

THREE THINGS A PRACTICING CHRISTIAN CAN EXPECT

3 Nebuchadnezzar the king made a golden statue, ninety feet high and nine feet wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. 2Then Nebuchadnezzar the king summoned the satraps, the prefects, the governors, the judges, the treasurers, the counselors, the magistrates, and all the provincial officials to come to the dedication of the statue that Nebuchadnezzar the king had erected. 3So the satraps, the prefects, the governors, the judges, the treasurers, the counselors, the magistrates, and all the provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the statue that Nebuchadnezzar the king had erected, and they stood before the statue that Nebuchadnezzar the king had erected. 4Then the herald loudly proclaimed, This is what you are commanded to do, O peoples, nations, and [men of every] language: 5As soon as you hear the sound of the cornet, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes, and all kinds of music, you are to bow down and worship the golden statue that Nebuchadnezzar the king has erected. 6Whoever does not bow down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace. 7Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the cornet, flute, zither, lyre, harp, and all kinds of music, all the peoples, the nations, and [men of every] language bowed down and worshiped the golden statue that Nebuchadnezzar the king had erected.

8At that time some of the Chaldean [astrologers] came forward and brought charges against the Jews, [because they disregarded the king's command]. 9They said to Nebuchadnezzar the king, O king, live forever! 10You have issued a decree, O king, that every man who hears the sound of the cornet, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes, and all kinds of music, must bow down and worship the golden statue, 11and whoever does not bow down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. 12There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego—these men, O king, have disregarded you. They neither serve your gods nor do they worship the golden statue that you have erected. 13Then Nebuchadnezzar, with rage and fury, summoned Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. So they brought these men before the king. 14Nebuchadnezzar said to them, Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, that you neither serve my gods nor worship the golden statue that I have erected? 15Now if, when you hear the sound of the cornet, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes, and all kinds of music, you bow down and worship the statue that I have made, [it will be well with you]. But if you do not worship, you will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace. And who is the God who will deliver you out of my hands? 16Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego replied to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. 17If [you] do [throw us into the furnace], our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the blazing furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. 18But if [you do] not [throw us into the furnace], let it be known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods, nor will we worship the golden statue that you have erected.

19Then Nebuchadnezzar became filled with fury, and the expression on his face [reflected his anger] against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. He ordered the furnace to be heated seven times hotter than usual. 20Then he commanded valiant warriors who were in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego and throw them into the blazing furnace. 21So these men, [still wearing] their trousers, their

robes, their turbans, and their [other] garments, were thrown into the middle of the blazing furnace. ²²Because the king's command was so urgent and the furnace [had been made] extremely hot, the flame of the fire consumed those men who brought Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego [to the open furnace]. ²³So these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, being firmly tied, fell down in the middle of the blazing furnace. ²⁴Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astonished and leaped to his feet. He said to his advisors, Did we not tie up three men and throw them into the fire? They replied to the king, [That is] true, O king. ²⁵He responded, Look! I see four men untied and walking around in the fire, and they are not harmed! And the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods! ²⁶Then Nebuchadnezzar approached the entrance of the blazing furnace and shouted, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, you servants of the Most High God, come out and come here! Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego came out of the midst of the fire. ²⁷The satraps, prefects, governors, and royal advisors crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was the hair of their head singed; their trousers were not scorched and there was no smell of fire on them.

²⁸Nebuchadnezzar declared, Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him! They have defied the king's command and have yielded their bodies, so that they might not serve or worship any god except their own God. ²⁹Therefore, I make a decree that any people, nation, or [men of any] language who say anything offensive against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego shall be cut in pieces and their houses shall be reduced to a pile of rubbish; because there is no other god who can save like this! ³⁰Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego in the province of Babylon. (Dan. 3:1-30)

Introduction

Some years ago there was a series of T.V. commercials that conjured up all kinds of appealing fantasies. Wouldn't it be great if you won the \$5 million lottery—you could quit your boring job; you would no longer have to take orders from your demanding boss, you could live in luxury. Wouldn't it be great if you were selected the most valuable player in the Super Bowl—you would win the hottest sports car, you would receive a gigantic gleaming trophy, you would have your picture in all the newspapers and sport magazines. Wouldn't it be great if you won the jackpot in Las Vegas—you would become a millionaire; you could buy a whole store full of fancy clothes; you could take a cruise around the world.

