

KEEPING A COOL HEAD
WHEN THE HEAT IS ON
DANIEL 3

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

One of the myths that some people have about teenagers is that they want to be different and unique, that they are striving to be individualists. The reality is that most teens are much more concerned about fitting in. Although they sometimes want to be different than their parents in certain ways, they don't want to be too different from their peers. Generally they crave acceptance and respect from them.

Even when we get older, we are still subject to peer pressure. At the office or the job site we want to dress in a way similar to our coworkers. Moms want their child raising methods to be acceptable to other moms. People at church want to appear to be as spiritual as everyone else. Generally we want to fit in.

Twice I have had the experience of street preaching in Times Square in New York City. I have been trained to preach. I have had experience doing it. I get paid to do it. But it was still hard to stand on a street corner, even with a bunch of other Christians, and preach to crowds of people passing by. I felt pressure within myself not to be different, not to seem odd in the eyes of people walking the streets of New York City, even though I didn't know them, and they didn't know me.

Peer pressure is something that all of us have to deal with from time to time. The problem comes when that pressure would cause us to compromise our faith in God. It is tough to stand out in a crowd, whether that crowd is a horde of people on Broadway that we don't know or our peers at the office or friends at church or fellow students or our neighbors or our family.

Three young Jewish men faced that pressure in Daniel #3. The pressure that they faced to compromise their faith came not just from their peers, not just from the fear of being different, not just from the threat of losing their jobs, but also from the likelihood of being executed for not going along with the crowd. But because of their heroic response to that pressure we learn a lesson about how we should live in an often godless society and about whether God is worthy of our trust.

I.

In vv. 1-7 we learn about THE OCCASION FOR THE TEST OF FAITH. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE OCCASION FOR THE TEST OF FAITH) The events of #3 occur after the episode in #2 where Daniel described and interpreted the dream of King Nebuchadnezzar and where Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego were given promotions in the government of the province of Babylon. (BABYLONIAN EMPIRE 3) That province apparently included the territory surrounding the capital city of Babylon.

Daniel is now serving as chief of the wise men and governor of the province. His three friends are serving in Daniel's administration.

Now King Nebuchadnezzar decides to build an image made out of gold, at least plated with gold. The thing is 90 feet tall. That would be the height of an eight or nine story building. The Colossus on the Greek island of Rhodes (COLOSSUS AT RHODES), built a couple of hundred years later, was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It was just slightly taller than this statue.

The image in our story was set up on the plain of Dura, probably to the south of Babylon. In this general area archaeologists discovered a base 40 feet square by 25 feet tall. Some suspect that this was the base for the statue in our story.

We aren't told exactly what it looked like. Some have suggested that it could have been the image of the statue that Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream in #2. Some have suggested that it was an image of Nebuchadnezzar himself. There is, however, no other evidence that rulers from this part of the world ever made people worship images of themselves. (NEBUCHADNEZZAR IMAGE) My guess is that it was an image of the chief Babylonian god, Marduk.

After the image is built, Nebuchadnezzar gathers together government officials from throughout the empire to come to the dedication of this image. As part of the ceremony everyone is required to bow down and worship before it. Anyone who refuses to do that is to be killed.

At the end of #2 we saw last week that Nebuchadnezzar responded to Daniel's description and interpretation of his dream by falling down before Daniel and praising his God. By his actions here we see that the king really had made no commitment of personal trust in Daniel's God. He had no sense of responsibility to this God above all gods. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The text does not tell us the reason for this ceremony before the statue on the Plain of Dura. There are events recorded in other historical records that may relate to what happened here. We know that Nebuchadnezzar had a 43 year reign as king that was generally stable, with the exception of one incident. In the earlier part of his reign there was a coup attempt that involved a certain segment of the army.

In the Chronicle of Nebuchadnezzar dated to 595 or 594 BC archaeologists discovered a few decades (PROJECTOR ON--- NEBUCHADNEZZAR QUOTE) ago these sentences: **"In the tenth year the King of Akkad [Nebuchadnezzar] was in his own land. ...there was rebellion in Akkad. ...with arms he slew many of his own army. His own hand captured his enemy."** (D. J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldean Kings*, p. 73)

We also know from Jeremiah #27 and other historical records that there was unrest among some of the subjected countries in the earlier part of the king's rule. (JUDAH

MAP) This unrest led to a revolt that involved Judah, Moab, Edom, Tyre, and a few other countries. Scholars have speculated that news of the political unrest within Babylon may have touched off thinking by the subjugated countries that now was a good time to revolt.

