

Faith Amidst Flames

Daniel 3:1-30

Studies in Daniel #4

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It's easy for us with all our temporal and tangible prosperity to forget that the church across the world today as well as in all ages and places has suffered. I heard an interview this week with a Christian apologist who debates and writes against Islam in which the radio host said, "They're threatening our way of life!" The apologist replied: "Christianity is flourishing all over the world without our way of life; that's not what it's about."

As we journey by faith back to sixth century BC God's people were in exile in Babylon because of their sins. Through men like Daniel he reminded his people not only that they had a future but that in the here and now he was with them. And he continues to be present with his people especially where they face opposition. Amen? Daniel 3 is a story of saints in the hands of a saving God and their *Faith Amidst Flames*.¹

Nebuchadnezzar Shows His Hubris (vv. 1-15)

Did you notice how repetitive this story is? That's intentional. The theology is taught through the tedium. The story begins as *Nebuchadnezzar*

¹ Davis, *Daniel*, 50.

² http://www.swierenga.com/DisloyalDutch_pap.html.

³ Davis, *Daniel*, 58.

⁴ Richard P. Belcher Jr., "The Role of Heavenly Beings in Daniel," in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised*, ed. Miles V. Van Pelt (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2016), 548-549.

shows his hubris. And we see this in several ways repeated in our text.

First, in his creating an image. We have no idea when this story took place in relation to the story before, but they're linked here. But right after he had a nightmare of an image of a massive statue; he **made** one! But remember: in his nightmare the statue only had a head of gold; Nebuchadnezzar's creation is *all gold* (v. 1). While his nightmare was in his head, now he's made one in reality and its **height was sixty cubits** (90 feet) **and its breadth six cubits** (9 feet). He's just confessed Israel's God to be "God of gods and Lord of kings" (2:47), but now he worships the creature rather than Creator who is blessed forever (Rom. 1:25). O much for his profession of faith! He shows that his faith was like the seed that falls on rocky soil, immediately springs up, but quickly dies because it has no depth (Matt. 13). And to show us how ridiculous this really is, right from the first verse Daniel begins repeating two key words. Who **made** it? Nebuchadnezzar. We're told that twice. Who **set it up**? Nebuchadnezzar. We're told that nine times. As the psalmist says about idolatry, "Those who make them become like them" (Ps. 115:9). Like even more ancient Babel, Nebuchadnezzar wants to make a name for himself and his kingdom (Gen. 11). So what's the image of? It was some visible demonstration of the power

of Babylon. It was a symbol of the Almighty State. Be aware, brothers and sisters, of the lesson of human history: governments always descend into thinking of themselves as god. From cradle to grave, is their promise. And we read in 2 Thessalonians 2 that this self-divinization is what anti-Christ does, “who opposed and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God” (2 Thess. 2:4).

We see Nebuchadnezzar’s hubris in a second way: in his worshipping an image. We read twice that **Nebuchadnezzar...gather[ed]** his government officials from all **the provinces** of his kingdom, and twice we read the lengthy list (vv. 2, 3). For what? A **dedication** ceremony (vv. 2, 3). And what did they do? **They stood before the image** (v. 3). And after they were **commanded...when** they **hear[d] the sound** of the huge orchestra Nebuchadnezzar had assembled, they all **fell down** (v. 7). How ridiculous! Nebuchadnezzar wanted image bearers of God to fall down and worship an image of a man made by a man! Oh, and I almost forgot, this was on the coercive threat of death in a **burning fiery furnace** (v. 6). We can already hear the shots across our bow from so-called enlightened progressives: “If you don’t renounce your antiquated and bigoted ideas about the nature of

humanity as male and female, about marriage, and about using sexuality as God says, we will tax you into non-existence and re-educate your ministers!”