As ridiculous as those commercials were, there are people who entertain equally unrealistic conceptions of the Christian life. Wouldn't it be great if the Christian life was easy; if God removed every obstacle from your path; if God caused everyone to love you and admire you because you serve Christ; if there were no fiery trials.

In contrast to all this we have the Word of God as recorded in 1 Peter 4:12-14;

Beloved, do not be surprised by the fiery trials among you, (which have come for the purpose of testing you), as though a strange thing has happened to you. ¹³On the contrary, since you are participating in the sufferings of Christ, rejoice; so that at the revelation of his glory you may indeed rejoice with exultation! ¹⁴If you are denounced for the name of Christ, you are blessed; because the Spirit of glory, indeed, the [Spirit] of God, is resting upon you. (1 Pet. 4:12-14)

When he wrote these words the Apostle Peter might well have had in mind the three young men who faced the flames of the fiery furnace because of their commitment to Christ. As we come to the third chapter of Daniel let us consider the subject, Three Things a Practicing Christian Can Expect.

I. You Can Expect to Find Yourself in Conflict with the World (Dan. 3:1-12)

The trouble began when Nebuchadnezzar the king decided to erect a huge golden statue (ninety feet high and nine feet wide) and have all his subjects pay homage to it.

What motivated Nebuchadnezzar to set up such a statue? Was he inspired by his dream? There is a striking parallel between this statue and the image he saw in his dream:

You, O king, saw and observed a huge statue. This statue, which was enormous and whose brightness was brilliant, stood before you. Its appearance was awesome. ³²The head of this statue was made of fine gold, its chest and arms were made of silver, its stomach and its thighs were of bronze, ³³its legs were made of iron, its feet were made partly of iron and partly of clay. (Dan. 2:31-33)

Did his God-given glory and position go to his head and inflate him with pride? Daniel had testified to the king:

You, O king, are king of kings, the one on whom the God of heaven has bestowed the dominion, the power, and the strength and the glory. ³⁸Into your hands he has placed mankind, as well as the beasts of the field and the birds of the air— wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are the head of gold. (Dan. 2:37-38)

Throughout chapter three Nebuchadnezzar is repeatedly referred to as "*Nebuchadnezzar **the king.***"

As the image was under construction, no doubt the more astute Jews could discern that trouble lay just over the horizon. When the statue was completed, Nebuchadnezzar summoned all the officials of the realm to the dedication ceremony. If there had been any doubt before as to what Nebuchadnezzar had in

mind when he commissioned the building of the statue, it became clear now what his intention was:

Then the herald loudly proclaimed, This is what you are commanded to do, O peoples, nations, and [men of every] language: ⁵As soon as you hear the sound of the cornet, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes, and all kinds of music, you are to bow down and worship the golden statue that Nebuchadnezzar the king has erected. ⁶Whoever does not bow down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace. (Dan. 3:4-6)

According to verse 7, Nebuchadnezzar got universal compliance with his demand. For the pagan idolatrous people of his realm, what was one more idol? To them, all religions, or any religion, were pretty much the same. Then, too, these ancient people well understood the connection between church and state. There was one official state religion, other religions might be tolerated, but it was understood that they must submit to the State and its official religion.

