

A Faith More Precious Than Gold

Author: Larry W. Wilson

Last month, we studied the experience of Daniel in the lion's den and how God used Daniel's faith to set His people free from their Babylonian captivity. This month, I would like to share a story that explains why God put Daniel's three friends in a fiery furnace.

I want to share these stories of faith because they have so much to say about the coming drama predicted in Revelation. As you proceed through this story, see if you can detect any end-time parallels.

God's Agent of Wrath

King Nebuchadnezzar set siege to Jerusalem three times. He finally destroyed the city in 586 B.C. because Israel refused to submit to his "higher" authority. Even though the secular mind might say that Jerusalem was destroyed because of rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar, the Bible indicates that Jerusalem was destroyed because Israel refused to submit to God's authority. (See Jeremiah 25 and Ezekiel 14.)

The destruction of Israel by Nebuchadnezzar teaches a profound truth: God's long-suffering and wrath against Israel are but a mirror reflecting how God deals with all nations. (Leviticus 18:28; Jeremiah 25:12; Acts 10:34) God preserved a Biblical record of His actions so future generations could understand why *"He sets up governments and takes them down."*

In this particular story, understand that God selected Nebuchadnezzar to be His servant; His agent of wrath against Israel. (Jeremiah 25:9; 27:6; 43:10) In other words, God empowered and enabled the king of the North, Nebuchadnezzar, to destroy His city and His people because of their decadence. (Daniel 9)

The role of Nebuchadnezzar as the king from the North and as the king of Babylon parallels the coming of the Antichrist. During the Tribulation, Lucifer will be the "stern-faced king" from the north (Daniel 8:23; 11:36) and also the king of modern Babylon! (Revelation 17:11) This is just the beginning of end-time parallels.

Three Sins

God's patience with Israel ended because of three persistent sins: Israel violated His Sabbaths, engaged in sexual immorality and preferred to worship idols instead of Almighty God. (Do you see an end-time parallel in this?) Thoughtfully consider the words of God as He laments the apostasy of Israel: **"Her priests do violence to my law and profane my holy things; they do not distinguish between the holy and the common; they teach that there is no difference between the unclean and the clean; and they shut their eyes to the keeping of my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them."** (Ezekiel 22:26, insertion mine)

Also consider God's comments about the clergy of Israel: " **'And among the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen something horrible: They commit adultery and live a lie. They strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from his wickedness. They are all like Sodom to me; the people of Jerusalem are like Gomorrah . . . For they have done outrageous things in Israel; they have committed adultery with their neighbors' wives and in my name have spoken lies, which I did not tell them to do. I know it and am a witness to it,' declares the Lord.**" (Jeremiah 23:14; 29:23) **"Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: 'I myself am against you, Jerusalem, and I will inflict punishment on you in the sight of the nations. Because of all your detestable idols, I will do to you what I have never done before and will never do again. Therefore in your midst fathers will eat their children, and children will eat their fathers. I will inflict punishment on you and will scatter all your survivors to the winds.'**" (Ezekiel 5:8-10)

We learn from Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel why God's anger with Israel reached a boiling point. His holy name had been profaned among the nations of Earth by Israel's decadence. As representatives of the Most High God and trustees of the everlasting gospel, Israel's rebellion had degenerated them to such a decadent condition that God could no longer use Israel for the benefit of the world. Destruction was the only solution. Therefore, God Himself chose a "servant-destroyer," the king of Babylon, to destroy His plans, His city and His people.

The Vanished Vision

Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, were taken to Babylon as prisoners of war during the first siege of Nebuchadnezzar in 605 B.C. Shortly after they arrived, God exalted Daniel and his friends before King Nebuchadnezzar through a curious turn of events.

One night God gave Nebuchadnezzar a vision that outlined the remaining course of human history. (Daniel 2) Essentially, the vision consisted of a great statue of a man that was made out of various materials.

At the end of the vision, the statue was smashed to pieces by a great rock that came out of the sky. When the king awoke, he became agitated for two reasons. First, Nebuchadnezzar knew that he had received an important vision but he could not remember what it was.

