

# Make Babylon Great Again

**Nebuchadnezzar was a narcissistic maniac who would do anything to retain power. Tips from the Book of Daniel for dealing with a tyrant.**

By [Rev. William J. Barber II March 2018](#)  
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**I**n the Book of Daniel, you find the words, “Can the God you serve deliver you?” Here’s the truth: The God we serve can deliver. But even if not, we will never bow down and serve other gods.

Daniel, set during the Babylonian exile, has something to say about history. It explores the vulnerability of people living under oppression. Many of the Israelites found themselves in bondage in Babylon.

There was a king of Babylon named Nebuchadnezzar. He was a mighty king, and when he issued an order, he meant business. Nebuchadnezzar was a narcissistic maniac who made everything about *him*. He made a golden tower, and he ordered that everybody under the reign of his kingship had to bow.

One day, Nebuchadnezzar called in those he had appointed and the ones he had pardoned, the governors and the sheriffs. He had a dedicatory service for his golden image, and he was trying to make sure that he wouldn’t have to lie about those who attended his inauguration.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, three young Hebrew men, represent the choices faced by those who must either support a repressive regime or face certain death. Nebuchadnezzar wanted them to bow—forget their heritage, forget their legacy, forget their journey, forget their God, forget their rights, and bow down. He wanted everyone around him to feel less than him, because he had his own inferiority complex.

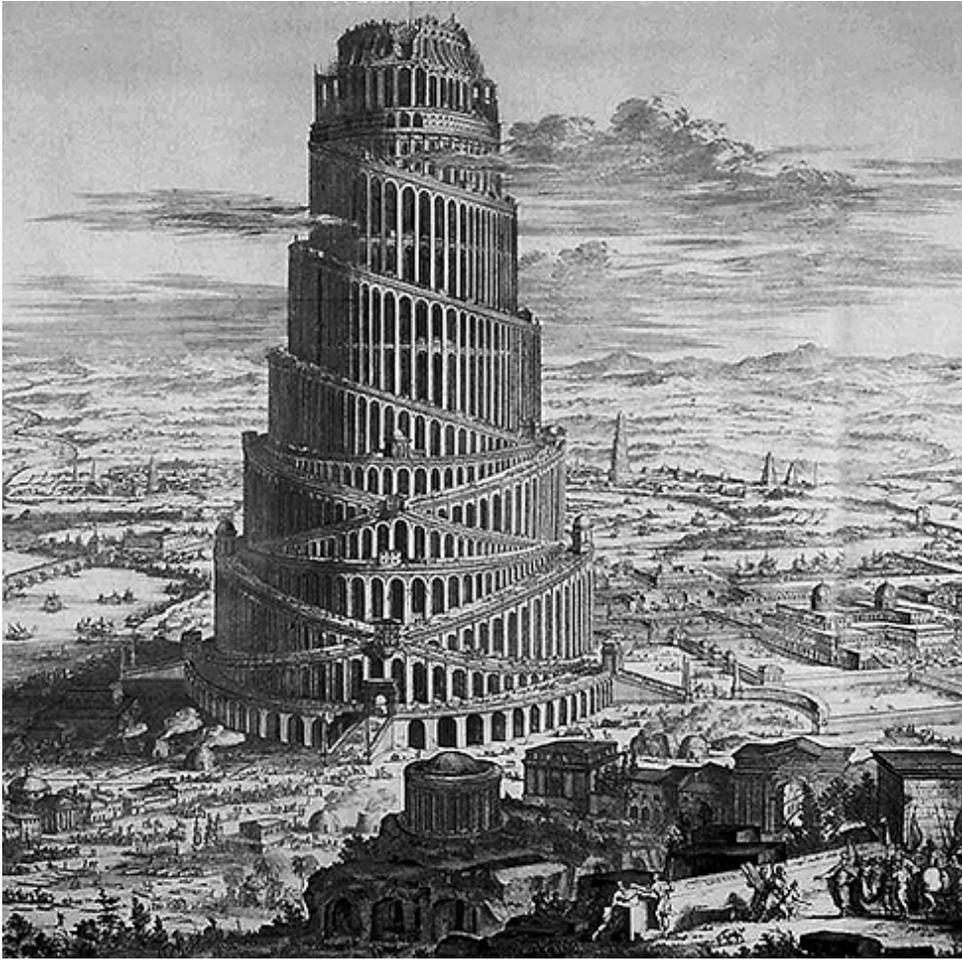
**(Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to accept the religion of the king, the religion of greed, racism, and hate.)**

The name Nebuchadnezzar literally means “one who will do anything to protect his power.” That’s why Nebuchadnezzar built his towers. He built his tower more than 10 stories tall. Nebuchadnezzar put his name on his tower. Everything he built, he put his name on it, because he was a narcissistic maniac. And then he put gold on his tower, and he promised that he, and only he, could make Babylon great again.

