

DANIEL — WEEK 3

A TEST OF FAITH



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is Daniel in the Lions' Den by Peter Paul Rubens

Nebuchadnezzar, amazed at Daniel's interpretation of his dream, promotes Daniel and his three buds.

Then he turns right around and erects a statue and commands everyone to worship it, apparently in a goofy attempt to overturn the interpretation. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego refuse to play along and Nebuchadnezzar tries *hard* to talk them out of it—to no avail. Worship is non-negotiable.

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We are a spiritual fellowship patterned after the Celtic Revival. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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1 Daniel 2:46–49

Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell on his face, prostrate before Daniel, and commanded that they should present an offering and incense to him. The king answered Daniel, and said, “Truly your God is the God of gods, the Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets, since you could reveal this secret.” Then the king promoted Daniel and gave him many great gifts; and he made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and chief administrator over all the wise men of Babylon. Also Daniel petitioned the king, and he set Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego over the affairs of the province of Babylon; but Daniel sat in the gate of the king.

Notice that while Nebuchadnezzar is very impressed, he isn’t really converted. *“Truly your God is the God of gods, the Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets, since you could reveal this secret.”*

See why that’s not good enough? What’s missing?

Monotheism. He needs to say that there is only one God. He still doesn’t get it.

That’s not too surprising at this stage though. Recall how Daniel has been easing Nebuchadnezzar into knowing the real God. First, in Daniel 2:28, he said that *“there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets.”* Then, in 2:37 he said, *“For the God of heaven has given you a kingdom, power, strength, and glory.”* Lastly, in 2:45, he said that, *“the great God has made known to the king what will come to pass after this.”*

That’s not exactly pounding monotheism. It’s not surprising that Nebuchadnezzar still refers to God as “your God.”

The lessons will continue.

Nebuchadnezzar’s path to faith was normal. Obviously, some of the plot lines were unique, but the internal maturation of Nebuchadnezzar’s faith was typical.

There are many baby steps, and some big steps, in everyone’s path to faith. Even Martin Luther had more than one lightning bolt moment. Some of these moments can happen before one crosses the line and professes Jesus as their Lord, some of them after.

Unfortunately, some Christians think that conversion is all in one moment. New Christians often don’t even fully understand what they’ve signed up for. Yet their teaching is neglected because “they’re saved now.” The truth is that faith is a process—a lifelong process.

Shepherding that process is one of the most important functions of the church. Christians should examine themselves in terms of their growth path. At the Fellowship of Ailbe, we are intentional about this. Personal assessment is part of the membership process and renewing that assessment is important.

Every Christian should grow in some noticeable way over the course of, say, a year.

2 Daniel 3:1–6

Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its width six cubits. He set it up in the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. And King Nebuchadnezzar sent word to gather together the satraps, the administrators, the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces, to come to the dedication of the image which King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. So the satraps, the administrators, the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces gathered together for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up; and they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Then a herald cried aloud: “To you it is commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that at the time you hear the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, you shall fall down and worship the gold image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up; and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace.”

This is madness. What’s Nebuchadnezzar up to with this stunt? This is the second time he’s threatened mass murder. Do his subjects live in constant fear of being put to death for whatever crazy reason he dreams up next?

We can only guess at where Nebuchadnezzar’s polytheistic mindset has taken him, but there’s one striking clue—the statue looks a lot like the statue in his dream. Recall Daniel’s description.

You, O king, were watching; and behold, a great image! This great image, whose splendor was excellent, stood before you; and its form was awesome. This image’s head was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, ...” — Daniel 2:31–32a

But notice the difference. This statue is all gold. Note Daniel’s interpretation.

“you are this head of gold. But after you shall arise another kingdom inferior to yours; then another, a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over all the earth.” — Daniel 2:38b–39

So, the new statue is like the one in his dream except his kingdom never gets replaced. Hmmm.

And for some strange reason, it’s now very important to Nebuchadnezzar that everyone worship this similar-but-different statue over and over. Why?

We can’t know Nebuchadnezzar mindset, but it sure looks like he’s trying to “edit” the prophesy.

It’s hard to wrap our minds around Nebuchadnezzar’s polytheism. One thing is clear though. The actions ancient polytheistic people took weren’t for entertainment value; they were to achieve a result. Whether they wanted to prevent a volcano from erupting, or to make it rain, everything they did had a purpose. Nebuchadnezzar believed that getting people to worship this statue would accomplish something.

