

Daniel 3 - Pluralism, Compromise and the Protection of Jesus

December 16, 2012

Good morning! I am Pastor Kurt. I want to say a special "Hello" to those connecting through the Internet. It is good to have you. I want to remind you about our Christmas Eve services at 4 p.m. and 5:30 p.m. tomorrow. I look forward to seeing you there. If you can't make it because of weather or travel plans, I encourage you to access the live stream on the Internet and join us virtually.

We are in a teaching series on the book of Daniel. Today, we study Daniel 3. Take out your Bibles and turn to that chapter. If you didn't bring a Bible, Daniel 3 is found on page 739 of the pew Bible.

While you are turning, let me give you some background that will help you understand this text. God was disciplining his chosen people. God raised up Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon to attack, and after three campaigns, destroy Jerusalem. Before he destroyed the city, he deported the intelligent young men to Babylon for reeducation. Daniel and his three friends were in that group. He also took as POWs the military leaders, the artists, the craftsmen and the government officials of Jewish society. He settled them by the Kabar canal just outside Babylon. The plan was that within a generation or two they would be culturally-assimilated. They would forget their homeland and their God. They would eventually become productive members of Babylonian society. This is similar to what happens in America. The Irish, the German, the English and a host of other nationalities come to America with hopes of keeping their cultural

identities. They never can. Within a generation or two they are absorbed and become Americans.

There was a great fear among the Jews that they would be culturally assimilated, their children would intermarry and they would cease to be the chosen people of God. Many of the prophets encouraged the Jews not to settle down. They encouraged them to pray against the city and to ask God to destroy the city. When they saw the demonology and occult in the city, that seemed like a God-honoring plan. They were sure it wouldn't be long until God judged it.

The prophet Jeremiah, who was the true prophet of God, told the people something different in Jeremiah 29. He said God wanted the Jews to settle down. They were to become productive members of Babylonian society. They were to pray for the prosperity of the city and to be involved in the life of the city. They were to be a positive force in the Babylonian culture.

For the exiles, that raised questions that are identical to ones we wrestle with today. How do we live as a man or woman of God in an evil pluralistic culture? How do we get involved in the life of the city without being absorbed by the city? Isn't that the same tension we wrestle with as a church? We don't want to isolate ourselves from our community. We want to be involved in the community. We are to be active and helpful citizens, helping our schools and our community. How can we do that as a church without losing our identity as the church? Daniel 3 has an answer.

Where do we cross the line into cultural assimilation?

When we left off our story in chapter two, Nebuchadnezzar had a dream. It was a dream of a grand statue. Daniel didn't just tell Nebuchadnezzar his dream but explained it to him. The statue represented world empires from Babylon until the birth of Christ. The statue's head of gold represented Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon. The silver arms and chest another empire, the belly of bronze another world empire and the legs of iron and the feet of iron mixed with clay another empire. As chapter three opens Nebuchadnezzar is back in the statue business. He thought of a way to improve upon his God-given dream. Instead of a statue with just a head of gold, he decided to make the entire statue of gold signifying it was all about him.

Why did he build it? I think part of the answer is because of his dream. He wanted to fulfill his dream and build a monument to himself. Another part of the answer is pragmatic. This was a way of unifying his vast and diverse empire. He had one of the largest world-dominant empires that existed on the planet. His empire was composed of different races, languages and cultures. How do you hold together something this diverse, especially in a turbulent area like the Middle East? You create some type of cultural glue. That was the purpose of this image. Worship of the statue would be the common religious experience that tied his entire empire together.

This chapter opens with the dedication of the statue on the plains of Dura. For the dedication ceremony, Nebuchadnezzar invited the satraps, prefects, governors, treasurers and a host of other government leaders from around his

empire to the ceremony. They would all bow to this image. If this took place today, he would invite the House of Representative, the Senate, the governors of the states and the local mayors. If he got all of the leaders worshipping the same thing, that would create a unity between them in spite of their diversity. That was his game plan.

