

EAGLES RENDEZVOUS

UNRAVELING THE FUTURE STUDIES IN THE BOOK OF DANIEL

With God in Furnace or With King in Fear? Daniel 3-4

OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION

Daniel 3

1 King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, ninety feet high and nine feet wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. 2 He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. 3 So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it. 4 Then the herald loudly proclaimed, "This is what you are commanded to do, O peoples, nations and men of every language: 5 As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. 6 Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace." 7 Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

8 At this time some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. 9 They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, live forever! 10 You have issued a decree, O king, that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, 11 and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. 12 But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon-Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego-who pay no attention to you, O king. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up."

13 Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, 14 and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? 15 Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" 16 Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. 17 If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. 18 But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

19 Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude

toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual 20 and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. 21 So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. 22 The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, 23 and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace. 24 Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?" They replied, "Certainly, O king." 25 He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods."

26 Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!" So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, 27 and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them. 28 Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. 29 Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way." 30 Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

No details are provided either regarding the character of the image or what it represented. It has been objected that a statue that big could not have been made of solid gold. If the image represented a human figure, as some commentators suppose, these measurements seem indeed out of proportion. King Nebuchadnezzar's edict to worship the image he had erected reminds of John's vision in Revelation of the image set up during the reign of the Antichrist to which the inhabitants of the world are required to give worship.

The text beautifully depicts the pompous ambience that accompanied the ceremony by enumerating, first the long list of dignitaries present (satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials), and then also the detailed description of the orchestra.

The Hebrew word rendered "denounce" is *qerats*, which literally means eat "to the morsels of any one." *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* suggests: "They ate the torn limbs or flesh of the Jews." Whether this means that a sentiment of anti-Semitism ran through the empire, we do not know. If the Jewish captives distinguished themselves by their dietary restrictions and their shunning of idolatry as well as by their superior abilities which had propelled some of them to high government posts, a strong feeling of jealousy may very well have been present.

The accusation against Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego was, first of all, that they paid no attention to the person of Nebuchadnezzar. The way this is stated would, inevitably, kindle the king's wrath immediately, creating the right atmosphere to introduce the seriousness of the offence in not worshipping idols in general and not participating in the worship of this image in particular. It has been suggested that, if the image was dedicated to the god Marduk, a neglect

to revere it would be considered an offence against the state and be counted as treason. The accusation has its desired effect: the king flies into a rage as he was accustomed to doing so in the previous chapter.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are summoned to the king's presence and his majesty gives them a second chance. For the fourth time the inventory of the orchestra is itemized, adding divine ridicule to the story.

The answer of the accused stands out in Scripture as one of the most impressive statements of faith. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had surrendered their lives to God. They knew that their lives were in His hand and that He could do with them according to His pleasure. Fear of death played no part in their conviction. They expressed what Jesus would later formulate in His advice to His disciples: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul."

The answer of the three made the king lose all self-control that he may have demonstrated up to that point. The Hebrew text reads literally: "the form of his visage was changed." His face was contorted by fury. The strange aspect in this outburst of rage is that Nebuchadnezzar had formerly confessed to Daniel: "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings." The king's frenzy not only changed his facial expressions, it also warped his concept of the truth. He knew in his heart that what these men said to him was true, but he was unwilling to listen.

Proof that the fire was extremely hot is found in the fact that the soldiers who were commanded to execute the king's command perished themselves in the flames; Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did not survive because the heat was bearable enough.

Evidently, Nebuchadnezzar witnessed the execution, probably because he felt he would enjoy the scene that proved his supreme power over the life of his subjects. The king may have possessed a streak of sadism. It was the satisfaction of revenge for a personal insult. It is said that Adolph Hitler ordered the execution of those who had plotted to assassinate him to be filmed so that he could enjoy viewing them.

In his viewing of the execution, the king has a surprise, to put it mildly. His question is the equivalent of: "Pinch me! Am I really seeing what I see?" The king's observation that the men had been tied when thrown into the fire and that they were seen walking around unfettered suggests that their bonds had been non-combustible. They had probably been chained together. The heat of the fire ought to have singed them beyond recognition even before they hit the bottom of the furnace. But here they are, walking around as free men. The most astonishing phenomenon is the presence of a fourth person, whose radiance must have outshone the fire so as to qualify him as "a son of the gods." From his later statement that God had "sent his angel and rescued his servants," we may conclude that the king had seen a supernatural being. The Second Person of the Godhead could have come personally to the rescue but our text does not state this conclusively.

In calling the three men out of the fire, Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged defeat. He had of course little choice in the matter. If this fire could not destroy those who had rebelled against him, nothing could.

