

“But, if not . . .”

Daniel: The First Wise Man, Part 2

Daniel 3

In a journal article I read recently, the author asked a question that provoked my thinking. He wrote, “Imagine you’ve been handed a script of your child’s life; then you’re given an eraser and told you have 5 minutes to edit out whatever you want – whatever you read that you don’t want your child to experience, you can erase out of the manuscript.

You begin to read as fast as you can. You soon discover that that a learning disability will cause your child to find reading difficult, making education difficult and tiring – do you erase that disability?

You read further and notice that he or she makes a number of friends in high school, but then one of closest friends dies of cancer – do you edit out that friendship and the grief it will cause?

Sill further, you discover that your child gets into the college of their choice but while there, they get into a car accident and end up losing a leg – do you erase the accident?

A few years later, you read that they land a wonderful job in their field of expertise, but then an economic downturn causes them to lose that job and face difficult and stressful times – do you erase those months and years of a difficult economy?

Imagine . . . with the script of someone’s life in your hands – what would you erase? What would you leave for them to experience, no matter the suffering or pain or uncertainty?ⁱ

Even though you would never want your child to suffer loss or rejection or adversity, if you could erase every failure and every disappointment from their lives, wouldn’t that actually hinder rather than develop them into faith-filled, fruitful lives?

By the way, if that’s true for your child, what should we expect for God’s children?

The Apostle James makes it clear that the trials and testing of our faith produce endurance and depth and spiritual maturity (*James 1:2-4*)

The trouble with average view of Christians today is that God doesn’t seem to know when to erase.

Or maybe He doesn’t have an eraser after all.

Which is why the most predominant questions on the American mind, verbalized in the form of accusations are, “Why did God let that natural disaster take place?” “Why doesn’t God make everybody healthy?” and while He’s at it, “Why doesn’t He just wipe out all the bad stuff that happens?” “I mean, if He exists, bad things shouldn’t happen!”

He ought to erase all those things!

And at the same time, false teachers who seem to multiply like rabbits jump in and make things worse by fleecing the flock into believing that what you really need to do is learn how to declare your faith in God – you know, learn how to speak so that God gets His eraser out.

Faith becomes a series of declarations or statements you need to learn how to say. And if you say everything just right, you can kind of create a spiritual force field around you which keeps bad things from entering your life?

The more powerful your faith, the more powerful your force field . . . no, that only works on Star Trek.

One recent bestseller on the Christian market, promises readers that if you make these positive faith declarations – one a day – you will be “blessed beyond your normal salary . . . beyond your normal income . . . God will suddenly change things in your life.”ⁱⁱ

In other words, you’ll be able to guarantee God’s richest blessings now.

I’ve decided to start calling this, “lottery theology” . . . which is why so many people line up for it; buy this ticket and you’ll hit the jackpot.

Say these words every day, this author tells his world-wide audience, as he smiles from ear to ear – that you can speak your destiny into existence.

He promises – again, I’m reading from what Amazon.com revealed, “Use my book as your guide for declaring your victory each day – declare health – declare favor – declare abundance.”ⁱⁱⁱ

You know, just say the right words . . . and God, the mighty Genie, will deliver your best life imaginable – and the lottery winnings will arrive by the truckload.

I mean, who doesn't want that? And millions of people will buy his book and try it.

But what if your best life, in the mind of God, involves the dismantling of your life?

What if He wants to lead you into a deeper understanding of why Jesus Christ never defined a good life in terms of how long it lasted or how much stuff it had.

And what if God does change your life, but He changes things from bad to worse?

Like North Korean congregations who were herded out into the streets 40 years ago, so that – under the orders of Kim II-Sung – they could be run over by bulldozers. Thousands of believers were crushed to death, not because they *lacked* faith, but because they refused to *renounce* their faith. And their bodily remains were used to line roadbeds throughout surrounding cities.^{iv}

What happened to their force field of faith?

Today, there are more than 200,000 believing descendants of those who were crushed, now living under Kim's son – the new dictator – and they are praying that they might be faithful to the will of God.

