

## Consistent Monotheism

If you believe there is only one God – you are a monotheist. If you are consistent in your monotheism, then you must say that there is no other God besides that one God, and there is no other way to Him except through the way He has given.

Of course, consistent monotheism has never been popular. It's not popular today. If you hold that there is only one God and only one way to know Him, you will be accused of being intolerant, bigoted, narrow, even cultic. You'll be lumped together with Osama Bin Laden and be categorized as someone who hates others and is filled with aggression.

The strange thing is, people who believe the Bible and believe there is only one God and He has only one Son, so there is only one way to be reconciled to Him, are not often the aggressors. They are more often the victims of the prophets of tolerance. Ironically, it's those who preach tolerance and pluralism that get angriest and nastiest when Christians say that Christ is the only way. But in fact, the spirit which controls a Christian is not a spirit of rage and nastiness, but rather a deep-seated conviction that there is only one true God, and only one way to know Him. And we are not out there flying planes into buildings and strapping bombs to our bodies. We are reporting what we have discovered, and hope to live quiet and peaceable lives. However, it's inevitable that when you believe that, you are going to clash with someone. It may be a schoolteacher who insists all religions are the same. It may be colleagues who want you to agree that there are many paths to God. It may be family members who're convinced you've gone off the deep end, and that everything, including religion should be in moderation.

In Daniel 3 we see how consistent monotheism is lived out. Three Jewish men believed that only one God exists, so, to in any way worship a false god is spiritual suicide. They were absolutely convinced that they could not share worship with any other being besides the God they served. Studying this account shows not only the greatness of God and His reality, but the kind of gentle, unyielding courage that every believer can have in the face of opposition.

As we study this account, we'll see again that the God of Daniel and his three friends is the only God, and that He is worth the ultimate commitment. If God is God, then even life itself is worth giving up to honour Him. Let's set the scene by looking at verse 1, where we see:

### I. The Colossus of Idolatry

**Daniel 3:1-30** *Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its width six cubits. He set it up in the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon.*

Somewhere into Nebuchadnezzar's reign, he decided to set up a massive image. In Daniel chapters 1 and 2, we are at the very beginning of his reign as king. We don't know how much longer this took place after those chapters, but this probably occurs during a time of peace, when the kingdom is established and prosperous, and he has the time and freedom to do a thing like this.

Marshalling his economic power, he decided to create a massive symbol of his power. An image, probably a statue which was sixty cubits high, and six cubits wide. That equals 27 metres high, or the height of a nine-story building. It was only three metres wide, making it a fairly lanky and thin image proportionally. Given the sheer size of this thing, the image would have been plated gold, not solid gold. Gold is a very precious commodity, and not even Babylon's love for gold could have produced enough gold to make a solid gold image this tall. (All the gold ever mined would produce a cube of roughly 25 metres on each side). Nevertheless, it must have been an awesome thing. For miles around, you would see this gleaming gold tower, nine-stories high. Anyone who saw it would have been in awe of Nebuchadnezzar's power and economic clout.

We don't know exactly what the image looked like, but you can't help wondering if Nebuchadnezzar didn't take something of what he had seen in his dream and try to duplicate it. Perhaps he remembered Daniel interpreting the dream as Babylon being the head of gold, and the three other kingdoms following him being the silver, bronze and iron kingdoms. Perhaps he thought, no one will ever replace us. There will be no silver kingdom, bronze kingdom or iron kingdom. Babylon will last forever! It will be gold from head to toe. However it looked, it was majestic, imposing and awesome to behold.

But Nebuchadnezzar had some political purposes behind this image, too.

## II. The Cause for the Idol

*<sup>2</sup> And King Nebuchadnezzar sent word to gather together the satraps, the administrators, the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces, to come to the dedication of the image which King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. <sup>3</sup> So the satraps, the administrators, the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces gathered together for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up; and they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. <sup>4</sup> Then a herald cried aloud: "To you it is commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, <sup>5</sup> "that at the time you hear the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psalter, in symphony with all kinds of music, you shall fall down and worship the gold image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up; <sup>6</sup> "and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace."*

You might remember that when Babylon conquered a nation, it would take the best and brightest from that land, bring them back to Babylon, and put them in a three-year program to Babylonialise them. Once they had been essentially brainwashed, they would be sent back to their native countries to rule on behalf of Babylon.

