

Safe and Secure in the Fiery Furnace • Daniel 3

Terror came from the east. They resisted as best they could but it didn't make any difference. The invaders were well trained and well funded. Nebuchadnezzar, their leader, was an able military leader and the future king of the Babylonian empire.

When Nebuchadnezzar carried thousands of prisoners of war from Israel back to Babylon, he never could have dreamed that their great God would come with them. Perhaps he thought that these Jews were just like every other people in his world. How very surprised he would be.

Nebuchadnezzar led an empire that had been growing in strength and wealth for many years. At first they were no match for the older and stronger Egyptian Empire. In 601 B.C. they met in an historic battle and the Egyptians were victorious. Unfortunately, the Jewish King Jehoiakim switched his alliance from Babylon to Egypt in spite of contrary advice from the prophet Jeremiah. It was a terrible political mistake. The Babylonians closed in on Israel and carried away their citizens and their wealth, eventually returning to destroy the city of Jerusalem.

Nebuchadnezzar ordered that the best and the brightest captives from conquered nations be trained and educated in Babylon at royal expense. It was a strategy to socialize and develop young leaders so that they would become loyal to him and then help him in the administration of his empire. One of the stars of this program was a young Jew named Daniel. He was smart, strong, healthy . . . and good at interpreting dreams. The Babylonians changed his name to Belteshazzar.

During the second year of his reign King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that he wanted interpreted. He summoned to his royal court all the astrologers, the wise men and the counselors and demanded that they tell him the dream and the interpretation. It was a clever approach. If he told them the dream they could fake an interpretation, but if they knew the dream without being told he could assume that the interpretation was correct. The astrologers insisted that this couldn't be done, so

Nebuchadnezzar added some pressure. We read about this in Daniel 2:5-6:

The king replied to the astrologers, "This is what I have firmly decided: If you do not tell me what my dream was and interpret it, I will have you cut into pieces and your houses turned into piles of rubble. But if you tell me the dream and explain it, you will receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor. So tell me the dream and interpret it for me."

The astrologers, wise men and counselors-to-the-king thought this was a totally unreasonable and impossible expectation. They said that no one could possibly know the dream without the king telling them. They stalled and Nebuchadnezzar became impatient. There was a definite difference of opinion between labor and management. Since the king was king, his will prevailed. He ordered that all the astrologers and wise men of Babylon be executed.

Daniel was on the death list because he had been drafted into the guild of royal wise men. When he was told of the impending execution he asked for an audience with the king. The king gave him overnight to come up with the dream and the interpretation. Daniel went home and asked his three godly friends—Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah—to pray. During the night God told him the king's dream and the interpretation. He reported to Nebuchadnezzar the next day and the king was totally impressed. Daniel got it right, pleased the king and saved

the lives of all the astrologers, wise men and counselors. They were all impressed.

Daniel told the king in Daniel 2:29-35:

"As you were lying there, O king, your mind turned to things to come, and the revealer of mysteries showed you what is going to happen. As for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because I have greater wisdom than other living men, but so that you, O king, may know the interpretation and that you may understand what went through your mind."

***What we do on the outside is
the proof of who we are and
what we believe on the inside.***

“You looked, O king, and there before you stood a large statue—an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were broken to pieces at the same time and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.”

With divine inspiration Daniel interpreted Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. The statue was a picture of history. Each section represented a major kingdom. The rock at the end of the dream was the kingdom of God that would eventually fill the whole earth. The first of the kingdoms, the kingdom of gold, was the Babylonian kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar.

King Nebuchadnezzar was thrilled with the interpretation. He liked the idea of being the head. He thought Daniel was absolutely wonderful and immediately appointed him as governor of the province of Babylon and put him in charge of all the royal wise men. At Daniel’s request his three friends were appointed administrators of the province with Daniel as their boss.

Although Daniel (Belteshazzar) was then and is now the more famous and powerful, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah were as good and godly as their more famous friend. They were men of prayer, conviction and great professional competence. They were Jews. They believed in Yahweh, the one Lord God of heaven and earth. Their homeland was Israel. They were forced to live in a foreign country, speak a foreign language, adopt foreign customs and serve the government and monarch who was their enemy. This would be the equivalent of any of us natural born English-speaking Americans being carried off to Iraq to work for the government of Saddam Hussein.

God told them to settle in and do a good job. They were to adapt to the language and culture but not compromise their love and loyalty to God. That would not be easy to do. (Note: It is interesting that this section of the Old Testament book of Daniel is not written in Hebrew like almost all of the rest of

the Old Testament. It is written in Aramaic. This indicates how far God is willing to go to adapt to this foreign culture—even to the point of changing the language of the Bible.

How were Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah to be loyal employees of Nebuchadnezzar without compromising their faith in God? It is the same challenge we still face today. We live in America but our citizenship is in heaven. We are to work hard at our jobs, school and relationships—fitting in as best we can and doing our jobs with excellence—yet never compromising our faith in God.

