

Lesson 9

Last week when we ended we were looking at Daniel 3:16-18, in which Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego respond to King Nebuchadnezzar's death threat in verse 15.

Daniel 3:17-18 - If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.

In verse 17 they begin by acknowledging God's ability to save them and by declaring their belief that God will save them. We see in that verse their great faith in God. They are not just saying that God can save them; they are saying that God will save them. There is no doubt in verse 17.

And I don't think there is any doubt in verse 18 either. Instead, in verse 18 they are simply acknowledging the possibility that God may choose not to save them from this sentence of death. Perhaps God has some plan in mind that requires their deaths, and if so, then that is fine with them.

But verse 18 also has another message. What they are saying in that verse is that if God decided they should die, then that would make no difference at all in their faith in God and in their obedience to God's word.

Job 13:15 - Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.

Some people are willing to serve God only so long as God always does what they want him to do. Which, of course, make us wonder who is serving whom? These three were going to serve God no matter what happened, and sometimes that decision leads to physical death.

Revelation 2:10 - Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.

Here in Daniel 3, as we will see, it served God's purpose to spare these three and to show his power to Nebuchadnezzar. Later in Revelation, God did not physically spare many of those who were being persecuted by Rome. But whether spared or not, God's people remain faithful in the face of persecution. Why? Because God's people understand that what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is permanent (2 Corinthians 4:18).

And that is not just a New Testament concept. Recall what Hebrews 11 tells us about Moses:

Hebrews 11:26-27 - Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured, **as seeing him who is invisible**.

Where does a Christian today find the strength to make such a courageous stand and to remain faithful unto death? From Jesus. Jesus is our perfect example in all things, and especially in remaining faithful unto death.

Hebrews 12:2 - Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

What did Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stand to lose by their refusal to bow down before this image? They would lose their royal favor with the king. They would lose their high government positions. They would lose their newly found fame and fortune. They would lose their lives.

From a worldly perspective, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were the worst sort of fools! Look at what they could gain just by bowing down! Look at what they would lose by not bowing down!

But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were not operating on a worldly level. They were not focused on the seen, but rather on the unseen.

How would we have responded in their shoes? How do we respond when in their shoes today?

- No one will see us in this big crowd.
- Everyone else is bowing down.
- Bowing down will advance our careers and help us do a lot of good later.
- They will kill us if we don't bow down!
- There are only three of us, and we are a long way from home. What does God really expect us to do all by ourselves?
- When in Rome, shouldn't we do as the Romans do?

- We know that the idol really isn't a god. Can't we just cross our fingers when we bow down?
- We can do so much more for God if we remain alive.
- Doesn't God want us to be happy?

However we try to rationalize it, disobedience is disobedience.

John 14:15 - If ye love me, keep my commandments.

If we are disobedient - whatever the excuse - then we are unloving. If we love Jesus, then we will keep his commandments. Period. There is no way to misunderstand John 14:15, and there is no way to rationalize disobedience into anything other than an unloving action directed at Jesus, who loved us and gave himself for us (Galatians 2:20).

Why was everyone so upset with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego? Because they refused to compromise and bow down, and the world hates those who refuse to join the crowd.

John 15:18-19 - If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.

1 Peter 4:4 - Wherein they think it strange that ye run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you.

People who wallow in sin aren't satisfied unless they can drag others down into the mire with them. The world wants us to go along with its fashions and its customs and its desires. The world wants to make us just like everyone else.

The real question was not what men thought about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego - but rather what did God think about them?

Of the thousands who were present at the dedication of this giant idol, how many do we know by name? Other than the king, just these three. In fact, their names are mentioned thirteen times in this chapter! God seems to have been very proud of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego! And I think Daniel was, too.

Notice again the respect that these young men continued to show to the king. This is the same sort of respect that Peter and Paul told us we must show to earthly rulers, who have all been given their power by God. They orally acknowledge Nebuchadnezzar as king, while committing their ultimate allegiance to the King of kings. The allegation that they had no regard for the king was a false accusation.

Let's pause to consider a question that you may have already been asking yourself: where was Daniel during this big event?

To answer that question, we should start with the last verse of Daniel 2:

Daniel 2:49 - Then Daniel requested of the king, and he set Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, over the affairs of the province of Babylon: but Daniel sat in the gate of the king.

The purpose of Daniel 2:49 was most likely to explain why Daniel was not involved in the events of Daniel 3. That verse tells us that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were set over the affairs of the province of Babylon, but then makes a point of telling us that Daniel was different - he sat in the gate of the king. That difference between Daniel and his friends at the end of Chapter 2 was likely intended to explain why Daniel was not present in the events of Chapter 3.

But how is Daniel's absence in Chapter 3 explained by that last verse of Chapter 2? That's a good question, and commentaries differ on the answer.