What Nebuchadnezzar is doing here is recalling all the various branches of administration in his empire, bringing back all the boys from Egypt and Assyria and Judah and other parts of the empire. Whatever realm they ruled in: the military, the economy, justice, administration, both from Babylon itself and from the provinces, they were there. And Nebuchadnezzar had organised an event in which all his under-rulers could prove their loyalty to him, their patriotism to Babylon, their full solidarity with Nebuchadnezzar. Instead of signing a piece of paper, or swearing an oath with your hand on a holy book, the officials could show their loyalty by bowing down to the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Whether or not it was an image of him, by bowing down to it, all would display that they honoured Nebuchadnezzar as if he were god in Babylon. They were completely loyal to him, and would even worship what he told them to. Whatever their tribal gods might be, whatever the religion in their home countries, by returning and worshipping his image, they would show that they ultimately served and obeyed the will of Nebuchadnezzar.

So here was the scene: this massive image, and hundreds of officials from all over the empire are present. Nebuchadnezzar's orchestra is going to provide the cue to worship, as well as the atmosphere for all these men to kiss the dust and show how deeply they loved Nebuchadnezzar, and how thankful they were to be in his government.

And this really isn't a problem to a polytheist. If you worship more than one god, what's one more? You might have one god that you like or honour above all others, but if Nebuchadnezzar puts up an image that represents himself or Babylon or perhaps his god Marduk, there really isn't a problem. You just honour and worship here, too.

But what if you're a monotheist? What if the first two of your God's ten commandments read as follows:

**Exodus 20:3-5** *You shall have no other gods before Me. <sup>4</sup> " You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; <sup>5</sup> you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God,*

What if your God has repeatedly said things like,

**Isaiah 46:9** *<sup>9</sup> Remember the former things of old, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me,*

What if the reason your nation ended up in Babylon was as a punishment for bowing down to images, for having other gods?

If you're one of the three Hebrew young men, you have a problem. You cannot bow to an image and retain your integrity and your faith; you cannot retain your faith and retain your life. That's been the experience of hundreds of thousands of believers down the ages. Deny the absolutely exclusive place that belongs to God, and to Christ, and so deny your Saviour. Or, deny the demands of the political ruler of the time, and so deny yourself any further life. In small ways, it may be your experience as you are called to deny the exclusivity of Christ, or compromise on the need to preach the gospel, or agree with the spirit of the age that most people are good and nice, and therefore there will be a happy ending for most people, regardless of their relationship to their Creator. There's a subtle or not-so-subtle call to idolatry.

### **III. The Call to Idolatry**

*<sup>7</sup> So at that time, when all the people heard the sound of the horn, flute, harp, and lyre, in symphony with all kinds of music, all the people, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the gold image which King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. <sup>8</sup> Therefore at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and accused the Jews. <sup>9</sup> They spoke and said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, live forever! <sup>10</sup> "You, O king, have made a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, shall fall down and worship the gold image; <sup>11</sup> "and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. <sup>12</sup> "There are certain Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego; these men, O king, have not paid due regard to you. They do not serve your gods or worship the gold image which you have set up."*

So the call, comes, and everyone falls down and touches their foreheads to the ground while the music plays. Nebuchadnezzar must be absolutely glowing at the sight of all his administrators of his world empire on their knees, prostrate, showing absolute humility before a representation of himself, or Babylon or his god.

