

Group Study Outline

Daniel 3 Theme Sentence

God has astonishing ability to deliver His faithful servants even from the fierce judgment of a powerful king who establishes idol worship.

Launching Question

Thinking perhaps of the examples of world leaders throughout history, what would you say are the most powerful ways to demonstrate political power? What would be the way to prove you were the supreme political power?

READ Daniel 3:1-7

What is Nebuchadnezzar trying to achieve by all this, do you think?
How big are his power claims? What clues are there in the text?
What is the irony of this, given what we read in chapter 2? How does he see himself, do you think?
How powerful is Nebuchadnezzar, in fact? How much compliance is there with his authority?

READ Daniel 3:8-15

How would you feel, as an exile, having this kind of pressure on you?
What would make it feel so frightening in that situation?
What answers might you be tempted to give?
In what ways are there huge challenges to the faith of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego? What is at the heart of the threat (v.15c)?

READ Daniel 3:16-23

What is it about their answer that is so impressive?
What is at the heart of their reply?

READ Daniel 3:24-30

What are the surprises for Nebuchadnezzar?
Who do you suppose the fourth person to be??
How would Nebuchadnezzar be feeling at this point?
How does this challenge his initial bold claim for supreme political power?
What does Nebuchadnezzar begin to learn, at least superficially, about God?

Thinking it through

What things in the world today do you think tend to be set up as idols for us to 'worship'? (e.g. money, job success, fashion, qualifications, beauty, successful children, possessions, health, etc.)
Would people sometimes judge us for not worshipping/living for those things?
How does it feel if they do?

How does this encourage us as 'exiles' (1 Peter 2:11), often feeling intimidated by worldly pressures – by idolatrous powers against us? What is it about God that shows He is the supreme political power?

Daniel 3



Introduction

Daniel is about kingdoms in conflict – specifically, God's kingdom in conflict with powerful-looking pagan kingdoms. The book has its setting, and quite likely its origin, in the sixth century BC in Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of the mighty Babylonian Empire, has attacked and besieged Jerusalem, destroying both its kingship and its temple worship and crushing the hopes of the Jewish people (1:1-2). (Nebuchadnezzar invaded on several occasions; the one in view here took place in 605 BC, during the third year (Babylonian counting system; fourth year in the Jewish counting system, see Jer. 25:1) of Jehoiakim's eleven year reign (2 Kings 23:36)). People like Daniel and his friends were taken into exile, to Babylon. However, even though this appeared to spell the end for Jewish hopes in God's kingdom promises (few people, no place, no divinely appointed rule), the reality was that it was God who had brought the calamity about. 'The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into [Nebuchadnezzar's] hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God.' (1:2). God was judging His people, with the sins of King Manasseh being particularly in view (2 Kings 24:1-4).

The all-consuming question was then – how should God's people respond to this horrendous new situation? Was it still possible to live a life of faith? On what basis? How could they sing the song of the Lord while in a foreign land (Ps.137:4)?

Chapter 1 sets up two key themes for the whole book: (See Sinclair B. Ferguson, New Bible Commentary)

1. Babylon versus Jerusalem – the city of this world against the city of God (Augustine).
2. The sovereign reign of God, despite all appearances to the contrary.

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Daniel 3 Theme Sentence

God has astonishing ability to deliver His faithful servants even from the fierce judgment of a powerful king who establishes idol worship.

Application

- Recognise that impressive-looking worldly idolatries can bring with them fierce threats of judgement for rebellion against the system
- Trust God's astonishing ability to deliver His servants from the power and judgment of any authority that sets itself up against Him

Commentary

The passage operates as a powerful and fast-paced story, full of drama. It makes sense to trace the points of dramatic tension and resolution as the events unfold and to see how this reveals truths about God and the world that He rules. (1 – Orientation, 2 – Discord, 3 – Ultimatum, 4 – Response, 5 – Judgement, 6 – Miraculous deliverance, 7 – Resolution).

