

## THE FIERY FURNACE

### *Daniel 3*

The teacher should study the sections in the various graded notes on the decline of Israel and Judah and the captivities. This is the background against which today's lesson must be taught because of Daniel's origin and his position in Babylon. It is also important that all the children above the Primaries should know at least the simple facts concerning the captivities. A few minutes should be spent in reviewing the names and periods of the four great prophets so as to place Daniel among them, but most of the lesson time should be occupied with the story for the day.

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#### **Doctrinal Points**

*The Lord is close to us in times of trouble and temptation.*

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#### **Notes for Parents**

The book of Daniel is perhaps the best known of all the books of the Prophets. This is because it contains several striking stories which can be told to little children. One of these is the subject of our lesson today.

Because of the presence of the temple in Jerusalem and because some of the kings there were faithful to the Lord, the kingdom of Judah was able to stand longer than the kingdom of Israel. But in spite of their good kings and in spite of the warnings of the great prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, the people persisted in worshiping idols, and finally Judah was conquered by Babylon. If we persist in thinking that the good things of the world and the learning and theories of men are more important than finding out and doing what the Lord tells us is right, the time comes when selfishness takes complete possession of our hearts.

Daniel and the three young men of our story today were among a small group of youths of royal blood, specially chosen for their

mental ability, who were taken away before the destruction of Jerusalem to be educated in Babylon in the king's court, and they were well treated. These four remained faithful to the worship and practices in which they had been brought up at home, and so the Lord was with them and protected and prospered them. He gave Daniel the power of prophecy and the ability to interpret dreams so that Daniel, like Joseph long before, rose to be one of the chief rulers of the land; and at his suggestion his three friends were also put in charge of provinces.

In the divided kingdom, Israel pictures our mind and Judah our heart. Israel fell first because it was started in idolatry. When once we begin to listen to worldly reasoning—as Psalm 1 points out—we get further and further from an understanding of the truth. Our hearts may still cherish good intentions, but without the truth to guide and protect us, selfishness eventually prevails. This selfishness, especially the love of having our own way, is Babylon; and Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, stands for the ruling principle of the selfish heart, the principle of self-praise and belief in our own wisdom.

Nebuchadnezzar set up a great golden image, and ordered everyone in the land to worship it on pain of being cast into a burning fiery furnace. In our story the fiery furnace into which Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were cast for refusing to worship the image pictures the temptations to which we are subjected when we are steadfast in looking to the Lord for guidance instead of doing as “everybody else” does. But we need not be afraid of these temptations, for the Lord is present with us. In His life on earth He met and overcame every temptation which can possibly come to any of us; and if we are faithful, He will always give us strength to overcome, just as He brought Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego unharmed through the fire.

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### Primary

This is an easy story to tell to children, who can be fired with admiration for

the faithful three and with wonder at their deliverance. It is a good thing for the Primary children to learn the name of Daniel and to try to learn the names of his three friends so that the names will at least be familiar to them. They will be interested in the incident of their refusing the king's rich food (Daniel 1). The important lesson is the necessity of standing up for what you know to be right no matter how strongly you may be tempted.

When you are playing with other children and they all begin to do something you know you have been told not to do, it is very hard, isn't it? You don't like to be different from all the rest. But if you are brave enough to do what is right no matter what the others are doing, things go better for you afterward.

Long ago there were four young men in the king's family in Judah who were carried far away to Babylon when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, took possession of Judah. They were well treated, for king Nebuchadnezzar wanted them as very special helpers for himself. But the people of Babylon did not worship the true God whom the four young men had been taught to worship, and did many things which they knew to be wrong. They made up their minds they would not do these things.

One of these young men was Daniel, who afterward became a prophet of the Lord and wrote one of the books in our Bible. In his book he tells about some of the things which happened to them. At the very start they refused to eat some of the food the king gave them because it was food which their religious laws forbade them to eat. They asked the man in charge to give them only vegetables to eat and water to drink. He was afraid they would not be as healthy as the others and that the king would blame him, but he agreed to try it. Because they were doing right, the Lord saw to it that their food agreed with them, and they became stronger and handsomer than all the others.

Then king Nebuchadnezzar set up a great golden image and told everyone to worship it.

What did Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego tell the king?

What did the king have his servants do with them?

Were they burned?

Whom did Nebuchadnezzar see in the fiery furnace with them?

What happened to the men who cast them into the furnace?

Then the king commanded that no one should ever speak a word against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

And he promoted all three of them.