The execution by fire may have had a deeper spiritual meaning. The furnace may have been part of Babylonian idol worship or used to fashion the statue. As a matter of fact, fire was considered to be a divine element in the mind of the Babylonians. Jehovah had shown himself as the supreme Revealer of secrets when he enabled Daniel to tell Nebuchadnezzar his dream. He now manifested himself as Master of the most powerful of elements - fire. The Jews could thus maintain their faith unchallenged.

The king's acknowledgment that the God Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego served was the Most High God does not imply that he ceased to believe in the gods he worshipped; he merely recognized the supremacy of God over the other ones. As a result of this miracle, the king issued a decree that is again typical of the brutality with which he reigned over his empire. His subjects are not ordered to worship God, but if they say anything that would discredit YHWH or the Jewish faith, they would "be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble."

Some commentators believe that the three men were promoted to a post that put them in charge of Jewish affairs in the empire.

Daniel 4

1 King Nebuchadnezzar, To the peoples, nations and men of every language, who live in all the world: May you prosper greatly! 2 It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me. 3 How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an eternal kingdom; his dominion endures from generation to generation.

4 I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at home in my palace, contented and prosperous. 5 I had a dream that made me afraid. As I was lying in my bed, the images and visions that passed through my mind terrified me. 6 So I commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be brought before me to interpret the dream for me. 7 When the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners came, I told them the dream, but they could not interpret it for me.

8 Finally, Daniel came into my presence and I told him the dream. (He is called Belteshazzar, after the name of my god, and the spirit of the holy gods is in him.) 9 I said, "Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you, and no mystery is too difficult for you. Here is my dream; interpret it for me. 10 These are the visions I saw while lying in my bed: I looked, and there before me stood a tree in the middle of the land. Its height was enormous. 11 The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky; it was visible to the ends of the earth. 12 Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it the beasts of the field found shelter, and the birds of the air lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed. 13 "In the visions I saw while lying in my bed, I looked, and there before me was a messenger, a holy one, coming down from heaven. 14 He called in a loud voice: `Cut down the tree and trim off its branches; strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the animals flee from under it and the birds from its branches.

15 But let the stump and its roots, bound with iron and bronze, remain in the ground, in the grass of the field. "Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, and let him live with the animals

among the plants of the earth. 16 Let his mind be changed from that of a man and let him be given the mind of an animal, till seven times pass by for him. 17 "The decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men.' 18 "This is the dream that I, King Nebuchadnezzar, had. Now, Belteshazzar, tell me what it means, for none of the wise men in my kingdom can interpret it for me. But you can, because the spirit of the holy gods is in you."

19 Then Daniel (also called Belteshazzar) was greatly perplexed for a time, and his thoughts terrified him. So the king said, "Belteshazzar, do not let the dream or its meaning alarm you." Belteshazzar answered, "My lord, if only the dream applied to your enemies and its meaning to your adversaries! 20 The tree you saw, which grew large and strong, with its top touching the sky, visible to the whole earth, 21 with beautiful leaves and abundant fruit, providing food for all, giving shelter to the beasts of the field, and having nesting places in its branches for the birds of the air- 22 you, O king, are that tree! You have become great and strong; your greatness has grown until it reaches the sky, and your dominion extends to distant parts of the earth. 23 "You, O king, saw a messenger, a holy one, coming down from heaven and saying, 'Cut down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump, bound with iron and bronze, in the grass of the field, while its roots remain in the ground. Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven; let him live like the wild animals, until seven times pass by for him.' 24 "This is the interpretation, O king, and this is the decree the Most High has issued against my lord the king: 25 You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes. 26 The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules. 27 Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue." 28 All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar.

29 Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, 30 he said, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?" 31 The words were still on his lips when a voice came from heaven, "This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. 32 You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes." 33 Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird. 34 At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. 35 All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?" 36 At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honor and splendor were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisers and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before. 37 Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.

“Signs and wonders” is the translation of the Aramaic words *’ath* and *temahh*. They are only found in The Book of Daniel. The fact that the king called his personal experience “signs and wonders” indicates that he, correctly, understood them to be of universal significance for the human race as a whole. The topic of the following testimony is human pride and the miraculous change of heart produced by a supernatural intervention. The fact that Nebuchadnezzar’s experience is called “a sign” means that a change of heart is an option for every human being; that it is called “a wonder” shows that only God is able to change the human heart. God’s hatred of human pride is a theme that runs like a thread through all of Scripture.

