

# THREE WHO WOULD NOT BOW

Theme: This chapter illustrates the call of God's people to stand faithful in times of paganistic challenges. (Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from The Holy Bible, New King James Version; copyright 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc.)

This chapter follows naturally after the interpretation of King Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Chapter 3--a dream in which a large image was described. The strange image of gold that the king built for himself in Chapter 4 was obviously (and wrongly) inspired by the dream of Chapter 3. In Chapter 3, we're told of God's sovereign program for the times of the Gentiles through four coming world empires. And now, in Chapter 4, we're told of the resolve of Daniel's three friends to refuse to bow down and worship the false gods of the first and greatest of those four Gentile kingdoms.

This story should inspire us to live 'in the world but not of the world'. It is a reminder to us that--no matter what cultural context we live in--we must "be subject to the governing authorities" (Romans 13:1-7); but that we also must make sure that, in those times when the ruling authorities call us to compromise our primary allegiance to Jesus Christ, we must always remember that "[w]e ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29)--and refuse to fall down and bow to the false gods men create for themselves.

## I. THE PAGAN KING'S COMMAND (vv. 1-7).

The image that Nebuchadnezzar set up was clearly inspired by the dream he had (see Daniel 2:31-35). Nebuchadnezzar would eventually submit fully to the God of Israel (as we'll see in Chapter 4); but up to this point, he had not yet fully done so. Note how, in 3:47, he referred to the God of Daniel as "your God". He was not yet able to say, as Thomas said, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28).

The image itself is described in what seems to be grotesque proportion (ninety feet high and nine feet wide; although its odd proportions may suggest that it included pedestal, and that the actual human-like figure rested on top of it). Its remarkable height (some twenty feet taller than the famed Colossus of Rhodes), and its position on the plain of Dura, would have made it visible for some distance. Key to the story of this image was its official 'dedication ceremony'. The names of the various leaders that were called from all of the different provinces makes it clear that it was to be an all-encompassing ceremony. Everyone who was anyone of any official capacity was there by compulsion. It may have been that this dedication ceremony was motivated, in part, by political concerns to consolidate his empire; but Nebuchadnezzar was clearly calling for his image to be worshiped in a religious sense. He was in defiance of the God of the Jews; and was seeking to set himself up before all gods (v. 15).

A herald cried out the command to everyone present that they were to fall down and worship the image at the sound of the music. The presence of the fiery furnace must have made the command a very frightening and intimidating one. It's interesting to note that the command to bow down and worship an image at the threat of death characterizes both the beginning (here) and the end (in Revelation 13:15) of Gentile world-domination. And it's also interesting to note that the number six (the symbolic number for human self-deification) figures in the two images (sixty by six cubits in the case of Daniel 3:1, and the number 666 in the case of Revelation 13:18).

## II. THE THREE FRIENDS' RESOLVE (vv. 8-18).

The command of the king appears to have been readily and universally observed by "all the people, nations, and languages" (v. 7). But it came to be reported to the king that the three Jewish friends of Daniel (Shadrach, Meshack, and Abed-Nego) would not obey. (Note that their Babylonian names are used, because they stood in an official capacity.) Their conduct in this passage shows that they were respectful of every command of the king that they *could* obey; but they could not obey this particular command without violating the second commandment (Exodus 20:4-6; Deut. 5:8-10). The real heart of

the issue is made clear when the king said, “Is it true . . . that you do not serve my gods or worship the gold image which I have set up?” (v. 14).

Though in a rage over the news of their refusal to bow (and note that, in his rage, he does not even finish his sentence in verse 15!), the king nevertheless gave them an opportunity to bow at the sound of the music playing. But he also issued the warning that if they did not obey, they would be cast into the fiery furnace. Arrogantly, the king asked, “And who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?” This question was also asked by the Assyrian commander in Isaiah 36:19-20. In both cases, the question was asked rhetorically by an arrogant king--but answered quite literally by a mighty God!

The resolve of the three friends (Daniel perhaps not being present) makes it very clear where their commitments were. They were in no way disrespectful to the authority of the king; but they were also unwaveringly committed to obeying God. To say that they had no need to answer (v. 16) was as if to say that they were not going to argue with the king for their lives. If they were cast into the fire, the God of Israel was fully capable of delivering them. But even if He chose not to, He would most certainly deliver them out of the king's hand by death. But whatever the outcome, they would by no means disobey God's command and fall down to worship the image. (Note that the accusations brought against them were (1) that they did not pay due respect to the king, (2) that they did not serve the king's gods, and (3) that they did not worship the golden image (v.12). In their resolve, however, they affirmed that they would not serve the king's gods or worship his image (v. 18). In this, they didn't fail to pay due respect to the king.

### **III. THE FIREY TRIAL (vv. 19-23).**

Nebuchadnezzar's unstable state is shown in his response. He was full of fury, and the expression of his face changed toward the three friends. (He was a man clearly shown in this book to be driven to extremes by his emotions.) He called for the furnace to be heated up seven times hotter than usual--when, of course, if he had *really* wanted to make them suffer, he should have cooled it down! With all of the officials of his kingdom present (which as a matter of God's amazing providence!), he commanded the three friends to be bound up and thrown into the furnace. The haste of the king's command is shown in the fact that the men who threw them in were killed by the fire (v. 22).

### **IV. THE LORD'S PROTECTION (vv. 24-27).**

The king must have positioned himself to be able to see the three friends when they were cast in. But he could also clearly see them walking around unhurt--with a fourth figure that the king says was “like the Son of God” (or more probably, “like a son of the gods”). It may have been a pre-incarnate appearance of the second Person of the Trinity. The king later blessed God for having sent His Angel to protect them (v. 28). (Daniel did not miss out; because an angel was later sent to protect him in the lion's den; see 6:22). In any event, it was clearly God who was protecting these three faithful men.

The king called them by name and commanded them to come out of the fire. (We see something of their character in that they obeyed the king--when they could have just as easily said, “We're not coming out, King; but if you'd like, you may come in and get us!”) This remarkable miracle was wonderfully validated by the collection of high-ranking government officials. They confirmed the complete absence of any effect of the fire upon the three--with the only exception being that their bonds must have burned off. God's promise is shown here to be true: “When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you” (Isaiah 43:2).

### **V. THE KING'S RESPONSE (vv. 28-30).**

The response of the king was to bless the God of Israel (perhaps not yet to “worship” the God of Israel, however). The king acknowledges that they were demonstrating trust in God by the fact that they frustrated his command to the point of yielding their bodies to death so as not to serve or worship any god but the one true God. He commanded that no one in his kingdom was to speak against this God on pain of suffering the same fate with which he once threatened the wise men of his kingdom (2:5). He also promoted the three (and we can assume that this means he promoted them to higher positions than they already possessed).