

When Christianity Doesn't Pay

Daniel 3

Introduction

Today we will begin by turning in our Bibles to the book of I Peter and reading I Peter 2:19-21.

For this finds favor, if for the sake of a conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly.

For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God.

For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps,

Now turn to I Peter 4:12-16 and let us read.

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you;

but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation.

If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler;

but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name.

Now turn to Daniel chapter 3, and let us read the first verse. As we read, we automatically remember this familiar story as we were told as young children. Look at Daniel 3:1.

Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, the height of which was sixty cubits and its width six cubits [ninety feet in height and nine feet in width]; he set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon.

As we read this, I could almost sense everyone thinking, "Ho hum. So what?"

This is as story of another king who is filled with his ego, another image in the plain of Dura, and another scenario in which Christians are about to be persecuted. This story is so old that we almost come to Daniel 3:1 and say, "Not again."

However, I think we are going to discover, as we go through Daniel chapter 3 today, that the story is a living, vivid illustration of I Peter chapter 2 and I Peter chapter 4.

We will look at the similarity and the contrast in these passages, but in order to understand the significance of Nebuchadnezzar's actions in Daniel chapter 3, let us briefly look back at Daniel chapter 2.

The purpose of going through Daniel is not as much to discover the prophetic portions of Daniel as to delve into the biographical sketch of the man. But, when we come to Daniel 3:1, we must look at some of the prophetic element in Daniel 2.

Nebuchadnezzar's Image

Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that was the image of a man, in Daniel 2. Daniel told him the dream and then interpreted it.

The head of gold was Babylon. The next kingdom, in 538 BC, was the Medo-Persians. Then, the belly and thighs of brass were Greece. Finally, the legs of iron symbolized Rome.

Daniel interpreted this dream, and said, "Nebuchadnezzar,"

*. . . You are the head of gold.
(Daniel 2:38b)*

Between Daniel 2 and Daniel 3, sixteen years have elapsed. We might think that Nebuchadnezzar gets the interpretation of the dream, which ends in Daniel 2:49, and then, in Daniel 3:1, immediately begins to erect an image. However, it has been sixteen years.

Understand the significance of this because it is not in black and white. Nebuchadnezzar was told by Daniel that the image – the head of gold – represented him. Then, sixteen years later, Nebuchadnezzar goes out and constructs his own image. The entire image, however, is solid gold.

Now we might speculate as to what is going on in the mind of this pagan king. Perhaps sixteen years have gone by and he has been waiting for the next kingdom to overthrow his.

The Medo-Persians would come along later, destroy Babylon, and set up their kingdom of lesser value – that of silver. Sixteen years have taken place though, and nothing has happened.

As a result, Nebuchadnezzar says, "Hey, maybe my kingdom is going to last forever."

Then, despite the image and the identification by God's man, Nebuchadnezzar erects an entire image of solid gold. It is as if to tell the world, "My kingdom – my Babylon – will last forever."

Look at Daniel 3:2.

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.

Nebuchadnezzar calls all of these rulers and perhaps in his kingdom, the great capital city of Babylon, he also had leaders from all the other nations who would stay in the capital. He had these leaders come out to pay homage to this image that he had erected.

Look at Daniel 3:4-5.

*Then the herald loudly proclaimed,
"To you the command is given, O peoples,
nations and men of every language,*

"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."

It is fascinating that music played such an important part in pagan ritual. It is no different today. In fact, going back in history to Nimrod and the great rebellion, we find that they had their own music that would lay the groundwork for worship, and in itself, was worship. I think of the beautiful hymns we sing in our congregational singing and they are all designed, not only to worship, but to lay the groundwork for continuing worship of God.

Let me tell about some of these instruments because they all sound so foreign. The horn or cornet, as your translation may read, was made from the horn of an animal. The flute was made from the reed, and if we could hear it today, it would sound more like the early American fife or piccolo. The lyre or harp was a twelve stringed instrument. The trigon or sackbut was a triangular-shaped type of harp which had perhaps thirteen or fourteen strings attached – it was more like a harpsichord. The psaltery was a twenty stringed harp-like instrument. Then, the bagpipe or dulcimer was a wind instrument. It was not the bagpipe of today, but was the forerunner of the modern day bagpipe.