What did this image look like? Interestingly, we do not know. Some people think it was an image of Nebuchadnezzar. That is possible. I don't think it was. There is no record of Babylonian kings getting divinized. Others think it was a statue of one of the Babylonian gods, such as Marduk. That is possible. There is plenty of opportunity for a particular Babylonian deity to be identified in the chapter but the text is silent.

Since the text is silent, I don't think it represents a particular Babylonian god. Rather, I think the statue was a conglomeration of items that represented all the gods, values and beliefs of Babylonian society. This image represented Babylonian culture and Nebuchadnezzar's power over it. Look at the wording that Nebuchadnezzar used toward Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego when they refused to bow down to his statue.

Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, "Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up?" Daniel 3:14 (ESV)

Notice, they had a choice. Nebuchadnezzar realized everyone would not worship the gods of the Babylonians so he set up this image as an alternative that would be palatable to everyone because it contained parts that everyone could identify with. You didn't have to stop worshipping your gods and start

worshipping the Babylonian gods, rather just added worship of Nebuchadnezzar's statue to your religious experience. Don't worship Babylonian gods *instead of* your god, worship this image *in addition to* your god.

There are two things he did with this.

He eliminated religious exclusivity. Nobody could worship their gods exclusively. They could still worship their gods but they also had to worship his statue. He forced religious pluralism across his culture.

He forced people to privatize their faith. In private they could worship what they wanted, but in public they had to act like everybody else. They had to fit into the culture and worship the statue. Here is what we learn. All the great pluralistic societies of the world do the same thing. It was true for Babylon and Rome, and it is true in the United States. They say you cannot claim your god is the exclusive truth, and your faith must be kept private. In public, you need to act like everyone else. This is how a pluralistic society assimilates cultures.

Let me give you some examples. One of the most controversial quarterbacks is Tim Tebow. Why is he controversial? He does the Te-bow. What is wrong with thanking Jesus for success? Nothing. The problem is when he does the Te-bow in public on a football field. Everybody wants him to do it in private. A pluralistic society tells you that your faith must be kept private, and in public you need to act like everybody else.

Let me give you another example. I ran across a study done by sociologists studying the sexual behavior of young people in America. Part of the study focused on two groups of men 18-23 years of age. One group was raised

in communities where people didn't believe there was anything wrong with premarital sex. The second group was raised in churches, synagogues and families where the men were taught sex was to be reserved for marriage. For the first group, only 23 percent of those men remained virgins by age 24. In the second group, only 28 percent were virgins at age 24. The conclusion of the sociologists was there is little statistical difference in the sexual behavior of those raised in the church and those raised outside of the church. Why? The sociologists believe American teenagers are privatizing their faith. What they believe in their heads and how they act in their lives are two separate worlds. There is tremendous social pressure to do what everybody else is doing, especially when it comes to their sexual behavior. This is called bowing to the image.

What we learn from this text is these two actions of giving up on God's claim to be the exclusive truth and privatizing your faith so you can fit in with society, cross the cultural line and mean you have gone too far and become assimilated.

In a pluralistic culture, we will experience persecution.

“There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men, O king, pay no attention to you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.” Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought. So they brought these men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, “Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?” 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 3:12–18 (ESV)

The issue was that Daniel’s three friends were not going with the culture. They didn’t made a big issue out of it. They didn’t tell others about their disobedience by taking out a full page ad in the newspaper. They simply chose not to bow down to the idol. As far as we know, it all began when they were mysteriously absent from the statue-bowing ceremony. As a result they experienced persecution.

We will experience persecution from our peers.

Notice who brought the issue to the king’s attention. It was certain Chaldeans. It was astrologers that had their noses out of joint because Daniel became their boss in chapter two when they couldn’t interpret Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. They were looking for a way to strike back at these young Jewish men, so they maliciously accused them. The way to get God’s people in trouble is to look for ways they are not conforming to culture.

I don’t think it is much different today. As Christians, if we claim exclusivity, if we say Jesus is the only way, what are we accused of by others? We are accused of intolerance.

