

Nebuchadnezzar's finest lying dead at the entrance to the furnace, God had a perfect opportunity to reveal His true power to protect His people. Nebuchadnezzar was "blown away," to put it in modern-day vernacular. In fact, at this point, the amazed king wasn't even sure he could trust his own memory. He quickly double-checked with his counselors about the number of men that were thrown into the flames. They assured him that, indeed, there were only three thrown in and that they were all bound. The fact that there were four men, all walking about freely and having no hurt, left the king with only one solemn consideration. This must be the work of their God and that fourth person in the fire with them must be their mighty Deliverer Himself.

This was not the only reason King Nebuchadnezzar knew this fourth person was the Son of God. "Daniel and his companions had ever sought to bring before the king, the princes, and the wise men of Babylon, a knowledge of the true God. These Hebrews holding high positions in the government had been associated with the king; and as they were not ashamed of their God, they had honored the Lord whenever opportunity afforded. The king had heard from their lips descriptions of the glorious Being whom they served; and it was from this instruction that he was able to recognize the fourth person in the fire as the Son of God" (*The Story of Daniel the Prophet*, S.N. Haskell, pp. 44-45).

Here also we have an apt illustration that the same fire that is death to the wicked is life to the righteous. While the fire of the furnace destroyed the mighty men of Babylon, the faithful followers of God were unharmed in its very midst. So it shall be in the final reckoning. "Our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrew 12:29). Consuming not to all, however. "Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings? He that walketh righteously . . . Thine eyes shall see the king in His beauty . . . Thine heart shall meditate terror" (Isaiah 33:14-15, 17-18). Yes, the righteous will abide in the eternal burning of God's glory and not be devoured. But of the wicked it is written, "Fire came down from God out of Heaven, and devoured them" (Revelation 20:9). The fire that is life to the righteous will consume the wicked. God's very presence is to them a consuming fire. The glory of Him who is love will consume the sin. It is no arbitrary act of vengeance on God's part that excludes the wicked from eternal life. He who is the Spring of life and love is "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). He is eager to give all an abundant entrance into the glory of His kingdom, but He cannot and will not force men and women to love Him, who alone is the Source of life. Their own choice excludes them from heaven. And their own persistence in evil makes it impossible for them to endure the light of God's love. In sorrow He will give up those whom in self-sacrifice He labored to save.

The Power of God Acknowledged

"Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the mouth of the burning fiery furnace, and spake, and said, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, ye servants of the most high God, come forth, and come hither. Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, came forth of the midst of the fire. And the princes, governors, and captains, and the king's counselors, being gathered together, saw these men, upon whose bodies the fire had no power, nor was an hair of their head singed, neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire had passed on them. Then Nebuchadnezzar spake, and said, Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who hath sent His angel, and delivered His servants that trusted in Him, and have changed the king's word, and yielded their bodies, that they might not serve nor worship any god, except their own God. Therefore I make a decree, That every people, nation, and language, which speak any thing amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made a dunghill: because there is no other God that can deliver after this sort. Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, in the province of Babylon" (Daniel 3:26-30).

No God Like Our God

We cannot underestimate the importance of standing true to God though the majority oppose us. Through Daniel and his three friends God was building His case in the courts of Babylon. But it was not just Babylon He was trying to reach. Due to the fact that dignitaries from every corner of Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom were in the plain of Dura for the dedication of the image, the story of the three Hebrews would be told throughout all the earth. And through this story God would work by His Holy Spirit to draw souls to Himself. Evidence was being given, facts and experiences were developing to give overwhelming proof of the power, love and sovereignty of the God of gods. A message was now being heralded by the heathen in every nation under heaven that there is no god like this God.

And it's true, friends. There is no god like the God of heaven and earth. His eye rests continually upon the afflicted. He always stands with those who are wrongly persecuted. He promises to be there for us in our darkest trials, when the world seems arrayed against us. The Son of Man was with the three Hebrew men and He wants to be with us. In fact, He is with us, with all of us, in a very real and personable sense. When Jesus was born of Mary in Bethlehem, the angel of the Lord said, "Call His name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us" (Matthew 1:23). Through the incarnation of God's son, humanity has been united with divinity by ties so tender and so close that they shall never be broken but by the choices of individual men. Having been born in our very human nature, Jesus became our brother. He lived as a real man, facing the issues of life, wrestling with temptation and conquering sin on our behalf. He was "in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15).

In the passion of temptation, in the fiery trials of life, there is a fourth one among us, one who is the Son of God and yet the son of man. As the Son of God He represents the true character of the Father to our blinded minds: "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory [character] of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6). Jesus is "the brightness of His [the Father's] glory and the express image of His person" (Hebrews 1:3). Of His mission to earth Christ said, "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). Through the incarnate Son of God we encounter the One who is our Father, and we are persuaded that He is, indeed, altogether lovely, deserving of our highest honor and most ardent devotion. Having seen Him through Christ as a God of infinite love, we are able to "serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness . . . all the days of our life" (Luke 1:74-75).