Nebuchadnezzar believed only he could save the people. He didn’t believe in God, he didn’t ask for help, he didn’t repent, he didn’t ask for forgiveness; whatever he wanted to do, he thought he could do it.

Whatever he wanted to do to other nations, he thought he could do it. Whatever he wanted to do to women, he thought he could do it. Whatever he wanted to do to his opponents, he thought he could do it. He felt like it was all right because all that mattered was protecting his power, protecting his crown, and people coming and bowing down.

He said, if you want a job, come to my tower and bow down. If you want protection, come to my tower and bow down. If you want money, come to my tower. This was not merely an act of respect toward the king; he wanted worship. And three young Hebrew boys, millennials who had gone to a HHCU (Historically Hebrew College and University) that had taught them who and whose they were, found this to be something they would not do, even with the penalty of death. His false prophets did it, those who wanted positions did it, those who didn’t support him but felt like they just had to do it to negotiate did it.



But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow down at the tower. They could not accept the religion of the king, the religion of greed, the religion of racism, the religion of hate. They could not go through the motions of bowing to the statue while still maintaining their belief in God. They knew that there are times you must stand your ground because bowing down is not an option.

**When you know God,  
you can't bow down**

Nebuchadnezzar's towers are big now, and Nebuchadnezzar is crazy. Nebuchadnezzar will use his power; his money is real and plentiful. He is tied to mean-spirited autocrats across the world. But

this story teaches us that, even with all of that, when you know God, you can't bow. We have to be faithful even unto death.

Right now, we need this word in our political reality. This is a political text. It is a text about the struggle between the oppressed and the oppressors, between the high and mighty and the least of these. We need to hear it again because we're living in a time with people and political systems and personalities who are absorbed with themselves.

And it's not just one person. That one person is a symptom of a larger moral malady of greed and avarice and the craving for power. It's not just about a president, it's about an entire web of money and influence that has been working to tie up American democracy forever, even as the divide between the rich and the poor is at its widest in our nation's history. Our electorate is growing more diverse. Wealthy oligarchs know they cannot hold on to power in truly democratic elections, so we are witnessing an all-out assault of the statutes—not the statues, but the statutes—of white supremacy and white nationalism.

This is not simply about the preservation of a government conceived by human beings. We're talking, fundamentally, about the well-being of creation and the survival of those creatures who bear the very image of God.

We live in a moment when millions desperately need a government and a society with a heart. Millions of Americans need health care and living wages and protection from xenophobia, homophobia, systemic racism, religious bigotry, immigration resentment, and climate destruction. This moment we're in is about whether a government of the people and by the people will, in fact, serve the people. It is about whether we as a people can reconstruct the heart of our democracy.

I hope the change comes. I hope hearts are changed. But the Bible says what comes out of your mouth is a reflection of your heart. Somehow we've got to get it in our spirit. Even if it doesn't, this text says we must stand our ground because bowing down is not an option.

### **Nebuchadnezzar lives**

A century ago, Woodrow Wilson played *Birth of a Nation*, which glorified the Klan, in the Oval Office. Now, 100 years later, a new leader brings white supremacy right into the Oval Office again. In a moment like this, bowing down is not an option.

Politicians and preachers say they are against the hatred and death that happened in Charlottesville, caused by white nationalism and white supremacy, but every day on Capitol Hill they support the agenda and the policies of white supremacy and white nationalism. They refuse to fully restore the Voting Rights Act. They confirm an attorney general who wants to roll back affirmative action and refuses to address voter suppression. They pass policies that attack Latino immigrants and Muslims and the LGBT community. All of those things are the policies of white nationalism. Just because you renounce extreme hate, it doesn't mean you renounce white nationalism or white supremacy. In such a moment of moral confusion, bowing down is not an option.

