



Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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Chapter 3: The Fiery Furnace

3:1-11, Nebuchadnezzar Erects an Idol to Worship

Daniel himself plays no role in the events of this chapter. This chapter instead features his companions from Chapters 1 and 2, Hananiah (now Shadrach), Mishael (now Meshach), and Azariah (now Abednego or Abed-Nego).

Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold: It's hard to tell exactly when this occurred. Some scholars believe it was shortly after the events of Chapter 2, while others maintain it happened years later.

There seems to be a link between Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Chapter 2) and the image he has created here. That it is made entirely of gold (or entirely covered in gold, perhaps), would seem to communicate that Nebuchadnezzar expected his reign and authority to never end, in defiance of God's plan as communicated through the dream and its interpretation.

This "image" sounds like an obelisk rather than a normal statue, at 90 feet (60 cubits) high and 9 feet (6 cubits) wide. At that size, it's probably safe to assume that it was solid gold, but constructed of wood, then overlaid with gold (a common way to build such structures). It would have looked incredibly impressive, to be sure.

W.G. Heslop, quoted by David Guzik:

“On the plains of Dura there stands today, a rectilinear mound, about twenty feet high, an exact square of about forty-six feet at the base, resembling the pedestal of a colossal statue.”

Gather together the satraps: “Satrap” is a Persian word meaning “protector” as in “protector of the realm”. It refers to governors, or subordinates to governors such as local rulers.

...To come to the dedication of the image: This attendance requirement is a test of allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar and his rule of the empire.

Whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace: So this is a demand for worship, not a request! Nebuchadnezzar would regard refusal to worship the image as tantamount to treason, not merely a religious offense.

This sort of demand of allegiance probably seems archaic and perhaps even ridiculous to our modern sensibilities, but as recently as the 1960s, the President of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, erected a bigger-than-life-size statue of himself in front of the House of Parliament. On the statue was infamously and blasphemously inscribed, “Seek ye first the political kingdom and all else shall be added unto you”. Perhaps more familiar to our collective memory, an element of the indoctrination of the Hitler Youth was the principle that whoever serves the führer (Hitler) serves Germany, and whoever serves Germany, serves God. So perhaps this kind of demand for allegiance is not so archaic or ridiculous after all. Always beware of politicians who claim to be saviors themselves, or special envoys from God.

When all the people heard the sound: There was no excuse for not hearing the time to bow down in worship; Nebuchadnezzar’s grand idolatrous celebration was accompanied by music. Quite a symphony from the description of instruments.

b. Fell down and worshiped the gold image: According to Baldwin, this literally reads as soon as they were hearing they were falling down. There was total and immediate obedience to Nebuchadnezzar’s command.

3: 8-12, Three Hebrews Refuse to Obey (and the Chaldeans are narcs!)

Certain Chaldeans came forward and accused the Jews: These Chaldeans had an obvious political motivation against the young Jews who were promoted to high political office along with Daniel as recorded in Chapter 2. And with thousands of officials in attendance from across the empire, three guys would have been really easy to miss. But these certain Chaldeans *made it known*. There's no indication in the text that the Hebrew men (any of them) filed any sort of request for an exception, or a protest to the king's orders; they simply refrained practicing idolatry themselves, apparently without making a public scene of it.

At the same time, it's reasonable to think that these men would expect that they could, perhaps even would, be discovered. Remember, attendance was a requirement, so whether they were absent altogether, or present but failed to bow down in worship, they were bound to be noticed at some point.

3:13-15, Nebuchadnezzar Interrogates the Disobedient Hebrews

Is it true...: To his credit, Nebuchadnezzar did not merely accept the accusation of the "certain Chaldeans" as fact without confirmation, and he even gives the three men an opportunity to deny the charge or otherwise defend themselves. Not only that, but he did this in person.

But if you do not worship, you shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace: There is no offer of mercy or second chances here. Nebuchadnezzar would not tolerate defiance, let alone losing face on this important occasion.

Who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?: This is interesting in that it tells us that Nebuchadnezzar thought nothing of challenging and even insulting *all gods*. He appears to be more of a secular king than a theistic or polytheistic one here. He sets himself on a pedestal even higher than the gods of Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar probably didn't even care if these three men continued to worship the God of the Hebrews, but he required them to worship him above all. Essentially, his own pride made him declare, "You shall have no other gods before me."

This put the pressure on Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to compromise in order to save themselves.

3:16-18, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego Refuse to Worship the Idol

We have no need to answer you: The men had no need to defend themselves; they were guilty of defying the king's orders, and would continue to do so.

Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us... But if not...: I genuinely wonder if they expect this deliverance to be in the afterlife? Either way, our Jewish friends here display a mighty faith in and appreciation for God's great power. One way or the other, they knew that God was able to deliver them from both the fiery furnace, and from Nebuchadnezzar himself. They trusted God's power, and they knew that they must do what was right even if God did not do what they (desperately?!) hoped He would do.

They did not doubt God's ability to save them from a fiery death, but neither did they presume to know God's will regarding what would happen. This reminds us of Job's words: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him." (Job 13:15). They recognized that God's plan might be different than their desires. We have our own dreams and desires, and we pray that God fulfills them. But if He doesn't, we don't turn our backs on Him, because we know He never turns His back on us!

Thinking of the ranks of martyrs over the centuries who did in fact die rather than deny Christ, I wonder how many of them might have thought back to this account? We know that God granted a vision to Stephen, the first Christian martyr. And some early Christians were thrown to the lions not because they worshipped Jesus, but because they would not worship the emperor. One thing we do know is that God is faithful and just, and is always with His people in every circumstance, including the most extreme ones, even like this.

