

Standing up, not bowing down

Daniel 3:1-30

January 17, 2021 (Cop Church)

Purpose statement: The word of God trumps the word of government.

Attention Getter: At West Point a cadet earned the nickname “Tom Fool Jackson” for his childish antics. Later however, he was given a name that stuck with him for life when General Bernard Bee commented on the soldier’s resolve, “There is Jackson standing like a stone wall.” At the First Battle of Bull Run, General Thomas Jackson stood firm in the face of enemy fire. From then on he was known as “Stonewall Jackson.” He stood out because he stood up.

Today’s text is about standing up for what’s right in the face of severe opposition. It’s about standing up for what’s right when the government is wrong. It’s about standing up and doing the right thing against public pressure to do otherwise. It’s about standing up when everyone else is bowing down.

Introduction: Three young men stood out, because they stood up; something lacking not only in our society, but also in our churches. Many are frightened to take a stand against public pressure. We’re afraid of what it might cost us—popularity, a good grade, a promotion, a job, or maybe a relationship. These three men stood up when it could have cost them their lives. Nebuchadnezzar made a golden statue and commanded everyone to bow down and worship it. Any who refused faced death by fire.

Read: Daniel 3:8-12 *“These men, O king, pay no attention to you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up” (Dan. 1:12b).*

Background: Chapter two revealed what the future held for the nations of the world. According to the Septuagint, there is a 16 to 20-year break between chapters two and three. While some believe the events in chapter three come shortly after the events of chapter two, most scholars agree there's a break of several years between chapters.

Chapter two records Nebuchadnezzar's disturbing dream of a terrifying image of a man. The image had a head of gold, a chest and arms of silver, a midsection of bronze, legs of iron, and feet an iron/clay mix. Then, out of nowhere, a large stone crushed the image. Daniel interpreted the dream. The image represented a succession of world empires beginning with Babylon as the head of gold. Each succeeding substance represented the next ruling empire. Lastly, Daniel revealed that there will be a divine kingdom represented by the stone that crushed the image. Hence, human rule will be brought to an end by God's Kingdom, **Dan. 2:44-45a**. Note how Daniel finished his interpretation with an emphatic statement about God's word, **2:45b**.

In chapter three, we find Nebuchadnezzar wasn't happy with the interpretation, so he created his own image, one entirely of gold. Chapter three focuses on Nebuchadnezzar. It reveals an egotistic, hot-tempered, and rash world leader who believed he could control the future. In chapter two, God told Nebuchadnezzar what the future held. He objected. And in chapter three, he created his own image of the future and bowed down to it. Let's look at Nebuchadnezzar's image.

I. **Nebuchadnezzar's image (3:1-12)**

The chapter begins with Nebuchadnezzar building an image of gold, **Dan. 3:1a**. Where do you suppose he got this idea from? Recall the dream Daniel interpreted in the previous chapter? Nebuchadnezzar was happy that he was the head

of gold. But he didn't like the rest of the image, and especially the part about his kingdom coming to an end. He simply refused to believe God's word and created his own god and interpretation of the way he wanted things to be.

The giant image towered 90' high and was located some distance outside Babylon, on the plain of Dura, **3:1**. Nebuchadnezzar sent for all his officials to gather around the great image of gold, and perhaps for effect, Daniel repeated the titles of these government movers and shakers, **3:2-3**.

What a sight! Nebuchadnezzar teemed with pride. Everyone was in place, and with a great voice—so that everyone could hear—the herald stepped forward to make the announcement. When the music is played everyone in the kingdom, small and great, were to bow and worship the image. Any who refused would *be cast into a burning fiery furnace*, **3:4-6**. The furnace was likely the kiln used to make the bricks and smelt the gold for the image.

Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom included a wide diversity of people. There were people from different backgrounds, different cultures, and different religions. Nebuchadnezzar wanted unity. A unified people are strong people, and what better way to be unified than around religion—his religion.

Unity around Nebuchadnezzar's image was acceptable to almost everyone there. The religions of the world were polytheistic and the government pluralistic. At the time, only Judaism worshipped one God. The general consensus was that gods were territorial, and wherever a nation was located, the god they worshipped was the god of that local. Therefore, a myriad of different religions and gods were acceptable.

Never mind truth. *Unity was more important than truth.* Worshipping a false god that everyone could **agree** with was more important than worshipping the true God. Especially a God that refused to be manipulated by the desires of humanity. So, under the threat of severe consequences, the people bowed down in unity to the image, **3:7**.

From a 21st century perspective, we might scoff at Nebuchadnezzar and his silly image of a god. But before we do, let's compare it to the god being pushed on us today. It too is a man-made god. It's an image that though it can't be seen, supporters demand obedience. Supporters of this god demand it be bowed down to and worshipped. The name of this god is *tolerance*.

What's wrong with tolerance? There's nothing wrong with tolerance. The problem is tolerance has been redefined. Tolerance used to mean it's okay for people to have opposing beliefs. Now tolerance means that you must accept everyone's belief as true. It's religious pluralism.

The fact is truth doesn't depend on what we believe. Truth is true whether we believe it or not. If you are so bold, as to say another's belief is wrong you are labeled intolerant! Yet, that would be intolerant to make such a claim. It's not unlike what happened in Babylon 2500 years ago.

It's been estimated that some 300,000 people attended the dedication of the golden image.¹ With the large crowd, and perhaps the fact that Nebuchadnezzar himself bowed to the image, he didn't notice when three men remained standing. However, there were some who were more than eager to

¹ (Jeremiah, 1992, p. 75)

inform him. Not only did they inform him, they did so with malice, **Dan. 3:8**.

