

# *A Dilemma in Daniel's Generation*

## **About when to bow and when to remain standing – Daniel 3**

It was customary for the Assyrian kings to erect statues of themselves. The 30-meter-high golden image built for Nebuchadnezzar was most probably a resemblance of himself. He wanted everyone, especially his leaders, to recognize his greatness and show their allegiance to him by bowing down before this image. While the building of the statue developed, so did the debates and discussions. Normal Babylonians had no problem with bowing down and worshiping the image. King Nebuchadnezzar had brought great success and prosperity to Babylon. Bowing down would be their way to express their gratitude and allegiance to the king.

For the many Jews living in Babylon, the prospect of having to bow down became a great dilemma. The second of the Ten Commandments they had received through Moses read: "You shall not make for yourself an idol 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..." (Ex. 20:4-5). Was this commandment applicable in this 'forced' situation? Could they externally bow down while internally keeping their hearts true to Jehovah?

Peoples of other nations and languages, that is, non-Jewish immigrants absorbed into the Babylonian Empire, would simply bow down in recognition that King Nebuchadnezzar had conquered their lands. They would bow down reluctantly, perhaps even with anger or bitterness, expressing their submission to a powerful and victorious king.

### **What would you do?**

The day came. The impressive golden statue was complete and standing in the plain of Dura. A great multitude of important people of the vast and powerful Empire "stood before it" (3:3). The king's command was loud and clear: when you hear the sound of the musical instruments, "you must fall down and worship the image of gold" (3:5). Then the musical instruments started playing. With great pomp, everyone began to bow down. The pressure was on. Given that a fair number of Jews had leading positions in the Babylonian Empire (Daniel 1:4,6; 3:8), it is very unlikely that Shadrach, Meshach

and Abednego were the only Jews present on that large plain. They were, however, the only three Jews spotted standing and reported by some envious Chaldeans: “There are *some* Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon... who pay no attention to you, O king” (3:12). *What would you have done if you were there?*

The Jews had had plenty of time to think and discuss the different options open to them. I’m sure they did! Their homes and synagogues must have become alive with conflicting strongly-held opinions and proposals. In fact, every generation of God-fearing men and women is faced with some old but also some new challenging situations. For 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians, some older issues could be rights and wrongs of capitalism, socialism and communism, capital punishment, open borders for needy immigrants, slavery, inter-race marriages, the participation of Christians in politics or in the military, the use of war and nuclear weapons, the ethics of family planning and abortion. We also face new dilemmas, such as how to respond to the rapid social acceptance of cohabitation, easy divorce and remarriage, the legal acceptance of same-sex marriage and flexible gender categories. Here another dilemma: if your elderly Christian mother is bedridden, in constant pain and deeply longing to depart and be with her Lord and Saviour, how would you respond to her request for active or passive euthanasia?

Like the Jews in Babylon, we should also explore, think and discuss the different dilemmas of our generation. Our homes, churches, conferences and seminars should also become alive with open, respectful and graceful Bible study and discussion – as we seek God’s mind on the ethical issues of our day. We are urged not to conform to the way of thinking of a Godless world, but instead to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). Without the development of Biblical convictions, we shall be unsure as to when to bow and when to remain standing. Without personal and collective Biblical reflection, we Christians shall simply do our local culture considers ‘normal’ or ‘acceptable’ rather than be the *salt* and *light* the Lord Jesus expects us to be (Matt. 5:13-17). Are you willing to take the time to seriously consider some of the dilemmas of our generation? *How are you responding?*

### **Seven common arguments**

When faced with difficult decisions, we humans respond in different ways. I am fairly confident that each of these seven types of argumentation had its proponents among the Jews in Babylon – as they have among Christians today. You will notice that sometimes one of these arguments may be valid and sometimes not. Ethical issues can be complicated, they may appear right from one perspective but wrong from another. There may be no ‘simple solution’. That is why some issues are called *dilemmas*. The fact that a Biblical answer may be difficult to find, the fact that on some issues some Christians choose to bow and others to remain standing, should not lead you to conclude that ethical dilemmas have no solution. It should, however, encourage you to be humble and careful in your pursuit of God’s mind on a given issue.

As you read what follows, imagine yourself at the time the golden statute is being built. Place yourself in the shoes of a Jew listening to a lively discussion in a Babylonian synagogue. Consider the validity of these seven different types of argumentation.