Perhaps the explanation is simply that, with the king and other important officials in the plains of Dura, someone was needed to stay behind and govern in the city itself. That would mean that Daniel had a very good excuse for not bowing down to the image - he was unable to leave Babylon and travel to the plain of Dura for this big event.

That explanation is a simple theory that seems to fit well with the available evidence. But there are some other possible explanations.

Perhaps Daniel was absent from Babylon at this time because he was away on government business in some other part of the kingdom.

Or perhaps Daniel was ill and unable to attend the public ceremony. We will see something similar later in Daniel 8:27, where we will find Daniel sick for some days and unable to attend to the king's

business. But that sickness was brought on by a vision when Daniel was much older, so I'm not a big fan of this theory.

Another possibility is that, as chief of the wise men, Daniel may not have been required to bow down. Daniel's loyalty to the king may have been beyond question. Presumably, Nebuchadnezzar himself did not bow down, and he may have extended that privilege to others as well.

Yet another possibility is that Daniel's reputation may have been such that even the Chaldeans did not dare to accuse him in front of the king. So perhaps Daniel was there and refused to bow down but the king was not told about it.

We don't know for sure that Daniel was not present for these events, but I think the evidence of Daniel 2:49 suggests that he was not present. Had Daniel been present, I think we would have seen him make a spirited defense of his friends to the king even if he had not himself stood accused.

Whatever the reason we don't see Daniel in Chapter 3, one thing is absolutely certain: Daniel did not and would never have bowed down to that false idol.

How do we know that? Because we know Daniel, and because we already know what kind of person Daniel was. We know with certainty that if Daniel had stood accused before the king along with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, then there would have been four people tossed into that fiery furnace instead of only three.

And one more thing - Daniel's omission from Chapter 3 is additional proof of the book's authenticity. Why? Here is how one commentator explained it:

Had the story been the invention that many have suggested; had it originated in the days of the Maccabees to nerve the faithful against Gentile oppression, it is unlikely that the chief hero would have been omitted. Reality transcends fiction, and the very "incompleteness" of this account testifies to its fidelity.

If someone were just making all of this up hundreds of years later, then there would be no reason to leave Daniel out of this exciting episode. So, Daniel's absence here is evidence of the book's authenticity.

So that explains why Daniel was not there with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. But what about all the other Jewish exiles? Did they bow down to the giant statue?

We don't know, and we should not assume the worst about them. Some of the reasons we just discussed for Daniel may have applied to others as well. Maybe these three were the only ones who were accused by the Chaldeans even though many others could have been accused as well.

But, with that said, we might be seeing the beginning of a theme here. Only a few of the Jews were shown as not eating the unclean food, and now only a few of the Jews are shown as not bowing down to the idol. After a while we have to start wondering whether the reason only a few faithful people are shown is because there were only a few faithful people.

And if history is any guide, then there were likely just a few faithful people at this time. But we know that there were quite a few faithful people of God about 70 years later when Cyrus allowed the Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem, so we shouldn't be too pessimistic about the others here in Daniel 3. There may have been more than we think who refused to bend their knee to Nebuchadnezzar's false god.

Daniel 3:19-23

19 Then was Nebuchadnezzar full of fury, and the form of his visage was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: therefore he spake, and commanded that they should heat the furnace one seven times more than it was wont to be heated. 20 And he commanded the most mighty men that were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. 21 Then these men were bound in their coats, their hosen, and their hats, and their other garments, and were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. 22 Therefore because the king's commandment was urgent, and the furnace exceeding hot, the flame of the fire slew those men that took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. 23 And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace.

I'm sure that we all love the response given by Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in verses 17-18, but Nebuchadnezzar has the opposite reaction. The king becomes furious and the image of his face changes to show his fury. Again, we may be seeing a bit of satire here in this description of the king.

"The one who in his pride has created an image with the purpose of assuring uniform loyalty finds his own image provoked beyond his control."

Why was the king so furious? Likely many reasons, but a big reason that we mentioned earlier was that these events were taking place before a crowd of very important people that the new king wanted very badly to impress.

And so, to show that he was in complete charge and control of the situation, Nebuchadnezzar orders the three young men to be cast into the fiery furnace, which then happens at once.

The phrase "heated seven times more" is a common idiom and should not be understood literally. It simply means to make it as hot as possible, which is what they did.

And if there was any doubt about the heat of the furnace, that doubt is removed when we see the deaths in verse 22 of those who threw them into that furnace.

The list of clothing in verse 21 has long been a source of trouble to translators. The Septuagint tried to make sense of the terms but reduced three words to two words in the process. The liberals would have us believe that the writer of Daniel lived within 50 years of the Septuagint, but how could that be true? How in just that short time could these words for court clothing have become so completely forgotten so that they could no longer be correctly translated in the Greek Septuagint?

