

“But I See Four Men”

The Seventh in a Series of Sermons on the Book of Daniel

Texts: Daniel 3:1–30 (vv. 9–20 in bulletin); Revelation 7:9–17

After Daniel interpreted the king’s frightening dream, Nebuchadnezzaer was greatly relieved. In fact, the king was so thankful to Daniel that he acknowledged his young Hebrew servant’s God as “God of gods and Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries.” The Babylonian king even made good on his promise to reward anyone who could interpret his dream. He “*gave Daniel high honors and many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon*” (v. 48). Daniel remained in service to the royal court until his death about 538 BC—living well into his eighties. But while Daniel remained a trusted court advisor to both Babylonian and Persian officials, his three Hebrew friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, were serving elsewhere as high officials in the province of Babylon—a favor which Nebuchadnezzar granted to Daniel on their behalf. Although Nebuchadnezzar offered high praise to YHWH because he revealed the meaning of the dream to his servant Daniel (as recounted in chapter 2), it will become clear that the Babylonian king never gave up his pagan ways and erected a golden statue, demanding that his subjects worship it. This strange demand is a mix of a gigantic royal ego, ancient near-eastern power politics, combined with pagan religion. Once again, Daniel’s friends’ lives are in danger, and this time Daniel will not rescue them—YHWH will, in what amounts to the next round in the on-going conflict between YHWH and the idols of Babylon.

As believers in YHWH, Daniel’s three friends (who were taken captive when Daniel was) refuse to worship Nebuchadnezzar’s statue, believing this to be a violation of the first two commandments in the law given to Israel by YHWH—There are no Gods but YHWH, and YHWH’s people are not to worship idols. Upon learning that three of his own appointed officials refused to worship the statue—especially three men who were serving in this capacity as a favor to Daniel—Nebuchadnezzar erupts in his characteristic rage and fury. The king demands the execution of these rebellious Hebrew officials—just as he had ordered previously with his court magicians. Yet, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, will be spared again, only this by far more dramatic and miraculous means.

This passage (Daniel 3) is one of the most famous of the so-called “Bible stories” (along with “Daniel in the lion’s den”) which Christian children are taught, and which few forget because of the nature of the story, its ability to capture a child’s imagination, and because of the sing-songy names of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. While Bible stories are anything but harmful, they are often sanitized and prone to miss the main redemptive-historical point of the original event, which is, in this case, the conflict between YHWH and the idols, reflected in the difficult struggle faced by YHWH’s faithful servants in exile, who are under tremendous pressure from a pagan king to renounce their faith, and who threatens their lives if they refuse to renounce their faith in YHWH. The alternative is death and martyrdom—such as we have recently seen on the evening news, ironically, in the same location.

As we continue our series on the Book of Daniel, we come to an episode which reflects the struggle of Hebrew exiles living in Babylon now living under the heavy hand of a tyrannical king like Nebuchadnezzar. Although commanded by YHWH to live their lives to the fullest during their exile (cf. Jeremiah 29:1–9)—including serving in the government of the nation which was bringing havoc upon their own people (Israel)—YHWH’s people are to worship and serve him only throughout their time away from

the promised land. Nebuchadnezzar, however, now demands that all his subjects worship a newly-erected golden statue—an edict which includes all the exiled Hebrews in Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar’s order also included the rulers throughout his entire kingdom, likely extending to the Jewish vassal king back in Judah (Zedekiah). In any case, the act of bowing before such a statue would have been an extreme violation of a Jew’s conscience, and an act of open disobedience to YHWH’s commands.

As we turn to our text—the thirty verses of Daniel 3—the scene is set in the opening verse for all that follows. *“Then king Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its breadth six cubits. He set it up on the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon.”* Ironically, the golden statue was quite possibly inspired by the vision which YHWH had given him previously of a giant and terrifying metal statue with a head of gold—which Daniel identified as Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom (as recounted in chapter 2). There is the very real possibility that the king ordered this statue built as a result, with a date of completion likely around December 594 or January 593 (a number of years after Daniel interpreted the dream). Based upon the dimensions given, the statue was nine feet wide, and some ninety feet high, shaped like an obelisk, no doubt with images of Nebuchadnezzar and his “gods” depicted on each of the four sides. The statue was about the same height as the highest palms which dominated the fertile landscape. Only the famous Greek statue, the “Colossus of Rhodes,” was taller.¹

