

## Faithful to Death – The Fiery Test

There is a reason for stories. We don't so much in facts, figures, and time, as we live in stories. A story is universal and timeless. They can convey many things: Loyalty, faithfulness, true love, deceit, despair, and on and on. Our love for stories is not so much about those actually involved, but in the message that we take away from them.

Our stories for this evening are no exception. Something within us loves it when the good guys win. The lessons that we get from the stories tonight is that the good guys always win, when viewed from God's perspective.

In the first, God's children find themselves in a situation over which they have no control. They were ordered to come. They comply with the king as far as they could. But they refuse to actively worship a false god.

In the second, God's servant finds himself in a situation which again is beyond his control. But rather than being a matter of refusing to do something, he refuses to abstain from doing something that is right. Which is the harder test?

Before we begin tonight's study, I want to do a quick review of where we have been and where we are going.

Remember our outline for the first 7 chapters of Daniel?

A: Daniel 2. Rise and fall of kingdoms

B: Daniel 3. Persecution of Worthies

C: Daniel 4. Rise and fall of Neb.

C: Daniel 5. The fall of Belshazzar

B: Daniel 6. Persecution of Daniel

A: Daniel 7: Rise and fall of kingdoms.

We are back to King Nebuchadnezzar tonight as we work with Daniel chapter 3.

Nebuchadnezzar decides to set up a huge image. The issue is not *that* he did it, but *why* he did it. I believe that there were probably 2 reasons for this image at this time.

We get to that tomorrow night, but Nebuchadnezzar had a dream, the interpretation of which prophesied that the great kingdom of Babylon would not be eternal, but would indeed fall to another power. I am sure that this weighed on the King, his mind going over and over this dream.

How could he assure that his kingdom would last forever?

There were issues already. There had been a rebellion in the army, and Nebuchadnezzar had barely escaped with his life, having had to kill some of his own soldiers personally to survive. It was a close call.

So the King decides to have a "re-dedication" ceremony, a show of loyalty.

So he builds a great image. 6 cubits wide and 60 cubits tall. That is the *what* of the story. Now those are not the proportions of a human being, but many of the statuettes of the gods from that time and place depicts them in approximately the same proportions.

On the other hand, the figures might have included a base upon which the image stood. That would give it a more pleasing dimension to us.

The Bible says that this image was a golden image. It probably was wood or some other material covered with gold leaf, as it would have taken a pretty big chunk of gold to make a golden image of that size.

We are told that it was set up on the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. Dura literally means "The Wall".

There have been several suggestions as to where this wall and plain would have been. It would have to have been in an area that was not built up with houses. A good possibility for the location would have been in the area that was being annexed to the city of Babylon. The wall was being extended to take in more area, but it was not yet populated.

Another thing in favor of this site was that if the statue faced west, it would be looking directly at the temple of Marduk, the major Babylonian deity.

As for what the image represented, two suggestions present themselves. First, would be the king himself. Now arguing against this, the belief at that time was that any king that claimed divinity would be punished by the gods.

The second, is that it represented Marduk. Again, this completely golden image would counteract the message of the king's dream we will study in Daniel 2. Nebuchadnezzar wanted Babylon to stand forever. Marduk was the god of Babylon. Therefore a solid golden image could have easily represented Marduk.

So the Babylonian officials, administrators, governors, etc, etc, were summoned together to demand and show their loyalty.

It is people who work closely with the government that would be the most likely to overthrow it. Nothing has changed.

The way to show loyalty to the king was to bow to Marduk, who had chosen Nebuchadnezzar to be his king. At least in their thinking.

So what we have here is preventive politics wrapped in a shroud of religion to control the population. Hang tight, for we will see that again.

Well the crowd is there. There was probably food, for food always draws a crowd. Then there was music. The music was to be the signal for the beginning of obeisance to the statue, and what it stood for.

There would have been a lot of people there, for nothing multiplies employees like government. Perhaps there were as many as 2000 people there for the occasion.

