

4. From Furnace to Palace (1Q 2020—Daniel)

Biblical Material: Daniel 3, Rev. 13:11–18, Exod. 20:3–6, Deut. 6:4, 1 Cor. 15:12–26, Hebrews 11.

Quotes

- He [Nebuchadnezzar] then went a step further by issuing a new command to the effect that from that day forward, anybody caught treating Yahweh with anything but the highest respect was to be torn limb from limb and have his house burned down, in that order. Yahweh was presumably pleased by this sudden conversion of Nebuchadnezzar's, but he may have had the sense that there were still a few rough edges to take care of before the job was complete. *Frederick Buechner*
- Nebuchadnezzar was a proud ruler with some good character traits. Perhaps God looked at Nebuchadnezzar's innate sense of justice... But the Lord of Hosts had to break Nebuchadnezzar's pride first. *Michael E. Fassbender*
- I built a strong wall that cannot be shaken with bitumen and baked bricks... I laid its foundation on the breast of the underworld, and I built its top as high as a mountain. *Nebuchadnezzar, cuneiform tablet*

Questions

This is often cited as a great example of divine victory over paganism. But what was really God wishing to communicate? Was he pleased at the death of the guards who threw the prisoners into the furnace? What of the king's reaction? Was that God would have wanted? How does God look in this story—or did he have no alternative in the situation?

Bible Summary

Daniel 3 records the story of Nebuchadnezzar's later rejection of the image in his dream which he replaces with an all-gold statue. The three Hebrews refuse to worship under the threat of death, but are saved from the flames. Rev. 13:11–18 describes the second beast that arose from the earth. Exod. 20:3–6 is the commandment against other gods. "Our God is one" (Deut. 6:4). Only Christ can raise us from death (1 Cor. 15:12–26). Hebrews 11 details the faithful.

Comment

How does this story reveal the truth about God? Could it be possible to get a very wrong impression about God and his commandments from this account? Clearly it is a wonderful testimony to the faithfulness of the three Hebrews, yet in this "power showdown" is there not also ammunition the devil can use? For is the central aspect of the cosmic controversy over God's power? Is it not more about the way he *uses* his power? And the way this story can come across is as a struggle between an earthly Nebuchadnezzar and a heavenly One! Yet in the context of the situation, this autocratic and tyrannical king would hardly have been persuaded by an outpouring of love and grace... Consequent actions reveal that the king had learnt very few lessons...

He had already acknowledged the supremacy of God—from his experience with the dream. However, in contrast to the consecutive kingdoms revealed in the dream, he seems to have wanted to make his kingdom of gold the permanent one. Clearly the corrupting nature of

power is at work here, as the reality of the dream and its interpretation fades and he constructs his own image of the reality he prefers (is there a message for us here too?!)

Once again this is hardly an opportunity for quiet discussion of the nature of truth. Nebuchadnezzar has to be helped by God where he is. He understands the exercise of raw power. He has threatened it against the three Hebrews whom he must have valued. Yet their refusal would have seemed to him gross insubordination, and he is furious at the loss of face. In his rage he orders their execution. (Another reflection on the desire for power and prestige, like the Devil's desire to make himself like the Most High...)

His horror at seeing "one like the son of man" with the three now unbound "captives" in the fire is easy to understand. God at least got Nebuchadnezzar's attention. He orders them to come out (note he's still using the command operating system, even in God's visible presence!)

The king's response? He praises this ability of God to preserve his followers. He exalts the faithfulness of the three Hebrews. Then he orders that anyone who speaks against this God is to have his house torn down and themselves chopped to pieces. (As if this all-powerful God could not do this without help from Nebuchadnezzar if he so desired!) He speaks of God's salvation, but seems to miss the irony in his actions on behalf of the Almighty God. He clearly

It's interesting to reflect on what was happening to Nebuchadnezzar's "picture of God" in all of this. Of course, he would have had his presuppositions about divine natures from the stories about Babylonian gods. From what we know, they were bloodthirsty, cruel, arrogant etc. This would have been Nebuchadnezzar's background, and the place where God would need to reach him. The witness of Daniel and his friends would have vied for his attention against that of the official priests and holy men. Like people throughout time, he would have been presented with conflicting views. As he tried to re-write future history by building the golden statue, even Nebuchadnezzar must have seen this as a challenge to the God who had revealed the dream in the first place.

The refusal of the three Hebrews to bow down and worship the king's image indicates that they saw this as pagan/emperor worship. They would worship no false God or proud man. The humbling of the king's false vision and worship of a false god (himself) shows that God is still working with him, providing Nebuchadnezzar with confirmation that the Hebrews had the truth about God.

Yet in the end Nebuchadnezzar still is operating from type, and acting in God's name in a way that must have made the true God shudder. To threaten the death penalty for speaking against this God is surely a gross perversion of the truth, and not what God would have intended at all. Yet this is the way the king with his limited perception of the nature of God chooses to act, showing that like all of us he has much to learn about the way God operates and how he would prefer we act. In all too many ways, Nebuchadnezzar was only confirming the characteristics that Satan blamed God with possessing...

Ellen White Comments

Light direct from Heaven had been permitted to shine upon King Nebuchadnezzar, and for a little time he was influenced by the fear of God. But a few years of prosperity filled his heart with pride, and he forgot his acknowledgment of the living God. He resumed his idol worship with increased zeal and bigotry. {SL 36}

The king's wrath knew no limits. In the very height of his power and glory, to be thus defied by the representatives of a despised and captive race was an insult which his proud spirit could not endure. {SL 38.1}