

The Church in Babylon

Study Notes

Session Three

“When the State Becomes God”

A. Standing Strong While Others Bow

1. Nebuchadnezzar, Idolatry, and God

- a. **Background:** Following the exile, the Jewish people were forced to live in Babylon, a powerful country that exercised more authority than was permitted by God. An example of such overreach was a situation that stemmed from a dream given to King Nebuchadnezzar. He saw a man with a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, middle and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet a mixture of iron and clay. According to Daniel, the dream revealed future world kingdoms that would arise (Persia, Greece, Rome, etc.). However, because the head of gold represented Babylon and King Nebuchadnezzar, he decided to set up a “golden image” of a man for the people to worship. It would be ninety feet high (“sixty cubits”) and constructed on the “plain of Dura,” and was most likely an image of himself.
- b. **Problem:** As all of the inhabitants were brought out to the plain, they were commanded to worship the image.
 - **Daniel 3:4-5** – *“And the herald proclaimed aloud, “You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace.”*
- c. **Rebellion:** The music began to play and thousands of people bowed down like commanded. However, three men remained standing – Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Rather than obeying the government, they rebelled and obeyed God.
 - **Daniel 3:16–18** – *“Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”*
 - **Daniel 3:19** – *“Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury, and the expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated.”*
- d. **Rescue:** Even after making the fire hotter and scorching some of his own men, King Nebuchadnezzar was shocked when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego survived the fiery furnace – and even more shocked by what he saw alongside them.

- **Daniel 3:24–25** – *“Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, “Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?” They answered and said to the king, “True, O king.” He answered and said, “But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.”*

2. **Question:** How were these three men able to be so bold, even if it meant death?

a. **They Trusted the Promises of God**

- **Isaiah 43:1-3** – *“But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you.”*
- **Psalm 73:23-26** – *“Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”*
- **Quote:** *“The question is not whether we will escape the fire, but whether he will walk with us through it.”* – Lutzer
- **Point:** In America, we may not face being thrown into a burning oven, but we could lose our jobs, be denied acceptance into schools and organizations, be penalized or punished for our spiritual convictions, etc. The question is, will we be faithful to God and trust that He is with us each step of the way? Are we willing to trust God and place faithfulness above desired outcomes?

3. **Transforming Lessons for Us Today**

- a. **Opposition is to Be Expected:** We must embrace our predicament for what it is and see God’s hand in the process. We must consider it a privilege to be identified with Jesus within a hostile culture and realize that blessings will come as a result – either in this life and/or the next.
- **1 Peter 4:12-14** – *“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.”*

- b. **We Must Learn to Stand Alone:** How many other Jews were bowing down to the golden image? The story says that only Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were standing. How difficult must it have been to be the only three?
- **Mark 8:36** – *“For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”*
 - **Quote:** *“Resolution One: I will live for God. Resolution Two: If no one else does, I still will.”* – Jonathan Edwards
- c. **Freedom isn’t Necessary to Be Faithful:** It may surprise some to learn that our religious freedoms are a historical anomaly. For most of the past 2000 years, the church has not had freedom of religion. The story of Christianity is filled with those who were sent to prison, burned at the stake, downed, or made to dig their own graves and then buried alive. There will be a day when world powers will assume the authority of God.
- **Revelation 13:7-8** – *“Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.”*
- d. **The Power of an Authentic Witness:** In one of the greatest displays of grace in the Bible, the same pagan king who killed and exiled the Israelites, and demanded people worship him, actually turns from his idolatry and honors God.
- **Daniel 3:28–30** – *“Nebuchadnezzar answered and said, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king’s command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way.” Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon.”*
 - **Daniel 4:37** – *“Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble.”*
 - **Point:** Daniel prayed three times a day, which included praying for the two kings he served. God used Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s powerful witness to lead the king in this direction. The king who had once been an enemy of the Jews was most likely converted to be one of God’s redeemed.