

I. The King's Golden Image (Daniel 3:1-30)

A. Introduction

The setting for this chapter is set in chapter two with Nebuchadnezzar being told by Daniel that “you are the head of gold” (2:38). The king’s heart swelled with pride at the thought of being the ruler of the Babylonian empire. In response, he built an entire image as a monument to his own glory and the glory of his gods. This would set up a situation in which Daniel’s friends would have to either succumb to external pressure and compromise their convictions or live by their internal principles. It would also provide an occasion for God to demonstrate His faithfulness to His people and His power to deliver them despite the world’s hatred.

This account would have been a great encouragement to the faithful remnant of Israel in Babylon. It would have provided a great encouragement to them to remain faithful to the Lord despite being in exile and living in the face of pagan Gentile oppression. It would have strengthened their resolve to live a life of integrity and with uncompromising faith.

Daniel 3 seems to follow a chiasmic pattern:⁹⁴

- King’s decree: dedication of image (1-7)
- Accusation: rebellion (8-12)
 - Royal rage – opportunity (13-15)
 - Answer: confession (16-18)
 - Royal rage – punishment (19-23)
- Deliverance: evidence (24-27)
- King’s decree: vindication of friends (28-30)

B. Expository Notes

1. The Demand to Worship the Image (vs. 1-7)

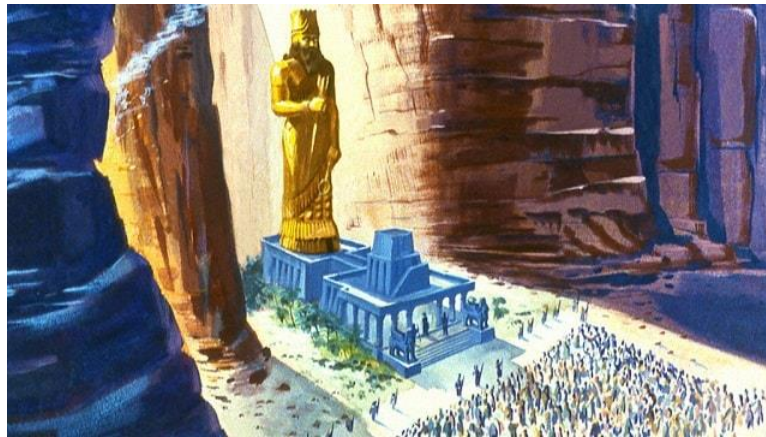
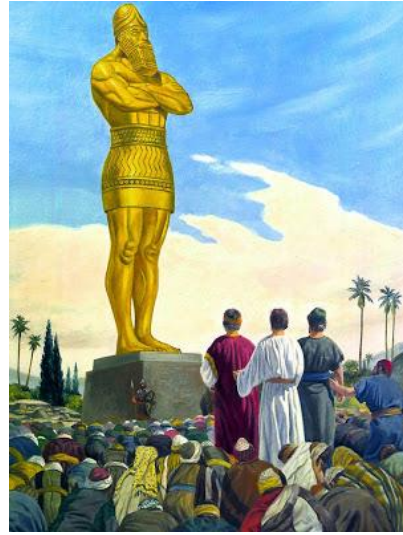
Daniel 3:1 ~ Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, the height of which was sixty cubits and its width six cubits; he set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon.

- How much time has passed between chapters two and three is unknown as there are no time clues given.
- The events of chapter 3 clearly follow the events of chapter two because Daniel’s three companions are in a position of authority, the very positions they were appointed to at the end of chapter two (Dan 2:49).
- The Septuagint adds in Daniel 3:1 that this event occurred in Nebuchadnezzar’s 18th year (about 585 BC).

⁹⁴ Davis 2013: 51.

