

“Able to Deliver”
Daniel 3:1-30
February 14, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

As we get into this famous account of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery furnace, we need to back up just a little and consider the larger context of Daniel. The book was written to encourage God’s people when it seemed that things were spinning out of control and that even God had lost control. Judah had been taken into captivity to Babylon, effectively ending its identity as a nation, at least for a time. The God who had delivered Israel so powerfully from Egypt, through the Red Sea and into the Promised Land, now seemed to exist no more. He had let the sacred items from his own temple be taken into captivity to Babylon, where even at this moment they were in a place of subservience to Babylon’s god. In light of such circumstances, it’s not hard to imagine a crisis of faith on the part of the Jews. The message of Daniel is that God has most certainly not lost control, in spite of all these significant setbacks. The previous chapter shows how God has wisdom unavailable to anyone else. That point is made by contrasting God’s knowledge with humans known to have the most wisdom and knowledge, which in Daniel’s day would have been the wise men of Babylon. In today’s chapter, the theme is the power of God, contrasted again with the human who would be seen as having the greatest power on earth, King Nebuchadnezzar.

When things are spinning out of control in our lives and nothing is making sense, we need to know that God is wise and powerful. A husband or wife loses a job just when their first child is entering college and the need for money has reached a high point. God provides a miracle child to an infertile couple, bringing great joy to the couple, only to have the child get cancer as a kindergartner and die. Or perhaps the issues are more global and less personal. I’ve been reading the account of the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Why would God allow this center of eastern Christianity to fall into the hands of the Muslims, under whose control it continues today in the city we know as Istanbul, Turkey? God doesn’t expect us to know why he allows such things to happen, but he does expect us to trust him as the God of all wisdom and power. Let’s look at his power as revealed in this account by considering the main characters of this story.

I. Nebuchadnezzar

What has happened to Nebuchadnezzar since the end of chapter 2? After Daniel had interpreted the dream to him, he was ready to give praise to Daniel’s God, calling him God of gods and Lord of kings and a revealer of

mysteries (2:47). Now he is ready to destroy the servants of that God in a fiery furnace. It would seem that Nebuchadnezzar had not yet been converted. After seeing the wisdom of God in the interpretation of the dream, he eventually reverted to his old ways. Those ways become evident in the statue he built and to whom he commanded universal worship throughout Babylon.

The statue was quite large and impressive, standing 60 cubits, or about 90 feet in height, and being made out of gold. It was likely gold-plated rather than solid gold, but still a dazzling sight. What was Nebuchadnezzar thinking? I don't think it is without significance that he builds a statue after dreaming about a statue. In chapter 2, he had dreamed about this image of a man with a gold head, silver arms and chest, bronze midsection and lower legs and feet of iron and clay. But Nebuchadnezzar's statue departs from the one he saw in his dream. As he thought about Daniel's interpretation of the dream, he became more and more troubled. He liked the fact that Daniel had identified him and his kingdom as the head of gold, but not the part about other kingdoms coming after his. He especially disliked the part about the stone striking and obliterating the image. So he makes his statue in a way that matched his ambitions. He wanted to be the founder of a kingdom that would last forever. In short, he wanted to be as God. He said the opposite of what Jesus taught us to pray, saying instead, "My will be done on earth and in heaven." As the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche famously said, "If there were gods, how could I endure not to be a god! Hence there are no gods." What Nietzsche failed to see is that in a world where there are no gods, everyone is a god. If everyone is a god, then it is no surprise that there is conflict and violence in the world. All these gods are forcing others to serve them and center their lives upon them, and they aren't cooperating. That's exactly what Nebuchadnezzar was doing. He was acting violently toward the three friends of Daniel when they refused to worship his statue. And he did harm to the poor, using such a large quantity of gold for his ridiculous statue instead of providing for the needy within his kingdom.

What is the difference between Nebuchadnezzar and the rest of us? According to the Bible, the desire to be as God is part of fallen human nature. It has been that way ever since Adam and Eve believed the devil's lie and ate the forbidden fruit in order to be as God. We even go about asserting our divinity the same way Nebuchadnezzar did. He used what God had given him, the dream and its interpretation, as well as his wealth and power, to assert his will over that of God. We do the same thing, using God's gifts against God. If God gives to one some money, the money will be used so as not to need God. If God gives to another beauty or talent, those gifts will be used in an attempt to provide life and meaning, the very things God offers through knowing and worshiping him. The difference between Nebuchadnezzar and the rest of us is simply that he had the wealth and power necessary to impose his will on

everyone. Everyone, that is, except God himself, and that brings us to the next character in this story.

II. God

Nebuchadnezzar defies God with the threat and question of verse 15. **“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?”** Psalm 2 talks about God’s attitude toward kings like Nebuchadnezzar. It says that when the kings of the earth set themselves against the Lord, **“He who sits in the heavens laughs”** (Psalm 2:4). Tremper Longman says that when Nebuchadnezzar asserts his power over God by asking this question, “we can imagine the God of Psalm 2 raising his eyebrows and emitting a slight chuckle.” God’s complete control of this situation is shown in the fact that he has Nebuchadnezzar answer his own question. He had asked, “Who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?” After he threw the three into the fiery furnace, he says, **“Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?... But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods”** (v. 24-25).

