

FLEA VIDEO #7:
"NO BOWING TO ASSUMPTIONS"
(Daniel 3)
5.19.20

Our story today is from the OT book of Daniel, and it's about three young men from Judah who have been captured in a war with the Babylonian Empire and relocated about 500 miles from home. Now instead of being killed outright or sold into slave labor, because they seemed bright and capable, they were enrolled in a three-year program, learning among other things Babylonian language, laws, literature and culture - including Babylonian religion. The goal was to eventually be in position to work for the king. They also were given new, Babylonian names, which have become the names by which we know them today: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego - and it's these three that are our focus today.

Now all of them, along with their friend Daniel, had recognized that, no matter where they were in the world, no matter their circumstances, God was their master; He and His word still ruled. So, the four of them made a pledge that they would never defile themselves in any way. In other words, they would not forget that God ruled their lives. Their loyalty would remain with Him. They would all have that commitment tested during their time in Babylon. Today we take a look at one of those tests.

Their king, a guy named Nebuchadnezzar, ruled a vast empire, with many different lands and people groups. One day a question crossed his mind, "Are all these people loyal to me?" To answer that question, he devised a test of all his leaders to determine their political loyalty by means of 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 his power, including the evident blessings of the gods of Babylon who had 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 the king over all the people and lands he had conquered.

Now, to ensure that this moment worked out like he was hoping, two things were included in this celebration: (1) A signal of music that, as soon as the music was heard, everybody was to bow down (and they had made sure that everybody knew the signal) and (2) a fiery furnace that was the destination for anybody who did not bow. Nothing like a little incentive to inspire loyalty. So, when the moment came, the music played and, at that understood signal, everybody bowed down to the king's image - except three: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They didn't bow down. But, how could they? You see, this moment required a stand because 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.

Now they might have remained standing, but they did not remain unnoticed. That's kind of hard to do when everybody around you is face-planting right to the ground, but now a couple of things start happening: First, this is disrupting Nebuchadnezzar's carefully planned ceremony, and second, it is disrupting the display of all his royal power. As a result, King Nebuchadnezzar is, to put it politely, miffed; to put it accurately, he was furious.

So, he had them brought before him. Now maybe, being foreigners, they hadn't understood his expectation. Maybe a quick review would help, so the king explained to them the process - the musical signal, then you bow, all that stuff - but he also included the consequence of not getting with the program, along with a little addendum: ***[I]f you do not worship [the image], you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?*** - ***Daniel 3:15b***. Did you hear that: The game just changed. King Nebuchadnezzar 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.

But these guys didn't need to know the consequences. Without a moment's hesitation, they looked him right in his royal eyes and said: ***"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***. Wow, what a statement! Despite whatever success they had achieved, it simply didn't compare to the only God to whom they would bow down. Nebuchadnezzar wasn't their king; God was. It wasn't Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom they worked for; it was God's kingdom. Therefore, it was never about them; it was only about God. And because it is only about God, they left the consequences to God, showing a deep belief and recognition of God's right to rule and act in this moment as he pleased - whatever that might mean. Therefore, God might miraculously rescue them from the danger they were in - but he also might not. Acknowledging God may not rescue them at this moment because that may not carry out His purpose, they steadfastly refused to change their position. Another wow; talk about amazing faith. At no time did Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego ever presume on what God was going to do. 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? God would be glorified. His power would be witnessed. His righteousness would

be declared.

OK; so Nebuchadnezzar got even more furious with them. He ordered the furnace to be heated seven times hotter than usual and commanded that they be tied up and tossed into the flames. The Bible tells us that the furnace was so hot that it killed the soldiers who threw them in.

Now ol' Nebuchadnezzar likely thought the story was done when all of a sudden he discovered that not only were those three guys not dead but they were walking around . . . and, in fact, they got one more guy in there than they started with, and that extra guy seemed somehow to be oddly divine. Nebuchadnezzar is so stunned that he checks in with his aides to make sure he understood how many guys they threw in. "Three, Your Majesty," came their reply. Nebuchadnezzar looked again: "So who's the extra guy? And why are they walking around in there like it's a day at the beach? And why isn't the fire doing anything to them? It killed our guys; why isn't it killing those guys?" Finally, he couldn't take it anymore, and he called to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to come out of the furnace. And out they came - unburned, unbound, and unharmed. How could this be?

Now we know looking back that what Nebuchadnezzar saw with the fourth person in the furnace was probably what is called a "theophany," which means a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ in the world. How cool that must have been for those three, that God's Son would join them there just to confirm His presence with them. But regardless of that, this moment had a profound and immediate impact on the king, as the Bible tells us: ***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.***

What Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego displayed was not only faith in God, but the incredible peace that can come from faith in God - in His rule, in His plan, in His purpose. While it most certainly was within God's power to rescue them from their fiery predicament, it may not have been within His perfect plan to do that. The peace from their faith was found in their commitment to a God who cannot fail no matter what path He chooses. Their peace was found in trusting God's view versus their own - no matter what that may wind up looking like. Wow!

Now obviously faith does not mean the absence of problems; Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were smack dab in the middle of a whole lot of problems. In fact, you could say that problems

are often the setting for where God's followers find themselves - in absurd places where no one in their right mind would want to be. In other words, the fire that faced them was absolutely real. They very much for real could have very literally been barbecued to death in that massive oven. But the God they loved was, for them, even more real. And surely they had words from their Scriptures to claim even as they viewed the flames and felt the heat - words like these from Psalms: ***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 44:8, 112:6-8a.***

What are they saying by their choosing to honor God? Simply this: If God is our 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; as Paul would say centuries later, ***our citizenship is in heaven - Paul, Philippians 3:20a.*** And if that is true, we live and make our choices based on that truth. 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.*** As a consequence of their faith, 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, as Paul said to the Philippians, "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. What a way to live! Wouldn't you just love to be able to ask Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego about this moment from their lives? Guess what - someday we'll be able to do just that. I can hardly wait to hear them tell their story! But who knows? Maybe they just might to want to hear our stories of trusting God. What will our stories sound like?