As recounted in Jeremiah 51:59-64, Zedekiah (who then king of Judah) was forced to go to Babylon, perhaps to pay homage to Nebuchadnezzar’s statue, but then subsequently plotted a revolt against Nebuchadnezzar after being humiliated and belittled. By comparing the Babylonian Chronicles with the the Book of Jeremiah, it may indeed be the case that Zedekiah’s reaction to this forced pilgrimage and Jeremiah’s prophecy of Babylon’s eventual destruction (Jeremiah 27) motivated Judah and its current king, Zedekiah, to rebel against Babylon by making an alliance with the nations of Edom and several others.² YHWH warned Judah not to do this through the prophet Jeremiah, because YHWH will deal with Babylon in his own time—he did not need Zedekiah’s help. It was this rebellion by Judah (led by Zedekiah), which prompted Nebuchadnezzar to sack Jerusalem and destroy the temple in 587. This is also why Nebuchadnezzar killed Zedekiah’s sons before blinding him, then forcibly removing him to Babylon. The events surrounding the golden statue as recounted in Daniel 3 reflect the larger world of ancient politics and royal power as Nebuchadnezzar was seeking some way to shore-up the loyalty of his vacillating vassal states. Making his subjects bow to a symbol of his power might just do the trick.

Although the building and erecting of such a statue has both religious and political ramifications, the focus of Daniel 3 falls squarely upon the religious. A universal religious confession (acknowledging or even worshiping the “gods” of Nebuchadnezzar) was one way to unify the king’s racially, culturally, and religiously diverse empire as is implied in verses 2-3. *“Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent to gather the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Then the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces gathered for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. And they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up.”*

All of Nebuchadnezzar’s subjects throughout his empire, including all government officials, were

¹ Baldwin, Daniel, 110.

² Steinmann, Daniel, 167-169.

summoned to attend the dedication of the statue. As one commentator points out, “a contrasting theme is skillfully woven with the main theme throughout this chapter: the absolute and unthinking acceptance of polytheistic idolatry among most of the participants in the convocation.”³ The willing acceptance of Babylonian religion by Nebuchadnezzar’s subjects is the backdrop as Shadrack, Meshach, and Abednego represent the faithful Jewish exiles, refusing to comply with the king’s edict.

In constructing such an image, Nebuchadnezzar sought to unite all of subjects under a joint affirmation of the “gods” of Babylon⁴—symbolized by the golden statue. To come to Babylon for the statue’s dedication (no small feat when travel was so difficult) and pay homage to it (by bowing before it) was an act which publically demonstrated the loyalty of the king’s subjects (the vassals) to the watching king, who was suzerain over the bowee’s land and property.⁵ This is power politics at its worst—if you are truly loyal to your suzerain and want his blessings, then you will come to Babylon bow before my statue. If not, well then, the king knows where you and your people stand. He knows where you live and with whom you trade, and will respond accordingly. Zedekiah, Judah, Jerusalem, and all those taken in exile will pay that price—even though Zedekiah may have been one of those present for this ceremony.

In verses 4-6, Daniel describes the text of Nebuchadnezzar’s order to the assembled crowd. “*And the herald proclaimed aloud, ‘You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace.’*” The response from Nebuchadnezzar’s subjects is given in verse 7. “*Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.*” As an aside, three instruments mentioned are Semitic in origin (horn/a ram’s horn, pipe/a shepherd’s flute, lyre/zither), three are Greek loanwords (trigon/a four-stringed harp of triangular shape, a simple harp, bagpipes/some sort of primitive instrument using a bellows). Furthermore, large charcoal furnaces were common throughout the land for the firing of ceramics and the making of bricks—the mention of these things support an early date (6th century BC) for the Book of Daniel.

However, at least three of the king’s subjects failed to attend the dedication of the statue and were quickly ratted out to Nebuchadnezzar by their coworkers. According to verses 8-12, “*at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and maliciously accused the Jews. They declared to King Nebuchadnezzar, ‘O king, live forever! You, O king, have made a decree, that every man who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, shall fall down and worship the golden image. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into a burning fiery furnace. There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men, O king, pay no attention to you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.’*” There are three specific accusations made by the Chaldeans against

³ Steinmann, Daniel, 164.

⁴ Baldwin, Daniel, 110.

⁵ Steinmann, Daniel, 168.

the Hebrews.⁶ 1). These three Hebrews do not accept the king's royal authority. 2). They do not worship the king's gods, and 3). They did not bow down to the statue. Given what the king had commanded of his subjects, the accusers demand these three Hebrews be put to death.

Since Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were appointed to their offices—and there were a number of Jewish exiles in Babylon already at this time—no doubt, they were watched closely by those Babylonians jealous of their high office, who despised their religion, or who were not sure of their loyalty to the king. It is important to notice that throughout this account that Daniel uses the pagan names assigned to his Hebrew friends to make the point that they were well-known as Babylonians and were expected to bow before the statue as loyal servants of Nebuchadnezzar.⁷ In the mind of their accusers, any such refusal to worship the statue immediately exposed the three Hebrews as traitors who refused to acknowledge the king or his “gods,” which were at that time seen as essentially one and the same. To bow to the statue was to bow to the king. To bow to the statue was to acknowledge the gods of Babylon.

