

HOW TO CHANGE A BAD LAW

By a bad law we do not mean a law that some people do not like, but a law that requires something that is wrong. Many people dislike that which is good; and human nature is ever inclined to make itself the standard of goodness, and to say that whatever is opposed to its desires is bad; but our tastes and inclinations are not to be taken into account at all; there is one standard of right, and that is the law of God—God's own life. Whatever is contrary to God's Word—the word of life—is bad, and should be shunned as one would shun the plague. To obey a bad law is identical with breaking a good law.

Now there are laws that are bad. They are found to a greater or lesser extent in every nation. Such are the laws that are directly opposed to the law of God, although they may be in harmony with the sentiments of the majority of the people. In every nation there are also to be found men who are sorely distressed over the existence of such laws, and to exert themselves in various ways to have them repealed. This opposition usually takes the form of political agitation, of the same nature as that by which the laws were enacted, sometimes going even to the extent of armed rebellion and revolution. In some instances the opposition is apparently successful, but in most it is an open failure, and in no case is the success real and lasting.

How then can any reform ever be effected? This is what we propose to show; and since nothing is so convincing as a case already worked out, we shall content ourselves with referring to an instance where a bad law was effectually changed.

Daniel 3:1. "Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, whose height was threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof six cubits: he set it up in the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon."

Nebuchadnezzar had been told that the God of heaven had given him a kingdom, and power, and strength, and glory, and although God's servant had revealed to him things to come, he did not yet have any practical knowledge of God. For we find him making a colossal image of gold, and commanding all men to worship it under penalty of death.

What hope for one who would still remain an idolater after having received such wonderful light from heaven? Who would not have left him to destruction? Anyone would, except the merciful God. He reveals Himself to men, and if they are slow to learn, He is very patient with them, longsuffering, “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” 2 Peter 3:9.

Nebuchadnezzar had enough time to think about the dream of the multi-metal image with the stone representing his beloved Babylon soon to be replaced. So he decided to countermand the Divine interpretation of the dream by setting up a brick-fired, ninety-foot tall monolith overlaid with gold to represent eternal Babylon. The width of the statute to its height was a 1:10 ratio. This tall obelisk-like image undoubtedly represented the chief god of Babylon, Bel Marduk, to whom the king owed his throne.

The statute-god was set up on “the plain of Dura” or “the plain of the wall.” There was an inner wall encompassing the old city of Babylon. The territory inside this inner wall was urban, containing many buildings and streets along with the palace and the largest temple in the city. In the center of the city was the temple area of Marduk which contained the great temple tower, or ziggurat, of Babylon. At some 300 feet high, it dominated the landscape. Its base was approximately 300 feet square and extended upward in a solid pyramid shape through seven levels, each covered with enamel bricks of a different color from the previous level. The top level consisted of a temple to the god Marduk in addition to the main temple located at the foot of the ziggurat.

Later, Nebuchadnezzar added an outer wall several miles long that extended to the east bank of the Euphrates River and around the city. In Nebuchadnezzar’s time, Babylonian engineers and builders had not yet filled this area between the inner and outer walls with buildings, although construction was taking place. The open area served as a parade ground for the army and a place within the city walls where the troops could bivouac. This large open space between the two walls could properly be called the “plain of the wall,” or “the plain of Dura.”

Daniel 3:2. “Then Nebuchadnezzar the king sent to gather together the princes, the governors, and the captains, the judges, the treasurers, the counselors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the provinces, to come to the dedication of the image which Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up.”

There had been an insurrection in the recent past which Nebuchadnezzar had put down. there

was such serious opposition to Nebuchadnezzar that on one occasion a revolt arose from within the city that resulted in hand-to-hand combat in the very palace itself with the king fighting for his life! The Babylonian Chronicle entry reads:

“In the tenth year [595/594 B.C.] the king of Akkad [Babylon] was in his own land; from the month of Kislev [December] to the month of Tebet [January] there was rebellion in Akkad. . . . With arms he [the king] slew many of his own army. His own hand captured his enemy.”¹

Daniel 3:3. “Then the princes, the governors, and captains, the judges, the treasurers, the counselors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the provinces, were gathered together unto the dedication of the image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up; and they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up.”