If you think about this, it is backward. If pluralists claim Christians are intolerant towards others because they believe Jesus in the only way, doesn’t the same argument work in reverse? Isn’t it just as intolerant toward Christians to say we must believe all religions are the same? The knife of intolerance cuts

both ways. Look at this logically. Are all religions essentially the same as pluralists claim? Absolutely not. Mormons and Muslims claim you can have multiple wives; Christianity says you cannot. Religions of the world claim you have to work to earn your salvation from God; Christianity says there is nothing you can do other than accept the free gift of Jesus. He did it all for you. Those two positions are logically incompatible. Pluralism falls apart logically.

Even though pluralism falls apart logically and the claim of intolerance cuts both ways, we should still expect persecution from our peers when we claim exclusivity and refuse to privatize our faith.

We will experience persecution from those in power.

Once Nebuchadnezzar got involved, the pressure turned up. He gave Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego a second chance. I think he wanted to see for himself if they would refuse to bow to his statue. He couldn't believe everybody wouldn't go along with his program. He couldn't understand why these Jews wouldn't add worship of his statue to worship of their God. Everybody else did it, why wouldn't you? You can sense the incredible isolation of these young men were facing. Everybody else was going with the program. For everybody else, it was no big deal. In fact, their refusal to worship Nebuchadnezzar's image was considered treason.

How do we face cultural persecution?

I love the way Nebuchadnezzar put his statement. He said, "If you refuse to worship my image, who can deliver you out of my hands?" Nebuchadnezzar assumed the gods he worshipped were not involved in history. He assumed he

was in charge. He didn't understand he was not in charge. The reason Daniel's three friends refused to worship anything but the one true God was because there is only one true God. That one true God could deliver them out of Nebuchadnezzar's hands.

Know God has the power to deliver us, no matter what the odds.

There are two things I love about these guys. The first is their faith in God.

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. Daniel 3:17 (ESV)

They knew that the God they served was able to deliver them. Their eyes were not fixed on the fiery furnace in front of them but on the God who was sovereign over them. They knew God's will for them was to love the culture and help the culture but not be absorbed by dropping their claim to exclusivity or privatizing their faith. They were to be faithful to God and trust him with the results.

This reminds me of some of the craziness we see in the news with the new government health plan. The Obamacare health plan forces larger privately-held companies to pay for contraception services of their employees. That doesn't sound bad until you realize that includes abortions, the day-after pill and the week-after pill. Hobby Lobby, Tyndale publishers and a number of other privately-held Christian businesses are suing the government saying it is a violation of their rights for the government to force them to fund abortions for their employees. I read someplace, and I may be wrong so I could stand to be

corrected, that the government's penalty for disobeying this rule is a fine of up to \$1.6 million a day.¹

What amazes me is not the health plan. I am not amazed by the Christian businesses that are willing to spend millions of dollars to fight it. What amazes me is that there are not more lawsuits. Why not? Many Christian businesses choose to privatize their faith and to bow to the image. Why risk losing millions of dollars? Keep our health care public and our faith private.

My friends, one day we will stand before God and give an account for our lives. What will matter is not the money in the bank but the choices we made to honor Christ with our lives.

While God has the power to deliver us he knows best on if, when and how to deliver us.

"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 3:17–18 (ESV)

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego thought God would save them because they were choosing to honor him. Many times God does come to the rescue of those who honor him. That doesn't happen all the time. Sometimes God chooses to bring glory to his name through the death of his saints rather than the rescue of his saints. That is God's call my friends. Either way, God promises he will bring glory to his name through our lives. We need to leave the choice of rescue or ruin in his hands. Either way, our faithfulness to him will bring glory to him.

¹ <http://www.epm.org/blog/2012/Nov/30/hobby-lobby-and-mardel>

God promises to be with us in the furnace.

You know the story from here. When Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego trusted in God's ability to rescue and refuse to bow, Nebuchadnezzar blew a gasket. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual. That may not be literally possible. These ovens already ran at 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit. The point is that it was as hot as Nebuchadnezzar could make it. The heat of the furnace was in sync with his rage. The three friends were tied up in their clothes and thrown into the furnace. I picture flames shooting out the top and sides of the furnace to such a degree that the soldiers were consumed by the flames just getting close to the door.

