

# The God Who Is There

**Daniel 3** contains maybe the most well-known story in the whole book, and one of the best-known in the Bible:– what, as children, we always used to call ‘the burning fiery furnace’.

Probably about 13 or 14 years had passed since Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the statue of gold, silver, bronze, iron and clay (**Daniel 2**). Daniel and his three friends were just over 30 years old and had risen to positions of authority. Nebuchadnezzar had continued to extend his massively powerful empire, and it may have been to celebrate his latest round of victories that he built an enormous image, possibly to try to contradict the downfall of his kingdom prophesied in the dream’s interpretation, but probably erected in honour of the Babylonian god Bel.

Daniel and his three friends had been renamed as soon as they arrived in Babylon (**Daniel 1:7**). Daniel himself had been given the name Belteshazzar meaning ‘Keeper of the hidden treasures of Bel’ in place of his own name which means ‘God is my judge’. The same tactic was employed for the other three. Shadrach (‘Inspiration of the sun’) in place of Hananiah (‘The grace of the LORD’), Meshach (‘He who belongs to the goddess Shach’) instead of Mishael (‘He that is the strong God’) and Abednego (‘Servant of the shining fire’) to replace Azariah (‘The LORD is a help’). These changes were made on the command of the king (**Daniel 5:12**). [There are several other possible meanings for these Babylonian names!]

In our culture, our names are usually not common words. In many countries today, and in the Hebrew-Aramaic languages of Daniel’s time, when you spoke a name then you spoke its meaning in everyday words. You can see why Nebuchadnezzar changed their names – he didn’t want to be constantly reminded of the God he didn’t believe in, and he also hoped to deflect their attention away from the God of their fathers and towards his own gods.

These three were reported by some Chaldean astrologers because they didn’t bow down to the king’s new statue (**Daniel 3:8-12**). In **Daniel 2**, the astrologers had failed where Daniel had succeeded – by the power of the LORD. The fact that these 3 men were Jews (and followers of the LORD) was right at the centre of their objection.

Through the whole book, there is a constant struggle about ‘Who is the real God?’ together with envy of the way that these four Jews had special status and privileges. Any opportunity to ‘get’ them was seized!

We all know their response. “If our God delivers us from the fire, then He will deliver us from you, O king. And if He doesn’t, then we are still not going to serve your gods or worship this image!” (***Daniel 3:16-18***). Nebuchadnezzar was already angry – this made it worse!

Nebuchadnezzar seems very slow to get the message. He had seen the wisdom and understanding that the four young Jews showed (***Daniel 1:18-20***) and had already acknowledged that ‘Daniel’s God’ was “the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries” (***Daniel 2:47***). Why did he expect them to be happy to worship his brand-new idol? The answer lies with the fact that no idol-worshipper regards ‘his’ god as THE God, so why should anyone else think any different?

Perhaps the main message conveyed to him (and the other rulers in this book) is spelt out by the Jews refusing to worship any of the Babylonian gods or idols: “there is only one God, the God of heaven, who is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob”. There are those today who will tell you that they would like to add Jesus to their collection of deities. They too tend to get angry when they are told that He is the only way!

One of the key characteristics of these three (and Daniel) is their certainty. It is not just a question of “We are Jews, so we will stick to our own traditions, thank you very much.” That would have been bad enough in Nebuchadnezzar’s eyes, especially after all his efforts to integrate them by teaching them the Chaldean literature, language and culture, *and* changing their names! They actually seem to have integrated very well but still persisted in their worship of the one true God. Why? Simply because He IS the one true God, and they knew it!

For this reason, their response to the ‘call to worship’ in ***Daniel 3:4-6*** was entirely predictable: “We can’t worship that image, only the LORD is the true God.” They weren’t just slavishly following the second commandment. This wasn’t legalism, it was reality! The threat of being burned to death couldn’t alter what they knew to be true. It is

that certainty which has been shared by many Christian martyrs, both of history and the present day.

When Jesus met the woman at the well outside Sychar (**John 4:1-42**), the conversation soon turned to worship and almost immediately the Lord Jesus points out the difference between Jewish worship on Mount Zion and the Samaritans' worship on Mount Gerizim. "You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews." (**John 4:22**)

Hard words, perhaps, but true. The Samaritans were descendants of mixed races which had been 'ethnically cleansed' from their homelands by the Assyrians and dumped into the land that had been left virtually empty when the ten tribes were taken off into exile and lost to history. They only started 'worshipping' the LORD to get themselves out of problems. The whole story in **2 Kings 17:21-41** makes it clear that their 'worship' was far from wholehearted!

Real worship, Jesus says, is in spirit and in truth (**John 4:23,24**), not this sort of routine observance – the same as Nebuchadnezzar had tried to force on Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. By contrast, because they knew the reality of the LORD, they were able to worship Him and refuse idols. Without that *knowing*, we would not be reading their story today!

The same is true for us. It is too easy to think that we are worshipping the Lord because we are following a particular course of action . . .

Perhaps we join in an 'act of worship', sing hymns, pray, hear the Bible read and listen to someone talk.

Or we follow a style of worshipping, maybe raising our hands in the air or clapping.

Surely these are worship? They may well be, but not necessarily!

'In spirit and in truth' – what does that mean?

Unfortunately it is easy to pretend to be 'spiritual', and we can often fool other people and even ourselves. In the end, it is only the Lord who knows who are His, and we certainly can't fool Him. (**2 Timothy 2:19**)

Right at the heart of worship is a genuine knowledge and appreciation of God Himself. That knowledge may not be massive, but

it is real, personal and growing. The person who is learning to know God is the person who is learning to worship Him, because worship means 'acknowledging the worth' and we cannot possibly acknowledge the worth of someone we do not know. When Jesus says 'in truth', he doesn't just mean without deceit, he means in **reality**.

This growing knowledge of God is a **spiritual** process. Information stored in our memory (or our notebook!) may be a valuable contribution, but it is the revelation of the Holy Spirit that takes truth and makes it real to us (**John 14:26, 16:12-15, 1 Corinthians 2:7-12**). The automatic result of such revelation is worship. In **Ephesians 1:15-23**, praying for the believers to receive revelation, Paul himself seems to get carried away by the awesomeness of that same revelation!

One of the most amazing prophecies in the Old Testament is in **Jeremiah 31:31-33**. It talks about a new covenant, in which all God's people will know Him personally. That is fulfilled in us, as **Hebrews 8:8-12** confirms.

Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah didn't have anything like as much as we have! They had the books of the Law, but temple worship had ceased when the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. They had traditions passed down and the history of the LORD's dealings with His people so far, but personal forgiveness was through sacrifices which they couldn't perform and they certainly could not know the reality of spiritual new birth.

What they did have was some knowledge of the reality of the LORD, the true God of the heavens, the God who is actually **there!** This was enough for them to stand firm and worship Him alone. They began to fulfill a prophecy for much later: "the people who know their God will display strength and take action" (**Daniel 11:32**, NASB)

Nebuchadnezzar, on the other hand, has still not quite got the message! He praises 'the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego' for sending His angel to rescue them, and makes it illegal for anyone to say anything against Him, but he stops short of making any personal acknowledgment of faith. He is not a worshipper – yet!

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