- If that is the case, then Daniel’s friends are not teenagers anymore but are in their late thirties.
- Daniel is not mentioned anywhere in this passage.
- He may have been out of the empire on business (cf. Dan 2:48), at the king’s palace governing the city in his absence (cf. Dan 2:49), ill, on leave, or not on duty.
- The focus of this chapter is on Daniel’s three friends and the strength of their own faith in the Lord and the substance of their character.
- The king made an image of gold, most likely a human image since the Aramaic word for “image” usually means a human form.
- It is possible that the dream of chapter two inspired Nebuchadnezzar to set up an image similar to the one he had dreamed about more than 15 years earlier.
- Instead of building the image exactly as he had seen in his dream, it is possible that he commissioned the statue to be built entirely out of gold in hopes that no kingdom would destroy his.
- It may have been Nebuchadnezzar’s defiant statement that there would be no end to his kingdom.
- “Rejecting now the idea that any kingdom could follow his own, he may have determined to show the permanence of his golden kingdom by having the entire image covered with gold. Thus, he clung to the more flattering aspects of the dream interpretation but dropped the rest.”⁹⁵
- Gold was prevalent in Babylon and, although he could have made this image out of solid gold, it is more likely that it was made of wood overlaid with gold as the cost of solid gold for a statue that size would have been prohibitive.
- Also, gold plating of idols was known in the OT (cf. Is 40:19; Jer 10:3-4).
- The size of the statue was 60 cubits tall and 6 cubits wide (a cubit = about 18 inches; so 90 feet tall and 9 feet wide).
- Those dimensions would have given the statue a 10 to 1 ratio, height to width, making it very disproportionate to normal human dimensions.
- The Babylonians often distorted the human figure in constructing their images so that might be the case.
- Or some have suggested that it was a normal-sized human statue set on a large pedestal to make it more imposing.
- (Note: the Colossus at Rhodes of Grecian fame [300 BC] was 105 feet high so a statue this size would not have been unfeasible).

⁹⁵ Whitcomb 1985: 53.



- Whatever its configuration, it was a large, golden statue 90 feet tall.
- The king's message was clear: He thought of himself as the supreme ruler of the world, worthy of its worship.
- This statue was erected "on the plain of Dura" (Dan 3:1).
- "Dura" was a common name in Mesopotamia for any place that was enclosed by mountains or a wall, i.e. a walled place.
- Archeologists have uncovered a large square made of brick some six miles southeast of Babylon, which may have been the base for this image.
- Its proximity to Babylon would have served as a suitable rallying point for the king's officials.
- Incidentally, this is most likely the same region that the tower of Babel was set up in Genesis 11.
- Ironically, the builders of the tower of Babel were seeking to build a name for themselves, something Nebuchadnezzar was also doing with the erection of his statue.

Daniel 3:2-7

- The king sent word throughout the kingdom to gather together all the chief officials to assemble for the dedication of this great statute.
 - These were all the leaders of all the land of Babylon at every level: regional leaders, military leaders, lawyers, judges, and all other civil leaders, the political movers and shakers within the kingdom.
 - It must have been an impressive sight with so many officials standing before the image in Nebuchadnezzar's presence to swear allegiance to him.
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- The people were required to bow down in worship at the sound of the musical instruments.
 - "Since the last two of these names for instruments...are obviously Greek, critics have long considered this to be additional evidence that the book of Daniel could not have been written until after 322 BC, when Alexander the Great conquered Palestine and brought Greek language and culture with him. But this view must now be abandoned in the light of many new discoveries of the close contacts Greek traders, artisans, and soldiers had with Near Eastern kingdoms several centuries *before* the time of Nebuchadnezzar."⁹⁶
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- They were commanded to "fall down and worship the golden image" (vs. 5).
 - And they were to do so "at the moment you hear the sound" (vs. 5).
 - Nebuchadnezzar demanded absolute submission with immediately compliance and no delay.
 - He was demanding a public display of recognition and submission to his absolute authority in the kingdom.
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- Who the worship was intended for is not exactly clear.
 - It would appear from vs. 12 and 14 that Nebuchadnezzar was seeking that men worship his gods such as Bel, Nebo, and Marduk and recognize him personally also.
 - Although the image is never called a god it is probably a representation of his gods.
 - It also likely represented himself as well as Nebuchadnezzar may have regarded the image as the embodiment of divine power and the recognition of his personal power.
 - Thus, it essentially symbolized Nebuchadnezzar and his empire in one great reality, representing himself and his gods.
 - The image likely had religious and political significance.
 - Nebuchadnezzar purposed to establish a unified government and a unified religion with himself as the head of state and the head of religion.
 - This was his defiant declaration that, as king, he could set up gods for his people to worship.
 - Likely this was Nebuchadnezzar's grandiose way of securing the worship of his people, of securing their allegiance, and of unifying his nation.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 55.