Not all the citizens of Babylon were called to assemble. It was a select group. These Babylonian government officials were “summoned” (vs. 2) by the king to attend the dedication ceremony. If the summons was a response to the rebellion that had taken place, it is easy to see why the king would have selected this group. Government officials and those working in the palace were the most likely to formulate plots against the king. They were the ones potentially most dangerous to him, and they were also the ones whose support was most crucial to the king. Any disloyalty in this group would plunge the monarch and his kingdom into serious trouble again.

To prevent such a development, the king assembled these officials and had them swear an oath of allegiance. It took a religious form. If one bows down and worships the god of Babylon, then one is also pledging allegiance to faithfully serve that god and his earthly representative, the king. Thus the events of chapter 3 can be seen as preventive politics practiced in religious garb on the plain of Dura.

Daniel 3:4, 5. “Then an herald cried aloud, To you it is commanded, O people, nations, and languages, that at what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of music, ye fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king hath set up.”

¹ Quoted in Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldean Kings*, 73.

Heralds instructed the assembled officials to bow down and worship the great image when the players in the orchestra struck up their music. The music consisted of wind and stringed instruments.

Daniel 3:6. “And whoso falleth not down and worshipeth shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace.”

One or more furnaces probably stood nearby, adding to the monarch’s threat. We must not think these were constructed specially for the Hebrews when it was discovered that they would not obey the king and worship the image. Rather, the furnaces had been constructed in advance and were standing ready for anyone foolish enough to resist the king’s loyalty oath. As the music played and the Hebrews remained standing, they could look out over the huge crowd bowing to the ground and see clearly the instruments of punishment for those who refused.

Most likely, these furnaces were brick kilns. Bricks were made in two ways in ancient times—by drying them in the sun and by firing them in kilns. Kiln-fired bricks were harder and were used especially for the outer surfaces of buildings. The great plain between the two sets of city walls was a place of ongoing construction projects, and the main construction material used was not wood or cement, but clay. The city of Babylon was made of thousands, if not millions, of clay bricks. The kilns used to fire these bricks were shaped like a beehive with a hole at the top of the cone through which flammable material was dropped; there was another tunnel-like opening on one side. Pallets of bricks were put in the side opening, and the material with which the kiln was fired was dropped into the kiln from above. Steps went up the side of the kiln to the upper opening. The Hebrews were probably dropped into the kiln through the hole at the top.

The kilns were probably already fired up by the time the ceremony took place. Thus the Hebrews not only knew they would be thrown into one of these kilns for their refusal to worship the image, they could actually see it burning and smoking in the distance. But in spite of looking right into the terrifying face of their fate, they stood firm in their refusal to bow down (vss. 16-18). Fear of a horrible death could not induce them to be unfaithful to God!

Daniel 3:7. “Therefore at that time, when all the people heard the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and all kinds of music, all the people, the nations, and the languages, fell down and worshipped the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up.”

We do not know how many persons gathered before the image, but the list of officials given in verse 2 seems to be all-inclusive. Perhaps 2,000 officials would have been involved. Imagine that large crowd of 2,000 people all bowing down at one time. Then imagine the three Hebrews standing all alone as everybody else was prostrate on the ground. These three men must have felt very much alone as they stood out distinctly from the bowing multitude. They felt keenly the pressure of 2,000 other officials all conforming, all obeying the king's decree. Some of these officials probably worked with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They may even have been friends. Can't you imagine an official who is bowing near these three Hebrews whispering, "Get down! Get down, for your own good! You don't have to mean it; just get down!"

But the Hebrews did not flinch or bow. They were not swayed by the crowd, all of whom were bowing before the image. There are times when Christians, like these men, have to take an unpopular stand. Early Christians refused to burn incense to the emperor, and in some instances it cost them their lives. Burning incense to the emperor was an act of worship; bowing down on the plain of Dura was also an act of worship. Worshipers of the true God could not participate in either ceremony.

Daniel 3:8, 9. "Wherefore at that time certain Chaldeans came near, and accused the Jews. They spake and said to the king Nebuchadnezzar, O king, live for ever."