There never has been any true separation of church and state. As the historians, Wil and Ariel Durant write, "There is no significant example in history before our time of a society successfully maintaining moral life without the aid of religion" (Wil and Ariel Durant, *The Lessons of History*, quoted by Charles Colson in *Kingdoms in Conflict*, p.229.) The apparent separation of church and state has worked successfully in America only because up to the present in reality they have actually been of one united mind. The American nation was founded largely upon Christian principles and values; it has been permeated by a Christian influence; and up to the present it has been populated by an overwhelmingly large "Christian" population. Thus, in a very profound sense, Christianity controlled the state by controlling the thinking of both the people and the leaders; to quote the Christian thinker, Charles Colson,

The Founding Fathers were well aware that the form of limited government they were adopting could only succeed if there was an underlying consensus of values shared by the populace. I am always reminded of this when I visit the House of Representatives. A beautiful fresco on the upper walls of the chamber itself contains the portraits of history's great lawmakers. Standing at the speaker's desk and looking straight ahead over the main entrance, one's eyes meet the piercing eyes of the first figure in the series: Moses, the one who recorded the Law from the original Lawgiver. (Charles Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict*, p.120)

But in the present day all this has rapidly and radically changed. For the most part, the United States has departed from its Christian heritage; the Christian influence has been greatly diminished, and the secular state is asserting itself in opposition to Christianity. The secular state is seeking to systematically remove the church from public life; seeking to dictate to the church its limited and private sphere of influence; and seeking to indoctrinate the public with its own religion of

secular humanism. By way of example, in 1980 the Supreme Court declared unconstitutional a Kentucky law requiring that the Ten Commandments be posted in public school classrooms (*Kingdoms in Conflict*, p.205.)

Another reason why the populace of the ancient Babylonian Empire willingly complied with Nebuchadnezzar's decree is the fact that there is an inherent tendency in sinful man to deify the state and its leader. There is a tendency for sinful man to identify himself with the State in an absolute, religious manner. A little boy, raised in a secular, non-Christian home, when asked, "What is your religion?" replied, "I am an American." There is the tendency for sinful man to view national leaders as messiahs and wonder-working saviors.

Yet another reason for the universal compliance with Nebuchadnezzar's decree is the pragmatic question, "What does religion matter when your life is at stake?" Faced with the prospect of an awful death, these pagan peoples had no qualms about paying homage to Nebuchadnezzar's huge statue.

Thus there was universal compliance with Nebuchadnezzar's demand, almost universal compliance—there were those three young men who maintained and exhibited their devotion to the LORD (vs. 12.) Their commitment to Christ had not gone unnoticed, and it would not go unchallenged.

As we consider this third chapter of Daniel, the first thing we learn is the fact that as practicing Christians we can expect to find ourselves in conflict with the world:

If you belonged to the world, the world would love its own; but because you do not belong to the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ²⁰Remember what I told you, A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. ²¹But they will do all these things to you for my name's sake, because they do not know the one who sent me. (Jn. 15:19-21)

... everyone who would live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. (2 Tim. 3:12)

II. You Can Expect to Be a Witness to the World (Dan. 3:13-18)

According to verse 13, these three young men were summoned to appear before the king. According to verses 16-18, their appearance before the royal court proves to be an occasion for them to bear witness for Christ.

Their refusal to pay religious homage to the statue, and the very way they address the king—they address him with the words "*O Nebuchadnezzar,*" in contrast to the repeatedly used title, "*Nebuchadnezzar the king*"—confronts him with his blasphemous arrogance. They are reminding Nebuchadnezzar that he is under God, he is not equal to God, he does not possess the prerogatives of God.

Individual men and governments tend to view themselves as being independent and separate from God; they need to be confronted with the truth that we are all accountable to God. When the Apostle Paul reasoned with Felix, the Roman governor, *"about righteousness and self-control and the judgment to come, Felix terrified"* (Acts 24:25.) Paul was confronting this Roman magistrate with his accountability to the LORD God the Almighty.

These three young men, as they stand trial before Nebuchadnezzar, express their confidence that the God whom they serve is able and willing to deliver them: *"If [you] do [throw us into the furnace], our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the blazing furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king"* (vs. 17.) Our assurance and our testimony as Christians is expressed in such a passage as Hebrews 7:25, *"he [Christ Jesus] is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them."*

They are resolved that they will not deny the LORD, even if Nebuchadnezzar is willing to extend clemency to them: *"But if [you do] not [throw us into the furnace], let it be known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods, nor will we worship the golden statue that you have erected"* (vs. 18.) Our testimony must be that of Joshua, when he declared, *"as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD"* (Josh. 24:15b.)