Some scholars have suggested that all of this may tie in with Daniel #3 in that the ceremony here is a kind of loyalty test. (PROJECTOR OFF) Nebuchadnezzar calls together these government officials and says, "Look, guys, I'm in charge here. I want to know if you are with me or not. If you are, I want you to bow down before this image. If you don't, that's the end of you. If you don't keep yourselves in line, you can expect the same kind of ending to your life."

There is another piece of archaeological evidence that may be relevant. An undated clay tablet (PROJECTOR ON--- ISTANBUL PRISM OF NEBUCHADNEZZAR) that comes from some time in the reign of Nebuchadnezzar was discovered years ago (William Shea, *St. Andrews Theological Review*). Archaeologist William Shea noted a list that appears on that tablet. The list is preceded by this statement from King Nebuchadnezzar: **"I ordered the following court officials in the exercises of their duties to take up positions in my official suite..."**

There then follows a long list of officials and their corresponding positions. The question is: When would so many officials be appointed all at once to high office, if indeed this is describing one occasion when a number of officials were given government appointments? A reasonable answer would be after the attempted army coup when there would likely have been a house cleaning in the king's administration. Perhaps the dedication ceremony in #3 relates to this coup and the subsequent installation of new officials. We can't be certain, but this seems to be a reasonable conclusion.

There are also some fascinating names that appear on this tablet. (HANNANU) One of them is Hannanu, appointed as chief of the royal merchants. That might be a position similar to the US Secretary of Commerce. The name Hannanu sounds suspiciously close to Hannaniah, and could be a Babylonian variation of the name. Hannaniah was the Hebrew name for one of our Jewish young men, who was given the name Shadrach by the Babylonians when they began their government training.

(MUSHALLIM-MARDUK) A second name on this tablet is Mushallim-Marduk. He is listed as overseer of the slave girls. A shortened variation of his name could very well have been Meshach. Professor Shea, who noticed these names on the list, says that this is linguistically possible.

(ARDI-NABU) A third name on this tablet is Ardi-Nabu. In the Babylonian language that literally means "Servant of Nabu, or Nebo." Nabu, or Nebo, is one of the most prominent of the Babylonian gods. The third hero in our story is Abed-nego. "Abed" in Hebrew means servant. So the name literally means "Servant of Nego." But, as I pointed out in an earlier lesson, there is no Babylonian god by that name. So the suspicion of many scholars is that the "g" was substituted for the "b" as an intentional corruption. "G," or

gimmel, comes after “B”, or beth, in the Hebrew alphabet. The Hebrew writers didn’t always like to use the names of the pagan gods, and sometimes they changed their spelling.

For that reason Professor Shea--- and I have come across other recent commentators who agree with him--- is convinced that Ardi-Nabu is one and the same person as Abed-nego. The listed position for Ardi-Nabu on the clay tablet is secretary of the crown prince. That means that perhaps Abed-nego had the primary responsibility and care for the heir to the throne of Babylon. A bit later we will consider the significance of that.

II.

In vv. 8-23 we find THE RESPONSE TO THE TEST OF FAITH. (II. THE RESPONSE TO THE TEST OF FAITH) A conflict develops because Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego are unwilling to bow down before the image. It must have been lonely standing there by themselves. I can picture friends and colleagues yelling at them to get down. There may have been hundreds, and even thousands, gathered for this dedication. But the three young Jews were unwilling to participate in anything resembling idol worship.

Daniel was apparently not present. We don’t know where he was. He could have been away on business. By virtue of his high position and demonstrated loyalty he might not have been required to attend.

When the three Jews do not bow down, v. 8 tells us that certain Chaldeans bring charges against them. The term “Chaldeans” at times refers to Babylonians generally, at times to an ethnic group within the empire who came to dominate the leadership, and at times to wise men serving as top government advisors. Probably the wise men are in view here.