Nebuchadnezzar’s hubris is shown in a third way: he had a secret police as **certain Chaldeans** (who had been embarrassed in ch. 2) **came forward and maliciously accused the Jews** (v. 8), who would not go along with the Statism of Babylon. It’s interesting that they say, “**O king, live forever!**” They said this in 2:4 but he was suspicious of them; but now when it serves his ego he accepts it! They accuse **Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego** of not **serv[ing] your gods or worship[ing] the golden image that you have**—and there’s that repetitive refrain again—“**set up.**” And as Nebuchadnezzar interrogates them about their compliance to his decree, he not only began in hubris by making the image he ends in hubris: “**And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?**”

Let’s not think that this Statism is so far removed from us. We see it in the new sexual revolution. But it’s been with us as a society for a long time and in more innocuous ways. Did you know that during WWI our federal government started a propaganda ministry to its own citizens? One of the agenda items was introducing the American flag in sanctuaries during worship services. And did you know that the men and women of the

Christian Reformed Church, from which our denomination sprang, who opposed this practice on theological grounds were called anti-American, pro-German, had burning crosses placed on their home and church lawns, were beaten by mobs, had their barns and farms burnt to the ground, for example?² And all in the family-friendly, wholesome states of Iowa and Michigan! The governor of Iowa, Warren Harding, who eventually became President, unilaterally decreed that all worship services had to be in English! And this was back when our country was so Christian and godly!

The Three Show their “Heroism” (vv. 16–18)

So there the three men stood before the King. What would they do? The kingdom was watching. The people of God were watching. *The three show their “heroism.”* What I mean, of course, is their faith. Their answer is one for the ages:

“O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. 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. 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.”

“We serve God whether he saves our lives or not!” What faith! I read a story about how the communist Russian KGB traveled around to churches to

² http://www.swierenga.com/DisloyalDutch_pap.html.

see how loyal Christians were to the Party. On one occasion an agent saw a woman kissing the feet of a statue of Jesus—obviously we don't endorse this. But it illustrates the point: she was asked, "Are you ready to kiss the feet of the Leader of the Communist Party." Her answer: "Yes, if you crucify him first!"³

What was the problem with Nebuchadnezzar's decree to these three Jewish men? It violated both the first and second commandments: no other gods and no worship of images. Would you stand up to your government in order to obey your God's laws? We can't even control ourselves from treating Sunday like any other day of the week with all our shopping, parties, sports, school activities, concerts, etc. in a time of peace and prosperity, how are we going to in a time of persecution? Lord help us! We'll just wait for our miracle of being preserved in the flames, right? But the miracle here is the faith to refuse to bow the knee! It was once said of John Knox that he feared the face of no man because he feared God.

Nebuchadnezzar Turns Up the Heat (vv. 19–23)

Their faith causes **Nebuchadnezzar** to be **filled with fury** (v. 19) and to *turn up the heat* of his death furnace **seven times more than it was**

³ Davis, *Daniel*, 58.

usually heated (v. 19). **Some of the mighty men of his army bound Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego...in their cloaks, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments** (vv. 20, 21). This heat even **killed those men who took up** the three men (v. 22), showing us how little Nebuchadnezzar viewed their lives in his fury. Then for the third time we're told they **fell bound into the burning fiery furnace** (v. 23). Think that's important? Why three mentions? It really happened. It is the precursor of what's about to happen.

The Three Are Not Hurt (vv. 24–30)

But then Nebuchadnezzar is filled with **astonish[ment]** (v. 24). Why? Three men entered bound; *four* men were walking unbound, unhurt (not even **the hair of their heads was...singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them** [v. 27]); three men came out (vv. 24–26). And he makes this astonishing confession: **“the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods”** (v. 25). The King James has overly interpreted by saying “the Son of God.” The Aramaic is “gods” as Nebuchadnezzar is describing what he sees from his vantage point as a pagan. What he sees is some divine being.

Who is it? Why is this character mentioned in the story? Elsewhere in

the Old Testament there is a figure called “the angel of the Lord” and he is described as a man (Gen. 32:33–32; Num. 22:22–35; Josh. 5:13–15; Judg. 6:11–23; 13:3–23).⁴ He’s also described as God himself. He’s described as “encamp[ing] around those who fear him and deliver[ing] them” (Ps. 34:7). What we see here is that the angel of the Lord enters the realm of death to save these three men. The book of Hebrews says “by faith...[they] quenched the power of fire” (Heb. 11:34). Sound familiar? This is the Son of God before the incarnation prefiguring how he would enter the realm of our death in this world and undergo hell on the cross for us! He came to demonstrate to all the Jews that the Lord was in the midst of his people in Babylon even in the fiery furnace.

Turn over with me to Isaiah 43:2, where this promise was made: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.” Sound familiar to you? It’s the same promise made to all believers in suffering in 1 Peter 1: “though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that

⁴ Richard P. Belcher Jr., “The Role of Heavenly Beings in Daniel,” in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised*, ed. Miles V. Van Pelt (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2016), 548–549.

perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:6–7).