

Daniel
Through the Fire (Part 3)
Daniel 3
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I invite you to take your Bibles tonight and turn back with me to Daniel 3, Daniel 3. I hope for us to finish this wonderful chapter tonight. Just to remind you of what we're learning in this magnificent chapter in the story from the life of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego. The message of Daniel 3 is that God is sovereign. He is sovereign even over the government sponsored persecution of His people. This account from the lives of Daniel's three Hebrew friends there in Babylon, we've noted, provides for us several biblical perspectives about the persecution that comes against us as God's people from the governments of this world, and it is a constant reality.

In fact, the first biblical perspective that we learned in this chapter is the relentless reality of government persecution. In the first 15 verses we meet one version in one period of time in one place, and yet this is a constant reality. Because the governments of our world are energized by Satan himself as he seeks to attack the work of God and the Lamb, the relentless reality of government persecution.

Now just to remind you, and I'm not going to go back through this in detail, but just to remind you, in the first 15 verses we saw Nebuchadnezzar's image. Obviously, from the image in his dream in chapter 2 Nebuchadnezzar got the idea of building this great statue: a statue 90 feet tall and 9 feet wide, 30 yards high. The image was covered entirely with hammered gold. You remember that in his vision the image had been made of different metals, but when he came to construct this image, he did so entirely of gold. And as I've noted, he did so to make a point; to make a statement. Because Babylon, he thought, would endure. No other kingdoms would follow his. It would all be gold. This image was really in defiance of what Yahweh had told him in his dream that his kingdom, the kingdom of Babylon, would end and another would follow. His statement was, oh no it won't. The gold will continue.

For the dedication of this image Nebuchadnezzar had required all of the important officials of the empire to be present and to bow down before this image, not so much as an act of worship of him but rather a worship of Babylon's gods. Even as we will see tonight this is what was

implied, worshiping the gods that had made Babylon possible. Refusing to do so came with a horrible penalty. Verse 6 says, “But whoever does not bow down and worship shall immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire.” So, as you would expect then, and as often happens, when the orchestra begins to play with the pressure of that threat, hundreds of the most influential people in Babylon all went along. They all fell down, and they worshiped the image of gold exactly as Nebuchadnezzar had commanded them. All of them except for three, three young, probably late teenage, Hebrew young men. They continued to stand.

Their refusal to bow was quickly pointed out to Nebuchadnezzar by jealous members of his government. Verse 13, When he heard “... Nebuchadnezzar in rage and anger gave orders to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; then these men were brought before the king.” He was overcome with rage, and he ordered for them to be brought, but even in the midst of that, he decided for the better purposes of the kingdom, and for consolidation of his power, and for unity, to give them a second chance.

Verse 15, he said to them, “Now if you are ready, at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe and all kinds of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, *very well*. But if you do not worship, you will ...” literally ‘in the moment’ be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire;” [And then he adds this at the end of verse 15,] “and what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?” Nebuchadnezzar is about to discover the answer to that question.

Now, the second biblical perspective that we saw last time was the believer’s response to government persecution. And I spent our entire last time looking at these three verses, verses 16 to 18, because here we learn the biblical response to government persecution. And again, just briefly to remind you, here is how we ought to respond when the governments of this world come against us in our faith.

Number one, be completely unintimidated by human authorities. Verse 16, “Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, ‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter.’” Essentially, they fully admitted that what they had been accused of by Nebuchadnezzar was true, but their minds were made up; they weren’t going to change; they would not be intimidated by this circumstance and the king’s threats. And that’s how we ought to respond. We ought to be respectful. We ought to be kind. We ought to be gracious. But we also

ought to be courageous and firm and unintimidated. Any human authority only has that authority because of God Himself.

And the reason that human authority's heart continues beating at that moment and their lungs convert the oxygen to the air they desperately need is because God enables it to be so. We don't have to be afraid. And the way we keep from being afraid, we learned, is to fear God more; to fear God more. And that's what Jesus said, you remember? He said don't fear the one who can kill your body. The government can kill your body. Don't fear them. Fear the One who can cast both body and soul into hell forever. Fear God.

