

Daniel – Chapter 3

New International Version of the Holy Bible

With this third chapter of Daniel we travel to the ancient plain of Dura, and there we witness a great spectacle. We watch the world bowing down to worship its horrible god. Not all mankind could come, no, not all. But they are all represented – all nations and people and languages. Their leaders were there; and when the signal was given, they fell down to worship the idol of Nebuchadnezzar.

What a sight that must have been: the monstrous statue of gold glittering in the sun and the world on its knees before it. We may never see the like of it again, yet we know that if the world were shaped like the plain of Dura, and if we could watch the people of the world assembled as they were then, they would still be doing the same thing. Their chief desire is to please the god of this world and they need only be shown how to do so. Let the devil start his music and the people will bow; for they are by nature the children of the father of lies. If he sets up a doctrine, they pay homage to it. If he sets us a new standard of immortality, they obey it. When he builds a temple, they come to the dedication.

Three loyal confessors of the God of Israel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, heard the music at Dura but stayed on their feet and turned their faces away. They would not become part of this abomination and blasphemy. And they stood alone. In our day, among those who profess to be Christians, there seems to be more and more who are ready to listen to the directives of Nebuchadnezzar.

They seem to fear his furnace, but they forget the other furnace. They go to Dura and they worship what Nebuchadnezzar has built. It is a sight that makes our hearts bleed. We are experiencing a season of strong denial and great disloyalty. What strength and comfort is there for us in the plain of Dura?

I

If after Daniel had interpreted the dream of the image for Nebuchadnezzar someone deduced that Nebuchadnezzar had been converted to faith in the God of Israel, he would now see how mistaken he was. Nebuchadnezzar had praised the God of Daniel for his strength and power. He said to Daniel: That was quite a god you've got there! But Nebuchadnezzar thought that he was quite a great one himself. He had no intention of humbling himself. Quite to the contrary: In order to prevent the people from acquiring too much respect for Daniel's God, the evil king hurried to cement his own power down tightly upon the subjects. When God builds a church, the devil builds a chapel next to it; and when the true God showed his glory and majesty, Nebuchadnezzar hastily drew the attention of the people away from him by preparing the largest image he knew how to make. It was of gold and it was 90 feet high, 9 feet across. What did it resemble? We do not know. Was it a statue of Nebuchadnezzar himself? It could have been a statue of the king, but Scripture does not say so, and it really does not matter at all. What ever it looked like, that image was nothing but the sum total of the evil heart of Nebuchadnezzar, the evil heart of the world. It stood for something that is far from the true God;

for its purpose was to keep the people far from the God of heaven, from giving their hearts to him, from accepting his wondrous love and from submitting to his holy Word. It did not matter how the image looked; the important thing was that it was sufficiently glittering and spectacular to furnish competition for God. And of course it was. Its glamour prevailed with the people.

Perhaps you will say: No wonder that they got down on their knees, for they feared the fiery furnace. It may seem so. Nebuchadnezzar is a cruel, hard master, and fear is his weapon. But paying close attention to the story before us will reveal that it was not fear alone which produced this abominable worship. Thousands of people came for the dedication of the statue before they had heard about any fiery furnace. They needed no threat; they were willing without it. Do you know why? Look at the image again and remember that not even Nebuchadnezzar can force so many people to adore his silly god unless there is a piece of that god in their hearts. Let no one think that the king is the only evil one, and that the people are all innocent sheep. The king succeeds, and the image finds its worshippers, because in reality it is a composition of all the idols which the people worshipped in their homes and their hearts. They loved the things Nebuchadnezzar loved, and they would play along with anything that kept them away from God and from the Truth because that is what they were used to doing and the only thing that they were able to do.

“. . . every inclination of his (mans) heart is evil from childhood.”

Genesis 8:21

So then the events recorded in our story were to be expected. They are to be expected today. Satan has set up his images all over the world - each one is a competition to the true God. Surely the most life-like of these is and will remain the Roman anti-Christ, who with his popery, his masses, and his synergistic repudiation of the salvation that is by grace alone through faith alone is working feverishly, even in his modern garb of a counterfeit ecumenicity, to keep men blind to the Truth. For those who think themselves too smart for the wiles of the anti-Christ, Satan has other statues and images, false fellowships, false churches with soul-destroying doctrines but bearing crosses on their steeples, Lutheran churches that have abandoned their true heritage – something to suit everyone's taste. And for all there are the sanctuaries of lust and vice, of drunkenness and carousing. Great is the image in the plain of Dura, and faithful are the people of this world. Satan calls, and they answer. He blows his music and they follow lies, sin and vice because they cherish them, because their hearts are full of them. We expect to find the people of this world in the plain of Dura until by the message of our Gospel the Holy Spirit creates in them a new heart and a new life.