Has it ever occurred to you that the promise of immediate and guaranteed comfort is actually the offer of Satan – that's his gospel.

Eve, you can have it all – here's the secret to life and happiness and wisdom . . . I can give you that if you listen to me.

In fact, when Jesus was personally tempted by Satan, recorded in Matthew chapter 4, this was one of the temptations he presented, "Jesus, worship me just once" and I'll give you everything you can imagine.

In another temptation, he told Jesus that He really shouldn't be suffering from hunger – surely that wouldn't be His Father's will – so turn some of those rocks into freshly baked bread and serve Yourself.

C'mon, it's time you spoke words of favor and blessing.

What if God takes you from bad you worse?

Like missionary pioneer Adoniram Judson – I'm halfway through his astounding biography. He was imprisoned after being unjustly accused of collaborating with the British government which had sent troops to fight against the Burmese in the early 1800's.

Adoniram's wife, Ann, did everything she could to see that Adoniram was fed while in prison. But

after many months of unbelievable suffering and deprivation – it actually went from bad to worse.

Ann became so deathly ill she was unable to even feed their 3 month old daughter, Marie. The jailor finally permitted Adoniram to leave the prison for a few hours each day so that he could carry his starving baby to a nearby village to beg nursing Burmese mothers to feed his baby too.^v

Listen, as the Apostles wrote letters to the churches and believers in the first century, you discover that the end of suffering and the glorious rest and comfort of the believer were in fact guaranteed – but never in this life.

There was no force field for sickness or bankruptcy or persecution or sorrow or pain.

But what the Apostles did was elevate everyone's perspective away from what seemed to be the finality of earth, to the soon coming glory and joy of Christ's revelation (1 Peter 4:13).

They basically said,

- What health is there now compared to an glorified body?
- What wealth is there now compared to such opulence that city walls are built on gemstones and gold is nothing more than pavement?
- What comfort is there now compared to the presence of Christ and the joy of worshiping Him face to face?

A number of Bible scholars believe that when the Apostle Peter wrote this paragraph, which includes the verse – ***Do not be surprised at the fiery trial among you, which comes upon you for your testing (1 Peter 4:12a)*** – that Peter was thinking about an event that had happened centuries earlier.

A literal trial by fire.

One of the greatest statements of faith in the Bible - not from believers who were saying the right thing in order to get what they wanted from God – they were saying the right thing even though they thought they were going to die.

Many believe the Apostle Peter was thinking about ***Daniel chapter 3***.

So let's turn there and rehearse a story that is commonly known to the church; although it includes a demonstration of faith that is entirely uncommon. In our last discussion, Daniel and his three friends have just arrived as captives of Nebuchadnezzar's empire.



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ishtar_Gate_at_Berlin_Museum.jpg

They walked through the rediscovered Gate of Ishtar, one of the amazing wonders of the ancient world – preserved over time, thanks to Nebuchadnezzar’s ground breaking practice of firing his bricks so they’d last longer.

The gate has actually been reassembled in the Berlin Museum just as it was when these young Hebrew captives walked through it, no doubt, with their mouths open in amazement.

This wasn’t little Jerusalem anymore . . . this was Babylon the Great and Nebuchadnezzar was the King of the greatest empire on the planet.

The Image is Designed

Chapter 3 opens, Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, 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.

Most evangelical Bible scholars believe this event is taking place some 18-20 years after these young men arrived and passed their first tests of faith.

They would have been in their early to mid-thirties.

And whatever would motivate Nebuchadnezzar to build an image of gold?

We’ll get into the details of Daniel’s end-time prophecies in another session, but you need to know that the context for Nebuchadnezzar’s image of gold came out of Daniel’s interpretation of the king’s dream in **chapter 2**.

Daniel informed the king that his God had given the king this dream of a giant statue – shaped like a human body. Different parts of the body were made of different elements, representing different world empires.

And Nebuchadnezzar was thrilled to hear Daniel say that Babylon was the head of the statue, made of gold.