He thought it was from Marduk, the god of the Babylonians. Second, as the king fretted over his loss of memory, he realized that he had no other option but to ask the clergy of Babylon for help. The king did not have total confidence in the "wise men" of Babylon and he anticipated a skirmish with them. To stop this before it started, Nebuchadnezzar made it clear that he would not tolerate any delay or double talk on their part.

Behind the scenes, the God of Heaven was unfolding a plan to exalt His holy name throughout the world. Nebuchadnezzar's vision was from the God of Heaven, not Marduk, and it was the God of Heaven who gave the king amnesia. By doing this, God made fools of Babylon's clergy and at the same time revealed the impotence of Marduk.

Even though the vanished vision agitated the king, the agitation caused by that vanished vision became the very means through which young Daniel became exalted to a position close to the king.

God Is So Clever

After rising from bed and I am sure, pacing the floor, Nebuchadnezzar called an emergency meeting for all the wise men of the palace.

Suspecting lame excuses and weasel words, Nebuchadnezzar confronted his wise men with these words: **"So the king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed. When they came in and stood before the king, he said to them, 'I have had a dream that troubles me and I want to know what it means.' Then the astrologers answered the king in Aramaic, 'O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will interpret it.' The king replied to the astrologers, 'This is what I have firmly decided: If you do not tell me what my dream was and interpret it, I will have you cut into pieces and your houses turned into piles of rubble. But if you tell me the dream and explain it, you will receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor. So tell me the dream and interpret it for me.' Once more they replied, 'Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will interpret it.' Then the king answered, 'I am certain that you are trying to gain time [so that you can create another one of your incoherent riddles], because you realize that this is what I have firmly decided: If you do not [immediately] tell me the dream, there is just one penalty for you. [If you do not tell me the dream, I will know that] You have conspired to tell me misleading and wicked things [during times past], hoping the situation will [favorably] change [in each instance to fit your predictions]. So then [since you claim to have contact with the god of Babylon], tell me the dream, and I will know [beyond doubt] that you can interpret it for me.' "** (Daniel 2:2-9, insertions mine)

Nebuchadnezzar was no dummy. Consider his speech to the wise men. If the wise men proved to be a bunch of clever liars, he would destroy them. If they really did have a supernatural connection with Marduk, *as they had claimed*, they would be rewarded.

The astrologers, magicians, sorcerers and enchanters represented Babylon's diverse religion and they claimed, from time to time, to have received visions from Marduk on behalf of the king. *Their claims of contact with Marduk almost led to their demise.*

False Prophets

In ancient times kings often sought the services of clergymen as counselors and advisers. For example, Jezebel employed 450 prophets of Baal. (1 Kings 18:19) Even as late as the fourth century A.D., Constantine depended heavily upon the advice and flattery of the theologian, Eusebius. Clergymen were sometimes deemed important because rulers believed that their prosperity depended on staying within the favor of "the gods." To earn their "salt," clergymen had to walk a fine line.

They had to be very careful with their words. They not only had to say things that bolstered the ego of their employer, they had to say things in a way that could not be proven false. For this reason, "wise men" were notoriously hard to "pin down." They always had an "out" hidden somewhere in their riddles and prophecies.

In ancient times, the highest rank among the clergymen was that of a prophet. (Remember Balaam? See Numbers 22.) Any person who had direct connection with "the gods" was highly honored, respected and paid well. It is ironic that God's prophets in Israel had just the opposite fate. They were often stoned or executed because Israel's kings did not want to hear the truth! (Matthew 23:37)

In most cases, to become "a prophet," all a person had to do was claim that he or she had received a message from one of "the gods." Of course, a prophet was validated when his prophecy came to pass, but this was the point that bothered Nebuchadnezzar. Babylon's prophets presented their messages with such slippery words that they always seemed to come true no matter how the situation unfolded. However, when Daniel stood before the king and repeated the vision and declared its interpretation, the king immediately recognized the veracity of Daniel's words.