A second response to government persecution is: be completely confident in God's power regardless of the danger. Be confident in God's ability to deliver you from whatever it is you're being assaulted by, intimidated with, and to do so miraculously if He so chooses. Look at verse 17, "If it be so ..." [that we are thrown into the fire] "... our God whom we serve ..." underline this "... is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire." They were expressing their full and complete confidence in God's power to rescue them from the most powerful human rulers and the worst persecution they could bring.

They were essentially saying, look, if God wants to do so, there is nothing you can do to us. And then in verse 17 they add, "... and He will deliver us out of your hand, oh king." Since they're about to imply that they may not survive this, they may, in fact, be thrown in the fire, that is really that last part of verse 17, is an implication of their hope of life beyond death of the resurrection. Do your worst, and we will survive eternally in the presence of God.

A third response to government persecution is: be completely submissive to God's will regardless of His choice. Verse 18, "but even if He does not ..." That is if He does not deliver us from the fire, if we perish, these young men acknowledged God's power to intervene miraculously, but they also acknowledged that they didn't know exactly what God's will in this situation was.

When persecution comes to us, make sure you file this away, it's not a matter of if, by the way, it's a matter of when; when persecution comes to us from our government, God may powerfully rescue us, or He may choose to allow us to endure the worst that men can do. He's done both in the history of the church. We simply have to trust Him and His sovereign purpose in our situation. Be submissive to God's will.

There's a fourth response to government persecution, and that is: be completely committed to God regardless of the consequences. Verse 18, "But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." Whatever the cost, simply refuse to deny God. They did. In their case the cost was horrific, painful death.

Think about this. They don't know the end of the story. You and I know how the story ends. They had no spoiler alert. As far as they knew, they might very well be roasted alive in a smelting furnace on the plains of Babylon. That might be the end of their story. And they remained committed to God regardless. And when our story comes, we won't know the ending either. And we have to be just as faithful whatever the consequences.

Now, that brings us to a third biblical perspective about government persecution. And this is picking up where we left off last time, and this third perspective is this: God's complete power over government persecution. I love this section, verses 19 - 27. This section begins with what is really the severest example of government's cruel treatment of God's people. Verse 19, "Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with wrath. And his facial expression was altered toward Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego." Nebuchadnezzar had been angry before. We read it just a moment ago. But when he saw the boldness of these three young men, and when he saw that they were completely unrepentant, he became far more furious.

I mean, think about it from his perspective. He had spent a lot of money and invested a lot of time to make this occasion a unifying experience for the kingdom where they all came under his authority. And here are these three young Hebrews who are messing up his event; destroying the very unity he wanted to build. He is enraged. Literally, the Aramaic says he was "filled with rage." As a result of that, and this is what always happens with anger doesn't it, the expression on his face changed. That's what the text says. His countenance, suddenly, where he had wanted to give them a second chance; when he saw they were resolute, his countenance changed; his face became hard, and his eyes flashed with anger.

Verse 19 says, "He answered by giving orders to heat the furnace by seven times more than it was usually heated." Now, when you read that, don't think that seven times is some sort of mathematical formula. This was not an engineering problem. This is a proverbial expression. The "seven" is used in other cases. For example, in Proverbs. You know, "The righteous man falls

seven times, but rises again.” It’s a figure of speech to say as hot as possible. That’s what he’s saying. He ordered them to heat the furnace to maximum intensity. That would have required two things. It would have required adding a lot more fuel to the fire and increasing the draft.

Now, a smelting kiln like this one that was probably used to actually manufacture the bricks that were used for the super structure of the image and for the smelting of the gold that would have been hammered onto the surface of this image. A smelting kiln like this one could generate temperatures as high as almost 2,000 degrees, the temperature at which gold melts. Actually, it’s 1,984 degrees, if you’re interested, Fahrenheit.

Just to give you a point of comparison, a cremation furnace typically runs about 400 to 500 degrees cooler than this furnace. Nebuchadnezzar demands that this one not be at the normal temperature for melting gold, but rather that it be heated to the maximum capacity. We’re talking 2,000 degrees and beyond. Verse 20, “He commanded certain valiant warriors who were in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in order to cast them into the furnace of blazing fire.”