He also heard that there would be future kingdoms of silver, and then bronze and then iron

and finally a mixed kingdom of clay and iron – but he didn’t really care.

What he seized upon was that his kingdom was the head of the statue and it was made of gold.

So, I know . . . let’s make a 90 foot tall, 9 foot wide statue – and we’ll make the entire image plated with gold.^{vi}

Never mind that Daniel’s God said we won’t last forever and that there was a kingdom of silver in the future . . . never mind that – Babylon is the kingdom of gold!

And so the image was built in Dura, about 11 miles south of the capitol city of Babylon. Archaeologists have since discovered a brick structure 45 feet long on each side and 20 feet high – a structure they believed served as a pedestal for something huge, although whatever it was has long since disappeared.^{vii}

No surprise that the bricks were left behind and the gold disappeared.

You need to understand that this image was effectively Nebuchadnezzar’s challenge to the prophecy of Daniel.

This statue represented his will for the future. This chapter will implicitly repeat the same question that will pop up over and over again in this book – whose god is the real God? Who really rules history?^{viii}

Who’s really in charge around here?

O.T. scholars have pointed out that this image – this statue – more than likely represented Nebuchadnezzar’s patron god – Nabu.^{ix}

Nebuchadnezzar was going to use this event to craft a state religion. The people could continue worshipping their own god, but they had to acknowledge this god too – the patron god of the Babylonian empire.

Every leader, representing every aspect of Babylonian culture was to demonstrate their allegiance to the god Nabu – and his servant-emperor named after him – Nabu-chadnezzar.

The Invitations are Delivered

The image is designed . . . notice here that the invitations are delivered; notice who got an invitation, **verse 2**. ***Then Nebuchadnezzar the king sent word to assemble the satraps*** – they were like state governors; ***prefects*** – they were military commanders – leaders in the pentagon; ***governors*** – this word refers to leaders of smaller provinces – these are all the mayors; notice next, ***the counselors***

– these were the special advisors – think of them as senators and representatives; then *the treasurers* were also invited – these were treasure bearers – these are the fortune 500 CEO’s and CFO’s of the nation; then *the judges* – literally law bearers – here’s your supreme court justices, probably of the nation and what we have in every state; then next are *the magistrates* – think of United Nations representatives; and lastly *rulers of the provinces* – this term has legal and executive authority and probably refers to those we would understand today law enforcement officers, sheriff’s, and leading lawyers.^x

These were the movers and the shakers of the kingdom. Everybody who was anybody got an invitation.

And the invitation would have been like the invitations sent out when Queen Elizabeth was crowned in Westminster Abbey. I’ve read that she sent out royal invitations to the lords and nobles of the aristocracy; to academic and industry leader; to government officials. To receive an invitation was a high honor. But it was more than an invitation, because with it came the statement in writing, “All excuses easing...” In other words, a royal invitation was really a royal command.^{xi}

You didn’t get a free pass, because your wife had a cold or you had hay fever.

Everybody showed up! Including, as we’ll soon discover, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

One immediately wonders, where’s Daniel? We’re not told.

He might have been with other members of the king’s cabinet, working offsite. He might have even been on the platform with the king, for that matter; we’re given no indication that everyone was out on parade grounds, ordered to bow before the image – in fact, it seems pretty clear that Nebuchadnezzar didn’t bow himself.

He was more than likely on some great platform for this grand occasion, surrounded by his family and favorite officials – one of whom might have been Daniel – the very man who gave him the idea that his kingdom was the head of gold.

The Instructions are Described

Now, for the sake of time, let me give you an overview of the instructions that come next through the rest of this paragraph.

Everyone is assembled . . . they’re out there on the parade grounds eating hors d’oeuvres, drinking royal punch. That’s in the Hebrew text.

The herald stands and announces that the Royal symphony is prepared to play a brand new composition in honor of his royal highness and his god-statue, standing there on its pedestal, plated in gold, reaching in all as high as 120 feet in the air – so brilliantly reflecting the sunlight that you can barely look at it.

