

Daniel 3: Bend or Burn

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1984 I visited a small town in England with a group of people. The town's name was Hawkshead. High on a hill there was a parish church. Not far from the church was the old part of town. In the old part of town there was an old pub that was over 100 years old. The door of the pub was very low. The top of the door was about as high as my neck. Above the door was the most famous sign in the town. Its message read, "Bend or Bump". It was obvious that anyone entering that door had those two choices. He could bend over as he walked in. Or he could bump his head. Bend or bump.

There is an ancient story with a similar message as that old sign. Only in this story the message was not, "bend or bump." The message was, "bend or burn".

In Daniel 2, we already saw the powerful prophecy of the metal man. This metal man was the image which had been in two dreams. First, the king had the dream. Then Daniel had the dream and explained its meaning to the king. The different metals of the image had represented the succession of different kingdoms in history. These kingdoms were represented by the golden head, the silver arms, the bronze thighs, the iron legs, and the feet which were part iron and part clay.

At that time, King Nebuchadnezzar had been very impressed with the dream and its interpretation. But now, it seems, he wanted to invent his own interpretation.

Read Daniel 3:1,2

Though it may not be obvious at first, this was a direct challenge to Daniel's God. The image which had been in the dream included different metals. Daniel had told the king that the golden head represented Babylon (Daniel 2:38,39). But now, the king was setting up an image that was 100% gold. He was reinterpreting the prophecy. He wanted to show that there would be no end to Babylon.

In our day it is the same. People are not willing to accept the interpretation of prophecy which was shown by God. There are three basic views of prophecy: the preterist view, the futurist view, and the historicist view. [For more on this, see the introductory chapter.] As a brief review, the preterist view says that everything prophesied already happened in the past (around the time of Daniel). The futurist view throws the entire prophecy into the distant future. But the historicist view accepts the prophecy the way Daniel understood it. The events which had been predicted would start at the time of Daniel. Then they would continue through history into the future.

Nebuchadnezzar is not satisfied to have his kingdom represented by a head of gold. He has an image constructed which is made entirely of gold. It seems that he wants

people to believe that his kingdom will last forever. He is not allowing Bible prophecy to speak for itself. Like many religious people of our day, the king wanted to reinterpret prophecy.

He was also setting himself up to be seen as higher than the true God. He had set the stage for a showdown. For some reason, Daniel was not mentioned in the story. This is probably due to the fact that the king knew that Daniel would never bow to a golden image after interpreting the king's dream about the multiple metal image. But the king made a big mistake. He did not realize how mighty were the three friends of Daniel.

The theology behind this account becomes even more clear when it is compared with Revelation 13. There is a great deal of overlapping material. There is also a good chance to see a biblical concept of hell.

THEOLOGICAL TOOLS

Some have argued for a late date in writing the book of Daniel due to the use of some Greek words in Daniel 3. These words are transliterated into Aramaic, but are taken from Greek. It is argued that this would indicate the book was written around 180 B.C. since the Greeks were the main power at the time. These words are mentioned repeatedly in Daniel 3 beginning in verse 7.

Some of the words mentioned include קִיתָרוֹס [qithros] "kitharis", פְּסַלְטֵרִין [p^santerin] "psalterion", and סוּמְפֹנְיָה [sumphonyah] "symphonia". The *kitharis* was a kind of lyre or lute. The *psalterion* was a kind of harp. It was a three cornered stringed instrument with a sounding board. The *symphonia* was a kind of bagpipe. But this word could also be translated, "concord" or "harmony".

Those who have a problem with the presence of these words forget the fact that language often is used where there is no accompanying power. An example of this would be in the loan words from Swedish to English. These loan words include, smörgåsbord and ombudsman. These words have meaning in English and have been borrowed due to the fact that they state concisely matters which may require whole phrases to express in purely English words.