...We do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image: Wow, no excuses, no lengthy explanations, no thought of offering a compromise; just a simple and unmistakable declaration. On the surface it might seem that saying this took intestinal fortitude and great courage. What it actually took was great faith in God, who had brought them to this place and prepared them for it. The intestinal fortitude and great courage all flow out of that faith.

3:19-23, The Three Men are Cast into the (Extremely Hot!) Furnace

Nebuchadnezzar was full of fury: No matter how brave Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were, facing the fury of a king was still no small thing. We get the sense that prior to their statement Nebuchadnezzar had spoken more kindly, as if these might simply be wayward young men who needed a course correction. But upon hearing their bold defiance, everything about his demeanor changes.

Bound in their coats... the furnace exceedingly hot: The men were bound fully clothed to ensure that they would be quickly and completely consumed by the flames and heat. It's striking that the furnace was stoked to such a high level that the heat even killed the jailors who we charged with casting them into it. The intensity of the heat must've been fierce!

3:24-25, Nebuchadnezzar Sees Four Alive and Well in the Furnace

Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished: Presumably about 6 men went in, including the jailors, who died right away, and so the expectation was that the 3 Hebrews would be dead just as quickly; there should be nothing but burning corpses on the floor of the furnace. It is astonishing that anyone survived for even a few seconds inside the furnace, when the others died at the door!

The Septuagint and a few English translations indicate that Nebuchadnezzar's attention was caught when he heard the men singing praises. While that is not something we find in the currently available fragmentary evidence for Daniel, it makes a lot of sense. It's easy to imagine that the king had them tossed into the furnace, then turned and walked away, believing they would be immediately consumed. The sound of singing coming from the furnace would be shocking, perhaps even disorienting. So "astonished" probably carries all that reaction in the one word. Then, at a safe distance from the deadly heat, he looks inside – and sees four men, walking in the midst of the fire.

I see four men loose... and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God: Nebuchadnezzar unknowingly tells us who the fourth person was – the Son of God. Jesus was literally with them in the midst of their circumstance.

We don't know if Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego knew that it was the Messiah, the Son of God, with them in their fiery environs. They may have thought their new companion to be an angel.

Too often, I suspect, it is easy for us to forget that the Son of God is always with us, but these guys got to **see** Him!

...Walking in the midst of the fire: The four men were free to walk around in the fire. Did the fire burn their ropes off, or is this just God at work? Presumably, their clothing was intact!

3:26-27, The Hebrew Men Leave the Furnace Unharm

Servants of the Most High God: Before they even were out of the furnace, Nebuchadnezzar recognized that these men served the true God, the “Most High” God.

...They saw these men on whose bodies the fire had no power: Note that this was not just Nebuchadnezzar, but all the “satraps, administrators, governors, and the king’s counselors” who had gathered due to the commotion. There’s no indication that the king had summoned them, though he certainly couldn’t be blamed for wanting witnesses, and perhaps a sanity check over what he himself was witnessing!

The smell of fire was not on them: This is not just a stray detail. This is a demonstration of how utterly complete their deliverance was. It is also a picture of how complete **our** deliverance from sin, death, and the grave will be.

Many protestant churches teach parallels from this story to what they believe will happen in the end times. Note: This is not Lutheran teaching, but something to be aware of, as many Christians are taught this. They see/teach:

- The fiery furnace as representative of a final great tribulation
- Nebuchadnezzar as representative of “the Antichrist” who forces the entire world into a single idolatrous religion
- The dead jailors representing all who support the Antichrist and will be killed by Jesus
- The obelisk/image representing the image of the second beast described in Revelation 13
- The three Hebrew men representing Israel, which some say includes the nation-state, while others say is only believers in Jesus
- Daniel – not present in this story at all – representing the part of the church that is to be raptured prior to the great tribulation

For a brief overview of different end-times schools of thought including “Amillennialism”, which is where we Lutherans align our teaching, see the “End Times” lesson from my “What Lutherans Believe” Bible study:

https://backtothebiblecatechism.com/wlb/WLB_08_End_Times.pdf

3:28-30 Nebuchadnezzar Acknowledges and “Blesses” God

Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: Nebuchadnezzar gave glory to God, but he also recognized that this great God is not *his* God. He was still the God of these three brave men.

Who sent His Angel and delivered His servants who trusted in Him: Earlier in the Chapter (verse 15) Nebuchadnezzar had asked, “Who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?” Now Nebuchadnezzar knew:

- He is the God of the Hebrews (the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego)
- He is the God who sends a Savior (who sent His Angel)
- He is the God of great power (delivered His servants)
- He is the God worthy of trust (who trusted in Him)
- He is the God greater than the king (set aside the king's command)
- He is the God who actually deserves exclusive allegiance (that they should not serve nor worship any god except their own God).

Therefore I make a decree: Note that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego didn’t demand or even request such a decree. In fact, they probably did not *want* him to! Coerced worship isn’t real worship, whether it’s of an idol or even the true God. Faith comes as the gift of God, not as a decree, not as a the result of an analytical process or a review of the evidence. Nebuchadnezzar does not understand this. He remains under the spell of his own power....

There is no other God who can deliver like this: ...But he is learning. Seeing God at work in the life of His people through these three believers was an extremely effective testimony to Nebuchadnezzar.

Paul expressed this same idea in 2 Corinthians 3:2-3:

You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.