

War of the Gods

Messages from the Book of Daniel

Message 4

From Dream to Nightmare

Daniel 3:1-30

The Dream

What would you do if you dreamed tonight that you would not graduate from Lehigh University? Would you wake up bemused at the silliness of dreams? Or would you be worried at the cloudiness of your future? Would you be positively alarmed and set out to make sure this dream does not come true? Now what if God spoke to you somehow and told you that this dream was infallibly true? He has decreed that you will not graduate. Would you prepare to do something else with your life – or would you exercise every means possible to ensure that this terrible fate never materializes?

Last week Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, was tormented by a dream he could not remember. He sensed that it was supremely important, but try as he might, it totally escaped him. As did all kings then, Nebuchadnezzar employed a stable of dream interpreters whose job was to explain the meaning of any dreams he might have. These men were trained to interpret dreams, but they had no ability to conjure up forgotten dreams. They pointed out that only the gods could discover lost dreams. Nebuchadnezzar had no interest in chasing after some gods. He was enraged by the inability of his wise men to remember his dream for him. So he ordered them all to be executed. Fortunately, for him and the wise men, God revealed the dream to Daniel, who relayed it to the king. Nebuchadnezzar was deeply grateful to Daniel for recovering the dream.

I am sure the king was pleased at the dream, too – at least the first part of it. The dream consisted of a huge statue in which the head was made of gold, the chest of silver, the abdomen of bronze, and the legs of iron. Then a rock was cut out and hurled at the statue. The rock pulverized the statue and its dust blew away. Daniel interpreted the dream as a prophecy of the succession of future kingdoms. Nebuchadnezzar was the head of gold. This was good. It is good to be the head, and if you are a man as ambitious as Nebuchadnezzar, nothing less than the head will do. It is good to be gold. In those days gold was the most precious metal, and still it is the most glorious. This dream was very pleasing to Nebuchadnezzar. But there was a dark, disturbing aspect to the dream. It is good to be the head of gold, but the existence of those other metals was interpreted to mean that other kingdoms would supplant his own. All his labors, all the glory of great Babylon – someday it would be captured by another king. This was so wrong, Nebuchadnezzar would have to take action to make sure such a disaster would not come to pass.

The Nightmare

The foundation of any great empire is a common religion. Egypt and Greece each had their gods. Rome tolerated all sorts of religions, but only as long as the people also worshiped the emperor. The religious wars of the 17th century in Europe were inevitable because the rulers recognized they could not hold their realms together if different religions were practiced. This principle holds for America today in which a weakened, secularized version of Christianity is the glue that binds this society together. If Nebuchadnezzar had any hope of constructing an empire which would outlast him, it was essential that he establish a common religion. It appears that Nebuchadnezzar did not care much what people did on their own time – as long as they participated in the state religion. Taking inspiration from his dream, the king constructed a huge statue. Sixty cubits comes to ninety feet – perhaps taller than the steeple of Packer Chapel. But now Nebuchadnezzar directly rebukes the dream; he makes his statue all gold. He made an image of one eternal empire, and brought the whole realm into the worship of this unified religion. Clearly Nebuchadnezzar rejected God's message and was determined to make history in his own image.

It must have been the greatest festival in the world – probably the greatest in history to that time. Nebuchadnezzar controlled the whole Mid-East between Persia and Egypt. All the important people from that vast area assembled in the broad plain of Dura. Imagine that you are there. You have endured a long, hot, dusty and difficult trip from some distant province of Babylon to this massive assembly. You anticipated the event with excitement mixed with dread. But now that you are here – in the center of the world – you are dazzled by the brilliance, the energy, the excitement of the greatest city man has ever built. Unheard-of riches pour in from all over the world. Here you can rub shoulders with all sorts of nationalities speaking all sorts of languages. There are parties every night, and during the day you jostle for promotion to the better positions in the empire. And now the main reason you have been called here – the Festival of Eternal Babylon. Riding out to the plain of Dura you are unprepared for the spectacle that greets you. Slowly rising from the horizon is an image of untold splendor. It shines with divine brilliance – an awesome structure that reaches into heaven. The cost of such a creation of gold is something no man can calculate. As you get closer, you shrink into insignificance as the massive image towers over you, bathing you in its golden rays. You wish to fall before its majesty and worship its beauty. Then you are overwhelmed by the most beautiful music you have ever heard. You cannot understand how such music can be made. It must be the music of heaven itself. When you do catch a glimpse of the musicians, you see strange, unfamiliar instruments. The herald commands you to worship by order of the king, but it is superfluous – it is a relief to worship something so wonderful – so divine it must have come from the gods.

