

Showing God's Kingship to the Nations

Daniel 3

Russ Kennedy

Introduction It is an interesting time, this transition between presidents. One is on his way in and has no authority. One is on his way out and seems to have little power. So who really governs? Who is really making the decisions? Who is in charge?

Sometimes this is the way it seems in our world. The kings of the world seem to have all the power and God seems distant. Yet the Bible declares that God is over all. How are we to declare that? Is it just a matter of words? How do believers, living as exiles, really show that God is not only their King but rules as sovereign over all?

One might wonder why the narrator through this story has switched to the Babylonian names for the three friends. In the middle of the last chapter, when Daniel began to reveal and interpret the dream relating the Times of the Gentiles, the book switches from Hebrew to Aramaic. So through this section of Daniel, which is about and to the nations, is written in the common Gentile tongue of the day. So, he uses the Aramaic or Babylonian names.

King Nebuchadnezzar has had his frightening dream revealed and interpreted. God's Word has been spoken to the king and his leaders. He has humbled himself in astonishment and has honored the young men who speak for God. But shallow humility soon is swallowed up in the ocean of pride surging within Nebuchadnezzar. Thus, he will take God's revelation about his place in history and twist it into self-deification. In this context, where unbelievers pilfer from God's truth and turn it to deify themselves as mini-messiahs, believers must show the nations that God alone is King above all.

That is what this story is all about...

Living among Sinners

(v.1-12)

God's people living in exile do not live in a friendly, God-loving, Bible-respecting society. They live among sinners. While we in the West have largely deluded ourselves with our comparative ease, we have been gutted of our courage. We stand publicly for the wrong things and get involved in social issues in ways that make us acceptable to the very people who are building images and fiery furnaces.

The Royal Pride

(v.1-7)

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 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

zar 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.

Imagine this scene (v.1). South of the city of Babylon, the plains of Dura made a natural amphitheater. A furnace is erected with a giant ladle for smelting gold. A ninety foot tall, nine foot wide image emerges from the hand of the craftsman. It is slowly erected on its stone base. There it stands, a tribute to the pride of Nebuchadnezzar. He has confused what God has told him with his own aspirations.

See the people begin to gather on the day appointed (v.2-3). They well know that the furnace that melted the gold is now reserved for unbowed knees. Riding in on their carriages come the opulently dressed politicians, all who served in any capacity in the kingdom. Rubbing shoulder to shoulder are the chief representatives of the king, the military commanders with their clanking swords, and the civil administrators. Hurrying along in their wake are the advisers or counselors to those in governmental authority, the treasurers who administered the funds of the kingdom, the judges who administered the law, and the magistrates who enforced the law. The other provincial officials, subordinates of the satraps, mingled their lesser persons with the mighty of the realm.

If William Shea is correct, we could turn our camera to a section of the crowd where those gathered there were of many tribes and nations in their varied dress. We can zoom in on Zedekiah, the vassal king of Jerusalem and his entourage (Jeremiah 51:59). He is here along with the rest to affirm their loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar.

Across the plain we hear the trumpets sound and the massive crowd hushes (v.4-6). At a signal, the herald's voice rings out the king's command. "At the sound of the instruments, everyone is to bow down and worship towards the golden image. Anyone who does not bow will be thrown into the furnace." Every eye turns fearfully to the roaring noise and smoke of the smelter.

Suddenly, the trumpets sound with the full orchestra taking up its mighty sound. All across the plain, people slip down to their knees and press their faces into dirt. The ground vibrates to the thunder of the drums. The air is thick with the sound of instruments and voices.

What would you do? Would you have good solid reasons for bowing to the image? Would you hope to get lost in the crowd so no one would see your face in the dust? Would you even recognize the test? Are you so immersed in Babylon that at the world's bidding it simply feels natural to kneel? Would your friends be tugging at your clothes urging you down?

But, look over there. Right over there among the highest officials in the land. What about those three? Why are they still standing?

The Jealous Plot

(v.8-12)

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.

