

FRUIT NO. 3 — PEACE

(Daniel 3)

2.3.19

BACKGROUND

Israel split into two kingdoms in a civil war following the death of Solomon. The northern kingdom (10 tribes) kept the name “Israel” and had its capitol city in Samaria. The southern kingdom was called “Judah” (consisting only of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin) and maintained Jerusalem as its capitol city. Though separate, the two kingdoms were still united by two ugly common denominators: (1) disobedience of God’s law, and (2) rejection of His calls to repentance, calls communicated for literally hundreds of years by God’s prophets. His message: “Come back to Me.”

Finally, with no response to His pleadings, God’s judgment arrived. The northern kingdom had been conquered by the empire of Assyria about 120 years before Daniel’s time. Babylon followed Assyria as the preeminent power of the world, gradually taking over their lands. They were led by King Nebuchadnezzar.

The southern kingdom ceased to exist as an independent nation when Nebuchadnezzar took Jerusalem approximately 605 B.C.; this is where the book of Daniel begins. At that time, Daniel and three of his friends were taken prisoner and brought to Babylon. The journey (forced march) they took from Jerusalem to Babylon was approximately 500 miles (approximately the distance from Redwood Falls to Chicago). Incidentally, Babylon is located about 50 miles south of present-day Baghdad in Iraq.

Daniel 1 tells us that Nebuchadnezzar was a bright guy. He saw his captives as additional resources that could be used for the benefit of his kingdom—and Daniel and three of his friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, were just what he was looking for: *young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king’s palace—Daniel 1:4a*. They were enrolled in a three-year government administration program, learning among other things the Babylonian language, laws, literature and culture — including Babylonian religion. The goal was to eventually be in position to work for the king. Incidentally, the four of them were also given new, Babylonian names. Now, few people think of Daniel by his Babylonian name (Beltshazzar). However, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah have become far better known by their Babylonian counterparts: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Now, while Daniel is obviously important, it’s his three friends that will be our focus today.

Now all four of them had recognized one fundamental truth: no matter where they were in the world, no matter their circumstances, God was still their master. He and His word still ruled. Remember, they had seen their homeland conquered precisely because of disobedience to the Law God had given them, and denial of who the Master was: *[E]veryone did as he saw fit—Judges 21:25b*. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had seen firsthand this disobedience and had experienced firsthand the tragic results. They resolved not to make the same mistakes themselves. The Bible says that all four of them made a pledge; they resolved *not to defile — Daniel 1:8a* themselves in any way. In other words, regardless of what life in Babylon held, they would not forget that God held their lives. Their loyalty would remain with Him. They would all have that commitment tested during their lives in Babylon. We’ll look at one of those tests now.

THE STORY: Daniel 3:1-30

King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the

dedication of the image he had set up. 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 — Daniel 3:1-3. Nebuchadnezzar is commanding political loyalty via religious worship of an image, in our measures approximately 90-100 feet high, 9-10 feet wide, and gold-plated. It must have been an amazing thing to see. Now this image was designed to both demonstrate and celebrate all his power, including the evident blessings of the gods of Babylon who have brought him and his empire to their present greatness (if the gods weren't with him, how could he have accomplished all these things?). This moment was set up to celebrate the rule and authority of King Nebuchadnezzar over *the nations and peoples of every language — Daniel 3:4a.* And while Daniel was not present for this moment, his three friends were, and would make their presence known ways that no one could have ever imagined.

Then the herald loudly proclaimed, “Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: As soon as you hear the sound of . . . all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had 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 . . . all kinds of music, all the nations and peoples of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up — Daniel 3:4-7. Except three. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego would not bow down to this foreign king's image. They couldn't bow down. You see, this particular situation required a stand because of the violation of God's first two commandments:

You shall have no other gods before Me — God speaking, Exodus 20:3.

You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything. . . . You shall not bow down to them or worship them — God speaking, Exodus 20:4a, 5a.

And remember that they had made a pledge not to defile themselves. They hadn't defiled themselves then with foods that didn't honor God. They wouldn't defile themselves now with worship that didn't honor God. So, while everyone else has bowed down, they remained standing. But they did not remain unnoticed.

At this time some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, “May the king live forever! Your Majesty has issued a decree that everyone who hears the sound of . . . 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, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up” — Daniel 3:8-12.

Now a couple of things are happening: First, this is disrupting the ceremony that Nebuchadnezzar has so carefully planned, and second, it is disrupting the display of all his royal power. As a result, King Nebuchadnezzar is, to put it politely, miffed.

