

DANIEL LESSON 9 NOTES

Daniel 3:8-30

Daniel's Companions and the Fiery Furnace

The Accusation (Daniel 3:8-12)

The Chaldeans approach the king and bring their accusation, likely spurred by resentment that these foreigners had been put in charge of the province of Babylon. Usually, subjugated people were placed in positions of servitude, not elevated to authority. These young men not only refused to worship the gods of Babylon, but they were a prominent foreign element in the government. Miller suggests that an additional motive for the Chaldean's hostility may have involved anti-Semitism, based on the statement that they "denounced the Jews," and again referred to them as "certain Jews" in v. 12. "These references to their nationality," Miller continues, "seems to reflect resentment toward the Jewish people and toward their religious practices that caused them to act to very differently from the rest of the world. Such anti-Semitism is ultimately satanic in origin, as Whitcomb explains: 'Satan knew that through this divinely chosen people would come the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of all mankind.'"

Not all commentators agree that the suggestion of anti-Semitism is warranted, given the historical record of the generally good treatment of the Jewish captives in Babylon. Nevertheless, there is clearly a motive of jealousy in their accusation. Walvoord notes that "the word **accused** translates a common Aramaic expression that literally means, 'they ate their pieces,' hence, to devour piecemeal. This connotes slander or malicious accusation which devours the accused piece by piece." (86) Miller adds the observation that the Chaldeans now accuse the three young men by name, but do not mention Daniel. This arouses speculation concerning whether Daniel was present and refused to bow but was of too high a position to be accused, or whether he was elsewhere in the empire carrying out his duties. Pentecost and Spence agree with commentators who note the absence of all reference to Daniel in this chapter. Miller concludes, however: "Whatever the reason for his not being mentioned, Daniel's dedication to his God and

submission to the Law certainly precluded his bowing before the image.” Thus the three friends face the accusations alone.

Having set the stage by reminding the king of the details of his decree and of the punishment for disobedience, the Chaldeans make three charges against Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego: they disrespected the king, they don't serve the king's gods, and they refuse to worship the king's golden image. Regarding the first charge, it seems that the Chaldeans almost rebuke the king for making a serious mistake in placing foreigners in high offices, entrusting them with the political security of the entire realm. Such high officials should demonstrate unquestionable personal loyalty, but they had shown disregard for the king.

Secondly, the accusation that they don't serve Nebuchadnezzar's gods goes beyond religious differences. The concept of political loyalty is demonstrated in worshipping the image in recognition that the king's gods have given him his prominent position, and to challenge his gods is to challenge Nebuchadnezzar himself and to cast doubt on the young men's political integrity. Thus the third accusation, that they refuse to worship the golden image, is given as proof of the Chaldeans' suspicions of disloyalty. “The arguments were calculated to arouse the anger of Nebuchadnezzar and to bring about the downfall of these three men with the possibility that the Chaldeans themselves might be given greater authority in political affairs.” (Walvoord, 87)

The Inquisition (Daniel 3:13-18)

Spence comments that it is likely that this huge festival of dedication of the new idol of the Babylonian king lasted several days. Nebuchadnezzar seems to see the disobedience of the three friends not only as a threat to his political security, closely linked in his mind to an affront to his god, but also as a personal affront. Nevertheless the king, seeming to strive for fairness in spite of his anger, is willing to give them a second chance to obey his command, likely at the sunrise of the following day. Walvoord further observes that since it is probable that they had been in office for some years and had been excellent in performing their duties, the king may have felt that they had earned this rare second chance.

When he brings them in, he asks if the accusations against them are true, and then he asks two clarifying questions: do they serve his gods, and do they worship the golden image. Distinguishing between serving his gods and worshipping the image seems to confirm the idea that the worship is primarily political. He then repeats the entire edict, making it clear that, whatever the motives of the Chaldeans, there is no alternative but that the friends worship the image. He thus gives them the opportunity to obey his edict, or to be cast into the fiery furnace.

Finally he asks one more amazing question: “Who is that God who will deliver you out of my hands?” He was fully aware of the superiority of the Hebrew’s God when his dream was interpreted in chapter 2, but he can’t believe that their God would, in these circumstances, be able to deliver them from his hand. He assumes he is supreme in his power and doesn’t expect any god to interfere, especially the God of the Jews who, though he may reveal secrets, could not prevent the conquering of their homeland. Thus in Nebuchadnezzar’s mind, their God must be inferior to the king as well as to the gods of the conquering Babylonians. The challenge then becomes a conflict between Nebuchadnezzar and Yahweh.

