

September 4
Daniel 3

Today we read Daniel chapter 3.

So far in the Book of Daniel we have watched the progress of God's dealings with one very powerful and very proud despot named Nebuchadnezzar -- the great king of Babylon. First there were those reports from his spies over in Jerusalem -- reports about a holy man named Jeremiah who communed with the God of Israel -- who they said was the God of all the earth. Then, if Nebuchadnezzar took the time to familiarize himself with what was happening in his diplomatic school, there would have been the remarkable progress of those four Jewish boys. They ate the simplest of all diets, disdaining the rich food of the king's table, but in every single test they proved to be the best and not just by a little. They stood head and shoulders above the best. Could it be their God?

Then came that dream. In a fit of anger Nebuchadnezzar swore that he would kill every last wise man in Babylon because they could not make the contents of that troubling dream known to him. It's not fair they said -- only a God could do that and just in case the king hadn't noticed, the gods don't live with men. He would have carried out his threat too -- sometimes even kings paint themselves into corners they can't get out of -- especially proud kings. But then Arioch, the captain of the guard, reported to him that one of the Jewish men Belteshazzar, Daniel, could tell him what he had dreamed, and interpret the dream as well. That day ended with the king of Babylon on his face prostrate before Daniel saying, "Your God is the God of gods and Lord over kings." The light was beginning to dawn on Nebuchadnezzar, king of kings. Nebuchadnezzar was beginning to pay attention, but he wasn't a convert -- not yet.

Then came the plains of dura that means "fortress." Nebuchadnezzar had erected a 90' statue of himself and commanded that all men bow down and worship it. That should be some indication of the size of the prize of Nebuchadnezzar, and an indication that he had not yet understood who was really sovereign in Babylon. Daniel was not present that day, perhaps he was not in Babylon that day or else busy on the king's business and therefore not present at the ceremony. It is also possible that the men who set the ambush for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego deliberately kept Daniel out of it because they feared the great power he wielded with the king. For whatever reason Daniel wasn't there.

Perhaps the reason for the ceremony was to unite the politics and the religion of the empire. The pharaohs of Egypt had done it before Nebuchadnezzar and the Caesars of Rome would do it after him. Once again Nebuchadnezzar lost his temper. When told of the refusal of the Hebrews to bow down, he was furious. His royal pride had been challenged. With the furnace heated seven times hotter than normal, they were thrown in.

I know you noticed their faith. Our God will deliver us from your majesty's power. But if not, we shall not serve your gods or worship the gold image you have set before us.

There is that "either way we win attitude" that we saw in Paul's letter to the Philippians. By the way, I am very sure I know exactly what Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were thinking about when they were bound and thrown into the furnace. They were quoting the words of Isaiah the prophet; chapter 43 verses 1, 2 and 3. "But now Jacob, this is the word of the Lord, the word of your creator, of him who fashioned you O Israel: fear not for I have redeemed you, I call you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the water I will be with you; when you pass through rivers they will not overwhelm you; walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, through flames and they will not burn you. For I am the Lord your God, the holy one of Israel, your deliverer."

At the end of that day Nebuchadnezzar issued this decree. "Anyone whatever his people, nation or language, if he speaks blasphemy against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, is to be hacked limb from limb, and his house is to be reduced to rubble; for there is no other God who can save in such a manner." Yet another step in Nebuchadnezzar's march toward faith.

They claimed the promise of scripture and they found it to be completely and totally true. They were not scorched. They were not burned and they were not alone. There was a fourth person in the fire, one "like a god" -- almost certainly this is a Christophany -- a preincarnate appearance of Jesus Christ, the clearest example I can find in the whole Old Testament of this phenomenon. When Jesus says I will never leave you or forsake you, friends, He means it!