There is an insightful article¹ written by Carl Nylander (Upsala University, 1970) entitled: "Ionians in Pasargadae". In this article, Mr. Nylander shows that Greek workers helped to construct the Persian city of Pasargadae by the year 550 B.C. This is known by a study of their construction techniques. It would be very likely that these workers would have brought their musical instruments with them, and so the normal terms for those

¹I learned about this article on 11 February 1992 in a class with Hans Erbes.

instruments could have been taken over by the Aramaic language (as in the English example mentioned above).

The dimensions of the image were 60 cubits by 6 cubits. This would be about 90 feet (27 meters) high. But notice the significance of the numbers. This is a double six. In Revelation 13:18 we can see a triple six (666 is the number of the name of the beast). Six is kind of the number of man (God created man on the sixth day of creation). Six was also a special number for the Babylonian god, Anu. From the worship of Anu came the sexagesimal system (a system based on the number 60). From this system we get hours containing 60 minutes, and minutes containing 60 seconds. Daniel chapter three had the double six. Revelation 13 had the triple six. Perhaps this was one way to show an intensification as we move from the microcosm to the macrocosm (from Daniel's friends to the last-day remnant).²

Here we see the ungodly twins--FORCED worship and FALSE worship. It is possible that Revelation uses one more feature of Daniel. In Daniel 3:19, the king asked for the furnace to be heated seven times hotter than normal. Revelation 13 is followed by seven last plagues (seven times worse than one plague).

Some have contended that the Bible is not accurate since it would violate known properties of thermodynamics for a furnace to be seven times hotter than normal. But these people fail to take into account that the Bible never says that the furnace was actually raised to such a temperature. It merely records the command of the king. And it records the efforts of his workers to follow his command (efforts which brought about dramatic results).

²As a kind of side note, the number 666 is only used one other time in Scripture. It is used in 1 Kings 10:14. The tribute money which was paid to Solomon in one year was 666 talents of gold (along with other kinds of payment). It is possible that John had this in mind when he was writing Revelation. Before this number (1 Kings 10:1-13) there is the record of the visit from the queen of Sheba. She is able to see the way that God had blessed Solomon. After this (1 Kings 11), there is the record of how Solomon's many wives led him astray through the worship of false gods. Perhaps the number 666 can lead us to see a shift from the blessings of following God to the problems which follow implementing human plans apart from God.

Daniel 3	Revelation 13
Nebuchadnezzar requires false worship (3:5,6) ³	The beast requires false worship (13:15)
Death penalty (3:6)	Death penalty (13:15)
Fire in a furnace (3:6)	Fire from heaven (13:13)
A universal gathering (3:2)	A universal gathering (13:15,16)
60 cubits and 6 cubits (3:1) The double six	Number of his name: 666 (13:18) The triple six

There were three different kinds of people at the fiery furnace. I believe that each group represents one of the groups which will be present when Jesus comes in the clouds of glory.

1. There were the strong men who threw the three Hebrews into the fire. These strong men died from the intense heat (Daniel 3:20,22).
2. There were the three Hebrews themselves. They were not harmed in any way by their exposure to the hot fire (Daniel 3:23-27).
3. There was the king, himself. He eventually came near to the furnace (Daniel 3:26). And yet he was not harmed by the intense heat. But how is this possible?

Ponder the fact that our God, Himself, is a consuming fire (Deuteronomy 4:24 and Hebrews 12:29). There are many passages in scripture that speak of the fire of God's presence. For example, in Genesis 15:17, God appeared to Abram as a smoking furnace. In Genesis 19:24-28, God rained fire and sulfur on the people of Sodom. The fire came from God. In Exodus 13:21, God was in the pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. In Exodus 19:18, God descended upon Mount Sinai as a smoking, fiery furnace. In Exodus 24:17 the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain. Over and over in the Bible, the presence of God is seen to be a place of intense fire.

³Joshua Mura (in a presentation on 5 January 2006) noted five corresponding elements between Daniel 3 and Revelation 13. He identified 1) each involved a powerful kingdom; 2) each set up an image; 3) each commanded worship; 4) in each case, those who did not worship should die; 5) each was connected with the number 6. He went on to point out that the real issue involves the law of God versus the law of man. The five points of the story in Daniel 3 become a kind of type of what we will have to face in the end time. Revelation 13 has the same elements.