- It was a calculated move on his part to secure the loyalty of his people and to force them to pledge their loyalty to the state.
- Failure to comply with the king’s demand would result in being cast into the “furnace of blazing fire” (vs. 6).
- The severity of the penalty indicates that submission on the part of every official was obligatory.
- This was no idle threat as Nebuchadnezzar had carried out his intimidations previously (cf. Jer 29:21-23).
- It is likely that the furnace was within sight of the very place they had assembled.
- Nearly all of the officials in attendance complied with the king’s demands (vs. 7).

2. The Defiance in Worshipping the Image (vs. 8-18)

Daniel 3:8-15

- The gauntlet had been laid down and the moment of decision came for Daniel’s three friends.
- They were required to “worship” (11 times – vs. 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15 [twice], 18, 28) and “serve” (5 times – 12, 14, 17, 18, 28) the image.
- These men knew the law of God regarding idolatry and the instructions against such spiritual adultery (cf. Ex 20:2-5; Deut 4:15-19).
- In fact, they knew that the reason Israel was in exile in the first place was because of the very thing they were being asked to do here.
- Thus, they refused to bow down to the statue.
- They were men of conviction, uncompromising in their faith.
- NOTE: This shows that those who live with uncompromising faith often find themselves in the minority.
- Those who live with conviction and commitment to the principles of the Lord should expect to be in the majority as standing up for God can be a lonely activity.
- Some of the Chaldeans, upon witnessing their disobedience to the king’s order, immediately brought charges against them to the king (vs. 8).
- “brought charges” literally means “they ate their pieces” with the idea of an animal ripping the flesh off a body.
- These men came ready to shred them to pieces in their anger.
- Perhaps this was because they were jealous of the Jewish hostages who had been given positions of honor in the kingdom (vs. 12).
- These lower ranking Babylonian court officials may have resented them for receiving some of the choicest positions in the government.

- Those officials “stress the personal affront the Judeans pose to the king. These Jews, they allege, thumb their noses at the king’s order...They cast everything into a mould of sheer defiance of the king.”⁹⁷
- Their accusations were intended to arouse the anger of Nebuchadnezzar which they did (vs. 13 ~ in rage and anger).
- He called the three men into his presence and gave them a chance to recant and to yield to his desire (vs. 13-15).
- But “for an Israelite, Nebuchadnezzar’s statement in that verse [vs. 15]...sums up the theological asininity of the whole affair. To worship what someone made! But a reader almost ducks under the machine-gun-like occurrences of the verb *qum* (‘set up’); it appears nine times (1, 2, 3 [twice], 5, 7, 12, 14, 18), always in reference to the image the king had *set up*.”⁹⁸
- He announced his demands again trying to compel their obedience.
- In doing so, Nebuchadnezzar made an incredibly foolish statement: vs. 15 ~ and what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?
- This is the key verse in this chapter and, together with the answer in vs. 28, it forms the central theme of chapter three.
- In his pride, Nebuchadnezzar set himself up against the one true and living God, possibly even deliberately challenging Him.
- He had apparently forgotten what he had said in Daniel 2:47.

