

DANIEL

Week 9, chapter 3

Open your bibles to Daniel chapter 3. We'll re-read this chapter in sections. I'll advise you ahead of time that while the last several lessons have been mostly technical and historical; today's is going to hit home and become personal.

RE-READ DANIEL 3: 1 – 7

King Nebuchadnezzar demanded that an enormous statue, an image, be set up in the plain at Dura. 60 cubits (90 – 100 feet) high, by 6 cubits (9 -10 feet wide), it was a monstrosity. In ancient times the only known statue that stood the same or higher was the Colossus of Rhodes, which wasn't erected by the Greeks until around 300 B.C. It needs to be taken into account however that more than likely the overall 60 cubit height included its pedestal base that reduced the actual height of the human image to probably around 45 cubits. Nonetheless, at the time it was built, it would have been awe inspiring.

There is no hint in the Scriptures as to any person or god that this statue was meant to represent. Opinions of scholars vary, with some imagining that it had to be an image of the King's chief god (or better, Babylon's chief national god), but surely the text would have named the particular god if that was so since Babylon honored so many gods. Might it have been a likeness of the king himself? While it can't be ruled out entirely there is no suggestion of it. So the best solution that fits the text, and taking into account what happens next, is that the image represented the governmental power of Babylon itself. The idea of it surely came from Nebuchadnezzar's dream-statue that represented a succession of 4 world empires. So this golden statue that he had built was essentially the national symbol of the government of his world-wide empire of Babylon.

The giant statue no doubt had a strong religious element to it, because all nations and kings were interwoven with their gods; no separation was possible. But the issue behind the king setting this statue up was not religious zealotry. Rather it was that it was high time that the many conquered nations and kingdoms that formed his empire were to forsake any semblance of independence and declare allegiance to the central government of Babylon, and therefore (automatically) to whatever god the king held highest as representing the true power behind the Babylonian Empire. This was a matter of either declaring obedient allegiance or declaring hostile defiance to the pagan version of the trinity: the king, his nation, and the national god.

As we continue to study Daniel, I find myself in the uncomfortable position of having to challenge the teaching of both well-meaning Believers and not-so-well-meaning un-Believers. This is because there are a number of Christian denominational doctrines floating around that are based on Daniel but which take great and unwarranted liberties with the Holy text; and on

the other hand there is modern scholarship that unequivocally denounces Daniel as a pious Jewish fraud, and says that the book has nothing to do with Babylon or Nebuchadnezzar. Rather it was written as a diatribe against Antiochus Epiphanies and as a message of hope and encouragement to the persecuted Jewish community; therefore it was written around 165 B.C. I have spent much time on this particular aspect of Daniel-study with you because many Christians have no idea that their own pastors, or seminary professors, or favorite bible teachers and commentators actually believe that this pivotal bible book is a fake. And that belief comes from little more than scholarly arrogance and academic elitist consensus as their proof, because there is nothing empirical to lean upon; there is nothing else to explain away the amazing predictions of Daniel that have all proved to be accurate (thus far) except their own imaginations and theories. Thus at times I want to highlight a passage that these bible critics will choose to explain away in order to “prove” their unbelieving stances. I want to do this so that you know how to deal with it when you encounter it. And this is one of those times.

The bible critics' thought process is that in Daniel chapter 3 we are hearing a story of terrible religious persecution that is much like the Tribulation of the Book of Revelation. And although the Book of Daniel ascribes it to the King of Babylon in the 6th century B.C., in fact this is a direct referral to the infamous Antiochus Epiphanies, who despised the Jews and had no tolerance for their Judaism. Antiochus Epiphanies was of the Seleucid dynasty, and he ruled a huge section of the Middle East that in modern times we could generally call Syria, Lebanon, Iran and Iraq. The Seleucus family along with 3 other aristocratic families were the recipients of the Grecian Empire that Alexander the Great had acquired and built upon by conquering the Media-Persian Empire (the bronze empire that took over the silver empire). Before he died Alexander split his empire into 4 governing districts, each of the aforementioned families being given charge over one of them. In the end, the Ptolemy and the Seleucid families dominated the former Greek Empire.