Ordinarily, one might expect the three friends to explain why they could not obey, but the issue is now clear: is their God able to deliver them or not? Thus their reply simply states that there is no need to defend themselves before the king. Rather, they state positively that their God not only is able to deliver them from any fiery furnace, but that He will deliver them. Pentecost adds that “their words, ‘the God we serve,’ show that they recognize God’s authority was greater than the authority claimed by Nebuchadnezzar. Though they were employed by Nebuchadnezzar, they **served** Yahweh, who explicitly forbade idol worship.”

Spence notes that the Aramaic verbal form rendered ‘he will rescue’ (*yesezib*) could also be translated ‘he may rescue,’ which Spence feels would be better in this context. However this word is translated, there is clearly no doubt in the minds of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego about the ability of their God to deliver them. The three show absolute confidence in God, stating that their God is greater than Nebuchadnezzar and is able to deliver them from the king’s judgment in a display of His superior power.

The next phrase “but if not” refers not to God’s ability, but to their recognition of the possibility that God may choose not to deliver them. They humbly accept the fact that God does not always choose to intervene miraculously in human circumstances, even on behalf of his servants, for sometimes it is not in the purpose of God to deliver faithful ones from martyrdom. Even if God does not deliver them, however, this will not change their decision to refuse to worship the Babylonian gods as well as the golden image. Obeying God was more important than life to these three, so if God chose not to deliver them, they would still obey Him. Therefore they refused to serve Nebuchadnezzar’s gods, or worship the image he made.

Leupold aptly says, “The quiet, modest, yet withal very positive attitude of faith that these three men display is one of the noblest examples in the Scriptures of faith fully resigned to the will of God. These men ask for no miracle; they expect none. Theirs is the faith that says as in Job 13:15: *Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him.*” (89) Thus the Hebrews believed that their God *could*, but not necessarily that He *would* spare their lives.

The Sentence (Daniel 3:19-23)

Walvoord then notes that the king is “full of fury,” as angry as he could possibly be. His pride is so severely damaged that he foolishly orders the furnace to be heated seven times hotter than usual. Actually, a slow fire would have been far more torture. Geoffrey King observes that “losing his temper is always the mark of a little man. His furnace was hot, but he himself got hotter! And when a man gets full of fury, he gets full of folly. There is no fool on earth like a man who has lost his temper. And Nebuchadnezzar did a foolish thing. He ought to have cooled the furnace seven times less if he had wanted to hurt them; but instead of that in his fury he heated it seven times *more*.” (90) Baldwin points out that “seven times” is a proverbial expression. Hartman agrees, stating that this is an idiomatic way of saying “as hot as possible.” Thus the furnace is heated to maximum capacity.

Now instead of giving Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego another opportunity to disobey him, the king immediately orders their execution, commanding the strongest men in the army to bind them hastily, still in all of their clothing, and to cast them into the over-heated fiery furnace. The detailed listing of the bound men's flammable garments is in contrast to the usual practice of victims being stripped of their clothing. This provides yet another specific detail to the miracle about to happen. It's not clear why the king needed exceptionally strong men for this duty. Young suggests: "Probably the choice of men of strength was intended to forestall any intervention, either of human or of Divine power." The urgency of the king's command indicates that the soldiers were forced to carry out the command so hurriedly that they did not have time to protect themselves from the fire. Thus, when they threw the victims into the furnace, the extreme heat (or a shift in wind direction) killed the obedient soldiers immediately. The decree having been fulfilled, however, Nebuchadnezzar could now leave to the furnace the task of executing the men who had challenged his authority and his gods.

Miller notes that because the wording states that the three men "fell down" into the furnace, it suggests that they were thrown in through an opening at the top. "Furnaces of this kind would have had an opening at the top and at the side. The furnace may have been built on the side of a small hill or man-made mound of earth, enabling the soldiers to walk to the top and throw the three Hebrews into it. Later Nebuchadnezzar would be able to look into the opening on the side and observe the three in the fire."

The Deliverance (Daniel 3:24-27)

Apparently Nebuchadnezzar was seated so that he could see the interior of the furnace from a safe distance. He couldn't believe what he observed, and asked his counselors to confirm: weren't only three men cast into the furnace? "True, O king," they agreed. The astounded king observes that instead of three men he saw four; instead of being bound, they were free; instead of writhing in anguish in the flames, they were walking about in the fire and making no attempt to come out. They were obviously unhurt, and the fourth looked like "a son of the gods."

