**Faith and the Furnace (Daniel 3:1-30)**

***(Nebuchadnezzar Puts the Heat on the Hebrews)***

**Introduction**

The story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego is a story we all know well. Who does not know how these three Hebrews were cast into the fiery furnace and came out alive? Familiarity with the story of the fiery furnace is one of two major obstacles which prevents us from benefitting from this passage as we should.

We are told automobile accidents often happen close to home. Because we are so familiar with the area, we pay less attention. In the same way, familiar passages of Scripture may receive less of our attention. Christians, and many others, know the stories of David and Goliath, Samson and Delilah, and Jonah and the “whale.” We may fail to grasp the meaning and message they were intended to convey because of our superficial understanding of the characters and events.

A second barrier is our mentally filing the story of these three Hebrews under the category of “fairy tale” or “myth.” Some commentators candidly admit, even advocate, that this story is merely a myth, and not history. They, at least, are conscious of their perspective on this passage. But many of us have heard this story so often in Sunday School that we may have lumped Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego with Cinderella, Hansel and Gretel, and Goldilocks and the Three Bears.

My goal is to challenge your childhood perception of this favorite and familiar story. We must see this event as history, not fairy tale. We must feel the heat of that fire and smell the smoke of that ancient furnace. Our study will consider this text in light of both its context in the Book of Daniel and in the history of Israel. The message of our text is as vital to Christians today as it was to the Israelite of old. Carefully consider the words of Daniel 3 and look to God’s Spirit to enlighten your mind’s understanding and to quicken your heart’s belief and application.

**The Stage on
Which the Scene is Played**

The same stage upon which today’s events are being played is also the setting of past biblical events. Imagine for a moment that you are an American soldier sent to the Middle East during the Persian Gulf War to liberate Kuwait. As part of a tank battalion, you are scanning the landscape for enemy troops. As you fire rockets, taking out a bridge over the Euphrates River, you recall that here, or nearby, is where it all began. The Garden of Eden may have been near this spot (Genesis 2:10-15). Imagine tank tracks in the Garden of Eden!

Near here, or nearby, Nimrod built the city of Babel, and the kingdom of Babylon had its birth (Genesis 10:8-10). Centuries ago, about the time of Abraham, men concentrated themselves in a city on the plain in Shinar (Genesis 11:1-2). They intended to build not only a city, but a tower of bricks and stone with tar as mortar (Genesis 11:3-4). God frustrated and ended their efforts by confusing their language and scattering them. The place became known as Babel (later Babylon), which meant confusion (Genesis 11:5-9).

In this land, God called Abraham. Abraham was commanded to leave Ur of the Chaldeans, a place within the range perhaps of your tank’s cannon. Abraham left this place, the cradle of civilization, to go to an unknown and, as yet, undesignated place, where God was to bless him and others through him (Genesis 11:27–12:3).

Centuries later, after countless warnings from God through the prophets, Israel was taken captive and dispersed by Assyria. Little more than a hundred years later, the southern kingdom of Judah was taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, just as God had foretold.

You wonder, surveying the plain stretching out before you, if this is where the tower of Babel was built and if it is the same place where Daniel’s three friends were cast into the fiery furnace. Was the furnace really a brick-kiln, as many have suggested? Was this kiln left by the ancients who sought to build the tower of Babel out of bricks and stone? The king’s image may have been constructed upon the same historical stage other earlier scenes had already been acted out.

**Our Approach to Chapter 3**

We will avoid “straining gnats” in order to pursue the “camels” of our passage (see Matthew 23:24). The text leaves some matters unspecified or unexplained which, from the silence of the passage, I understand to be mysteries by divine intention. We should spend little time seeking to learn what God has omitted.

A good example of intentional silence in Daniel 3 is the king’s “image.” I was tempted to use a play on words and call verses 1-7, “The King’s Self-Image.” But this title does not take the silence of the text seriously enough. We know very little about the image which Nebuchadnezzar set up. Whether this image was a representation of the king, of a known deity, or something totally different, we are not told. We should not seek to learn what God has withheld from us.

“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law” (Deuteronomy 29:29).

Avoiding the “secret things” withheld, we will give our attention to those things mentioned. Chapter 3 has several obvious repetitions we should note and respond to accordingly. The first repetition is the references to the political officials gathered for this occasion (see 3:2-3, 24, 27). Another striking repetition is the listings of the various musical instruments (3:5, 7, 10, 15). Yet another is the frequent reference to the peoples of all the different nations (3:4, 7, 29).

Our lesson will minimize speculation, and concentrate on that which is both clear and emphatic in our text.

**The King’s Command
(3:1-7)**

1 Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold,[40](https://bible.org/seriespage/faith-and-furnace-daniel-31-30%22%20%5Cl%20%22P645_167810) the height of which was sixty cubits and its width six cubits; he set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon.[41](https://bible.org/seriespage/faith-and-furnace-daniel-31-30#P646_168068) 2 Then Nebuchadnezzar the king sent word to assemble the satraps, the prefects and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates and all the rulers of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up. 3 Then the satraps, the prefects and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates and all the rulers of the provinces were assembled for the dedication of the image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up; and they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. 4 Then the herald loudly proclaimed: “To you the command is given, O peoples, nations and men of every language, 5 that at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe, and all kinds of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king has set up. 6 But whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire.” 7 Therefore at that time, when all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe, and all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshiped the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up.