Why? Why would you have these warriors, probably his personal bodyguard, these choice soldiers, why would you have them do it, and why would you have them bound? Well clearly, he is intent on making sure there is no intervention, human or divine. They’re tied up in order to be completely unable to save themselves. Verse 21, “Then these men were tied up in their trousers, their coats, their caps and their other clothes...” Now, by the way, those are good translations of the Aramaic words, but there were other words that we can’t be absolutely certain of the meaning of each of them.

But when you do a little historical research, you learn that in Babylon this would have included shoes; it would have included leggings; it would have included a robe or a coat that went over the body much like a robe or long coat we would wear; and then caps or turbans and other clothes as well. This would have been their finest official uniforms to be worn on this auspicious occasion. They were intentionally left fully dressed. I think, not only because of the hurry to execute this sentence, but also, they’re dressed in highly flammable clothes that would immediately catch fire, and they would quickly be engulfed in the flames.

So, once fuel is added to the fire, once the draft is increased, the temperature rises. These men have been tied up, verse 21 says, “They were cast into the midst of the furnace of blazing fire.”

[Verse 22] “For this reason, because the king’s command was urgent and the furnace had been made extremely hot, the flame of the fire slew those men who carried up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.” The king’s command was so urgent; this had to be done immediately. He was shamed. This is how authorities who feel that they have been disrespected respond sinfully. It has to be done now, it’s unreasonable, but so be it.

The furnace was so hot, the commitment of these soldiers to carrying out the commands of their king so extreme that they failed to adequately protect themselves from the fire, and they themselves were killed by the fire. We don’t know exactly how. Either they were overcome by the heat that was generated, the sudden blast of heat as they came to the edge of the furnace and were putting these men in, or perhaps a sudden shift in the wind blew the flames toward them and consumed them. But verse 23 says, “But these three men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, fell into the midst of the furnace of blazing fire *still* tied up.”

Now, notice they fell into. The wording suggests that they had been thrown into the furnace through an opening at the top. And this really reflects the building and construction techniques at the time. Mesopotamian smelting furnaces like this one were often in the shape of an old fashioned, think, glass milk bottle. A large opening at the top is where they dropped the ore to be smelted in, and which the fire and smoke rose from. Then there was a large opening at the bottom, and that’s where they added the wood and the charcoal. It’s where they removed the ashes, and it’s also where they opened the doors to vary the amount of draft, the amount of wind that went in to increase the heat of the fire or to limit it.

Usually, there was an inclined ramp of earth, or there was a platform, or even sometimes these were built next to adjacent hills in order to provide access to the top opening. It was apparently that ramp or that platform or that incline that the soldiers used to access the top opening of this furnace and to throw these men in, and the soldiers are killed in the process. This is man in his government persecuting the people of God.

Retrace the history of humanity, and you will discover that Satan’s children have always targeted God’s children. It happened at the very beginning with Cain and Abel, and it still happens to this day. And the greatest animosity has often come from ungodly men and women in positions of power in human government. That’s exactly what happened here. It’s exactly what’s happening right now to our brothers and sisters on the other side of this planet. And if Christ delays His

coming, we need to recognize that it very well could happen in the lifetime of some of us here in our country. It's a reality.

Now, in Daniel 3 the stage was set for a dramatic miracle, and in that miracle, we see God's greater protection of His people. If we see government's cruel treatment of God's people, then we see in much more profound color God's greater protection of His people. Look at verse 24, "Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astounded and stood up in haste..." Nebuchadnezzar, apparently, had positioned himself so that he could watch these three rebels disintegrate in the fire. But that's not what he saw. And what he did see astounded him. He jumped up from his chair, literally the Aramaic says, "in alarm", and what he saw immediately prompted a question.

Verse 24, "... he said to his high officials, 'Was it not three men we cast bound into the midst of the fire?'" He only remembered there being three men that he had ordered to be thrown into the fire. But remember he was enraged, and so now he's doubting his memory. Wasn't it three?

"They replied to the king, 'Certainly, O king.'" Yes, his officials conferred; yes, O king, it was in fact only three men. Verse 25, "He said. 'Look! I see four men ...'" He encourages them to look for themselves. Perhaps, initially, only he was positioned to see through the bottom opening of the furnace. And now he invites them to look as well, and he says look there aren't just three men in there, there are four. But that wasn't the only cause of his astonishment. Notice verse 25, "He said, 'Look! I see four men loosed *and walking about* in the midst of the fire without harm..." In fact if you look at this text, he's astonished for five reasons.