The term used to describe this fourth man is the Aramaic form *elahin*, which is plural whenever used in the Aramaic section of Daniel, while the singular *Elohim* is used when the true God is meant, as in Daniel 6:20. Thus, while some older translations say that the fourth man is like “the Son of God,” the better more consistent translation is “a son of the gods.” Walvoord further observes that, while it is entirely possible that the fourth person in the fiery furnace was indeed the Son of God, it is doubtful that Nebuchadnezzar would have comprehended this. Nevertheless, the presence of the fourth person in the furnace added to the king’s astonishment at the tremendous miracle he was witnessing.

It is immediately apparent to Nebuchadnezzar that the God of Israel, here referenced as “the most high God,” is more powerful than the Babylonian gods. At the king’s command, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are ordered to come out of the blazing furnace and to come before him. Though the three young men had refused to obey him in the matter of worship, they now fulfill his command to come. Scripture records that from among the great throng, the king’s most important officials acted as witnesses of the delivering power of God. No one could question that a mighty miracle had been performed: the hair of the three Hebrews had not been singed, the garments in which they had been bound had not changed, and not even the smell of fire was upon them. The only damage was to the ropes which had bound them, “symbols of Nebuchadnezzar’s unbelief and wrath, which were destroyed in the flames.” (92)

Spence cautions that the fact that Nebuchadnezzar acknowledges Jehovah as “Most High God” doesn’t imply recognition of his supreme divinity. “It was simply a matter of what we may call religious etiquette to address gods of the higher class as ‘god most high.’” Whether or not the officials had seen the fourth figure in the flames, they were able to bear testimony to the fact that the three friends had escaped. This event was all the more important to the Babylonians as to them fire was a god high in the pantheon. The God of Israel was thus manifested as so much greater than Iz-bar, that he could deliver his servants even from the very element in which Iz-bar had his power. The fact that even their garments were not burned, and not even a hair singed, while the cords that had been used to bind them were consumed, emphasizes their deliverance, and shows it to be the

work of a higher power, who could discriminate and limit the deliverance. The cords were consumed, but the garments of his servants were preserved even from the smell of fire. Jehovah had shown himself as the supreme Revealer of secrets when he enabled Daniel to tell Nebuchadnezzar his dream. He now manifested himself as Master of the most powerful of elements – fire. The Jews could thus maintain their faith unchallenged.

The Result (Daniel 3:28-30)

The first result is that Nebuchadnezzar recognizes the delivering power of the Hebrew God, who sent his angel to deliver the three men. It was a common belief of the Babylonians that their gods used messengers to accomplish their purposes. Thus Nebuchadnezzar interprets the event this way. The term *bar-eloheen* translated as “a son of the gods” in verse 25 to describe the fourth man in the furnace, is now regarded by Nebuchadnezzar as an angel, sometimes translated as messenger. Spence warns us that we need to guard against importing Hebrew ideas into the utterance of the king. It was quite in keeping with his mythological beliefs that a great god like the God of the Hebrews might have a messenger to be his instrument of deliverance of his servants. Walvoord adds that there is no clear proof that the fourth person in the furnace was actually deity or an angel, as all we have is Nebuchadnezzar’s conclusion based on what he saw. It may well be that the protector of the young men was Christ Himself appearing in the form of an angel. It could also be that God sent a mighty angel to protect them, which is also plausible and in keeping with other Scripture. Miller adds that “From the Christian perspective, we know that the preincarnate Christ did appear to individuals in the Old Testament. It is certainly true that when believers go through fiery trials Christ is with them. The three Hebrews experienced literally the promise of Isaiah 43:2.”

The second result of this miraculous delivery is that just as Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged Daniel’s God at the conclusion of chapter 2, so here also he admits

the power of the God of Daniel's three friends, and issues a decree to commemorate the occasion of this miraculous deliverance. The king now not only recognizes the Hebrew God, but actually commends the three young men for their trust in their God, recognizing their superior obligation to worship no deity but their own. Spence adds that Nebuchadnezzar recognizes not only the deliverance as evidence of the truth of Jehovah's Divinity, but also is impressed by the willingness with which his servants were ready to offer their bodies to be burnt. "This was a remarkable admission for a king in Nebuchadnezzar's position." (93) Now the king orders his people to respect this Hebrew God or risk being cut to pieces and their houses being made into dunghills. This acknowledgment, though showing that the king is impressed, does not yet show that he has been brought to the place of placing his trust in the God of Israel.