Daniel was a "true" prophet speaking clearly and decisively. He did not use weasel words! Therefore, Nebuchadnezzar promptly promoted Daniel above all the prophets in Babylon.

Let me explain one thing. A false prophet is a person who claims to speak for God when God has not spoken to that person. As Israel degenerated, she became full of false prophets and this made God very angry. Prophets were saying "God showed this to me," or "God said this to me," when in fact God had said nothing or shown nothing.

The reason this makes God so angry is because it is only a matter of time until His Word is defamed and considered worthless because of prophetic falsehoods. God feels so strongly about this that He promises to destroy anyone who uses His name for the sake of credibility, when in reality the false prophet is speaking out of his own imagination. (See Ezekiel 13.) Lucifer is called "the false prophet" in Revelation 19:20 for this very reason. He will speak out of his own evil imagination, claiming to be God!

So, in an effort to stay within the king's favor (and earn their keep), Babylon's prophets made up fables and riddles to please and flatter the king. But Nebuchadnezzar was smart enough to know that (a) a dream cannot be validated or studied by other people, and (b) although a false prophet can say that he or she has received a vision, no one can prove otherwise if the message cannot be clearly nailed down? (See also 1 Kings 18:22 and 2 Kings 3.)

So, when Nebuchadnezzar demanded the wise men to reveal the vanished vision, he turned the tables on them. There was no room to deceive. The king reasoned that if his wise men really had contact with Marduk, if they received visions as he had, and if they had the ability to interpret visions from Marduk, then they *should be* able to determine, describe, and interpret the vision which Marduk gave the king.

So, the king was ready to confront his "wise men" and framed his request in a way that left no wiggle room. When the wise men considered the demand of the king, they knew they were in big trouble.

They would not be able to weasel their way out of this confrontation. Consider their defense: **"The astrologers answered the king, 'There is not a man on earth who can do what the king asks! No king, however great and mighty, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or astrologer. What the king asks is too difficult. No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among men.'** This made the king so angry and furious that he ordered the execution of all the wise men of Babylon." (Daniel 2:10-12)

Can you imagine being summoned to the palace for an emergency meeting only to discover that your execution is minutes away? In the presence of Nebuchadnezzar, all of the wise men of Babylon were forced to admit deceit and failure.

How clever of the God of Heaven to have the wise men confess with their own mouths the impotence of the Babylonian religion. When the moment of truth came, the clergy of Babylon were disgraced and the king was justifiably furious with them.

Marduk Is No God

Before God would exalt His holy name throughout the Earth, He chose to demonstrate that Marduk was "no god." It is amazing how a vanished dream turned the world of the clergy upside down. Before the vision took place, the prophets of Babylon were highly paid and widely respected as "wise men." After meeting with the king for only a few minutes, the clergymen of Babylon confirmed with their own mouths they were just "a clutch of liars" with a death sentence hanging over their heads.

I am reminded of Paul's words, **"But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong."** (1 Corinthians 1:27) Do you see an end-time parallel here? (Hint: Is it possible that few, if any, of the 144,000 will be theologians?)

Remember, the ultimate point of this story is that God wanted to vindicate His holy name before the nations of Earth. He wanted the whole world to know that He was a God of love and salvation, a God of mercy and justice, a God of fairness and truth, a God of compassion and majesty. Unfortunately, just the opposite had occurred. The Jews had made enemies of almost everyone on Earth, they had slandered and profaned the exalted name of God, trampled upon His law, and rejected every prophet He sent to them.

So, God implemented a plan to restore His good name and He chose to use the mouth of a heathen king to do it! A sovereign God can make a servant out of anyone or anything.

The Death Decree

News of a sudden and unexpected death decree for all the wise men of Babylon flew from the palace of Nebuchadnezzar as fast as a horse could go. The "news media" was on this story in a heartbeat. The threat of death for all the wise men of Babylon did something that Nebuchadnezzar would later regret.