“But that won’t matter”, the royal herald says, “Because you’re not supposed to look at it, you’re supposed to bow before it. As soon as the orchestra of horns and flutes and harps and pan pipes all began to play our new Babylonian national anthem, everyone is to fall prostrate with your forehead to the ground in honor of Nabu and his prince Nebuchadnezzar.”

And just in case you thought this was optional and you didn’t dress in such a way that made bowing convenient – *verse 6* ends with the king’s herald saying, “Oh, and by the way . . . *whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire.*”

Everybody felt like bowing now.

They stowed away their plastic plates, forks and waited for the music to begin.

And there it was . . . the orchestra had begun . . . and every supreme court justice and attorney and general and CEO and mayor and senator and sheriff and judge and governor, fell to their knees and bowed their heads to the ground.

What a sight.

What loyalty . . . what respect . . . by the way, the word worship shows up nearly a dozen times in this chapter . . . what an amazing collective act of worship to the image of our patron god.

The Injunction is Defied

Everyone bowed . . . except for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

If ever there was a time for them to whisper to each other, “Everybody else is doing it,” it was now.

If there was a time to rationalize, “Look, let’s just go along with it – we can do more good by being officers in the king’s service than ashes in the king’s furnace.”^{xii}

Let’s not make a scene . . . what good is a fanatic anyway. What good does it do to look so weird; we got to build a bridge to these idolaters . . . God won’t mind one little bow.

Oh, oh . . . I know . . . “We’ll bow our knees but we won’t bow our hearts.”^{xiii}

I love that!

Beloved, genuine faith isn’t on the lookout look for loopholes . . . it does what it knows to be right.

Now evidently, Nebuchadnezzar didn’t see them standing, but certain officials did. In fact, the implication is that Chaldeans – wise men – were eagerly watching to see the response of these Jewish young men who’d risen to top administrative posts quicker than these veterans appreciated.

And this was their chance.

Notice *verse 12*. ***There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the administration of the province of Babylon, namely Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. These men, O king, have disregarded you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up.***

Just like that, they are accused of treason and heresy.

Verse 13 tells us this news threw Nebuchadnezzar into a rage – a fit of violent anger . . . he’s hotter than the furnace nearby.

He demands these three be brought before him.

Verse 14, ***Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up?***

And then at this moment, he’s struck with magnanimous charity – tell you what – I’ll give you a second chance – notice, ***Now if you are ready, at the moment you hear the sound of the orchestra . . . if you’ll fall down – and I’m paraphrasing – very well.***

In other words, I’ll let bygones by bygones.

But if you don’t bow down – notice *verse 15b* – ***“What god is there who can deliver you out of my hand?”***

You don’t stand a chance . . . so whaddya say.

I can imagine the tattletale wise men standing nearby thinking to themselves; man, we thought we had ‘em . . . where in the world did a second chance come from – Nebuchadnezzar doesn’t give people second chances – especially having been defied in front of every leader in his empire.

Now they’re going to change their minds. What they did was rash . . . we got to admit, it was brave . . . but now they’ve had an opportunity to get a good look at the furnace; they’ve seen the expression on the king’s face . . . they’ve had time to wonder how long fire hurts before it kills.

They’re going to change their minds for sure.

What they hear next is almost too good to be true. Almost in unison, the three men respond – *verse 16*. ***“O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter.”***

In other words, we don’t need to think about what we did and why we did it – and we don’t need a second chance. Notice, *verse 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. But even if He does not – but if 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.”***

Even the great Martin Luther asked for a night to pray and think when he was asked to recant his faith in Christ alone.^{xiv}

These guys don’t even pray about it.

They had actually had days to prepare for it . . . they knew it was coming . . . they already knew they would die.

But not before one of the most remarkable statements of faith in the Bible; listen, O king – our God is actually able to deliver us out of your hand . . . but if not!

Wait . . . back up. Stop with, “Our God is able to deliver us out of your hand.” That’ll sell books . . . I can see your force field forming all around you as you declare your destiny.