As someone who grew up in the sixties and seventies, these verses remind me of a favorite TV show - Batman! Remember how at the end of an episode, Batman and Robin always find themselves tied up and facing certain death. And remember how they would still be in their costumes? We see something similar here. They even had their hats on!

Nebuchadnezzar's commands in verses 19-21 were intended to leave no room for escape. The already deadly furnace was made even hotter. And the three young men were fully dressed, even with their hats on, so the flames would completely and quickly envelop them. They were tied up and thrown like logs into the fire so that there could be no opportunity for escape.

Will Shadrach escape? Is it curtains for Meshach? Are things finally too hot for Abednego? Tune in next week...

Let me ask another Batman question - did anyone watching that show ever have the slightest doubt about how things would turn out for Batman and Robin? Yes, the show always left us with a cliffhanger, but did anyone ever spend the week worrying about it?

Again, we see something similar here. Things look pretty bad for these three young heroes, but can

anyone having read this far in the Bible have any doubt about the ultimate outcome?

These three did not. We already saw that in verses 17-18. Even if they died in that fire, they still had no doubt about the ultimate outcome. They were part of God's faithful and obedient people, and they knew that God would deliver them one way or another.

But wait, someone might say. They were facing the most horrible thing possible - death by burning - and so how they could be so confident?

I think they would have disagreed with the premise. They would have disagreed that the most horrible thing possible is being cast into the fire and burned alive. Instead, the most horrible thing possible is **not** being cast into the fire and burned alive because you compromised and bowed down to that false god! What we see here is a historical demonstration of what Jesus taught us.

Luke 17:33 - Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it.

Some may think the situation is hopeless at the end of verse 23, but we know that the situation is not hopeless at all. We know that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are doing just fine at the end of verse 23! And we know that before we ever get to verse 24! Why? Because we know God! Things are not what they seem!

Daniel 3:24-25

24 Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astonished, and rose up in haste, and spake, and said unto his counsellors, Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? They answered and said unto the king, True, O king. 25 He answered and said, Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.

After a while you have to almost start feeling sorry for poor Nebuchadnezzar. Once again, things are not going quite as he had planned. The all-powerful king is apparently unable to execute three young Jewish exiles, and the all-knowing king finds himself dumbfounded in verse 24!

Why was Nebuchadnezzar dumbfounded? Why was he astonished? Because instead of seeing bound and burning bodies, he sees men who are loose and walking around in the flames! And instead of seeing three such men, he sees four! And the fourth is different from the other three. "The form of the

fourth is like the Son of God," the king says.

There is so much for us to talk about here!

Let's start with some easy lessons. "I see four men loose," the king says in verse 25! Why was that such an astonishment? Because of verse 21 - they had been "bound in their coats, their hosen, and their hats, and their other garments" before being tossed in the fire. As one commentator summed it up, "What men had bound, God loosened - and isn't it ever so!"

And even today it is only through fire that we find freedom from our bonds.

John 12:24-25 - Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

As one author has written: "How we long for holiness without pain; sanctification without a cross, and growth without tears."

We all face fiery furnaces of one sort or another, and it is through such events that we can grow and bear much fruit.

We could pause and preach some sermons here, but let's move on to the million dollar question - **who was the fourth man?**

Let's look at the clues, and we don't have too many. In verse 25, the king said, "the form of the fourth is like the Son of God." And in verse 28, the king refers to the fourth man as an angel.

So who was he? What was he?

For starters, what Nebuchadnezzar said about the fourth person was not inspired. We know from inspiration that the king actually made those statements, but inspiration does not vouch for the accuracy of what this pagan king said. So all we can really say about the fourth man from what the king tell us is that the fourth man looked different and seemingly more impressive in some way than the other three. The king had no apparent difficulty in distinguishing this fourth person from the other three.

The KJV clearly suggests that the fourth person was Jesus with the translation "the Son of God," but a

better translation is "a son of the gods," which also fits better with the king's polytheism.

It seems that Nebuchadnezzar immediately jumped to the conclusion that this fourth being was divine, which is understandable given the circumstances! We might very well end up with the same conclusion.

So who was the fourth person?

I think we have two possibilities. Either the fourth person was a delivering angel (and we will see such angels later in this book), or the fourth person was a preincarnate appearance of Christ as the KJV translation suggests.

We spent a great deal of time talking about the Angel of the Lord in our study of Zechariah. As you recall, some believe that the Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament is Jesus, and there is some evidence in support of that view.

Let me stress here (as we did in Zechariah) that Jesus is not an angel as we ordinarily use that term. Angels are created beings, but Jesus is not a created being. But the word "angel" means "messenger," and God the Son is a messenger from God the Father, and so in that sense we could refer to Jesus as the Angel of the Lord or the Messenger of the Lord.