You see when we mean to be good and try to do right, the Lord is always very close to us to help us resist temptation. He keeps us safe, just as He kept Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego safe in the midst of the fiery furnace. And when we have the courage to do right, we help other people to do right, too.

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### Junior

With this class the historical background should be carefully covered, and they should be told something of Daniel's later history. They know that people who are upright and firm come to be respected, and they need to be shown that this respect is not something that can be won in a moment or sometime after you grow up, but must be built up by a lifetime habit of acting from principle instead of from impulse.

Judah had several good kings but also many bad ones. Israel, you remember, had only bad kings. Israel became worse and worse, and the Lord could not save it because its people would not obey Him. Finally, the armies of Assyria conquered Israel and carried all its people away to the east, sending in foreigners to take their place. The Samaritans of the Lord's time were descendants of these strangers. The ten tribes who composed the kingdom of Israel never came back to the Holy Land. They are sometimes called "the lost tribes," and there have been many theories as to just what became of their descendants.

The king of Assyria also tried to capture Jerusalem and Judah, but the king on the throne of Judah at that time was one of its best kings, Hezekiah, and so the Lord saved Judah. Later, however, the kings of Judah forsook the Lord again, and the armies of Babylon were allowed to conquer Judah and destroy Jerusalem and carry off all the important people to Babylon. But it was promised that after seventy years they should be allowed to return.

When the king of Babylon won his first victory in Judah, he

carried off a selected group of people (read II Kings 24:11-16) among whom were four young men (read Daniel 1:1-7) of the royal household who were of special ability.

What were their Hebrew names?

What were they called in Babylon?

Daniel's Chaldean name never became familiar, because he was chosen by the Lord to be one of the Prophets, and in the Word he is always called Daniel, one of the books of the Word bearing his name. The other three are best known by their Chaldean names. All four, although they were specially educated to serve the king of Babylon, remained faithful to the Lord. They proved this first by refusing to eat the king's rich food while they were being trained. They asked instead to be given only "pulse" to eat and water to drink. *Pulse* is an old word for green vegetables and perhaps cereals. They lived on this all the time they were being educated, and it is reported that they thrived on it better than all the other young men did on the king's food.

The Lord gave Daniel power to interpret dreams—the same power He had given Joseph so long before—and Daniel was able to interpret a strange dream for king Nebuchadnezzar which none of his own wise men could interpret. So Nebuchadnezzar made Daniel ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief of the governors, and at Daniel's request he gave high positions also to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

But Nebuchadnezzar was a very proud man, who enjoyed making other people do his bidding. In our chapter for today we see the trouble to which this led.

What did Nebuchadnezzar set up?

What command did he give?

What was to be the punishment of anyone who disobeyed?

What did Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego do?

What did Nebuchadnezzar command in his rage?

What happened to his own officers as a result?

Afterward, what did Nebuchadnezzar see in the furnace?

You see, the Lord was with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to

save them just as they had said He would be. Whenever we stand up for the right and do right, the Lord is with us and takes care of us. And not only this, but we also influence others to recognize and respect the Lord. This was shown in the effect on Nebuchadnezzar of the steadfastness of the three young men.

What new command did Nebuchadnezzar give?

What did he do for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego?

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### Intermediate

The tendency to “follow the crowd” is particularly strong at this age; so the lesson is an important one. A discussion of the common temptations of school life and how they can be met will be helpful. Call attention to the fact that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did not make a parade of their goodness. They merely took it for granted that they would do what they knew to be right regardless of the consequences. This habit was built up in them from the beginning of their captivity, and while it set them apart from their companions, in the end it made them great men.

Assyria was not permitted to conquer Judah. Assyria as an enemy represents false reasoning, and while false reasoning can wholly take possession of the understanding, it cannot of itself destroy good motives in the heart. But there is an enemy which can corrupt the heart. One of the later kings of Judah, Hezekiah, although he was one of the most thoroughgoing reformers of them all, admitted to his confidence the envoys of the king of Babylon who came pretending to be his friends, and showed them all his treasures. After that it was not long before Babylon conquered Judah and gradually carried away its treasures and its leaders, finally destroying Jerusalem and the temple itself. Babylon pictures “the love of dominion from the love of self”—in simple terms, the love of getting our own way—and this is the enemy which can creep into our hearts and gradually rob us of all our good affections.