As the son of man, Christ represents humanity to the Father. He stands before God as one new man on behalf of all men. "Therefore as by the offense of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life" (Romans 5:18). Announcing the birth of Messiah, the angels of heaven proclaimed two amazing achievements through Him: "Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:14). Not only is God's character magnified in Christ, but all of mankind is lavished with peace and goodwill. As a man bearing our sin, Jesus was baptized of John in the Jordan River, not for Himself, but for us, for He "knew no sin" (2 Corinthians 5:21). When the voice of blessed benediction resounded from heaven, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17), the entire human race was blessed in that blessing, "accepted in the beloved" (Ephesians 1:6).

As we see the three Hebrew worthies walking in the midst of fiery flames with the Son of God, we ourselves are one with Christ through His incarnation. He is with us. God is with us; humanity is embraced in Christ. "Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh" (1 Timothy 3:16).

The Unsealing of Daniel

Study Number 4



If you have been impressed with the book of Daniel so far, this chapter will not be a disappointment. It unfolds in miniature the very issues that will confront all the world just before the second coming of Jesus. More importantly, it shows how important it is to stand on the Word of God through all opposition, for the truth of God's Word withstands the test of fire.

According to Revelation 13, the Bible teaches that the antichrist and the false prophet will collaborate with civil powers to deceive the world in the last days (see Revelation 19:19-20). Under seemingly good intentions, a system of religious worship symbolized by an image, will be established. All will be forced to conform to this religious worship on threat of economic sanctions and death (see Revelation 13:11-18).

The idea of bringing economic sanctions against other nations is already a reality. It has been a long-practiced policy of America and other leading world nations to boycott non-Christian nations like Iraq or Cuba. Though the motive and intent is now quite different, the transition to a religious motivation is a definite prediction of Bible prophecy. The fact that such sanctions will actually come against individuals, rather than just nations, is also clearly revealed (see Revelation 13:15-17).

The most important point of this entire chapter might be found in the following verse: "God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). Never can the worship of God be enforced upon the conscience and the principle of this Scripture be maintained. To worship God in spirit and truth is to be unaffected by any force or compulsion, any threat or punishment. It is the violation of this very principle which brings down upon spiritual Babylon some of the strongest denunciations found in the Word of God (see Revelation 14:8-13). "Because" Babylon has "made" or caused all people to worship through economic sanctions and the threat of death, God declares her to be fallen. In sharp contrast, the very essence of true Christian worship is liberty, religious liberty to all, even those who would choose to be lost. In this one principle will be found an unmistakable distinction between God's cause and that of the antichrist during the coming world crisis.

The Antichrist Principle

What does the antichrist of Revelation 13 have to do with the third chapter of Daniel? The first similarity is that Nebuchadnezzar has become a professed worshiper of God (see Daniel 2:46-47). Yet, he is about to enforce a false worship upon the multitudes. In this alone he is illustrating the spirit of antichrist. The word "anti," not only means "against" but "in place of" (*American Dictionary of the English Language*, Noah

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Webster, 1828). This definition is enunciated by the apostle Paul's description of the antichrist in 2 Thessalonians. Notice how he describes this false religious leader: "Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshiped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God" (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4). In other words, the antichrist power puts itself in the place of God.

According to these verses, the antichrist is not non-religious. It is, in fact, quite the opposite. The antichrist power is so religious that it believes it deserves the very place of God. This power wants to be seen and worshiped as God. He wants to sit in God's place before the world. He even desires to be exalted above God before the masses of humanity. This New Testament description of the antichrist bears a striking resemblance to the goal of King Nebuchadnezzar. Consider the record:

"Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, whose height was threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof six cubits: he set it up in the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. Then Nebuchadnezzar the king sent to gather together the princes, the governors, and the captains, the judges, the treasurers, the counselors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the provinces, to come to the dedication of the image which Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up. Then the princes, the governors, and captains, the judges, the treasurers, the counselors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the provinces, were gathered together unto the dedication of the image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up; and they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Then an herald cried aloud, To you it is commanded, O people, nations, and languages, that at what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of music, ye fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king hath set up: And whoso falleth not down and worshipeth shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace" (Daniel 3:1-6).

Did you catch what Nebuchadnezzar had done? God had revealed the future to him through a dream, interpreted by Daniel. This dream revealed an image just like the one Nebuchadnezzar had erected, but the image in the dream was of four different metals. The significance of those metals was that three others would follow Babylon's kingdom. But Nebuchadnezzar made his image all of one metal, gold.

In the dream God gave Nebuchadnezzar, it was only the head of the image that was gold, representing King Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon's reign. Yet Nebuchadnezzar was not content with just a part in history. Perhaps the idea of his great kingdom coming to an end began to disturb him. He didn't like the thought of being replaced by another kingdom, especially since he was the most powerful kingdom around at the time. Who, among all his subject nations, would dare mount an attack against his great kingdom? Finally he concluded that the whole image should have been made of gold, signifying that his kingdom would last forever. In order to firmly establish this desire, he set out to construct just such an image. This would send a warning message to any would-be insurgents, as well as to future generations.