The king had unwittingly informed the whole world of the impotence of Babylon's wise men by putting a death decree on their heads. Even worse, the entire kingdom became eager to know the contents of the vision that had vanished and wondered what was so imperative about the vision that the king intended to kill all of his wise men?

Daniel Exalted

Through a series of providential events, Daniel eventually stood before the king. He not only revealed the vanished vision, but he also interpreted the vision for the king.

This pleased the king more than words can express. When the king heard Daniel's testimony, he was thrilled: **"Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor and ordered that an offering and incense be presented to him. The king said to Daniel, 'Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery.' Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men."** (Daniel 2:46-48)

A few hours later, after pondering the consequences of his rash decisions, the king had a change of heart. He must have grimaced as he faced three sobering truths: First, Daniel had informed the king that Marduk did not give him the vision. *Nebuchadnezzar's* vision came from the Most High God *of the Jews*, those despicable people.

They were the last people on Earth Nebuchadnezzar wanted to have a God greater than the Babylonians.

Second, Daniel told the king that the God of the Jews was sovereign over all the kingdoms of the world, even Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar heard how God sets up kings and takes them down, according to His sovereign authority. Nebuchadnezzar was flattered to learn that it was the God of Heaven who had given *him* a throne.

At the time, the reality of Daniel's words had not sunk in. God wanted Nebuchadnezzar to know that he had not gained the throne by human prowess, but this lesson would not be learned until the king was humbled and spent seven years living as an animal.

The third truth was the most chilling of all. The king was told that *his* kingdom would fall and it would be destroyed in days to come. As the king churned on the vanished vision and the train of events that it produced, he must have thought his vision was more of a nightmare than a revelation from God.

The King Distressed

Nebuchadnezzar's impatience with the wise men had created a political nightmare. The king had publically humiliated and discredited the wise men of Babylon. He had tested the god of the Babylonians and proved that Marduk was inferior to the God of the Hebrews. Worst of all, he had fueled the curiosity of his subjects by putting a death decree on the heads of Babylon's wise men.

Everyone wanted to know the contents of the vanished vision! The seriousness of a death decree for the clergy indicated this vision was not a trivial matter. Furthermore, when the Jewish teenager, Daniel, was promoted above all the wise men of Babylon, it was obvious to everyone that Daniel had successfully recalled and interpreted the vision for the king. So, the vision had been recalled and interpreted, but what did it say?

We know the vision predicted the fall of Babylon and other world empires, but Nebuchadnezzar did not want his subjects to know that the God of the Hebrews had predestined the fall and destruction of his empire. The king knew that if this information leaked out, his government would collapse. A government cannot survive without the submission and loyalty of its subjects. If the news of Babylon's predestined fall reached the ears of his top administrators, Nebuchadnezzar knew he would soon be a king without a throne.

How could anyone maintain confidence in a king that was predestined to destruction by the Most High God? Nebuchadnezzar realized that a long tenure on the throne was only possible for as long as people *were loyal* to him and his regime. If his subjects knew that God had numbered his days, they would rise up in rebellion and he would perish.

Kings may conquer nations and kings may kill thousands to secure their authority, but no king can thwart the God of Heaven. The rumor began to spread that the fall of Babylon was predestined by the God of the Jews. Based on Nebuchadnezzar's subsequent actions, I believe it is safe to conclude that the administrators from the far reaches of the empire must have sent requests for clarification so that they could deal with the rumors about the vision.

As the situation worsened, Nebuchadnezzar consulted with his embarrassed wise men and they decided to dissolve the rumor by mixing error with truth.

Nebuchadnezzar chose to distort the truth that was given to him in the vision for a number of practical and political purposes. The wise men owed their lives to the king (actually to Daniel and his three friends) because the king relented on the death decree. Consequently, they were very eager to help the king solve his political problem.

Nebuchadnezzar and his wise men conspired to tell the world that Marduk had given the king a great vision of "a golden man." The people would be told that the golden man represented the kingdom of Babylon, *which would last forever*. Based on the course of events, Nebuchadnezzar evidently alleged to his subjects that he "was commanded" in vision to empty the golden coffers of Babylon to erect a great golden replica of his vision.

