

Faithful in the Fire

Daniel: When Kingdoms Collide

Daniel 3:1-30

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Daniel 2 taught us that God reveals his plans for the world. He reveals that he sets up kings and kingdoms and removes them. The kingdoms of this world are passing away. But God's establishing a permanent kingdom that will never be removed.

God revealed all this to Nebuchadnezzar. And at the end of chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar gives a favorable response to God's revelation. He fell down and paid homage to Daniel. He acknowledged that God is a God of gods, a Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries.

It may seem that Nebuchadnezzar is coming to believe in the God of heaven. But true faith in God will show itself in faithfulness to God. What we believe will be seen in what we do (cf. Jas. 2:17). So, what does Nebuchadnezzar do with what he's learned about God? Chapter 3 tells us.

Chapter 3 is full of drama. As the chapter begins, the tension builds like air going into a balloon. The balloon gets so big, we think it's going to burst. But then there's a turn. The air's let out. The tension unwinds in reverse order. My sermon this morning will trace the rising tension and the unwinding reversal of the story.

TENSION RISING

The rising tension comes to us in three main movements. There's a frightening image, three men who face a fiery furnace, and a faithful response.

Frightening Image

The frightening image is introduced to us in verses 1-7.

Daniel 3:1-7¹

¹King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its breadth six cubits. He set it up on the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. ²Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent to gather the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. ³Then the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces gathered for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. And they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. ⁴And the herald proclaimed aloud, "You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, ⁵that 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. ⁶And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace." ⁷Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

This is the Word of the Lord.

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

What do Nebuchadnezzar's actions tell us about his faith in God and what God revealed in his dream? Well, let's examine his actions.

He sets up an image of gold. It's a statue sixty cubits high. That's about ninety feet or six stories high. It's a menacing statue. Imagine standing in front of it. It would be pretty frightening. It represents the height of human power and achievement. You might be impressed, but you'd feel pretty small.

And it's not only tall, it's completely covered in gold. And this gives us our first clue that Nebuchadnezzar's not a big fan of what God revealed to him in his dream. Remember the head of gold in his dream? It represented Nebuchadnezzar and the kingdom of Babylon. But there were other kingdoms depicted in that statue. Kingdoms of silver, bronze, and iron. God set up the kingdom of Babylon. But eventually, it would come down. Nebuchadnezzar didn't like that truth. So, he set up his own statue. This statue was comprised only of gold, putting everybody on notice that his kingdom would never end. He'd make sure of it. Chapter 2 taught us *God* sets up kings and removes them. But in chapter 3, we're told nine times that *Nebuchadnezzar* set up his statue.

And what was his end game? Why did he set up the statue? He *set it up* so that everyone would *fall down* and worship the golden image. Instead of worshiping the God of heaven, he wanted people to worship an image that reached to the heavens. An image that represented his human achievement and his false gods.

So, he calls together all of the important and powerful people of his kingdom, people from all peoples, nations, and languages, and commands them to fall down. And if they don't? They'll burn. They'll be cast into the fiery furnace. This is quite a frightening image.

Now, you may think this is such an extreme example that it can't apply to us today. Maybe it applies to communist countries or places where dictators are in leadership, but not to us. But this passage does apply to us. It's an extreme case, but sometimes the extreme cases help us to see the truths more clearly.

The narrator gives us a clue that what's happening in Daniel 3 is a pattern throughout all of history. Notice in the first verse, we read that the image was set up on the plains of Dura, in the province of Babylon. This is the same place where the Tower of Babel was built in Genesis 11. And remember what happened there?

In Genesis 1, God created humanity to bear his image and to fill the earth with his glory. But at Babel, the people weren't content to *scatter* throughout the world. Instead they *gathered* at Babel. Not to worship God. They gathered to make a name for themselves. They wanted independence from God. So, they built a tower to the heavens. They wanted to rise to the level of God by human achievement.²

That's what Nebuchadnezzar's doing. Instead of worshiping God and bearing his image, he *sets up* an image that represents *his* gods and *his* power. Then he calls the nations to gather and worship *it*, instead of God. He calls them to worship idols.