But over in one corner, almost unnoticed in the vast throng, three figures stood upright. Perhaps they might have gone unnoticed all day, but certain sharp eyes caught sight of them. The text alerts us that their motives are malicious when we read in verse 8 that they accused the Jews. Notice in verse 12 how their report is particularly worded to antagonize the king.

There are certain Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego; these men, O king, have not paid due regard to you. They do not serve your gods or worship the gold image which you have set up. (Daniel 3:12)

Not only do they report the failure of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego to worship the image, they embellish their report by adding that these Jews also do not serve Nebuchadnezzar's gods, nor do they respect the king. In other words, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego are guilty of open treason. Now as we have seen Nebuchadnezzar was not a man prone to subtlety. He immediately flew into a great rage and ordered the men to be brought before him instantly. Full of fury, he repeated his demand – bow before the image or die in a furnace. For Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, Nebuchadnezzar's dream had turned into a nightmare.

Faith vs Threats

Death is not pleasant in any circumstance, but death by burning surely is one of the most gruesome ways to go. In the face of such a threat, any ordinary man would quaver. We marvel at the steadfastness of these three men. They know King Nebuchadnezzar. They understand full well that his is no idle threat. You would expect most people to attempt a bargain, or to reason with the king – especially when one's life is at stake. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego make no effort to appease him. Their minds are made up and they know it is futile to reason with a madman. But how could they do it? How could three ordinary men face torture so calmly?

James Boice identifies three characteristics which enabled Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego to survive and emerge victorious in this great test.¹ First, they knew that God was sovereign. King Nebuchad

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Daniel: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House,

nezzar might rule from Persia to Egypt, but God rules all the heavens and earth. God created Nebuchadnezzar, and God will do with him what He want. God also created wood and oxygen which made the fire burn. It is a small matter for God to extinguish a fire or render it powerless to harm. So they said, “Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king.” (Daniel 3:17) On this point they had not an ounce of doubt. God is able to deliver them.

Second, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego knew the Bible. They knew that God specifically, unambiguously commanded that His people should never, *ever*, bow before an image created by man. This is the second of the Ten Commandments.

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. (Exodus 20:4-6)

This was not a grey area. This was not a matter for discussion. This was a matter for simple, complete obedience to God’s word.

Third, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego were willing to die for their convictions. They knew for certain that God was *able* to deliver them. What they did not know was whether it was God’s plan to save them from death. They knew that sometimes God’s plan includes the suffering and even death of His servants. So they replied, “But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up.” (Daniel 3:18) Their fate is in God’s hands, but either way, in life or in death, they will not worship the false God.

Such men are invincible. In a contest of wills they always win. Dr. Boice tells of such a man in our own day.

I think of Dr. Joseph Tson, the Romanian pastor who before his exile was called before the Communist authorities to answer for his religious convictions and preaching. He expected to be killed. So he set his affairs in order, and when he appeared before the interrogating officer, he said, “I have to tell you first that I am ready to die. I have put my affairs in order. Your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying, because when you kill me people all over Romania will read my books and believe on the God I preach – even more than they do now.”²

This testimony so rattled the Romanian authorities that they eventually released Dr. Tson and exiled him – upon which he began sending his sermons into Romania by radio!