He forgot that it’s about who is God.

3 Daniel 3:7–12

So at that time, when all the people heard the sound of the horn, flute, harp, and lyre, in symphony with all kinds of music, all the people, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the gold image which King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Therefore at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and accused the Jews. They spoke and said to King Nebuchadnezzar, “O king, live forever! You, O king, have made a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, shall fall down and worship the gold image; and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. There are certain Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego; these men, O king, have not paid due regard to you. They do not serve your gods or worship the gold image which you have set up.”

The time has come to pick a fight. Worship is not negotiable. *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego* are willing to “die on this hill.”

To the secular mind, this is nuts. Who cares? Why pick this fight? The statue has no real power, despite what the king might think. It doesn’t matter.

They pick this fight because the secular mind is wrong; God made it perfectly clear that this matters.

“You shall have no other gods before Me.

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.” — Exodus 20:3–6

Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego are right. There’s no conceivable interpretation of this passage that allows for worshipping Nebuchadnezzar’s gold statue.

Any exile who obeys the king’s command is an unbeliever.

True faith trumps everything else. When secular reasoning and Christian reasoning are in total conflict, you find out whether faith is real.

But Christians fail these tests all the time. Does that mean they’re not really Christians?

Yes and no. A better way to say this might be, “It’s a work in progress.”

Faith grows.

4 Daniel 3:13–15 (ESV)

Then Nebuchadnezzar, in rage and fury, gave the command to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. So they brought these men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar spoke, saying to them, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the gold image which I have set up? Now if you are ready at the time you hear the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, and you fall down and worship the image which I have made, good! But if you do not worship, you shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?”

At least Nebuchadnezzar asks the right question. “*Who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?*” Some translations say, “*What God ...*”

The question sounds rhetorical, but maybe it’s sincere. He’s promoted these guys once because of “their God.” He’s well aware that “their God” has done things way beyond anything he’s seen either from his “wise men” or from his gods. He might be genuinely curious.

Nebuchadnezzar is afraid. This all started with his dream. He was so afraid that *his sleep left him*. That’s why he took the outrageous action of threatening to kill all his wise men. He even started carrying this threat out. Then Daniel comes along and interprets the dream. Peace at last.

Well, not exactly. Daniel’s interpretation prophesies the end, not just of Nebuchadnezzar, but of his kingdom. He promotes Daniel and his buddies because they’re obviously worth promoting. That doesn’t completely fix the problem though.

The nightmare continues.

Why is Nebuchadnezzar so insistent?

Does he believe that three people declining to bow down to his silly statue will somehow wreck the whole scheme?

Or is it just an enforcement thing? Is he worried that folks would see that they can get away with disobedience?

In any case, he’s trying remarkably hard to talk them into bowing down to his gold statue. Why not just toss them into the furnace and be done with it?

As always, there’s not much chance we’re going to be able to fully comprehend Nebuchadnezzar’s polytheistic mindset. As we’ll soon see, he even heats the furnace up extra hot before he throws them in.

He’s not doing this reluctantly.

5 Daniel 3:16–18

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up.”

The first sentence of *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego*’s response doesn’t translate well. The Hebrew expression they use sounds disrespectful in English. “*O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter.*”

They mean no disrespect. They’re just saying that they don’t need to be acquitted of the charge. The *God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace.*

As always, the point is that it’s about who is God, not who is king.

And to drive the point home, they note that God may not deliver them. “*But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up.*”

Worship is non-negotiable.

Just as with Daniel, this is coming down to a very distinct moment of truth. But don’t assume that the moment of truth is when God either saves them or lets them die.

No, the moment of truth was when they either caved or held firm in refusing to bow down to the statue.

What happens next isn’t about them; it’s about Nebuchadnezzar’s awakening.

Is the purpose of prayer to get, say, healing? Or is it to glorify God?

I am often stuck by God’s timing. Even when a prayer request is granted, it often seems later than I would have liked.

But that got me to pray longer and harder. Hmmm.

What if the prayers themselves are important for their own sake?

Maybe they teach me. Maybe they glorify God. Maybe they do something else beyond my imagination. In any case, it’s evident that the LORD often stretches them out.

There must be something to that.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. How have you grown over the last year?
2. Does the polytheistic mindset still live?
3. Have your failures grown your faith?
4. When have you passed a test of faith?
5. What is the purpose of prayer?

Items for prayer: