

Daniel's Friends Face The Fiery Furnace

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church
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Daniel 3

The greatest battle every fought was not at Omaha Beach on D-Day, Falusia in Iraq or Antietam in the Civil War. It is the battle that rages in the human heart. Who will reign supreme? Christ or Satan? Which will conquer? Pride or submission? That battle is fought today in our hearts, and it was fought in the heart of Nebuchadnezzar 26 centuries ago. That's why the Bible is such a relevant Book: it gives insights into those things that have to do with the great issues that affect every human being, whether they live now or long ago.

As we begin our study of the three Hebrew worthies and the fiery furnace, we'll take a brief look at a couple of preliminary items. First, it's always interested me that people identify the Jewish young men in our story as "worthies." If you mention "The Three Hebrew Worthies," the odds are pretty good that people, at least those familiar with the Bible will know you're referring to Hananiah, Azariah and Mishael. (Because of their faithfulness to the true God, I'm not going to use their Babylonian names today.) I don't know at what time they acquired this nickname, but it seems to fit. Though it doesn't seem to be talking about them, in Nahum 2:5 we read, "He remembers His worthies."

This story is memorialized in Gospel music. There's a song called "The Fourth Man," which has in it the line, "They wouldn't bow, they wouldn't bend, they wouldn't burn." There's another

song that touches on the fact that while there were four in the furnace, the story says that when called, "these three came out," and supposedly a little boy asks, "What happened to the Fourth?" His mother, in the song, explains that "He's still in the fire," and makes the point that Jesus is with us when **we** pass through fiery trials.

Many people wonder about Daniel in this chapter. It doesn't mention that he refused to bow like the other three. I think the simplest answer is that Daniel must have been out of town on a royal assignment. It's inconceivable that he would have caved in, given his stand on the king's food in chapter one and the lion's den episode in chapter six.

Something else that makes a few people wonder is the skinny proportions of the statue. The Bible says that it was 90 feet tall and 9 feet wide, which is a 10:1 ratio, making a pretty thin statue. If you take an average man who is 6 feet tall and about 18 inches across the shoulders, that is a 4:1 ratio. The best way to understand this is to imagine that the height measurement in the Bible story no doubt includes a pedestal. When we speak of the Statue of Liberty, for example, it is 305 feet tall, but more than one half of that is its pedestal.

Since we're thinking about the dimensions of this statue, be aware that the Babylonians used a math system which had 60 as its base, not the 100 that we're used to. Actually, 60 makes an excellent numerical base. Just think of how many numbers go into 60: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 12, 15, 20, 30 and 60, for a total of 12. Even though it's a larger number, there are only 9 numbers that go into 100: 1, 2, 4, 5, 10, 20, 25, 50 and 100. The 60 based-system of the Babylonians has filtered down to us and is found in our measurement of time (the 60 minute hour) and space (360 degrees in the compass).

Now let's get into the story. "Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its width six cubits. He set it up in the plain of Dura, in the province of

Babylon. And King Nebuchadnezzar sent word to gather together the satraps, the administrators, the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces, to come to the dedication of the image which King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. So...they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Then a herald cried aloud: 'To you it is commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that at the time you hear the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, you shall fall down and worship the gold image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up; and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace.'" Daniel 3:1-6.

It says that the king erected this image of gold that was about 90 feet tall, a cubit being about 18 inches in length. That's a pretty tall statue, basically equivalent to a 9 story building. For those of us who live near Escondido, Palomar Hospital is 9 stories high. This image was set up on a broad, flat plain, the plain of Dura, so that it could be seen from a great distance.

Why did Nebuchadnezzar erect this image? One thing we need to understand is the connection between the second and the third chapters of Daniel. Sometimes chapter divisions, given much later than when the Scriptures were originally written, can confuse us as to the bearing one chapter has upon another. What did we discover in chapter two? It was that there was a great and awesome image shown to the king in a dream, wasn't it? And it was made of metal. Here in chapter three we see that king has made an awesome image, similar to the one he saw in his dream. But there was one significant difference between the images of chapter two and chapter three. What was it? In the image of his dream, the statue had different kinds of metal in it. It had a head of gold, a chest of silver, and so on. And what did these different metals represent? God told him, through Daniel, that these different metals represented the different kingdoms that would reign over the earth.