When they landed in the burning coals, Nebuchadnezzar did a double take. He expected to see their bodies burst into flames. Instead, they were walking around inside. A fourth man was walking around inside with them. Look what Nebuchadnezzar said about this.

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." Daniel 3:25 (ESV)

Who was this man? There is a lot of ink spilled on this. It says this person looked like a son of the gods. Many think this was an angel. Nebuchadnezzar described what he saw with the religious education he has, which was very limited. He had a furnace with flames billowing out of it probably 7,000-10,000 degrees Fahrenheit, yet, he could see this fourth man was quite different from the rest in spite of the brightness of the flames. Nebuchadnezzar was grasping for words to describe this man.

In the Old Testament, there is a particular figure that keeps showing up called “The angel of the Lord.” In Exodus 3, the angel of the Lord came into a burning bush. When Moses got near the bush, a voice came out and told him to take off his shoes because he was on holy ground. What I find interesting is in Exodus 3 sometimes it says Moses talked to the angel of the Lord and other times it says Moses talked to the Lord. The Lord and the angel of the Lord were the same person talking from the burning bush. The angel of the Lord had no problem existing in the fire of the burning bush.

Another example is Joshua 5. Joshua went out to look at Jericho the night before the battle and suddenly he saw this towering man in full armor in front of him. Joshua asked him whose side he was on. The man replied that he was the commander of the Lord’s hosts. Then he told Joshua to hit the deck because he was standing on holy ground. What is interesting is when you get to the New Testament you find that every time somebody bows before an angel the angel says, “Get up! Don’t worship me. Worship God alone. I am a created person just like you.” From this, we learn the angel of the Lord could manifest himself in human form.

Who was this guy that took worship as God but was called the angel of the Lord. This was the preincarnate Jesus protecting Shadrach, Meshach and Abednago in the furnace. Why do I think it was Christ, not just an angel?

Isaiah the prophet wrote to the people of Israel before they went into exile. God gave those destined for exile a special promise. Let me read it for you.

“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...” Isaiah 43:1–3 (ESV)

Who promised he would protect them when they felt overwhelmed by the Babylonian culture and their lives hung in the balance? Jesus! Who promised to protect them in the flames? The Holy One of Israel, their savior, Jesus! This was Christ acting as their savior in the furnace.

What does this have to do with Christmas?

I want you to notice what Nebuchadnezzar said after Jesus protected them in the flames.

“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.” Daniel 3:29 (ESV)

What amazed Nebuchadnezzar was not just that they were saved, it was how they were saved. Jesus protected them in the furnace. Jesus could have snapped his fingers and transported them to a distant land. He could have struck everyone with blindness and stopped the whole thing. He didn’t. He went into the furnace with them and protected them from the hottest and fiercest wrath Nebuchadnezzar could dish out.

Isn’t that what happened at Christmas? In the Old Testament, Jesus manifested himself in a variety of ways to protect his people, but he only did it temporarily. On Christmas morning, Jesus came in the flesh to be with us. He united himself with flesh permanently. He came in the flesh to die and face the ultimate furnace, the furnace of God the Father’s wrath. Just as he was the savior that protected Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from the furnace of

Nebuchadnezzar's wrath temporarily on earth, he is our savior that came to protect us from the ultimate furnace of God's wrath eternally. Why did he do this? He loves us.

Christmas is the story of Jesus coming in the flesh to become the shield that protects us from the fiery furnace of the wrath of God.

What can we take away?

1. We are to work for the good of our city, not isolate ourselves from the city.
2. When we allow the pressure of the culture to force us into privatizing our faith and when we no longer believe God's claim to exclusivity, we are culturally assimilated.
3. As Christians in a pluralistic culture, we will experience persecution from our peers and the cultural powers. If you don't have that persecution, it is a sign of assimilation.
4. We are to rest in the confidence of God's power to deliver us. He also has the wisdom to know if, when and how to deliver us.
5. Jesus usually doesn't save by protecting us *from* the furnaces of life; he saves us by protecting us *in* the furnaces of life.
6. Just as Jesus promised to shield Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from the furnace of Nebuchadnezzar's wrath, he was born to die to shield us from the ultimate furnace of God's wrath against our sins.



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