I love music and harmony. The more I looked into these instruments, the more I could not imagine a bagpipe harmonizing with a flute or a piccolo. However, somehow all of these musical instruments chosen by the king were to create a particular sound. The sound would associate in the people's minds the worship of this great image. The music was about to begin.

God's Sovereignty

Let us notice, however, the defiance of the faithful three – Daniel's friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego – to the king's command to worship the image. Skip to Daniel 3:8. We will go through this rapidly, since it is a familiar story.

For this reason at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and brought charges against the Jews.

The words "brought charges against" or "accused," as your translation may say, are an Aramaic expression that literally means, "to tear apart piece by piece". These men came to the king to tear apart "the Jews".

Notice again, in Daniel 3:12, these men say,
There are certain Jews . . .

We can almost hear the spit in their voices as they refer to "the Jews". Why not just say, "certain men"?

I think if we could get into the minds of these Chaldeans, we would probably find a tremendous amount of bitterness and jealousy. They were native Babylonians and they had captured and brought certain Jews to the capital city. These Jews had graduated at the top of the academy, as we studied in Daniel chapter 1, and the king gave them the highest places. As a result, the native Babylonians were out of a job.

There is some of that feeling in our area. The southern natives say, "We've got all these northerners coming here and getting our jobs. Throw them out."

My wife, Marsha, and I lived in Dallas, Texas, while I studied there for several years. Actually, we lived in Irving, which is the home of the Dallas Cowboy stadium. We lived close enough to hear the roar of the fans at the stadium. In Texas, people say, with a lot of pride, "I'm a native Texan." In fact, I was shopping at a store one day, and the lady behind the counter was dressed immaculately and was dripping with jewels. Among her jewels, she wore a watch that was studded with diamonds in the shape of Texas. Can you imagine wearing a several thousand dollar watch in the shape of that dust bowl? She was a native Texan. They had the idea, "We don't want people coming in here and getting the jobs."

It must have been the same way in Daniel's day. The Chaldeans were saying, "I'm a native Babylonian. I've been raised here. You bring in these Jews and you're giving them our jobs."

These men were literally tearing the Jews apart, piece by piece.

Look at the last part of Daniel 3:12.

. . . These men, O king, have disregarded you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up.

I love what happens when the king calls in the Jews to make a defense. Look at Daniel 3:16.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter."

The literal translation of this could be, "King, we refuse to make a defense in our behalf."

How different this response is from Christians today. I think Christians of our day carry around a portable soap box. Let somebody make a wise crack and the soap box is set up, stood on, and a defense begins. We say something like, "I'll give five good reasons why I don't do that. I'll give ten good reasons why I do this."

We, as Christians, are always defending a position that needs no defense.

These three men said, "We refuse to make a defense."

We can imagine the heat rising in the heart of the king.

Continue to Daniel 3:17-18 and notice the words of these three men.

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.

When we read this, we might think that these three must have lacked faith. They said, "We know that God can rescue us from the fiery furnace, but if He doesn't, we'll still serve Him."

We are being fed a line today that this would reveal a lack of faith. If we want to be healed, or want everything to go just right, or want a particular job, then we go to God and say, "God, I want it," and claim it.

Do you feel a little guilty in our day saying, “Lord, would You heal so-and-so? Would You touch their body? But if You don’t want to, then that’s fine.”?

Do you feel as if you lack faith when you say something like this today?

This is a classic illustration of the faith of these men. Faith is a reliance on the sovereignty of God, regardless of the outcome.

Faith is saying, “God, if You want to heal this individual, if You want to make a way for me, if You want to give me that job, if You want that promotion to be for me, fine. But if not, it’s still fine.”

I think we would rewrite this part of the story, if it were up to us. We are used to a Christianity that pays dividends; we are used to the Christianity that, if we do what is right and we are honest, then we *will* get the job, we *will* get the bed of roses. I think we would stop after Daniel 3:18, and translate Daniel 3:19, “Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with compassion, and his facial expression was altered toward Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego with pity and respect. He answered by giving orders to clothe them with the finest robes and give them the best positions in the kingdom.”

