



DEFYING THE DEATH DECREE

As Daniel chapter 3 begins, we find Nebuchadnezzar constructing a great image on the plain of Dura. Now remember, the main theme of Daniel chapter 2 was a great image and each of the metals of this image represented a successive kingdom, beginning with Babylon as represented by the head of gold. In chapter 3 however, we find the great image is constructed of only one metal, gold. It is as if Nebuchadnezzar is saying: "I don't care what God says, Babylon will never fall, it will never be succeeded by another kingdom, it shall stand forever. And to illustrate this I will build an image completely of gold, not just the head." This thought is even conveyed in an archaeological discovery which reads: "Babylon, kingdom of kingdoms, the excellency of all the earth. My kingdom. May it last forever."

The size of this image built by Nebuchadnezzar has disturbed some in that it appears to be disproportionate, being 60 cubits high and 6 cubits wide. A cubit is between 18 and 24 inches depending on the length of a man's forearm. Therefore, taking the smaller figure of 18 inches, 60 cubits would be 90 feet and 6 cubits would equal 9 feet. Thus, we have a ratio of 90 to 9, or 10 to 1, which is definitely disproportionate when compared with the human body which is approximately 4 to 1. However, this need not present a problem when we understand this measurement was for the entire structure and not just the human figure alone. For example, the statue of Liberty has a total height of 305 feet, but more than half of that is the pedestal. The human figure itself is only 111 feet tall. If half of the 60 cubits were pedestal, then the statue itself would have been 45 x 9 feet.

What an impressive sight this towering image must have been as it rose 90 feet (almost nine stories) above the flat plains surrounding Babylon. It would have been visible for miles as the gold reflected the brilliance of the sun; and now completed it stood in direct opposition to the power, authority, and word of God.

In preparation for the dedication service of the symbol of the permanence of the Babylonian Empire, Nebuchadnezzar summons all the leaders throughout his kingdom. As this assembly stands before the image they receive a command that as soon as they hear the music begin to play, they are to "fall down and worship the golden image that king Nebuchadnezzar hath made." Until now nothing had been said regarding worship, it was to be a dedication service, but now worship is demanded and the penalty for refusal is death; for "whosoever falleth not down and worshipping shall the same hour be cast into the midst

of a burning fiery furnace."

The command is given, the decree has been made, worship the way man says or die. A command governing worship which stands in opposition to God's command. Whom should God's people obey?

Before we continue, let me remind you that the stories found in the book of Daniel were recorded for those of us living in these very last days of earth's history. Remember, the stories of Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego, or of Daniel in the lions' den, are more than interesting stories to tell our children. They are more than historical events with little or no relationship to us today; but rather, they are types or symbols of events that are to take place in these last days. Therefore, as we consider the events of Daniel chapter 3, keep in mind we are also looking at events and principles you and I will have to face one day soon.

An image has been set up and the people commanded to worship the image; it is a forced worship, a legislated worship, as church and state unite to enforce the decree. The command was given and the basic issue became one of obedience. Obedience to God or the government. To obey one is to disobey the other.

The ceremony began, the command was given and everyone bowed down; everyone that is except three young men. These three must have been as conspicuous as a candle in a dark room as thousands lay prostrate before the image while they alone remained standing, towering above the multitude in direct defiance to the decree of the state. But even with the tightness in their stomachs and the dryness in their mouths, they determined to stand for God.

Immediately, they were reported to the king. "There are certain Jews whom thou hast set over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; these men, O king, have not regarded thee: they serve not thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up."

Why didn't Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego bow down? Why did they not obey the command of the state? It was because the command was in direct violation to the commandments of God, and when the commandments of men stand in opposition to the commandments of God, "we ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). For them to obey the command of Nebuchadnezzar would have been to disobey both the first and second commandments of God. However, being obedient to God meant being disobedient to the king and to the government, therefore, these three were considered traitors and outlaws of the state.

In ancient Babylon the church and the state united to promote falsehood, force the conscience, and coerce worship. In the last days we find spiritual Babylon will also attempt to do these very things. (See Revelation 17:1-6) In the thirteenth chapter of Revelation we find a similar decree compelling worship, and it, too, has a death decree for all who dare disobey. Again church and state shall unite, and again worship shall be legislated under penalty of death. "And he had power to give life unto the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak, and cause that as many as would not worship the image of the beast should be killed" (Revelation 13:15).

