who bowed to the image, only three remained standing (see vv. 8-12).

The Spirit of Babylon Does Not Have the Allegiance of the People of God (vv. 13-18)

The peer pressure must have been nearly unbearable for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. It is estimated that at least 200,000 people lived in Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon. That means that at least 200,000 people were gathered to worship the king's gold statue. To get a sense for the kind of pressure Daniel's three friends felt, imagine being at a football game where everyone in attendance is there for only one team except you and your two friends. Imagine the pressure you would feel if everyone in the stadium wore the jersey of one team and you and your two friends were the only ones who wore the opposing team's jersey. Now imagine if your team won, and the only three people who stood to cheer the winning touchdown were you and your two friends. The only difference between my illustration and Daniel 3, is that the 199,997 people who bowed to Nebuchadnezzar's statue did so out of fear that if they did not bow, they would die.

The herald was clear about what would happen to all who did not bow: "...**whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace.**" The furnace is the same place the gold was melted down to create the statue, which is 1,948°F. For Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to stand while 199,997 of their peers bowed was not easy; they understood that to stand while everyone else bowed would be a death sentence. What would have been easy was for these three men to fake it by bowing without really meaning it. They could have possibly hid somewhere because it would have pretty hard to notice their presence in the midst of 200,000 or more people. However, they showed up and they stood up.

The spirit of Babylon is still trying to force people to bow its idols. A pastor of a church who was ordered by the Chinese government to put out patriotic slogans in his church refused to do so. He was recently fined over \$7,000 and sentenced to five and half years in prison for disobeying the order. Voice of the Martyrs posted the following prayer request:

Pastor Li's church, the Yuanyang County Central House Church, was established as a government-approved Three-Self church, but in 2013 gave up that status and merged with a local house church. Typically, 700-800 people attended services there weekly, and it was the largest house church in the area. When the government began oppressing house churches in 2018, they required the Yuanyang Country Central House Church to change a sign reading "Love God and People" to "Love Country." They also told the church they must remove the cross on their steeple. The church refused to comply, and on Feb. 20, 2019, Pastor Li was arrested along with three others for obstructing government administration. The others were released, but Pastor Li remained in detention. In January 2021, officials finally handed down the five-and-a-half year sentence to Pastor Li. After the pastor's arrest, the cross atop the church was forcibly removed, and the Christian sign

was forcibly replaced. Continue to pray for Christians in China who are following their consciences rather than the government.

We are told that when king Nebuchadnezzar learned that three of his government officials disobeyed his orders to worship his golden statue, he, in a furious rage, commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought before him. The king gave the three men one more chance to worship the gold statue and warned them: **“But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands”** (v. 15)?

Once again, the king put Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in an impossible position. Daniel’s friends had a god-sized problem that only God could fix. The three men could not bow because their allegiance was to the God over all creation. Their answer was simple: **“O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up”** (Daniel 3:16–18).

The king had drawn a line that Daniel’s friends could not cross. The ultimatum was clear: Worship Babylon or die. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego could not worship anything or person other than the one true God. So, the king, filled with fury, had the furnace heated up seven times hotter than it already was, and had the three men cast in to the furnace.

Nebuchadnezzar did not have a problem with Shadrach Meshach, and Abednego worshiping their God, his problem was that their primary allegiance was to only their God. Listen, the Spirit of Babylon is okay with you worshiping whatever god you chose just as long as your allegiance is primarily to the Spirit of Babylon. Listen to the warning we have been given in James 4:4, **“You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God”** (James 4:4, NIV).

The Spirit of Babylon Cannot Destroy the People of God (vv.19-30)

Nebuchadnezzar was so angry that he had the furnace heated up seven times hotter than it already was; multiply the melting point of gold by 7 and you have a furnace that was about 13,636°F. The furnace was so hot that those who led Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to the entrance of the furnace died because the fire was so intense. It would have worked just as well to keep the furnace at its current temperature. However, like all sin, there is no rationale behind it. Listen, the reason why Nebuchadnezzar’s actions seem irrational is because sin is irrational. This is the same irrationality that we are all guilty of every time we sin.