II

Those whom we do NOT expect to find in the crowd that bows to the evil image are the children of God, the baptized disciples of Christ our Savior. In this we are sometimes disappointed. For we are forced to watch helplessly while this or that dear soul in whom we believed to have found a brother walks out of our fellowship when Satan's music

sound, to bow to the shrine of lies, of wickedness and worldliness. Then our hearts ache. Some of them thus prove that they are not Christ's people at all but hypocrites. They have put the Truth away from their hearts. They cherish Satan's vices and not the melodies of holiness and purity and rectitude which the Savior sends forth with his Gospel. St. John in his tender way explains it: **"They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us."** I John 2:19

But there are others also who are caught in the plain of Dura – caught there and overcome because they were unprepared. They were watching because they forgot that in their hearts, too, still lurks the old love for the things of the devil. Perhaps they agreed to worship the image without thinking, but afterward returned to the arms of their Lord with tears of true repentance. We sorrow with them; we sorrow when they have been deceived by the Anti-Christ or by the lusts of their flesh, and our pain is all the greater for knowing that in a very real sense we are all guilty of disloyalty. We have not and do not always confess our faith as we should, and above all we do not sufficiently resist Nebuchadnezzar. Our testimony against the worship of the image is not what it must rightfully be. In this respect we share in the guilt of those of our brethren who are misled and should cry with them repentantly when they return to us. As often as a child of God worships the world's image there has been a tragic and needless failure. Such things need not happen. Nebuchadnezzar is powerful - but the believing, confessing Church is stronger in the strength of her

Lord. Where better can we see this than in our chapter three of the book of Daniel? We have been amazed by the example of the Church at Babylon. The Babylonian church seemed pitifully small, but it was bigger than the king and bigger than the image on the plain of Dura. The three men who refused to worship the image had stayed away from the dedication although they knew of the fiery furnace and yet they did not know how God would handle the matter. He could deliver them, but he might let them suffer the fire. In either case, said the believers, we will not serve the image. Indeed, they said more. They said: **“O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter.” Daniel 3:16** In other words, these men of God do not intend to enter a legal defense with carefully prepared brief before Nebuchadnezzar and argue their case because there is nothing to argue about. They know what Satan wants and what Nebuchadnezzar stands for. Why make long talk about it? Sin is sin, and one does not trade words over the question of right and wrong. This issue was and is always clear-cut. Whether or not to bow to a false religion, to an idol, to the god of lust or the god of lies – that issue is closed for God’s children. We cannot worship in a temple of false doctrine, nor must we lend our ears to the music of the world that seeks to seduce us to great shame and vice.

Nor is it a question of where the advantage lies for God’s people. Some are tempted to think that it is safer and more comfortable to deny their Lord and God just a little. But there are, after all, two fiery furnaces: Nebuchadnezzar’s and the one prepared by the holy God. There is no doubt about which is hotter. Jesus put it this way: **“Do not**

be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” Matthew 10:28 Nebuchadnezzar’s triumph is Satan’s hell-fodder.

Yet the three men at Babylon did not make their decision because of or despite of any furnace. They rested their case upon a divine promise which was wonderfully fulfilled for them. **“When thou pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.” Isaiah 43:2-3** We have read how marvelously God observed this and kept his promise to the letter. God will always keep his promises in the best possible manner for those who put their trust in him. His people will not always escape pain, but they will win; for he is with them. The major miracle in the fiery furnace was the presence of the fourth man - the Son of God. The Son of God lives in the hearts and lives of those whom he has called to his eternal glory. God brings to those hearts courage and devotion. There was no argument when the Son of Man came into the fiery furnace of this world and sacrificed his holy body as an offering for sin. He knew and felt all that sin was, paid the price for it and said: **“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” John 16:33**

He walks with us today in the furnace of our earthly afflictions and in the heat of temptation. When the multitudes are worshipping the image in the plain of Dura, he is at home with us in our houses. He is

our Friend, our preserver from all evil. Fear not; he will keep his Church secure. He will uphold the confessing Church to the end of the world. That is the true wonder of our story, and it continues day after day. The marvel is that God will still be able to find faith in the earth. Give thanks to him for that; and let us pray for one another that we shall all see the day when the furnace door opens and we step out unsinged, in white garments beautiful and eternal.