The head of gold represented Babylon. How Nebuchadnezzar must have smiled when he heard that. But perhaps the most chilling words he ever heard followed: "after thee another." In other words, Babylon would not last forever; it would hand the scepter of rulership over to another, in this case the kingdom of Medo-Persia. At the time, when Nebuchadnezzar heard this pronouncement, given in the context of the miraculous recounting of the forgotten dream, he was sobered and accepting. Conviction had swept across his heart, and he knew the message came from the Sovereign Who reigns on high. He acknowledged the superiority of Yahweh. But, as is so often the case with human nature, spiritual impressions, if not nurtured, fade into the background and the old selfish desires rise to the forefront.

This is what happened with Nebuchadnezzar. The more he thought about another kingdom coming to take Babylon's place, the more it bothered him. It didn't fit into his plans. It wasn't how he saw the future unfolding. So eventually, despite his previous convictions, he decided to make a statement. He decided to take an action that would express his view of world rulership. It wouldn't be the same as the message of the dream. He would make an image, a copy, similar to the one in the dream, except it would be entirely of gold. Can you hear what he's saying by doing this? There was no place for a chest of silver, waist of bronze, legs of iron in his statue. It would be gold from head to toe. It would be Babylon from here to eternity. It was an act of defiance and obstinacy. It said, "I don't care what God said. I'm going to do it my way anyway." How foolish for mortal man to defy the Eternal One!

With that design in mind, Nebuchadnezzar commissioned the forming of his statue of gold. Not content in rebelling against God by himself, he would make a public statement of his way of thinking, and compel all to join in his expression of insubordination. When the Bible says it was of "pure gold," we don't have to understand that it was "solid gold." It was probably hollow, just as the Statue of Liberty is. But it must have been stupendous! A larger than life "Oscar," lustrous and gleaming,

piercing the skyline! And, to garner the support of all in this nationalistic, patriotic endeavor, everyone was invited to the dedication. At the prescribed sound of the Imperial Symphony Orchestra, all would bow and acknowledge the supremacy of Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom.

What about these instruments? From archeological evidence, it seems the Babylonian orchestra had instruments that would resemble guitars, harps, bagpipes, flutes, zithers and various horns. Their music would have sounded strange to our western ears anyway because they used a different scale than our "whole, whole, half, whole, whole, whole, half." Theirs was "half, whole, whole, half, whole, whole, whole, half." The point was that when the king's herald shouted and the orchestra blasted, then everyone was to bow to the image.

The only problem was that the Hebrews had been taught that this was in direct violation of the Commandments of God. The First Commandment said, "You shall have no other gods before Me" and the Second said, "You shall not bow down and worship graven images."

"Worship" is the key word in this chapter, appearing no less than 11 times! From the beginning, Satan has coveted the homage due to God alone. "How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, you who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart; 'I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.'" Isaiah 14:12-14.

Satan has always wanted to be worshiped. He was jealous of Jesus in heaven. When Christ was on this earth, one of the three temptations was an invitation to bow to Satan, with the promise that the devil would give Him "all this" if He did. It was Satan who inspired Nebuchadnezzar to challenge the express plan of

God, by altering the composition of the image and demand that all bow at its feet to voice their allegiance. In so doing, they would be disobeying God by defying His prophetic revelation and His Commandments by bowing in worship. They in effect would be **worshiping Satan**, and carrying forth his desire to rebel against God.

The three Hebrews faced a choice: would they obey God or man? This choice would have serious consequences, because the decree had stipulated that if anyone refused to bow to the image, they would be cast into a burning fiery furnace. Since the Babylonians did so much of their building with mud blocks which they fired into bricks (some of which have survived to this day), this "fiery furnace" was no doubt a large brick kiln close by on the plain of Dura, in which several people could stand. To say, "No" to the king was essentially to sign your own death sentence.

But for these three, the choice was easy. God had given them everything, including life itself. How could they deny Him Who had been so gracious to them? The language of their heart was, "How can we bow and sin against Him?" They would obey God, meaning that they would disobey the king's command, no matter what the cost.

