

The Test of Allegiance

April 11, 2021

Daniel 3:1-18

After our yearly, incredible experience of focusing on the death and resurrection of Jesus, we return to our study of the book of Daniel. We are now in Daniel 3, the story of the fiery furnace. Everyone knows the story, right? This time, the heroes of the story are not Daniel, he is not in the text. Instead, they are Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, or Raq, Shaq, and Bennie for the Veggie Tales fans.

But in order to put the story into context, we must go back to chapter 2. There, King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream and Daniel was the only one found who could interpret the dream. The dream was of a statue, a statue in the form of a man, with a head of gold, a chest and arms of silver, and on down. But a special rock comes and knocks the statue down and crushes it into fine powder which the wind carries away. So this statue of various materials disappears and the rock remains which grows into a mountain which takes over the whole earth. That was the dream.

And the interpretation of the dream was that King Nebuchadnezzar was the head of gold. But after him would come another kingdom, and then another, and then another. And the rock was a kingdom of God's making that would come during the era of the 4th kingdom (Rome) and crush all of the human kingdoms and expand and fill the whole world. That was the interpretation. But the important part for our context is on the first and last aspects of this succession of kingdoms. Nebuchadnezzar was the head of gold and the kingdom of God's making would smash the whole statue in the days of the 4th kingdom.

So now, what do you suppose happened next? Of course, Nebuchadnezzar had a statue built (in the form of a man perhaps???) and overlaid it with gold. Hmmmm...I wonder what might lead him to do a thing like that? And then he

orders everyone to bow down to the statue or else! I think he got the wrong message from the dream.

Let's read what happened when King Nebuchadnezzar set up the image and commanded worship. Or the story of the fiery furnace. Know going in that just like last time, this passage is too long to take in one sermon, so we are going to be left hanging this morning, finishing the story next week. But I also ask you to notice the exact spot where we leave off today. Here we find one of the greatest declarations of faith in all of Scripture. I could actually just skip the whole story and preach just v.18. So, don't miss v.18. READ Daniel 3:1-18

Main point: God's people never bow before other gods, no matter what the consequences.

Bowing in worship, pledging loyalty to other gods crosses a line that followers of Yahweh cannot cross, even if the consequences are death. If ultimate allegiance is the test, that we stand with our God. We do so in faith that God can deliver them from the consequences, but we also do so knowing that God might not deliver us from the consequences and that's okay. We will follow Him regardless. Our ultimate allegiance is to our God...no matter what!
(2 parts)

I. The ultimate test: bow down before another god. vv. 1-7

This really is the test for all of us: will we worship only the God of Scripture or will we bow before another god, a fake god, an image of a god? It matters not who or what that god is, we are not to worship it or give it honor that ought to be reserved for the One True God. This is really just an illustration of the first commandment of the 10 commandments. And yet, it is the test that all of us face. Who is our God? Where is our loyalty?

v.1- 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.

Now, the details of this image of gold are sparse. We know that it is tall, really tall, 90 feet tall, twice as tall as the tallest power poles around here. And it is about 9 feet across. It is covered in gold. This does not mean it would be made out of solid gold, there wouldn't be that much gold. But gold is able to be hammered quite thin and laid over the statue, making it appear as solid gold. And as you might expect, such a statue would shine, brilliantly shine. Is this reminding you of anything? Of course, the image in Nebuchadnezzar's dream. But the text does not give us any more details, like the features of the images, whether it was made to look like a man. So, we must not assume that we know the details. All we know is that this image was really, really tall, shiny and set up so all could see (on the plain of Dura) You can't miss a 90 foot tall shiny gold statue!

It could be that the statue was of Nebuchadnezzar himself. But it could also be a statue of his god, Nebu. That seems more likely to me. And yet, the point is still the same. After declaring that Daniel's God was the god of gods in the last chapter, Nebuchadnezzar erects an image made with the same gold material described in the last chapter. In the last chapter, he bowed before Daniel as his God's spokesman. Yet, the very next event is Nebuchadnezzar building such an image for himself. He went right back to the mindset of chapter 1. His kingdom ruled over all. His god was superior to all. Allegiance to him and his god was the ultimate test. He didn't learn much from his dream. Or, perhaps he was only concerned with the short term. Perhaps he had pondered too long on what Daniel declared about him. After all, Daniel affirmed that he was the head of gold. It seems to me that this declaration went to his head. He saw himself as all that and wanted to make sure everyone in his kingdom agreed. What we as the readers know just from reading this first verse is that Nebuchadnezzar did not learn the intended lesson of chapter 2 and by extension, this is not going to turn out well for him. In other words, the God who sent him the dream might just have something to say about this test he has set up.

2 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. 3 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.

One of the features of this story that is left unexplained is the use of repetition. Here, it is the names of all the offices of the officials. Later it will be the musical instruments used. Clearly, there is a meaning behind this long list repeated, but we are never told what it is. While this is a fairly common feature of writing of this type and era, my sense is that the intended message is that of inclusivity, meaning they were ALL to bow, all of the leaders, from the highest to the lowest. Now, this brings up a problem though. Where's Daniel? Why is he not in the story? We are not told. I'm confident that there would be a good reason, but we are not told. He simply is not a part of this story. This is about the three men underneath Daniel. This is their story!

4 And the herald proclaimed aloud, "You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, 5 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. 6 And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace." 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.

Notice this comes as a command by the king. Every person who hears the sound of all those instruments, this ancient orchestra, this call to worship, are to immediately fall in worship before the image. This is instant, total, universal declaration of loyalty. And the alternative is also in the superlative: thrown into the furnace. We call it the fiery furnace because there is a doubling up of terms.