Daniel 3:16-18 ~ Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego replied to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. 17 If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. 18 But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

- “He will deliver us” (vs. 17) – “Although no doubt existed in the minds of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego about the ability of their God to deliver them, they humbly accepted the fact that God does not always choose to intervene miraculously in human circumstances.”⁹⁹
- “But even if He does not” (vs. 18) – this sounds like the men were questioning the sovereignty and power of God to deliver them.
- “But it is not the power and ability of their God but his perfect will and plan that is in question here, because these three men had *no* guarantee that God would perform a miracle on their behalf on this particular occasion, even though He obviously could have done so if He had wanted to.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Davis 2013: 53.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 53.

⁹⁹ Miller 1994: 119.

¹⁰⁰ Whitcomb 1985: 58.

- “It’s as if they said: ‘We don’t know what our God will do, O king; you may turn us into puddles of carbon; but in one sense it doesn’t matter; the bottom line is that we will not serve your gods or worship your image.’ So they were unsure of God’s circumstantial will (whether they escape) but were sure of God’s revealed will (‘You shall have no other gods besides me’). Observe how the three men did not lose sight of the crucial matter. What matters for them is not deliverance but obedience.”¹⁰¹
- The incredible character in the face of tremendous pressure and opposition is evident: their minds were made up.
- They possessed uncompromising trust in God’s faithfulness and were certain of God’s sure deliverance of them.
- And even if He didn’t deliver them, they would not compromise no matter the pressure to conform.
- Though they had confidence in God’s power to deliver them, they were also completely submissive to God’s will.
- Their overarching passion was to see God glorified, whether in life or in death.
- Obeying God was more important than life to these men.

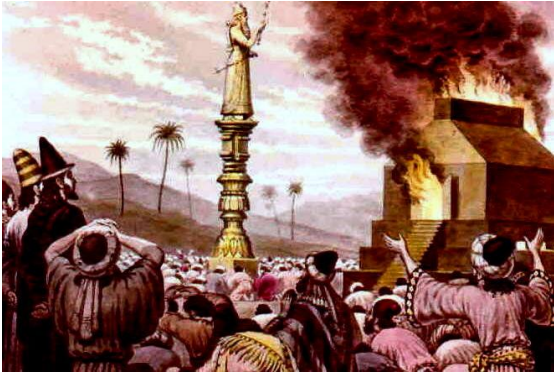
3. The Deliverance from the Furnace (vs. 19-27)

Daniel 3:19 ~ Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with wrath, and his facial expression was altered toward Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego. He answered by giving orders to heat the furnace seven times more than it was usually heated.

- Nebuchadnezzar was not going to stand for their rebellion and, in fact, wanted to make a clear statement about what would happen to those who would rebel again his authority.
- So angry was he about being defied by these men, he wrinkled up his face in anger (literally it says “his face was screwed up” or “the image of his face was changed”).
- By standing firmly for what was right and not compromising, Daniel’s friends opened themselves up to vicious opposition and persecution.
- The furnace may have looked like a lime kiln, with a shaft up and down and a door at the bottom.
- The fact the men were “carried up” (3:22) and that they “fell into” the furnace (3:23) may indicate there were steps leading up to the furnace.
- “furnaces of this kind would have had an opening at the top and at the side. The furnace may have been built on the side of a small hill or man-made mound of earth, enabling the soldiers to walk to the top and throw the three Hebrews into it. Later Nebuchadnezzar would be able to look into the opening on the side and observe the three in the fire.”¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Davis 2013: 56.

¹⁰² Miller 1994: 122.



- “seven times more than it was usually heated” – this likely is figurative for “intense heat” or “as hot as possible.”
- cf. 3:22 ~ the furnace had been made extremely hot.
- cf. 1:20 ~ he found them ten times better.

