

The Image of Gold and the Blazing Furnace

Dani'el 3: 1-30

DIG: What did King Nebuchadnezzar do and why? The king's huge gold image and invited guests speaks to what tendency in people? At the dedication ceremony for his gold image, what was the king's audience commanded to do? By whom? What was the result? Who refused to worship the image of gold? Why would the astrologers tip off the king? Why was the king furious? What test does King Nebuchadnezzar propose? Who is he really testing? For you, what is the climax in the classic testimony by Dani'el, Hananiah, Misha'el and Azariah? What were they sure about? What were they unsure about? What was remarkable about the blazing furnace? Who is killed? Why? Who manages to survive? How? How do you explain the mysterious fourth figure? What does King Nebuchadnezzar make of the three servants of El 'Elyon? Why? Do you think this experience made a believer out of King Nebuchadnezzar or not? Why?

REFLECT: How is YHVH with you when you are suffering? What have your sufferings to do with standing up for what you believe about YHVH? Have you ever betrayed your own beliefs and bowed down to some "golden image" of today? When? For how long? What did you learn? What are you still learning? How can you remain faithful? How does the king's affirmation of El 'Elyon reinforce your belief about Jesus (Phil 2:6-11)? How much are you now willing to risk in order to obey a clear commandment of God?

Shortly after the Destruction of Solomon's Temple in 586 BC

The Building of the Image: In Second Kings 25:8 we are told that on the seventh day of the fifth month, in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon demolished Jerusalem. Thinking that he was greater than the God of Isra'el, who was unable to save His City or His Temple, King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits, or ninety feet high and six cubits, or nine feet wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. The king made an image that Dani'el described to him in Chapter 2; however, instead of a mixture of metals, he made the image overlaid with pure gold. In Nebuchadnezzar's thinking, he wanted Babylon to last forever and no succeeding kingdoms would come after him.

He then summoned all the civic and military leaders, the satraps (chief rulers of a province), prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other lesser provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. So they stood before it (Daniel 3:2-3). At this point nothing is said about the worship of the image, only the dedication of the image. Going did not compromise their faith. Interestingly enough, Daniel plays no role in this chapter, we're not told of his whereabouts.

Everyone obeyed and came together and stood before the image. Then the herald loudly proclaimed: Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do. As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. All this was based upon the pagan model of that day: the right of the state is the law of the state. Therefore, to worship the law of the state is to submit one's self to that state. But if they were a conquered people, they were admitting that the conquering god was more powerful than their own national god. And by worshipping the conquering god, they were pledging allegiance to the state of that god. Now if you were polytheistic, as most of the conquered peoples were, this would not violate your conscience. It wouldn't be rejecting your national god; it was merely a statement of loyalty and nothing more. So if you were a polytheist, you would have no problem with this.

Centuries later we have a modern example of this pagan concept in the Nazi state. On July 29, 1936, the head of the Hitler Youth Baldur von Schirach, made a speech in which he said. "One cannot be a good German and, at the same time, deny God. But a declaration of faith in the eternal Germany is, at the same time, a declaration of faith in the eternal God." In other words, "If we act as true Germans, we act according to the laws of God. Whoever serves Adolph Hitler serves Germany, and whoever serves Germany serves God."³⁵⁷

Several years later Paul Schneider stood lined up with the other prisoners at Buchenwald concentration camp. It was April 20, 1938, Hitler's forty-ninth birthday and, in tribute, the prisoners were ordered to remove their berets and venerate the Nazi swastika flag. At once all whipped off their headgear. But the guards observed one man who would not "bow" to the swastika . . . Paul Schneider. They beat him with twenty-five lashes with an ox-hide whip. That was only the first time he was beaten because he refused to worship the idol.³⁵⁸

Whoever does not fall down and worship the idol will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace (Daniel 3:4-6). Probably like the lime-kiln, with a vertical shaft and an opening at the bottom for extracting the fused lime. It was usually built by a cliff so you approach the top from the cliff, or there would be an incline leading up to the top. The Persians are said to have had similar ovens for the execution of criminals. Such

cruel punishment was common in Babylonia and Assyria (Jeremiah 29:22). You had a choice, fall down before the image or fall down into the blazing furnace. **The rabbis teach that this was a deliberate attempt to lead the Jews astray, and so cause them to forfeit God's favor and their right to the promises of YHVH.**

Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the nations and peoples of every language fell down on their knees and on their faces and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up (Daniel 3:7) - except for the three Jews still standing. They were quickly noticed.