1. The problem may go away: 'We see that Nebuchadnezzar is building a golden image, but perhaps he will not finish it. Maybe God will intervene and destroy the image before we are asked to bow down before it. Maybe other Jews will be asked to bow but not those who meet in our synagogue. Maybe we can arrange a family or business trip to ensure that we are not present at the dedication of the image. If we focus our attention on God and the positive, He will deliver us from these difficult and time-consuming dilemmas.' *Is this a valid argument?*

When threatened by king Herod, Joseph was called to take Mary and baby Jesus and *escape* to Egypt. When threatened by the Pharaoh, Moses told the Israelites to relax: "The LORD will fight for you; you need only to *be still*" (Ex. 14:14). But escaping and stillness are sometimes not possible. Parents may choose to close their eyes as gender-as-a-choice begins to be taught in primary schools and sexual experimentation (hetero and homo) encouraged in secondary schools. Churches may hope that divorces and remarriages may never happen in their midst, that men and women with same-sex attraction will never knock at their doors, that no elderly suffering saint in their midst will plead for some form of euthanasia. To close our eyes or hide from reality will not help. This is the world we live in. If we have not taken the time to study God's word, discuss it, pray over it and develop our own convictions on some of these issues, we shall seek to avoid the dilemmas by living in the 'pretend world' of religious isolation, or instinctively please those who shout the loudest – be it the conservative legalists or cultural liberals.

2. Be culturally sensitive: 'The Lord spoke to us through the prophet Jeremiah telling us to adapt to life in Babylon, to "build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters..." We have also been encouraged to integrate into Babylonian life, to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (Jer. 29:4-7). Bowing down before the golden image is simply a Babylonian way of saying 'thank you' to the king. Not bowing down would set us Jews against the Babylonians. Being different at this crucial moment could be interpreted as elitism or disloyalty. It is normal for successful kings to build statues of themselves. It is common practice to show respect, submission and allegiance to victorious conquerors by bowing down before them. We should bow down, not as a religious act, but as an act of respect to the host culture we are living in.' *Is this a valid argument?*

As the apostle Paul travelled, he was very aware and sensitive to host cultures. "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews... To those not having the law I became like one not having the law... so as to win those not having the law... I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Cor. 9:20-22). In a growing number of countries, cohabitation before marriage is becoming normal. Could cohabitation be considered a form of marriage? If in a given culture a man may marry another man or have multiple wives, how should Christians respond? For centuries Christians have been thought that the Bible describes marriage as a lifelong covenant relation between a man and a woman. Given cultural developments, does this definition of marriage need updating? Like Paul, we do well to be culturally relevant and avoid

unnecessary cultural offence. But sometimes Christians are called to stand up and be different from those around them. Culture is not a morally neutral force (1 John 5:19).

3. Study the Biblical text carefully: ‘Look carefully at the wording of the second of the Ten Commandments: “You shall not make for yourself an idol... You shall not bow down to them or worship them...” (Ex. 20:4-5). It prohibits Jews from bowing down to idols *they have made*. We Jews have not *made* Nebuchadnezzar’s golden image. So, this commandment does not directly apply to our situation. Furthermore, the Ten Commandments were given to Israel while they were in the desert to help them as a nation to stay true to Jehovah and stop them from mixing with pagan religions. The context is so different from what we are currently living here in Babylon. This commandment, therefore, does not help us solve the dilemma we currently face here in Babylon.’ *Is this a valid argument?*

The holy Scriptures should be studied carefully: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17). Every word, every expression, every paragraph has a meaning, a context, a purpose. We are warned not to “go beyond what is written” (1 Cor. 4:6). With good intentions, the Pharisees added their interpretations of Scripture to the Scriptures - and then did not distinguish between them. We should be honest and humble enough to avoid the same mistake. Bible study is serious work. One passage of Scripture has been given to balance or influence our understanding of other passages. We should be cautious in our study, and where Holy Scripture provides enough clarity, we should also be bold enough to draw conclusions. Does the Bible reveal something about God’s mind on gender? Does God expect something different from a husband than from a wife? Are men and women designed to be different in some significant way? Is the Bible clear enough to be able to distinguish between a valid and a non-valid divorce? Or can it help us reach some conclusion on when, if ever, an abortion, euthanasia or a transgender operation is the correct thing to do?