Few doubt that Daniel intended to indicate a relationship between the statue of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in chapter 2 and the king’s image in chapter 3.[42](https://bible.org/seriespage/faith-and-furnace-daniel-31-30#P648_169801) Much is omitted in the chapter 3 account, such as when the events took place in Nebuchadnezzar’s reign. But the precise timing of the events of chapters 1-4 does not contribute to the argument or the message of the Book of Daniel.

Indeed, we may have something to lose by knowing more. For instance we are not told what the image of chapter 3 represents. Is it an image of the king or of some deity? Why are we not informed? A high regard of Scripture assumes this information is withheld because it is not important. Little would be gained by knowing any more about the king’s image. Yet we may lose by knowing more.

Israel was commanded to serve God alone, and thus all idols were forbidden (Deuteronomy 5:7-10; 6:14-15). When the Israelites defeated their enemies and took the images of their gods, they were to destroy them. They were not to keep them even for the value of their metals (Deuteronomy 7:25-26). God specifically forbade the Israelites to avoid satisfying their curiosity about how the idols were used:

“When the Lord your God cuts off before you the nations which you are going in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, beware that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How do these nations serve their gods, that I also may do likewise?’ You shall not behave thus toward the Lord your God, for every abominable act which the Lord hates they have done for their gods; for they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods” (Deuteronomy 12:29-31).

I believe Daniel avoided giving more information about the king’s image in obedience to this command. To give any more information was to provide what could become a snare to the reader. Think of it. If you knew more about the king’s image, would you not attempt to understand how this idol was to be worshipped? Daniel’s silence concerning the details of this idol was deliberate and instructive.

For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise in what is good, and innocent in what is evil (Romans 16:19).

We are told only that king Nebuchadnezzar had an image constructed 90 feet high and 9 feet wide, to which the entire nation was commanded to bow down. This was not merely an act of respect toward the king, but an act of worship.[43](https://bible.org/seriespage/faith-and-furnace-daniel-31-30#P655_172788) Daniel’s three young Hebrew friends found this something they neither could nor would do, even on penalty of death.

What Daniel does describe in detail may puzzle us. He describes the various levels of political and administrative leadership in Babylon, and then repeats them. He does the same for the various musical instruments, which make up the “orchestra” that provides the musical cue for all who will worship the image. There is also reference made with repetition to the peoples and nations of every language. Why does Daniel place the emphasis here?

Allow me to suggest a possible explanation. King Nebuchadnezzar, still an unbeliever, has been given divine revelation through a dream and told its interpretation in chapter 2. He grasps this revelation as an unbeliever and his understanding and response are impaired (see 1 Corinthians chapter 2). Viewing the revelation of Daniel 2 through the eyes of unbelieving king Nebuchadnezzar provides a better understanding of the king’s goals and methods described in chapter 3.

The king knew his dream pertained to the future of not only his kingdom but of kingdoms to follow. He knew the metals of the statue diminished in value. Though his kingdom was that of gold, those which followed were of silver, bronze, iron, and finally iron mixed with clay.

From his perspective, the king did not focus on the “stone cut out without human hands” (2:34) as the cause of the demise of the entire statue. Instead, he concentrated on the weakness of the statue itself. What was this weakness? It was the feet made of iron mixed with clay. They had no strength. When the stone struck the statue at its feet, the entire statue fell, disintegrated, and was blown away by the wind.

If you were a heathen king, intent on extending your rule and creating some kind of political immortality, what would you have done based on the dream of chapter 2? Would you not try to strengthen the feet? Made of a mixture of iron and clay, they had no strength. We know what the iron and clay mixture represented, and so did the king:

40 “Then there will be a fourth kingdom as strong as iron; inasmuch as iron crushes and shatters all things, so, like iron that breaks in pieces, it will crush and break all these in pieces. 41 And in that you saw the feet and toes, partly of potter’s clay and partly of iron, it will be a divided kingdom; but it will have in it the toughness of iron, inasmuch as you saw the iron mixed with common clay. 42 And as the toes of the feet were partly of iron and partly of pottery, so some of the kingdom will be strong and part of it will be brittle. 43 And in that you saw the iron mixed with common clay, *they will combine with one another in the seed of men; but they will not adhere to one another, even as iron does not combine with pottery* (Daniel 2:40-43, emphasis mine).

The weakness of the final kingdom, which in the king’s mind causes the entire statue to collapse, is the mixture of races and a resulting lack of cohesiveness. This is the “problem” which king Nebuchadnezzar set out to “fix” in Daniel 3.

Nebuchadnezzar, from the very beginning, seems intent on fulfilling a grand objective. He wants not only to establish a great kingdom, but it seems he envisioned a world empire. He hoped, like all ambitious despots and Satan, who stands behind them, to rule the world. Thus, in chapter 1 we find the king assembling a large pool of advisors representing the various schools of wisdom from all over the world. In this sense, he welcomed Daniel and his three Hebrew friends (remember that Solomon was renowned for his wisdom).

When the king learned from his dream that the mix of races weakened the last kingdom, he set his mind to solve this problem rather than deal with the stone of his vision. How could he change the course of history? How could he eliminate the fatal flaws of that final kingdom to prolong the life of the statue and thus his glory?