Nebuchadnezzar missed the point of his own dream. Instead of recognizing that God is the ultimate ruler of the world, Nebuchadnezzar was caught up in the idea that he was the head of gold in this statue he dreamed. But dreams and imagination were not enough. He wanted the real thing. So, he ordered the building of an actual statue of gold that was 90 feet high and 9 feet wide. It was a colossal image to honor him, his dream and his kingdom. He was a self-absorbed egotist. Daniel 3:1-7 tells us:

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. 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. 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: 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. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.”

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.

Religion and nationalism were mixed together. It was then and is now a common and dangerous practice to confuse patriotism with religious worship. Nebuchadnezzar had presented himself to be a god and then used the religion of his country as a test for political loyalty.

In every generation there is also a mix of politics and envy. Some of the king's astrologers envied the success of the Jewish immigrants. It was probably not a simple envy (envy is seldom simple). There was resentment of foreigners, prejudice against the Jewish religion, jealousy over the success of Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, and probably a lingering resentment over their inability to know and interpret the king's dream. Whatever the reason, the astrologers seized an opportunity to betray the three godly Jewish leaders. Instead of calling them by their Hebrew names, they called them by their adopted Babylonian names. According to Daniel 3:9-12:

They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, live forever! 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, and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. 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."

What would you do? If given a choice between a five-minute bow to a statue and death by fire, would you bow or burn? Really, what difference does a little bow make? After all, you would know in your heart that the idol wasn't a god and you were a true believer in your head. Isn't life more important than some symbolic act?

Please understand these amazing men. They were 100% committed to God. Life was not what was most important to them; God was most important to them. They would not say or do anything that reflected negatively on the Lord they loved. If God

chose to save them, they wanted to live. If they died, that was God's decision to make. They lived to please an audience of one—and that "One" wasn't Nebuchadnezzar!

There is something very important for us to learn here. We are often tempted to compromise on the mistaken belief that actions and symbols don't count: I can cheat and swear at work but believe in Jesus in my heart. I can tell racial jokes and exhibit unbiblical prejudice but be a good Christian on Sundays. I can believe in Jesus with all my heart but share my body in sexual union outside of marriage and it really doesn't matter. I can convince myself that I am a follower of Jesus Christ but live a life of selfish greed without compassion for the poor. I can claim to be a disciple of Jesus but treat others with anger, criticism and hostility.

None of the above is true! The truth is that symbols do matter. What we do on the outside is the proof of who we are and what we believe on the inside. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were persons of principle. They would rather die than displease their God.

Nebuchadnezzar was furious. He ordered the furnace superheated and ordered that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be bound and burned. The huge two-story furnace was so hot that the flames killed some of the guards assigned as executioners. With every

indication that they would die a horrible fiery death, the three remained loyal to God and would not recant. Into the flames they went.

Nebuchadnezzar was there to personally witness the executions. But something totally amazing, unexpected and supernatural happened. The three did not die. They were alive in the fire. They walked around. And there were four of them!

The king was dumbfounded. 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." He called into the flames and asked them to come out.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were alive and accompanied by the angel of God. They were safe. They were not burned. Their clothes

Whatever we face as individuals or as a nation, let us be like these three Jewish heroes—faithful to God, refusing to sin, unafraid of danger . . . and trusting God to take care of us no matter what happens.

weren't burned. They did not even smell of smoke. God had performed a miracle.

Nebuchadnezzar was totally impressed. He changed his orders in a pronouncement to his entire empire. We are told in Daniel 3:28-30:

Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "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. 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."

Then, the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar was impressed by the miracle, but he was hardly a convert to faith in God. As his biography continues we find him again steeped in arrogance and self-centeredness. Again and again this man must be humbled by God. There is a huge difference between defeat by God and faith in God.

On September 11, 2001, many Americans felt like they had been thrown into a fiery furnace. Indeed, the fireball of burning aviation fuel that melted the World Trade Center was a literal fiery furnace. Some people were afraid to fly. Many were just plain afraid of almost everything all the time.

The week after that event Charleen and I flew back and forth across the country on five different flights. There were plenty of empty seats. One flight had only 12 passengers. A flight attendant told us she was scared. A girl traveling unaccompanied in the seat in front of us cried until the flight attendant moved her to a first class seat with an airline captain in uni-

form who reassured her. I don't think we were reckless. We adopted the approach of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in Daniel 3:17-18:

"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. 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."

Whatever we face as individuals or as a nation, let us be like these three Jewish heroes—faithful to God, refusing to sin, unafraid of danger . . . and trusting God to take care of us no matter what happens.

Before we conclude, I need to ask you if you are trusting God. If you are thrown into some fiery furnace do you know that the Son of God will be there with you to protect you and save you? Specifically, have you committed your life to Jesus Christ as your Savior? We have all thought about the possibility that our flight could be hijacked, our building could be bombed, our lives could unexpectedly end. The time to seal our relationship with God through Jesus is not then but now. If you haven't accepted Jesus as your Savior and Lord I invite you to do so now. Pray a prayer of faith in your own words telling God that you are a sinner who needs him and that you invite Jesus Christ to forgive your sin and be the Boss of your life from now on.

And so, our Lord, whatever befalls us, whatever comes—a fiery furnace or days of peace and calm, we will trust you.

Most of all, we will trust you for the forgiveness of our sin and for our eternal destiny in heaven with you,

through faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.

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