"So at that time, when all the people heard the sound...of the music, all the people, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the gold image which King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Therefore at that time certain Chaldeans (who were alive because of Daniel's prayer in chapter 2!) came forward and accused the Jews. They spoke and said to King Nebuchadnezzar, 'O king, live forever! You, O king, have made a decree that everyone who hears the...music shall fall down and worship the gold image; and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. There are certain Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon. These men, O king have not paid due regard to you. They do not serve your gods or worship the gold image which you

have set up.” Daniel 3:7-12. Notice the word “or.” There must have been previous occurrences of non-compliance.

Notice the demeanor of Nebuchadnezzar in this story. It is consistent with someone who is struggling with a troubled conscience. He knew full well that he was going in a direction contrary to the revealed will of God. It was obstinacy and not submission; it was “my way,” and not “His way.” Someone once called that popular song, “I did it my way” the “sinner’s anthem.”

Upon hearing that the Hebrews had not complied with his command, Nebuchadnezzar lost control of his temper. “Then Nebuchadnezzar, in rage and fury” gave the order that they be brought forward to answer for their disregard of his explicit directive. Nebuchadnezzar is like King Saul, who, because he could see that his plans were not in keeping with God’s will, flew into a rage and tried to pin David to the wall with his javelin. One of the fruits of the Spirit is “self-control,” and unfortunately Nebuchadnezzar was in short supply of that commodity right then.

They brought the three Hebrews up and the king said something like, “What we’re doing here today is to give honor to Babylon the Great, by bowing to the image. Maybe you didn’t get the instructions right the first time. When you hear the music, then bow. Everybody’s doing it. And by the way, if you don’t, do you see that furnace over there? You’ll be thrown into it. Who is the god who will deliver you from my hand?”

The king’s question, “Who is the god who will deliver you” is reminiscent of Pharaoh’s “who is the LORD that I should obey His voice.” Exodus 5:2. It accurately reflects the attitudes of our godless age today. The fact was that Nebuchadnezzar was well acquainted with the religion of the Hebrews. It aggravated him to no end that these foreigners would not accede to his demand. With defiant tones he challenged, “Who is the god who will deliver you?” Unfortunately for Nebuchadnezzar, he already knew Who that God was! It was the same God Who could read minds, reveal

dreams and foretell the future! But the king was not yet at that time willing to surrender his life to God. **Conviction is not the same thing as conversion.** That greatest of all battles still raged in his heart.

Have you ever wondered why the Hebrews didn't say to themselves, "You know, we can bow here and pray to the true God. We'll have our morning worship right here." No, they didn't choose this way out, no more than Daniel closed his window when he prayed in chapter six. The price of obeying God would be high that day, but their love and loyalty to their God was so strong they were willing to pay it.

They answered the king, "We have not need to answer you in this matter." Daniel 3:16. The King James Version reads, "We are not careful to answer thee." What they're saying is, "We don't need to re-think this. We don't need more time or another opportunity to give you an answer. We don't need to draft a position paper. You could give us another chance, but it wouldn't change anything. Our decision is already made. If God wants to deliver us, He can. But we won't bow."

I know today there are many who promote the advantage of having an "open mind." But I've come to the conclusion that *in some things it's good to have a closed mind.* You've made a choice, and that's final. In regard to your commitment to Christ, it's good to have a closed mind. You don't need to "re-visit" the issue. You've chosen to follow God, and that's that. If you're married, with respect to your marriage it's good to have a closed mind. You've made a choice, and that's final. These Hebrews knew where they stood, and they didn't have to take time to reconsider it.

Then Nebuchadnezzar completely lost it. He lost his temper, his face grew red and he ordered that the furnace be heated seven times hotter than usual. (It was probably fueled with oil-soaked straw or something like that.) The Hebrews were then

tossed in, and the furnace was so hot that those who threw them in perished.

The king composed himself and probably said, "Now let's get back to the dedication. I'm sorry about these three, but we tried to tell them. We gave them a chance, but they wouldn't listen. Maestro, let the orchestra strike the note again and we'll proceed." But before the music director could lift his baton, do you know what Nebuchadnezzar did? He snuck a glance over to the furnace. Like a magnet, his troubled conscience pulled his vision over to the furnace to "make sure" the disobedient ones were destroyed. Why did he do that? There was "no question" but that they had perished! The heat of the fire had killed even those who put them in there! There was no "reason" to confirm their death! Or, was there? His troubled conscience wouldn't let him return to the image dedication without stealing a peek over to the fiery furnace. A deep foreboding, a nagging premonition told him, "You'd better look over there." He was fighting against God! The battle in his heart raged! Like Saul who became Paul, he found it was hard to "kick against the goads." Acts 9:5. Have you been there, my friend? How much easier to surrender to Christ and live His way than fight off the impulses of His gracious Spirit!

