

The Book Of Daniel

*And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom.
(Daniel 1:20 ESV)*

*but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days.
(Daniel 2:28 ESV)*

*And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.
(Daniel 12:2–3 ESV)*

The Fiery Furnace

January 26th, 2020

Daniel 3

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Introduction:

Good morning church! I'd like to invite you to open your Bibles this morning to Daniel 3; that's on page 739 in your pew Bibles. We've had some bad weather for the last couple of weeks so I realize that some of you may have missed the first two messages in this series so let me just briefly review how we got here.

In 605 BC the southern kingdom of Judah fell afoul of the Babylonian Empire. They had foolishly attempted to align with Egypt against Babylon and as a result Babylon had punished them by stripping the temple of some of its treasures and implements and by taking several of their young nobles into captivity. These young men were most likely made eunuchs and they were educated in all the wisdom and knowledge of their captors. The intention was for them to serve as advisors to the King with respect to the governance of the subject province of Judea – but God had other plans.

God blessed Daniel – and his 3 companions – with extraordinary wisdom and as we saw last week – God blessed Daniel with the ability to recall and interpret a very important dream. And by means of this provision God secured the promotion of Daniel and his friends into positions that

would allow them to protect and preserve the great mass of Jewish people who would shortly be arriving in Babylon.

So Daniel and his friends are now firmly ensconced in the government and in the court and favour of the King. To borrow a phrase from the New Testament – they are in the world but not of it – and that brings us to the story that we will be reading this week.

It is a long story – but not as long as the story we read last week. So our plan for today will be to walk through this story at tree level and then to pull up to forest level in order to reflect upon the various insights, examples and life-giving instructions that are present in the text.

Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 1:

King 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. ²

Now let's just pause here for a second. If you were here last week when we were talking about Nebuchadnezzar's dream then probably you are hearing some alarm bells. In chapter 2 the King had a dream about a giant statue that represented the kingdoms of this world – and he was told by Daniel – that he was the head of gold. Now here in chapter 3 we have the King making a giant gold statue and telling everybody that they have to bow down and worship it – so it would seem likely that the King's dream has literally gone to the King's head. Most ancient kings thought of themselves as being in some sense divine. Pharaoh thought of himself as a God – Nero thought of himself as a god – and here, clearly in some sense, Nebuchadnezzar is thinking of himself as a god as well. Perhaps this is Nebuchadnezzar pushing back on part of Daniel's interpretation. Daniel prophesied that Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom would be succeeded by other lesser kingdoms – a kingdom of silver, a kingdom of bronze and a kingdom of iron – all of which would be ultimately shattered and supplanted by a kingdom from heaven – by the ROCK not cut by human hands that would strike the statue in its feet of iron and clay and grow and grow and grow and gradually fill the entire earth as waters cover the sea.

Maybe this is Nebuchadnezzar – saying NO! The gold is all. The head is all. I AM ALL.

Maybe.

The story doesn't say – but as I said – if you were here last week then your spidey senses are tingling and I think they are supposed to be.

Either way – we have an arrogant king and an idolatrous statue – that much is for certain. We pick up the story at verse 2:

Then 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. ³ Then 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. ⁴ And the herald proclaimed aloud, “You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, ⁵ 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. ⁶ And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace.” ⁷ Therefore, 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.

⁸ Therefore at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and maliciously accused the Jews. ⁹ They declared to King Nebuchadnezzar, “O king, live forever! ¹⁰ You, 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. ¹¹ And whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into a burning fiery furnace. ¹² There 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.”

Now let's just pause here and ask the obvious question – why is there no mention of Daniel? The jealous officials point the finger at Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego – but say nothing of Daniel – why is that?

The most likely answer is that Daniel was too powerful at this point for them to make such an accusation. Rather than go at him directly, they decide to first strip him of his friends and allies. These Babylonians are not content to be surpassed in influence and authority by these young Jews. And so they accused them – maliciously – before the king. David Russell says here:

“informers and the totalitarian state go hand in hand.”¹

That is certainly true.

Verse 13:

¹³ Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought. So they brought these men before the king. ¹⁴ Nebuchadnezzar 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? ¹⁵ Now 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?”

You can write in the margins of your Bible here:

“He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.” (Psalm 2:4 ESV)

Who asks a question like that? It is never a good idea to initiate a contest between yourself and the God of the universe.

That’s a free tip.

We jump back into the story at verse 16:

¹ D.S. Russell, *Daniel* in The Daily Study Bible, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 65.

¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. 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. ¹⁸ 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.”

¹⁹ Then 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. ²⁰ And 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. ²¹ Then these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the burning fiery furnace. ²² Because 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. ²³ And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace.

²⁴ Then 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.” ²⁵ He 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.”

²⁶ Then 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. ²⁷ And 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. ²⁸ Nebuchadnezzar 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. ²⁹ Therefore 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.” ³⁰ Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon. (Daniel 3:1–30 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord – thanks be to God!