All except three men – Hananiah, Azariah and Mishael, or Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. At this point, the natural question is, where was Daniel? In short, we don't know. The Bible doesn't say. We can speculate that he was either travelling, as the ruler of the province of Babylon. He certainly would have travelled much, and it's not unlikely that he was simply away. Another possibility is that Daniel is standing right next to Nebuchadnezzar as his second-in-command. Nebuchadnezzar obviously isn't bowing to the image himself, and it may be that the one or two right next to him were not required to either. Had Nebuchadnezzar demanded Daniel bow, we know what he would have said. Wherever Daniel was, we know where he was not. He was not bowing and scraping before a golden pole. The man who refused to eat defiled food, who refused to stop praying, and did so openly even with the threat of a lion's den, is not the sort of man who would compromise when it came to this image. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were like Daniel. They were required to bow, and they didn't.

So up come certain Chaldeans who come to inform the king that these three Jewish men had not bowed when the band played. Now you have to ask yourself how they knew that if they were

supposed to have their heads bowed and their eyes closed. It's rather like when one child tells on another one, telling Mom and Dad that Johnny had his eyes open during the prayer. Well, how did he know? These Chaldeans must have known what was coming, and had been keeping half an eye on Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. See, these three men had been promoted above them many years previously, when Daniel had correctly interpreted the dream. There was no doubt some lingering resentment and politics going on here. They wanted the positions these guys had, and could never find a way to get rid of them. Their holy lifestyles probably showed them up, their wise administration gave no gap to accuse them of being incompetent. But I'm sure that once they heard about Nebuchadnezzar's plan to have everyone bow to this image, they rubbed their hands and licked their lips. If there was one thing a loyal Jew would never do, it's bow to an image. So they must have known what was coming, and positioned themselves close enough to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to watch them when the music began. And once they saw it, they ran to the throne like the little girls who always told on you in grade two.

They reminded the king (as if he needed it) of what he had said, and then pointed out that these three men, whom you set over the province of Babylon, do not regard you, they do not serve your gods, nor do they worship the image you set up. That lead to a second chance.

#### IV. The Chance to Change

*<sup>13</sup> Then Nebuchadnezzar, in rage and fury, gave the command to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. So they brought these men before the king. <sup>14</sup> Nebuchadnezzar spoke, saying to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the gold image which I have set up? <sup>15</sup> "Now if you are ready at the time you hear the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, and you fall down and worship the image which I have made, good! But if you do not worship, you shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?"*

This has turned Nebuchadnezzar from a warm glow to a boiling rage. He knows these three men. Being administrators of Babylon, he probably worked with them all the time. This is the kind of insult that an absolute ruler like Nebuchadnezzar cannot tolerate.

You sense that he is giving them a second chance here. Perhaps he liked them. He wouldn't be happy to see such skilled men go up in flames. So instead of roasting them immediately, he asks them, is it true? And without waiting for an answer, he says, with some irony, Now if you are ready, when you hear the music, fall down and worship. If not, you will be cast into the furnace. As if to say, OK guys, you've made your point about being Jews. But now, in all seriousness, you will bow down, like everyone else. If not, you will be thrown into the oven we use to melt metal and bake bricks. And then he says something which perhaps changed the whole situation. He asks the rhetorical question, And who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?"

With that statement, Nebuchadnezzar had just thrown down the gauntlet at the feet of the God of the Jews. He was effectively saying, gathered in front of me are hundreds of men who worship countless gods. Everyone of them submits to me. What is so special about your god that you think you are exempt? And is your god really so powerful that he would intervene and protect you from me?

God doesn't always choose to dramatically deliver His people, but one thing God almost always does is publicly vindicate His name. You might remember the account of the Assyrian king Sennacherib, who surrounded Jerusalem, and shouted to the people in Hebrew.

**2 Chronicles 32:10-15** *"Thus says Sennacherib king of Assyria: 'In what do you trust, that you remain under siege in Jerusalem? ... <sup>13</sup> 'Do you not know what I and my fathers have done to all the peoples of other lands? Were the gods of the nations of those lands in any way able to deliver their lands out of my*

hand? <sup>14</sup> 'Who was there among all the gods of those nations that my fathers utterly destroyed that could deliver his people from my hand, that your God should be able to deliver you from my hand? <sup>15</sup> 'Now therefore, do not let Hezekiah deceive you or persuade you like this, and do not believe him; for no god of any nation or kingdom was able to deliver his people from my hand or the hand of my fathers. How much less will your God deliver you from my hand?' "

Sennacherib found what happens when you publicly insult and challenge God. In one night, an angel destroyed 185 000 of his men.