The manner of God’s deliverance of these men is significant. He could have done so in any number of ways, many of which would have been more easily accomplished. He could have simply extinguished the flames in the furnace as they walked into them. Or he could have protected them without going into the furnace with them, simply allowing them to walk out unharmed. He could have struck down any who laid a hand on them until there was no soldier left to obey Nebuchadnezzar’s order. Or he could have made a more overt display of power by striking down the golden statue and speaking with a booming voice from heaven that he alone should be worshiped, reinforced by throwing Nebuchadnezzar into the fire as a warning to any who would not worship Jehovah. But he did none of that. He walked with them through the furnace, delivering them not *from* the furnace, but *in* and *through* the furnace. He did deliver them fully. They went in bound, but were quickly freed. And the fire, despite being hot enough to kill the soldiers who threw these three into the furnace, had no effect at all on them. Their hair was not singed, and their clothes were not burned. There was not even the smell of fire upon them. Anyone who has smelled that smell knows that it is not easily removed. Their deliverance was complete, but why did it take the particular form it took?

I believe the reason God delivered in this way is to show that he is not only powerful, but loving as well. If God were only wise and powerful, that would be neither comforting nor helpful to us. Unless we are convinced that he will use his wisdom and power on our behalf, we will not be comforted. He shows his love to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego by being with them in the fire. This

picture of God in the fire points us to the suffering of God. In the Bible, love and suffering go together. When you love someone, you are willing to suffer for that person. Loving parents are willing to suffer for the good of their children, and a loving God is willing to suffer for the good of his children. God shows us his love in the fact that Jesus is willing to suffer for us. In Matthew 13:42, hell is described as a fiery furnace, **“where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”** When Jesus was on the cross, he experienced that hell in our place. He didn’t just suffer *with* his people; he suffered *instead* of his people.

There’s another side to the love of God in this passage, one that was of benefit to Nebuchadnezzar. He wanted to throw these three men into the furnace for refusing to worship in the way he directed. God would have had every right to do the same with Nebuchadnezzar. He could have delivered these three by judging Nebuchadnezzar right then and there. But he didn’t do so. Why not? It is because God is loving toward his enemies as well as his friends. God gave to Nebuchadnezzar a front row seat to his acts of great wisdom and power. He is a God who seeks the lost. God may often act in ways that puzzle us and feel like things are spinning out of control. Though he doesn’t tell us why he acts in a particular way in particular incidences, he does tell us that he is a God of love and mercy who seeks the lost. He is doing so with this pagan king, who so far is resisting God’s grace. He may be willing to say good things about God, but he is not yet ready to follow Israel’s God wholeheartedly. On the other hand, his story is not concluded yet.

III. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego

Remember that these three men are exiles. They are to resist the two errors of too much separation from Babylon and too much assimilation. This passage shows their resistance to the error of assimilation. The chapter mentions repeatedly and monotonously the groups that did as King Nebuchadnezzar directed and worshiped his statue. They were **“the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces”** (v. 2, 3, 27). The effect of that repetition is to help us feel that everyone was worshiping this image, leaving Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego on an island. It can feel very lonely to worship God and not assimilate to the worship of the gods of our land. I notice that they didn’t make a big show of defiance. Nebuchadnezzar didn’t notice their refusal to bow down, and didn’t learn of it until others pointed it out to him. They just quietly refused to bow down to his god.

What are the gods of our land? I think one of the big ones today is the god of human choice, by which everyone is told they can do whatever they want. A person can worship in any way they want, they can choose any moral code they prefer and believe anything they want to believe. It feels at times like we

are on an island when we say that there is a God of truth who alone should be worshiped and obeyed. And there are furnaces of affliction reserved for those who dare not bow down to the god of human choice.

What gave to these three men the strength to resist? Two things stand out to me. First, they believed in the power of God, indicated by their words to Nebuchadnezzar. **“Our God who we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace”** (v. 17). They didn’t know how he would do so, and they didn’t even know for sure that he would. They go on to add, **“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”** (v. 18). But they had a firm belief that God was able to help them.

They also experienced the presence of God. It is often in the fiery furnace that we experience most significantly the loving presence of the Lord. When things are spinning out of control in our lives and it doesn’t seem that God is paying attention, we can know that he is still in control. He is wise, powerful and loving. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego show us that we are not permitted to demand that he behave in a certain way. But there is a demand we are permitted to make of God. It is the demand Moses made of God after the tragedy of the golden calf incident in the wilderness. Moses said to God, **“If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here”** (Ex. 33:15).

CONCLUSION:

Bryan Chapell tells the story of a coal miner who lived in the community where he once pastored. This coal miner was a strong Christian, but he had been seriously injured in the mines at a young age. He became an invalid and over the years watched those with whom he had worked get married, have children and then grandchildren, none of which he was able to experience. Instead, he was secluded in his small, cluttered home. One day, when the bedridden miner was quite old, a younger man came to visit him. “I hear that you believe in God and claim that he loves you,” said the young man. “How can you believe such things after what has happened to you?” The miner admitted that sometimes Satan came to him to tempt him in just that way. He said that Satan will point to the grandchild of a friend of mine—a man who has everything I do not—and Satan waits for the tear in my eye before he whispers in my ear, “Does Jesus really love you?” The young man asked how he answers Satan’s question, and the miner said that he simply takes Satan to Calvary and shows him the suffering of Jesus there for him. You see, Nebuchadnezzar spoke better than he knew when he said, **“for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way”** (v. 29). No other god loves to the point of suffering. We can trust a God such as that.