Politicians, with insurance paid for by the people, try to take health care from millions of Americans. The last time we saw that kind of program eradicated was in 1866, when the Freedmen's Bureau hospitals—which served poor whites, free blacks, and former slaves—were closed. Do you know what the rationale was in 1866 for closing the hospitals? One, we need to cut taxes. Two, the folks that are getting sick, they're sick because of their own personal morality. And three, why would we keep people alive that might vote against us if they live? When that is going on, bowing down is not an option.

We live in a country where 250,000 people die from poverty every year. According to the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University, more than 45 percent of black children are poor; 54 percent of African Americans make less than a living wage. Here we are, 150 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, and we have 400 families in this country that make \$95,000 *an hour* while we are locking people up who simply want \$15 an hour and a union. Bowing down is not an option.

Our deepest values are not Republican or Democrat. They are not left or right. They are moral issues. When government decisions and corporate greed poison and weaponize water and air from the Rio Grande to the rivers of Flint, Mich., we can't bow down.

Voter suppression is alive and well. Racist gerrymandering has allowed people to win offices through racial cheating, and then they use that power to hurt the very poor whites that voted for them. Twenty-two states have passed voter suppression since 2010, and the same states that passed voter suppression have the poorest people and are the least likely to have a living wage and health care and have the most attacks on immigrants and the LGBT community. We have less voting rights today than we had 50 years ago.

The attack on voting is theologically wrong. You have the right to vote if you are 18 years old and a U.S. citizen—a human being, a creation of God. When you deny my right to vote, you are denying the *imago dei* in me.

### **Saving in the fire**

The Bible says in Isaiah 10: "Woe unto those who legislate evil and rob the poor of their rights and make women and children their prey." As long as this is our reality, bowing down is not an option. Our deepest values are not Republican or Democrat. They are not left or right. They are moral issues. Lifting up the least of these, making sure people have living wages and an education, making sure there's fairness in the criminal justice system and that equal protection under the law, regardless of

your race or color or sexual identity, is non-negotiable. These are moral issues, and we can't stand down.

Under oppression, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego knew who they were. So they said to Nebuchadnezzar: We can't bow. Our God can deliver. Those boys knew that they might die for standing. They knew the king might make a fiery furnace seven times hotter, but even so they declared: We cannot bow.

Whenever we take a stand and choose not to bow, it does something to the heart of God. When God knows that our serving God is not predicated on knowing we're going to be delivered, God starts shaking on the throne. When we refuse to bow, it moves God. God doesn't keep them from being thrown in the fiery furnace. God decides instead to go in with them. God was the fourth one in the fire. God didn't save them by keeping them out of the fire. God saved them *in* the fire.

**(It's not just about a president, it's about an entire web of money and influence that has been working to tie up American democracy forever.)**

Has God ever saved you in the trouble? Has God ever walked with you through the fire? God is a very present help in time of trouble. The Lord will make a way inside the trouble.

The haters thought it was all over. But God was inside the trouble. And the Bible said that when they came out, they didn't even smell like they'd been in the fire, because the God I serve can deliver.

So it might look like that narcissistic Nebuchadnezzar and all of his nasty is going to nullify us. But stand, and the Lord will make a way somehow. God can bring power out of pain, mercy out of meanness, love out of hate. God can bring joy out of sorrow, good out of evil, hope out of despair. God can bring deliverance out of depression, and life out of death.

Like those Hebrew boys, we've got to make up our minds when it comes to the modern-day manifestation of Nebuchadnezzar.

### **Living in fiery times**

When Nebuchadnezzar threw those boys in the fire, the old preachers say there was a pre-incarnation incarnation. That Jesus got in the fire with them.

We're in some fiery times right now. But bowing down is not an option. If Harriett Tubman didn't bow, if Medgar Evers didn't bow, if Frederick Douglass didn't bow, if Rosa Parks didn't bow, bowing down is not an option.

I serve one who was born in the time of another narcissistic maniac named Caesar. They hung him high, they stretched him wide, but that brown-skinned Palestinian Jew, that revolutionary, didn't bow and neither can we.

One day, we'll be able to bow—when we stand before the Lord. When the lion lays down with the lamb. When the rough places are made smooth, the crooked places are made straight, the mountains are made low, and the glory of the Lord is revealed. We can bow then.

But until then, stand. When there's nothing left to do, stand. Watch the Lord see you through. And after you've done all you can, stand. Because bowing down is not an option.

## **WE WILL NOT BOW DOWN!**

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