We see the same thing in our day. It's maybe not as obvious, but it's just as extreme. Idol worship has always been around. An idol is anything we set up and serve, other than God, in order to

² David Helm, *Daniel for You*

advance man's glory. They're not always bad things. But when anything given to us by God stands in the place of God, it's an idol.

God gave Nebuchadnezzar his kingdom. But he made it an idol of human achievement. Nations have been doing this ever since, even America. God gave Nebuchadnezzar great wealth. So much so that his kingdom was represented with gold. But he made an idol of his wealth. And we do the same today with the idols of career and money.

There are many idols. Power, wealth, our country, sex. You can probably list many more that you see in your life and in our culture.

The kingdom of man sets up idols. But it doesn't stop there. It also demands that we fall down and worship them. And it uses fear to accomplish this. There's fear of death, like we find in Daniel 3. But there are other subtler fears. There's the fear of going without. Or the fear of being left out. The enemy uses these fears to threaten us. To command us: Fall down, or else!

So, we shouldn't be surprised that in verse 7 everybody falls down. "Therefore, as soon as the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up."

Everybody fell down and worshiped. Well, not exactly. There are three men who don't fall down and worship. And some of their colleagues see this and report them to the king. And when he finds out, he's hot. So, these men will face the fiery furnace.

Facing a Fiery Furnace

Daniel 3:8-15

⁸Therefore at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and maliciously accused the Jews. ⁹They declared to King Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, live forever! ¹⁰You, O king, have made a decree, that every man who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, shall fall down and worship the golden image. ¹¹And whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into a burning fiery furnace. ¹²There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men, O king, pay no attention to you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

¹³Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought. So they brought these men before the king. ¹⁴Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, "Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? ¹⁵Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. 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?"

The tension is rising. If they will not fall down, they will face the fiery furnace. And remember these are not simply idle threats. Nebuchadnezzar has a resume to back him up. He has overcome the world. He has a track record of killing millions, even women and children (cf. Ps. 137:8-9). He's brutal. He knows where your family lives!

But the tension is deeper than simply whether or not these three men will face the fire. The tension is a tension of faith. At the end of his threat, Nebuchadnezzar says something that gets to the heart of the tension. He says, "And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?"

Nebuchadnezzar is showing his true colors here. It's clear what he believes about the God of heaven. He doesn't believe there is any god more powerful than him. He's not just threatening these men. He's throwing down a challenge for their God. How will these men respond?

Faithful Response

Verses 16-18 give us their faithful response.

Daniel 3:16-18

¹⁶*Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. ¹⁷If 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. ¹⁸But 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."*

This is at the center of the whole passage. And it teaches us the central truths of the passage. It teaches us what's true about God, and what true faith looks like. What does it teach us about God? Look at verse 17: "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."

They've seen that their God reveals his plans. They've seen that he rules over all history. He sets up kings and removes them. And he's establishing an everlasting kingdom. And so, there's no question in his mind that he is also able to rescue them. God is able to save. That's what they believe about their God.

So what does their faith lead them to do? What do their actions say about their faith? "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." This is what we learn. God's people won't serve idols, even in the face of death.³

It's important to see that even though they acknowledge God is *able* to save, they also acknowledge that he may not *choose* to save them from this particular situation. If he's *willing*, he *will*, but he may not be willing.⁴

We see Jesus express this same theology. In the garden of Gethsemane, he said to God, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will" (Mt. 26:39). Of course, it was possible for God to deliver his Son from death, but it wasn't God's will. God's will was for Jesus to go to the cross.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego know God is establishing an everlasting kingdom. And they have hope in that everlasting kingdom. In fact, that hope is what leads them to faithfulness. But that doesn't mean they presume they'll be delivered from death.

The same goes for us. We do have a promise of eternal deliverance, but not of temporal deliverance. If we trust in Christ, we'll be delivered from the eternal flames. But we won't necessarily be delivered from the fire of suffering (Is. 48:10). Our fiery trials are actually the very thing that prove our faith. That's what we see in these men.