The king told them that when the music played, and they had the Babylon philharmonic there to play, that everyone was to bow and worship the image, and whatever it stood for.

If they did not comply, there was an alternative: the furnaces.

Aaah, the furnaces!! Probably some of the beehive shaped furnaces for firing brick. That fits nice with building a wall.

These furnaces were normally fired with tar covered straw. There were tar seeps in areas around the city where bitumen oozed up from the ground. It would be collected and burned. It was even used as mortar for bricks at times.

There was an entrance at the top, and one at the side. The bricks would be loaded at the side, and the fuel dumped through the top, which was accessed by a set of stairs.

The music plays. The people bow. Except for 3 lonely figures. I can hear the people around urging them to bow to save their lives, even if they didn't mean it.

To keep them from the furnaces.

I don't know if you have ever been lonely in a crowd. When I was a child, my family went to Iran. We took a freighter that had first class accommodations for 12 people. We got off at one port in Italy, took the train to Rome, and met the ship at it's next port of call.

We happened to be there on Sunday, so we went to Vatican square, which is a circle, to sightsee. As luck would have it, there was a large crowd in the square waiting to hear the pope speak.

When he came to the balcony, all of the people bowed down on their hands and knees. All except a few, which I assumed to be protestants or atheists. It is kind of a unsettling feeling to be one of a very small group that is going against the crowd.

Anyway, the defiance of the Hebrews does not go unnoticed. Some of the officials, probably some who were jealous of these three "foreigners" who had gained positions in the government.

Can you imagine the pressure to conform? No one really wants to be burned alive. And neither does anyone want to put themselves in the place where they are ostracized. Not just by the king, but also the crowd. That also places pressure on them to conform.

There is something about going along with the crowd that is very compelling. Even with something that seems so simple as worship.

But is worship so simple?

During the time of the Roman Empire, Christian citizens were required to offer a pinch of incense to show their loyalty to the empire. They did not have to bow. Just offer a pinch of incense, which was probably provided to them.

If they did not do this small act of worship, they would receive the death penalty. But you are faithful to God or you are not. Faithful worshippers of the true God cannot bow to any other power. They cannot participate in any activity that gives glory to another god.

The royal tattletales ran to the king.

**Daniel 3:8-12 (KJV)**

<sup>8</sup> Wherefore at that time certain Chaldeans came near, and accused the Jews.

<sup>9</sup> They spake and said to the king Nebuchadnezzar, O king, live for ever.

<sup>10</sup> Thou, O king, hast made a decree, that every man that shall hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and dulcimer, and all kinds of musick, shall fall down and worship the golden image:

<sup>11</sup> And whoso falleth not down and worshippeth, that he should be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace.

<sup>12</sup> There are certain Jews whom thou hast set over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; these men, O king, have not regarded thee: they serve not thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.

These "tattle-tales" were probably rubbing their hands with glee mentally. Maybe already deciding how they might take the places of their foreign rivals.

Naturally Nebuchadnezzar is livid. If he set this up to demand loyalty, everyone must be involved. It takes only one person to start a rebellion.

He has the Hebrews brought to him. He wants to present the picture of unity to his subjects.

So he decides to be magnanimous. O.K., maybe you did not understand. You are after all foreigners. So I will give you another chance.

Remember, this is probably in context of a put-down rebellion.

**Daniel 3:16-18 (KJV)**

<sup>16</sup> Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter.

<sup>17</sup> If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king.

<sup>18</sup> But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.

Nebuchadnezzar could make laws, he could organize rallies, he could threaten, but he could not take away their power of choice. He could try to persuade them, coerce them, punish them, but he could not force them to act against their will.

The king was in a no-win situation. If they were seen as martyrs, he was the persecutor, and would be vindicating the originators of the rebellion. If he forgave them, he would be seen as a weak target and easy prey for would-be supplanters.

The 3 friends were in a no-lose situation, though I doubt that they were thinking that. If they were thrown into the furnace, they were martyrs. If they were not burned up, they were celebrities.