Knowing God is sovereign, knowing the Bible, willingness to die – Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego did not gain these virtues the day they stood before the statue. They did not gain them the night before they were called to take a stand for God. These godly traits were developed beginning long ago, when they refused to eat food prohibited by God. They were cultivated by fellowship in prayer, and in standing together with Daniel in the matter of the king’s dream. Character is a long-term project. The sort of person you will be ten years from now is being determined by your behavior as a student. If you are looking for

1989) pp. 45-46.

² Ibid., p. 46.

easy Christianity now, you will be too weak to serve God in the tough times in life. When your marriage becomes difficult, you will bail out and get a divorce. When your children become unruly, you will abandon them to their own desires. When your work becomes difficult, you will cut corners and lie to cover up. If you wish to be faithful to God when life gets difficult, you must serve Him fully now. Do not seek easy service. Offer to serve God in something you know is humanly impossible, and watch God use you beyond your imagination. But be prepared for hardship. And in the process you will become fit to overcome real hardship later.

God to the Rescue!

On good days Nebuchadnezzar had a short fuse, but the sauciness of these uppity Jews enraged him all the more. So blinded by ambition and anger, he challenged any god to oppose him, and in so doing sealed his own failure. He ordered the furnace heated to the max and threw the three traitors in. The fire was so hot, the soldiers who carried them to the furnace died in the process. But when Nebuchadnezzar looked into the furnace, he could not believe his eyes! There they were, all four of them, walking around as if they were taking a stroll in the park. But wait! Four men? He only threw three men into the furnace. But sure enough, there was no mistaking there were four men now. No one knew who the fourth man was, but his nature was clear enough. Nebuchadnezzar saw he was a god. Nebuchadnezzar defied any god to oppose him, and one did.

And now we see a most amazing turn of events – perhaps *the* most amazing event. Faced with a terrible humiliation, many a man would call forth Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, and slay them on the spot. What a furnace could not do surely a sharp sword would accomplish. Think of it. Nebuchadnezzar has boasted in the most shameless terms of his infallible power. And the whole purpose of this festival was to cement himself as the quasi-divine ruler over all men. No expense had been spared to ensure that the whole empire would quake before their king and worship his image. Now, in one moment, three unarmed men have ruined the whole thing. So you would expect someone as ambitious as Nebuchadnezzar to kill the Jews with his own hands and hush up the whole affair.

But instead Nebuchadnezzar blessed the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, and decreed that He should be worshiped in the empire. This is not a conversion story. It is one thing to add a powerful god to your pantheon. It is entirely another to destroy the pantheon to worship the true God. Nebuchadnezzar was not there yet, but at least he recognized the power of this Jewish God. Why? Why did Nebuchadnezzar worship God instead of killing His witnesses? For the same reason God has let you live, even though you hated Him and wished He would allow you to pursue your lusts. Salvation is always by grace. In his anger Nebuchadnezzar demonstrates the true character of man, and in his worship he exhibits the true effect of God's grace. For some reason no one can fathom, God chose to give Nebuchadnezzar the grace to begin believing.

The Secret of Faithfulness

And now we come back to you. What would you do if God revealed to you that the future you have invested so much in will never come to pass. Would you submit to His will, or would you rebel against Him? And if you are faced with death, or even suffering or great disappointment, will you remain faithful to God, or will you make whatever compromises are necessary to stay alive? Honestly, do you have the strength to give your life for your faith in God? If you are honest, you will say No. Neither you nor I have the strength to serve God. None of us do. Although we mentioned the godly character of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego earlier, the secret to their success is not in their character. It is in the faithfulness of God. This story is not primarily about your faithfulness to God, but about His faithfulness to you. You see, the critical element in this story is the fourth man. No one knew who he was, but we do. The man who looked like a god was of course Jesus – the Son of God visible in human form before He became a man. When the chips were down, when all options had run out, when death was certain – God came to the rescue.

But notice *how* God rescued His servants. He did not calm the fire by mere force, He did not send an angel – He came *in person*. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego were in the fire, God went in there with them.