Daniel 3 suggests that the king determined to solidify his dominion by unifying the many races and nations under his rule with a common religion and object of worship. This posed a serious threat to the Jews. Other nations, who believed in more than one god, simply added this idol to their list of deities to be worshipped. The Jews, however, worshipped God alone. They could not be faithful to their God and worship anyone or anything else. Humanly speaking, if the king’s command stood, it could mean the end of the Jewish faith.

The first time the image is to be worshipped appears to be at its dedication ceremony, described in Daniel 3. This initial ceremony is important in determining how successful the king’s plan for unifying his empire will be. I believe this occasion is carefully designed and orchestrated to lead a unified worship of the image by those of every nation and language.

The dedication ceremony is to lead to a climactic act of worship. There is an “orchestra” which appears to include instruments from around the world. The orchestra itself is symbolic of the unity the king seeks to produce and protect. The orchestra gives the cue for all to fall down in worship in a carefully prescribed way.

The political authorities of the land are the first group of participants. These leaders fall into various groups identified repeatedly by Daniel, representing not only the different levels of government but the various races, languages, and cultures integrated into the government of Babylon. Even the clothing may have been representative of the nations and cultures gathered there to worship one image as one nation.

Had things gone according to the king’s plan, it would have been a very spectacular ceremony. A huge crowd—virtually all who lived in Babylon—would have gathered, the awesome golden image standing high above the crowds. Not far away, the furnace was burning, smoke billowing from its top. Everyone knew they must choose between the two. It was the image or the furnace; bow down or burn.

The political powers, who led in worship, were to be followed by the rest of the peoples of the land.[44](https://bible.org/seriespage/faith-and-furnace-daniel-31-30#P671_178931) Daniel’s three Hebrew friends were numbered among the political leaders, thanks to Daniel’s recommendation and the promotion given them by Nebuchadnezzar himself (see Daniel 2:48-49).

The celebration began. The orchestra signalled the political leaders that it was time to bow down. The rest of the masses were to follow the example of the leaders, perhaps in some kind of grouping, bowing down to the golden image. But this never happened. The celebration which began was never completed.

**The Chaldean’s Charge
(3:8-12)**

8 For this reason at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and brought charges against the Jews. 9 They responded and said to Nebuchadnezzar the king: “O king, live forever! 10 You yourself, O king, have made a decree that every man who hears the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, and bagpipe, and all kinds of music, is to fall down and worship the golden image. 11 But whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire. 12 There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the administration of the province of Babylon, namely Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego. These men, O king, have disregarded you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up.”

The counselors of the king, which would include the Chaldeans, may have been the next to bow in worship. The Chaldeans would have noted the failure of the three to fall down rather than the king or the other political leaders. They, after all, were on their faces before the idol. How could they look about for those who did not bow down?[45](https://bible.org/seriespage/faith-and-furnace-daniel-31-30#P677_180925)

The charge made against the three Hebrews was three-fold:

* They showed disregard for the king’s authority.
* They did not serve his gods.
* They would not bow down to the image.

The Chaldeans were men who owed their lives to Daniel and his friends. Had Daniel not revealed the king’s dream and its meaning to Nebuchadnezzar, all of the wise men of the land would have been put to death. Now, they show their gratitude by pointing out the disobedience of the three Hebrews to the king.

The Chaldeans’ opposition is not difficult to understand, given the goal of Nebuchadnezzar to use foreigners as a part of his administration. The Chaldeans were the “natives” of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar himself was a Chaldean. Daniel and his three friends were outsiders, yet they had higher positions in Nebuchadnezzar’s administration than the Chaldeans. The attack on the three Hebrews was an attack “against the Jews” (3:8).[46](https://bible.org/seriespage/faith-and-furnace-daniel-31-30#P684_182213)

While the Chaldeans did not devise a scheme to bring about the demise of the three Hebrews (as others would later do with Daniel in chapter 6), they certainly took advantage of the situation. They apparently interrupted the ceremony, reporting to Nebuchadnezzar that these three Jews refused to bow down. When the king stopped the ceremony, everyone must have looked on with great interest to see how the matter would be handled and to see if the three Hebrews would buckle under to the king’s orders.

**Deadlock:
The King’s Offer and the Hebrews’ Response
(3:13-18)**

13 Then Nebuchadnezzar in rage and anger gave orders to bring Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego; then these men were brought before the king. 14 Nebuchadnezzar responded and said to them, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? 15 Now if you are ready, at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, and bagpipe, and all kinds of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, very well. But if you will not worship, you will immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire; and what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?” 16 Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. 17 If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. 18 But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

The king, who had appointed these men to their high positions, probably valued their service. Realizing his reputation was at stake, he gave them, before all present, a second chance. He would instruct the orchestra to play once more, and if they bowed down, the matter would be forgotten.

What the king said next proves to be the most significant statement to come from his lips: “What god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?” (verse 15).

He was soon to find out. Like Pharaoh of old, he would learn that the God of Israel is to be heard and obeyed; the God of Israel is able to deliver His people.

The response of the three Hebrews may at first seem to be too abrupt and even disrespectful.

“O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up” (Daniel 3:16b-18).

The king had raised the issue —who was able to deliver these three? They responded that they need not give Nebuchadnezzar any answer because he was not their deliverer. They need not make their defense to him. He could not deliver them and this is why they could not bow down to his golden image. God was their Deliverer. He had proven so at the Exodus, and afterward He commanded His people not to bow down to any image.