Daniel 3:20-23 ~ He commanded certain valiant warriors who were in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego in order to cast them into the furnace of blazing fire. 21 Then these men were tied up in their trousers, their coats, their caps and their other clothes, and were cast into the midst of the furnace of blazing fire. 22 For this reason, because the king’s command was urgent and the furnace had been made extremely hot, the flame of the fire slew those men who carried up Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego. 23 But these three men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, fell into the midst of the furnace of blazing fire still tied up.

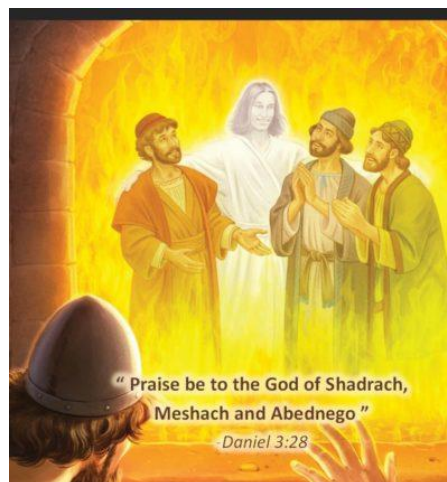
- Nebuchadnezzar ordered his soldiers to tie up the men and throw them into the furnace.
- It was customary to remove the clothing of those being executed, but because of the urgency (“urgent” vs. 22, or “harsh”) with which the king wanted his command carried out, the men were tied up in their clothes and thrown in.
- “The utter helplessness of these three men could hardly be pictured more vividly. Thus, God’s power to deliver is magnified, for with Him all things are possible...”¹⁰³
- The fire was so hot that it actually consumed the soldiers who threw the men in.

Daniel 3:24-25 ~ Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astounded and stood up in haste; he said to his high officials, “Was it not three men we cast bound into the midst of the fire?” They replied to the king, “Certainly, O king.” 25 He said, “Look! I see four men loosed and walking about in the midst of the fire without harm, and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods!”

- Peering into the furnace, Nebuchadnezzar was shocked at what he saw.
- In the furnace, he could see the men were untied and walking around, completely unharmed by the fire swirling around them.

¹⁰³ Whitcomb 1985: 59.

- Added to this shocking element was the presence of a fourth person he described as having “the appearance like a son of the gods.”
- This is obviously One sent by God in His sovereign and supernatural protection of these men.
- To preserve them in the midst of the intense flames, they encountered God’s divine presence.
- (see below for the identification of this fourth figure)



Daniel 3:26-27 ~ Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the furnace of blazing fire; he responded and said, “Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, come out, you servants of the Most High God, and come here!” Then Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego came out of the midst of the fire. 27 The satraps, the prefects, the governors and the king’s high officials gathered around and saw in regard to these men that the fire had no effect on the bodies of these men nor was the hair of their head singed, nor were their trousers damaged, nor had the smell of fire even come upon them.

- This is nothing short of a miracle as there is no other explanation for this event.
- Nebuchadnezzar recognizes it as a miracle which is evident from the fact that he addresses Daniel’s three friends as “servants of the Most High God.”

4. The Decree (vs. 28-30)

Daniel 3:28 ~ Nebuchadnezzar responded and said, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, who has sent His angel and delivered His servants who put their trust in Him, violating the king’s command, and yielded up their bodies so as not to serve or worship any god except their own God.

- The king, who had already seen God at work (2:46-47), knew from the miraculous event he had just witnessed that the God of these men was the true God.
- This is really a remarkable admission by Nebuchadnezzar who, up to this point, believed that his Babylonian gods were superior but is forced to admit that even his gods could not deliver anyone alive from a furnace (cf. vs. 15 ~ what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands).

- Nebuchadnezzar, a pagan king, affirmed these men’s godly character.
- He recognized their confident trust in God.
- He recognized their willingness to obey God rather than men.
- He recognized the fact that they were willing to die instead of committing idolatry.
- This is a tremendous reminder that believers cannot control the circumstances of life, but they can respond to those circumstances with integrity, uncompromising faith in God, and a steadfast resolve to honor the Lord above everything.