So without realising it, Nebuchadnezzar has just electrified the air. He has thrown a challenge out, and in heaven, God can be heard unsheathing his sword.

Just think of how emptying this is. Not everyone would have received a second chance from Nebuchadnezzar. These three men know him. He's not bluffing about the fiery furnace. Most men would have been immediately put in there. Here, Nebuchadnezzar is delaying, giving them a chance, extending some mercy to them.

How tempting to say, "Well, we did what could be expected. We drew attention to God. Now, no need to get killed. Think of how much good we can still do. God knows our hearts. We might be bowing down on the outside, but we'll be standing up on the inside. It's just an external act – God knows our hearts. We know it's just a big statue. We're not really worshipping it". Is that how they thought? The road to idolatry is paved with good intentions. These men were not about to compromise.

Nebuchadnezzar is about to give the signal to his musicians to begin take two, when the three men give their answer.

## V. The Courage of Consistent Monotheism

<sup>16</sup> *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. <sup>17</sup> "If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. <sup>18</sup> "But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up."*

When the men say 'we have no need to answer you in this matter', they are not being disrespectful. They are saying, "O king, we are not going to defend ourselves. We are guilty of not bowing to your image. You know what our answer is going to be. We are consistent monotheists. This is not even a question for us. But then they reply to Nebuchadnezzar's question about which god can deliver them. They say, our God whom we serve *is* able to deliver us, and He *may* deliver us. But even if He does not, know this, O king, we will not serve your gods nor worship your image.

Notice. In terms of power, our God can deliver us. In terms of His will, we don't know. And in fact, that's not their main point. This is not about proving the king wrong, or forcing God to do one thing or another. They were motivated by the basic commitment to worship only the true God regardless of the outcome. Here is the heart of a consistent monotheist- my God is the only God, and I cannot deny Him without giving up all that I am. There is a fate worse than death, and it is fate of a person who knows the truth and then turns his back on it.

**2 Peter 2:20-21** <sup>20</sup> *For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. <sup>21</sup> For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them.*

Once you know the truth, to deny your God would be like to renounce all you love the most. It

would be like extinguishing yourself, annihilating your very being. Far better to lose your physical life, than to renounce the One who is your life.

**Matthew 10:28** <sup>28</sup> *"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."*

## VI. The Crazy Fury of the King

<sup>19</sup> *Then Nebuchadnezzar was full of fury, and the expression on his face changed toward Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. He spoke and commanded that they heat the furnace seven times more than it was usually heated.* <sup>20</sup> *And he commanded certain mighty men of valor who were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, and cast them into the burning fiery furnace.* <sup>21</sup> *Then these men were bound in their coats, their trousers, their turbans, and their other garments, and were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace.* <sup>22</sup> *Therefore, because the king's command was urgent, and the furnace exceedingly hot, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego.* <sup>23</sup> *And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace.*

This is classic Nebuchadnezzar. No more nice guy. He commands the furnace to be made as hot as it can go. This furnace was probably a furnace they used to bake bricks. It would have looked like a large dome, with a hole in the front, and a hole on the top. It would have been heated with charcoal, and was hot enough to melt metal, or bake clay. The men would have been bound, and then taken to the top of the furnace and dropped in. Then, the bloodthirsty spectators would watch as those thrown in would have died a torturous death. It was certainly a powerful visual warning not to flout the authority of Nebuchadnezzar.

In his rage, he calls for some really tough men to take these three men up to the top of this now super-heated furnace. The result is that the flames kill those soldiers, while the three men fall in, still tied up. Nebuchadnezzar is expecting to see these three scream their dying last words, but he saw something else.