Daniel 3 gives us a peek at the time when Jesus comes again. We will see the same three groups. But this time, they will not be facing a fiery furnace. They will be facing the fire of God's presence.

1. The wicked will die from the intense flames of God's presence. In Revelation 20, there is a lake of fire prepared for the Devil and is also experienced by the wicked.
2. The righteous will be unharmed from the fiery presence of God. In Revelation 15:2 we see a sea of glass mingled with fire and the righteous are walking upon it.
3. Then there are people who did not follow God, but will be converted at the last minute. Like Nebuchadnezzar, these people will be able to approach the flames. They can come to the presence of God, because they have been changed by God.

In working with people who believe in eternal hellfire, I like to take them to a special passage of scripture written many decades before the book of Daniel. Isaiah 33 contains the passage. I ask the person to cover up verses 15-17 with one hand. Then we read Isaiah 33:14. I ask the same question as the prophet. Who will live in eternal fire? The normal Christian will answer that the wicked will live there. That is the message which most Christians have been taught. But that is not the message of the Bible. Then I have the person read Isaiah 33:15-17. In this context, these are shocking words. It is the righteous who will live with the eternal fire. And so, the presence of God is a consuming fire. The righteous live in it unharmed. The wicked die in it.

SPIRITUAL INSIGHT / PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Too many people read the Bible prophecies the way this king tried to understand the previous dream. I guess that it takes away some of the pressure from my life to read it that way. If the message is for the distant past or the distant future, then I don't need to change my life. But the message was for today: starting in Daniel's time and continuing until our time and beyond. We could see this in the story of that soldier, Mr. Hasel. [This story is in the last section of the chapter commenting on Daniel 2.]

Underneath this change in the interpretation of prophecy was another issue. It was the issue of control. Who was in control of the events of history? The king? Or God? The king was trying to show that he was in control.

And I have to ask myself, "Who is in control of my Life?" Am I trying to be in control? Or am I allowing God to be in control? If I am uncomfortable with God's leading, do I follow my own way? Or do I follow God, no matter what the consequences may be?

This was a huge image. A cubit is the length of a man's arm and hand. Sixty cubits would be about 90 feet (27 meters) high. But don't let yourself get distracted with the translation. In this story, even seemingly small details can have significance.

Notice the numbers: sixty and six (60 and 6). The image was 60 cubits high and 6 cubits wide. [See the section on theological tools for more comments on this.]

When God created the earth, He created man on the sixth day. The number six became a number for man. God's day came after that, on day number seven. Could it be that King Nebuchadnezzar chose this size to show that Anu's number was more important than the true God's number?

Here was a contest which involved numbers. And suddenly, I realize that this story is connected with another prophecy. The story of Daniel 3 is directly connected with the prophecy of Revelation 13. As we continue, take note of the similarities along the way.

In Revelation 13:14, we can see that the symbolic beast has an image set up. This image also was based on a number. But this time it was more than 60 and 6. This time it was 600, 60, and 6 or 666 (Revelation 13:18). We have moved from the double 6 of Daniel to the triple 6 of Revelation. Perhaps this is a way of showing that there is even greater intensity in the conflict. Man is setting himself up above God and God's requirements.

The king had required people to come from all parts of his kingdom. This was a kind of universal gathering (Daniel 3:2). The image of Revelation 13 also called for a universal gathering (Revelation 13:15, 16).

Read Daniel 3:4-7

The two stories are so similar. King Nebuchadnezzar was requiring false worship (Daniel 3:5,6). In Revelation 13:15 the beast was requiring worship. In both cases, there was a death penalty for those who refused to worship the image. In both stories there was fire. Fire in the furnace (Daniel 3:6) or fire from heaven (Revelation 13:13). The story of Revelation 13 is a prophecy for the last events of earth's history. At that time, God is looking for people who will stand true to Him. But how can we do this? How can we keep from compromising our faith when we risk losing everything? The story of Daniel 3 can give us the answers to these questions.