It is a furnace, the sort that you set up to melt iron, or harden bricks or some other such large use. But this furnace would be really, really hot. It would be a fiery hot furnace. And since the carrying out of the sentence would be instantaneous, we know that the furnace would have been right there, fully heated up as the call to worship rang out. I can think of no more intimidating and imposing of features. You either worship or else! No choice, no delays, certain death. That was the test.

And the officials all complied. When they all heard the sounds of the instruments, they all fell before the image. They all were obedient to the test of loyalty. They all chose to worship and live. Oh yes, they had a choice. But the choice wasn't really much of a choice. It's kind of like elections in communist countries. They have 100% turnout to vote. And the winning candidate gets just about 100% of the vote. So, such officials are technically elected...but there really is not an election. The people are forced to vote. There is only one candidate, and your ballot is not secret. You really didn't have a choice.

So it is here. Yes, technically there was a choice, but the alternative was instant sure death. That's not a choice.

II. The ultimate stand: I will not, even if it costs me my life. vv. 8-18

And yet, in the face of such consequences, there were three brave Hebrew men that day who refused to bow down in the face of death. They defied the king's order, under the watchful eye of all the others who hated them. I wonder how this will all turn out?

8 Therefore at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and maliciously accused the Jews.

If you remember back, this term "Chaldeans" could refer to the class of people, think of them as native nobles. Or, it could refer to the astrologers. In chapter 2, we considered them as astrologers. And it could be that case here. Or, it might just be the native nobles. Either way, the implication here is that this is a group of people with an axe to grind with their Hebrew neighbors. They hated

the Hebrew people and saw this as an opportunity to get them. And, as opportunities go, this one should go pretty well. You have to bow down immediately, the sentence for refusal is death, and the furnace is ready and waiting, with extra heat just for the occasion. This is a dream scenario for the accusers.

9 They declared to King Nebuchadnezzar, “O king, live forever! 10 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. 11 And whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into a burning fiery furnace.

They go before the king. They pledge their love and loyalty with the greeting of “O king, live forever!” Can you see the irony here? The point of the dream is that the king will NOT live forever, that there will come another king after him. But, these noble loyalists want the king to know their desire is that he would live forever. They remind the king of his order, they got the order right!

12 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.”

But you see, O king live forever!, there are these certain malcontents, you might remember them. You actually appointed them as leaders over the very land we are in. They are in charge, by your command. But, O king live forever!, they have refused to comply with the king’s order. They are not listening to you. They don’t care what you think. They have not bowed down. They do not serve your gods, they are disloyal to this kingdom and you, its king, O king, live forever!”

In other words, if you don’t do something about this, O king, live forever!, this whole experiment will come crashing down, no pun intended. The whole point was to foster this system where conquered people would be loyal to the king and their new kingdom, not their old kingdom. To which one are they

ultimately loyal? The king has set up the test and they have failed the test. Rats! They are going to have to die.

13 Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought. So they brought these men before the king. 14 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?”

Their scheme worked. The ego of the king was stroked enough and enraged enough to take action. Oooh, this is going to be fun! He orders the three men to stand before him. How dare they defy the king! He gives them an opportunity to respond, recant perhaps.

15 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 king decides to give them one more chance. Maybe they weren't paying attention, or couldn't hear the music or couldn't feel the heat from the super-heated furnace. Let's just try this one more time.

But then, the king makes the tragic and so often repeated mistake throughout Scripture. He adds this line, “And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?” As students of Scripture, we know all too well. He has just changed everything. He has put this in the terms of a battle of the gods. Just as was true with the dream, there is no god that we know of who can get you out of this mess. Whoever your god is, he is not powerful enough to get you out of the mess you are in. Can you see where this is headed? God gets to show off.

16 Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. 17 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.

Their answer? We don't need to defend ourselves. We refuse to play the game. We refuse to obey. And we know that the God we serve is able to save us, to deliver us from your hand. So, yes, our God IS able to deliver us. He is much stronger than you are, O king. Yes, you are our king, but you are not in control of who we worship as God! But then we have the shocking statement.

18 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."

But even if He does not deliver us, even if we die in the fire, we will have made the right choice. We will serve Him with no guarantee that He will choose to show His power right now, in this situation. Can you see how strong of a statement of faith this is? You are our king O king, live forever!, but you are not able to dictate to us the god we will bow down to. Ours is the God of all gods, and if He chooses to do so, He can protect us from your hand. But even if He chooses not to, we will continue to serve and worship Him. That's faith! This is the ultimate statement of faith. This is what the life of faith is all about. It is taking steps forward with no guarantee that the results hoped for will actually come to pass. It allows God to be God. We don't get to dictate what He must do. We know He can, but we can't know if He will this time. We live lives of obedience because of who He is rather than what He will do for us today. We live trusting His promises rather than His immediate benefits.

The contrast is stark and total. All the rest of the officials bowed before a god under the threat of death from his king if they refused. The Hebrew young men refused to bow down even if it ended up costing them their lives. They were living by faith in what God COULD do for them and would ultimately do for them rather than the assurance of what He WOULD do for them today. They were more concerned about eternity than this life or even death. As we saw some time ago, Job said, "Even if He slay me, yet will I serve Him!" It's the same thought. My God doesn't have to give me what I want right now for me to follow Him. I follow Him because of who He is and what He has promised and

what He MIGHT do right now. It is the complete opposite of the world's perspective. This is biblical faith.

And that's where we leave off the story for today. Raq, Shaq, and Bennie have made their stand. Next time we will see what happens when they again refuse to bow down.

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

1) We will identify situations where we are asked to cross boundaries with our God.

2) We will refuse to bow before any other gods or cross those boundaries.

3) Our trust in God will not be dependent on Him doing what we want Him to do. We will have "even if He does not" faith.

4) We will be ready to face hardship over our loyalty to the King of kings over any earthly human authority.