First of all, because there were four men. They were all confident there had only been three, but now there are four.

Secondly, the three were loosed. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had been carefully bound before they were thrown in, and now they are loose. Apparently, their ropes had been burned away.

Thirdly, all four of these men are walking around in the fire. Now, think about this for a moment. Not only were they alive, but they were walking around as if they were enjoying one another and the experience. And can you imagine, you know this story is told from Nebuchadnezzar looking in, but can you imagine being one of those three young Hebrew men imagining you were about to be incinerated, and you find yourself completely untouched walking around in the fire.

Another reason he was astonished, a fourth reason, is none of the four were harmed.

And the fifth, and I really think a key one, is the identity of the fourth man. Look at verse 25, "... and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of *the* gods!"

Now, don't read your trinitarian Christian theology into this verse. He's a polytheist. He's a pagan. And, in the polytheistic religion of Babylon, the gods could have offspring. They could have sons and daughters. And as Nebuchadnezzar examines the fourth person in the fire, he concludes, he is, in fact, a son of the gods. Down in verse 28, you'll notice he refers to this person as an angel. But in Aramaic the word "angel" could be used of a divine being just like in the Hebrew Scriptures when it refers to the angel of the LORD who clearly was a divine person in the Old Testament.

Nebuchadnezzar, the language he uses in verse 25, is clear. He was convinced that the one he saw in the flames, the fourth person he saw in the flames, was a divine being. Now from his pagan mindset that meant that this fourth person in the fire was, as commentator Young puts it, "a son of deity, a divine person, one of the races of the gods, a supernatural being."

Verse 26, "Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the furnace of blazing fire;" so that he could see better and so that they could hear him over the noise of the fire. He actually approached the furnace and verse 26, "he responded and said, 'Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, come out, you servants of the Most High ..., and come here!'" He shouted for them to come out of the fire. I love this because here is great Nebuchadnezzar who has just vented his wrath on these three young men essentially admitting he is a beaten, defeated man. Ok. This isn't working; come out.

Now, notice here in verse 26 that Nebuchadnezzar calls their god, the Most High God. You are servants of the Most High God. Nebuchadnezzar has become convinced, at least for now, he's a bit of a moving target on this issue, but at least for now, he has become convinced that the God of Israel, Yahweh, is the Most High God. Now, again don't think Christianity. Don't think even Judaism. This still fits his pagan, polytheistic view of the world. Even the Greeks with all of their gods, called Zeus the most high. So, he's not yet a true believer in Israel's God. By the way, let me just say this is an interesting point. Even seeing a miracle first-hand doesn't bring him to genuine faith just like the resurrection of Jesus didn't the leaders of Israel.

How does a person come to believe? James 1 says, James 1:18, through the seed, the word of God. Jesus said if they will not believe Moses and the Prophets, they will not believe the one who was raised from the dead. In this case the One, three protected from the fire. He didn't believe. He believed God was great. He's impressed that Israel's God, chapter two, is not only profoundly wise and able to reveal the contents of his dream and talk about the future, but He's also extremely powerful, chapter 3, and He is both wiser and more powerful than all the other gods including Babylon's gods. He is the Most High. But He's still just one in the pantheon.

Verse 26 says, "Then Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the midst of the fire." I just can't help but think that they hated to do so. What a moment that was. Verse 27, "The satraps, the prefects, the governors and the king's high officials gathered around..." Now folks, verse 27 is a crucial verse because it shows us that many of the highest officials of Babylon were first-hand witnesses of this divine miracle and could substantiate it as absolutely authentic. In fact, they crowded around to examine these three young men. Notice what they saw. These officials made several observations. Verse 27, "... *and* they saw in regard to these men that the fire had no effect on the bodies of these men ..." Literally the Aramaic text says the fire had not had power over their bodies. That's astounding. Verse 27 goes on to say, "... nor was the hair of their head singed..."

[Now, you know I'm no great barbecuer, but I do enjoy cooking a steak now and then on the grill, and I can tell you that the thing that happens first before your skin burns is your hair is singed. Here we're told not only was their skin not burned, not even the hair of their head was singed.] Verse 27 goes on to say, "... nor were their trousers damaged..." [Their clothes had not been negatively changed or affected in any way. They were unscorched, unburned, unaffected.] "... nor had the smell of fire *even* come upon them."

