

## COOL IN THE FURNACE

### Daniel 3

**Dr. Howard Batson**  
**First Baptist Church**  
**Amarillo, Texas**  
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#### **Introduction**

In chapter 2, Daniel played a prominent role while his friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah), were quiet prayer partners in the background (2:17-18). In chapter 3, however, the friends take center stage, and Daniel is absent from the story. Most likely, this transition is set up by stating at the end of chapter 2 (v. 48-49) that the king appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego administrators over the province of Babylon, while Daniel himself remained at the royal court. This transitional information explains why the three friends are together while Daniel is alone in a different location. With all the other officials attending the king's "big event" on the plain of Dura, Daniel is unable to leave Babylon, as his presence is needed to oversee the palace affairs.

#### **The Idol (3:1-7)**

Having already introduced the idea of metallic monstrosities in chapter 2 with the image in Nebuchadnezzar's nightmare adorned with a head of gold, the story now transitions to an enormous statue completely gilded in gold standing all the taller. Apparently, the dream motivated the megalomaniacal king to actually construct an image he felt worthy of worship. The dimensions make the golden god extremely tall (90 feet).

While the text describes the image as "gold" (v. 1), in reality, the statue was most likely overlaid with gold. We find comparable construction methods in Isaiah 40:19, where "...the idol, a craftsman casts it, a goldsmith plates it with gold," or in Jeremiah 10:3-4, which refers to gods of wood overlaid with silver or gold.

Many commentators claim that this story is little more than "folklore" quite common in the time period. Before you dismiss the story's believability, however, be aware that enormous statues were often constructed by ancient kings. Herodotus (1.183), for example, mentions a "sitting figure of Zeus, all of gold" in the temple of Bel in Babylon, and a "figure of a man, twelve cubits high, entirely of solid gold" in the same temple at the time of Cyrus. Other examples include the large statues that Ramses II and other pharaohs built of themselves which were placed throughout Egypt. Finally, the huge statue entitled "The Colossus of Rhodes" (C.A. 300 B.C.) stood 105 feet tall, exceeding even Nebuchadnezzar's idolatrous image.

The faith of Daniel's friends was tested on "the plain of Dura" (v. 1). While the exact location of "Dura" cannot be known, the most likely site is about 16 miles south of Babylon. The indication from the text, "in the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon," seems in harmony with this location. Nebuchadnezzar, therefore, constructed this monstrosity beyond the city walls, but close enough for everyone to gather for the grand unveiling.

Much has been written concerning the exact identity of the idol. Was it a depiction of the megalomaniacal monarch himself? Was it an image of one of the gods of Babylon, perhaps Marduk, the chief god of the city of Babylon and the national god of Babylonia? Perhaps we would do well not to speculate, since the text itself is silent concerning the exact identity of the statue. In the end, it matters little whether the stone was an image of the megalomaniacal king, a pagan deity, or simply an obelisk (like the Washington Monument). In all cases, to bow down to the image would be tantamount to breaking the first two of the Ten Commandments: “You shall have no other gods before me,” and, “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God...” (Deuteronomy 5:7-8).

The king called together all the ranking officials in the kingdom. The attendees appear in descending order, most likely from the highest ranking (satraps) to the lowest (all the rulers of the provinces). The rhythm of repeating all the various classifications of officials served to build the official expectation that everyone will obey the king and bow.

During this dedication of the king’s pet project, the king’s herald issued a clarion call of expectation, indicating that at the moment the orchestra struck the first note, everyone was to fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had erected.

We can easily envision the scene. The orchestra had already been tuned to the first chair, the officials were seated in order of importance, and the gold god was glittering on the plain of Dura. Through the fancy fanfare and stately statue, Nebuchadnezzar communicated his own glory to all of his subjects. This was power and prestige, vainglory and volume, kingship and kingdom all wrapped up in one metallic monstrosity.

### **The Accusation (3:8-12)**

The Babylonian bagpipes sounded; the Chaldean cornets blasted away. And every dignitary from every nation in the kingdom fell down in submission to worship the golden image, the nine-story-tall metallic monstrosity. Everyone, that is, except Daniel’s friends.

Have you ever been left standing when everyone else was seated? That was the very uncomfortable situation facing the Jewish men. Although Nebuchadnezzar himself had not seen them, some of their Chaldean counterparts had. Well aware that no Jew could, in good conscience, bow to any other god rather than his own, these Chaldean counselors were focused on the friends of Daniel, watching and wondering, “Will they bow down?” As readers of the story, we also ponder, “Will they give in? Will they bow down to an idol?”

In verse 8, “**certain Chaldeans**” came forward and accused “**the Jews**” of failing to fall before the statue. Literally, the Chaldeans are said to have “eaten the pieces of” the Jews. Perhaps this was an ancient idiom that falls along the lines of our “chewed them out.” Make no mistake, they were labeled “Jews” because their nationality fostered resentment from the Chaldeans in the kingdom. How dare the king place these Jews into positions of authority? The locals felt slighted by the internationals when the king handed out promotions. The Chaldeans, therefore, did not mind pointing out every failure of these foreigners. In fact, lest the king miss their jealous message, they

clarified their concerns, “There are certain Jews **whom you have appointed** over the administration of the province of Babylon...” (v. 12).

The “Jews” stood out against the people from all the other nations, because they, and perhaps they alone, could not join in the worship of the Babylonian god. The charges against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were three: (1) they paid no attention to the king (and his commands); (2) they did not serve the king’s gods; and (3) they refused to worship the golden statue the king himself had set up. The clear penalty for such disobedience was death.