Nebuchadnezzar's eyes were drawn over to the furnace, and what he saw brought amazement words can't describe. "Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished; and he rose in haste and spoke, saying to his counselors, 'Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?' They answered and said to the king, 'True, O king.' 'Look!' he answered, 'I see four men loose walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.'" Daniel 3:24, 25. How did Nebuchadnezzar know what the Son of God looked like? Besides the Spirit whispering to his heart, he had seen the character of God's Son in the lives of the faithful Hebrews.

I wonder how long the Hebrews and their Lord would have walked about in the furnace if the king didn't notice! Not that it would have mattered; the fire had no power over them

whatsoever. They were in the company of Jesus, the Giver of life. Nature and science are the servants of their Master; not the other way around.

"Come on out!" the king shouted, and when they examined them they found the fire had not hurt them at all. They didn't even smell of smoke, which is one of the most pervasive things on earth. One time my parents bought a used car from someone who had smoked. No matter what we did, that car always smelled of cigarettes.

What does this story have to do with you and me? "Beloved," wrote Peter, "Do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you." I Peter 4:12. Part of being a Christian is experiencing trials, but with the knowledge that Jesus is in the fire with you. He's been there; He's still there, and He knows what you're going through. Here's a question for you: let's see if anyone knows the answer. What was the only thing that burned in the furnace? It wasn't them, and it wasn't their clothes. What did the king say? Didn't we throw three men "bound" into the furnace, and now I see four men "walking." What had burned in the fire? The ropes that bound them. Jesus allows trials to come to free us of those things that bind us, that hold us back in our spiritual life.

This story has application to the trials and temptations that come to all Christians in all times. But it has special application to us who live in what the Bible calls the Last Days. Notice that Jesus saved them in and through the trial, not "from" it. There is a teaching popular today among many Christians that God is going to rapture His Church away before the last day tribulations, but that teaching is not supported by the Bible. Noah was saved in and through the flood, not from it. Israel was saved in and through the plagues of Egypt. They were not taken to Canaan before the plagues of Egypt fell, any more than God's people will be taken to heavenly Canaan before the plagues of Revelation

come. The Hebrews were saved in and through the fire, not from it.

Doesn't the book of Revelation talk about a "death decree" issued against those who "refuse to bow to an image"? A travel-worn and war-weary Abraham Lincoln jotted a few lines while riding a train, winding its way to a memorial of one of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War. He wasn't to be the featured speaker that day at Gettysburg; that would be Edward Everett, who labored at the lectern for some two hours. When Lincoln spoke, it was for about two minutes, and he began his speech by saying, "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." With these words, he drew attention to the genesis of our nation, reminding us that it was for liberty, specifically liberty of conscience, that these United States were birthed. All could be free to worship or not worship as they choose, in contrast to the religious oppression and persecution from which they had fled.

One thing about freedom: it isn't free. It was purchased by the life blood of the patriots of Lexington and Concord. Even the victims of 9/11 in their own way made the supreme sacrifice in the name of liberty, as do those who serve our nation today in the armed forces.

But already there are attempts to erode the freedoms we enjoy. Revelation 13 predicts that our fair country, at first symbolized by a "lamb-like beast" (symbolizing Christ, Who would have all people to be free) will then speak as a "dragon" (representing Satan, who uses force to get his way), and will make a copy, a replica, of what the first beast depicted in that chapter did.

It is with charity in my heart that I address this sensitive subject, but I must share the truth of God's Word. The Lord put these things in the Bible for our instruction. If you study carefully the prophetic clues, you will discover that the first beast of

Revelation 13 represents the church of the Middle Ages, which compelled worship at the cost of property or life. Ask those millions who gave their life-blood as martyrs for their faith during those centuries. A while back we visited a display in San Diego's Balboa Park called, "Torture Instruments Of The Inquisition," and we saw first-hand how pressure was used to compel worship.