Epiphanies viewed the Jewish religion as ignorant superstition; and because the Jews were fanatically dedicated to their One God, their Holy Temple, and to their Holy Book the Torah, he also saw them as a rigid, dangerous and hateful people who were intolerant and unwilling to simply adopt the multiple-god system of everyone else in the world. He saw the Jews as a threat to peace in his kingdom and to mankind in general. Therefore Epiphanies determined to eradicate their religion and their religious leaders. Judaism was outlawed, the Temple was turned into a pagan shrine, and those Jews who violated the king's decree and continued their loyalty to Judaism and to the God of Israel were executed (usually in the most horrific manner. such as being burned alive).

And so the modern bible critics say that this is what is being described in Daniel chapter 3. Nebuchadnezzar isn't really Nebuchadnezzar; it is just a kind of coded language for the anonymous writer of Daniel to disguise his speaking out against Antiochus Epiphanies. However the abundant written history of Babylon itself, and the well-known way that the world of that era understood the sphere of the gods, soundly refutes what these bible scholars claim. In fact there was no religious persecution being described in the story of Nebuchadnezzar's golden statue. We neither read before, during, or after this episode that anyone, Jew or otherwise, had to give up their own gods. They merely had to show respect for the national god of Babylon, symbolized by the gigantic golden statue in Dura, which represented the

government administration of Babylon. This was typical and customary for that time. The people of every nation and kingdom (including the Jews) were free to keep their idols, their shrines, their temples, and to keep praying their prayers to any gods they wanted to, without fear or oppression. In fact what is described in Daniel 3 is fundamentally different from what Antiochus Epiphanies did, because Epiphanies openly sought to bring an end to Judaism and to violently force his gods upon everyone in his kingdom to create a religious uniformity.

Thus in Daniel 3 we simply don't hear of outcries from the people of Babylon, nor of mass executions, nor do we read of any who seemed to oppose what Nebuchadnezzar demanded. Rather what comes next is, from the Babylonian viewpoint, merely a game of power politics.

RE-READ DANIEL 3:8 – 16

We're told that some Chaldeans came forward as informants. They tell the king that despite his explicit instruction to his subjects that upon the sound of the various musical instruments that they are drop to their knees and face towards the golden statue, some Jews didn't. The Aramaic word used here is **segid**; and while in the appropriate context it can be used to mean "worship", it really only means to lay prostrate. So one could **segid** before a king (meaning to lay prostrate to so show royal respect), or one could **segid** before their god (meaning to lay prostrate as worship of that deity). To me, in this context, to "pay homage" is a decidedly better translation because this is about showing allegiance to the government of Babylon, even if all governments of that era involved a national god. Again: the issue of the golden statue was political; it had nothing to do with religion as we think of it today. There were no priests, no holy men, no religious rituals involved: only politicians at various levels responding to a government edict.

And the Jews who the Chaldeans were tattling on were **Shadrakh, Meshakh, and Aved-N'go**. "They do not serve your gods", they say, and they did not lay prostrate before the statue. This verse (12) is important because they didn't accuse the trio of not worshipping the god-statue. Rather the accusation was of not worshipping the several Babylonian gods, plural; the Jews don't worship Babylon's pantheon of gods. And, in addition, they didn't follow the king's command to bow down to the statue at its dedication ceremony.

The issue is transparent: these Chaldeans (who were native Babylonians) didn't like a bunch of outsider-Jews having the high government positions that they felt rightfully belonged to Babylonians. The king had given these high ranking positions to these 3 Jewish men as a result of their being able to interpret his dream. Not only had the Jews humiliated these Chaldeans by being able to know the king's dream when they couldn't, but they were now their bosses! Nebuchadnezzar well knew, as did everyone in Babylon and especially in the capital city, that the Jews had one God only, and they weren't permitted to worship other gods. This incident was just the opportunity the Chaldeans needed to end their shame by getting rid of these 3 Jewish officials.

The king is furious and summons **Shadrakh, Meshakh, and Oved-N'go**. But he gives them an opportunity to explain themselves no doubt because he understood the jealousy of these Chaldeans (who, remember, he had at one point condemned to death!). When he inquires if it

could be true that they don't worship his gods and that they didn't prostrate themselves towards the new statue, it is not that he thinks that they have become, or ought to be, multiple god worshippers. Rather this is an issue of their showing proper respect and a degree of political correctness. The king has put them in charge of the government of his own capital city of Babel! To be rebels in this manner makes the king look bad. Can't they just play the game? What harm would it do? Everyone understands that the Jews are god-poor and only have one god. Just go along to get along and everybody will live, prosper and be happy.