The God of the Jews was their Deliverer. He was able to deliver them from the fiery furnace. They did not presume that He was going to do so. He could if in His sovereignty, He chose to do so. The statement which follows is significant: “He will deliver us out of your hand.”

The confidence of these three comes not from any personal assurance of deliverance from the furnace, but from God’s promise to the captives of Babylon that He would deliver them from captivity and restore them as a nation:

Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying, “Thus says the Lord God of Israel, ‘Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the captives of Judah, whom I have sent out of this place into the land of the Chaldeans. For I will set My eyes on them for good, and I will bring them again to this land; and I will build them up and not overthrow them, and I will plant them and not pluck them up, and I will give them a heart to know Me for I am the Lord; and they will be My people, and I will be their God, for they will return to Me with their whole heart (Jeremiah 24:4-7, see also Deuteronomy 30:1-10; Jeremiah 27:22; 29:10-14; 32:36-38).

Whatever happens to them personally, God has promised to deliver and restore His people. Their hope is in God, their Deliverer. One thing is non-negotiable: they will not bow down to this image.

There is a strong note of irony here. The Jewish captives of Babylon are in bondage because of their idolatry (see Isaiah 2; 30:19-22; 31:7; Jeremiah 8:19; Ezekiel 5:1-12; 6:1-10; 14:1-5; 16:15-23; 20:39-40; 22:1-4; 23). Israel was commanded not to make or worship idols, on penalty of death. Until their Babylonian captivity, they persisted in their idolatry. Idolatry was one of the reasons for their being in Babylon.

Now, with the making of this golden image and the dedication ceremony, Daniel’s three friends find themselves commanded to worship this idol, or die. God said, “Worship idols *and* die,” while Nebuchadnezzar said, “Worship my idol *or* die.” Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego were determined to flee from idolatry, even if it meant death; Nebuchadnezzar commanded them to practice idolatry, or they would surely die. In doing what seemed to lead to certain death (refusing to bow down to the golden image), the three Hebrews were delivered from death. These three remained faithful to God and to His law, even when threatened with the fiery furnace. In contrast, Israel persisted in her idolatry, even when warned not to do so. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego are the ideal Israelites, who obey God’s law even when it is life-threatening. They would rather face the wrath of men than the wrath of God.

**Taking the Heat
of Nebuchadnezzar’s Wrath
(3:19-23)**

19 Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with wrath, and his facial expression was altered toward Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego. He answered by giving orders to heat the furnace seven times more than it was usually heated. 20 And he commanded certain valiant warriors who were in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, in order to cast them into the furnace of blazing fire. 21 Then these men were tied up in their trousers, their coats, their caps and their other clothes, and were cast into the midst of the furnace of blazing fire. 22 For this reason, because the king’s command was urgent and the furnace had been made extremely hot, the flame of the fire slew those men who carried up Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego. 23 But these three men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, fell into the midst of the furnace of blazing fire still tied up.[47](https://bible.org/seriespage/faith-and-furnace-daniel-31-30#P704_189069)

We can almost see the redness of Nebuchadnezzar’s face when he hears these men will not obey this command, even if it means the furnace. Thousands of his subjects must have been listening and looking on. The orchestra was set, ready to play once again. All of Babylon’s political leaders were assembled, ready to bow down once again. The masses stood by too, ready to bow as well. Only these three Hebrews would not bow down.

Nebuchadnezzar was so hot, he commanded that the furnace be fired even hotter. This furnace may have been a brick-kiln, perhaps used in making the base for the golden image. The top was like a chimney, where smoke from the fire could escape. It could serve a second purpose as well—offenders could be cast into the fire by being thrown down from above. At the bottom there was a door or hole through which fuel could be added and air for combustion introduced.

The three Hebrews, bound tightly and still in their festive dress, had to be carried to the furnace and then thrown in. The fire was so intensely hot that those charged with the unpleasant task of throwing the men into the fire were consumed by the flames which belched from the furnace. These three men did not stand a “prayer of a chance,” unless their God was able to deliver them. They were cast into the top of the furnace, bound hand and foot.

**The King’s Astonishment
(3:24-27)**

24 Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astounded and stood up in haste; he responded and said to his high officials, “Was it not three men we cast bound into the midst of the fire?” They answered and said to the king, “Certainly, O king.” 25 He answered and said, “Look! I see four men loosed and walking about in the midst of the fire without harm, and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods!” 26 Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the furnace of blazing fire; he responded and said, “Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, come out, you servants of the Most High God, and come here!” Then Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego came out of the midst of the fire. 27 And the satraps, the prefects, the governors and the king’s high officials gathered around and saw in regard to these men that the fire had no effect on the bodies of these men nor was the hair of their head singed, nor were their trousers damaged, nor had the smell of fire even come upon them.

The king’s vantage point must have afforded him a view of the furnace from below so that he could look into the flames through the bottom door where fuel and air were introduced. With utter amazement, the king looked inside. He was astonished! While the executioners were slain by the flames, the three Hebrews were not. They were walking about inside the furnace. Their bonds had been loosed, but the flames did them no harm.

Something else puzzled Nebuchadnezzar. There were not three men walking about in that furnace, but four. More troubling was that the fourth person in the furnace was not like the other three. The king turned to his high officials, who were looking on. He asked them if there were not three men cast into the fire. They wisely agreed. He called their attention to the fact that four men were now in the fire, and one had a god-like appearance. Whatever that appearance was, he knew it was not human and assumed it to be divine.

