

# DANIEL — WEEK 4

## SINFUL FEAR



F. Michael Slay  
*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

## The cover image is Daniel in the Lions' Den by Peter Paul Rubens

Nebuchadnezzar super-heats the furnace and tosses the kids in. Surprise! They're just fine. This scares the bejeebers out of him and he makes a bunch of flowery pronouncements about their god.

Then he has another dream.

The nightmare continues.

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Daniel, Week 4 — Sinful Fear  
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1 Daniel 3:19–23

*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. 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. 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. 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. And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace.*

Do not miss how incredibly evil this is. Nebuchadnezzar really is burning them alive for the “crime” of refusing to bow down to a statue. Obviously, his path to faith is still a long way from complete.

Note that the number seven shouldn't be taken as a literal multiplier here. The Babylonians have no concept of something being heated to seven times as hot. The number seven is just symbolic of a great amount.

This intensity is confirmed by the next detail. *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.*

The dramatic point is being made—there's no way the three youth are going to survive this.

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The past year has seen several amazing answers to prayer in some of the groups I'm involved with. It's been beautiful but also intimidating. Something's up.

One offshoot of this is that I've developed a fondness for the long shots—the prayers which, if granted, don't inspire even a hint of, say, being thankful for modern medicine. All the glory goes to God.

I'll pray for anything people ask for, but recently the prayer requests that really float my boat are when people need a miracle. I've seen quite a few come through lately, and there are no words for how thrilling that is.

I thought I had faith before, but it's different now.

Still, that's nothing compared to what *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego* are up against in this chapter. Not only do they need a miracle, they literally put their lives on the line.

I only commit time and emotion to my long shots.

They're committing everything.

2 Daniel 3:24–25 (ESV)

*Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, “Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?” They answered and said to the king, “True, O king.” He answered and said, “But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.”*

Why is Nebuchadnezzar even watching? He delegated the execution to his henchmen. Some of them even died in carrying out his command. So, what’s the big deal? Kings are supposed to be busy. He should have just delivered his judgement and gone back to the palace. Why is he staying?

The truth is, Nebuchadnezzar is on the bubble about what to believe! He knows this is important. Of course, *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego* said that even if “our God” doesn’t deliver them, they’re willing to die before worshipping a statue. They specifically avoided predicting that they would be saved.

Still, Nebuchadnezzar is locked into “don’t touch that dial” mode. He’s not changing the channel until the show’s over. Deep down, he fears that “their God” will save them.

Of course, if he was sure “their God” would save them, he wouldn’t have sent them into the flames in the first place. Ticking off gods is a big no-no in the ancient polytheistic world.

If *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego* are saved, the king just made a formidable enemy.

And that is exactly what appears to be happening.

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Remember, this whole sequence of events has been, right from the start, driven by Nebuchadnezzar’s fear. It began with a fearsome nightmare that left him so rattled that he couldn’t sleep. His reaction was so extreme, he almost kills off all his advisors.

Then Daniel comes along and supernaturally interprets the dream. It’s flattering to Nebuchadnezzar, but he doesn’t like the way the prophesy ends. So, he pulls another crazy stunt and erects a golden statue that everyone must worship or die.

That, however, doesn’t go according to plan. Three “youths” refuse to comply. So, Nebuchadnezzar, in his paranoia and megalomania, sentences them to a horribly torturous death.

This act backfired. God saved the three youths in a particularly spectacular way. The presence of an extra person walking around in the furnace, who *is like a son of the gods* is a display of power. It intimidates Nebuchadnezzar, presumably by design.

Before, Nebuchadnezzar didn’t actually have anything to fear.

Now he does.

3 Daniel 3:26–30

*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. 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.*

*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! 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.”*

*Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego in the province of Babylon.*

Nebuchadnezzar takes another baby-step towards true faith. This time he says that “*there is no other God who can deliver like this.*” If only he’d stopped after the word “God,” and said, “*There is no other God.*” To Nebuchadnezzar, the one true God is still merely “*the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego.*”

Still, the king feels compelled to make silly, brash statements, stating that people *shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made an ash heap*. That’s a symbolic “sacrifice” to the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. He’s trying to placate “their god.”

Nebuchadnezzar’s fear has gone nuclear. He was flighty enough before, even though he wasn’t under any real pressure. Now he imagines that he’s gotten on the wrong side of an incredibly powerful god.

Nebuchadnezzar, O king live forever, did you happen see where that “Angel” went (the one who was in the furnace with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego)?