Daniel, the last of the Major Prophets, was one of the young men of the royal household carried away to Babylon with the first group, before the great captivity. These young men were selected to be trained in Babylon as advisers to the king, and they were

well treated. Doubtless most of them fell readily into the ways and worship of Babylon. But four of them, Daniel, Hanniah, Mishael, and Azariah—to whom were given the Chaldean names of Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—determined to remain faithful to Jehovah and to continue the customs in which they had been brought up in Judah. They first refused to eat the king's rich food. We can easily see that this pictures refusing to take into our hearts and minds desires and thoughts which support the habit of living for the pleasures and rewards of the world. Whenever we find ourselves trying to get our own way without thinking whether it is really right and just and then hunting for "good" reasons why we should have our own way, we are eating the food and drinking the wine of the king of Babylon.

This temptation to put ourselves first is further defined in the story of our chapter for today, which concerns worship. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, pictures the ruling principle of self-love, which is self-intelligence, the idea that "what I think is so must be so." This idea tries to bend all the truths of the Word and the services of the church to the glorification of self. So Nebuchadnezzar set up a golden image and commanded the people to worship it. The punishment for disobedience was that one would be cast into a "burning fiery furnace." Worldly people imagine that the good life is a hard and painful one, full of suffering from the burning of unsatisfied desires. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to worship the image. They felt sure that the Lord would not let them be tormented, but they said that even if they should suffer in the furnace, they would still be faithful. And their faith was justified. The Lord appeared in the furnace with them and they were unhurt. The Lord, when He was in the world, underwent all the temptations which men can ever feel, and He is closely present with us in temptation to give us power to overcome. Not only were the three young men unharmed by the fire, but Nebuchadnezzar was convinced of the power of their God and issued an edict that no one in his kingdom should ever speak a word against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Daniel later in a similar incident was saved by the Lord from lions. All four young men were raised to positions of power in Babylon. Daniel, because the Lord gave to Him, as He had to Joseph, the ability to interpret dreams, was elevated to a position next to the king. The other three were given charge over provinces. And Nebuchadnezzar, through the series of experiences he had with these four young men, was finally brought to acknowledge Jehovah as the most high God. Nebuchadnezzar's son, Belshazzar, also had a demonstration of Daniel's power, and his successor Darius the Mede, although he overthrew Belshazzar, retained Daniel as ruler under him of the whole land. And it is recorded that Daniel continued to prosper in the reign of Cyrus the Persian, the ruler who permitted the people of Judah to return to their own land. So the prophet Daniel spans the whole period of the captivity of Judah.

*Basic Correspondences*

- Assyria = the rational plane of the mind
- Babylon = the love of dominion from the love of self
- Nebuchadnezzar = self-intelligence, the ruling principle of self-love

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**Senior**

Something should be done in this class with the subject of the Lord's temptations and victories and the reality of His presence with us in temptation. Young people may not talk much about the Lord, but if he is presented to them in an inspiring way in home and Sunday school, they do not forget Him in their thinking. He does in a very real sense walk with them by the way and save them from many dangers.

The prophet Daniel is one of the most striking figures in the Word. His fidelity and courage in the face of the temptations of wealth and power have always stood as an example, and—unlike many of the Bible characters—he seems to have no weaknesses to explain away. The promising young Hebrew, taken captive in his early youth by the king of Babylon with a view to making his



talents useful to the king, is a clear symbol of our spiritual nature so early subjected to the selfish and worldly demands of our natural heredity.

Daniel and his three companions refused to eat the rich food or drink the wine of the king of Babylon. It is possible for us, even as very young people, to reject selfish feelings and thoughts and to substitute for them humility before the Lord and study of the truths of the Word. And the result is always immediate. We gain from day to day in strength and beauty of character, as Daniel and his companions “appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the King’s meat.” Chapter 1 of Daniel tells this story. And just as Daniel and his three companions gained the king’s favor, so we also gain unexpected recognition and respect from the selfish “leaders” around us.

But this external prosperity and admiration brings with it a new temptation to rely on self and forget God. The changing of the names of the four young men by Nebuchadnezzar suggests this. In each case the original Hebrew name contains the syllable *el* or *ah* which are syllables taken from the name of the Lord—Elohim or Jehovah. The new names not only leave out these syllables but contain either the name of an idol or the suggestion of some quality which exalts self. Babylon throughout the Scriptures is the symbol of the “love of dominion from the love of self.” Reduced to the simplest language this means the desire to have our own way in everything. The king who rules this selfish kingdom is the principle of self-intelligence: “I know; if you don’t agree with me, you must be a fool.” The golden image which Nebuchadnezzar set up is a symbol of self gilded over and made into a god to be worshiped. Nebuchadnezzar says in effect: “If you don’t serve yourself first, your natural desires will burn you up.” The selfish person sees no possible happiness in self-control. And when we yield to this temptation to set up self as an idol, the very fate prophesied for the God-fearing overtakes us instead: our natural passions increase and do burn us up, as the sevenfold heat of the furnace destroyed the men who threw Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into the fire.