The Accusation Against the Jews: At this time some magi, nationalists, came forward and denounced, literally *to eat the pieces of the Jews*. That word refers to slander and malicious accusations that devours the accused *piece by piece*. They **saw an excellent opportunity of displaying their anti-Semitism against the "foreign nobodies" who were occupying positions that they considered they were more entitled to hold.** They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "May the king live forever! Your Majesty has issued a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon - Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego - who do not respect Your Majesty. They felt that Babylonians should be in those positions, not Jews. Then they get specific: **They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up"** (Daniel 3:8-12).

The faith of the children of Abraham: Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned them by their Babylonian names: Shadrach (meaning *command of Aku*, the Babylonian god of the moon), Meshach (meaning *who is like Aku*) and Abednego (meaning *servant of Nebo*, the Babylonian god of wisdom); but their Hebrew names were actually Hananiah (meaning *God is gracious*), Mishael (meaning *who is like YHVH*), and Azariah (meaning *ADONAI has helped*).

So these men were brought before the king, and Nebuchadnezzar angrily said to them: **Is it true that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up.** Remember, he didn't owe these three men anything. It was Daniel who had interpreted the dream. And their appointment to high office was at Daniel's request. So as far as Nebuchadnezzar was concerned, they owed Nebuchadnezzar something, not the other way around. **But before throwing them in the fiery furnace, he decides to give them a second chance, saying: Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made,**

very well. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. And then, in light of his recent destruction of Tziyon, he said: What god will be able to rescue you from my hand (Dani'el 3:13-15)? Well . . . he was about to find out.

Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah replied to him, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. **By dropping the king's title, the three Jews implied that he was but a mortal being who had no right to demand of them an act that violated their conscience.** If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and He will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But, even if He does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (Dani'el 3:16-18). That's hutzpah!

The miraculous deliverance by ADONAI: Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with them and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual, but he wasn't thinking very clearly because that would only decrease their time of suffering. And commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah and throw them into the blazing furnace. So these righteous sons of Abraham, wearing their fancy clothes for the dedication, their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took them up and the three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace (Dani'el 3:22-23).

Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?" They replied: "Certainly, Your Majesty." He suddenly changed from anger to astonishment: Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods, an angel (Dani'el 3:24-25).

Nebuchadnezzar approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servant of the Most High God (Hebrew: El 'Elyon), come out! Come here!" So they came out of the fire, and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair on their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them (Dani'el 3:26-27). So the fire that was meant to destroy them caused them no harm. There were no roasted Hebrew nationals!

King Nebuchadnezzar worships the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: Then Nebuchadnezzar said: Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent His angel (just like an angel delivered Dani'el from the lion's den in Chapter 6) and rescued His servants! They trusted in Him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God.

Therefore, I decree that the people (to the same people he had issued the decree to worship the golden image before) of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way. Then the king increased the wealth of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon (Dani'el 3:28-30). There is no way that Nebuchadnezzar would have destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple after making such a declaration. Thus, it must have been after Zion and the Temple had been destroyed. (see **Gb - The Destruction of Solomon's Temple on Tisha B'Av in 586 BC**).

The furnace story tells of deliverance, but it is also about worship. It tells me that what's really important is that I keep the first commandment (see the commentary on **Exodus Dp - You Shall Have No Other Gods Before Me**) even if it kills me. And now that we live in a post-empty-tomb time there is even more reason to remain faithful. Os Guinness tells of one of the periodic efforts to wipe out religious belief in the former Soviet Union. The communist party sent KGB agents to the nation's churches on Sunday morning. One such agent was struck by the deep devotion of an older woman who was kissing the feet of a life-size carving of Christ on the cross. He asked her, "Babushka [Grandmother], are you also prepared to kiss the feet of the beloved general secretary of our great Communist party?" She shot back, "Why, of course. But only if you crucify him first."³⁵⁹