This is what Jesus promised to do. The last thing He said before He left this earth was that He would be with us always. This is your promise and hope. This is the promise that will enable you to suffer disappointment, and if necessary, torment and death. You can endure the worst for God because Jesus will be there with you. If God yanks you out of Lehigh prematurely, if He sends you into some dangerous place, if He gives you a life of poverty, or if He gives you ill health – He is with you. Jesus suffers with you and is always there to comfort you. Wherever you go, Jesus goes with you. You will experience no hardship without Jesus right there beside you, encouraging you, giving you the strength to press on.

Faithfulness Today

This was the foundation of the mission to the Auca Indians in Ecuador, now on film in the movie *The End of the Spear*. By the mid-twentieth century missionaries had taken the gospel to most of the Indian tribes in Ecuador. The one tribe which was unreached was the Aucas. They were a violent, murderous people, but God prepared five men to break into their tribe with the gospel. Jim Elliott was the leader of the group. Jim was a very gifted young man. He was a wrestler and a scholar, a young man who excelled in sports and studies by diligence and hard work. Jim was called to the ministry, and went to Wheaton College to prepare for God's service. Unlike many reluctant students, he threw himself into his studies and became proficient in Greek and Hebrew. One summer he traveled across the U.S. preaching in churches and youth groups wherever he went. At Wheaton Jim met and fell in love with Betty. After graduating from college, Jim went to Ecuador and began ministering among the tribes there. He and Betty married.

Jim began to dream of reaching the Auca Indians. He recruited Pete Fleming, Ed McCully, Nate Saint, and Roger Youderian to join him. They knew the Aucas killed anyone who attempted to contact them, but they were determined to try. They spent some time dropping gifts from an airplane to show they had friendly intentions. Finally, they had to take the plunge and approach the tribe in person. One day the dream came true. After months of prayer and preparation the five missionaries met the people they had longed to see. Moments later all five were speared to death.

Before the plane took off, Jim and his friends committed themselves and their mission to God. Then they sang a hymn.

We rest on Thee, our Shield and our Defender!
We go not forth alone against the foe;
Strong in Thy strength, safe in Thy keeping tender,
We rest on Thee, and in Thy Name we go.
Strong in Thy strength, safe in Thy keeping tender,
We rest on Thee, and in Thy Name we go.

Yes, in Thy Name, O Captain of salvation!
In Thy dear Name, all other names above;
Jesus our Righteousness, our sure Foundation,
Our Prince of glory and our King of love.
Jesus our Righteousness, our sure Foundation,
Our Prince of glory and our King of love.

We go in faith, our own great weakness feeling,
And needing more each day Thy grace to know:

Yet from our hearts a song of triumph pealing,
“We rest on Thee, and in Thy Name we go.”
Yet from our hearts a song of triumph pealing,
“We rest on Thee, and in Thy Name we go.”

We rest on Thee, our Shield and our Defender!
Thine is the battle, Thine shall be the praise;
When passing through the gates of pearly splendor,
Victors, we rest with Thee, through endless days.
When passing through the gates of pearly splendor,
Victors, we rest with Thee, through endless days.

That day Jim, Pete, Ed, Nate, and Roger passed through those gates of pearly splendor, but they died victors. They succeeded in their mission. Their widows were overwhelmed with grief. But after the funeral Betty Elliot and Nate’s sister Rachel returned to Ecuador and went to live with people who had killed their husband and brother. The Aucas received them, and eventually received Jesus Christ.

Today the Auca tribe is learning to follow Christ. But where are the men and women who will go into Iraq, and Palestine, and Iran, and North Korea to bring the gospel to those people? These are dangerous places. If you go there you may not return alive, and you may not return at all. Where are the men who long to go where the gospel has never gone before? Where are the women who will give their husbands to the Lord? Who believes that Jesus goes into the furnace with His servants, and who desires that the name of Jesus be praised in every land? Is it you?

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