Drawing near to the door of the furnace, Nebuchadnezzar called into the flames, telling the men to come out. He referred to these men not only by name, but also as “servants of the Most High God.” This was perhaps motivated by the fourth man in the fire. Fortunately for the king and the rest, the fourth person did not come out with the other three.

The king and his officials now witnessed the full extent of the miracle God had performed in their sight. Neither the clothing nor the bodies of the men had been harmed by the intense heat and the flames. Their hair had not been singed; their clothing was not damaged. There was not even the smell of smoke to be detected. Their deliverance could not have been more complete. The only thing they lost in those flames were the ropes which bound them.

**The King’s Announcement
(3:28-30)**

28 Nebuchadnezzar responded and said, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, who has sent His angel and delivered His servants who put their trust in Him, violating the king’s command, and yielded up their bodies so as not to serve or worship any god except their own God. 29 Therefore, I make a decree that any people, nation or tongue that speaks anything offensive against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego shall be torn limb from limb and their houses reduced to a rubbish heap, inasmuch as there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way.” 30 Then the king caused Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego to prosper in the province of Babylon.

Before we consider the words Nebuchadnezzar spoke at the end of Daniel 3, let us recall what we have read at the beginning of the chapter. Nebuchadnezzar had planned to further his kingdom by assembling a large crowd, all of whom would bow in worship to an image he had made. Men had to choose between bowing down to the idol or being burned in the flames of the furnace. The “god” represented by this idol was to be honored and worshipped. Those who resisted were to be destroyed. Yet Nebuchadnezzar’s final words are praise and adoration for these three “rebels,” who refused to bow down, and for the God whom they served, even to death.

This day’s events had not turned out the way the king had planned. He intended to turn the nation to worship his idol. That failed. He planned to subordinate all worship to this “god.” That failed, too. All of the energy and expense to produce worship of a false god was to no avail, and the king fell to his knees before the God of Israel.

His question, asked only moments before, “What god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?” is now answered by the king who asked it. Nebuchadnezzar blessed the God of these three Hebrews, as the God who had delivered them from death. He praised them for their faithfulness in obeying their God, even unto death. Significantly, the king praised these men for their exclusive (monotheistic) worship of their God. Unlike the rest, they were not willing to serve any other god in addition to the one God they worshipped and served.

The king’s decree goes beyond praise. It declares punishment for any who interfere with the free worship of the Jews. Nebuchadnezzar tried to interfere with the religion of the Jews. Their God had intervened and delivered them from the king’s wrath. Now the king seeks to insure this will not happen again. Anyone, the king declared, who so much as speaks against the worship of these men will be torn limb from limb and their property confiscated. All this because no other God had shown himself able to deliver as their God had done.

Finally, the king promotes Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, causing them to prosper in their administration of the province of Babylon.

**Conclusion**

Nebuchadnezzar’s decree set a legal precedent of paramount importance in Babylon. It determined the way religion was to be practiced in Babylon for years.

Other decisions have had a similar impact on the history of the people of God. In chapter 18 of Acts, the Jews charged Paul with holding and promoting a religion which was not Jewish. Their hope was to obtain a legal precedent which distinguished Judaism from Christianity. If this could be accomplished, Christianity would, from that time onward, be regarded as illegal by Rome. Rome would no longer protect the preaching of the gospel but would persecute Christians. When Gallio pronounced that Christianity was Jewish, the church and the preaching of the gospel enjoyed the continuing protection of Rome.

Another landmark case is described in Exodus 1-2. The Egyptians sought to exterminate the Jewish race by killing all the Hebrew boy babies, first by having the midwives kill them in the birth process, and later by drowning the babies in the Nile River. Pharaoh ordered the Hebrews and the Egyptians to “throw into the river” the Hebrew boy babies. Then Pharaoh’s daughter took a Hebrew baby out of the Nile. She even named him Moses, which signified that she took him out of the water (see Exodus 2:10). The actions of Pharaoh’s daughter virtually nullified the Pharaoh’s decree, thus reversing the death sentence imposed by the Egyptian king. If Pharaoh’s own daughter would not kill a Hebrew baby, but spare it from death in the Nile, what Egyptian would throw a baby into the Nile?

In the Book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar has been divinely granted victory over Judah and Jerusalem. The king deported many of the Jews to Babylon. In his effort to unify all of his Babylonian empire by worshipping one god, he has declared it illegal to worship only one God. The religion of the Jews was in the process of being outlawed, right there before the image as the orchestra played and the peoples of every nation began to bow down to it. Had the events of chapter 3 not taken place and the king made the decree of verse 29, the Jews would not have been able to legally practice their worship of God.

In the providence of God, the Chaldeans pressed the link of the three friends of Daniel with the Jews as a group. The end result guaranteed all Jews freedom of worship. The faithfulness of this small remnant of three Jews brought the protection of the worship of all the Jews in Babylon.

In addition to the precedent set by this decree of Nebuchadnezzar, a number of other lessons are to be learned from our text.

**(1) Civil Disobedience**

In chapter 1, Daniel and his three Hebrew friends were able to serve their God without disobeying the government of their land. In chapters 2 and 6, this is not possible, and so the people of God chose to obey God rather than men.