But they didn’t stop there – they actually announced that God might not get out his eraser . . . He might allow them to suffer death.

This wasn’t doubt . . . this was the deepest kind of faith.

Listen, you don’t speak your destiny into existence – you surrender your destiny to the sovereign Lord of the universe.

And these three men are ready to die – if that is God’s destiny for them – and their answer seals their death warrant.

In fact, Nebuchadnezzar is so angry, he orders the furnace to be heated 7 times hotter than usual.

We know from history and the help of archaeology that this was a smelting furnace – a large structure with a large lid on the roof-top through which materials were deposited. There was a large opening down below, a few feet off the ground, from which the ore and other materials could be removed. There were holes all around the walls through which bellows could be inserted and operated to increase the heat. And there was a ramp,

usually made of earth leading up to that top opening on the roof.

Up that ramp these three men went – still dressed in their clothing, and their coats.

They were going to be thrown in like logs on a fire.^{xv}

Now I don't know about you men, but I don't do much in the kitchen. I don't know much at all about using the oven. And that's a win-win for everyone's safety.

But sometimes my wife will ask me to get those biscuits or casserole or dish out of the oven.

Have you noticed that when you open that oven, you are immediately hit with a wave of hot air – so much so, that you close your eyes and turn your head until the gust of air goes away?

Evidently, that gust of air was so powerful that as soon as the soldiers opened it up to throw the three young men in, it killed them – and the three Hebrews fell into the furnace.

They should have immediately ignited – and for a few seconds writhed on the bed of white hot coals until they literally disappeared.

Notice *verse 24. Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astounded and stood up in haste; he said to his high officials, "Was it not three men we cast bound into the midst of the fire?" Verse 25, He 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."*

In the plural form, this is a correct translation. He didn't know anything about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, but he did believe, as all the Babylonians did, that many of their gods had sons.

What he's saying here is that this fourth man looks divine. And he'd have to be something not-so-human to appear in the furnace and then disappear.

This was what theologians call a Christophany – a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ – taking some form, like He did when He appeared to Abraham before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (*Genesis 18*) or the form of a man when He wrestled with Jacob by the brook (*Genesis 32*).

And look at them – they're walking around like they're in a palace instead of in a furnace.^{xvi}

Look at *verse 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!"*

Now just imagine for a moment what they could have said.

Abednego could have said, "Why don't you come in here after us . . . hot shot . . . you're not so big now . . . Nabu . . . Shnabu."

Meshach could have said, "We're not coming out until we get a raise . . . and a new chariot . . ."

Shadrach could have added, "And until you apologize . . . bring those Chaldeans over here . . . let's see how long they last in this oven."

You ever been mistreated . . . and then vindicated? Who gets the credit?

Evidently, here . . . God did.

And did you notice, the only thing the fire burned away was what bound them . . . that was it.

They came out of the fire and were immediately inspected – *verse 27 - they weren't singed; their clothes weren't burned; they didn't even have the smell of fire on them.*

Only one thing was changed. They were no longer bound.

Isn't that just like fiery trials – God intends that they burn away whatever it is that binds our hearts and our affections to earth.

Nebuchadnezzar can't stop saying good things about their God.

Notice the end of *verse 29 – there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way.*

Now I've seen everything!

Nebuchadnezzar is impressed . . . he's not converted . . . he's got a few notches to come down before that happens. But is he ever amazed.

And *verse 30 informs us that all three men were caused to prosper in the province of Babylon. That's a long way of saying they got promoted . . . they probably got new chariots too.*

Why? Because they spoke positive favor into their destiny? Because of their faith-spoken force field around them?

What they *did* say in *verses 17-18* was, "Our God is able to save us . . . *but if not* . . . we're still following the real God and you're just worshipping a hollow statue with gold plating.

No, the king promoted them because as far as he knew, he'd just discovered three guys who couldn't be bribed or threatened even to the pain of death, to violate their personal character.

Frankly, if I were God, I would have stopped the story after *verse 18*.