Once he accomplished the building of the image all of gold, the next logical conclusion was to make all nations come to bow in allegiance to his image. This would ensure absolute loyalty among his subjects. It was vital that he bring representatives from every part of his kingdom. More important still, all of them must be left with an unshakable conviction that he would allow not a particle of disloyalty.

So what that he was misrepresenting the truth God had revealed to him. So what that Daniel had clearly uncovered to the king that which he once confessed must have come from the only true God of gods. "I'll just send Daniel to a far away province during the dedication," he may have thought. Perhaps this is why Daniel is not present at the dedication. Men have often tried to remove from their presence the messenger of truth so they can carry out their own desires. With Daniel gone, this purpose might have gone unchecked, but for three other Hebrews who would not allow their love for God to be compromised.

It is in this sense that we find King Nebuchadnezzar illustrating the spirit of antichrist. Nebuchadnezzar put himself in the place of God and sought the worship of all nations, which is due only to God. Of course, we might expect such tactics from a heathen ruler. But this king had been enlightened. Still, God in His mercy would work through his faithful servants to bring the truth of His sovereignty home to Nebuchadnezzar's heart.

Three Refuse to Worship

"Therefore at that time, when all the people heard the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and all kinds of music, all the people, the nations, and the languages, fell down and worshiped the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up. Wherefore at that time certain Chaldeans came near, and accused the Jews. They spake and said to the King Nebuchadnezzar, O king, live forever. 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 music, shall fall down and worship the golden image: And whoso falleth not down and worshipeth, that he should be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. 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. Then Nebuchadnezzar in his rage and fury commanded to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Then they brought these men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar spake and said unto them, Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, do not ye serve my gods, nor worship the golden image which I have set up? Now if ye be ready that at what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and dulcimer, and all kinds of music, ye fall down and worship the image which I have made; well: but if ye worship not, ye shall be cast the same hour into the midst of a burning fiery furnace; and who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands?" (Daniel 3:7-15).

Let's pause for just a moment here. The issue between Nebuchadnezzar and those three faithful worshipers of God is made crystal clear in verse 15. The conflict we are about to witness is really all about power. It's a power struggle between Nebuchadnezzar and God. The enraged king, though a professed worshiper of the God of heaven, does not believe in God's power to deliver these three Hebrews out of his hands. And he might well have reason to doubt, for he defeated God's people. But though God allowed Babylon to take His people captive, Nebuchadnezzar is about to find out that it is no lack of power on God's part, but rather unbelief on the part of His chosen people that brought them as captives to Babylon.

Before going on, look at another prophetic warning recorded by the apostle Paul. This one is in his second letter to Timothy. It is a message given in regard to the "last days," when, says Paul, "perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away. For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lusts, ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:1-7).

Daniel 3 underscores why the condition of the last days, as Paul explains them here,

are so perilous. It has to do with the contrast between those who have a form of godliness, a profession of Christianity only, and those who are truly committed to the Lord Jesus Christ. Nebuchadnezzar had an intellectual conviction only. His heart had not yet been fully surrendered to God. Yes, he had acknowledged Daniel's God as the God of gods, but he then went on to distort His Word and challenge His power. Like those Paul prophesied of in these last days, Nebuchadnezzar had a form, or profession, of godliness but denied the power thereof.

Loyalty to God No Matter What

"Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. 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. 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" (Daniel 3:16-18).

I think we all can admire the courage exhibited in the answer of these three Hebrews. Their trust is in the will of God. Their lives are swallowed up in glorifying Him. In actuality, they exhibited the same spirit of Protestantism seen in God's faithful people down through the ages. They were protesting against false worship, and, in spite of their minority position, refused to yield the dictates of conscience to the dictates of human authority.

They believed God could deliver them from the fiery furnace if it was His will. Their trust was based on God's Word, for only one hundred years previous the prophet Isaiah had said, "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee" (Isaiah 43:2).

At the same time they knew that God's faithful people have sometimes glorified Him in death. Thus, they exemplify those pictured in Revelation who overcome the devil "by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony" and who love "not their lives unto the death" (Revelation 12:11). "The phrase 'but if not,' like Jesus Christ's 'nevertheless,' epitomized their faith. They didn't want to die; even more, however, they didn't want to disappoint the wonderful, personal God who was always with them." (*God Cares*, vol. 1, C. Mervyn Maxwell, p. 54).

Four Men in the Furnace

We do not have to guess how contorted the king's face must have looked when he heard these courageous words from three Hebrew captives. How dare they defy his power and authority! He must have been beside himself. The record says:

"Then was Nebuchadnezzar full of fury, and the form of his visage was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: therefore he spake, and commanded that they should heat the furnace one seven times more than it was wont to be heated. And he commanded the most mighty men that were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. Then these men were bound in their coats, their hosen, and their hats, and their other garments, and were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. Therefore because the king's commandment was urgent, and the furnace exceeding hot, the flame of the fire slew those men that took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astonished, and rose up in haste, and spake, and said unto his counselors, Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? They answered and said unto the king, True, O king. 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" (Daniel 3:19-25).

Can you imagine a fire so hot that the mightiest men in the world were killed because they ventured near it? A fiery furnace fed to an intense heat by order of an angry king, this was the hotbed into which God's faithful were thrown. With