

The STORY CHURCH

Summer Bible Study: The Book of Daniel

Session 3

Free Will and the Quest for Power

The Precursor to Nebuchadnezzar: Nimrod

Preamble: The Tower of Babel & the Birth of Babylon

Nebuchadnezzar Builds a Great Statue

Nebuchadnezzar Acknowledges God's Power

Free Will and the Human Quest for Power

Premises of free will:

- God given gift based on His great love for us, and based on His desire to be in relationship with us
 - Makes love a choice
- It allows us to decide who we worship and serve
 - It allows us to forge our own destiny
 - It allows us to choose or reject salvation

The precursor to Nebuchadnezzar: Nimrod



-Means "Rebel"

-Could have been one man or a group of men who led a rebellion against God

-Led the rebellion through the tower of Babel

-Described in scripture as a hunter and warrior (Gen 10:8-12)

-Could have been a giant (descendent of Nephilim)

-Since the patron god of Babylon, Marduk, was also a hunter, warrior, and king, there are theories suggesting the legend of the god Marduk came from Nimrod's story.

-Nimrod's story is one of the first "societal" rebellions against God's created order and will recorded in scripture

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Cautionary Tale and the Origins of Babylon: The Tower of Babel



“Although the name “Babylon” is derived from the Akkadian word babilu meaning “gate of god,” it is an evident counterfeit of God’s eternal city. The opposition to the rule of God by world powers or the exile of God’s people from the land of blessing is conveyed properly through the metaphor of Babylon.”

The Tower of Babel is a story that serves as a great preamble to Nebuchadnezzar’s story. Ruled by Nimrod, the kingdom in the land of Shinar was the first earthly empire where people’s rebellion against God’s sovereignty and thirst for power took center stage. Nimrod’s thirst for power led him to start a rebellion against God. He built a structure that defied God, a monument to human “autonomy” and the desire to rule over the earth. Here’s an excerpt from the Book of Josephus, Book 1, Chapter 4:

1. Now the sons of Noah were three, - Shem, Japhet, and Ham, born one hundred years before the Deluge. These first of all descended from the mountains into the plains, and fixed their habitation there; and persuaded others who were greatly afraid of the lower grounds on account of the flood, and so were very loath to come down from the higher places, to venture to follow their examples. Now the plain in which they first dwelt was called Shinar. God also commanded them to send colonies abroad, for the thorough peopling of the earth, that they might not raise seditions among themselves, but might cultivate a great part of the earth, and enjoy its fruits after a plentiful manner. But they were so ill instructed that they did not obey God; for which reason they fell into calamities, and were made sensible, by experience, of what sin they had been guilty: for when they flourished with a numerous youth, God admonished them again to send out colonies; but they, imagining the prosperity they enjoyed was not derived from the favor of God, but supposing that their own power was the proper cause of the plentiful condition they were in, did not obey him. Nay, they added to this their disobedience to the Divine will, the suspicion that they were therefore ordered to send out separate colonies, that, being divided asunder, they might the more easily be Oppressed.

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2. Now it was Nimrod who excited them to such an affront and contempt of God. He was the grandson of Ham, the son of Noah, a bold man, and of great strength of hand. He persuaded them not to ascribe it to God, as if it was through his means they were happy, but to believe that it was their own courage which procured that happiness. He also gradually changed the government into tyranny, seeing no other way of turning men from the fear of God, but to bring them into a constant dependence on his power. He also said he would be revenged on God, if he should have a mind to drown the world again; for that he would build a tower too high for the waters to be able to reach! and that he would avenge himself on God for destroying their forefathers !

3. Now the multitude were very ready to follow the determination of Nimrod, and to esteem it a piece of cowardice to submit to God; and they built a tower, neither sparing any pains, nor being in any degree negligent about the work: and, by reason of the multitude of hands employed in it, it grew very high, sooner than any one could expect; but the thickness of it was so great, and it was so strongly built, that thereby its great height seemed, upon the view, to be less than it really was. It was built of burnt brick, cemented together with mortar, made of bitumen, that it might not be liable to admit water. When God saw that they acted so madly, he did not resolve to destroy them utterly, since they were not grown wiser by the destruction of the former sinners; but he caused a tumult among them, by producing in them divers languages, and causing that, through the multitude of those languages, they should not be able to understand one another. The place wherein they built the tower is now called Babylon, because of the confusion of that language which they readily understood before; for the Hebrews mean by the word Babel, confusion. The Sibyl also makes mention of this tower, and of the confusion of the language, when she says thus: "When all men were of one language, some of them built a high tower, as if they would thereby ascend up to heaven, but the gods sent storms of wind and overthrew the tower, and gave every one his peculiar language; and for this reason it was that the city was called Babylon." But as to the plan of Shinar, in the country of Babylonia, Hestiaeus mentions it, when he says thus: "Such of the priests as were saved, took the sacred vessels of Jupiter Enyalios, and came to Shinar of Babylonia."

Discussion Questions:

Why do humans have a tendency to reject God and His will for the world and humanity?

Do you personally find it hard to live according to God's will?

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Pluralism: The Religious Foundation of the Babylonian Empire

The Babylonian empire was polytheistic and pluralistic. One of their key practices was allowing the easy integration of additional gods into their pantheon. This practice became well established as they conquered other kingdoms and sought the assimilation of other cultures into the Babylonian religious and cultural ethos. They realized they didn't need to change the beliefs or practices of other cultures in order to assimilate them. Instead, they needed to streamline the process by simply adding their deities to their already long list of gods and goddesses.

This practice of religious pluralism was and it continues to be antithetical to the most basic premise of scripture. Through the very first commandment God instructs us to not compare the God of Israel to any other gods and issues a stern warning against idolatry, Exodus 20:

And God spoke all these words:

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

"You shall have no other gods before me.