So in a long-winded repeat of the command to listen for the symphony of musical instruments as the signal and then to drop into a prostrate position before the statue, the king obviously hopes the 3 Jews will now do it since they have seen just how upset he is, and how serious he is that anyone who doesn't obey (even including them) gets sent to the furnace. To say that their response doesn't please the king is an understatement.

Most versions say something like: "We don't need to give you an answer concerning this matter". At first glance this sounds like a pretty arrogant, proud, and most disrespectful response to the monarch of the known world. And don't forget, these 3 understand that Yehoveh has chosen Nebuchadnezzar to be His servant on earth, and has given him dominion over every sphere: sea, land, and air. So most scholars, Jew and Christian, agree that the translation leaves something to be desired. Most likely the sense of it is, "we really don't have a choice in the matter, what you have been told is true, and there's not much we could say to change your mind".

But then comes a pronouncement from these 3 Jewish men that we need to pay close attention to.

RE-READ DANIEL 3:17, 18

I at once feel thrilled at their courage and faith, and yet a bit anxious because while I hope and pray that I would have the willingness to let go of my life as easily as they seem to be letting go of theirs in order to be faithful to the Lord unto death, I won't know for sure unless, and until, I'm faced with it. And wouldn't you just know it: this is yet another passage that the bible critics say is proof that this book is from the age of Antiochus Epiphanies because religious fanaticism as radical as exposed here was rampant in those days and certainly this **MUST** be one of the more extreme examples of fanaticism one could imagine. After all, these 3 young men understand that the penalty they are facing for merely not bending down on their face for a few moments towards a lifeless statue is to be burned alive. God knows their hearts, right? Can't they briefly do what is wrong, as long as God knows they love Him?

But that suspicion of religious fanaticism gets rebuked when we look at the entirety of their response to the king. In verse 17 they say that IF their God is able to save them from the furnace, He will. The earliest rabbis, Church Fathers and bible commentators were uncomfortable with the difficulty of this verse because taken in one sense there seems to be an expressed doubt as to whether or not the God of Israel has the ability or jurisdiction to be able to rescue them from the fire. There have been all sorts of attempted solutions by scholars and teachers to address this difficulty, but truly none of them gives us a satisfactory answer without

doing great harm to the biblical text, at least as we have it today. So indeed, to me, I can only conclude that the 3 men are being open and honest and the bottom line is that they just don't know what God can do and will do under the circumstances.

But then comes the part that sears my heart. They say that whether Yehoveh can or can not, and does or does not rescue them from a horrible painful death, nonetheless they will NOT serve Babylon's gods and they will not lay prostrate before the statue: the symbol of the one-world power that is the Babylonian Empire.

I think we could contemplate these words for some time and still not be done with them. If I might be permitted to offer a paraphrase of those powerful words of those 3 Jewish men: We will do what is right before God, and let the chips fall where they may.

Solomon said as much in a far more eloquent manner than mine:

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 CJB

13 Here is the final conclusion, now that you have heard everything: fear God, and keep his mitzvot; this is what being human is all about.

14 For God will bring to judgment everything we do, including every secret, whether good or bad.

Since Solomon was addressing Hebrews, what he meant was: "That's what being a REDEEMED human is all about". Keeping God's commandments; little else matters in the end, for a Believer. And the 2nd of the 10 Commandments is that the redeemed of God shall only worship One God, and no other. And ***Shadrakh, Meshakh and Aved-N'go*** were willing to die to uphold this fundamental commandment. Fanaticism the bible critics say. No; I say it is an example of the faithfulness that is expected of us, God's worshippers.

One of my favorite movies is called the Kingdom of Heaven. This epic is the story of the Crusades and a youngish Englishman who had lost his wife and unborn child to suicide, and then murdered his own brother (a priest) in anger for condemning his dead wife to Hell. He fled his village with his newly discovered father to Jerusalem, to fight for the Christian King of Jerusalem, and to try to find personal forgiveness and salvation, and ended up committing to help keep Jerusalem Christian. The Muslims wanted the city that they called Al Quds back in their possession; and the great warrior leader Saladin was coming with hundreds of thousands of Islamic soldiers to lay siege to the outmanned citizen army and a few bold Crusaders who were left behind to defend those ancient stone walls.

