

The Lord Protects

Daniel 3:19-27 from the series, "The Lord Provides"

Message from the Master Broadcast April 13, 2008 by Pastor Daron Lindemann

The Bible book of Daniel tells a dramatic story of power and pride. Its first verses report, "*Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia*" (Daniel 1:1,2). Nebuchadnezzar, by all accounts, is a hall-of-fame king and one of the most powerful world rulers in world history. The Babylonian gods were deemed by Nebuchadnezzar and other pagans as possessing power over the weather and fertility and the growth of good crops, so powerful that the gods of any other nation pale in comparison. Which is why Nebuchadnezzar stole away from the Jerusalem temple some articles that belonged to the Lord God and, in a gesture indicating the Lord God's submission to the Babylonian gods, set up the articles in the Babylonian temple. For the next ten or so chapters, the book of Daniel pits the power of the Babylonian gods against the power of the Lord God. Then we discover, along with Nebuchadnezzar, that the Lord God is sovereign over all the Babylonian gods and over Nebuchadnezzar himself. After Daniel accurately interprets one of Nebuchadnezzar's dreams, the ego-laced king admits to Daniel, "*Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings*" (Daniel 2:47). It takes only two chapters of Daniel's book to report that the source of power in ancient Babylon, as confessed by its very own king, was not the Babylonian gods or the king himself but the Lord God, the maker of heaven and earth. That sovereign rule over all other powers makes its mark throughout the book of Daniel.

Which is why the behavior of King Nebuchadnezzar is even more incredulous. No sooner had he made the confession I just stated than he set up an image of gold ninety feet high in Babylon and assumed that everyone should bow down to it, declaring allegiance to the Babylonian gods and their power as manifest in King Nebuchadnezzar himself. Such pride. As sinful and dangerous as it is blind and stubborn. Pride doesn't allow a person to learn lessons like the one the Lord God gave to Nebuchadnezzar in his dream. Pride doesn't allow a person to acknowledge any sort of weakness, or fear, or need to depend on anyone else.

In the book of Daniel our God contrasts for us the pride of a king like Nebuchadnezzar with the humility of a Christian like Daniel. As Nebuchadnezzar built a dynasty around himself, Daniel served in that kingdom with a humility that opened doors for the Lord God to do his work his way in his time. Today's sermon from the series "The Lord Provides" offers us not only a comforting word that ***The Lord Protects*** but lessons about power and pride. This account of the four men in the fiery furnace helps us realize that we have the power, incredibly so, to resist even the mightiest deeds the sovereign Lord can do, yet, on the other hand, when we lay down our pride and trust in the Lord with humility, he will protect us with his power in ways we may sometimes not see or be able to imagine.

Daniel and three other talented young men from Jerusalem were captured by Nebuchadnezzar's army and brought back to Babylon to be trained for service on the king's royal staff. Their names were Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah but, in order to give credit to the pagan gods, the king issued them new Babylonian names: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Along with Daniel these three young men had refused to defile themselves with the non-kosher foods that the Babylonians wanted to serve them. Such humble faith and dedication to their God made an impression on Nebuchadnezzar. The Bible reports, "*To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning ... The king talked with them, and he found none equal ... so*

they entered the king's service. In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in the whole kingdom" (Daniel 1:17,19,20).

Nebuchadnezzar's delight in these new recruits, however, took second place to his delight in himself – his pride – and consequently his desire for more power. Either he didn't consult with them or he didn't listen to them when he laid out plans to construct a ninety-foot high idol of some Babylonian god or possibly of himself. He wanted it to be very clear where the power of Babylon resided, so he decreed, *"Whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace" (Daniel 3:11)*. The Bible makes it very clear to us that when we shove him aside as the object of our fear, love, and trust and replace God, we are also shoving away his divine protection and care. When Pharaoh tried to push God out of Egypt like a bully on a playground neither he nor the Egyptians were protected from the plagues, but the Israelites were. When the Israelites left Egypt and traveled in the wilderness they remained healthy and strong until they manufactured and bowed down to a golden calf, after which a plague sickened them. When Peter turned away from Jesus and focused on the storm and his ability to walk on water he began to sink down into the waters of the Sea of Galilee. When the Pharisees relied on their own self-righteous behavior to earn God's favor they only found a fear that drove them mad enough to crucify the only one who offered them spiritual protection from their sins.