And that's what we see in Jesus as well. Remember when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness? Satan showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. He basically showed him the statue of

³ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Daniel: Foundations for Expository Sermons*

⁴ Iain M. Duguid, *Daniel*, Reformed Expository Commentary

gold. And he said, if you will fall down and worship me, these kingdoms will be yours. But Jesus refused. He said, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’ Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him” (Mt. 4:8-11). Sounds like Daniel 3.

Jesus was tempted in every way, yet he was without sin (Heb. 4:15). So, he not only pays for our sin on the cross, he also lives the life we’ve failed to live. But now, if we have faith in him, we’re called to live with this same level of faithfulness.

TENSION REVERSED

Well, the tension has reached its tightest point. What happens next wouldn’t have surprised those at the scene. Nebuchadnezzar follows through on his threat. And he sends these men to the fire. But what happens after this is a complete surprise. The tension is unwound. In fact, the whole story is turned on its head in a great reversal. Let’s read the rest of the passage. Then I’ll briefly point out three elements of reversal.

Daniel 3:19-30

¹⁹Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury, and the expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated. ²⁰And he ordered some of the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. ²¹Then these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the burning fiery furnace. ²²Because the king’s order was urgent and the furnace overheated, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. ²³And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace.

²⁴Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, “Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?” They answered and said to the king, “True, O king.” ²⁵He answered and said, “But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.”

²⁶Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning fiery furnace; he declared, “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. ²⁷And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king’s counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men. The hair of their heads was not singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them. ²⁸Nebuchadnezzar answered and said, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king’s command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. ²⁹Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way.” ³⁰Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

Rose Up

Verse 24 gives us the first clue that there will be a reversal in this story. The first half of the story we repeatedly hear that Nebuchadnezzar *set up* an image and commanded everyone to fall down and worship it. But in verse 24, we see that after the three men are thrown into the fire that Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and *rose up* in haste. In the original language, this is the same verb. This is the first indication of a reversal.

Rescued

The reason he rose up leads to the second reversal. These men weren't burned up by the fire. Not even a hair of their head was singed (v. 27). Instead they were walking around. And not only that, there was a fourth man in the fire with them (v. 25). God rescued them personally. He sent his angel to deliver them (v. 28). As he promised in Isaiah 43, when they passed through the fire, he was with them.

Revolution

But that's not all. Nebuchadnezzar goes on to speak better than he knows. He announces a third reversal—a coming revolution.

Remember at the beginning of the passage? The king made a decree that people from every nation gather to worship the image. And so, people from every nation come and gather around the image.

But now these same people are gathered around these three men, to witness what their God had done to rescue them. And then, Nebuchadnezzar issues a new decree in verse 29. “Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way.”

There is great irony in this passage. At the beginning, if you don't worship idols, you'll burn. But now, notice that those who speak against the God of heaven will face death. Nebuchadnezzar surely doesn't understand the significance of what he's saying. But Jesus did.

Jesus also turned the image of the fiery furnace on its head. Nebuchadnezzar used the furnace as a judgment on the people of God. Jesus used it for those who reject the Son of God. In Matthew 13, he says that those who reject the gospel will be thrown into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (vv. 41-42).

And this is so important for us. The world uses fear to tempt us to worship idols. Fear of losing our lives. Or fear of going without. Or fear of missing out. But the fear of God puts all of these fears into proper perspective.

In Luke 12:4-8, Jesus said, “I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows. And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God.”

There is a promise and a warning in these verses. Citizens of the kingdom of God are very valuable to God. God not only knows the number of hairs on our head. Our hair won't be singed in the fire. Christ walked through the fire for us, so that we could be delivered from the fire. He went to the cross to pay for our sins. If we place our faith in him, we'll be saved.

But saving faith will show itself in faithfulness. Those who have faith in Christ will be willing to acknowledge Christ before men, with their lips and their lives, even when they're faced with the fiery trial. And for those people, they will be saved from the fire of hell.

But those who don't acknowledge Christ before man, show they don't have faith in him. Those people have something far worse to fear than man! They have to face God.

What kind of faith do you have?

Do you have faith like Nebuchadnezzar that acknowledges God in one breath but then sets up idols in the next? Or do you have faith like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego? A faith that proves itself in faithfulness, not just up to the point of death, but even unto death.