These Chaldean astrologers were the elite Babylonian wise men whose lives were saved by Daniel's intervention. Here they serve as the king's informants. Apparently, sheer envy prompted their accusation of the Hebrews. Their use of the term "the Jews" demonstrated their dislike of these foreigners and their professional envy.

Daniel 3:10. "Thou, O king, hast made a decree, that every man that shall hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and dulcimer, and all kinds of music, shall fall down and worship the golden image."

The presence and the repetition of the lists heighten the story's dramatic character.

Daniel 3:11. "And whoso falleth not down and worshipeth, that he should be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace."

The Chaldeans sound polite. They greet the emperor in the customary way: "O king, live forever!" To enhance their accusation, they repeat Nebuchadnezzar's order word for word.

Daniel 3:12. "There are certain Jews whom thou hast set over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; these men, O king, have not regarded thee: they serve not thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up."

To make their slander stronger, they exaggerate the matter by saying that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego do not pay attention to the king nor to his religious beliefs. The accusation they present against the Hebrews is fourfold: They accuse the three men of ingratitude, disloyalty, disrespect, and disobedience.

The true character of the accusers is betrayed when they remind the king that he is the one who placed the three Hebrews in high positions. Clearly the Chaldeans are making a veiled attack on Nebuchadnezzar's judgment. The same people whose lives have been spared by the intervention of the God of the Hebrews are now denouncing his worshipers and directly attempting to obtain their capital punishment.

Daniel 3:13. "Then Nebuchadnezzar in his rage and fury commanded to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Then they brought these men before the king."

The king flies off into an hysterical rage. No doubt, the pressure the three Hebrews felt from the conforming crowd intensified when they were brought before the king (vs. 13). Nebuchadnezzar was the world's most powerful monarch. Whatever he wanted to do with them, would be done; they were completely in his control. There was one thing, however, he could not do. He could not violate their will and choice. He could attempt to persuade them. He could try to coerce them. He could punish them. But he could not force them to act against their will.

Daniel 3:14. "Nebuchadnezzar spake and said unto them, Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, do not ye serve my gods, nor worship the golden image which I have set up?"

It's also interesting that they didn't break ranks over this issue. Two didn't stand firm with one bowing. Two didn't give in and leave the third alone in his faithfulness to God. All three were united in the common bond of faith and courage so that when one spoke to the king, he spoke for all three. This is the kind of unity in the faith that is needed as the church approaches its final crisis. When Christians break ranks and divide in their response over test and trial, they only make it harder for themselves and for their fellow Christians.

It's not a good thing to have the world's most powerful ruler angry at you, with his instruments of

torture and annihilation standing by at the ready.

Daniel 3:15. “Now if ye be ready that at what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and dulcimer, and all kinds of music, ye fall down and worship the image which I have made; well: but if ye worship not, ye shall be cast the same hour into the midst of a burning fiery furnace; and who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands?”

In Nebuchadnezzar’s mind, here were the seeds of another revolt in the making. No wonder this was such a sensitive issue with him and that he took the Hebrews’ refusal so seriously.

Yet, in spite of all this, the king was still willing to give them another opportunity to bow to the image. He was willing to have the orchestra strike up again and see if the Hebrews would obey (vs. 15). But their mind was set so firmly upon remaining faithful to God that they told the king not even to bother with another stanza of music.

Daniel 3:16. “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter.”

Their decision was set in a cement stronger than that which held the city’s walls together. Here was a law directly contrary to God’s law, which says: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven 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; thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them.” It was therefore a bad law, although the most of the people had nothing against it. At least they obeyed it without question.

But there were three men who knew the law to be bad, and who knew that to obey it would be to sin against God; so while the others fell down and worshiped, they stood upright. We all know the story well. The king was very gracious toward them, and though they had not heeded his law, he was willing to give them another chance. But they gave him to understand that they were fully decided, and did not need any time to think over the matter.

Daniel 3:17. “If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king.”

This is one of the great dramatic scenes of biblical writings, and the climax of this chapter. This was not disobedience but obedience. They were not law-breakers, but lawkeepers. The true law was, “Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve;” the king’s law was in

itself an act of despite to the law, so that when the three men refused to regard it, they were only showing their faithfulness to law.

Daniel 3:18. "But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up."

