

Daniel 3 - Trial By Fire ¹

Before the Lesson: Prepare equipment to show the PowerPoint slides, The Fiery Furnace in Ancient Art.

Fellowship question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, to begin some discussion, and to lead into the study):

- a. Do you prefer sculpture that is abstract or imitative?
- b. If you must suffer, would you rather suffer by heat or by cold?

Information

Today, we will read the third chapter of Daniel. It is a familiar story - the fiery furnace that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego endured. Pay attention to what you've never heard before in the story.

- Have a class member read Daniel 3.
- What did you hear that was “new” to you? [Use the following quotes to respond to things that were “new” and/or to educate class members about some things they may have not mentioned.]

Statue - “The statue may have represented Nebuchadnezzar himself...[But] the association of bowing down before the statue with serving Nebuchadnezzar's god(s) (vv 12, 14) rather suggests a statue of a divinity, presumably Bel. But the text's omitting to clarify what the statue represented reflects its concern with the challenge it issued to the three Judahites and reflects the interwovenness and support of god, king, and nation...Conversely, even if it is a statue of a god, it is a kind of idol of Nebuchadnezzar himself, and extension of his will.”²

“Whatever the statue's nature, it held religion and state together... ‘Nebuchadnezzar's statue stands for political and economic power’ while the Judahites are characterized by ‘political “atheism”... in their refusal to bow to the symbols of Babylonian power.”³

¹ This lesson is copyrighted by Dr. Rick Jordan, Great Bible Teachers, Inc, 2025. More lessons may be found at greatbibleteachers.com.

² John Goldingay, *Daniel: Revised Edition*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 2019), 232.

³ Goldingay, 237f. Quoting D. L. Smith-Christopher, “The Book of Daniel” *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 66, 65.

“The odd proportions of the golden image...90 X 9 feet...Surely the point is precisely the fantastical nature of the image...It parodies the tradition of monumental architecture and sculpture itself, which was a fundamental method of royal propaganda.”⁴

Repetition -

“This court tale is also an example of Daniel's comedy at its best. The main source of satire stems from the contrast between the mechanistic and automatic behavior of the pagans and the assertive and pious behavior of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego....

“But the enumerations of musical instruments also help to expose the mechanistic behavior of the pagans. The four mechanical iterations of a lengthy list of musical instruments in w 5,7,10, and 15 mirror the mechanistic behavior of the pagans before the image...

“The comic and absurd mechanistic behavior of the pagans is in stark contrast to the behavior of the three pious Jews. Whereas the officials (every single one of them!) assemble automatically after being summoned, the three young men must be coerced into coming before the king. The [verbs] used to describe the summoning of the three young men by Nebuchadnezzar emphasizes the involuntary nature of the Jews' actions....

“The worship of the lifeless image is, according to the story, one of the greatest absurdities of pagan society, and the mechanistic iteration of the enumerations is a most effective means of conveying the absurd and thoughtless behavior of pagan worship.”⁵

The three young men “speak straight and succinctly without the repetitions that characterize everyone else.”⁶

Types of instruments: “None are used in Israelite worship; most of the terms are foreign ones for instruments used in secular contexts. They thus imply a double judgment on the alien, pagan nature of the ceremony that Nebuchadnezzar is inaugurating.”⁷

The Chaldeans/Kasdites “may be people of Babylonian race (as in 1:4) who are hostile to the three Judahites on ethnic grounds (cf. Haman in Esther); or they may be court experts (as in chapter 2) suffering from professional jealousy (cf. chapter 6).”⁸

⁴ Carol A. Newsome with Brennan W. Breed, *Daniel: A Commentary* The Old Testament Library (Louisville: The Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 103.

⁵ Hector I. Avalos, “The Comedic Function of the Enumerations of Officials and Instruments in Daniel 3.” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (1991): 580–88.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43718347>.

⁶ Goldingay, 239.

⁷ Goldingay, 232.

⁸ Goldingay, 233.