Listen, when God performs a miracle, it is clearly a miracle. I mean you just sit around a small campfire for a few minutes, and you smell like fire. I mean here are these men who've been thrown into a smelting furnace which was at least 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit, and there was no smell of smoke or fire. God had miraculously preserved them in every conceivable way. Think about this: the only things that were damaged by the fire were the ropes that bound them and the soldiers that threw them in. Nothing else was affected.

Now folks, this really happened. This is not a myth. This is God; the God who created this planet; the God who made fire intervening on behalf of His children. This story and this outcome powerfully remind us that God is sovereign over every human king; over every human government; over every empire, and their persecution of His children. Listen, it is absolutely nothing for God to end the persecution in China yesterday. That puny man who rules over that great country could breathe his last this moment because of some small virus. God is on His throne, and He is in control. And He is completely able to protect His children.

Now, God doesn't always protect us in the same way. And so, it's important for us to step back from this story and remind ourselves that God can and may, when persecution comes for us, intervene like this, miraculously protect us. But that's not what He always does. So, let's consider what God does when it comes to protecting us from government persecution.

First of all, on rare occasions as we see here, He does so by miraculous protection. He just works a miracle and intervenes. We see it here in chapter 3. We're going to see it again in chapter 6 with the lions, right? In Hebrews 11:33 and 34, it speaks of saints,

... who by faith ... shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword....”

God sometimes intervenes miraculously, and human history (and church history) is filled with examples of this miraculous intervention. But that's not all that God does.

Sometimes God protects us from government persecution through our Christian brothers very simply. In fact, look at Acts 9. Acts 9:23. It says,

When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with [him] Paul. But their plot became known to [at that time still known as] Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death. But his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket. And when he came to Jerusalem he was trying to to associate with the disciples....

Sometimes God uses our brothers and sisters in Christ. When I was over in Lebanon, I had the privilege of interacting with a pastor who came across the border from Syria. He pastors a small church in Damascus. And he was describing the threats and even attacks that have come against

him and the members of his church and how they have, by God's grace, been able to help protect one another. God often acts in that way. He uses our Christian brothers. Acts 17:10, "The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea..."

A third way that God protects us from government persecution, He often does is just by the use of biblical wisdom, by doing what's smart. There's no valor in intentionally putting yourself in harm's way if you can avoid it. You see it with Jesus in Matthew 12:14 and 15,

... the Pharisees went out and conspired against Him, *as to* how they might destroy Him. But Jesus, aware of this withdrew from there."

His time had not yet come. There would come a time when He needed to die. That's why He came. But as a normal human being acting as you and I should act before that time, He removed Himself from danger. John 7:1, "After these things Jesus was walking in Galilee, for He was unwilling to walk in Judea because the Jews were seeking to kill Him." John 11:53 and 54,

... from that day on they planned together to kill Him. Therefore Jesus no longer continued to walk publicly among the Jews, but went away from there to the country near the wilderness into a city called Ephraim; and there He stayed with the disciples.

Again, in His case, the timing was all wrong. He came to die but not yet. But you see this wisdom. You see it in the commands that He gave to us in Matthew 10:23 He said, "whenever they persecute you in one city flee to the next...." So, often God protects us from government persecution by the use of biblical wisdom not unnecessarily exposing ourselves to risk. Now, don't get me wrong. It is right to take reasonable calculated risks for the sake of the gospel, and the saints have done that through the centuries, but it is not right to unreasonably put yourself at risk when it's unnecessary to do so.

A fourth way God protects us from government persecution, and this is frequent, is through just providential protection; providential protection. I love the story. I won't have you turn there, but you remember the story in Acts 23 of Paul's sister's son, Paul's nephew, who hears about the plot to kill him, and he comes and tells Paul. And Paul shares it with the head of the military guard, and he is protected. What is that? That's providence. God allowed Paul's nephew to hear

about the plot in order to protect him. And God so often protects us through His providence, through bringing things to light, by arranging things in such a way that we are protected.