Because the rumor had circulated that Babylon was predestined to fall, the king decided to use the golden image as a way to renew loyalty to his government. He planned to require all of his administrators and governors to travel to the province of Babylon so that they might be present on the day when the vision of "the golden image" would be told by the king and the image dedicated.

The construction of a 90-foot tall golden image of a man began in earnest. (It is believed that a cubit in ancient Babylon equaled 18-20 inches, so 60 cubits [in height] would equal about 90 feet. For comparison's sake, the Statute of Liberty is 111 feet tall, but Lady Liberty stands on a pedestal that is 194 feet high, which makes her total height 305 feet.)

Due to the swiftness of rumors and the irreparable damage they could cause, there was no time for delay. Riders on horses were dispatched to the ends of the Earth calling the administrators and governors to be present on the Plain of Dura at an appointed time. Nebuchadnezzar anticipated some resistance to his plans, so he ordered the giant smelting furnaces that were used to cast the metal man to be kept burning during the dedication service. The loyalty test would be "real simple."

If anyone refused to bow down and worship the golden image, they would be thrown into a furnace. The king calculated his loyalty test would force everyone back into "the fold" if any loyalties had been compromised by the rumor that Babylon was destined for destruction. The immediate death of rebels would reduce potential problems. The king was satisfied that this course of action would protect his throne.

I Did It My Way

Now remember that Nebuchadnezzar believed that he had *earned* his throne through political savvy and military prowess. (Daniel 4:30) He heard, but did not comprehend the words of Daniel, indicating that his kingdom had been *given* to him by the God of Heaven.

Therefore, the king thought a golden image and a loyalty test would bring an end to the rumor that Babylon was predestined to fall. It is possible that this is the most expensive lie ever told. Consider the amount of gold that was required to cast a statue 90 feet tall. Consider the amount of labor for making such an image and the amount of travel and logistics necessary to bring thousands of administrators from the far-flung corners of the Earth to the Plain of Dura.

This whole story highlights an interesting point about the carnal heart: Power can be of greater value than money. Men will go to extremes to gain or hold on to power. (We regularly see politicians spend millions to win a government office that pays very little money. Why do they do this?) To keep his lie covered up, Nebuchadnezzar prevented Daniel from attending the service. He had highly honored Daniel for telling the truth, but now that he was implementing a great lie and he did not want Daniel to be at the service to observe his foolishness.

A Time of Testing

When Daniel was promoted above the wise men of Babylon, Daniel asked that his friends be recognized for their contribution toward solving the mystery of the vanished vision. (Daniel 2:18,49) Their promotion almost proved to be the cause of their death.

The king wanted everyone who was someone in his government to be present at the dedication of the golden image. In a political setting, the question of loyalty is paramount to everything else. *One man can exercise power over others only if the others are willing to submit.*

Daniel's friends, Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego, knew the test of loyalty was coming. What should they do? They could not run and hide because they had been given high positions in the government of Babylon by the king. Furthermore, the impotent wise men of Babylon were jealously eager to have Daniel and these "three Jews" removed from their high offices.

Therefore, if they were to avoid the dedication of the golden image they would show reluctance in honoring the king. Hesitation on this point could be regarded as treason.

As the date approached, I am sure Daniel and his friends met together to ask the Lord for divine intervention. On the basis of their testimony during the dedication service, it is safe to say that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego obediently went to the service expecting to be thrown into the fiery furnace.

What courage! But, this is exactly what God wanted! God needed three young men who were willing to go to their death so that He could exalt His holy name. Remember, this story began when God wanted to correct the impression that the nation of Israel had given of Him.

The Jews had profaned His holy name and God wanted to set the record straight. In order to do this, God needed an expensive golden image, a pagan king who knew the truth, a large crowd of world leaders who were confused by rumors, a very hot fiery furnace and three young men who would be faith-full unto death.