But in this case, God works things out so that everyone wins.

But not before the king, in a fit of rage orders the furnaces to be heated 7 times hotter than ever before and then the 3 defiant Jehovah worshippers thrown into them.

I am not sure how you make a furnace 7 times hotter. I am sure that is just an expression. But one of the furnaces nearby was loaded with fuel. I can imagine the flames shooting out of the top like a jet engine, just like they did when our chimney caught fire on a Christmas Eve.

God's faithful stand true. They watch the preparations and they do not flinch.

They were tied up and carried to the entrance of the furnace, and were thrown in. The furnace was so hot that the heat killed the guards that threw them in.

I can imagine the king looking into the furnace to watch his handiwork. Another problem solved the royal way. I can see him turn away, and then do a quick double take. Instead of charred and broken bodies, he sees them standing calmly in the furnace. They had been trussed up before they were thrown into the furnace, but now, their legs and hands were free.

This was a selective fire. It burned the ropes off of the wrists of the Hebrews. Other wise, the 3 men might have just been taking a stroll. This, after killing the guards that threw them into the furnace.

But wait, they are having a conversation, with a 4<sup>th</sup> being.

**Daniel 3:24-25 (KJV)**

<sup>24</sup> Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astonished, and rose up in haste, and spake, and said unto his counsellors, Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? They answered and said unto the king, True, O king.

<sup>25</sup> He answered and said, Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.

The Aramaic literally says, "Like a son of the gods."

This is not to say that Nebuchadnezzar has an understand of God as we know him

We must remember that Nebuchadnezzar is not yet converted. He is still a worshipper of pagan gods. But he recognizes that something extraordinary has happened, and this must be something outside of human experience. He knows intuitively that this being cannot be human.

And he knows it is a message to him. You see, what happened on the plain of Dura was not just a political rally, it was also a religious event. And what the king did not know at

the beginning, he found out now. This was a struggle between Jehovah and Marduk. And this battle had been fought and lost by Babylon before at the Tower of Babel.

Now, Nebuchadnezzar had to pay and work to get that image up on the plain. As it was going up, people could see the frame work being constructed. They watched as the final layer of gold was applied. It had probably taken months.

Now, in just a few minutes, that object of so much care and concern was totally forgotten when the God of heaven joined his persecuted Hebrews in the hottest fire that man could produce.

King Nebuchadnezzar had set himself up against God. We tend to do the same thing. Whether we exalt ourselves, or we look to some human being as our deliverance, there is no difference. We are to worship only God.

Looking forward to our study on Daniel 7, Daniel looks into heaven and sees the heavenly judgment. As he is watching, the son of man approaches the Ancient of Days to intercede for his people.

In the fiery furnace, one like the son of God comes down to protect his people.

Now we must remember. God's deliverance is not always in the way that we ask or expect. Our faithfulness should never be based on what we get out of it, but on what God is worthy of receiving. Too many today ask, "What is in it for me?"

The answer to that is often lightly given, eternal life.

But is that really what it is all about?

#### **Revelation 4:11 (KJV)**

<sup>11</sup> Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.

#### **Revelation 5:12-13 (KJV)**

<sup>12</sup> Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing.

<sup>13</sup> And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, *be* unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.

We are to worship because HE is worthy. He made us. He sustains us. He guides us. He teaches us. And He delivers us, sometimes from situations on earth, but eventually from sin, sin's results on us and our bodies, and the results of sin on this planet.

Our gospel text is Revelation 5:

13. And every creature which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, I heard saying: "Blessing and honor and glory and power *Be* to Him who sits on the throne, And to the Lamb, forever and ever!"

He is worthy. He is worth worshipping. In worshipping him, you can find the highest joy. In honoring him, you can find your greatest fulfillment.

The kings and crowds of this world tell you to follow and worship them. God calls you to worship him.

What is your choice tonight, for you do have one. Are you going to choose Jehovah or Marduk, the god of this world?