Number five, He always protects us in the sense of eternal deliverance from the persecution. Daniel 3, you remember they said even though you may throw us in the fire, and God may choose not to keep us from burning in the fire, He will deliver us out of your hand, oh king. They were talking about an eternal deliverance. Listen, you may burn us; we may die, but He's going to rescue us from you.

That's what Paul said in 2 Timothy 4:18 when he was in prison awaiting his execution, and he knew his execution was coming. He said, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and will bring me safely into His heavenly kingdom." The worst that people can do to us here, the worst that government can do to us here, cannot in any way affect our eternal future.

Number six, God protects us from government persecution always with spiritual protection; always with spiritual protection. You see, God doesn't always choose to protect us physically from persecution, but if He doesn't protect us from the persecution itself, He always, always, always will protect us spiritually in and through it. In Luke 22:31 Jesus said to Peter,

"Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat."
[Remember He's talking about the government arrest. The Jewish and Roman arrest of Jesus and all that's going to unfold in that, and He says, Satan wants to destroy your faith] "... but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail."
[Jesus says, I will not let you fail spiritually. I will preserve you. Your faith will not be shipwrecked.]

And then I love that scene, I brought it to your attention before in John 18:8 and 9. There in the garden, you remember, they come there. Judas comes with a crowd to arrest Jesus. And when the crowd comes up with the soldiers Jesus says,

"Whom do you seek?" [You know what Jesus was saying? Whose name is on the arrest warrant?] "And they said, 'Jesus ... [of Nazareth].'" [And He says,] ... "I am *He*." [And remember at that moment God allows His glory to somehow slip through the veil of His humanity and the soldiers fall back.] "... again He ... [says], 'Whom do you seek? And they said, Jesus ... [of Nazareth].'" [He was

again asking whose name is on the arrest warrant? And] Jesus answered, “I told you that I am *He*; so if you seek Me ...” [if I’m on your arrest warrant then you have to] let these ... [people] go. [Why did Jesus do this? I love this.] to fulfill the word which He spoke, “Of those whom you’ve given Me I’ve lost not one.”

He was protecting His disciples spiritually. He knew that if they were arrested at that moment with Him their faith might not survive, and He would not let it happen. And the same will be true for us. God is never going to put you in a situation with government persecution and not preserve your faith through it. If you’re His, then He will protect you spiritually. How?

Well, that brings us to number seven. God protects us from government persecution always by His abiding presence. Let me ask you this, who was the fourth person in the fire? I’m not asking you who Nebuchadnezzar, the pagan, thought it was. I’m asking you who was the fourth person in the fire? Well, there are only two options.

The vast majority of Jewish scholars have identified understandably this person as an angel. The Jewish Talmud argues that it was the archangel, Gabriel. The other option is that it was a pre-incarnate appearance of the second person of the Trinity. This is very possible. In fact, we know that the pre-incarnate Christ often appeared in the Old Testament as the angel of the Lord. He is clearly a divine being, and I don’t have time to take you back and show you that, but I think many of you are aware of that.

I personally believe, and I think I can make an argument for the fact, that every Old Testament appearance of God, every theophany, was in fact a “Christophany”; an appearance, a pre-incarnate appearance of the second person of the Trinity, the eternal Son. And I think that’s what you have here. I can’t prove that to you that that’s who this is, but I think it makes perfect sense. And it’s the view of most interpreters throughout the history of the church, that the fourth person in the fire was a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus Christ. This underscores that whenever we go through fiery trials our Lord is always with us.

Think about this, I mean think about it for a moment, what God could have done in this situation. He could have just sustained them through the fire. He could have sent an angel, but instead, He sends a pre-incarnate appearance of His eternal Son. Why? To underscore His abiding presence with us which is exactly what’s promised. Isaiah 43:2, This was written a couple of hundred years before these events unfold, about a little over 150 years before these events unfolded.

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, Nor will the flame burn you.” How do you get that protection in the midst of the trouble? “I will be with you.”

Or Psalm 23:4, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...” meaning the deepest, darkest valleys of life; not just death, but the deep dark valleys of life, the worst trials “... I fear no evil for You are with me. Your rod and Your staff they comfort me.” Do you believe that? Do you believe that in the hardest, the most difficult times of your life that God keeps His word? I will be with you. You see a wonderful picture of it here in this remarkable story.