Successful believers living among pagans will be at risk. The astrologers notice with green-eyed delight that the three friends of Daniel have not bowed. In jealous ambition, they confer. Then they rush forward and wield the lying, slanderous swords of their tongues. The word here "accuse" is translated "denounce" and means "to tear into pieces." Like slaving lackeys, they remind the king of his command. But then, O the spin they put on it. Listen to the words designed to goad Nebuchadnezzar's anger. "These people you have promoted and honored totally disregard you. They don't listen to you. They don't honor you. They do not bow."

Hiss, dribble, slobber – sinners slander the good men who are pleasing God. They do so to tear them down, to destroy their influence, to take their place. This is what it means to live in exile among sinners. Don't expect necessarily to be admired for standing by your convictions. Why are Christians so hungry for the world's acclaim? What dangers do believers seeking high position and prominence expose themselves to?

Standing by Faith

(v.13-23)

When all are bowing, just standing is dangerous.

In a Fierce Trial

(v.13-15)

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?"

Nebuchadnezzar rises up, his face red, his fists clenched, his eyes flashing in a towering rage. He has been ignored. This may well be the greatest slight to offer a person who admires themselves. The three are brought into his presence. They are going to be given a second chance. When they hear the call to worship, they will bow down as they should. If they do, all will be forgiven. If they don't, the blazing furnace awaits.

Here is the challenge. Here is Nebuchadnezzar's glove across the face. "What god has what it takes to deliver you out of my hands?" I wonder if the three smiled a bit. Did they look at one another and think, "Our God can." So through this trial and temptation, God is being challenged. This is not just about whether

they will obey the Law. This is about whether they know and trust God. Being tested by sinners is often more about God than about you. Jesus said, "If they hated me, you will be hated too." Expect no less.

With a Faithful Trust

(v.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. 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."

The three friends believe in the authority of God to order their lives. They do not have to answer to Nebuchadnezzar. They are expressing the simple doctrine that God's authority supersedes the authority of human governments. When the human authority commands sin, then believers obey God.

The three friends trust in the ability of God to deliver them. They know that God is able to either keep them from or deliver them through the fire. This is an astonishing faith. This is not presumption on their part. It is simple faith in an all powerful God who intervenes on behalf of His people.

The three friends rest in the autonomy of God to act as He pleases. They are willing to submit to whatever God decides to do. If He does not deliver them from death, that is OK. They will be delivered through death to paradise, to Abraham's bosom (before the resurrection, the dwelling place of the souls of believers after death).

Therefore, the three friends affirm that they will obey God regardless. They are not going to bow to the image. They are not swayed by the threat of a horrible death. Their faith is the foundation of their obedience. They believe God in an obeying way. *And they will pay the ultimate price.*

How does this ring in your soul? Not one of you is facing the threat of death if you continue to obey God. Yet, in all kinds of small ways, we presume upon God's power and do not submit to His providences. How are we frustrated and maybe even angry when God does not move for us like we want? If we struggle under the small pressures of finances, health, enemies, how will we fare when pagans threaten our lives if we continue to come to church?

Through a Fiery Punishment

(v.19-23)

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.

Nebuchadnezzar now is roaring angry. He had hoped that they would bow. Now they won't even bend. How dare they!!! Time to die.

So they will be punished in an overheated furnace. More coal or wood is shoveled into the firebox. The dampers are opened wide. The billows pump madly. The furnace roars and begins to glow red hot. Stout soldiers are summoned to bind the three friends and to take them to the furnace. In the haste of the king and the heat of the furnace, the soldiers perish as they throw the three friends into the fire.

They are punished by a consuming fire. Now I want you to stop and think about that. Think about accidentally putting your hand on a hot stove. How long can you hold your finger in a candle flame? What about in an acetylene torch? Now imagine that for refusing to obey an earthly authority, you are about to be set aflame. How will your faith stand then?