These men appear to be jealous of the positions of the young foreigners. In v. 12 they accuse the three of disregarding the king, of not serving the Babylonian gods, and of failing to worship the image. Back in #2 Daniel and his friends were in a position where they could have had these guys sacked or even killed. But now these Chaldeans seem to be out to get our three heroes.

The Chaldeans correctly calculated that this would enrage the king. So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego are quickly brought forward. Perhaps because of what happened in #2 and because of the Jewish men’s faithfulness in office, Nebuchadnezzar gives them a second chance. He reminds them of the penalty for failing to fall down and worship. He adds at the end of v. 15, **“And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?”** Your God may have revealed my dream to Daniel. But I am in charge here. I am in control.

Notice the response in vv. 16-18: **“Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, ‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. 17 If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king.** [In my

opinion a better translation would be: "...and He may deliver us out of your hand, O king.] **18 But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.**"

These men have no doubt about God's power to deliver them from the furnace. They have some uncertainty as to whether such deliverance is according to God's purposes. So they openly admit their violation of the king's law and submit themselves into Nebuchadnezzar's hands.

That response is consistent with what the New Testament says about a Christian's responsibility toward civil government. We are to obey civil authorities until, or unless, they tell us to violate a clear command of God. Then we are to disobey, while recognizing that the state may exercise the right to punish us.

The reaction of the young men infuriates the king even more. Out of anger and perhaps out of a desire to make sure that they don't survive, he orders that the furnace be made seven times hotter. The three are tied up and tossed probably into the top of what is either a brick kiln or a smelting furnace. (BABYLONIAN KILN) This is a general picture of what such a furnace looks like. Ore was normally put into the top of Babylonian smelting furnaces while wood and charcoal were put in the bottom to fuel the fire. Supposedly temperatures inside could reach as high as 1800 degrees Fahrenheit. Brick kilns were usually smaller than smelting furnaces.

III.

In vv. 24-30 then we encounter THE DIVINE OPPORTUNITY FOR THE TEST OF FAITH. (III. THE DIVINE OPPORTUNITY FOR...) Nebuchadnezzar is sitting where he can see into the door at the bottom of the furnace, looking forward to seeing these guys burn. But what he sees astounds him. Not only does he see Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego walking around unharmed, but he also sees a fourth person present whose appearance he describes as "like a son of the gods." This may be the preincarnate Christ, or it may be an angel, sent to protect them.

Nebuchadnezzar then calls the three to come out of the furnace. All of the high government officials gather around them with an attitude of astonishment. The three are fully alive. Their clothes aren't burned. They don't even smell like smoke.

A hundred years earlier the Lord had spoken to Israel through the prophet Isaiah. (ISAIAH 43:2) In #43 v. 2 He said, "**When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.**" This was a literal fulfillment of that prophecy. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Nebuchadnezzar has no other choice than to acknowledge the sovereignty of the God of Israel. In v. 29 he decrees that no one shall speak evil of the God of these men. In so doing he gives the Jews a protected status in the nation of Babylon.

As for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, the last verse says that he **“caused them to prosper in the province of Babylon.”** Perhaps they were promoted. Perhaps that ancient tablet describes their new positions. Perhaps they were given material rewards. Probably they were given a new status of respect.

IV.A.

(PROJECTOR ON--- IV. THE LESSONS OF FAITH) Out of this story comes THE LESSONS OF FAITH. The first question that the Book of Daniel answers for us is: How should we live in an often godless society? (IV. THE LESSONS OF FAITH A. HOW SHOULD WE LIVE...) The clear answer from this chapter is that we must not compromise our worship.

The temptation that Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego faced was overt. There was a physical image before which they were ordered to fall down and worship. They were faced with the threat of death. They could have gone along with the crowd and thought, “Well, just because I’m falling down on the ground doesn’t mean that in my heart I am really worshipping that stupid statue.” There may have been other Jewish government officials present who did that. There may have been fellow officials yelling at them, “Get down, you idiots. What do you think you are trying to prove? You are going to get yourselves killed.”

But Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego knew that it would be wrong to give worship to anyone but the true God. When Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, he offered to give our Lord all of the kingdoms of the world if He would only fall down and worship him. Christ refused. For the end does not justify the means, and there is nothing that should compromise our worship of the true God.