Don't miss the point. An image is erected in Babylon; church and state are united and worship is enforced by a universal death decree. Once again a fiery trial is about to come upon God's people. A trial greater than any in the history of the world is soon coming and the followers of God are soon to be brought into a crisis over the issue of His commandments versus the commandments of men. When that time comes, will you be willing to declare

with Peter and the other apostles, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29)?

As the horns sounded and the music played, all but three present at the great gathering prostrated themselves before the giant image which the king had set up. These three, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did not have to quickly form a little huddle to decide what they should do. Abednego did not have to elbow his two friends and say, "Listen, we had better do something; everybody is down there and we are up here. Maybe we could squat down and tighten our sandal straps. No one would ever know the difference." No! These young men did not have to decide anything. Their decision had been made before they ever went to the plain of Dura. They had already determined that no matter what happened, they were going to remain true to God.

As a result of their loyalty to God and obedience to His commandments, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were brought before king Nebuchadnezzar and told they would be given one last chance. The musicians would be commanded to play once more, and if when the music sounded, the three of them would fall down and worship the image they would be spared, if not, they would be killed.

In response to the king's ultimatum, the three answered: "O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up." In other words: "We have no need to answer you in this matter king. We cannot and will not worship your gods or this image. If we are thrown into the furnace, our God is able to deliver us, but even if He does not, we refuse to disobey His commandments and to worship this image."

Then the mightiest men in the Babylonian army bound the three Hebrews hand and foot, carried them over to the furnace, tossed them in, and because of the extreme heat of the furnace, the soldiers themselves dropped over dead. Within moments Nebuchadnezzar, who had been sitting there watching these events transpire, suddenly jumped up from his throne with his eyes riveted to the furnace, and a terrified look on his face crying: "Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?" Confused as to what was taking place, his counselors replied, "True, O king." Then, with trembling hands the king grasps his throne for support, and in a hoarse whisper says, "Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God."

Mustering all the strength and courage he can, Nebuchadnezzar moves as near as possible to the mouth of the furnace and calls for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, to come forth from the fire. It is extremely interesting he did not call for the fourth man to come out of the fire. He had no desire to be standing before the Son of God, whose servants he had just attempted to destroy.

Imagine what it must have been like when these faithful servants of God came out of that furnace, in perfect health and completely free of the ropes that had bound them. What a thrill must have raced through that multitude of people gathered there who actually "saw these men, upon whose bodies the fire had no power, nor was an hair of their head singed, neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire had passed upon them."

The fire that these men passed through did not burn them. It could not harm them for the Lord Himself was with them. All it did was free them from their bonds. And so it is with us; if properly related to, every fiery trial that may beset us will but consume the dross of our worldliness and we may come forth as gold tried in the fire; free of the restraining

bonds with which Satan has shackled us for so long. Then when the Lord destroys this world by fire (2 Peter 3:10-13), we will have nothing to fear, for He shall be standing by our side as He was at the side of the faithful servants in the fiery furnace.

When trials and temptations beset you, claim this promise of God: "Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passeth through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shall not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour" (Isaiah 43:1-3).

The third chapter of Daniel ends with Nebuchadnezzar recognizing the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as the only true God and declaring that anyone who should "speak anything amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego" should be killed. This is quite a decree for the king to make when just a few short hours before, he had declared that anyone who did not worship the golden image was to be killed.

Certainly, all would agree the first law, forcing a person to worship an idol and to reject or disobey the God of heaven, was an extremely bad one. But what about this second decree? What about this law requiring everyone to acknowledge the great God of heaven, was that a good law for Nebuchadnezzar to make? Let's look at it in a little more modern setting. Suppose our government were to pass a law requiring everyone to be a Christian. (There are many today attempting to have just such a law passed.) Do you feel that would be a good law? What would that do to the religious freedom of the Jews, Muslims, and others in this country?

Now let's carry this one step further and suppose that in an attempt to reduce crime, conserve energy, and preserve the family, the government declared that everyone had to accept Jesus and to close all business establishments every Sunday in order to worship Him. We would then have a legislated worship. And then what if the government declared that those who refused to abide by this law were to be executed. Would this be a good law? Should Christians seek to force others to accept their beliefs? Should we seek to make this a Christian nation through legislation?

The God we worship is a God of love, and He wants us to worship Him because we love Him and because we want to express our love for Him. This is why He created each of us a free moral agent with the power of choosing whom we shall worship and how we shall worship. If God wanted forced worship, He could have created us without a free will, but instead, He gave each of us the freedom of choice. His word declares: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live: That thou mayest love the Lord thy God, and that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him" (Deuteronomy 30:19-20). May each of us make the right choice.