### **The Threat (3:13-15)**

Perhaps it is the simplest exercise in human psychology—pushing the buttons of someone with an inflated ego. All the Chaldeans needed to do was mention the disrespect the Jews had shown the king. Like awakening a sleeping volcano, their calculated conversation with the king resulted in the eruption of his rage, with a clear expression of the conflict between Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom and the kingdom of God.

The king could not have been clearer. He restated, “We’ll have the band play one more time, just for you three! Now, when you hear the Babylonian bagpipes strike the first note, you had better bow. If you do not”—look at the rage in his eyes—“you’ll go straight to the fiery furnace. There is no god good enough to deliver you from my fierce fire.”

The language Nebuchadnezzar used is emphatic (v. 15), “What (at all) god is there?” Perhaps Nebuchadnezzar was thinking that although Yahweh had proven himself powerful by revealing the dream (chapter 2), there was no god who was great enough to be able to protect his followers from death in the furnace. Given his megalomaniacal madness, Nebuchadnezzar may have even been deliberately challenging Yahweh concerning who was going to be greatest in the Chaldean kingdom.

### **The Reply (3:16-18)**

Their faith was NOT in their deliverance, but in their God. Certainly, others have not been delivered—John the Baptist, James (the brother of John), and Stephen. The list of martyrs is endless and continues today. Perhaps the Jewish refugees remembered their psalm well, “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear” (Psalm 27:1).

Perhaps the most pivotal words of the story come in verse 18, “But if not....” The faith of the three Jewish friends was not in deliverance, but, rather, in the goodness of God. Their position reminds us of that of Job, who endured innumerable trials and tribulations. Remember his faithful words, “Though He slay me, yet I will trust him” (Job 13:15). The New Testament counterpart would be the apostle Paul who wanted to glorify God in either his life or his death (Philippians 1:21).

Life and death were the same to Daniel’s friends, as long as God’s faithfulness was exalted. If God were to choose to save his faithful followers, he would be vindicated. If God chose to let them die a martyr’s death, their faithfulness to the end would testify to the glory of their God. In the New Testament, the author of Hebrews noted that God’s people do not always fare so well, even when faithful. By faith the flames may be quenched, but in the same faith “others were tortured, not

accepting deliverance, so that they might obtain a better resurrection.... They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were slain with the sword..." (Hebrews 11:35, 37).

Each one of us will gladly glorify God as long as he delivers us in our way, on our timetable. True faith is only revealed, however, when God seems to delay our deliverance or to close doors that we were certain he would open. When the biopsy comes back positive, when we are passed over for the position, when the pregnancy tests keep showing negative, when our children disappoint...these situations and a million more call for God's people to be "but if not" kind of followers. We all love God in the sunshine; the real question is can we also love him in the rain? But if not....

### **The Punishment (3:19-23)**

Nebuchadnezzar's ego was publicly bruised in front of international dignitaries. He was certain, therefore, to make burnt toast out of the boys who would not bow. A literal translation of verse 19 is, "...and the image of his face changed." Perhaps this was a pun on the "image" he had set up for worship.

In ancient Mesopotamia, furnaces were used for making bricks, pottery, and metals. We should not be surprised that such a furnace was found on the construction site of the monstrous statue. Imagine an "old milk bottle shaped" furnace with a roof opening for ventilation and a side door for inserting and extracting materials. Old Testament scholar Ronald W. Pierce estimated that the temperatures of such furnaces range from 1650°-2700° Fahrenheit. Therefore, heating the furnace seven times hotter than usual is mostly likely an exaggeration for effect. Old Testament scholar Joyce Baldwin interpreted "seven times" as a proverbial expression meaning "as hot as possible" (Proverbs 24:16; 26:16).

Following the king's urgent command, the soldiers moved in such haste and hurry that they had no time to protect themselves from the flames. As they threw the victims into the furnace, the extreme heat, in a twist of irony, extracted the lives of the executioners!

### **The Vindication (3:24-27)**

While, initially, Nebuchadnezzar's narrative called for the Jews to bow, he himself was, in the end, forced to leap to his feet! Nebuchadnezzar was slow to learn, for Daniel had already declared, "There is a God in heaven..." (2:28). Nebuchadnezzar said, "What God?"; the deliverance declares, "Our God, Yahweh!" Not only did Nebuchadnezzar witness Yahweh's faithful followers walking around unharmed in his seven-fold fiery furnace, he also discovered a mysterious fourth man who appeared "like a son of the gods." The word for "gods," 'ělāhîn, is actually plural and is sometimes translated "gods." On the other hand, it has the same force of the Hebrew 'ělōhîm, which can be translated as either plural, "gods," or as a singular, "God." When denoting the true God, the plural is engaged to express the divine fullness and majesty of God. Therefore, depending upon which translation is used, we have either "the son of the gods" or "the son of God." While many readers find an illusion to Christ in the expression, we must remember these words are spoken by Nebuchadnezzar, a polytheistic king who had no concept of either the Christian trinity or the Christ. Most likely, the pagan king only meant that the fourth figure in the fire was divine. Later, he simply refers to the fourth being as an angel (v. 28).

Emphasizing divine deliverance, the story declares that the faithful Judeans did not even so much as suffer a singed hair. They, moreover, did not even smell like smoke!

### **The Decree (3:28-30)**

Nebuchadnezzar was often a character who vacillated from one extreme to another. While the narrative opened with the command for everyone to bow before the monstrous statue, Nebuchadnezzar, at last, declared there is no other god who is able to deliver like the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

### **Conclusion**

At some juncture of our faith journey, the story of Daniel's faithful Jewish friends becomes our story. Eventually, someone will strike the first note of temptation and demand that we, too, fall at the feet of an idol. Will we stand tall to glorify God? Or will we bow down to blend in with the misguided masses? Our God will deliver us; but if not....