When the Muslim hoards arrived and surrounded the city, arrayed their many siege machines and laid out their demands to the people to open the gates and be taken as slaves or die, the Catholic Bishop of Jerusalem seeing the hopelessness of the situation suggested that everyone should renounce their Christian faith, profess Allah, and then later when safe, they could repent and again take up the Cross of Christ. I've never ceased to get that picture out of my mind. What a stark contrast to **Shadrakh, Meshakh, and Aved-N'go's** response to probable death. But I think that we all wrestle with such doubts and thoughts akin to that Bishop in the film, shameful as they might be, even if our situation isn't nearly dire as the residents of Jerusalem faced against Saladin, or what these 3 Jewish youth faced against Nebuchadnezzar.

In our day-to-day 21st century lives, some of us hate confrontation and will do anything to avoid it; so to defend God's truth is too costly to us. Others of us have the greatest need to please people and it distresses us greatly to upset or disappoint anyone for any reason. So to point out immorality, sin, or bad doctrine is too risky. And some of us are so concerned that we not upset our social circle, our family, or to make ourselves appear to be out of step with our peers and societal norm, that we will work rather hard to keep a lid on our faith and instead to make it as expansive, inclusive, and tolerant as we can. I'm afraid that none of this reflects the true Godly, biblical faith that we see being bravely defended by **Shadrakh, Meshakh, and Aved-N'go**.

And yet, let's look at what these 3 Jews did from another, equally difficult, angle. How often I have been reminded by brothers and sisters in the Lord, that much patience and pacifism is required on our part because we are to always obey our government at all costs, even if it bothers our Christian sensibilities. If only I had a dollar for all the times some these following passages have been quoted to me as a proper cause for Christian inaction and silence:

1Peter 2:13-14 CJB

¹³ For the sake of the Lord, submit yourselves to every human authority- whether to the emperor as being supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors as being sent by him to punish wrongdoers and praise those who do what is good.

Here's another:

Romans 13:1-2 CJB

CJB Romans 13:1 Everyone is to obey the governing authorities. For there is no authority that is not from God, and the existing authorities have been placed where they are by God.

² Therefore, whoever resists the authorities is resisting what God has instituted; and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.

And perhaps the most quoted of them all:

Matthew 22:19-21 CJB

¹⁹ Show me the coin used to pay the tax!" They brought him a denarius;

²⁰ and he asked them, "Whose name and picture are these?"

²¹ "The Emperor's," they replied. Yeshua said to them, "Nu, give the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor. And give to God what belongs to God!"

So if we went by the typical Christian interpretation of these verses (and a few similar or parallel ones), does that tell us that **Shadrakh, Meshakh, and Oved-N'go** were wrong to defy the King of Babylon? The law of the land was to be present at the statue dedication and to declare allegiance to the statue. The chief law giver of the government laid down the law, and it applied equally to everyone. He was an entirely legitimate king as the Lord Himself had put Nebuchadnezzar into power and said the following not ONLY to the Jews but to all gentile nations as well:

Jeremiah 27:1-8 CJB CJB

Jeremiah 27:1 At the beginning of the reign of Y'hoyakim the son of Yoshiyahu, king of Y'hudah, this word came to Yirmeyahu from ADONAI:

² "ADONAI says this to me: 'Make yourself a yoke of straps and crossbars, and put it on your neck.

³ Send [similar yokes] to the kings of Edom, of Mo'av, of the people of 'Amon, of Tzor, and of Tzidon by means of the envoys they send to Yerushalayim, and to Tzidkiyahu king of Y'hudah.

⁴ Give them this message for their masters by telling their envoys that ADONAI-Tzva'ot, the God of Isra'el, says for them to tell their masters:

⁵ ""I made the earth, humankind, and the animals on the earth by my great power and my outstretched arm; and I give it to whom it seems right to me.

