

THE FIERY FURNACE

Daniel 3

Please do not read these comments until you have read the Scriptures for this lesson. Begin by letting the Holy Spirit teach you directly from His Word.

Summary and Historical Background

In this chapter the issue of “conviction or conformity” arises. This time the godly leadership and influence of Daniel was absent, and the remaining three faithful Jews, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were forced to make a difficult decision on their own. The faithfulness of God’s children and the testimony of God’s character were at stake – each dependent on the other. Faithfulness or compromise, life or death were at stake when these three believers in God lived under the absolute authority of a proud monarch that demanded their worship.

GOD’S MIRACLE AT THE FIERY FURNACE

I. Dedication of the Golden Image – 3:1-7

A. Construction of the Image – 3:1

Nebuchadnezzar’s construction of this great golden image may have been stimulated by the dream of chapter two in which he was depicted as the “head of gold.” It was common in that day for a king to make an image of himself for his subjects to worship, but also for them to show their allegiance to his kingdom. This great image was plated in its entirety with gold, representing himself and the greatness of Babylon, his empire. The image was not made of solid gold, but had a gold covering.

3:1 – The Babylonians used a sexagesimal (base 6) rather than a decimal (base 10) numerical system. The sexagesimal numerical system found in Daniel’s writing is further proof that Daniel wrote this book and not some person in 165 B.C. The image was sixty cubits tall by six cubits wide. Using an eighteen-inch cubit, this statue would have been 90 feet high and 9 feet wide. From these dimensions it appears the image was placed on a tall base and the total height of the image and base was 90 feet high, otherwise the image would have greatly distorted. It was set up outside of the great city of Babylon, though still within that province, on a large plain which would accommodate a great mass of worshippers.

B. Call of the Officials – 3:2-3

3:2 – It is interesting that those called to worship this great image were exclusively the leaders of the nation (“princes, governors, captains,” etc.). This seems to indicate that, in some way, King Nebuchadnezzar was testing their loyalty. It may very well be that this list of government officials was largely comprised of the young captives who had graduated from the training program of chapter one. They had been appointed to various offices, had served a short amount of time in those offices and now were being called on show their loyalty and support of the Babylonian system by worshipping this representative image.

C. Command of the King – 3:4-6

3:4 – The king employed a herald to sound forth his command to the now assembled officials. Notice that the address was to “people, nations, and languages...” which confirms the concept that it was the various captives of conquered nations whose loyalty was being proven.

3:5 – The use of the various instruments in worship was not an uncommon practice. David, for instance, had developed a system of musical employment in Jewish worship (1 Chron. 16:4-6, 41-42) and had used instruments extensively in worshipping Jehovah (cf. 2 Sam. 6:5, 14-15). Though the exact nature of these instruments is largely uncertain, the idea is as follows:

“Cornet” – a horn of some type, possibly a ram’s horn

“Flute” – another wind instrument with a whistling sound

“Harp” – a stringed instrument as a harp or lyre

“Sackbut” – “trigon” a four-stringed three-sided instrument of higher pitches

“Psaltery” – possibly another triangular stringed instrument with a sounding board

“Dulcimer” – possibly a bagpipe type of wind instrument, though its actual nature is uncertain.

3:6 – The key response was to bow down and worship the image. It is not stated if the image depicted Nebuchadnezzar or one of his gods, but idea of worship was definitely connected with this ceremony. It must be remembered as in chapter one that the Babylonian culture included, not just a political system, but a religious system as well. This also seems to be the case where Babylon is referred to in Revelation 17, 18. Bowing to this image, then, involved religious conformity as well political allegiance (cf. 3:18, the last phrase). The punishment for non-compliance was to be cast into a burning fiery furnace. This furnace probably stood nearby as an ominous object lesson for those who might contemplate non-compliance.

This will be the practice of a future king of Babylon. The False Prophet will make an image of the Beast (Antichrist) and will cause all men to worship it. Those who do will receive his mark so they will be able to buy and sell. Those who refuse to worship his image will be killed (Rev 13:14-17).

D. Conformity of the Masses – 3:7

When the music began, all of that great mass of Babylonian officials bowed their knees and worshipped before the image. All of them but three, that is! The compliance of this great mass of people indicates that they were either (1) firm believers in Babylonian government and worship, or (2) cowardly opportunists who would rather surrender their beliefs for temporal advantage than practice their beliefs for eternal blessing. Responses to such situations separate the men from the boys. The difference is between conviction or convenience, consistency or compromise. Most will take the easier route.