Anti-Semitism is seen throughout history. God's people have always been the **target** of accusations. Not only are Jews targeted, but Christians are as well. Just look at the media headlines. These Chaldeans were likely native Babylonians who were passed over for promotion in favor of the three they accused. But whatever their motivation, they were correct that the three refused to bow to the idol.

The accusers first reminded the king of his decree, **3:9-11**. Then came the accusation. The charges were three: (1) they had no regard for the king; (2) they refused to serve the king's gods; and (3) they refused to bow down to the idol. Notice that all these were couched as personal affronts to the king; after all, it was Nebuchadnezzar who gave them such high position, **3:12**.

There was a small number who refused to bow down to the image—only three. They stood out because they stood up. The accusers hoped to get Nebuchadnezzar worked up into a fury. And they did.

II. **Nebuchadnezzar's fury (3:13-23)**

It worked! Nebuchadnezzar was furious and blew up in a rage. He demanded the three answer the charges against them, **3:13-14**. But, before they could answer, he gave them a second chance. It seems he just couldn't believe that anyone would so blatantly defy him. If they obeyed, all would be fine **3:15a**.

On the other hand, if they disobeyed, the fiery furnace awaited them. The king was so prideful he denied there was

a god powerful enough to deliver them from his wrath,
3:15b.

They responded, admitted they had no defense, and offered no excuses. They didn't claim they didn't hear the order, that it was confusing, that they were distracted, or whatever else one might come up with. Basically, they admitted guilt, **3:16.**

They continued and made two assertions, (1) if in fact Nebuchadnezzar carried out his order and they are thrown into the furnace, the God they serve is **able** to deliver them from physical harm, **3:17a.** And (2) God **will** deliver them from Nebuchadnezzar, **3:17b.**

So what's the difference? They understood a lot more about God than we might give them credit for. They understood the physical and the spiritual. The here-and-now and the hereafter. The temporal and the eternal. They were confident God is able to deliver from both—physical death and eternal death. And that in the end, he will deliver them from eternal death to eternal life.

They also understood that although able, God may choose **not** to deliver them from physical harm. Either way, their obedience wasn't determined by God's willingness to deliver from the dangers of this world, but from his promise to deliver from this world. They concluded with perhaps the boldest words ever uttered, **3:18.** These three stood out because they stood up. Their words remind us of Job's words; *"Though he slay me, I will hope in him"* (Job 13:15).

Nebuchadnezzar wasn't impressed. In fact, their courage to stand in defiance, resulted in his fury boiling over. In a ferocious rage he commanded the furnace to be cranked up and

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego thrown in. His orders were carried out immediately, **3:19-21**.

Because of his rage, proper precautions weren't adhered to and the soldiers that threw the three men in were themselves engulfed in the flames and immediately killed. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego fell to the bottom of the furnace, **3:22-23**. That's where the story should end. But it doesn't. To Nebuchadnezzar's astonishment, the story takes an unexpected twist.

III. **Nebuchadnezzar's astonishment (3:24-25)**

From a safe location, the king looked into the furnace to ensure their destruction was complete. He was astonished and couldn't believe his eyes, so he double checked with his officials, **Dan. 3:24**. Yes, that's what he thought, but that's not what he saw.

He saw not three, but four men in the furnace. Not only that, but they were also freed from their bonds and taking a stroll around in the fire. He described the fourth figure as that of a *son of the gods*, or a divine being, **3:25**. The fourth figure was the pre-**incarnate** Son of God!

They weren't delivered *from* the fire; they were delivered *through* the fire. Christ walked with them in the flame. The writer of Hebrews recalls God's promise to us, "*I will never leave you nor forsake you.*" So that we can confidently say, *'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear what man can do to me?'* (Heb. 13:5b-6).

This was Nebuchadnezzar's close encounter with God.

IV. **Nebuchadnezzar's nearness (3:26-30)**

For all Nebuchadnezzar was, he was honest with himself. He may have been an arrogant, self-centered, hot-tempered, and cruel dictator—but he called it like he saw it. He yelled to the three, calling them by name to come out, **Dan. 3:26**.

Two things to note. (1) Nebuchadnezzar referred to God as the Most High. This is the first time in Daniel *Most High* is used to describe God. (2) Nebuchadnezzar didn't invite the divine being to come, only the three. Why? Was he fearful? Why was he okay with simply observing from a distance?

The three exited the furnace and stood before the king and his officials for them to examine, **3:27**. The king acknowledged the power of the Most High God and their devotion to him, **3:28**. Note their testimony, they “**yielded** up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God.”

Conclusion: At the beginning of chapter three “*Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold.*” He created his own god. A god of his liking. A god he was comfortable with. A god he could manipulate to meet his desires. But he found the Most High God was different, **3:29**. *There is no other god who is able to rescue in this way—SALVATION!*

When others didn't bow down to his god “*Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury*” and sought to destroy any who held other views. But when he saw the salvation of the Most High God “*Nebuchadnezzar was astonished*” and impressed. This caused “*Nebuchadnezzar to come near*” to examine and evaluate the facts. He was forced to acknowledge the power of the Most High God, but he fell short of submitting to him as his God.

Acknowledging God's existence is one thing, **accepting** him as Lord is another. What would that mean for

Nebuchadnezzar? Would it mean he might be called to walk through a fiery trial? Would it mean to place God before anything else? Before his kingdom, his wealth, his plans, his very life? Would it be worth it? Not to Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar was good with admiring from a **distance**, but he wasn't about to step into the fire.

He knew by accepting the true God, the Most High God, things would be different. These three that followed God were different. They stood up when everyone else bowed down. For this they were promoted, **3:30**. Was this Nebuchadnezzar's way of trying to appease God?