But those three were not harmed, “nor was a hair of their head singed, neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire had passed on them.” They relied on the Lord, and the Lord was with them in the furnace of temptation: so the fire could not hurt or change them. The Lord took on our finite human nature for the very purpose of meeting and overcoming all the temptations which men can ever possibly experience. If we trust in Him and obey Him, He walks with us wherever we go and gives us power to resist temptation—to go through “fire” unharmed.

When they were brought before the king, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego seemed to stand alone. All the might of the kingdom was against them. So we may sometimes seem to be alone and helpless in the midst of our worldly environment. But we have only to stand firm. It is worldliness which is really powerless, powerless to bring happiness or peace to anyone, and powerless to disturb the good person. Throughout the history of the world it has been by means of the few people who stood firmly for the right that the course of events has eventually been decided. It helps us sometimes if we realize that to “follow the crowd” is weakness and not courage. The house built on the rock is the one which stands.

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### Adult

The meaning of Babylon and of Nebuchadnezzar and the image in their application to modern religious thought is an important lesson for this class. Attention should be called to II Kings 20:12-17, in which is described the insidious beginning of the captivity to Babylon. Psalm 1:1-2 may also be recalled in connection with the complete faithfulness of the three young men in the story.

We come now to the last chapters of the long history which we have been following through the Old Testament. Most of the nation—Israel—has been conquered and carried away into the eastern countries by Assyria, never to return. The surviving division—Judah—has been overcome by Babylon, and although we know that a part of this group is destined to return and rebuild Jerusalem

and the temple, it will be merely a return by permission of a foreign master.

In the decline of Judah we see the gradual degeneration of the will to serve the Lord, the desire to “be good,” which comes about through admitting other motives into our hearts—the worship of idols. Although worldly reasoning cannot actually destroy this good desire—Assyria (symbolizing worldly reasoning) was not permitted to conquer Judah—still the degeneration of the good will is much more rapid after the understanding is taken captive by worldly reasoning. Spiritual truth and the ability to reason from spiritual grounds are an essential bulwark of the good heart. Without them we do not recognize evil for what it is, as Asa invited the aid of Syria and paid for it with the treasures of the temple, and as Hezekiah later treated the envoys of Babylon as friends and showed them all his treasures. Often self-love enters into our hearts without our recognizing it. This is particularly true in our worship. Most of us, when we join the church, do so because we feel the desire to serve the Lord; but how easy it is, once we become used to our new position, to think of ourselves as better than those who have not taken the same step, to take our own goodness as a matter of course, making no effort to learn more of the teachings of the church than we already know, going through the forms of worship mechanically, and thinking of our church membership not as an opportunity to serve but as a fact which puts the church organization under a particular obligation to serve us! If we do not recognize and reject this evil in ourselves, we are likely to come into a state where we try to run everything in the church and care more about having our own way than we do about the service of the Lord or the welfare of the church. Whenever this happens, “Judah” has been carried away captive to “Babylon.” In AE 1010 we read: “The love of honor, of rule, and of supereminence is the last state of the church . . . for that love more than all other loves extinguishes the light of heaven and induces the darkness of hell.”

Daniel was a prophet of the captivity. He belonged to the royal family of Judah and was carried away into Babylon among the

earliest of the captives. He was one of several young men—among them the three of our chapter for today—chosen for their mental ability to be brought up in the court of Nebuchadnezzar and trained in all the learning of the Chaldeans. He was noted for his complete faithfulness to the worship of Jehovah, and because of it he was gifted by the Lord with great wisdom and with the power to interpret dreams. He remained in royal favor under Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Darius, and Cyrus, and is thought to have lived to be about ninety years old. The book of Daniel was written partly in Hebrew and partly in Chaldee or Aramaic, a closely allied language, the section from chapter 2, verse 4 through chapter 7 being in Aramaic. There is more narrative in the book of Daniel than in most of the Prophets, the stories of Nebuchadnezzar's image, of the fiery furnace, of the lions' den, and of Belshazzar's feast being incorporated in many books of Bible stories for children. Yet it also contains visions as strange as those in Ezekiel and Revelation, and visions of the future of the church under the form of the fate of Israel and the nations. The book was not included by the ancient Hebrews among the Prophets, but the Lord Himself restored it to its proper place by speaking of "Daniel the prophet" (Matthew 24:15 and Mark 13:14).