"That's it – you passed the test . . . congratulations men!"

I mean, think about it – at that point God could have snuffed out the furnace – He could have plugged up the instruments in the orchestra and then tipped over the statue with a big gust of wind.

He could have done anything – He was obviously planning on performing a few miracles. But He let:

- them get falsely accused;
- them feel the anger of an infuriated king;
- them get tied up;
- the soldiers turn the furnace into a raging inferno;
- them get carried up that ramp;
- them fall into that furnace, their eyes tightly shut and their heads turned away, expecting at any moment to burst into horrifying flames and die.

He didn't eliminate the fire – He just joined them in it. He does the same thing for you and me. He doesn't eliminate the trial – sometimes He allows it to be heated 7 times hotter. Ladies and Gentlemen, they were in that middle of that fire, in the middle of God's will.

You see, God didn't want them to experience the elimination of trouble; He wanted to demonstrate His presence in the midst of trouble.

We think faith should result in immediate deliverance; God is most often interested in our long term development.

One author put it this way – God is not at work in your life creating circumstances that you want; He is at work in your circumstances, creating in you what He wants.^{xvii}

Let me close with three observations of genuine faith demonstrated out here in the plain of Dura:
Genuine faith is demonstrated by following God:

- regardless of the feelings inside us;
- in spite of the circumstances around us;

- no matter what the consequences are before us^{xviii}

That's why this testimony would be so powerful to the Christian in any generation – in any culture – not because God delivered these three men from death – but because they were willing to die for their faith.

Because they understood that either way, God was in control. Our God is able to deliver us! But if not . . . He is still on the throne.

Let me give that definition of faith – once more; genuine faith is demonstrated by following God:

- regardless of the feelings inside us;
- in spite of the circumstances around us;
- and no matter what the consequences are before us.

Last night on Fox News, Mike Huckabee interviewed Joni Erickson Tada and her husband. I caught the last 2 minutes of the show and heard Joni say, with a depth only developed through decades of paralysis and life in a wheel chair following her swimming accident. I heard her say to Governor Huckabee and also to the millions of people watching the show, "I want my life to be an audio visual of the power of God."

And is it ever been. How? She can't walk.

But she's testifying that while God has not eliminated her trial . . . He's joined her in it . . . He's given her grace to persevere in it . . . and she knows by faith that one day, He'll release her from it.

Like Peter the Apostle who wrote . . . don't be surprised by a fiery trial . . . no matter what it is – no matter how long it lasts – it cannot compare to the joy of that day, when we see Jesus in all His glory, face to face.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 11/25/2012 by Stephen Davey.

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i Adapted from John Ortberg, "Don't Waste a Crisis", Leadership Journal (Winter, 2011)

ii Taken from Amazon.com/I Declare, by Joel Osteen (Faith Words, 2012), p. 3

iii Taken from Amazon.com/I Declare, by Joel Osteen (Faith Words, 2012), p. ix

iv Carl Moeller & David Hegg, The Privilege of Persecution (Moody Publishers, 2011), p. 67

v Jesse Clement, The Life of Rev. Adoniram Judson (Reprint from the University of Michigan Library), p. 170

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- vi Renald Showers, The Most High God (Friends of Israel, 1982), p. 29
- vii Ibid, p. 30
- viii James Montgomery Boice, Daniel (Baker Books, 1989), p. 42
- ix Frank E. Gaebelein, Editor, The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Volume 7 (Zondervan, 1985), p. 50
- x Adapted from Gaebelein, p. 51
- xi John Phillips, Exploring the Book of Daniel (Kregel, 2004), p. 62
- xii Warren W. Wiersbe, Daniel: Be Resolute (Victor Books, 2000), p. 42
- xiii Ibid
- xiv Boice, p. 44
- xv Gaebelein, p. 56
- xvi Wiersbe, p. 44
- xvii Adapted from John Ortberg, "*Don't Waste a Crisis*"; Leadership Journal (Winter, 2011)
- xviii Adapted from Wiersbe, p. 40