“If successful, [fire] erases any trace of what it consumes. In Dan 3, then, the burning of the three Jewish youths was an attempt by Nebuchadnezzar to erase not only the Jewish people but also any memory of their resistance against the Babylonian Empire.”⁹

Fourth “man”

“Nebuchadnezzar will later declare that this person is a divine aide (v. 28), the kind of supernatural being acting on God’s behalf and representing God who appears in elsewhere in the Old Testament (there is no pointer toward its being a preincarnate appearance of Jesus).”¹⁰

“The original audience would likely have associated it with the angel of YHWH (see v. 28; cf. Gen 16:7; Exod 14:19; 1 Kings 19:5-8; 2 Kings 19:35), the figure that often manifests divine power and presence to those for whom YHWH has particular concern. The imagery of fire that does not burn, however, most directly evokes the theophany of God to Moses in Exodus 3:1-3, represented there also by the angel of YHWH.”¹¹

“The only certainty is that the figure is a miraculous God-given presence, whether it be an angel or the divine persona himself, or perhaps Daniel in a kind of ideal form. The history of Christian treatment of this passage has been animated by the conviction that the figure is that of Jesus Christ... Surely had the intention been to give a preview of the coming Messiah, the writer of the chapter would have told us. In one sense, however, the figure can serve as a functional prototype of the coming savior, for whoever he may be, he is present as Immanuel. In him God is with his people in the time of their deepest need and effects salvation for them from the direst threat to their existence.”¹²

- On your index card, answer this question in one sentence: what is the point of this story?

There is a recent field of Biblical study called “reception history.”

“Reception history is the study of how biblical texts have changed over time in different cultures and communities, through transmission, translation, or reading, retelling, and reworking. In other words, reception history explores all the different ways that people have received, appropriated, and used biblical texts throughout history.”¹³

⁹ Newsome with Breed, 114.

¹⁰ Goldingay, 240.

¹¹ Newsome with Breed, 112.

¹² W. Sibley Towner, *Daniel*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1984), 55, 56.

¹³ Brennan Breed, “What is Reception History?”

<https://www.bibleodyssey.org/articles/what-is-reception-history/>, accessed 1/21/2025

[All of the phrases below which are in bold represent one “main point” that has been used in Biblical interpretation, teaching, and preaching.]

“Not only is Jewish faithfulness on the line, but **the ability of God to deliver** those who trust in him is also being tested.”¹⁴

“Since time immemorial this scene has served as a paradigm for every tiny group of **resisters standing before tyrannical authority**.”¹⁵

“Throughout history, most readers of Dan 3 have been nearly unanimous on one point: the three youths **encourage similar acts of religious, political, and cultural defiance** in the contemporary world of the reader.”¹⁶

“For Diaspora Jews the telling of such a story is a way of acknowledging the fearful power of the kings of the Persian and Hellenistic Empires while at the same time asserting the merely provisional reality of their claims to power. **There is a Sovereign beyond and above these earthly monarchies**.”¹⁷

“The dominating motivation in the hearts of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednigo is their utter loyalty to the first and second commandments, their utter **refusal to participate in idolatry**.”¹⁸

“They are clear on what they must do, and it is that clarity and not their impending deaths that makes them immortal figures. As Augustine put it, ‘The **martyr** is made by his cause, not by his punishment.’”¹⁹

Nebuchadnezzar “can kill the three Jews; but he cannot make them worship his god. Even if they should not be saved, in this matter **they have more power than the mighty king** of Babylon.”²⁰

“Generations of preachers and artists...traditionally understood the emergence of the young men from the fiery furnace as **a paradigm of the resurrection of Jesus Christ** from the grave.”²¹

Is your answer similar to one of those options the scholars offered?

Which do you think is most applicable in today’s situation in our country?

¹⁴ Towner, 46.

¹⁵ Towner, 51.

¹⁶ Newsome with Breed, 115.

¹⁷ Newsome with Breed, 102.

¹⁸ Towner, 52.

¹⁹ Towner, 52.

²⁰ Newsome with Breed, 110.

²¹ Towner, 56.

When we gain power and privilege, we often re-interpret passages to make us (and our peers) feel more comfortable. One way to do that is to soften a hard truth by “spiritualizing” it.

