

# FOOL'S GOLD

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## Defining and Finding Success

Text: Daniel 3

### I

GOLD. For centuries men and women have sought and prized it. They have killed for it, lied for it, gambled and died for it, conquered and cried for it; and that's not surprising. Just think of what gold represents. After all, gold is a sign of prosperity, isn't it? It adds luster to any appearance, value to any art object, and a glitter of wealth to anyone who wears or displays it. Gold is also a symbol of victory. That's why to the best and the brightest we give the gold medals, the gold stars, the gold records, the gold cards, the golden globes. And, as if this were not enough to establish its value, gold is a seal of longevity as well. In some societies today, people actually *eat* gold, believing it prolongs good health. Even here in America we tip our sparkplugs with it, and make our wedding rings out of it, and cast our retirement watches in it, for the simple reason that gold will not rust or corrode as other substances will. Even for us gold has come to be synonymous with "long life."

That's why it should not surprise us that when Nebuchadnezzar, the king of ancient Babylon, was looking for some symbol around which to draw his nation together... when he was searching for some icon that would help represent the prosperity, victory, and longevity of his reign... he chose to fashion a statue out of gold. Now you have to understand what motivated the creation of such a monument at all. You see, from our study of chapter 2 last week, we know that the king had had this upsetting stress dream. In the dream, he saw the kingdoms of mankind, represented in the form of a giant statue, at the top of which was his own head, cast in gold. It was a flattering picture – at least so far.

The problem with the vision was that the golden head soon gave way to a silver chest and arms, and then to a bronze belly and thighs, and then to legs of iron and feet of clay. The dream, as Daniel had interpreted it for the King, had a simple meaning, and it was this: Nothing made by humanity lasts forever. In time, Babylon would be conquered by the Medes and Persians; they would give way to the Greeks and Macedonians; and they would eventually surrender to the Romans. Then, eventually, all four of these empires would be smashed into wheat dust by the coming of the greatest of all administrations: **The God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. (Dan 2:44)**

Daniel's interpretation of the King's dream was, of course, a prophecy of the coming of Jesus and the in-breaking kingdom of God. It was fabulous news to people who don't

think government is the answer to human problems; it was very good news to those who believe that without a genuine spiritual revival mere politics won't work. It was not, however, very happy news to Nebuchadnezzar, the Lord of a very massive and entrenched bureaucracy. And so, old Neb decided to thumb his nose at that vision of the future. He ordered the construction of a literal statue that was 90 feet tall and 9 feet wide, and where not only the head, but the whole blooming thing, was made of imperishable gold. In other words, Neb built a visual aid to remind himself, his subjects, the gods, and anyone else who might be watching or listening that -- the kingdom of Babylon (a.k.a. HIS Legacy) would go on forever and ever. Amen.

And then, Nebuchadnezzar commanded that everyone come to the ribbon-cutting. The gathering that day **"on the plain of Dura"** was like a cross between a Presidential inauguration and one of those gigantic rallies that take place from time to time in front of the Washington Monument or elsewhere. You can just picture it, can't you? The plain is teeming with thousands of people. They're elbowing each other out for position at the falafel stands, or griping about why so-and-so got a better seat than they did, or marveling at the sheer size of this event, when all of a sudden, an official on the podium up front shouts out an instruction. The word gets passed back through the crowd and within minutes, everybody understands the deal. When the music starts playing, we are all to bow down to the King's statue, for **"Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace." (Dan 3:6)**

## II

Now, suppose you weren't a true native. Pretend for a moment that you had sworn your loyalty to a greater King than Nebuchadnezzar and a greater kingdom than Babylon. Imagine that your culture told you that true prosperity had more to do with the purity of your heart than the glittering baubles of this society. Suppose your true King had taught you that the victory that really mattered in life had more to do with conquering the inner temptation to lie, to lust, or to hate, than with gaining the upper hand over other people and nations around you.

Pretend for a second that in the country where you belonged, true longevity wasn't measured in terms of the healthy years you got to spend luxuriating in a comfortable Babylonian suburb, but in the number of days you got to spend in uncompromised service to the Kingdom of God, wherever you lived. In other words, just suppose for a moment, you were a Jew living in Babylon, or a Christian living in Chicagoland. Tell me, when the music started playing, and almost everyone around you was bending, would you be bowing to Nebuchadnezzar's gold or would you be standing up for God?

I know what I'd want to do; but I also know what I often do. I too often bow to this wayward world's gold. And you wouldn't believe how quick my rationalization muscles spring into action as I'm going down. Can any of you relate? Have you ever given in to

some temptation to compromise your loyalty to God's way, by using the I-Don't-Really-Mean-It dodge? You say: *"Look, I'm going to bow down; but I won't actually worship the idol. I'm going to spend my money on this thing instead of that kingdom project, but I'm not going to actually let it become my idol."* Or have you ever used the old Just-This-One Time approach? You say: *"Alright, I'm going to bow down and worship, just this one time, then ask God to forgive me. It's not like I'm going to make lying or cheating a regular thing, O.K."*

Maybe you like the I've-Got-No-Choice excuse. You say: *"Look, the King has absolute power and I've got to obey him. I know this business deal is a little shady, but the boss has authority over me, so I'm going through with it. God will understand."* Or perhaps you like the I-Owe-It-To-Somebody approach. *"Hey, Nebuchadnezzar has done so much for me, surely I owe him this respect. I know this back-biting gossip I'm hearing doesn't please God, but it would be rude and ungrateful to this friend who's talking not to bow down and join in."*

Or here's another good one. It's the When-In-Babylon dodge. Perhaps you've whispered to yourself as you've dropped to your knees: *"C'mon, it's not like I'm at home, where my family and friends are going to be hurt or ashamed of what I'm doing. When in Babylon, do as the Babylonians do."* Or there's the Lots-of-People-Do-Worse excuse: *"Look, I know plenty of people who've slept with temple prostitutes and actually put idols in their homes. Bending the ethical knee a little on this issue isn't half as bad as that other stuff."*

Or have you ever used the Who's-It-Gonna-Hurt line: *"Hey, isn't the really important thing here that I'm not hurting anybody else when I read that pornography or use that drug? So what's the problem with bowing down?"* Or my favorite one of all – the Fight-Another-Day approach. We say: *"C'mon let's be reasonable; if I get myself burned by standing up for God on this issue, some heathen will probably come and take my place and then who'll be there to look after God's interests?"* Oh, all the clever rationalizations we use when the music of temptation begins to play.