⁶ *For now, I have given over all these lands to my servant N'vukhadnetzar the king of Bavel; I have also given him the wild animals to serve him.*

⁷ *All the nations will serve him, his son and his grandson, until his own country gets its turn- at which time many nations and great kings will make him their slave.*

⁸ *The nation and kingdom that refuses to serve this N'vukhadnetzar king of Bavel, that will not put their necks under the yoke of the king of Bavel, I will punish," says ADONAI "with sword, famine and plague, until I have put an end to them through him.*

So, does this mean that in our modern times as Believers that (for instance) we are to accept Gay marriage as the law of the land and stay silent since we are to obey our government? Or that if a family member is gay that we ought to attend and celebrate their wedding in order to keep family peace and not harm our relationship? Or if we have a friend or family member living with a "significant other" without being married that we should say nothing or treat them as though they are married?

Should we stand with those who say that abortion is actually a woman's healthcare rights issue and understand that this is a matter of personal choice since we're in a democracy? How about the subject of Israel? Do we agree that Israel is merely a foreign policy issue and that our own national interests as described by our government override any concern of tiny Israel over their hereditary land rights, or right to defend themselves, or even to be a Jewish State (which more and more is described as racist)?

How do we respond to friends and family about biblical doctrine when the trend is towards saying that we can interpret any Scriptural passage any way we like, and every way a Believer chooses to do so is correct and OK with God? Or since the advent of Jesus that sin is completely customized and individualized? That is, what the bible says is a sin for you is not a sin for everyone, nor for me, unless I feel the Holy Spirit tells me so? What do we say to our Christian friends who say we must deal with the sticky issue of Israel and the Palestinians with fairness and an even hand because of the so-called NT law of love? Or that Muslims worship the same god as Christians and Jews, they just don't know it, so we need to be understanding and even pray and worship alongside them?

I could go on and on stepping on your toes and making everyone here feel uncomfortable with such confrontational questions. The point is our answers to these questions always involve a self-imposed limit on just how far we are willing to go as regards our personal faithfulness towards God. And in our day, those Believers who are perceived as going the farthest, stretching the limits and remaining the staunchest in administering their Judeo-Christian faith beliefs to every area of their lives are labeled as fundamentalists and fanatics, and as threats to peace and universal tolerance.

Those who more easily mold and adapt their Judeo-Christian faith to conform to the trajectory of secular humanist society and intellectualism and the concepts of democratized individual

rights and entitlements; and those who compartmentalize their beliefs so as to separate Sunday spirituality from Monday through Saturday reality are seen as enlightened and members in good standing of the world community.

If **Shadrakh, Meshakh and Aved-N'go** lived today, I don't think they would be painted in any better light (even among many Believers) than the Babylonians saw them in the 6th century B.C. They would be seen as ignorant hangers-on to an ancient faith that doesn't apply to their new situation.

So what will you do? What will you choose when you have a choice between absolute faithfulness, or continued comfort and personal peace? Thankfully few of us will ever face what these 3 Jewish men did. Yet of only the few examples I confronted you with, we face choices every single day regarding faithful submission to God versus personal freedom.

I want to close with this thought directly from our matchless Messiah, Yeshua the Christ because He asks a foundational question, and sets down a firm rule, for those who say they want to follow Him; a question that those 3 Jewish men had decided upon 6 centuries before He was born.

Luke 14:25-35 CJB

25 Large crowds were traveling along with Yeshua. Turning, he said to them,

26 "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father, his mother, his wife, his children, his brothers and his sisters, yes, and his own life besides, he cannot be my talmid.

27 Whoever does not carry his own execution-stake and come after me cannot be my talmid.

28 "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Don't you sit down and estimate the cost, to see if you have enough capital to complete it?

29 If you don't, then when you have laid the foundation but can't finish, all the onlookers start making fun of you

30 and say, 'This is the man who began to build, but couldn't finish!'

31 "Or again, suppose one king is going out to wage war with another king. Doesn't he first sit down and consider whether he, with his ten thousand troops, has enough strength to meet the other one, who is coming against him with twenty thousand?

32 If he hasn't, then while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation to inquire about terms for peace.

³³ *"So every one of you who doesn't renounce all that he has cannot be my talmid.*

³⁴ *Salt is excellent. But if even the salt becomes tasteless, what can be used to season it?*

³⁵ *It is fit for neither soil nor manure- people throw it out. Those who have ears that can hear, let them hear!"*