Think about your sin for a moment. Sin is the pursuit of a pleasure that you believe is greater than the joy God promises through faithfulness to him. We are all, on some level, more like Nebuchadnezzar than we are like Daniel and his three friends. David Helm, in his book, *Daniel For You* warns:

It is all too easy for us to stand outside this story in judgment over Nebuchadnezzar. And if we place ourselves in the story, we risk doing so in the wrong way. Our tendency is to

identify with the three friends of Daniel, those courageous young men who... resisted the call to worship anything other than God (v. 18). Yet, if we are honest, we all should primarily identify with the condition of the king, for as with him, the architecture of our own soul rises to the heavens in self-adulation. And if given our way, we too are tempted to call upon everyone within earshot to pay respects to our deeds.²

The king had Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego thrown into the burning fiery furnace. There was no guarantee that God would deliver these three men, and all three of Daniel's friends were okay with that; remember their answer to the king: **"...our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up"** (vv. 16-18).

What Nebuchadnezzar saw next blew his mind. He was astonished. The furnace had an opening at the top where Daniel's friends were thrown in, and at the base was an opening where the fire could be fed coal and oxygen could flow freely to keep it burning. Not only did God spare their lives on the way up to the entrance of the furnace, but Nebuchadnezzar also saw them unbound and walking around in the furnace. That is not all that the king saw! The king saw a fourth man, **"like a son of the gods"** (v. 25). Upon seeing that the men were alive, we are told that Nebuchadnezzar shouted: **"Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here!" Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire**" (Daniel 3:26).

Now, we are not told who the fourth person was in the furnace. All that we know is that he had the appearance of **"a son of the gods."** Some understand the fourth individual was an angel who delivered the men; many Christians believe the fourth man to be a preincarnate Jesus who made other appearances in the Old Testament were God's people are seen to worship him (see Gen. 16:14; 18:1; 32:30; Hosea 12:4; Judges 6; 13:22; etc.). I, along with the majority of Christian scholars believe that anytime God made a physical appearance on earth in the Old Testament, it is a preincarnate appearance of Jesus. I believe that the person who preserved the lives of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego was Jesus.

Conclusion

Regardless of who you believe the person was who was with Daniel's friends in the furnace, the point is clear: God is for his people, God is with his people, and God will go before his people. This is exactly what God did through the birth of his own Son through a Virgin: **"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us)**" (Matthew 1:23).

Today is Palm Sunday. This week is Holy Week, which is a time we remember the events leading up to the death of the Son of God who died for our sins by going before us to a cross we all deserved to save us from a fire infinitely hotter than the furnace Daniel's friends were thrown into. The fire that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown into was underserved, but the fire God created for Satan and his demons is one we all deserve because at the end of the day, we are all like Nebuchadnezzar. We are all guilty of sin and therefore, we are all guilty of idolatry.

² *Ibid*, p. 48.

All have sinned (Rom. 3:23). All are guilty of the worship of Babylon on some level according to the Bible:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (Ephesians 2:1–3)

But Jesus, entered Jerusalem one last time the week of his death to deliver us from a judgment we all deserved. What compelled him was both the love and justice of the God of Daniel: “**But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us...**” (Ephesians 2:4)

Conclusion

In 1982 John Piper preached on this passage; he used a very helpful illustration to help people understand what Jesus must have been feeling as He made His way to Jerusalem. I would like to use that same illustration.

A want you to imagine a scene with me. There is a young doctor who has a wife and three small children. He volunteers to take a dangerous six-month mission assignment to a place where there is an epidemic of a rare disease and a good deal of hostility from the local people toward outsiders. He takes the assignment because nobody else with his special training was willing to go.

The months pass slowly, and the kids really miss their daddy. The wife does a valiant job of holding things together and trying to be mom and dad. Then the day of his return approaches, and the whole family is full of excitement. Mom has butterflies in her tummy, and the kids race around the house shouting, "Daddy's coming home! Daddy's coming home!"

At three o'clock in the afternoon a taxi pulls into the driveway. The kids charge out the front door followed by mom with her heart beating so hard she can feel it. The back door of the cab opens, and out steps dad, a good bit thinner than before and bearded to conceal his hollow cheeks, but with a big smile across his weary face. He kneels down on the grass and is smothered with six clinging arms and legs. "Hooray for daddy! Daddy's home!" Each one gets his special hug and kiss while mom waits. Finally he pulls himself loose and they embrace: "Welcome home." "It's good to be back."

Now I want you to look into this young doctor's eyes, because there is a message there. And if you can see it and feel it, you will know something of what Jesus felt as he rode into Jerusalem to shouts of welcome and acclamation. What you can see in the doctor's eyes is something he knows that his family doesn't know: he caught the disease he went to heal and has one week to live.³

³ John Piper. *O, That You Knew the Terms of Peace* (April 12, 1981; preached at Bethlehem Baptist Church)