### III

If there had been a video camera there at the foot of Nebuchadnezzar's gold statue, it would have recorded hundreds of ostensibly God-fearing Jews -- people not unlike you and me -- all dropping to their knees before the king's idol. In fact, when you think of the colossal pressure to conform or the burning consequences of not bowing, it's mind-blowing that anyone was left standing. And yet, the Bible says, there was. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, these three Jewish young people alone, dared to stand tall.

Now, wouldn't it be great if, when we dared to be faithful to God in risky circumstances, we had assurance that his angels would be our perfect bodyguards, or that his grace would put an impenetrable shield around us like the steel cage in a luxury car?

Sometimes Christians and preachers talk as if it's supposed to work that way. There are individual passages of Scripture which, when taken out of context, seem to suggest that no harm can befall a believer when she or he acts faithfully.

But the absolute proof that God's providence is a bit more complex is there in cross of Jesus Christ. It has been said that the cross of Christ reminds us that *Jesus came not to remove suffering but to fill it with his presence*. God does not promise us salvation from suffering, but salvation through it and beyond it. Now, for the sake of his wise purposes, God does sometimes choose to heal a disease or provide manna for a hungry belly or rescue someone from disaster. Sometimes God delivers us from the bonfires of life, leaving us not even smelling of smoke -- as he did with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in this famous story. But, for the sake of those same wise purposes, it must be said that God sometimes allows the flames of this world to consume faithful people.

That's what makes the actions of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego here so remarkable. They say: **"If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is ABLE TO DELIVER US from it... But EVEN IF HE DOES NOT, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (Dan 3:17-18)**. And for that response of faith, they were bound fast and hurled into a furnace so hot that even the guards who escorted them to the edge of the furnace were instantly killed by the heat. Wow.

#### IV

Now, here's the question: Why'd they do it? Why did those three servants remain faithful? And why might we? Let me suggest a few possible motivations. Maybe Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, didn't want to let their Father down. A thoughtful child of God would almost rather die than purposely disobey the first and most important commandment of the Father. God stated it in Exodus 20: **"Thou shalt have no other gods before me and shalt not make or bow down to any graven image."** It is the primary thing God asks of you and me in this life: "Please don't value created things over your Creator." Nothing brings God greater heartache than when we forsake him through idolatry. Nothing brings him greater joy than when we refuse to bow down to things less than him, even though everyone else is doing so.

SECONDLY, perhaps Daniel's friends wanted to preserve the most sacred thing about themselves. You see, when you refuse to surrender to this world's understanding of prosperity, victory, and longevity... when you go out this week and refuse to allow yourselves those clever rationalizations I touched on earlier... you will be preserving the most important thing about you -- the integrity of your soul. To paraphrase Jesus: **"What shall it profit you to gain the [all the fools' gold in] the world but lose [the most precious gift you have] -- your own soul?" (Matt 16:26)**

THIRDLY, maybe Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego hoped to strengthen the power of their witness. I mean think about it. If Daniel's companions had bowed to the pressure to conform to Babylonian culture, how could they ever have spoken again of the power and position of their God above all earthly authorities? They would have stained their name. But instead, their faithfulness helped win the king and many of his court to faith in the living God. My friends, there will be people won to Jesus Christ, who will be used powerfully in ministries on this earth, and with whom you will be in fellowship in heaven one day, simply because you were a witness, an example of unusual faithfulness, that impressed them as more pure and priceless than all the golden icons in this world.

FOURTHLY, I suspect Daniel's friends had their eyes on the joy set before them. The scriptures say that it was **"For the joy set before him that Christ endured the cross" (Heb 12:2)**. God promises that the glory, beauty, love, and comfort that will be ours in heaven will more than make up for the most hideous and agonizing losses we may undergo in this life. As Christians, we can give up the fools' gold the world tries to sell us because what God is going to freely give us in eternity will make even 90 feet of the world's greatest riches look like little more than flaking gold paint.

But let offer one FINAL reason those Hebrew servants might have dared to stand up, had they known the full story of Scripture as we do. It is an awesome mystery and wonder that the very next verses reveal: **"Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, 'Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?' They replied, 'Certainly, O king.' He said, 'Look! I see FOUR men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed; and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.'" Neb then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out!" So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. (Dan 3:24-26)**

Who do you suppose was this fourth figure in the flames -- the one said to have looked like the son of God? You know, don't you? It was the pre-incarnate form of him who said many years later... **"Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." (Heb 13:5). "For I am with you always, even to the end of this age" (Matt 28:20).**

I'll close by saying that I don't know whether or not you will pass unsinged through whatever fires you're in right now or will face in days to come. But this I pray: Don't bow down to fools' gold when, by standing up for God, he'll refine his gold in you. This, the Bible teaches, is true SUCCESS. If you are obedient to him when the heat is on, you will bring delight to the Father; you will build your soul; you will increase the integrity of your witness for him and impact on others; you will know one day his absolute joy and reward; and, even if the flames get very hot here and now, He will be with you always and carry you to the place where tears are no more (Rev 21:4).