There are times when our Christian witness in word and by our conduct will result in a fiery trial, as was the case with these three young men:

Then Nebuchadnezzar became filled with fury, and the expression on his face reflected his anger against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. He ordered the furnace to be heated seven times hotter than usual. ²⁰Then he commanded valiant warriors who were in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego and throw them into the blazing furnace. ²¹So these men, [still wearing] their trousers, their robes, their turbans, and their other garments, were thrown into the middle of the blazing furnace. (Dan. 3:19-21)

But there are also times when the endurance of that fiery trial will prove to be an even greater witness to the truth of the gospel and will elicit confessions of praise to God:

Nebuchadnezzar declared, Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him! They have defied the king's command and have yielded their bodies, so that they might not serve or worship any god except their own God. ²⁹Therefore, I make a decree that any people, nation, or [men of any] language who say anything offensive against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego shall be cut in pieces and their houses shall be reduced to a pile of rubbish; because there is no other god who can save like this! (Dan. 3:28-29)

Concerning the phenomenal growth of the Korean church in contrast with the miniscule influence of the Japanese church:

... some Korean pastors believe that the main reason is the fact that their church has had a long history of obedience under persecution and is, therefore, strong and credible.

By contrast, it is well documented that Christian leadership during the militaristic era in Japan before and during World War II compromised their obedience to Christ. Under pressure of the government, almost all pastors, with the exception of some in the Holiness Churches, bowed to the tablets of the Emperor and gave silent assent to the militarist policies.

When Japan was defeated ... the people's spirit was severely broken and receptive to the certainty of the Gospel. But the pastors had no message to give them. They had lost credibility. As a result, church growth suffered. (*China Prayer Letter*)

Consider the example of Joyce and her faithful Christian witness despite the fiery trial of mockery at the hands of her peers:

Prior to her class reunion, one of Joyce's classmates phoned her and said, "Joyce, I know some of us made fun of you for carrying your Bible to school and for your heavy involvement in Youth for Christ on campus. We called you a square and thought you were kind of strange. But you were salt and you were light in our school, and I want to thank you for that." (*POWER*, 10/14/90) During the 15 years since their graduation, the young man who wrote those words had become a Christian himself, and he remembered Joyce's Christian life with gratitude and respect.

Here, then, is a second lesson we learn from this third chapter of Daniel: As practicing Christians we can expect to be a witness to the world for Christ.

... "sanctify the Lord," Christ, in your hearts; being always prepared with an answer for everyone who asks you for an explanation concerning the hope that is in you. (1 Pet. 3:15)

Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. ³³But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven. (Matt. 10:32-33)

III. You Can Expect to Be Sustained and Rewarded by Christ (Dan. 3:19-30)

These three young men have rebuked Nebuchadnezzar for his pride and self-deification, and they have withstood him even in the face of his threats (vs. 17-

18.) Now, all the fury of ungodly men and of the devil himself is unleashed against these three practicing Christians (vs. 19-23.)

But the LORD proved Himself worthy of their trust. He Himself was with them to sustain them in their hour of trial; as Nebuchadnezzar himself observed: *"He responded, 'Look! I see four men untied and walking around in the fire, and they are not harmed! And the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods!'"* (vs. 25.)

For the Christian, the greater the trial we are called to undergo, the greater we will find the sustaining presence of Christ the Lord. The experience of these three young Christian men is really a type of death and resurrection; they were not spared from exposure to the deadly flames, but Christ was present with them in the midst of the ordeal and brought them safely through it. Their experience bears testimony to the truth of Psalm 23:4, *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."*

Here, then, is the third lesson we learn from this well-known passage of Scripture: As Practicing Christians we can expect to be sustained by Christ Himself:

But the Lord stood by me, and strengthened me ... and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. ¹⁸The Lord will deliver me out of every evil work and will save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (2 Tim. 4:17-18)