

# Explore the Bible: Demonstrate Allegiance

January 18, 2022

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Jan. 30 focuses on Daniel 3:14-26.*

A little more than two decades ago, the United States was shocked and overwhelmed by the actions of two young men who entered Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., and proceeded to kill 12 of their classmates and a teacher before ultimately turning their guns on themselves and taking their own lives. The stories that came out of the shooting suggested some of those who were killed were shot because of their profession of Jesus. A few months later, another shooting, this time in a church in Fort Worth, took the lives of several young Christians.

Discussions popped up all over talk radio, in youth groups and in churches around the country about the relationship between our testimony and our faith. I remember one host arguing quite forcefully that if lying about your faith in Christ gets you out of a death sentence, do it. Others argued just as strongly that it is precisely in those moments of real danger that our faith had to be proclaimed the clearest.

It's an argument that goes all the way back to the beginning of Christianity. In the third century A.D., Christians debated that use of false *libelli* (official documents that the Roman citizen participated in the proper pagan sacrifices) to avoid persecution and death at the hands of the state. Indeed, it goes back even further than that to the time of Daniel, portrayed for us in our passage in Daniel 3.

# **Allegiance Declared (Daniel 3:14-18)**

Daniel 3 opens with King Nebuchadnezzar constructing a golden image that he demanded his officials bow down and worship. The given dimensions of this image (approximately 90 feet tall by 9 feet wide) suggest it likely was an obelisk with various images related to Nebuchadnezzar carved into it. In any case, the repetition of references to the number of instruments used and the formality of the whole event listed early in the chapter suggests this was an event very important to the king. Three of the heroes of the book of Daniel refused to bow to the idol when ordered and were reported to the king.

It is interesting that this is the only chapter in the book of Daniel where the three friends are referred to solely by their Babylonian names—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. In every other place, the Hebrew names of Hananiah, Mishaël and Azariah always are placed alongside the Babylonian names. In fact, except for this chapter, only the Babylonians used the Babylonian names. The narrator and the individuals themselves only used the Hebrew names. This is important, because the Babylonian names honor Babylonian gods, while the Hebrew names honor Israel's God. It would seem that the sole use of the Babylonian names here is meant to be understood ironically. It looks like Babylon has won, but we will see they haven't.

The king threatens the three friends with being cast into the furnace. Their response of faith in the true God often is pointed to as one of the greatest found anywhere in Scripture, and I would agree. But there is an element about their response that is sometimes minimized or overlooked altogether. The three friends state they believe God is able to rescue them. However, they add in Daniel 3:18, "But even if he does not... ."

Too often, when we read the biblical stories, we almost mythologize them

as if the people were quite certain they were not going to pay any costs for their stances and that God's rescue was a foregone conclusion. While there is great faith here, there is no such presumption in their words or attitudes. They were declaring their allegiance regardless of the outcome.

In the previous lesson, we saw Daniel and his friends commit to be faithful to the covenant despite the reality they had been turned into eunuchs and therefore were excluded from the community of faith in many ways. Here, once again, we see a commitment to integrity and God despite the very real chance that they were about to die. The testimony of the faithful first begins with a healthy balance of faith minus presumption and a commitment to do what is right regardless of what one might lose or have already lost.

## **Persecution Intensified (Daniel 3:19-23)**

The king's anger towards the three friends was intense. The language of his response, however, was not simply meant to express his outrage, but also communicate a theological truth. The Hebrew of Daniel 3:19 is expressed in a causative voice, literally "the look of his face was changed." Somebody or something else is changing Nebuchadnezzar's appearance. This is a man who believes he is in control and is doing all he can to present himself as such. And yet, he cannot even control his own reaction and appearance.

The men carrying out his orders to throw the three men into the fiery furnace died in doing so (Daniel 3:22). This side note serves two purposes. First, it communicates just how hot the furnace was, so as to highlight how awesome God's deliverance was. Second, it proclaims the truth that obedience is not the key, but obedience to the right things and the right God is. These men were obedient to a lie, and it cost them.

## God Honored (Daniel 3:24-26)

The story ends with God rescuing the three Hebrews by going through the fire with them (cf. Isaiah 43:2). In the end, that is the truth that must be at the center of our understanding of this passage. Though we may not always be delivered from the first, we know that God is able. Even if he decides to go a different route than our immediate rescue, he will never be anywhere but with us as we go through it. There is an allegiance declared by both him and us when we enter into a relationship with our creator.

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