Or there’s Matthew 28:20. Jesus, as He commissioned us with the Great Commission ’til He returns, He says “I am with you always even to the end of the age.” Our Lord often allows us to face persecution from governments, but He is with us through it. If that ever comes; if you’re ever challenged to stand because of your faith; if you ever endure threats from government because of what you believe, you will not be alone. Not only will you have brothers and sisters in Christ who will pray for you and stand alongside of you, and as Hebrews says, who visit prisoners in their affliction, but Jesus says, I will be with you; I will be with you. The question though is, why? Why does He allow it? If He can protect us from it, why does He allow it?

And that brings us briefly to a fourth perspective, and that is God’s specific purposes in government persecution; God’s specific purposes in government persecution. We see this unfold in verses 28 to 30. Look at verse 28, “Nebuchadnezzar responded and said, ‘Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent His angel and delivered His servants ...’” Nebuchadnezzar responds in praise to the God of Israel because He’s rescued His servants. But he was also impressed with these men and their faith. He says, “... who put their trust in Him, violating the king’s command and yielded up their bodies so as not to serve or worship any god except their own God.”

He admired, as much as he was irritated by them, he admired these men who were willing to defy his command and risk a horrible death in order to remain faithful to their own God. By the way, notice verse 28 “... so as not to serve or worship any other god except their own God.” That makes it clear that bowing before Nebuchadnezzar’s statue was to be an act of worship of Babylon’s gods. That’s why they couldn’t do it.

Verse 29, “Therefore ...” [in light of what the God of Israel has done the Most High God] “Therefore I make a decree ...” [And the word “decree” here is the normal word used in Ezra and Nehemiah for an official declaration of the state. Here’s the content of his decree.] “Therefore I make a decree that any people, nation, or tongue ...” [in other words this is empire wide] “... that speaks anything offensive against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego ...” [notice by the way, that Nebuchadnezzar does not refer to God as “my God.” Instead, he refers to Him as the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.] But this decree forbids anyone anywhere in the Babylonian empire speaking against Israel’s God.

By the way, this still fits with His polytheism. He hasn’t yet said Yahweh is the only God. He said He is the Most High God and nobody can speak against Him. And the penalty for those who are guilty of this event, verse 29, “[they] shall be ...” [you got to love his seriousness about this] “... shall be torn limb from limb and their houses reduced to a rubbish heap....” Even possibly, he means a latrine.

Now, why would Nebuchadnezzar make such a decree? Verse 29, he says “... inasmuch as there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way.” Now, folks coming from a polytheist and a worshiper of, and frankly the chief defender of all the gods of Babylon, this was absolutely astounding. I can promise you this: there was a lot of dinnertime discussion around the tables in Babylon about the king’s decree for a long time.

Why would he have done this? What motivated Nebuchadnezzar to make this decree? Well, it may have been to appease Israel’s God. After all Nebuchadnezzar had just challenged Yahweh’s power and attempted to kill His followers. So, this may be a way to kind of make things good. It may have been to limit possible retaliation from Israel’s God. I mean pagans are very superstitious, and Nebuchadnezzar was especially so, as we see from these stories. Perhaps he saw this decree as a way to protect himself from some potential negative consequences. He could sort of get God off his back a little bit.

But I also think, and you’re going to see this come even clearer in the next chapter, I think this decree was almost certainly a genuine respect for both the existence and power of Yahweh, Israel’s God.

Verse 30, “Then the king caused Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to prosper in the province of Babylon.” He caused them to prosper. This likely included greater honor, financial and material rewards, and even promotion in their work.

So, let’s answer the question then: What are God’s specific purposes in government persecution, in allowing government persecution? Some of these come out of this story. Others from other places. Let me just give you the list to think about.

First of all, God allows true believers to be persecuted in order that His name might be proclaimed to those government officials. In Acts 9:15 God says this about Paul whom He’s just saved, “He is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before ... kings.” How exactly did Paul get to proclaim God’s name before kings? It was through persecution. So, sometimes that’s what God’s about. He wants the pagan leaders to hear about Him, and that is one of the chief ways they can, through the persecution of His people.