For some reason, Daniel is not mentioned in this story. Based on the events of Daniel 6, it is evident that he, too, would not have worshiped the image. I think that the king knew Daniel would not bow down but he also knew that Daniel was loyal to him. He probably wanted to avoid an embarrassing experience.

But he had not counted on the courage of these other three young men. The music was played and hundreds of noses scraped the ground. But as noses went down and bottoms went up, there were eager eyes searching for trouble. I'm sure that the other princes knew that these three men would not want to bow down in false worship. They were eager to get rid of their competition. They were wanting to report any act of disobedience.

And, sure enough, Daniel's three friends did not bow down to the image. The message was quickly taken to the king and he was extremely angry. He demanded that these young men be brought to him. He decided to give them another chance to obey him rather than standing true to conscience.

Read Daniel 3:15

"Who is the god that will deliver you from my hands?" This was clearly a contest between obeying God, or obeying the king. Sometimes we have to face this kind of pressure. "If you don't kill him, you will be put in a military prison." "If you don't work this Sabbath, you will lose your job." "If you don't sleep with me tonight, I won't be your boyfriend anymore." "If you don't drink this beer with me, you don't belong in this group." "If you don't copy the answers for the exam, you might not pass." "If you don't bow down to this image, you will be thrown into the fiery furnace."

How many times the people of God find themselves choosing between obeying His commands or gaining some kind of earthly advantage. Where are you in this story? Is your nose on the ground with everyone else? Or are you still standing, even though it could cost you your job, your influence, your friends, your position, your desires? Where are you in this picture? Where am I . . . ? I hope that we are still standing.

Read Daniel 3:16

"We don't need to answer you. . ." Here was the first key to their success. For them, compromise was not even an option. We get in trouble when we begin weighing the consequences. Is it harder to suffer from people now? Or is it harder to find yourself moving away from God? There are so many times in life when we should do as these men did. They realized that it was not necessary to make excuses. They just kept doing what was right because it was right. They let God worry about the results.

Read Daniel 3:17

Here was the second key to their success. These young men knew that their God was more powerful than the king. That is where we sometimes get into trouble. We forget that our God is powerful. I sometimes hear people say things like this: "He made me drink the beer." "She made me sleep with her." "My boss made me work on Sabbath." "My mother made me cheat on the exam so that I could pass." "He made me . . ." Are these people really so powerful in our lives? Can they really force us to do all of these things?

The problem is that if we do not choose to stand for what is right, others will choose for us what they want us to do. But OUR GOD IS POWERFUL. He can deliver us from these things. Will we give Him the chance to do this? Or will we go ahead and bow to the image?

Read Daniel 3:18

Even if God didn't choose to protect them this time, they would still obey Him. They knew all too well that God sometimes permits bad things to happen to good people. They had been following God in their home country. Then this pagan army had attacked them. At that time, it looked like God did not protect them. He allowed them to be taken as prisoners into Babylon. But even if they could not understand His will, they chose to be loyal to God and to obey His commands.

Am I like that? Are you like that? Do you obey God's commands even when they don't make sense at the time? Or do you only follow His leading when it fits in with other people's ideas? I hope not. This was the third key to their success. They were willing to accept unpleasant consequences to obeying God. If I am not afraid of difficulty, I can stand for what is right.

And so, here were their keys to success: For them, compromise was not even an option. They knew that their God was more powerful than any problem they might face. And they were willing to accept whatever consequences might come as long as they could be loyal to God.

We can face temptation the same way these young men faced it. We can be strong when all others are compromising.

The king was extremely angry when he heard their words. He commanded that the furnace be heated seven times hotter than usual (Daniel 3:19). It was so hot that the soldiers who threw them in died from the heat (Daniel 3:22). These three men were bound and thrown into the fierce flames of the furnace. And then, they stood up and started walking around.

Read Daniel 3:24,25

The king was amazed. He recognized divinity when he saw it. He trembled in the presence of the Holy God Whom he had mocked a little earlier.