Insights, Examples And Instruction:

I mentioned last week that the Apostle Paul commended these great redemption stories from the Old Testament to his churches. He said in 1 Corinthians 10 that:

“these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.” (1 Corinthians 10:11 ESV)

So these are real stories – “these things happened to them”. This is not a parable or a metaphor or a literary creation – these things happened to them. They are real stories – but they were ordained and they were recorded because they say TRUE and TIMELESS things about the world, about God, about us and about how God saves his people IN and THROUGH the fire.

That’s why we read these stories.

Because God doesn’t change – sin doesn’t change – we don’t change – and because God is always working to SAVE and SANCTIFY a people for himself – hallelujah!

So let’s pull up now to the 10,000 foot level and reflect on this story in search of important insights, worthy examples and life giving instruction. I think we’ll agree that this story is rich in terms of each of those categories.

The first thing we see, in terms of an important insight is that:

1. Failure to worship what the culture worships will result in hostility and persecution

Regardless of whether the statue was supposed to represent Nebuchadnezzar or some other national deity – scholars universally agree that uniformity of worship is required in any totalitarian regime. Joyce Baldwin says for example here:

“The fact that all peoples, nations and languages were to fall down and worship it suggests that Nebuchadnezzar intended to unite his kingdom under one religion.”²

You can't have a unified society unless everyone agrees to worship the same things. Everyone who has thought carefully about society and community AGREES with this basic principle. You can find this principle in the pages of the Bible.

“Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?” (Amos 3:3 NKJV)

Social unity REQUIRES an essential agreement on issues of truth and value.

If you are going to WALK TOGETHER you have to WORSHIP TOGETHER.

By the way – ask the government of India whether or not they agree with this principle. They know very well that you can't govern a country of 1.2 billion people if there are 800 million worshipping this way and 400 million worshipping that way. It's not going to work. If TWO can't walk together unless they are agreed than how in the world can 1.2 billion walk together if they are not agreed?

That's why the Hindu nationalists are persecuting Christians AND Muslims in India. Because you have to worship together to walk together.

Now you say – but Canada and Europe are classic examples of countries and cultures where people from many different faiths walk together. But make no mistake, in those cultures, there has to be agreement on the highest virtues and values. Or unity begins to suffer – and persecution begins to happen.

Canada has its own test of orthodoxy to be sure.

You have to worship at the statue of diversity and tolerance and pluralism in order to be accepted in this society. You have to demote your God to the status of household deity in order to be

²Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 23 of Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 110.

welcome in the Public Square. You have to accept the ORDERING OF VALUES in Canadian society – an ordering that puts SEXUAL EXPRESSION and PERSONAL AUTONOMY at the very top of our TOTEM POLE.

If you question that – then prepare to be rejected and villified by your peers.

You see the gods of a culture may not always be gods per say. Paul Tillich said that it is more useful to speak of “Ultimate Concern” when speaking about idolatry. He said that a person’s god is the thing or person that he or she is most concerned about, the thing that he or she thinks the most about, the thing that most controls or affects his or her life and behavior – that is your Ultimate Concern. That is your god. And so if you don’t have the same Ultimate Concerns as the majority of your fellow citizens do – then you will inevitably face hostility and persecution in that society. That was true in the 7th century BC and that is still true – in every human culture still today.

Secondly, in this story, in terms of a positive example, we can’t help but notice the courage, courtesy and conviction of these three young men.

2. Courage, courtesy and conviction

The story is arranged in order to draw attention to their remarkable confession of faith. With your Bible open in front of you, you can easily see that for yourself. The confession of the three young men is the centerpiece of the story. There is about the same amount of word count leading up to it as leading out from it. This is a classic example of Jewish chiasmic structure – or sandwich structure if you like – with the best part in the middle. So let’s do what we’re supposed to do – let’s focus on this remarkable confession.

The King demands that they fall down and worship the statue – and he warns them that if they don’t he will throw them bound into the fiery furnace – and who is the God who will deliver you from my hand?

This is what the young men say:

“O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. 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. ¹⁸ 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 ESV)

That is a remarkable statement!

It takes an enormous amount of courage to say NO when everyone around you is saying YES.

Charles Taylor is generally recognized as Canada’s greatest intellectual export. Taylor is a philosopher and an expert on the process of secularization. He is interested in why cultures come to believe or disbelieve what they do. He talks a great deal about the conditions for faith. He says for example that in your great grandparents’ day it was almost impossible not to believe in Christianity in this culture. There was so much PEER momentum in that direction – and so much institutional support – that it would have required tremendous courage in 1885 for a person in this country NOT to believe. But then in your parents’ generation things began to change. All of the sudden it was possible to believe or not to believe. Institutions were losing their grip, public opinion was rapidly shifting. Groups and clusters could easily be found on both sides of the argument. But now, Taylor says, in this generation, it is virtually impossible to believe. The institutions have all crumbled and capitulated to the spirit of the age. The herd has gathered together around unassailable conclusions and consensus convictions. Now – for a person in this culture to believe in the God of the Bible would require almost other worldly courage and personal fortitude.