4. Your heart is what really matters: ‘Unlike pagan gods, our God Jehovah looks beyond externals, the visible, the forms. As Jehovah God said to Samuel, “The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7). It doesn’t matter if we bow down or not. Bowing down is something external. What matters is what happens in our heart. People may see us bow down before the golden image and think we are worshipping the king or his gods, but that is *not* true! In our heart, we remain true to Jehovah. If called to do so, let’s just bow down and not worry about what other people might think.’ *Is this a valid argument?*

On returning to his homeland, Naaman, a new believer in Jehovah, was worried that he might be forced to bow down before an idol as he entered the temple of Rimmon. Elisha’s reply was “Go in peace” (2 Kings 5:17-19). Why this reply? Was Elisha implying that such a situation would never present itself? Or did Elisha mean that if Naaman was forced to bow down before an idol, he should remain in peace since Jehovah could see that Naaman’s heart remained true to Him? Clearly, what happens

in our heart is critical. Does this mean that the impression we give by our actions does not matter at all? The apostle Paul strived “to keep my conscience clear before God *and man*” (Acts 24:16). Where possible, we are encouraged to maintain a good testimony (1 Pet. 3:16) and to avoid giving the *impression* of wrongdoing (Eph. 5:3).

There exists, however, a real danger that in seeking to avoid giving offence, we can easily become a slave to the expectations of the believers and unbelievers around us. It is the danger of keeping to a *form* of Christianity that is relevant in other countries or was relevant in previous generations. Yes, the condition of our heart is more important than a set of external forms. And yet a defective or outdated *form* can become a serious stumbling block to some and a hindrance to the spreading of the Gospel. For example, your decision to smoke tobacco or soft drugs, wear certain types of clothing, visit certain places of entertainment or share a tent alone with your non-married partner, will have an effect on others. It may influence your Christian credibility. A clear conscience is not everything. There was a time when Saul persecuted the church, and he did so with a clear conscience. He later wrote, “My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent” (1 Cor. 4:4). Heart is more important than form. But you will be unwise to underestimate the positive and negative power of form.

5. Submit to government authority: ‘Since the days of Noah, God has delegated some of His authority to human beings (Gen. 9:6). Some suggest that this marked the beginning of legitimate human government. We know that authority structures are given by God to maintain proper order for the benefit of us all, be it in a country, a village, a farm, a home or even a synagogue. Chaos and anarchy follow the disregard of law and order. If leaders are wrong, they will be held accountable before God. I suggest we should submit and obey the orders of Nebuchadnezzar. If we are called to bow down before the golden image, the Lord knows that we bow as an act of civil obedience and not out of personal conviction.’ *Is this a valid argument?*

We Christians are urged to be good citizens, to pay our taxes, to honour people in authority – even if they are non-Christians. “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God” (Rom. 13:1). We are to pay our taxes and respect traffic signs even if we do not agree with them. But God’s authority remains always above human authority. So, when human authority conflicts with that of God, Christians should follow the example of Peter and the other apostles who said: “We must obey God rather than men!” (Acts 5:29). National laws are usually good and fair. But what should you do if the laws of our country forbid you to do what God commands? For example, meeting together for worship and mutual encouragement (Heb. 10:24-25)? Or if the law forces you to do something you are convinced God disapproves, like joining the army, casting a vote, practicing an abortion, teaching children in Christian schools that same-sex marriage is a valid and natural life choice or officiating a same-sex marriage. Christians, churches and organizations that choose to speak up for God against government authority may well lose tax benefits, may be ridiculed, or may even be forced to close. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had considered the possible price and were willing to pay it: “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” (3:17-18). By choosing not to bow down we may face unpredictable consequences. Is this risk worth taking?

6. Display unity among God’s people: ‘Most of us Jews have come to the conclusion that we should bow to the image when the music start. Why would some Jews choose not to bow down? Do they think they are the only true followers of Jehovah? Surely the majority of Jewish believers cannot be wrong! By choosing to stand when most other God-fearing people have come to the conclusion that they should bow, spoils the unity among God’s people. Babylonians may think we Jews are divided.’ *Is this a valid argument?*

Our Lord Jesus pleaded with His Father for unity among His followers, “that they may be one as we are one” (John 17:11, 22). The apostle Paul urges us to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). Should we set aside our personal convictions for the sake of family, congregational or denominational unity? Is the voice of the majority always the voice of God? Of course, it is good to try to understand those Christians who have arrived at other conclusions. Practical unity does require a degree of flexibility and tolerance. To follow Jesus will sometimes require self-denial (Luke 9:23), it will sometimes require accepting injury due to the brokenness of others (1 Cor. 6:7), it will sometimes require limiting our freedom for the benefit of others (1 Cor. 8:9), it will sometimes require self-control and patience (Phil. 3:15-16). As someone once said, “A truly liberated Christian is never under bondage to his own freedom”. It is possible to become legalistic about our freedom!