These men were not rebellious. They did not attempt to raise any insurrection. They did not harangue the people about the injustice of the law, and the wickedness of the threatened punishment. They made no appeal for sympathy, but simply proclaimed the power of their God. They were not there to oppose the king, nor to defend themselves, but to honor God. So they refused to be disobedient to their Creator, and willingly allowed themselves to be bound and cast into the burning furnace.

Daniel 3:19. "Then was Nebuchadnezzar full of fury, and the form of his visage was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: therefore he spake, and commanded that they should heat the furnace one seven times more than it was wont to be heated."

Nebuchadnezzar was not happy with the response of the three Hebrews. The punishment previously designed was not sufficient in the face of such insolence. He ordered that the furnace be heated seven times hotter (vs. 19). How would he have accomplished this? Remember, this took place in Babylon. Today we call this area, Iraq. Iraq is a country rich in oil. Most of that oil is underground and has to be pumped out by modern oil companies. But there are places where oil seeps to the surface. These open asphalt wells have been used in modern times, and they were known and used in ancient times as well. The best way to have a brick kiln heated to a much higher temperature would be to throw some petroleum into it.

Daniel 3:20. "And he commanded the most mighty men that were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace."

The three men had been firmly tied when they were thrown into the furnace.

Daniel 3:21. "Then these men were bound in their coats, their hosen, and their hats, and their other garments, and were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace."

Steps went up the side of the kiln to the upper opening. The Hebrews were probably dropped into the kiln through the hole at the top.

Daniel 3:22. “Therefore because the king’s commandment was urgent, and the furnace exceeding hot, the flame of the fire slew those men that took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.”

The king’s order to increase the temperature was obeyed, and it succeeded so well that the men who carried the three bound Hebrews up the steps on the side of the furnace and threw them in, were themselves killed by the blast of the furnace.

Daniel 3:23. “And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace.”

Why make the furnace as hot as possible when burning in slow fire hurts even more? This detail confirms that the young men were thrown into the furnace through its top opening.

Daniel 3:24. “Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astonished, and rose up in haste, and spake, and said unto his counselors, Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? They answered and said unto the king, True, O king.”

The king came over to see how the punishment was progressing. He probably bent down to look in the tunnel at the side of the kiln. He expected to see the charred and burning bodies of his three unfaithful officials; instead he saw them perfectly unharmed and unburned! The three men had been firmly tied when they were thrown into the furnace (vs. 23). Now as the king looked in, they were unbound and walking around in the fire!

Daniel 3:25. “He answered and said, Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.”

They fell down in the furnace, bound hand and foot, but immediately stood up again, for the fire destroyed their bonds, and set them free. Rather, it demonstrated their freedom. It had no power over them. They walked about in the fire, with the Lord by their side, as comfortably as though they were promenading in the cool of a summer evening.

The king saw the three fall down bound in the midst of the furnace, and then saw four men loose, and walking about at their ease. The Lord Himself came down to fulfill in person His promise, “When thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.” Isa. 43:2.

Nebuchadnezzar did not see a clear picture of the Messiah in the fourth figure walking about in

the fire. He recognized this being as a “son of the gods” (vs. 25), as his description can be most literally and accurately translated. This is not at all the same as “the Son of God.” A “son of the gods” simply means a being from the realm of the gods, that is a supernatural being. His identification of this being as an angel brings up the references to other angels in the book of Daniel. Two of them are named Gabriel and Michael. Gabriel was the one who brought some of the prophecies to Daniel (9:21, 23). Michael, the archangel (or prince of the heavenly princes, Daniel 8:11, 25; 10:13; 12:1) was the one who stood up for and defended the people of God, both in Babylonian and Persian times and at the end of time (Daniel 10:13; 12:1). Given the defensive posture in which we find Michael, he would have been the ideal angel to have protected and defended the three Hebrews in the fire. From a New Testament perspective we know that Michael is Christ (Revelation 12:7), but that would not necessarily have been evident to Nebuchadnezzar on this occasion. He simply knew that the God of the Hebrews had sent a divine-like being to rescue them. That very vivid impression would have been adequate for the time being in the course of Nebuchadnezzar’s spiritual pilgrimage.