But that is exactly what we see in the hearts and minds of these young men.

Against all institutional pressure – against all peer influence – against all personal interest – these young men keep the faith.

They will be loyal to their God no matter how it looks and no matter what it costs.

FAITH requires COURAGE and sometimes COURAGE is a matter of fearing the most important thing. Jesus said that in Matthew 10:

“do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.... everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven,³³ but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.”
(Matthew 10:28–33 ESV)

These young men FEARED GOD and therefore they did not fear King Nebuchadnezzar.

But neither were they rude to King Nebuchadnezzar. Like the Apostles in Acts 4 they were not rabid dogs, they were not frothing fundamentalists. They showed all appropriate deference – but no more.

D.A. Carson says here:

“The courage that we need in this anti-Christian age is courteous and steadfast. It never apologizes for God. It joyfully believes that God can do anything, but it is prepared to suffer rather than compromise hearty obedience.”³

I think that is exactly right and I think that is precisely the witness that we need given the challenges that we are beginning to face in this culture.

And then thirdly, in terms of the life-giving instruction in this text, I think the most important revelation of all is that:

3. The Most High God is also God with us

At the conclusion of this story King Nebuchadnezzar has learned some very important things about God. In verse 26 he says:

“Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here!” (Daniel 3:26 ESV)

³ D.A. Carson, *For The Love Of God* Volume Two (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999), October 18th.

Servants of the Most High God – something just got added on to the very top of Nebuchadnezzar’s totem pole.

The King just figured out that there is a God who is above every other God. He just answered his own question:

“who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?” (Daniel 3:15 ESV)

Answer: The Most High God – that’s who, knucklehead! The one who sits in the heavens and LAUGHS!

The God of the Heavens is the God of the Hebrews – and also, as the King just learned, the God with us – the God who joins us in the fire!

Look at verse 24:

Then 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.”²⁵ He 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.” (Daniel 3:24–25 ESV)

Now obviously Nebuchadnezzar does not understand the Trinity and he is not at this point a Christian but he does at this point see the God of the Universe in the fire. With his people. Looking for all the world like a Son of God.

Tremper Longman III says here:

“The Christian cannot help but see a prefiguration of Jesus Christ, who came to earth to dwell in a chaotic world and who even experienced death, not so that we might escape the experience of death but that we might have victory over it.”⁴

⁴ Tremper Longman III, *Daniel* in The NIV Application Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 112.

Did you notice that word – PREFIGURMENT. That’s what this story is! An advance preview of the full disclosure of God in Jesus Christ! In the person and work of Jesus Christ – this is EXACTLY WHAT WE COME TO UNDERSTAND. That the God of the Universe – the Sovereign Creator of all things – IS EMMANUEL – GOD WITH US IN THE FIRE!

That’s the point – not just of this story – that’s the point of the whole Bible!

The God up there is the God down here.

He is YAHWEH!

He is Jesus!

Sovereign over everything – and with us in our troubles.

Do you remember what Jesus said to Saul on the Road to Damascus? He said:

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4 ESV)

But Saul wasn’t persecuting Jesus – he was persecuting the church. He was dragging Christians – men and women – from their homes and bringing them bound to Jerusalem for justice. But as the resurrected Jesus made very clear to brother Saul on that day, to persecute Christians IS TO PERSECUTE JESUS.

Jesus is GOD and he is with his people in the fire.

Now to be clear – he is not the God who EXTINGUISHES the fire – not in this story in Daniel – and not in the Book of Acts either. You see God is worried about another fire – the eternal fire – and so he lets this temporal fire rage.

He did not kindle it – but he does make use of it. To refine his people, to grow their faith, and most importantly TO AMPLIFY THEIR WITNESS TO THE WORLD.

No one ignores the witness of the flames.

Because nothing in this world speaks louder than personal sacrifice.

We spoke earlier about Ultimate Concerns.

Self-preservation has of course been, the Ultimate Concern of almost all people throughout human history. Which is why FAITH IN THE FLAMES is so compelling. The church never grows faster than when it is being faithful under fire.

Therefore, by the grace of God, let us resolve to be courageous in non-compliance with respect to the Ultimate Concerns of this dying culture. Let us be faithful, winsome and steadfast in our witness to a God who is SOVEREIGN and who also suffered and died on our behalf. And let us bear with grace whatever temporary trials we must endure – knowing that our God is FOR US and OUR GOD IS WITH US IN THE FIRE and blessed are all those who take refuge in him.

Thanks be to God – let's pray together.