As sheep of the Good Shepherd, we must learn to sacrifice our own interests and comfort for the sake of the unity and wellbeing of the whole flock. But sometimes there are important points, where our Good Shepherd will call you or me to stand up and speak up – for the health or protection of the flock. In those moments, may the Lord give us both the courage and the grace to do so in a loving and God-honouring way.

7. There may be different equally valid ways: ‘Maybe Jews born in Babylon should bow but not those born in Israel. Maybe only the Levites should not bow. Maybe Jews employed by Nebuchadnezzar should be the only Jews to bow before the golden image. Why should there be a one-only-fit-all solution here? We have different temperaments, experiences, theological convictions and backgrounds. We come from different families and tribes. God knows that we are different. In fact, God has made us all different! What is right for one, may not be right for another. Let’s stop talking about Nebuchadnezzar’s golden image and let every Jew do what he or she feels is the right thing to do. We should avoid being judgemental and simply respect each other’s convictions and choices.’ *Is this a valid argument?*

Could it be true that in God’s eyes some activity is a sin if carried out by one person, but not a sin if carried out by another? Could something be a sin in one culture and not in another... or sin at some point in time but not at another time? In his letter to the Roman believers, Paul devotes chapter 14 to “disputable matters”, practices where some

Christians were convinced that they were *right* and that those who disagreed were *wrong*. Some practices are morally wrong. The Bible makes this clear. 'Do not kill' and 'do not commit adultery', for example, will always be wrong. The ethics of other practices may be more complex, depending on the situation and the state of our consciences. Maybe what God expects from you is different from what God expects from another believer – one who lived at a different time, or in a different culture, or has a different conscience. Some dilemmas may have various equally valid (God approved) solutions. On "disputable matters" Paul concludes: "whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God" (Rom. 14:22a).

This, however, does not mean that truth is flexible. Paul is not advocating the Post-Modern idea that everyone has a right to hold to his or her *own truth*. Where God's revelation over a particular issue is clear, we are wise to submit our ideas to God's truth. But sincere Bible believing Christians may reach different conclusions, for example, on whether or not to join the army, to make a 'vow' on their wedding day, to be involved in politics or even cast their vote, or to use a particular type of contraceptive or not. God-fearing men and women must grow and mature and learn to humbly distinguish between God's revelation and their personal interpretation and application of God's revelation, and learn to firmly and graciously live their personal convictions while respectfully interacting with the sincerely held convictions of their fellow Christians. We are to be cautious. That is why Paul completed his thought by adding, "Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves" (Rom. 14:22b). None of us has arrived yet. And as we travel together, may we, like Timothy, "fight the good fight, holding on to faith *and a good conscience*" (1 Tim. 1:18-19). If you think something is wrong, do not do it (Rom. 14:23). It is very important to keep a "good conscience". First correct your thinking. Only then will you be able to correct your behaviour while maintaining a "good conscience". A new experience may at first *feel wrong*. That is normal. If you have always thought that casting a vote is a sin, your feelings may protest when you walk towards the voting booth. We need to educate our conscience Biblically. In time, our feelings will fall in line with our conscience.

### **Five guidance categories**

As Christians, we cannot escape the new ethical issues presented by modern society. From time to time we shall be confronted with serious choices. On what do you base your choice? Healthy Christians will seek to make their choices in a way that honours God. Practicing the Lordship of Christ in minor decisions, will prepare us for the more weighty and complex decisions. As you face choices and dilemmas, perhaps you will find the following 5 categories helpful. They do help me.