See, this is where the kingship of Christ is move visibly seen. That God is king above all kings is seen in the stoning of Stephen, the martyrdom of James, Peter and Paul. It is seen in humble saints whose blood soaked the sands of Rome's Coliseum and whose bodies were torches to light the Nero's and Caligula's roads. At the hands of sinners, believers have been stoned, burned alive, sawn asunder, stretched on the rack and lost their heads. Their voices rise from believing hearts and dying lips to proclaim that our God is king above all kings. He is the sovereign who has redeemed us and rules over us. No threat of death will cause us to worship another.

But, in the relative ease of our lives, do the lost around us see the kingship of Christ over us? Is this unmistakably visible in the way we talk and in the way we live? Are we confident in God's power and calm under His providences? Are we courageous to speak and committed no matter what? Does Christ actually rule over all our lives? Does Christ's redemption of us and reign over us actually make us different?

Glorifying in Deliverance

(v.24-30)

How does God bring about His deliverance?

By an Unexpected Person

(v.24-25)

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."

Here, it is. This is what the first three chapters of Daniel have been bringing us to: amazement at the personal presence of God in the trials of His people. Through the open door of the furnace, Nebuchadnezzar sees four men walking around in the fire, unscathed. The fourth man looks like the son of the gods.

Now, any Jew reading this would know that the fourth man was the angel of the Lord. Nebuchadnezzar describes what he sees through the words and concepts he has. He sees the angel of the Lord; but his framework is the Babylonian system of religion.

Here is the Lord's answer to Nebuchadnezzar's question: what god is there who can deliver them? THIS GOD. The High King of heaven will send His Son to de-

liver His people out of the fire. Here once again is not just an angelic messenger: here is the very Son of God, appearing in the Old Testament. He comes to His people in trials. He walks with them in troubles. He parts the waters for some. He provides food in the wilderness. He preserves in the midst in the furnace. Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil for He is with us (Psalm 23:4). We seek to have God's power, provision and protection, but most of all we desire His person and His presence. Regardless of whether we live or die, we will be satisfied if He is with us.

With an Unbelievable Safety

(v.26-27)

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.

Ah, look at the crowd. What had been an object of fear and anger has now become an object curiosity. They gather around to see what is going on. Out of the roaring furnace (now presumably turned down so that the king can be near the door) step the three friends, unsigned, unburned, unharmed. The fire had no power over them for the High King has power over all.

For a God Exalting Proclamation

(v.28-29)

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."

The king recognizes the God of the three friends. He witnesses to their faith and their faithfulness. He calls on the nation to recognize and honor the God of Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. His proclamation declares the awesome power of God to act on behalf of His people. Yes, there is fear in this proclamation, lest this awesome God who is the great God and the powerful King now move against Babylon or against Nebuchadnezzar.

By an Honoring Promotion

(v.30)

³⁰ Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

While it may not always work this way for God's people, the three friends are honored by promotion. They are given even higher rank and recognition than they have had before. This may be another aspect of the king's pride – he can point to these three among his mighty leaders as men who can walk unharmed among fire. His promotion of them may well have served to elevate himself.

Conclusion The legacy of the three friends is written for our instruction and as an illustration that we might live among sinners declaring that our God is King. Faith in God's power and submission to God's providences are at the core of living well among sinners.

Our faith and trust rests in the God who shows Himself mighty on behalf of the three friends. We believe His Word, trust His character and rest in His promises. These are not just Christian slogans, but are the life blood flow through our hearts. As we live among the nations, may God grant us faith and faithfulness.

Once again, 1 Peter informs our faith and shapes our obedience. As exiles with God's word and God's people, we are called to submit as servants even under great suffering. In the days to come, may we clearly show to all the Kingship of God over all.

Do people who watch your life know who really rules you?

Christ will be with you in the time of testing. He will be with you the hour of trial. He will be with you to show how great He is. He will be with you to deliver you from evil. He will be with you in your standing. He will be with you in your serving. He will be with you in your submitting. He will be with you in your suffering. He will be with you in your dying. May that be enough.