Most of us have not been faced lately with the threat of death or dismemberment or even disapproval from our peers for failing to fall down before a physical idol. But we do face temptations to compromise our worship. The objects and the pressures that would compromise our worship are more subtle today.

One of the greatest threats to our worship comes from materialism. (MATTHEW 6:24) Jesus said in Matthew #6 v. 24, **“You cannot serve God and money.”** The Apostle Paul warned his readers in 1 Timothy #6 v. 10 (1 TIMOTHY 6:10), **“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.”** Bruce Lockerbie (*The Cosmic Center*) writes, **“The signature of our civilization is our attitude toward material things.”** Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the famous Russian dissident declares, **“We [in the West] have become hopelessly enmeshed in our slavish worship of all that is pleasant, all that is comfortable, all that is material; we worship things, we worship products...”**
(PROJECTOR OFF)

Obviously we need to provide for the physical and financial needs of ourselves and our families. There is nothing intrinsically wrong about making money. There are passages in the Bible that encourage hard work, savings, and investment. Some of the godly people in the Scriptures were wealthy people.

The problem occurs when the pursuit of money and things becomes our primary goal in life. Materialistic worship happens when we develop a philosophy of life and ethical standards that center around the goal of acquiring more things. The materialistic worshiper talks about and meditates upon getting more things. He will sacrifice ethics and family and relationships for the sake of getting things.

In her book *The Overworked American* Juliet Schor quotes a museum curator who sheepishly explains why his museum had to be combined with a shopping mall: **“The fact is that shopping is the chief cultural activity in the United States.”** Ms. Schor adds, **“This arresting observation helps explain why Americans keep having to work harder than they want in order to buy more than they need. The main leisure activity of Americans is itself part of the business of getting and spending.”**

Unfortunately our federal government sets a bad example for us in spending a lot more than it takes in. It is hard to even comprehend what a debt of \$31 trillion means. Our kids and grandkids are liable to suffer because of it.

Is materialism threatening our worship? Does thinking about money dominate our thought life? Does the acquisition of things occupy our leisure time? Perhaps a greater threat to our worship comes from a temptation to live for sports--- or for music--- or for knowledge--- or for another person--- or even for revenge. Let's not compromise our worship. The Lord desires and deserves to have the number one position in our lives, no matter what the crowd or the world around us is doing.

B. 1.

The second question which the Book of Daniel answers is this: IS GOD WORTHY OF OUR TRUST? (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. A. B. IS GOD WORTHY... 1. GOD ALWAYS...) Chapter 3 gives us at least two responses to this question. The first is that God always accomplishes His purposes. Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego had complete trust in God's ability to deliver them from the fiery furnace. But they were not certain that God would deliver them. God is worthy of our trust because He is God, not because He always works out things in the way that we would like to see them be worked out.

God is all-powerful, but He uses His power in accordance with His character and His purposes. This means that we cannot always make God respond in the way that we want Him to respond. As Christians we do have the promise that all things will work together for our good, but that good may not always be realized in this life.

When I was living in Dallas, there was a large Baptist church that started to have regular healing services and that became involved in the pursuit of supernatural manifestations of the Holy Spirit. When their pastor was diagnosed with cancer, the congregation

became convinced that God would heal him of his cancer and that he would be restored to full physical health. Many prayers and petitions were directed toward heaven. But the pastor's condition progressively worsened. When he died, many of the church members were in a state of shock and confusion. They could not understand how God could allow their pastor to die.

God was fully able to save that pastor's physical life, but His purpose was for him to go home to heaven. God was fully able to save the lives of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, and His purpose for them was to live. By means of that miracle God was glorified before Nebuchadnezzar and the leading officials of Babylon. But God can also be glorified and can also accomplish His purposes through death. The church has a long history of Christians who died as martyrs and who brought glory to God in the process. The ultimate example of God's glorification through death, of course, is the crucifixion of Christ.

2.