## VII. The Creator's Power

<sup>24</sup> *Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished; and he rose in haste and spoke, saying to his counselors, "Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?" They answered and said to the king, "True, O king."* <sup>25</sup> *"Look!" he answered, "I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God."* <sup>26</sup> *Then Nebuchadnezzar went near the mouth of the burning fiery furnace and spoke, saying, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here."* *Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego came from the midst of the fire.* <sup>27</sup> *And the satraps, administrators, governors, and the king's counselors gathered together, and they saw these men on whose bodies the fire had no power; the hair of their head was not singed nor were their garments affected, and the smell of fire was not on them.*

Instead of seeing three men being roasted alive, he sees that the only thing that has burnt is the ropes that had been used to tie them. They are in the furnace, but miraculously not burning up. More than that, there is a fourth person in there, that looks like the Son of God, or probably son of the gods. Nebuchadnezzar would not have known enough to identify the Son of God, but he would have been able to identify someone supernatural.

Nebuchadnezzar knows he is witnessing the laws of nature being suspended. He is seeing before his eyes what is not physically or materially explicable. He is beholding a miracle. And he has enough sense to know who is behind this miracle. It is the Most High God, whom these three serve. He calls them out, and since he is not asking them to sin, they gladly come out. The fourth person does not come out with them, he was there to no doubt protect them in the flame, and reveal to Nebuchadnezzar that the God he had challenged had just flexed His muscle.

The three of them climb out, and you can imagine the crowd that encircled them and inspected them. Not a hair had been singed, not a thread burnt, not even the smell of smoke on them. This was not a fluke, a coincidence, or some lucky sequence of events that enabled them to look as if they had been in a furnace but hadn't actually. No, the dead bodies of the soldiers who got too close testified to the real power of the furnace.

Nebuchadnezzar and all his officials have just seen the God of the Jews intervene, and answer Nebuchadnezzar's question. *Which god is there who is able to deliver you out of my hands?* Not Baal, not Marduk, not Nebo, not Ra, not Dagon, not any of these gods. But Yahveh, Jehovah, the true God of Israel, He can. He can if He wants to, and in this case, He wanted to.

## VIII. The King's Conclusion

<sup>28</sup> *Nebuchadnezzar spoke, saying, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, who sent His Angel and delivered His servants who trusted in Him, and they have frustrated the king's word, and yielded their bodies, that they should not serve nor worship any god except their own God!"* <sup>29</sup> *"Therefore I make a decree that any people, nation, or language which speaks anything amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made an ash heap; because there is no other God who can deliver like this."* <sup>30</sup> *Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego in the province of Babylon.*

What can Nebuchadnezzar do with this? These men have refused to obey him, and he has had them executed. But his execution has been overruled by a king greater than himself. And Nebuchadnezzar submits to that. He realises that this God is to be praised, because He delivered His servants that trusted in Him. No God can deliver like this God can deliver. He praises God. He makes a decree that no one should ever speak evil of the God of the Hebrews on pain of execution and disgrace. He also pays tribute to their courage. They were willing to give up their very bodies to worship only one God. and yielded their bodies, that they should not serve nor worship any god except their own God!

Nebuchadnezzar promoted these men. Not every believer escapes persecution and death. Not every believer is promoted for their stand. Sometimes God delivers His children from death. Sometimes God delivers His children from this life, through death. Sometimes God promotes His children only once they are in His presence.

The point of the passage is not that God will always physically protect those who trust in Him. The point is that there is only one God, and He is worth dying for. There is a God great enough and good enough to deliver His people if He chooses to, but He always ultimately delivers them. He is worth your exclusive love and worship. There is only one true and living God, and if you truly know Him, you cannot deny Him without denying yourself. He has become your life, so

**2 Timothy 2:12-13** <sup>12</sup> *If we endure, We shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us.* <sup>13</sup> *If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself.*

Whether you someday face the official persecution of a government, or whether you face the more informal scorn of teachers, colleagues, schoolmates, friends or even family, it amounts to the same thing: will you agree with them that there are many gods? Or will you stand on what you already know – that there is only one God, who has only one Son, who is the only way to the Father? In other words, will you be a consistent monotheist?