And here. These college-aged young men being wined and dined in a foreign country with no parents and no professors and no uncles to tsk tsk them if they'd choose to enjoy the party scene. They are offered power on a silver platter, and probably along with it women and riches and fame. They had bright political careers ahead of them and all the luxuries of life they'd ever want but first, they had only a few short moments to make a decision that would change their lives. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego made their decision without hesitating. Because the goal of life is not to feel good or stay alive but to glorify God. They turned down the luxury and lucrative careers, and they turned away from their boss's command to bow down, understanding full well it could mean their death. They explained to the most powerful king on earth, *"If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (Daniel 3:17,18)*. The young men had no actual promise of a miracle from God, but they knew he could save them from the fire if he wanted. They did not dare to tell God how to make this turn out, but did tell Nebuchadnezzar they would fear, love, and trust in God no matter what. Their loyalty to God did not depend on a happy outcome and did not come with bargaining. Quite a contrast to the pride and power of the great king.

You may know what happened next to the three men, but before we go there, do you know what happened next to Nebuchadnezzar? The most powerful man in the world learned that you do not disrespect and dismiss the one in heaven who holds all power – the Lord God. God sent his prophet to announce to the king, *"You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven" (Daniel 4:25)*. From the height of pride and power to the depth of insanity and humiliation, Nebuchadnezzar was made by God to live like an animal in the wild until he admitted, *"Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven" (Daniel 4:37)*.

Centuries later a believer in God who didn't need to be humiliated expressed this truth as she rejoiced that her pregnancy would bring the virgin born Savior into the world, *"He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:51-53)*. We see that here in Babylon of all places – where some of the best of God's people have been forced, as prisoners of

war, to relocate, where a pagan king and his dynasty persecute the ways of God, where it seems that God has all but forgotten about his people. We see the mighty deeds of God's arm bringing down a ruler and lifting up these three young men who humbly disobey the king and obediently trust in their God.

"Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?" the king asked. *"Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods!"* Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were not tied up any more, they were not dead, and they were not alone. God had not forgotten at all. God's power hadn't been trumped by a king, by super strong ropes, or by a scorching fire. Why should it be? God made all those and they all answer to him. God protected his three loyal sons by sending his Son to be with them and deliver them from evil. That's power! Divine protection in a moment where there is no other hope.

When you face insurmountable odds will you believe that God can find a way to protect you, either earthly or eternally? When you are caught in the heat of the moment will you decide to be loyal to the God who has never turned away from you in a time of need? When you fear the evil of spiritual powers like sin and the devil and guilt and temptation will you face evil with the courage that it cannot harm you? Sure, you will, because the Son of God will there. His Father will send him, yet again, to stand by your side in the furnace of trouble and protect you. Pride and power have their say only for those who do not trust in God. But for you, humility and trust in the promises of God place you under his care and concern that will never fail. He promises, *"When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior" (Isaiah 43:2,3).*

In a song titled, "The Fourth Man in the Fire," Johnny Cash tells the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: "They wouldn't bend. They held on to the will of God so we are told. They wouldn't bow. They would not bow their knees to idols made of gold. They wouldn't burn. They were protected by the Fourth Man in the fire. They wouldn't bend. They wouldn't bow. They wouldn't burn." Johnny Cash, known as the man in black, had his dark side and not-so-secret sins like drug abuse and womanizing. But he faced up to them with humility, not pride. He confessed that he was the greatest sinner of all and believed in God's grace and forgiveness. His producers wanted him to stay away from religion in his music but he recorded a number of gospel albums anyway and wrote lyrics about sin and grace. This humble trust and obedience didn't ruin his career or wreck his life, but made it better, through the fire.

Jesus once walked into the fires of hell and escaped unharmed to bring you forgiveness and peace. He appeared in the blazing furnace of Babylon to rescue three young believers. And he will be with you in your decisions, troubles, and joys as ***The Lord Protects*** you in all your ways. Amen.