Furious with 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? Now when you hear the sound of . . . 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 3:13-15.

Did you hear that: The game just changed. King Nebuchadnezzar has now raised the stakes. This is

no longer about him and his power and three disruptive “Jews.” He has actually made this moment what it most truly is — a moment between him and his power . . . and God — and his power.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and He will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. But even if He does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, 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 already achieved significant success, particularly for former captives who were now rising stars in the administration of the world’s predominant empire. And some people might say, “Are you guys idiots or what?” But their faith revealed so much more about their world view than prestige or position. They knew that, in all times, in all places, in all circumstances, God was in control. Nebuchadnezzar wasn’t their king; God was. It wasn’t Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom that they worked for; it was God’s kingdom. Their positions in God’s kingdom were the only positions that mattered. Therefore, it was never about them; it was only about God. And because it is only about God, they leave the consequences to God, showing a deep belief and recognition of God’s sovereignty.

What is sovereignty? According to A.W. Tozer, “God’s sovereignty is the attribute by which He rules His entire creation, and to be sovereign God must be all-knowing, all-powerful, and absolutely free.” He goes on to say that God’s sovereignty means that God is “free to do whatever He wills to do anywhere at any time to carry out His eternal purpose in every single detail without interference (Knowledge of the Holy, page 108).” Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego understood this. Acknowledging God may not rescue them at this moment because that may not “carry out His eternal purpose” (as Tozer says), they steadfastly refuse to change their position.

And you know what is truly amazing? At no time did Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego ever presume how God was going to work in this particular situation. They might live but they might just as easily die. That didn’t matter. If God was in charge, nothing else mattered. And, if God was in charge, then only the very best would happen. And what was that best? God would be glorified. His power would be witnessed. His righteousness would be declared.

Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. 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 — Daniel 3:19-23.

By this time in ancient history, man had already learned advanced techniques for smelting and refining metals, so the skill to construct a “fiery furnace” would easily have been available for such an occasion. According to historians, kilns of the type mentioned in this story, heated with charcoal for maximum effect, would have been able to sustain temperatures well over 1600°F — hot enough to melt aluminum, calcium, glass, lead or magnesium! I don’t think sunscreen’s gonna help!

Now ol’ Nebuchadnezzar thinks the story is done when all of a sudden he discovers that not only are they not dead but they are walking around . . . and, in fact, they got one more guy in there than when they started, and that extra guy seems somehow to be oddly divine.

Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, “Weren’t there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?” They replied, “Certainly, Your Majesty.” 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 3:24-27.

The king calls them out; they are untouched in any way by the fire. And all of a sudden, the planned celebration of one deity becomes the spontaneous worship of a far more worthy one:

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 3:28-30.

APPLICATION

Toward the end of Paul’s letter to the Romans, he wrote: ***[E]verything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope — Paul, Romans 15:3.*** So let’s review what encouragements we have received over the last few weeks of studying the fruit of the Spirit:

Fruit #1: We saw what love looks like in the father of the prodigal son who, upon his son’s return, showed his love with restorative forgiveness; his sins were remembered no more, and he was completely restored into relationship with his father, reflecting how God offers to treat our forgiven sins through the work of His Son Jesus Christ.

Fruit #2: We saw what joy looks like in Paul and Silas, severely wounded from a beating with bundles of rods, suffering untold humiliation of being naked while publicly beaten, then held in the innermost recesses of a filthy, stinky prison while held fast in stocks that kept their legs spread wide apart, yet singing hymns of joyful praise to God so loud that the other prisoners could hear them.

And today? We see what Fruit #3 — Peace looks like in Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, not only holding to their faith, not only willing to die for their God, but understanding that, while it most certainly is within God’s power to rescue them from their fiery predicament, it may not be within His perfect plan to do that. Their peace is found in their commitment to a God who cannot fail no matter what path He chooses. Their peace is found in trusting God’s view versus their own — no matter what that may wind up looking like. Wow!

