

Lessons on Faith and Pride from the Book of Daniel

Daniel, Meshach, Shadrach, and Abed-nego

- When the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem in 604 BC, they carried off as captives princes, nobles, and leaders of the people, among whom were the Hebrew youths Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Relocated to Babylon, they were indoctrinated in the literature, language and wisdom of the Chaldeans for three years with the intent that they would serve in the court as wise men and advise the king.
- The children were given new pagan names:
Daniel (God is my judge) became “Belteshazzar” which means “worshiper of Baal”
Hananiah (God who is gracious) became “Shadrach” which means “command of the moon god”
Mishael (Who is like God) became “Meshach” which means “who is what Aku is”
Azariah (God has helped) became “Abed-nego” which means “servant of Nergal”
- **Daniel decides to be true to God:**

“And the king appointed for them a daily ration from the king’s choice food and from the wine which he drank...but Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s meat, nor with the wine which he drank; so he sought permission from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself”
Daniel 1:5-8.

The diet of pagans included “unclean” animals, and under Mosaic Law, Jews were not to eat certain meats, certain fowl, and certain fish (*Leviticus 11: 44-47*; contrast *Corinthians 10:25-27*). Meats offered to heathen idols were considered repulsive to Israelites. More importantly, though, an attempt was being made to make these young men Babylonians inwardly and outwardly. They were supposed to eat like Babylonians, dress like Babylonians, and think like Babylonians.

Daniel (~seventeen years old at the time) takes a stand for God and was not conformed to the world and its lush temptations; rather the will of God was the all-absorbing purpose of his life. His parents had done a good job!

Under normal circumstances, this would have been a fatal move; however, God was working on Daniel’s behalf:

“But Daniel said to the overseer whom the commander of the officials had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, ‘Please test your servants for ten days, and let us be given some vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance be observed in your presence, and the appearance of the youths who are eating the king’s choice food; and deal with your servants according to what you see.’” *Daniel 1:11-13.*

Daniel's obedience to God results results in multiple blessings:

“And at the end of ten days their appearance seemed better and they were fatter than all the youths who had been eating the king's choice food...And as for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and intelligence in every branch of literature and wisdom; Daniel even understood all kinds of visions and dreams.” *Daniel 1:15-17*

Indeed, when the commander presented them before Nebuchadnezzar, “the king talked with them, and out of all not one was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; so they entered the king's personal service. And as for every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king consulted them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and conjurers who were in his realm.” *Daniel 1: 19-20.*

- **Daniel promoted**

Nebuchadnezzar had a dream which none of the magicians, conjurers and sorcerers in his kingdom could declare. In his rage, he gave orders to destroy all the wise men of Babylon. Daniel then asks to see the king to declare the interpretation. Before going in to the king, though, Daniel seeks the help of God:

“Then Daniel went to his house and informed his friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, about the matter, in order that they might request compassion from the God of Heaven concerning this mystery, so that Daniel and his friends might not be destroyed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon” *Daniel 2: 17-18.*

The mystery was revealed to Daniel in a night vision, and Daniel praises God:

“Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning. He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him. I thank and praise you, God of my ancestors: You have given me wisdom and power, you have made known to me what we asked of you, you have made known to us the dream of the king.” *Daniel 2:20-23.*

- The king's dream:

“Your Majesty looked, and there before you stood a large statue—an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were all broken to pieces and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.” *Daniel 2:31-35*

The first part of Daniel's interpretation delights the king:

"You, O king, *are* a king of kings. For the God of heaven has given you a kingdom, power, strength, and glory; and wherever the children of men dwell, or the beasts of the field and the birds of the heaven, He has given *them* into your hand, and has made you ruler over them all—you *are* this head of gold." *Daniel 2:37-38*.

Nebuchadnezzar's response in an acknowledgement of God's power:

"Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor and ordered that an offering and incense be presented to him. The king said to Daniel, 'Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery.' Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men." *Daniel 2:47-48*.

Notice that Nebuchadnezzar still doesn't know how to worship the unseen, living God of the universe; in fact he begins worshipping Daniel instead!

- **The golden image and the fiery furnace**

However, Nebuchadnezzar falls victim to his own pride (after all, he's been told that he is the "head of gold"), and thus has constructed a golden image of himself, which he orders the people to worship:

"King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up...Then the herald loudly proclaimed, 'Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.' Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the nations and peoples of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up." *Daniel 3:1-7*.

The making of the image shows three things about Nebuchadnezzar:

1. rebellion against the God of Heaven, who had given him world dominion
2. tremendous pride in an act of self-deification
3. he was attempting to institute a world religion, and he is thus a picture of the antichrist.

The three Hebrew children fail to worship the image, and Nebuchadnezzar flies into a rage:

“But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego—who pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up.” Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego. So these men were brought before the king, and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, ‘Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?’” *Daniel 3:12-15*.

The response of the three Hebrews is one of absolute faith and trust in the power of God. Regardless of the outcome, these three had purposed to serve God (*Exodus 20:3-6*) and not the idol of Nebuchadnezzar. Compromise with man or with the world was not an option. God will deliver them from death or in death. The contrast: obey and fear God versus obey and fear man.

“King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and He will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. But even if He does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up” *Daniel 3:16-18*.

“You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.” *Exodus 20:3-6*.

Nebuchadnezzar orders the furnace fire to be built up seven times hotter than usual, and the three Hebrews to be thrown inside:

“And [He] commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego and throw them into the blazing furnace. So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. The king’s command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.” *Daniel 3: 20-23*.

God did not deliver them *from* the fire, He delivered them *in* the fire:

“Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, ‘Weren’t there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?’ He said, “Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a

son of the gods.”