We would stop at this point and think, “Look at these men – they are doing what’s right, not what’s wrong – they are standing up to the king for what’s right.” We would applaud them, and say, “Okay, God, it’s Your turn – make it all work out.”

Notice what happens instead, in Daniel 3:19.

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.

Nebuchadnezzar was so filled with fury that his face was distorted with anger at these three.

As I studied this passage, I realized that I do not know a thing about ovens, since my wife does not want me in the kitchen. That is for both of our benefits! So, I went to our oven and started studying it. It has all kinds of little knobs that make something happen and cause it to heat up. One particular knob is the key that makes the oven heat up on the inside. The only real application I could draw is that I think the oven in the house we rent was put together during the Babylonian captivity – it is that old! However, I

noticed that it would heat up to 500 degrees Fahrenheit. That is pretty hot.

My wife does let me take biscuits out of the oven. Men, do your wives let you do that? They say, “Hon, would you go and get the biscuits out of the oven?” You know the way it is – you reach for the door and you pull it open and “*wham*” you get hit with a blast of hot air. You kind of turn and you cringe. And, if your kitchen is like ours, our potholders are a pretty display of the fact that my wife is a tremendous decorator, but they offer no protection. They are made out of lace and are crocheted, so they have big holes in them. You reach in that oven and pull the pan out real quickly before your fingers melt. Why is it that they never ask us to put biscuits *in* the oven when the pan is cool?

I cannot imagine the heat of a 500 degree oven. Just imagine pushing yourself into that oven and closing the door. Then, imagine turning that thing up to 35,000 degrees – if there is such a thing – seven times hotter.

Now, at this point, I would think these three would have backed up and said, “Well, you know, king, maybe we would be a little bit better for the kingdom if we talked with you just a second. Let’s work something out.”

I do not think they even had a chance. In fact, look at Daniel 3:20-21a.

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.

Then these men were tied up in their trousers, their coats, their caps and their other clothes, . . .

Note that the fact that these three were tied up or bound is mentioned twice and that they were tied up in their clothing. Normally the king would strip people of their clothing before executing them in this oven. However, he was so angry that he did not even want to wait. He commanded, “Bind them in all their clothing. Get rid of them.”

Continue to Daniel 3:21b-22.

. . . and were cast into the midst of the furnace of blazing fire.

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.

Let us stop for a moment and put ourselves in the place of these three. The kind of Christianity that we are being fed today is the kind of Christianity that says God never wants us to suffer. We are being fed the line that God never wants us to go through agony; never wants us in the fire. In fact, we think, “Lord, I can’t understand it. I became a Christian and my grades didn’t improve, my boss still overlooked me for the promotion, my mate doesn’t love me anymore, my children don’t get along any better. I can’t figure it out. I thought . . .”

You thought wrong. Jesus Christ never intended to pull us out of the mainstream problems. He intended to give us the solutions to the problems.

Instead of backing down at this point, the three men went bound, we are told for the third time in Daniel 3:23, into the fire. Look at that verse.

But these three men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, fell into the midst of the furnace of blazing fire still tied up.

Now what happens next is a familiar story, but let us read it. Look at Daniel 3:24-25.

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?” They replied to the king, “Certainly, O king.”

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!”

They did not understand what the Son of God meant. They thought that this was one of their gods that had come down and rescued the men.

Then, Nebuchadnezzar brings the three men out and inspects them with all of the princes and all of the governors and captains and counselors. They surround them and their mouths are hanging wide open. They notice that the men do not even smell like smoke. The only thing missing are the ropes that had bound them.

Nebuchadnezzar says, in Daniel 3:28.

. . . “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.”

This reminds me of Romans 12:1-2.

Continue to Daniel 3:29a.

“Therefore I make a decree . . .”

Nebuchadnezzar is a smart man – I think I would have done this too. He goes on, in Daniel 3:29b.

“. . . 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.”

Then the king caused Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego to prosper in the province of Babylon.

Application

Now I have gone through this very rapidly because the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego is very familiar. However, let me give several principles of application before we close. These are principles that I think have been forged from the furnace and would apply to our lives.