- (1) Directives: When the Bible is clear on an issue, submit to it. When you see that we are called to "forgive one another" (Col. 3:13) or "not to commit adultery", not even in our minds (Matt. 5:27, 28), choose to submit and obey. On more complex topics, Biblical directives may be difficult to find. You will be wise to study Scripture with the help of others.
- (2) Principles: For most decisions in life, there are no directives. Can I work in a cigarette factory? Can I see a given film in a cinema? How many hours a day may I

devote to gaming or social media? Should I go to the office Christmas party? In Scripture, you may find principles that may help you make decisions. For example, does it edify? Does it honor God? Does it help or hurt others? (1 Cor. 10:23,24).

- (3) God's character: If you can't find relevant directives or principles, ask yourself if that choice or activity seems to be in agreement with the Biblical image you have of God as Father: does it rhyme with the heart of our heavenly Father? Are some options more in harmony with who the Lord Jesus is? Would He be pleased? Would you expect the Holy Spirit in you to rejoice or be grieved? God's revealed character may shed light on our decisions.
- (4) Divine guidance: Our God is a speaking God. "My sheep listen to my voice, I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27). The Holy Spirit can prompt us by placing a burden on our hearts, by giving us an idea, a 'revelation', a dream, a growing sensation, a burning desire, or by some other 'subjective' means. These are ways in which the Spirit of God guides the children of God, especially when facing personal decisions. Through one of these means, a believer may go into missions in Brazil, decide to marry someone, visit someone in hospital or pray in a particular way for somebody. Divine guidance will always be in harmony with the Holy Scriptures, God's 'objective' revelation.
- (5) Freedom: In some areas of life, perhaps in more than you think, the Lord grants you complete freedom in your choices. If her husband dies, a Christian widow "is free to marry *anyone she wishes*, but he must belong to the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:39). She may choose not to marry again. She may choose to marry a Christian man. She is free in her choice. The personal motivation behind a particular choice is probably of much more importance to God than the choice itself.

### **Three battle levels**

It takes energy and determination to swim against the current. How are *you* responding? Who are you listening to? How are you listening? In 1 Peter 3:15-17, the apostle Peter reminds us that the battle to find Godly solutions to the questions and dilemmas we face must be fought at 3 levels:

- (1) Heart level: "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord". Before you study Scripture or engage in discussion, examine your heart. If Christ is not Lord in your heart, you shall not have the burning interest to seek and understand His will – much less submit to it.
- (2) Head level: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience..." This head preparation requires work. It involves the study of Scripture and the open discussion and interaction with fellow believers. Development of sound Biblical convictions takes time and effort.
- (3) Life level: "It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil". Once our heart is right, we shall have the correct motivation. Once our thinking is



right, we shall have the correct direction. We then need the determination and courage to *live* and to *teach* God's will on these matters in a humble and attractive way - willing to endure possible social resistance and prepared to pay a price.

Does all this sound too complicated? Please do not lose heart. Our generation is not the first to face dilemmas. As Christians, we never face dilemmas alone: we have a guide. As we study a subject and study God's word, the "Spirit of truth" desires to *guide* us into all truth (John 16:13). Yes, mental work and open-minded dialogue is required. When facing difficult decisions, ask God for wisdom: "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5). That is why the apostle Paul encouraged Timothy to "*reflect* on what I am saying, for *the Lord will give you insight* into all this" (2 Tim. 2:7).

## Conclusion

Two and a half millennia ago, the Jews were faced with a dilemma: to bow or not to bow before the golden image. Today you and I face, or soon will face, a number of these social and ethical dilemmas.

Where do you stand? Prepare your heart to search for and submit to God's will. Decide to take the time to study God's word and to interact with likeminded Christians. Ask the leadership of your church or your youth group to include some of these dilemmas in their teaching agenda. If you are a church leader, Bible teacher, counselor or youth worker, may I encourage you to carefully educate yourself on some of these issues and then teach them with clarity and conviction - or invite Bible based speakers to do so. If you and I do not promote a Biblical world view in our homes and churches, who will?

What will you do? Moses was called to approach the Pharaoh to ask for social-structural changes. John the Baptist was publicly vocal against some of the immorality of his day. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego quietly and publicly remained standing when those around them bowed before the golden image. Moses succeeded in freeing the Israelites from slavery. John the Baptist was decapitated for his Godly efforts. The three standing men were thrown into the fiery furnace – but received the protection and unexpected physical company of the Lord Himself because "they trusted in him [God] 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" (Daniel 3:28). What are you called to do? May the Lord give you *discernment*, *determination* and *courage*. Your family, your church, your ministry and our generation desperately needs more inspiring examples like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

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