"You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your

God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Pluralism also asserts that there are many "truths" that serve as pathways towards spiritual discovery and enlightenment. Adherents to religious pluralism in Babylon often manipulated deities in order to achieve their own purposes or desires, and aside from a rejection of exclusive "truth" claims, there weren't strong moral or ethical boundaries to abide by. Religious pluralism gave birth to some reprehensible religious practices.

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Nebuchadnezzar Builds a Great Statue

Read Daniel 3:1-18

“Shadrach, Mesach and Abednego replied to the king,
‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter.
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 3:16-18



Key Details:

- Nebuchadnezzar’s statue was built in the same location as the tower of Babel in the land of Shinar (Genesis 11:2). The purpose of both was the same - a defiant attempt to build a monument to the legacy of an earthly kingdom. There is a subtle implication that Nebuchadnezzar’s majestic statue would finally accomplish the “unification” process that the tower of Babel failed to achieve (Daniel 3:7)
- Through the statue Nebuchadnezzar attempts to build a lasting legacy of his glory and power - we know this by his gathering of satraps, the prefects, the governors, advisors, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and provincial officials for the dedication of his statue (Daniel 3:2). But this list was not limited to the empire’s ruling class, and it also included “peoples, nations and men of every language) as we find in Daniel 3:4.
- He attempted to “unify” his kingdom through the worship of his image: This is common practice in totalitarian states (even in our day and age). Again, Nebuchadnezzar did not alienate people from the religions of their birth or ask them to renounce their beliefs. Instead, he wanted to subordinate the people in his kingdom by forcing them to pledge their allegiance to the Babylonian empire first.

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But how does this apply to us today? In our modern world, Babylonianism is alive and well, and modern day scholars call it syncretism and/or religious pluralism. The practice of syncretism and religious pluralism blends several cultural norms and religions into one, even when the individual doctrines and beliefs of those religions seemingly contradict each other. In today's society, polytheism is also still alive, and several religions are often blended through syncretism. The most prominent of these religions is "New Age." Authors Steven Bancarz was deeply immersed in New Age, and he summarizes how people utilized syncretism and pluralism to turn people away from Jesus in his book, "The Second Coming of the New Age":

"Unity has become the god of the New Age movement by exalting the absence of conflict over the presence of truth. A false peace is enforced by eliminating every idea that may cause some level of separation between us and our fellow man, even if these ideas correspond to reality. Disagreement is the enemy because it breeds negativity, so to avoid disagreement, 'tolerance' is redefined to mean 'complacency' --even in the presence of error.¹

There are also many totalitarian regimes in our world where the practice of religions that are not "sanctioned" by the state is forbidden and religious persecution is a daily reality.

Discussion Question?

What is the relevance of Nebuchadnezzar's actions in chapter 3 for us today?

How can we faithfully love and serve God in our own pluralistic society?

¹ Steven Bancarz and Josh Peck: "The Second Coming of the New Age." Pg 224.

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The Great Reversal: Nebuchadnezzar Acknowledges God's Power Read Daniel 3:19-30

"Then Nebuchadnezzar said, 'Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants!

They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God.

Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who says anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way."

Highlights:

- Something powerful happens in this chapter through a "Christophany," (as some theologians suggest), which would be an appearance of Christ prior to the incarnation. Or at the very least, the appearance of an angelic being who rescues the three friends. Verse 25 is one of the biggest reminders in scripture that even when we feel alone in the midst of the struggle, we never really are. The supernatural protection that God provides for His children leaves the king in awe, not even their clothes are harmed in this incident. This is also a prophetic fulfillment from Isaiah 43:2 - "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze." We are not promised that we will not encounter troubles or even persecution, but that God's grace will find us wherever we are.
- Nebuchadnezzar's rage against Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego points to his feelings of rage against them. His response leads us to think he finds them ungrateful after all the hospitality and privileges they've been afforded in Babylon. It is shocking to him that they're unable to set aside their faith in God in order to conform to his requests.
- The actions of the three friends are admirable in every way because they are the only individuals in the entire kingdom who stand up for their faith. But they soon realize that there are serious consequences for their non-conformity. They know Nebuchadnezzar's request is a command they cannot obey because they answer to a much greater authority. This author writes it well: "It is worth noticing that there were only three men in the whole vast crowd who refused to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's statue. This highlights the fact that standing up for God will often be a lonely activity."
- God's power comes into contrast with the vengeful "power" of Nebuchadnezzar. Up to this point, Nebuchadnezzar dealt with many gods who were powerless, so the powerful God of Israelites leaves him in awe, and the experience humbles him. He has no control

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over this God, and it becomes clear to him that his ability to demand allegiance from his subjects does not compare to the power and willingness to save displayed by the God of the Israelites. Nebuchadnezzar's power is merely human and God's display of power is miraculous at best. It is something Nebuchadnezzar could never achieve.

- Last, but not least, the furnace represents a "purifying" fire that all believers go through at one point or another, when our faith is tested and refined. Our actions speak louder than many words when it comes to our faith in God. The actions of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego leave us in awe of their faithfulness to God. It should also remind us of the temptation Jesus faced prior to fulfilling his mission on earth:

"[Jesus] experienced all the pressures and the weary paths of this world, yet remained utterly without sin. This was not because his commitment to holiness went untested. On one occasion, Satan came to him and offered to give him all the kingdoms of this world if Jesus would just bow down and worship him (Matt. 4:9). Think of what Satan was offering: the kingdom of the world could have become the kingdom of Christ without the agony of the cross...So, unbowed, Jesus responded to Satan with words of Scripture: It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" (Matt. 4:10).

Has your faith been tested lately? If so, do you think you passed the test?

Have you ever been in a situation when you felt God came to your rescue at your hour of greatest need?