Submission to authority is a principle which must never be put aside. God is the ultimate authority. He has ordained other authorities under Him, as His instruments. This includes human government. Generally when we submit to such authorities, we do so in submission to God. To oppose these authorities is to oppose God (see Romans 13:1-7; Ephesians 6:1-3). Jesus taught that we sometimes need to distinguish between our obligations to God and men and give each their appropriate dues (see Matthew 22:15-22). There are those unpleasant occasions when, in order to obey God, we must disobey human authority. In such cases, we must obey God, rather than men (Acts 5:29).

Nebuchadnezzar’s command to bow down to the golden image is one of those rare instances when godliness is expressed by civil disobedience. There was no chance, as in Daniel 1, for the three Hebrews to please God and the king at the same time. What the king commanded was clearly condemned by the Old Testament Scriptures. We can learn some valuable lessons from Daniel’s friends about civil disobedience.

**Civil disobedience is only permissible when obeying man’s commands would violate God’s commands.** When placed in a position where we must either obey God or men, then we must obey God and disobey men. If obedience to one of man’s laws would result in our disobedience to one of God’s laws, we must obey God by disobeying men.

A number of Christians would say a hearty “Amen,” but many go much farther than the Scriptures seem to warrant. Most of the civil disobedience of our time is very different than that of the three Hebrews. For Daniel’s friends, obedience to the king’s command would have required them to commit the sin of idolatry. They could not do what God had forbidden. If the law commands that we have an abortion, following the example of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego would require our refusal to have an abortion. But when the law allows a woman to have an abortion (a terrible thing, I agree), does the Bible encourage us to break those laws of the land which do not require us to sin in order to obey them? The civil disobedience of our time is not primary, but secondary. I do not find a biblical precedent for disobeying legitimate laws because another law is unbiblical.

Even when our obedience to God requires us to disobey a human law, there are proper ways to disobey. Daniel’s three friends disobeyed the command of Nebuchadnezzar, but they did so in a submissive manner. They did not seek to overthrow the king and set up another government. They did not attempt to call attention to their disobedience. Neither did they encourage others to follow their example. They quietly obeyed God by not bowing down; and then, without resistance, they accepted the king’s punishment. They left the rest to God. This kind of godly disobedience is far from inflammatory. It is the only kind of disobedience I find in the Bible.

**(2) Suffering**

Unlike some today, Daniel’s friends did not believe that faithfulness to God guarantees freedom from suffering and tribulation. We know from the Scriptures that those who would live godly lives should expect suffering and tribulation (see 2 Timothy 3:12; Hebrews 11 and 12; James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 2:18-25; 4:1-19).

In our suffering we gain and we grow. We experience a deeper level of fellowship with Christ (Philippians 3:10). We find Him present with us in the fires of our tribulations in a way we may not have previously known. From our text, we know that God was with Daniel and his three friends at all times. But in the fiery furnace, God was with these three in a very special way. How often we pray God would keep us *from* suffering, rather than keep us *through* suffering. Often God reveals Himself in our suffering in a much more personal and glorious way. So it was with these three. God was present with them *in* the furnace.

While these men bore witness to their faith by what they refused to do, God’s power was most dramatically demonstrated in the fire. When Christians suffer well, the world takes note that the faith of the believer is not a fair-weather faith. Suffering is the opportunity for God to bear witness through us.

Lastly, suffering is a beneficial experience because it purifies. The Bible likens going through tribulation to going through a fire (see 1 Peter 1:7). Fire purifies metals. It burned off the ropes which bound the three Hebrews. What the fire of affliction and suffering takes from us, we would be better off without (see 1 Peter 4:1-6).

**(3) Fearing God more than men**

Nebuchadnezzar sought to inaugurate the worship of a new god on the basis of fear. The citizens of Babylon, with the golden idol and the fiery furnace before them, had to choose one or the other. The refusal by these three Hebrews to bow down to the image was based upon a principle our Lord reiterated many years later:

“Do not fear those who can kill the body, but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28).

Nebuchadnezzar’s anger was fierce, his countenance frightening, and his furnace intensely hot. Nevertheless, Daniel’s three friends feared the wrath of God more than that of the king. They knew that the fires of hell were more devastating than the fire of Nebuchadnezzar’s furnace. These Hebrews feared God more than men, and thus they obeyed God rather than men.

**(4) Beware of oaths and vows**

Over the years, I have observed a number of ceremonies in which oaths or vows were taken. I thought little of them, until I started to listen more closely to what was being said in the vows. The vows of a number of seemingly beneficial secular organizations are frightening and unbiblical if the words are taken seriously. We should take them as seriously as Daniel’s friends took bowing down to the golden image. Our loyalty and obedience are to God, first and foremost.

**(5) Fallen man’s response to revelation**

Why should we be surprised that Nebuchadnezzar failed to understand the revelation from God in chapter 2? Apart from the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the natural man will never grasp what God is saying or doing. Nebuchadnezzar is an example of what Paul taught in 1 Corinthians:

Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; but just as it is written, “THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.”

For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man, which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no man. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that He should instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:6-16).

Apart from the ministry of the Spirit, we will distort and pervert the Scriptures as badly as the pagan Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar.

**(6) A taste of the last day**

Our text foreshadows the end times, when the Antichrist seeks to unify mankind by false religion and worship. We can see the similarity of Daniel 3 to the events described in the Book of Revelation (see chapters 13-14, 17-18, noting the references to Babylon). Satan, too, seeks to rule over men through false worship. In our text, however, this would-be antichrist is destined to become a saint, as we shall see in chapter 4. God can turn anti-Christ’s into worshippers of Christ.