"Still, Nebuchadnezzar recognized in Jehovah only the God of the Jews, and in the faithfulness of the three Hebrews only a species of religious patriotism, which he could at once understand and respect without having the slightest belief in monotheism, or even any comprehension of such a notion." Thus the decree was not out of a desire to protect the honor of Jehovah, but rather for the safety of the Babylonian empire from the wrath of so great a god. The punishment is the same as that against the wise men for failing to tell the dream. The object of the punishment here was "to remove utterly from the earth the wrong-doer and every remembrance of him, so that the offended deity might have no excuse for visiting the kingdom of Babylon with judgments." All that the king asserts in reference to Jehovah is that no other god has been able to deliver his worshippers out of the very realm of the god of fire. Thus, the king's subjects are to avoid enraging the God of the Hebrews, not to worship him.

Walvoord finally observes: "Just as the reign of Nebuchadnezzar is symbolic of the entire period of the times of the Gentiles, so the deliverance of Daniel's three companions is typical of the deliverance of Israel during the period of Gentile domination. Particularly at the end of the Gentile period Israel will be in fiery affliction, but as Isaiah prophesied, 'But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, and he that formed you, O Israel: Fear not: for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. 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.” Is. 43:1-2

Now Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are again promoted as principal officials in the province of Babylon, relieved of any opposition, and with the special favor of the king. Thus, Walvoord concludes, Chapter three as a whole can be taken as a thrilling account of young men who remained true to God even in severe trial. The account leaves no room for excuses for moral spiritual compromise under contemporary influences. “In spite of separation from parents and of the corrupting influences of Babylonian religion, political pressure, and immorality, they did not waver in their hour of testing.” Though likely Daniel included this chapter to remind Israel of the evils of idolatry and the necessity of obeying God rather than men, it is not an invented account, but rather a display of the faithfulness of God, who is ever ready to deliver those who are faithful to him, even in captivity. The contrast of the God of Israel to the idols of Babylon is a reminder that the god of this world, behind Gentile dominion, is doomed to judgment at the hands of the sovereign God. “This is illustrated in the fall of Babylon and the succeeding empires of Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. The downfall of these nations is a foreshadowing of the end of the times of the Gentiles, when the Lion of the tribe of Judah returns to reign.”(94)

Many commentators agree that there is prophetic imagery in this account. Spence references the similarities to events in the great Tribulation as prophesied in 2 Thes. 2:4 and Rev. 13:7-15. Pentecost summarizes: “A Gentile ruler will demand for himself the worship that belongs to God. Any who refuse to acknowledge his right to receive worship will be killed. Assuming political and religious power, he will oppress Israel. Many of the people in the world, including many in Israel, like the three in Daniel’s day, will refuse. Many who will not worship the Antichrist will be severely punished; some will be martyred for their faithfulness to Jesus Christ. But a few will be delivered from those persecutions by the Lord Jesus Christ at His second coming. In the forthcoming Tribulation period

God will do for the believing remnant what He did for Daniel's three companions...No doubt the remnant of believing Jews in that coming day will find great comfort, consolation and instruction from this incident in the lives of Daniel's three companions, as those in Daniel's day must have found as they were living under Gentile rule."

Ironside adds: "Why did God cause this particular bit of history to be recorded in the book of the prophet Daniel? ...This event, though actual history, is a typical scene picturing the trial and deliverance of a faithful remnant of Daniel's people that is to take place in the Time of the End. There will come a day when, (like the great image set up by Nebuchadnezzar) what the Lord Jesus calls 'The Abomination of Desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet' is going to be set up in Jerusalem by the Antichrist of the future. (Matt. 24:15) After the church has been caught away to heaven, at the close of this dispensation, the Jews will be deceived into owning the claims of a blasphemous impostor claiming to be the Messiah. He it is who is going to place the Abomination that makes desolate. He will demand that all men worship the image that he sets up; and thus the scene of the plain of Dura will be reenacted. In that day, as in the past, a remnant among the Jews will refuse to own his claims or obey his voice. This will be the signal for the breaking out of the great tribulation, 'the time of Jacob's trouble;' but many of the faithful will be saved out of it, just as these three young Hebrew men were preserved by God in the midst of, and eventually delivered from, the furnace of fire."

Walvoord concludes: "Chapter 3, the first of four chapters dealing with individuals, is an obvious preparation for chapter 4, which relates Nebuchadnezzar's conversion. In the deliverance of the three faithful companions of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar is confronted by the superior power of God which can nullify his commandment to execute the three men. This is a preparation for the lesson he was to learn in Chapter 4 that all of his power was delegated by God and could be withdrawn at His will. In this chapter we see for the last time Daniel's three companions, and no further reference is made to their subsequent experiences." (94)

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