II. Determination of the Hebrew Youths – 3:8-18

A. Accusation of the Chaldeans – 3:8-12

3:8 – These Chaldeans are the same as those mentioned in Daniel 2:2ff. It is interesting that it was due to Daniel and his three friends that these men still had their lives (cf. 2:24). Unfortunately, jealousy often outweighs gratitude. Many a pastor, for instance, has found that those he has helped the most later become his bitterest enemies. So it was with the Chaldeans, for now they sought to destroy the very ones who had spared them. The word translated “accused” literally means “to eat the pieces” and was a colloquial term denoting vicious slander.

3:12 – Having addressed the king (3:9) and restated the decree (3:10-11), the Chaldeans then name the offenders. Since Daniel was not mentioned, he probably was not in the city for this occasion. Perhaps he was travelling out of the country on a mission for the king. But if he were in the city, he would have been excused from this worship service since he had already proved that he was faithful to his God, yet loyal to the king.

Notice the three charges brought by the Chaldeans against the three Hebrew youths: (1) they had shown disrespect for the king; (2) they did not serve the king’s gods; and (3) they did not worship the golden

image. Legally, the charges involved (1) disrespect for a high official, (2) dissent from popular worship, and (3) disobedience regarding published law.

B. Anger of Nebuchadnezzar – 3:13-15

3:13 – Nebuchadnezzar was furious at the report of the Chaldeans. He immediately called the three Hebrew youths to appear before him.

3:14 – Nebuchadnezzar then questioned the young men concerning the charges. Notice that he only raises the last two charges (dissent and disobedience) and does not seem to question their respect for him as an official. Perhaps the king knew them well enough to understand that they might disagree with him without being disrespectful.

3:15 – The king reiterated the decree as though they may not have understood it, or possibly to give them another opportunity to comply. After reminding them that the fiery furnace awaited non-conformers, he threw in a barb challenging the ability of their God to deliver them from his decree. His anger caused him to speak foolishly about their God. God had already shown Nebuchadnezzar His powers were far beyond his gods, but the king was determined to make these young Jewish men rethink their convictions. The religious “convictions” of most men in that day (as with ours) fluctuated with the circumstances. That which was easiest and most convenient was the course of action that they followed. But that was not so with these young Jews. Circumstances, no matter how desperate, would never change their convictions!

C. Answer of the Jewish Men – 3:16-18

3:16 – The Jewish youths were not being disrespectful, as some translations may indicate. The word for “careful” is a technical term denoting “need.” The word for “answer” speaks legally of a “defense.” These young men did not need to defend themselves. They admitted they were guilty of the two charges.

3:17-18 – The Hebrew youths did not stop with their admission of guilt and the king’s ability to cast them into the furnace, but they had more to say. Nebuchadnezzar had challenged the ability of their God to deliver them out of his hand (3:15). These young men wanted Nebuchadnezzar to know that the real issue was not God’s ability to deliver them from the furnace. They knew God could do that. The real issue was His willingness to deliver them from the furnace. It may be His will that they lay down their lives as a public witness of their love for Him by obeying His command not to bow to any graven image (Ex. 20:5). They did not presume upon the will of God. They were there to obey God despite the consequences. They were not motivated by God’s ability to protect them or even by God’s willingness to protect them. They were motivated by a simple desire to obey God’s Word regardless of the outcome. The Hebrew men did not know God’s will regarding their deliverance, but they did know God’s will regarding idolatry and they were determined to obey God and not worship before this image.

True believers in God, who really trust Him, obey His Word. Why? Not because they believe the outcome will be pleasant, for it may not always be (cf. Mt 10:16-22), but simply because He commands them. The results of their obedience are left up to Him. Job said it this way: “Though He slay me, yet will I trust (obey) Him” (Job 13:15).

It should be noted that the Hebrew young men obeyed man’s law whenever possible (cf. Rom. 13:1ff; 1 Peter 2:13ff), but not when it violated God’s laws (cf. Acts 4:19-20; 5:29, 40-42). Then they were willing to suffer the consequences of their obedience to God. Also notice that these men were never formally indicted for disrespecting the king or the government. They were guilty only of exercising their God-given right to free worship and of disobeying a law, which violated their conscience. They submitted their lives to the will of God.

These men stood tall before the image and again before the king. Better to die doing right, than to live doing wrong. If we die doing right, we are rewarded; but if we live doing wrong, we will lose our reward. "If there is anything more rare than faith, it is submission" (Leon Wood, *A Commentary on Daniel*, p. 89).

III. Deliverance from the Fiery Furnace – 3:19-27

A. Passion of the King's Sentence – 3:19-23

3:19 – Nebuchadnezzar became so angry that his face was changed. His pride once again was displayed. To think that anyone could affirm a God strong enough to counter his decree was impossible! A God that could tell secrets was amazing (2:47), but a God that could deliver these men from his fire was unthinkable. The fact that these men were foolish enough to die believing in such an impossible God was even more insolent. In his great wrath, Nebuchadnezzar had his servants heat the furnace seven units of heat ("times") hotter than usual. The furnace was probably used for execution but built like a kiln.