Why do some think the Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament is Jesus?

Who spoke to Moses from the burning bush?

Exodus 3:2 - And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush.

But also note verse 4:

Exodus 3:4 - And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I.

Who stayed Abraham's hand in Genesis 22?

Genesis 22:11-12 - And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou

any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.

The "me" at the end of verse 12 is the angel of the Lord in verse 11!

So which is it? Is the fourth person Jesus, or is the fourth person an angelic deliverer? Either could be true, and we can't say for sure.

Either way, we know that Jesus was with them in that fiery furnace. But perhaps Jesus made a personal appearance.

Is there any more evidence that Jesus was there in person? Perhaps, but not from the book of Daniel. We may see some evidence in the book of Acts. Remember when Steven was stoned to death in Acts 7, and he looked up and saw Jesus? What did Steven see?

Acts 7:56 - And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.

What was Jesus doing? Jesus was standing. The Bible usually describes Jesus as sitting in heaven (Colossians 3:1), but Steven saw him standing. I love the fact that Jesus was standing when Steven was killed! What an encouragement that is to all who face persecution!

If you want my opinion it is that just as Jesus was standing when Steven was killed, so Jesus was standing when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were threatened with death, and in my opinion Jesus was standing right there with them in that furnace for all the world to see! That is my opinion.

Daniel 3:26-27

26 Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the mouth of the burning fiery furnace, and spake, and said, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, ye servants of the most high God, come forth, and come hither. Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, came forth of the midst of the fire. 27 And the princes, governors, and captains, and the king's counsellors, being gathered together, saw these men, upon whose bodies the fire had no power, nor was an hair of their head singed, neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire had passed on them.

Don't you just love how Nebuchadnezzar is still giving commands? Here the king commands that the

three come out of the furnace.

Did you catch the humor in the king's command in verse 26? "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, ye servants of the most high God, come forth, and come hither." Apparently, Nebuchadnezzar was not too anxious for the fourth person to come out! He was certainly reluctant to give that person any commands!

We have to picture this incredible scene. The furious king who had just had the three young man bound and tossed like logs to a certain fiery death is now talking to them while they are walking around in the flames - and the king is calling them by name and asking them to come out of the flames!

Most of us, when we get too close to a flame, don't need any encouragement to move away from it - but this king is having to plead with these three to come out of the furnace! Perhaps their reluctance to leave the furnace is yet another clue as to whom they were talking to in there!

All of the king's illustrious visitors are still there to see everything that is happening, and they all gather with the king to look at the men. Not only are Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego unharmed, but there is no smell of smoke or fire about them. Not a single hair is singed. Only their bonds were gone. It is as if they had never been in the fire at all.

Daniel 3:28-30

28 Then Nebuchadnezzar spake, and said, Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who hath sent his angel, and delivered his servants that trusted in him, and have changed the king's word, and yielded their bodies, that they might not serve nor worship any god, except their own God. 29 Therefore I make a decree, That every people, nation, and language, which speak any thing amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made a dunghill: because there is no other God that can deliver after this sort. 30 Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, in the province of Babylon.

And once again the king has a religious conversion! Will this one last longer than the one at the end of Chapter 2? We shall see in Chapter 4...

In verse 28, Nebuchadnezzar realizes that it was God who had changed the king's word. That is, it was

God who countermanded the king's order. Politicians, kings, and judges like to think that they have the last word on various subjects, but they do not. God always has the last word. Always. We may think we can redefine things that God has defined, but we cannot. God's definitions always control. Nebuchadnezzar learned that lesson here.

The king makes another decree in verse 29. He seems to have the same disease that our modern legislators have - when you run out of things to say, just make a new law!

Remember that Nebuchadnezzar's first decree back in verse 4 had not turned out very well. The king now once again pronounces death, but this time it is on anyone who says anything against God, "for there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way."

Notice that the king does not renounce his polytheism, but instead he simply says that God is the greatest god among many. Nebuchadnezzar is just adding another god to Babylon's pantheon here in verse 29.

Finally, the king promotes these three, which no doubt really thrilled their accusers! If you want an example of a plan that completely backfired, you can't find a much better example than this (at least not in the Old Testament)!

So where are we at the end of Chapter 3? Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are in positions of power within the Babylonian government, just as God wants them to be. And Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are remaining faithful to God and are refusing to compromise God's word. It is clear to all that they will remain faithful unto death. And when the world knows that you will go that far to remain faithful, the world suddenly realizes that it has very little power over you!

As we will see, the book of Daniel is filled with many fascinating and wonderful visions and events, but perhaps the most wonderful of all is the faithfulness of these young Jewish exiles in the first three chapters. They have left for us all a wonderful example of faithfulness to follow.

#daniel