No doubt, recalling that these three men had been appointed to their high offices as a favor to Daniel several years before, prompted the king to respond in anger. “I graciously saved their lives once before, and this is how they repay me now!” The three men were summoned (v. 13) to appear before the king so that the accusations brought against them by the Chaldeans might be confirmed through direct testimony. *“Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought. So they brought these men before the king.”* They will be immediately questioned and their loyalty to the king put to the test. *“Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, ‘Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?’”* The question is a simple one—“YHWH or my idols, which is it?”

Their answer (vv. 16-18) forces Nebuchadnezzar to act, especially in light of the likelihood that foreign dignitaries were probably still present from every corner of the empire for the dedication of the new statue, perhaps even present in the royal court where this conflict is taking place. *“Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, ‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. 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. 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 already refused to worship the king's statue, so their answer reveals the reason why they did not, as well as the fact that they are not about to change their minds. They worship and serve YHWH only. They will obey YHWH's commandments. They will not worship Nebuchadnezzar's imaginary gods represented by the statue. They will trust themselves to YHWH's care to deliver them from death, or else vindicate them before the king for their refusal to bow the knee to any idol—even his. By expressing such faith and courage, they put Nebuchadnezzar to the test, forcing him to make good on his threat.

The conflict between YHWH and the idols is now public. With important company in town at his behest, and likely a bit embarrassed by this demonstration of gross insubordination, and certainly angered

⁶ Steinmann, Daniel, 182.

⁷ Steinmann, Daniel, 166.

by their failure to comply, Nebuchadnezzar taunts them. *“Who is this god who will deliver you?”* The answer they give is, “YHWH, the true and living God whom we serve.” Their resolution (faith) and lack of fear in the face of death pushes Nebuchadnezzar to the edge. As the king had stated, the penalty for such gross insubordination and rejection of the king’s authority was death—swift, public, and as painful as possible. The three men entrust themselves in faith to YHWH’s care. They accept YHWH’s will. Their words echo those of the Apostle Peter’s in Acts 5:29, when the Sanhedrin demanded that Peter and the others stop preaching the gospel in Jerusalem, the Apostle stated, *“we must obey God rather than men.”*

Daniel describes what happened next in verses 19-20, as the royal gasket blows yet again. *“Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury, and the expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated. And he ordered some of the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace.”* The intense heat coming from the furnace—now fueled by a mixture of hot-burning dry wood and pitch which was added to the usual charcoal to superheat the furnace—was apparent to everyone watching. *“Then these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the burning fiery furnace. Because the king’s order was urgent and the furnace overheated, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.”* The fire was now so hot that the elite soldiers commanded to throw the three faithful Jews into the furnace, died because of the intense heat.

The fate of these three infidels was certain (or so it looked). The king’s policy was a matter of public record. If you do not worship the golden statue, you will face the full fury of Nebuchadnezzar’s wrath, graphically symbolized by the intense heat of the furnace. *“And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace.”* The king’s verdict was final and the sentence of death had been meted out. In a matter of moments, after an expected brief flare-up in the furnace as the bodies exploded and then burned in the heat, nothing would remain of the three infidels. All present would see Nebuchadnezzar’s great power and the futility of resisting him.

But YHWH will not abandon his people in times of trial—even when they find themselves in a fiery furnace. The narrative of the trial, sentence, and execution is abruptly interrupted in verse 24 by Nebuchadnezzar’s startled reaction to something unexpected he saw in the furnace. *“Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, ‘Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?’”* They answered and said to the king, *‘True, O king.’”* Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown into the fire—everyone saw it, along with the deaths of those soldiers who bound them and threw them in. Yet Nebuchadnezzar sees something he cannot believe. *“He answered and said, ‘But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.’”* A fourth man? Who is it?

Three of the figures, unbound, and walking in the fiery furnace unharmed by the heat were obviously Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Along with Nebuchadnezzar, Christians have long debated the identity of the fourth man seen by king and who appeared like a “son of the gods.” Not having any biblical categories to help him understand what he was seeing, the king falls back upon his default religious setting—Babylonian paganism. This fourth person must be the offspring of Bel or Marduk—a son of one of the gods no doubt depicted on his golden statue. Christians, however, have the biblical categories to know that if this is not the pre-incarnate Lord Jesus (the “Angel of YHWH”),⁸ then it must

⁸ See Steinmann, Daniel, 193-196, for the arguments in favor of this being the pre-incarnate Christ.

an angelic figure sent by YHWH to protect his servants from harm (Gabriel or Michael, perhaps).⁹

Such visible manifestations of God's protection of his people can be found throughout redemptive history, especially in the accounts of the pillar of cloud and fire which both led and protected Israel in the Exodus account, or when Joshua meets the mysterious figure who reveals himself as "the commander of the Lord's army" (in Joshua 5:13-15). Whether the pre-incarnate Jesus, or an angel, (and good arguments can be adduced to support either interpretation) YHWH protects and then delivers his faithful witnesses—not from the trial, but in the midst of the fiery furnace.