Daniel 3:26. “Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the mouth of the burning fiery furnace, and spake, and said, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, ye servants of the most high God, come forth, and come hither. Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, came forth of the midst of the fire.”

Accompanied by a heavenly being, the faithful are delivered not *from* the fire, but *in* the midst of it. Although fire is destructive, it figures in many biblical texts as a symbol of God’s presence and protection. Then the king called them out, and bore witness before all the assembled rulers that these three men had changed the law.

Daniel 3:27. “And the princes, governors, and captains, and the king’s counselors, being gathered together, saw these men, upon whose bodies the fire had no power, nor was an hair of their head singed, neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire had passed on them.”

As the faithful step out of the door of the furnace, the whole group of dignitaries, beginning with the king’s close associates and advisers, gather closely around the three men and witness that there was no smell of fire on them. They see with their own eyes that the God of the Hebrews can save his servants from the power of fire.

it did not touch the bodies of these three men, nor their garments, nor even a single hair of their heads! There was no smell of smoke about them! It was as if they had never been in the fire at all. It was as if there was a kind of protective nonflammable envelope surrounding them. Thus God honored the faith and trust of His faithful servants.

From that dramatic answer to prayer we can see that we serve a prayer-answering God. He may not answer our prayers in such a dramatic way, but the fact that He did so for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego assures us that He will hear and answer our prayers in the way that He sees is best.

Daniel 3:28. "Then Nebuchadnezzar spake, and said, Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who hath sent his angel, and delivered his servants that trusted in him, and have changed the king's word, and yielded their bodies, that they might not serve nor worship any god, except their own God."

There is no doubt but that the law was changed, abolished, for nobody was again commanded to worship the golden image. Nebuchadnezzar himself recognized God as the only One to be worshiped, and declared that these three captive Jews had changed his decree. Surely this was a wonderful deed.

How did they do it? As we have seen; they made no stir, they did not appeal to the people, they circulated no petitions, they did not plead, and they did not threaten. They used no coercive legislation, nor any other kind. How then did they succeed in getting the law changed? King Nebuchadnezzar himself tells us. He said, "They have changed the king's word, *and yielded their bodies that they might not serve nor worship any god, except their own God.*"

This confirms what we have said. They were not disobedient, but obedient. They were not rebellious, but yielding. They changed the laws by yielding their bodies to death, rather than do wrong. That was all, but was sufficient, for there is almighty power in righteousness.

Daniel 3:29. "Therefore I make a decree, That every people, nation, and language, which speak any thing amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made a dunghill: because there is no other God that can deliver after this sort."

One excellent trait the king had, namely, that he was ready to acknowledge when he was wrong. He had a mind open to receive instruction. But his decree shows that he had not yet learned to know God. He knew that He was far greater than any gods of the nations, but he did not know Him as He is. If he had, he would never have made such a decree. Let us note a few points suggested by it.

In the first place, it shows that the king did not know the essential difference between the God of heaven and the idols of men. The latter cannot help themselves, and they have no attractiveness, and so men must needs be forced to worship them. But the Lord is a living God, and is altogether lovely, so that He is able to draw worshippers to Himself. He needs nobody with a sword to secure homage to Him. Nebuchadnezzar did not know that the only acceptable service to God is love, and that such service cannot be bought or forced.

In the second place the decree was equal to saying that the king himself ought to have been cut in pieces, because he had spoken against God. Every decree of that nature is a condemnation of God's longsuffering. That law which says that those who do not render certain service to God shall be punished, virtually charges God with laxness. It declares that His longsuffering is altogether wrong. They who issue such decrees thereby invite God's judgment upon themselves. They really say that God ought not to show mercy to anybody.

But Nebuchadnezzar meant well, although he acted ill. He was yet ignorant of God, but his heart was open to instruction.

Daniel 3:30. "Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, in the province of Babylon."

People often wonder where Daniel was while his friends were undergoing their test on the plain of Dura. We don't know the answer to this question because the text simply doesn't tell us. Common speculation is that Daniel was absent on an errand for the king. That is a reasonable suggestion, but we do not know for sure why Daniel wasn't present when the king set up his image. What we do know is that Daniel himself later faced the same kind of test. He did not have to suffer with his friends on the plain of Dura, but he did not escape persecution.