He’s right behind you!

Just kidding.

I feel sorry for the guy. He needs to find God soon, before his case of the yips drives him around the bend.

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In addition to everything else going on, that much stress should be causing Nebuchadnezzar’s adrenal glands to secrete too much cortisol. That might explain why *his sleep left him* back in Daniel 2:1.

<https://www.webmd.com/a-to-z-guides/what-is-cortisol#1>

If this keeps up, it will start to make him literally ill—physically and mentally.

4 Daniel 4:1–3

*Nebuchadnezzar the king,*

*To all peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth:*

*Peace be multiplied to you.*

*I thought it good to declare the signs and wonders that the Most High God has worked for me.*

*How great are His signs,  
And how mighty His wonders!  
His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,  
And His dominion is from generation to generation.*

This is progress. Now Nebuchadnezzar calls God “*the Most High God.*” Not bad, until we carefully consider the first Commandment.

*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.  
“You shall have no other gods before Me.” — Exodus 20:2–3*

The Hebrew translated as “*before Me*” in this passage does not mean before Me “in line” or “in priority.” The Hebrew words are literally “upon my face.” We have a similar idiom in English. In essence, God is saying, “I don’t want any other gods in my face.” This means anywhere where He can see them, which is, of course, everywhere.

In contrast, Nebuchadnezzar views everything through a polytheistic lens. Recent events in his life have merely added another god to the list.

Something needs to happen to erase all those other gods.

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*“Ideas have consequences, and bad ideas have victims.” — John Stonestreet*

Bad doctrines, whether ancient polytheism or something more modern, cause real damage. This is true in government, business, religion, anywhere where false beliefs lead to bad decisions or a distorted view of reality. Nebuchadnezzar’s false beliefs led to bad decisions. Now they’re keeping him from correctly interpreting what happened.

Much of Nebuchadnezzar’s stress is rooted in the gap between what his mind believes and what his eyes see. If only he’d trust his own eyes and let their truth convert him.

Therein lies a lesson about being open-minded — “Pay attention to your observations. They are facts.”

Ironically, the stress from Nebuchadnezzar’s suffering could solve all his problems by turning the current events into a teachable moment, but he’s so locked into his polytheistic worldview that he can’t learn.

5 Daniel 4:4–12

*I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at rest in my house, and flourishing in my palace. I saw a dream which made me afraid, and the thoughts on my bed and the visions of my head troubled me. Therefore I issued a decree to bring in all the wise men of Babylon before me, that they might make known to me the interpretation of the dream. Then the magicians, the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers came in, and I told them the dream; but they did not make known to me its interpretation. But at last Daniel came before me (his name is Belteshazzar, according to the name of my god; in him is the Spirit of the Holy God), and I told the dream before him, saying: “Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, because I know that the Spirit of the Holy God is in you, and no secret troubles you, explain to me the visions of my dream that I have seen, and its interpretation.*

*“These were the visions of my head while on my bed:*

*I was looking, and behold,  
A tree in the midst of the earth,  
And its height was great.  
The tree grew and became strong;  
Its height reached to the heavens,  
And it could be seen to the ends of all the earth.  
Its leaves were lovely,  
Its fruit abundant,  
And in it was food for all.  
The beasts of the field found shade under it,  
The birds of the heavens dwelt in its branches,  
And all flesh was fed from it.”*

Nebuchadnezzar has another nightmare and, sure enough, he’s afraid again. There’s something not right with that. We all have nightmares. People had them back then too. Children waking up from nightmares might need some hugs before they can settle down, but grown-ups should be able to just let them go. Nebuchadnezzar’s fear reflects a sinful insecurity that traces all the way back to Adam’s fall in the garden.

<https://www.crossway.org/articles/when-fear-is-sinful/>

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The seven deadly sins are: envy, greed, gluttony, lust, pride, rage, and sloth. They’re traditional—you can’t find them listed in scripture—but they’re worth considering. One thing that fascinates me about this list is that the sins are more about feelings than actions. This gets to the root of what sin is all about.

Curiously, there has been much debate about adding an eighth deadly sin to the list—despair. Why would despair even be a candidate?

The same way fear can be sinful. It reflects a lack of trust in God.

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. What is the longest long-shot prayer you've seen granted?
2. Have you ever been scared by something God did?
3. Do you struggle to have sympathy for people who ruined their own lives?
4. What bad ideas have you seen hurt people?
5. Have you ever felt despair?

*Items for prayer:*