1. First, God, in His sovereignty, designs the furnace to destroy only the dross.

Let me add to your vocabulary today, the word “sovereignty”. It is not a word that we hear much about anymore. Sovereignty means, “supreme authority”.

God is sovereign. Unlike we are hearing today, God is not some good fellow up there that we, as humans, can manipulate to give us gifts if we pat Him on the head with empty praise. He is sovereign; He is the supreme authority. Whether we are facing the loss of finances, or have a child who is sick, or some other difficulty, God is sovereign.

I do not know about you, but I do not want a weak God that I can manipulate when I get in the furnace. I want a sovereign God; a God who is the supreme authority in the world.

Ephesians 1:11 says that He,

. . . works all things after the counsel of His will

God is in total control.

Now this application has to do with the fire burning away the dross, or the slag, or that which comes up to the top. As a liquid or a metal is burned, the impurities surface, which are called the dross or the slag, and they are wiped away.

This is exactly what God designs in our lives, when we go through the furnace. He brings the impurities to the surface and then, by His Holy Spirit, clears them away.

However, notice what happens to these men. I pointed out the word “bound” or “tied up” in verses 21, 23, and 24. Then, in verse 25, we read the word “loosed”. Now I do not want to go too far in this application and pull out things that are not given, but I could not help but see something in this that I would like to suggest. The things that were burned in that furnace were the things that bound these men.

Do you know what happens to us when we are in the furnace? By God’s design, the things that bind us are burned away.

We do not want to jump in the furnace, and it is hot. However, God, in His sovereign design, has made the furnace to burn away all of the impurities and all of the things that would bind us to this old earth.

2. Secondly, God’s sovereignty is revealed regardless of the outcome.

The three men said, “Oh King, we’re not going to bow to that image because our God is big enough to rescue us. But, in case He doesn’t, whatever the outcome, we’re still going to remain true to Him.”

We have the idea that God’s sovereignty is upheld when everything goes right. In other words, if things turn out right, then God was sovereign. What happens when it goes the other way? Lord, teach us to say, “Even in that, God was sovereign.”

3. Thirdly, God does not promise the absence of fire, but He does promise His presence.

Nebuchadnezzar said, “Look! We cast in three, but there are four!”

God does not promise the absence of fire; the absence of pain; the absence of difficulty, but He does, to believers, promise that He is going to be present, as a sovereign God, in the furnace.

We could ask Job what it was like. What a man of faith he was! Job said,

***Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him...
(Job 13:15a KJV)***

In other words, “Though He put me through the furnace; I will not turn my back on Him.”

God loves us, but let me tell something, and listen to this carefully. God may love us, but He may, in some of our lives, have a tragic plan. Even though He loves us, His plan for us may involve tragedy.

God is sovereign, regardless of the outcome. Even though it is tragic, and even though it is painful, and even though it hurts, God is the supreme authority and is ultimately in charge of all of the affairs, as the prophet said, of mankind.

I am convinced that God is looking for children who will enter the furnace and be willing to say, “Lord, burn away the dross in me.” I am convinced that He is looking for individuals who will take the heat.

I failed to mention, as we went through the story, my thoughts of the furnace and the fire and knowing that these men would be rescued. My thoughts went to the last part of Revelation, where we are told that people without a relationship with a sovereign God are cast into the furnace that burns forever.

I cannot preach this message unless I ask if you know in your heart that your destiny does not lie on this path. Do you know Christ as your Savior? Have you ever trusted Him personally? It is my desire that before the end of this day, you come to know Him personally by asking someone who knows Christ to show you how to escape this fiery end.

For those who are believers, this message has been primarily for you. Prepare your heart. Perhaps you are in the furnace. Your life has not turned out like you would want. Things are not going the way that you would like them to. God does not seem fair and there is a deepening sense of bitterness that always comes when there is a lack of yielding. Today, just let go of it and say, “God, teach me the sovereignty of Your character. Teach me that in spite of this furnace, in spite of these difficulties, in spite of the way You’re mapping out my life, You’re in total control. I want to worship You and thank You for the furnace. May I be willing to allow Your sovereign hand to turn up the heat, to burn away the dross, to take away the pride, to show me how small I am and how great You are.”

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 8/2/1987 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 1987 Stephen Davey

All rights reserved.