**(7) The necessity of faith**

What these three young men did was incredible! They stood up against the most powerful nation and king of their time. Standing virtually alone, they stood up by faith, a faith which qualified them to be listed in the “hall of faith” :

And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, *quenched the power of fire,* escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight (Hebrews 11:32-34, emphasis mine).

**(8) Deliverance**

This chapter is really about deliverance. The king expected all of Babylon, including the Jews, to fall down before his idol, because he was the one who could deliver or destroy them. “What god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?” , he asked them. To this he later replied, “there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way” .

The three Hebrews did not make any defense to this king because they knew he was not their deliverer.Their Deliverer was the God who delivered them from bondage in Egypt, who forbade His people to worship idols, and who promised to deliver them from Babylonian captivity. Their Deliverer was God.

Theirs was a complete deliverance, because God accomplished it. They were not merely delivered from the fire; they were delivered through the fire. They were delivered through the fire which brought death to their executioners and in a way that destroyed only their bonds.[48](https://bible.org/seriespage/faith-and-furnace-daniel-31-30#P771_209290) They were delivered from sizzling, singeing, and even the scent of smoke. That is complete deliverance.

The deliverance which God has accomplished for us is like that described in Daniel 3. It is, first and foremost, God’s deliverance. It is not a deliverance from all suffering and trials, but one which exists because God Himself experienced the fire. As the fourth person was present with the Hebrews in the furnace, Christ has endured the wrath of God, in our place. We are delivered from God’s eternal wrath because Jesus Christ, the Son of God, suffered for us, in our place. Deliverance, all deliverance, has been accomplished on the cross of Calvary.

I doubt that you and I fully grasp the extent of the deliverance we have in Christ. We say we believe that God has delivered us from Satan, sin, hell and death, but do we really believe it? Why do Christians frantically seek deliverance from drugs, addictions, fear, guilt, and bitterness in sources other than the shed blood of Jesus Christ? We do not fathom or experience the totality of the deliverance which God has for us now, let alone in eternity. God’s deliverance is complete deliverance.

**(9) A final perspective**

Would Nebuchadnezzar seek to establish his kingdom by initiating a common religion and worship? It would fail. The words written in the last book, the Book of Revelation, put Daniel 3 into perspective. As you read these words at the close of our lesson, remember that one of those among this throng of worshippers from every nation and language will be none other than Nebuchadnezzar, on his face before God, in wonder, adoration, and praise:

And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth. And He came, and He took it out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne. And when He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, having each one a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints, and they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to break its seals; for Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. And Thou hast made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth.” And I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing. And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, “To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever.” And the four living creatures kept saying, “Amen.” And the elders fell down and worshiped (Revelation 5:6-14).

Will you be among that throng who worships God for all eternity? You, like Nebuchadnezzar, must acknowledge your sin and trust in the God who delivers, through His Son—the stone of Daniel 2—Jesus Christ.

**Chapter 3:
Questions and Answers**

**(1) Where do you think Nebuchadnezzar got the idea to make an image of gold?**

The idea probably came from his dream described and explained in Daniel 2. From that dream, he learned that the entire statue (the Gentile kingdoms) disintegrated because a stone struck the feet which were weak. The weakness, he was told, was due to a racial mixture in the last kingdom. Seeking to “fix the feet” by making an idol of solid gold and creating one religion, Nebuchadnezzar constructed the gold image and required every race and culture to worship it. Nebuchadnezzar may have hoped to change the course of history and prolong the glory of his kingdom.

**(2) What should Nebuchadnezzar have learned from his dream and the interpretation of Daniel, as recorded in** **Daniel 2****?**

Nebuchadnezzar was still a pagan though he had acknowledged the God of Daniel and his three friends as a God of wisdom and revelation. In chapter 3, he learned that the God of Israel was also the Deliverer of His people. What the king did not take seriously enough was the stone, the real cause of the statue’s destruction and the creator of the new, eternal, kingdom which replaced Gentile rule. Rather than “fix the feet,” he needed to fall at the feet of the “stone,” Jesus Christ.

Nebuchadnezzar did not yet grasp the sovereignty of God over history. Although he was told the dream and its interpretation were trustworthy (2:45), he still believed he could change the course of history.

**(3) According to verses 2 and 3, who was specifically commanded to bow down to the image? Why these people?**

The political and governmental leaders of the nation are in focus because Daniel and his three friends were in this group. I believe there were thousands present, who were to follow their leaders in the worship of the image. Among this group were the Chaldeans, who revealed to the king that the three Hebrews did not bow down.

**(4) How and why were Daniel’s three friends singled out as wrongdoers with regard to the image? What was the real, underlying reason for the case against the three Hebrews? How did God use this for good for His people?**

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, seem to have been the only ones at the dedication who did not bow down to the image. The charges made by the Chaldeans against them as Jews, and in a sense this was correct for it was their Jewish faith which forbade them to worship any idol.

The Chaldeans should have been grateful to the three Hebrews and to Daniel because through them the king’s dream was revealed and interpreted which avoided the execution of all the Babylonian wise men.

The Chaldeans had a special animosity toward Daniel and his friends, which was probably racially motivated. The Chaldeans were the natives of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar was a Chaldean, and yet the king promoted these Jews rather than the Chaldeans to the highest positions in the nation. They seem to be acting out of jealousy and racial bigotry.