If we fast forward six hundred years to the coming of Jesus, the same theme reappears in the Book of Revelation—we face all of our trials with God's protection, presence, and promises. According to verses 13-17 of our New Testament lesson, which has profound echoes from Daniel 3, "*then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?' I said to him, 'Sir, you know.' And he said to me, 'These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'*" If YHWH can protect his three servants in the midst of a Babylonian furnace, then he can deliver us from any calamity. In light of the mysterious providence of God, there are times when God rescues us from temporal danger or serious illness. There are other times when he rescues from these things us through allowing us to die. But he always rescues us. Our robes will be washed and purified by the shed blood of Jesus. We are even reminded that scorching heat (symbolic of eternal punishment and an echo from Daniel 3) cannot harm us in his presence.

Nebuchadnezzar is taken back by what he sees inside the furnace. "*Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning fiery furnace; he declared, 'Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here!' Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire.*" This fire was hot enough to kill the mighty men (soldiers) who bound and then threw the three men into the flames. But the three men were completely unharmed, unbound, and able to walk out of the furnace. In fact, we read in verse 27 of the reaction of the watching crowds. "*And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king's counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men. The hair of their heads was not singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them.*" The king and his useless and silent idols lose yet another round in the conflict to YHWH. All those present for the burning of the Hebrew infidels who refused to worship the king's statue—and who came to watch the gory spectacle—are as shocked as the king. They came to see an execution, and instead, become witnesses to YHWH's mighty power in preserving his people. Along with the king, the crowds are also witnesses to the faith these three men have in the power of YHWH to deliver them. All are stunned.

In verse 28, the king is yet again forced to acknowledge the supremacy of YHWH over all things, including a super-heated furnace, as well as acknowledge the faith which his people place in the true and living God. "*Nebuchadnezzar answered and said, 'Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's*

⁹ A case for this being an angelic figure can be found in, Hamilton, With the Clouds of Heaven, 137-143.

command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God.”

While some consider this to be a confession of faith in YHWH on the part of the king, there is no evidence that such is the case. The king, however, must face the obvious—he threw the three men in a fire to kill them, and to his shock and dismay, they survive unscathed. The king even sees a fourth man in the fire with them. Once again, Nebuchadnezzar blesses YHWH for delivering his servants, and he praises the willingness of these three servants to trust their God unto death.

The result is an end to the persecution of faithful Jewish exiles in Babylon. The chapter ends (as did chapter 2) with an amazing declaration in verses 29. After seeing YHWH’s powerful hand in delivering his servants, Nebuchadnezzar exempts the Jews from his edict to worship his statue. *“Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way.”* The best indication that Nebuchadnezzar has not exercised saving faith in YHWH is seen in this edict. He does not command the people to worship YHWH, nor does he repent of his own pagan polytheism. In fact he still allows his subjects to worship the Babylonian dieties. What he does do is prohibit making blasphemous statements about the *“God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego*. Notice, he never claims YHWH as his God, nor as his people’s God. But having seen what he just saw, he is impressed with YHWH enough to allow the Jews to worship him, and not the king’s statue. Almost as an afterthought, the passage closes with the news in verse 30 that *“then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon.”* I’ll bet they got raises, too.

What then do we take with us from this passage? The most important fact is that in the midst of our trials, the fourth man is always there. God never leaves us, nor forsakes us. There is no personal report from Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego about their experience in the furnace. But Nebuchadnezzar saw with his own eyes that either the Lord or an angel was present with the faithful servants of YHWH. *“But I see four men.”* Nebuchadnezzar is right. There is always a fourth man with us. Even if we cannot see his presence. In his mysterious providence, God will not always heal us from illness or accident (though sometimes he does). He will not always deliver us from imminent danger (though sometimes he does). He does not always prevent his people from facing the Nebuchadnezzars of their day—tyrants who threaten God’s people with death for not renouncing Jesus Christ.

But the lesson from Daniel 3 is crystal clear. God is always with us in the midst of our trials. The fourth man is either the good shepherd himself, or an angel sent to protect us. But the fourth man is always there with us. Always.