1-7 **Episode 1 – Nebuchadnezzar sets up the golden image, gathers his officials, and commands everyone to fall down and worship the image at the sound of the instruments, lest they be thrown into the furnace. They all do so.**

These verses set the scene and define the parameters for what is to follow – everything that happens subsequently will be played out against this background. Notice the way there is repetition of sights and sounds – officials and instruments – helping you to feel ‘there’, in amongst the religious aura of it all, sensing the magnificent aesthetic impact of the event. We are repeatedly told that the image is golden (v.1,5,7,10,12,14,18 – 7 times), revealing the deep irony of Nebuchadnezzar’s response to Daniel’s divinely-revealed interpretation of his dream in chapter 2 (esp. 2:31-32,36-38,44-45,47). His profession is now clearly seen to be superficial – he not only transforms the ‘head of gold’ of the dream image into an enormous physical image made entirely of gold, but he demands that this image – inextricably tied to his perception of himself (he ‘sets it up’ (this phrase is repeated throughout the chapter: v.1,2,3,5,7,12,14,18), and it was the gold of the dream image that represented him (2:38)) – be worshipped. And this when Daniel has just revealed God’s kingdom supremacy in no uncertain terms (2:44-45). Nebuchadnezzar’s power to get the nations to worship his (in ownership, representation and perhaps form) image is extraordinary – they gather at his command and worship to the sound of his music. We see here a kingdom that is magnificent and supreme, yet idolatrous. And the choice is stark: idolatry or death.

8-12 **Episode 2 – Some Chaldeans accuse Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego of paying no attention to the king’s decree that everyone shall worship the image.**

Those who don’t worship the idol will come under the judgment of the one who set it up, and even of those who join in the worship. It seems hard to deny that similar principles are at work in the world today, albeit at a less intellectually obvious and less visibly spectacular level.

13-15 **Episode 3 – Nebuchadnezzar is furious, examines them and gives them an ultimatum. He claims that no god can deliver them out of his hands.**

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego’s challenge is questioned by Nebuchadnezzar – is it really *true*?! As an act of grace, or perhaps more likely pride, he allows them an act of ‘repentance’ (v.15a). Crucially, he

challenges not only their courage but also their God (v.15b,c) – Nebuchadnezzar is claiming supremacy of judgment over people’s lives. Again, it may be that we often, quite unwittingly, feel that the judgments of the various idolatries at work in the world today (money, success, fashion, beauty, possessions, health, etc.) are in some ways supreme, and that no one can deliver us from them.

16-18 **Episode 4 – Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego trust God to deliver and refuse to worship the image.**

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego re-assert their challenge with a powerful counter-claim: Nebuchadnezzar’s judgment is *not* supreme – the God they serve can deliver them out of his hand. ‘Their faith was suffused with expectation (v.17, cf. 1:12-13; 2:16) but displayed no presumption (v.18) and echoed Abraham’s example (cf. Rom. 4:20) and Job’s testimony (Jb. 13:15a).’ (Sinclair B. Ferguson).

19-23 **Episode 5 – Nebuchadnezzar is filled with fury, and orders a seven-times hotter furnace, killing the mighty army men as they throw the bound and clothed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego into the furnace.**

In the face of the Jews’ resoluteness (when they are thrown in, they are in festal attire (v.21)!), Nebuchadnezzar is so full of rage that he is even prepared to sacrifice his own mighty men in order to ensure that his judgment over the Jews prevails. Humanly, given the extreme heat of the furnace and the death of the soldiers, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego’s survival is impossible.

24-27 **Episode 6 – Nebuchadnezzar is astonished by seeing the men unbound and unharmed, with a fourth man like a son of the gods. He commands them to come out, and half the group of governors see that the fire had not had any power over the men.**

Curiously, Nebuchadnezzar’s astonishment is first at the appearance of a fourth man (frequently understood by Christians to be an appearance of the Son of God or the angel of the Lord (cf. v.28) – could it also be a shadowy reference to the conspicuously absent Daniel?), and second at the fact that the Jews are unhurt. Just as their faithfulness was *true* (v.14), so their rescue is seen by the authorities to be true (v.24). There is now a new ‘religious gathering’, this time with around God’s people, and with the completeness of their deliverance being observed. We may perhaps see here a foretaste of Rev. 5.

28-30 **Episode 7 – Nebuchadnezzar praises the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and decrees that no-one may speak against this supremely rescuing God. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are promoted in Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar.**

Having previously decreed destruction against the Kingdom of God, Nebuchadnezzar now decrees destruction of any who speak against God. Superficially and temporarily, at least, he has seen that ‘no other god is able to rescue in this way.’ (v.29)