So, what is peace? Obviously, it is much more than the absence of problems because Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are smack dab in the middle of a whole lot of problems. In fact, you could say that is often the setting for much of where God’s followers found themselves — in absurd places where no one in their right mind would want to be. Some examples:

In the Old Testament:

Abraham preparing Isaac for sacrifice

Moses and the nation of Israel trapped between the Egyptian army and the Red Sea

David walking into battle with the giant Goliath
Elijah confronting the wicked king and queen of Israel along with their prophets of Baal
Daniel continuing to pray even when disobedience meant a den of lions

In the New Testament:

Mary and Joseph embracing their roles no matter what it meant
The widow giving her two small coins at the temple
Peter and John continuing to preach Jesus despite opposition
Stephen praying for his enemies even in the midst of his death by stoning

Paul's testimony as to what being a preacher, teacher and follower of Christ meant for him:
troubles, hardships and distresses; beatings, imprisonments and riots; hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as imposters; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet living on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything. . . five [floggings], three times beaten with rods, once stoned (and left for dead), three times shipwrecked, a night and a day in the open sea, constantly on the move, in danger from rivers, bandits, [his] own people, Gentiles; in danger in the city, in the country, at sea; and in danger from false brothers, often without sleep; knowing hunger and thirst and often going without food; being cold and naked—Paul, from II Corinthians 6 and 11.

Yet all these people — and countless others — persevered, believing that, as the angel Gabriel would centuries later tell Mary: **“No word from God will ever fail” — Gabriel, Luke 1:37.** And that complete sold-out belief in what God had promised gave them peace. That's what we're talking about — the peace that Paul includes as a fruit of the spirit.

“Peace” — in the Greek EIRENE (i-rah[^]-nay) means: the sense of rest and contentment as a result of a relationship of harmony between God and man. For Christians, that relationship, of course, is the direct result of Christ's work on the cross. For these guys, it was the promises that God had given His people over the centuries before this:

“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified . . . for the Lord your God goes with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you” — Moses, Deuteronomy 31:6.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for You are with me — David, Psalm 23:4.

I put no trust in my bow, my sword does not bring me victory; but You give us victory over our enemies, You put our adversaries to shame. In God we make our boast all day long, and we will praise Your name forever. . . . Surely the righteous will never be shaken; they will be remembered forever. They will have no fear of bad news; their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the Lord. Their hearts are secure, they will have no fear — Psalm 44:6-8, 112:6-8a.

You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in You — Isaiah 26:3.

Toward the end of his letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote this: **Do not be anxious about anything — Paul, Philippians 4:6a.** He is not looking for a snappy end to his letter, but rather that is the logical conclusion to a life lived in the understanding of God's sovereignty.

What is he saying? The same thing as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: If God is Master, our outcomes here on planet earth don't matter: the circumstances don't matter, the consequences don't matter. We don't belong to this world; **our citizenship is in heaven — Paul, Philippians 3:20a.** In the meantime, we are invited to a life without anxiety because **God will meet all your needs**

according to the riches of His glory in Christ Jesus — Paul, Philippians 4:19. It is that same peaceful trust that Christ exhibited that Peter noted when he said: **“He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth.”** *When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly — I Peter 2:22-23 (quoting Isaiah 53:9).*

Paul even went so far as to call all he had endured for the sake of the gospel *light and momentary troubles* — *Paul, II Corinthians 4:17a.* Why? I mean, how could he say that after all he had been through? Because Paul realized that, before any other consideration, God was his sovereign, his ruler, his Master; therefore, Paul knew that *[if God is for us, who can be against us? — Paul, Romans 8:31b.* And because of that complete faith and trust in God, Paul could reflect his inner peace by writing what he said to the Philippians: *I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.* And what is Paul’s “secret” of living and being content? *I can do all this through [the Lord] who gives me strength — Paul, Philippians 4:11b-13.* And a Scripture with which Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego may have been familiar also provides insight into their ability to completely reflect the confidence they showed in the power, strength and sovereign rule of God: *The fear of the Lord leads to life; then one rests content, untouched by trouble — Proverbs 19:23.* Or they may have been sustained by many of the words of David, such as these: *When I am afraid, I put my trust in You. In God, whose word I praise—in God I trust and am not afraid. What can mere mortals do to me? — David, Psalm 56:3-4*

A huge part of the peace we can know is a direct consequence of surrendering our lives to acknowledge God as our Master — that, as our Master, He also becomes our “definer.” Well, what does that mean?

CONCLUSION

We are one tiny spot on one tiny corner of one tiny piece of a universe-sized mosaic. And while we can see only our tiny little spot, God sees the whole. For Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, their focus was not on what they saw, but on what they trusted God saw; their focus was not on what their picture looked like, but rather on what God’s picture looked like.

It really is an ownership question: Who’s our owner? Who’s our master? If God is our master, we really can live “not anxious about anything.” That’s the joyful, serene life God intends for us; that is the genuinely logical conclusion we can claim through Jesus Christ. So, what are we waiting for? Let’s claim it now!