The Moment of Truth

"So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it. Then the herald loudly proclaimed, 'This is what you are commanded to do, O peoples, nations and men of every language: As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up.

Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.' Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. At this time some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews."

(Daniel 3:3-8)

All of a sudden, the dedication service stopped. As far as the eye could see, all but three Jews had bowed down before the golden man. The wise men wasted no time reporting this anomaly to the king. The three men were arrested and presented to the king. The golden image was forgotten. The music stopped. Everyone stood up and turned around to see what was about to happen.

Every eye focused on three young Jews who dared to rebel against the monarch of Babylon! As they approached the throne of the king, the king must have uttered some bad Babylonian words under his breath, "How did *they* get here?" The king was embarrassed and frustrated. The whole dedication service could unravel and the result could be worse than the truth he was trying to hide!

Did you notice who reported the insolence of the three Hebrews? The wise men were the first to denounce the Jews. This is amazing.

The wise men owed their very lives to these three young men and yet, the wise men were the first to report their disobedience to the king. (There is an end-time parallel here.) **"They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, 'O king, live forever! You have issued a decree, O king, that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon – Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego – who pay no attention to you, O king. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up.' Furious with [embarrassment and] rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, 'Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up?'"** (Daniel 3:9-14, insertion mine)

The king personally knew Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. He knew their integrity and loyalty. He knew they were close friends of Daniel, but somehow they had been overlooked. They should not be present. Now, he had no other option but to destroy them if He wanted to protect his throne.

The king was "up the creek." Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Earth, had created a big lie, but the God of Heaven had gathered everyone together to hear and see the truth that was greater than a golden lie. (The truth of God is best seen when it is confronted with a great lie.) The king responded to the rebellion of Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego with feigned generosity, hoping they would humor him on this matter.

The king had a big political problem on his hands (which he had created by threatening the wise men), and he knew he did not need a showdown with the Most High God of these three men. So the king tried to appear generous: **"Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship**

the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" (Daniel 3:15)

The words of Nebuchadnezzar are interesting. The king honestly knew these three lads were not rebellious toward him; after all, they had joined with Daniel in seeking an answer to his vanished vision. But the king was haughty enough to taunt the lads with the remark, "**Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?**" The king uttered these words because *he knew* of their loyalty to their God.

He may have even known about the second commandment of their God. The action of the king reveals another interesting fact about the carnal heart: The performance of a miracle does not always change it. (Centuries later, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead in the presence of many unbelievers and some of them still refused to accept Christ as the Messiah! See John 11.)

In Nebuchadnezzar's case, the king had personally experienced the vanished vision and witnessed a second miracle when Daniel told him what he had dreamed. But neither event changed the king's heart. When confronted with their loyalty to the King of kings, the king of Earth thought he had the high ground, but as it turns out, he was on holy ground!

To protect his lies, the king had to kill those who *stood* for the truth. He knew that they knew the truth about the vanished vision because he had promoted them.

He also knew that he could never recover from public disgrace if he showed any sign of weakness or timidity in the presence of thousands of his administrators. So, the king did what every carnal heart would do and the young men did what every born-again believer would do. The metal in each heart was revealed.

"Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, 'O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter [because you know the truth and we know the truth about the vanished vision]. **If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.**' " (Daniel 3:16-18)

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had prepared for this moment. Through prayer and fasting, they had strengthened their resolve to stand firm for God. This event was a showdown between the gold of Babylon and the pure gold of faith in God. When the king saw that these young men were not going to acquiesce and "go along" with his plan, he became very angry.

They had publicly rejected his authority and this was the very thing he was trying to protect with the creation and dedication of the golden image!

"Then was Nebuchadnezzar full of fury, and the form of his visage was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: therefore he spake, and commanded that they should heat the furnace one seven times more than it was wont to be [normally] **heated. And he**

commanded the most mighty men that were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. Then these men were bound in their coats, their hosen [trousers], and their hats, and their other garments, and were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace." (Daniel 3:19-21, KJV, insertions mine)

I used the KJV for these verses because I like the language. The Bible says "the form of his visage was changed." I understand this to mean that Nebuchadnezzar's face turned fiery red (maybe his blood pressure hit 220/160). He was hotter than a firecracker on the fourth of July because his kingly ego had been hammered.