“Before Constantine’s privileging of Christianity in the Roman Empire, Christian theologians often dealt with questions of proper submission to secular authorities in light of idolatry with recourse to the story of the three youths. But after Constantine, Christian interpretation from that point on tended toward a spiritualization of the themes in Daniel 3. Medieval Jews, on the other hand, faced a constant struggle for ethnic and religious survival in the presence of oppressive powers and thus relentlessly revisited the example of the three youths in its literal sense.”²²

“In the African American community during the years following the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century, the popularity of the names Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego testify to the community’s self-understanding as a group of people who overcame traumatic oppression by means of God’s help.”²³

Transformational Exercise

“The story...became important to Christians not only as a story of faithful sacrifice but also of trust that God would resurrect the martyrs in return; this connection is made explicit in the many frescoes of the three youths and the lion’s den in Christian catacombs and sarcophagi from late antiquity.”²⁴

- Show the PowerPoint of The Fiery Furnace in Ancient Art.

From a bishop in Northeast Africa: “An icon often seen in the churches of Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan, North and South, is that of the four in the fiery furnace...In the suffering of the long war between North and South Sudan, it was this God, ‘He who suffers with us,’ who was the comfort and the hope of many Christians. ‘Our God is able to save us from this fiery furnace,’ the three young men declared, ‘but if not’ (in this way), we will cleave to Him (‘not bow down to Nebuchadnezzar’). Throughout northeastern Africa the message of this God is one that resonates with the African heart.”²⁵

“Though the stories in Daniel 1-6 are set during the sixth century BCE in the time of the Babylonian exile, scholars have long maintained that the book of Daniel actually took its final form later, in the second century BCE, during the reign of the Seleucid king Antiochus IV

²² Newsome with Breed, 116.

²³ Newsome with Breed, 118.

²⁴ Newsome with Breed, 121f.

²⁵ Goldingay, 243.

Epiphanes. Antiochus persecuted the Jews mercilessly, attempting to get them to abandon their traditional religion. Many Jews who resisted were martyred (1 Macc 1:62-63). The purpose of the composition of the book of Daniel, then, would have been to urge resistance to Antiochus by presenting Daniel and his three friends as models of Jewish faithfulness in a time of persecution. Unlike the happy endings in the folktales, faithfulness in the time of Antiochus often led to martyrdom. When the three young men in Daniel 3 say they will be loyal to their God even if it leads to death in the furnace, this may be a reference to the martyrdoms in the second century.”²⁶

“Perhaps the Judahites face a choice between offering loyalty and honor to the king as their patron or to their God as their patron. You cannot be loyal to and honor two patrons.”²⁷

“Their confession is made starkly for God’s sake.’Whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s’ (Romans 14:8). Their testing takes place in the flames, but it has already taken place when the flames have been threatened.”²⁸

Persecution -

“Although it is generally wise to avoid outright confrontation and provocation, Christians should never renounce their principles, regardless of the consequences...Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow before King Nebuchadnezzar’s golden image, fully aware of the consequences...Some issues are simply not worth suffering for, such as ludicrous cultural customs or unnecessary acts of provocation. But when it comes to bowing before idols or renouncing prayer, we are called to stay faithful to our biblical principles no matter what the consequences may be.”²⁹

Close in a prayer something like this: *We pray, O God of comfort and provision, for our brothers and sisters who are persecuted because of their faith in you. We can hardly imagine what they are going through. We live in a majority-Christian nation. Help the believers who are in the minority. We live in a nation that insists on freedom of speech and of worship. Help the believers who fight for their lives because of their testimony and faith community. Help us know how to help them. Amen.*

²⁶ Alan G. Meyers, 2017. “Between Text and Sermon: Daniel 3.” *Interpretation* 71 (2): 205.

²⁷ Goldingay, 237.

²⁸ Goldingay, 240.

²⁹ D.P. Petri; R. Boyd-Macmillan, “What Persecution To Endure, To Resist, or To Flee?”

Evangelical Review of Theology, [s. l.], v. 46, n. 1, p. 38–50, 2022.

<https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=2cacc26d-3bbd-3d1b-9cee-15c587865b2e>.

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