Secondly, for the salvation of the elect. We’re going to see in chapter 4. next week Lord willing, we’re going to see that God has a spiritual plan for Nebuchadnezzar. He is at work in Nebuchadnezzar’s life as we will see to draw him to Himself. And God is often doing that through persecution. He is working in the lives of individual leaders in order to redeem them.

Thirdly, for the faith and growth of His saints. The trial of chapter 2 in the lives of these three young men prepared them for the much greater trial of chapter 3. They grew spiritually as a result of what they had faced. And I can promise you they would never forget the fire. It strengthened their faith.

Number four, God allows government persecution for the future prosperity of His people. Notice again verse 30, “The king caused Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to prosper in the province of Babylon.” Now don’t read that too quickly because you might be left thinking that God was just ensuring the future prosperity of these three young men. And He was, but He was doing so much more. You see, the final destruction of Jerusalem and of Judah, and the exile of most of Israel’s people to Babylon was still more than fifteen years away when this incident occurred.

But God was using these events for the ultimate protection and prosperity of His people when they found themselves in Babylon. The eventual circumstances of God’s captive people in Babylon would be so much better because of what He was accomplishing through the interaction

of Daniel and these young men with Nebuchadnezzar in the midst of persecution. God was caring for His people even in and through the persecution.

Number five, God allows some to undergo government persecution in order to strengthen the courage of other saints. I mean, when you read this story, doesn't it make you say, God let me stand like that if the time comes. If you're in Christ it does. If you're a true believer it's like, God I don't want to capitulate. I want to have that faith. I want to respond like that. And that's what stories like this do. When you see the faithfulness and courage of other believers it makes your own courage stronger. One author puts it this way:

Through the centuries believers have been comforted by this display of God's sovereign power. For example, the dying Mattathias, who began the Jewish revolt against Antiochus during the Maccabean era between the testaments encouraged his sons by alluding to this account. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews inspired saints in his day by reminding them of past heroes of the faith who had quenched the fury of the flames no doubt referring to Daniel 3. If Yahweh could deliver the Hebrews from the furnace, He can see saints of any age through their fiery trials. [God allows some to go through persecution from government in order to strengthen the backbone of others.]

Number six, and this is the ultimate reason, the glory of God's name. You've already seen it in Daniel 3, right? Nebuchadnezzar, a pagan king, says, he praised and blessed the God of Israel, and he says He is the Most High God. He says, this is what God is about. In the ancient world when one nation defeated another nation in battle as Babylon had Judah, the pagans involved immediately jumped to the conclusions that that meant their gods were greater than the nation they defeated. Yahweh wanted to ensure that they were not left with that utterly mistaken idea. And so, Yahweh made it clear to Nebuchadnezzar, one who blatantly challenged His power by his very actions in the story and showed all the world that Judah's defeat was not because the God of Israel did not exist or because He was weak. He was, in fact, stronger than the gods of any nation, gods that don't even exist. And He is on His throne. He was giving glory to Himself. Very quickly, here are some of the lessons we've learned about government persecution. God protects us in and through persecution and ultimately delivers us from it. God will not allow us to suffer beyond what we can endure. God can, and at times does, choose to miraculously protect us

from government persecution. And I love this; we see it happening in Babylon. God can easily change state persecution to state acceptance to even state protection. This decree just made that clear. And you see it throughout church history. You see it with Rome, right? Constantine. God allows persecution for His own purposes.

I'll close with a quote from John Calvin. John Calvin says, "The church of Jesus Christ has been so constituted from the beginning that death has been the way to life and the cross the path to victory."

Let's pray together.

Father, thank You that You are on Your throne. We sang it earlier. And we thank You that we've seen it lived out in Daniel 3. Thank You, that the weak and puny leaders of our world are like nothing to You. They're like the springtime flowers that last only for a day and then are gone. But Your kingdom is forever.

Father, I pray that You would give us confidence in You. We pray for our brothers and sisters who are facing real government persecution around this world tonight. Lord, strengthen them, give them courage. Use passages like this one for their good and for their help and their hope.

And Father, if that comes in our day, help us to be just as courageous. Thank you that we don't depend on ourselves but on You in the event that happens. And we seek our hope and help in You, in the work of Your Son and in the help and strength of your Holy Spirit.

We pray in the name of Christ. Amen.