Here is a mystery: *Even though the carnal heart is full of rebellion, the carnal heart hates rebellion more than anything else.* When the carnal heart cannot get its way, its fury knows no limits. The king was rejected and no king or carnal heart can tolerate rebellion. Rejection or the fear of rejection is the underlying basis for peer pressure and a lot of social torment.

To successfully deal with rejection, a person must receive daily injections of spiritual courage and stamina. Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego were at peace with their fate on that day because they had walked and talked with God.

They had practiced obedience in small things; this was not their first test. This is a very important point. Loyalty that can withstand the prospect of a fiery death does not come overnight. Instead, it comes in little steps.

The God of Heaven Takes Over

"The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace. Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, 'wasn't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?' They replied, 'Certainly, O king.' He said, 'Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.'

Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, 'Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!' So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them." (Daniel 3:22-27)

The death of Nebuchadnezzar's soldiers proved to the vast audience that the heat of the furnace was extreme. The soldiers who threw the three Jews into the furnace went to their death because they were loyal and obedient to their earthly king. The three Hebrews that were supposed to go to their death were obedient and loyal to their Heavenly King. (Exodus 20:4-6) In both cases, loyalty was present, but the greater question is: "Which king deserves highest loyalty?"

While the three Hebrews were being bound and thrown into the furnace, the king's mind was in turmoil. He had to recover from the showdown caused by these three Jews. He watched with interest as the young men were bound and thrown into the furnace.

As he observed their fate and his authority over their life, the king is surprised! Instead of seeing three bodies consumed by fire, he saw *four* men walking around in the furnace. The king jumped to his feet and asked, "**Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?**"

His attendants assured him this was the case. Then, the king exclaimed, "**Look! I see four men walking around in the fire . . .**" Nebuchadnezzar immediately recognized this had to be the presence of God with the three Hebrews.

Nebuchadnezzar knew the golden image service was a charade. Nebuchadnezzar knew he was in the wrong when he sent Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to the fiery furnace. In spite of knowing these things, the king followed a course of action that protected his material interests. He did this because his highest loyalties centered on himself.

In this sense, Nebuchadnezzar demonstrates a carnal heart that plagues all of mankind. Nothing on Earth is more selfish and self-seeking than the carnal heart. The root of the world's problems today is selfishness.

"Then Nebuchadnezzar said, 'Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God.

Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way.' Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon." (Daniel 8:29-30)

What does a humiliated king say to an enormous gathering of world governors when his death decree upon three Jews was made null and void by a miracle? The king did not admit defeat, nor did the king offer an apology to the God of the Heaven. Instead, he turned to his impotent wise men and confused administrators and said, "If any of you speak evil about the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, you will be cut in pieces!" Wow!

The king deflects his responsibility once again. The carnal heart of the king rejected another chance to be transformed. Later, the God of Heaven finally got the king's attention by exiling him to the field as an animal for seven years – but that's another story.

The End of This Story

When the administrators and governors returned to their distant homes, they had a story to tell!

In a few words their story went like this, "Yes, we saw the golden man, but let me tell you about the God of the Jews. He delivered three young men out of a roaring fiery furnace. We saw it with our own eyes. The fire was so hot it killed the king's soldiers, but the flames did not hurt those three Jews!

That is some God the Jews have." This story, repeated by a thousand pagans all over the world, exalted the God of Heaven. As a nation, the Jews had profaned the wonderful name of God, but God found three Jews who had a faith of pure gold and He was able to exalt His holy name through their obedience and loyalty.

There are numerous important end-time parallels in this story. During the end-time, there will be "an image to the beast" and all people will be required to worship it or be killed. (Revelation 13) You and I will be players in the drama that is forthcoming. It is possible that we may have to stand before the dreaded king of Babylon (Lucifer).

Will we have a faith of pure gold? **"To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."** (Revelation 3:14-22)