After God delivered these three Jews, the king’s decree guaranteed religious freedom to all the Jews. The faithfulness of Daniel’s three friends brought freedom of religion for the entire Jewish community in Babylon.

**(5) Why is no mention made of Daniel in chapter 3?**

Daniel wrote this book; he is the one describing the events of chapter 3. He chose, for some reason, to exclude himself. We can only assume that Daniel was not charged because he had greater authority and prestige than the other three, or more likely, because Daniel was not there.

**(6) How is the issue in chapter 3 similar to the problem Daniel and his three friends faced in chapter 1? How and why is their response different in chapter 3 than in chapter 1? How is their outcome different?**

Both chapters deal with submission to God and to human government. In chapter 1, the four Jews served God **and** government, offending neither God nor the government. In chapter 3, they had to choose God **or** government, being unable to serve both at the same time. Thus, in chapter 3, godly men had to obey God by disobeying government.

In chapter 1, Nebuchadnezzar did not realize the superior wisdom of Daniel and his three friends. In chapter 3, the king clearly understands the issue is over whose god is more powerful, his god or the God of the Hebrews. In both chapters, Daniel and his friends are promoted, but in the latter Nebuchadnezzar recognizes God working miraculously to deliver His servants and acknowledges the superiority of their God over his.

**(7) Why did the three Hebrews answer the king as they did?**

They knew their destiny was not really in the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, but God. They made no defense to him because he was not their deliverer. Their deliverer was the God who delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage and then forbade His people to worship idols. The issues of deliverance and idolatry were therefore inseparably linked in God’s dealings with Israel. They knew God was able to deliver them from or through the fire. They also knew that God had promised to deliver the nation from Babylonian bondage. Their faith and hope was in God, not man.

**(8) What is accomplished by the events of chapter 3?**

* for Daniel’s three friends?
* for the Jews in Babylon?
* for Nebuchadnezzar?
* for the enemies of the three Hebrews?
* for the reader of this account?

Daniel’s three friends are delivered and even promoted because of their faithfulness, and are included in the “hall of faith” in Hebrews 11 (see verses 32-34).

Their deliverance reversed Nebuchadnezzar’s requirement of the Jews to bow down. It also protected Jewish worship by promising punishment for any who would seek to hinder their worship.

Nebuchadnezzar is humbled to some degree and given greater revelation concerning the God of the Jews. Nebuchadnezzar understands in chapter 2 that the God of the Israelites is the source of wisdom and knowledge. He learns in chapter 3 that He also intervenes in human history to deliver His people.

The enemies of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego were shown the folly of their own “faith” and the power of the God of the Jews to preserve and deliver them.

The reader of the account is reminded that God is the only Deliverer. Deliverance comes from God, to the people of God. Deliverance is complete. It will keep us through the fire of tribulation and adversity.

**(9) What are the issues in this text?**

* Idolatry
* Submission to the state and civil disobedience
* Suffering
* Divine deliverance
* The preservation of the Jews
* The Antichrist of the last days
* Whom do we fear?
* Fallen man’s comprehension and response to divine revelation
* The conversion of Nebuchadnezzar

40 The image could have been solid gold, or wood overlain with gold (see Exodus 37:25-26; 39:38; Isaiah 40:19; 41:7; Jeremiah 10:3-9).

41 “The archaeologist Julius Oppert states that he found on one of these mounds a large brick square, forty-five feet on a side and twenty feet high, which he believes was the foundation of this very image.” Leon Wood, *A Commentary of Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), p. 80.

42 While there seems to be a connection between the statue of chapter 2 and the image of chapter 3, there are striking contrasts between these two representations. Consider these contrasts:

Images of Chapter 2: (a) divine origin; (b) a vision only; (c) made of different metals; (d) not an object of worship; (e) privately revealed to Nebuchadnezzar; (f) fairly well described; (g) prompted king to bow down.

Images of Chapter 3: (a) human origin; (b) a reality; (c) made only of gold; (d) an object of worship; (e) revealed to all; (f) described only generally; (g) men commanded to bow down.

43 The term worship is employed 11 times in chapter 3 in reference to the king’s image.

44 One can see how disturbing the refusal of three high-level leaders to fall in worship would have been to Nebuchadnezzar. If the leaders were to worship first, followed by the people, what rebellion might that produce in the general population? These men were setting a bad example before all, and at the first ceremony of worship. Such disobedience would not be tolerated by the king.

45 None of the three Hebrews tried to call attention to their civil disobedience in refusing to bow down to the golden image. They were not trying to make an issue of this matter, but only being obedient to their faith and to the Law as quietly and inconspicuously as possible. Had the Chaldeans not made an issue of their failure to fall down, there would have been no confrontation.

46 This linking of the three friends of Daniel with the Jews was to work in favor of the Jews, as we shall soon see.

47 It is at this point in the text that Greek versions include a long addition: a prayer, a prose description of their deliverance and a hymn, commonly known as the Benedicite, supposedly sung from the furnace by the three men, or by Azariah alone (according to Theodotion). Evidence from Qumran has shown conclusively that these additions were not part of the original. Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1978), p. 106.

48 What a picture this is of their future deliverance from Babylonian captivity. They were, in Babylon, delivered from the bondage of idolatry. They were not in any way adversely affected by the fire of tribulation in Babylon.