There is similarity between Nebuchadnezzar’s first dream and this one but there are also many differences, the greatest being that, this time, the king remembered what he had dreamed. There is also no suggestion of cruel punishment for those who were unable to explain to the king the meaning of the dream. In both dreams the king sees himself as a glorious person: a head of gold, and a beautiful fruit tree reaching into heaven. This time, however, the view of his own greatness and his subsequent downfall disturbed the king, even before he understood the meaning of what he had seen.

The dream disturbed King Nebuchadnezzar, probably not because of the initial image, but because of the part in which the tree was ordered to be cut down. Nebuchadnezzar may have established peace for his kingdom; he had never found peace for himself.

It is significant that, when Daniel is introduced in the narrative, the king refers to him with his Babylonian name Belteshazzar, with the explanation that he is named after the god Bel. And Nebuchadnezzar still addresses this deity as: “my god.”

Daniel must have understood immediately what the dream meant and he was unable to hide his emotions in the presence of the king. Nebuchadnezzar reassured Daniel by saying: “Belteshazzar, do not let the dream or its meaning alarm you.” We detect a note of tenderness and, maybe, even affection between the king and Daniel. The obvious meaning of the dream was emotionally disturbing to Daniel and his emotional reaction in turn affected the king. He must have known that the king did not have many real friends in whom he could confide.

The fact Nebuchadnezzar was identified with the tree must not have come as a surprise to the king; it was the reason for his alarm. Daniel predicted that the king would become mentally ill to the point that he would no longer be able to function as head of state. This is symbolized in the cutting down of the tree.

In earlier centuries, serious Bible students believed that a metamorphosis occurred, physically changing Nebuchadnezzar into a wolf-man or some other kind of mythological creature. Others thought that there was a coup d’état in which the king was temporarily exiled. The more modern view is that the king became a hypochondriac maniac, imagining himself to be an animal and behaving accordingly. The latter interpretation is by far the most sensible one and it does not violate the text.

There were two points of hope in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream that Daniel was quick to grasp. The first was the fact that the king was given a dream at all. God’s warnings of judgment to come

always are an act of grace. The second one was the fact that the stump of the tree was to be preserved; the king would be given a second chance by acknowledging that the power he possessed was delegated to him by heaven. There is always a way out through confession and repentance.

Daniel's advice to King Nebuchadnezzar to renounce his sin and wickedness was a heroic act. Those words could easily have cost him his life. He saw in this most powerful man of his time a lost human soul, which filled him with compassion. Unfortunately, his advice is unheeded.

God, in His grace, gave King Nebuchadnezzar a whole year to repent. Beginning with verse 28, the narrative changes from the first to the third person singular, the reason obviously being that the king became insane and was unable to recall the details.

The text states that Nebuchadnezzar was walking on the roof of his palace, which gave him a panoramic view of the city. Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon must have a beautiful city. The king's sin did not consist in his efforts to beautify the city but in taking credit for his own greatness. Nebuchadnezzar's fatal statement was: "the glory of my majesty."

Nebuchadnezzar had used his year of grace to work himself up to this point of rebellion against the God who had spoken to him twice and who had shown His power in delivering three of His servants from the king's furnace. Punishment was instantaneous. Lunacy took over his mind. God simply took away from Nebuchadnezzar what was not his to begin with: his kingdom and his humanity.

We are not given any details about what happened, except for the coming of a voice from heaven, announcing the verdict that Daniel had foretold. The king was probably allowed a few moments of sanity, enough to recall his dream and Daniel's explanation.

At the end of the "seven times," (whether seven years, or months, we do not know), the king's sanity was restored to him. We are not told what happened in the interim period. Someone must have held the reigns of the empire, but we don't know who it was. He immediately realized the cause of his madness and confessed his sin by giving God the praise due to Him.

Interestingly, our text does not state that first the king's sanity was restored and, then, he raised his eyes toward heaven. The order is reversed. It was in looking up to heaven that he became sane again. This is another illustration of the intricacies of God's grace in the human soul.

Nebuchadnezzar's praise of God contains some sound theology. He returned the praise, honor, and glory he had demanded for himself to God. He recognized God for who He is, the Most High, the eternal one. There appears to be in the deepest part of every human heart, the knowledge of a Supreme Being. Nebuchadnezzar had encountered the Most High in the person of Daniel and his three friends. Now he had met Him personally in his episode of insanity.

APPLICATION

1. Beware of _____ and _____.
2. Beware of the _____.
3. Beware of _____.
4. Beware of your _____.
5. Be aware of _____.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. When pride begins to creep into your heart and life, what is it that drives and grows this attitude?
2. What is one area of life that I am aware God wants me to humble myself?
3. What steps could I take today to humble myself in this area?