Daniel 3:29-30 ~ Therefore I make a decree that any people, nation or tongue that speaks anything offensive against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego shall be torn limb from limb and their houses reduced to a rubbish heap, inasmuch as there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way.” 30 Then the king caused Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego to prosper in the province of Babylon.

- Nebuchadnezzar recognized the greatness of God and ordered all to honor Him.
- “Such a command emanating from the lips of a heathen king is astounding, but one must consider the circumstances – Nebuchadnezzar had just witnessed a miracle.”¹⁰⁴
- And he honored these men for their uncompromising faith.
- “Needless to say, the ceremony came to a sudden halt. Instead of worshipping the beautiful golden image, the people of Babylon were now commanded to honor the God of Israel under a threat identical to that made several years earlier to the court magicians (2:5).”¹⁰⁵

C. Theological Notes

1. The Identification of Fourth Figure

- To Nebuchadnezzar, the fourth person looked like “a son of the gods” (vs. 28) or an “angel” (vs. 28).
- The king obviously knew that this person was dignified, exalted, and therefore had to be a visitor from God.
- Various explanations have been offered for this figure including the belief that it was a concoction of a story-teller, that it was an angel only, or that it was the preincarnate Christ.
- The last of these is most likely since Christ appeared in the OT as the “angel of the Lord” (Gen 16:7, 9, 11; Gen 22:11-12 [the angel is equated with God; Ex 3:2-6 [Moses worshipped him]; Num 22:22-27; Judges 6:11-12, 22-23 [Gideon equated him with God]; Judges 13:18, 21-22 [Manoah equated him with God]; Zech 3:1).
- He also appeared as the captain of the Lord’s host (Josh 5).

¹⁰⁴ Miller 1994: 125.

¹⁰⁵ Whitcomb 1985: 61.

- “In view of the fact that the preincarnate Christ had previously appeared in a burning bush (Ex. 3) and had ascended in a flame of fire (Judg. 13), there is no biblical reason He could not have been the one who appeared in the furnace with these men.”¹⁰⁶
- “Some argue against identifying him as Christ on the ground that Nebuchadnezzar, a heathen, would know nothing of the Son of God. However, the king thought that this person was a son of God (the gods), and whatever his specific understanding of that may have been, the visitor could have been in actuality more than he realized. He could have been the very Son of God regardless of whether or not his understanding came up to this.”¹⁰⁷

2. The Faithfulness of God’s Deliverance and the Faith of God’s People

- This event was likely a literal fulfillment of the promise God had made to Israel through Isaiah: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, Nor will the flame burn you” (Is 43:2).
- This event was referred to in Hebrews as evidence of the godly saints’ faith: “who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, **quenched the power of fire**, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight” (Heb 11:33-34).
- “Daniel 3 is a token and not a blueprint, that is, it is a sample of the way Christ preserves his people but not a guarantee of his dramatic deliverance in every case. Still Christ’s flock are strangely comforted here. Christ did not keep them out of the furnace but found them in it. He does not always shield you from all distresses and dangers, but it is in the loneliness, in the betrayal, in the loss that the Fourth Man comes and walks with you. He has the knack of both exposing you to, yet keeping you through, waters and rivers and fire...”¹⁰⁸
- “If Yahweh could deliver the Hebrews from the furnace, he can see saints of any age through their fiery trials.”¹⁰⁹

D. Preaching Helps

1. Todd’s Outline

The Demand (vs. 1-7)

The Defiance (vs. 8-18)

The Deliverance (vs. 19-27)

The Decree (vs. 28-30)

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 60.

¹⁰⁷ Rosscup 2001: 49.

¹⁰⁸ Davis 2013: 58.

¹⁰⁹ Miller 1994: 126.