3:20-21 – In a further attempt to display his strength, Nebuchadnezzar commanded his mightiest warriors to bind the dissidents and cast them into the fire fully clothed. Notice how the king's passionate sentence further enhanced the power of God. (1) The furnace was hotter than usual so no one could say they escaped because the fire was not hot enough. (2) The men were bound by the mightiest of Babylon's army so no one could say they escaped because of loose bonds. (3) They were left fully clothed so their clothes would quickly catch the fire and burn them alive.

3:22 – Due to the harshness ("haste" cf. 2:15) of the king's command to overheat the furnace, Nebuchadnezzar lost his best men. These mighty men only came close to the furnace, but they were consumed while the Hebrew men were cast into it and survived! It cost the king prestige and power in his army to lose these mighty men, but it cost these men their lives. God's judgment was not only against the king, but also against these men for being accomplices to Nebuchadnezzar's folly (cf. 2 Sam. 18:11-12).

B. Presence of the Jew's God – 3:24-25

3:24 – Nebuchadnezzar was doubly astonished when he saw, not only three Jews walk around in the furnace, but also a fourth personage in the flames.

3:25 – Four things astounded him. (1) They had cast three men bound into the furnace, but now they were free—only the cords that bound them were burned. (2) A fourth person was walking with them in the flames. (3) None of those in the furnace were injured. (4) The form of the fourth person was like "the Son of God." Nebuchadnezzar exclamation is best understood as "a son of the gods." His unregenerate mind conceived of this person as having the qualities of a deity. He was speaking a great deal more than he really knew or believed, for the presence in the fire was a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ (Christophany). Isaiah 43:2 was literally experienced by these three men before his pagan king: ". . . when you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon you."

C. Proof of the Lord's Power – 3:26-27

3:26-27 – Nebuchadnezzar called for the three Jewish believers to come out of the furnace. All of the officials assembled for the dedication of the great image had just witnessed the amazing power of God – the living God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Four observations can be made concerning the well-being of these Jewish men: (1) their flesh ("bodies") was not burned; (2) their hair was not singed; (3) their clothes were not affected by fire or soot; and (4) they did not have even the smell of smoke. This was a mighty miracle!

IV. Decree of the Great Nebuchadnezzar – 3:28-30

A. Perception of the King – 3:28

3:28 – Only after God had accomplished this great feat did King Nebuchadnezzar perceive the greatness of the God of these Hebrew men. Two observations are made of their God. (1) His concern, in that He sent His “angel” to accompany these servants through the fire. (2) His power, in that He delivered the ones who trusted in and obeyed Him. To Nebuchadnezzar, an “angel” was simply a representative of the gods. Again he spoke a truth greater than he realized for this was indeed the “angel of the Lord,” the pre-incarnate Christ.

The king also recognized two things about the Jewish youths. (1) They “changed the king’s words,” i.e. his skepticism of their God’s ability and his magnified view of himself (3:15) was proven by them to be wrong in that God did choose to deliver them and was able to marvelously do so. (2) They had “yielded” their bodies to God in spite of the king’s threats and their uncertainty of God’s willingness to deliver them. Nebuchadnezzar clearly discerned the strength of character in these young men. It was evidenced by their decision to obey God even at the possible cost of their lives.

B. Pronouncement of the Decree – 3:29

3:29 – Before all of the officials of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar made a decree. The essence of the decree was that no one could speak anything against the God of these Hebrew young men. He did not command the worship of God, but only forbid the criticism of Him. The punishment threatened was a favorite one of Nebuchadnezzar (cf. 2:5): the dismemberment of offenders and the destruction of their property. The basis for Nebuchadnezzar’s decree was occasioned by the power of God to deliver His servants. He was in not converting to the worship of the Jew’s God, but simply adding Him to the long list of respectable “gods.” Miracles do not compel faith (cf. Pharaoh), but they can prepare an unbeliever to have faith.

The three young men had purposed in their hearts along with Daniel not to sin against God (Dan 1:7-8). Those who purpose in their heart not to compromise are prepared to defeat temptation; but those who do not purpose to do this, will fall into sin when tempted. The laws of the land must not violate the laws of God or the law of our consciences.

C. Promotion of the Hebrews – 3:30

3:30 – Though a description of their new responsibilities was not given, it seems as though Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were promoted from being assistants (positions they had gained through Daniel’s requests – 2:19) and now were given high-level authority over the affairs of the province.