The Lord was with them in the midst of the fire. In the trial of their faith, the testing in fire, they were unharmed, but the bonds that held them were loosed. Indeed they were walking about freely! Sometimes the fires and trial we encounter are meant to free us from the things (sins) that bind us.

The king orders them to come out of the fire and once again acknowledges the supremacy of God:

“Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, ‘Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!’ So Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego came out of the fire, and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them. Then Nebuchadnezzar said, ‘Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king’s command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way.’

Some commentators see this story as a depiction of the great Tribulation to come, with the Hebrew children representing the Jewish remnant, Nebuchadnezzar as the antichrist, the fire as the years of the tribulation in which God pours out his wrath on mankind, and the missing Daniel as the raptured church.

- **Nebuchadnezzar’s vision, abasement, and restoration**

The king’s pride rises yet again:

“I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at home in my palace, contented and prosperous. I had a dream that made me afraid. As I was lying in bed, the images and visions that passed through my mind terrified me” *Daniel 4:4-5*.

Pride is one of the things that God hates, and it is something that characterizes both man and Satan:

“Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy brightness: I will cast thee to the ground, I will lay thee before kings, that they may behold thee. Thou hast defiled thy sanctuaries by the multitude of thine iniquities, by the iniquity of thy traffick; therefore will I bring forth a fire from the midst of thee, it shall devour thee, and I will bring thee to ashes upon the earth in the sight of all them that behold thee. All they that know thee among the people shall be astonished at thee: thou shalt be a terror, and never shalt thou be any more.” *Ezekiel 28:17-19*

The magicians and conjurers are called in again, but again only Daniel can deliver an interpretation:

“The tree you saw, which grew large and strong, with its top touching the sky, visible to the whole earth, with beautiful leaves and abundant fruit, providing food for all, giving shelter to the beasts of the field, and having nesting places in its branches for the birds of the air-- you, O king, are that tree! You have become great and strong; your greatness has grown until it reaches the sky, and your dominion extends to distant parts of the earth. You, O king, saw a messenger, a holy one, coming down from heaven and saying, 'Cut down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump, bound with iron and bronze, in the grass of the field, while its roots remain in the ground. Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven; let him live like the wild animals, until seven times pass by for him.' "This is the interpretation, O king, and this is the decree the Most High has issued against my lord the king: You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes. The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules.” *Daniel 4:20-26.*

God will remove the kingdom from Nebuchadnezzar until He acknowledges that God is in charge of everything.

“Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, he said, “Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” Even as the words were on his lips, a voice came from heaven, “This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes.” Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like the ox. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird.” *Daniel 4:28-33.*

Nebuchadnezzar had become insane and was driven away from society. But his understanding came back to him, and he learns that God is in control. He yielded his proud mind to the will of God, and the kingdom was restored to him.

“At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honor and splendor were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisers and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.” *Daniel 4:36-37.*

“The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rocks and make your home on the heights, you who say to yourself, ‘Who can bring me down to the ground?’ Though you soar like the eagle and make your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down,” declares the Lord.” *Obadiah 1:3-4*

“For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” *Matthew 23:12*

- **The Writing on the Wall**

Nebuchadnezzar’s grandson, King Belshazzar, did not learn from his grandfather’s mistakes and experiences. He gave a great banquet in which he ordered that the gold and silver vessels taken from the temple in Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar be brought out so that his nobles, wives, and concubines might drink from them. Interestingly, this banquet was taking place while the Medo-Persian army was besieging the city of Babylon. Belshazzar felt safe inside the great walls of Babylon. He knew that getting over those walls was impossible.

“As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone. Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way.” *Daniel 5:5-7*.

The invasion of Babylon by the Medo-Persian army was indeed to take place that night. As predicted by Isaiah: “Thus saith the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut.” *Isaiah 45:1*

Once again, the wise men of Babylon cannot interpret the writing, and Daniel is called in again.

The inscription: “Now this is the inscription that was written out: ‘MENĒ, MENĒ, TEKĒL, UPHARSIN.’ This is the interpretation of the message: ‘MENĒ’—God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it. ‘TEKĒL’—you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient. ‘PERĒS’—your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians.” *Daniel 5:25-28*.

Daniel gives the reason why:

“Your Majesty, the Most High God gave sovereignty, majesty, glory, and honor to your predecessor, Nebuchadnezzar. He made him so great that people of all races and nations and languages trembled before him in fear. He killed those he wanted to kill and spared those he wanted to spare. He honored those he wanted to honor and disgraced those he wanted to disgrace. But when his heart and mind were puffed up with arrogance, he was

brought down from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. He was driven from human society. He was given the mind of a wild animal, and he lived among the wild donkeys. He ate grass like a cow, and he was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he learned that the Most High God rules over the kingdoms of the world and appoints anyone he desires to rule over them. You are his successor, O Belshazzar, and you knew all this, yet you have not humbled yourself. For you have proudly defied the Lord of heaven and have had these cups from his Temple brought before you. You and your nobles and your wives and concubines have been drinking wine from them while praising gods of silver, gold, bronze, iron, wood, and stone—gods that neither see nor hear nor know anything at all. But you have not honored the God who gives you the breath of life and controls your destiny!” *Daniel 5:18-24.*

It’s too late, and that very night, Belshazzar was slain by the invading Persian army. Whereas Nebuchadnezzar was guilty of pride, Belshazzar was guilty of insolence. The highest evidence of rebellion was profaning the sacred vessels of the Lord's house in Jerusalem. The vessels created to be used in the worship of the Lord of heaven were used to praise the gods of earth. Belshazzar had not glorified God even though God had supplied his very breath.

Reference:

Commentary on Daniel by J. Vernon McGee