Read Daniel 3:26

How can this be? How is it that the king could come near the furnace and not die? His strongest soldiers had died from the heat. But he could come near to the furnace.

I believe that this was possible because he had been converted. Those who came near the flame in their haughty disbelief, were killed. Those who entered the flame as followers of God, walked around with no harm. And one who was wicked but who then accepted the true God was also unharmed by this flame.

I believe that this is a small sample of what it will be like at the end of time. There will be three kinds of people who meet God in the end. Some will totally disregard God and His laws. Others will be true to Him at all times. And there will be some who have

not followed God, who will be converted and come to Him in the end. [See the Theological Tools section for comments on this and on Isaiah 33:15-17.]

God's people are not harmed by this fire. They can live in His burning presence without fear. Where are you in the picture? Are you in the fire? near the fire? or dead beside the furnace? If you claim the three keys of these young Hebrews, you can stand firmly on God's side no matter what will happen.

By the grace of God, are you willing to make a commitment to Him just now? In matters of conscience, don't consider compromise as an option. Claim God's power for your life. Be willing to accept whatever consequences may come as a result of following God. God will help you to live a life that is loyal to Him.

How to be Strong

Notice the king's words: "Who is the god that will deliver you from my hands?" (Daniel 3:15). This was clearly a contest between obeying God, or obeying the king. These words are similar to the words of Pharaoh when he defied the God of Moses. "Who is the LORD that I should obey his voice . . ." (Exodus 5:2). Notice the spiritual tools which Daniel's three friends used in order to remain faithful:

First, they had determined that compromise was not an option (Daniel 3:16). They would stand for the right because it was right.

Second, these men knew that their God was more powerful than the king (Daniel 3:17). We often fail because we forget that OUR GOD IS POWERFUL.

Third, these men had decided that no matter what the consequences might be, they would be loyal to the will of God (Daniel 3:18). Even if God did not choose to protect them, they would still follow His will.

A few more helpful insights were noted in class as students made their presentations. This chapter focuses on the issue of worship. The king wanted the worship of all of the people just like Satan wants our worship. On the other hand, Daniel's three friends gave the example of standing for the right no matter what might happen.⁴ This powerful section brings to mind the powerful quotation by Ellen White which states:

The greatest want of the world is the want of men--men who will not be bought or sold, men who in their inmost souls are true and honest, men who do not fear to call sin by its right name, men whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole, men who will stand for the right though the heavens fall.⁵

⁴Taken from a class presentation by Miguel Serrano given on 8 January 2004.

⁵Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1903/1952), 57.

Daniel's friends noted that, "God will deliver us . . ." (Dan 3:17). They showed so much faith in Him. And yet, they continued, even if God would choose not to deliver them, "We will not serve your gods . . ." (Dan 3:18). They were showing the truest faith possible because they were willing for God not to answer in the way they desired. We need to learn from this that we should trust God even without a visible answer to our prayers. It is not our will, but His will.⁶

In Daniel 3:6, the three Hebrews were faced with the thought of a painful death. And yet, they were willing to face the worst. We know that this is related to a series of life choices that they had made. It is a principle of life that if you give the small things to God, He gives strength to face the big things.⁷

Sometimes we marvel at the brave words of these young men. They had no need to answer since their way was set (Daniel 3:16). Their brave words must have seemed almost arrogant to the king (3:16-18). How much more angry could you make the king (even if this was your goal)? Their answer would naturally infuriate him. But these words may not have been intended for the benefit of the king. Their words were needed to give *themselves* courage. They were showing the whole universe what they stood for. This kind of faith starts small, and grows to this greatness.⁸

But what about the other side? As we look at the actions of the king, we realize that those who are against God can go to any extreme in fighting against Him. It is chilling to see what is possible when people try to resist the work of God.⁹

⁶Taken from a class presentation by Heather Haynes given on 5 January 2006.

⁷Taken from a class presentation by Andrew Uyeyama given on 8 January 2004.

⁸Taken from a class presentation by Cheng Vang given on 8 January 2007.

⁹Taken from a class presentation by Linda Terry given on 8 January 2004.