Revelation 13 predicts that our country will one day turn its back on the principle of freedom of religion and copy what the Church of the Middle Ages did. An "image" is a "likeness or copy." The term "image of the beast" simply means that it will behave in a similar way as the first prophetic beast described in that chapter, the Church of the Middle Ages. What did that Church do, which is at issue in Revelation 13, and relevant to the story of Daniel 3? It forced people to worship in a way that went against their consciences. What will the United States do? Someday, in a similar way, it will also force people to worship in a way that goes against their conscience, on pain of death. "He was granted power to give breath to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak and cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed." Revelation 13:15. Here's the link: ["Bow or die" is the context of both Revelation 13 and Daniel 3.](#)

After the severe warnings against worshipping the beast and his image comes the invitation to worship "Him Who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water." Revelation 14:7. Worship the Creator God, the One Who made everything, and therefore deserves our homage. In contrast to the reward of the disobedient, who worship the beast and his image, is given the blessing "Here is the patience of the saints. Here are they who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus." Revelation 14:12.

What is the key word of Daniel 3? It is the word "worship," which is repeated no less than **11 times**. What is the key word of Revelation 13 and 14? Again, it is "worship," which is repeated no less than **8 times**. What does Revelation indicate will be the

great issue of the last days? It is worship. You will be asked to either worship “the beast,” and the one who copies his behavior “the image,” or worship the God Who created heaven and earth, the sea and all that in them is.

The day will come when you and I will face a decision like Hananiah, Azariah and Misheal. Bow or suffer. Whom will we obey? God or man? The King of kings, or “a” king of kings? Remember, *obedience is the highest form of worship*. One of His express commandments specifies which day He set apart as His day of worship. Which day will we keep holy? God’s sacred Sabbath, or the day of man’s making, Sunday? What if it involves loss of convenience? What if it means loss of possessions, livelihood, or even life itself?

Do you know why the Hebrews could tell King Nebuchadnezzar, “We don’t need to think it over”? It was because they had already developed a pattern of making right choices. Here’s what the devil does: he tempts us to think it’s okay to disobey for now—when the big issues are at stake, then you can choose. That way of thinking puts you on very slippery ground.

In Yosemite National Park there’s a famous rock called Half Dome, which has a soft curving surface on one side. You’ve seen it on many a post card, I’m sure. Too many people have fallen to their death by taking “just one more step” on its curved brow, till they pass the point of “no return” and slip, then slide, then fall off the edge.

On the other hand, by consistently making right choices, when the major ones come, which could involve loss of property, freedom or life, you’ll be prepared to be faithful like these three.

The choice comes down to two “furnaces,” the one Nebuchadnezzar used, symbolizing the devil’s attempts to coerce disobedience against God, or the other furnace, the ultimate penalty for sin, the one Jesus spoke about when He said, “The

Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire." Matthew 13:41, 42. Two furnaces: but there's a huge difference between the two! If we obey God and are faithful to Him, we may face the "furnace" of affliction, trial or persecution. But in that furnace, Jesus will be with us and deliver us, just as He was with the three Hebrews. No such promise awaits those who suffer the effects of the other furnace. Jesus died on the cross and paid for our sins so we don't have to suffer that other furnace.

As one of my Bible teachers was fond of saying, the *prophecies* of Daniel tell us **what is to come**. The *stories* of Daniel tell us **what we should be**. What are we told about the way these three were dressed when they went into the furnace? "Then these men were bound in their coats, their trousers, their turbans, and their other garments" and thrown into the furnace. In other words, they were "fully clothed." What do you suppose that means to us? If we want to survive the trials that will surely come upon the earth, we must be **completely covered by the robe of Christ's righteousness**. Are you covered by His robe today?

Revelation 13 tells about a decree to bow to an image on pain of death, but it doesn't tell us the outcome! Have you ever noticed that? What happens in Revelation 13 to those who refuse to bow to the image? You have to read and understand Daniel 3 to know the answer!

God will have His last day "worthies," His last day Hananiahs, Azariahs and Mishaels who would rather die than disobey. Faithful to God at any cost. You could be one of them. In these last days, there will come a time when attempts will be made on the life of God's faithful and obedient ones, but the "Fourth Man," the Son of God will come and personally rescue them. Be faithful to Him: He's coming soon!