The second thing that this passage teaches us about why we ought to trust God is that He is gracious toward us in discipline. (IV. A. B. 1. 2. GOD IS GRACIOUS TOWARD US IN DISCIPLINE.) Even when God's people need discipline, the Lord is kind toward them. God was using Babylon to discipline the southern kingdom of Judah, which had turned away from worship of God. Last time we saw that even though God was disciplining His people, He was still caring for them. For at the end of #2 Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego were put in high places in government. Several years later, when there was a second invasion of Judah and thousands of Jews were taken into captivity to Babylon, they found four of their countrymen in positions of influence in government. I am sure that those high Jewish officials used their positions of influence to help care for those exiles.

Now as a result of the events in #3 we find out that King Nebuchadnezzar has made it illegal for anyone to even say anything bad against the God of Judah--- the one true God. Anyone who does speak out against Him is to be destroyed. What kind of encouragement do you suppose that was to the Jews being held in captivity in Babylon?

There is more. The last four verses of the Book of 2 Kings contain this postscript, which is also found at the end of the Book of Jeremiah (2 KINGS 25:27): **“And in the thirty-seventh year of the exile of Jehoiachin king of Judah, in the twelfth month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, Evil-merodach king of Babylon, in the year that he began to reign, graciously freed Jehoiachin king of Judah from prison. (2 KINGS 25:28) And he spoke kindly to him and gave him a seat above the seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon. (2 KINGS 25:29) So Jehoiachin put off his prison garments. And every day of his life he dined regularly at the king's table, (2 KINGS 25:30) and for his allowance, a regular allowance was given him by the king, according to his daily needs, as long as he lived.”**

Jehoiachin was taken into captivity in Babylon in 597 BC at the time of the second invasion of Judah. The Babylonians replaced him with his uncle, Zedekiah. The Jews

regarded Zedekiah as a puppet of the Babylonians. They regarded Jehoiachin as their real king, even though he ended up in prison in Babylon. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The British would have more of an appreciation for the psychological impact that it would have upon a people to know that their sovereign king was in prison in a foreign land. It would be to the British like having Queen Elizabeth captured by the Argentines during the Falkland War, or King Charles kidnapped by the IRA in Ireland. It would be extremely upsetting to them.

It likewise must have been a cause for discouragement and despair for the Jews to know that their king was sitting in a prison. But both 2 Kings and the Book of Jeremiah end with the hopeful news that their king has been released from prison and given a position of prominence in the court of the Babylonian king.

Why would the Babylonians be motivated to do that? What would prompt the new Babylonian king to be so kind to the Jewish king? Second Kings and Jeremiah tell us that this happens when Nebuchadnezzar dies, and his son Evil-merodach takes the throne. In the year that he comes to the throne, in his accession year, the Babylonian king frees Jehoiachin from prison and gives him a position of prominence above anything that he does for any other subjugated ruler. Why does he do this?

Remember Abed-nego, alias Ardi-Nabu? Do you remember what position the clay tablet said that Nebuchadnezzar gave to this Jewish man? Secretary to the crown prince. Who was the crown prince? Evil-merodach.

The Lord took Abed-nego--- a faithful man--- and put him in a position of influence in the Babylonian government. For years perhaps he served faithfully as the right hand man to the heir to the throne of the empire. From what we have already seen about his faithfulness I suspect that Abed-nego often spoke about the God whom he served. I suspect that he lived a consistent life because of his relationship with the true God. Then when the crown prince finally ascends to the throne, one of the first things that he does is to release the king of the Jewish people and give him a position of prominence. Can you imagine the encouragement that must have been to the captive Jews?

Do you see the grace and the love and the providential work of God? Isn't that kind of God worthy of our trust? Don't respond to the revelation of the truth of God like Nebuchadnezzar did. He was forced to recognize this true God, but he wouldn't trust him as his own god. Perhaps you have never trusted this one true God and His Son, the God-man Jesus Christ. You ought to. He is worthy of our trust.

As for us who are Christians, we ought to trust Him to accomplish His purposes in our lives, whatever those purposes might be. Perhaps God is seeking to exercise discipline in a particular area of your life, as He was with Judah. Respond to Him. He truly is worthy of our trust. Perhaps He is simply seeking to develop maturity in your life. Perhaps you are faced with a new challenge simply because He is wanting to stretch your faith in a new way.

How should we live in an often godless society? We should worship God with an undivided heart. Is God worthy of our trust? Yes, He is. Why? Because He always accomplishes His purposes, and because He is gracious and loving toward His people, even in discipline.