The personal history of Daniel and his companions, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, illustrates a very important lesson—the reward of faithfulness and obedience to the Lord in the face of apparently overwhelming difficulties. First they refused to defile themselves with the king's rich food. The food and wine of the king of Babylon picture the evils and falsities which nourish our self-esteem, such ideas as "If you don't put yourself forward, no one else will," and "God helps those who help themselves," in its commonly accepted meaning. The four young men instead ate only "pulse" and drank only water, which picture the simple principles derived from goodness of heart and the truths of the Word. As a result, instead of suffering they became "fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat." It is a fact that those who have the courage to live according

to the teachings of the Lord, putting the Lord and the neighbor before self steadily in their daily life attain a standing and reputation in their communities which no self-seeking person can possibly attain. If we today faithfully obey the Lord's teachings and have the courage to put them to the test, we shall find that His protection and enlightenment are with us throughout our lives.

As Babylon represents the "love of dominion from the love of self," its king represents the principle of self-intelligence which perverts all truth to the service of self. Swedenborg says that Nebuchadnezzar represents "the profanation of truth and its consequent destruction." This is typified in his setting up the golden image to be worshiped. When we begin to exalt human intelligence above revelation, we set up our own judgment as a golden god to be worshiped, and all truth must be bent to agree with the theories which our judgment has adopted.

There is something very striking in the repetitions in our chapter for today. The musical instruments, the various orders of rank of the kingdom, the burning fiery furnace, and even the repetition of the three Chaldean names, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, have a sort of hypnotic influence which makes one think of the reiteration of some current humanistic slogans. The words of the three young men in verses 16 to 18 stand out in sharp contrast. They say in effect: "What is all this mummery to us? We serve the Lord." So with us, if we accept the Word as divine revelation and recognize its simple commands as binding, its great plain affirmations cut through the maze of theory and rationalizing and elaborate terminology which some modern Bible scholars and theologians have woven to the enslavement of the unthinking. Nebuchadnezzar says to us today: "I have set up a god for you, the human intelligence glossed over with the gold of 'service to humanity.' Whenever you feel the impulse to worship—the sound of the musical instruments—recognize human achievement as your god. This is the only thing really praiseworthy. It shows you how to be comfortable, how to get what you want. If you will not march with the crowd, you will have no satisfaction for your natural

desires. They will burn you up.” And to this Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answer: “There is none good but one, that is, God.”

And when they were cast into the furnace, we read: “Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astonished, and said unto his counselors, Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? They answered and said unto the king, True, O king. 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.” Temptations not only have no power to harm the faithful, but the Lord is always close to us in times of temptation. In His life on earth He met and overcame all possible temptations, and it is His power which overcomes in and for us.

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#### From the Writings of Swedenborg

*Apocalypse Explained*, n. 1010: “The love of honor, or rule, and of supereminence is the last state of the church, when falsities are about to fight against truths, because that love is about to rule in the church in its last times, and when that love rules, falsity from evil rules also, and this overcomes truth; for that love more than all other loves extinguishes the light of heaven and induces the darkness of hell . . . That man from that love is in thick darkness as to all things of heaven and the church, consequently in mere falsities, does not appear to the man who is in it, because according to the brilliancy of natural light in them spiritual light is extinguished; but that brilliancy is from a delusive light, for it is a light kindled from a love of glory, thus from the love of self-intelligence; and when that intelligence is seen in heaven it is insanity and folly; therefore when that love rules in the church it is all over with it, for no one has any longer any understanding of truth or any will of good. . . . It is otherwise when uses are made the end, and man does not attribute glory and honor to his own person, but to the uses themselves according to their excellence. Then honor, rule, and supereminence are the means, and are esteemed only to the extent that they serve uses as means . . . Moreover, it has been shown me to the life that that love has devastated the church and adulterated all its goods and truths, not only in the kingdoms of Babylon but in all other kingdoms. For almost everyone at this day when he comes into the spiritual world carries with him out of the natural world the desire to be honored, to rule, and to be supereminent; and there are very few who love uses for the sake of uses, but it is their will that uses should serve, and that honor, which

is not a use, should govern; and when that rules which when separated from use is nothing, there can be no lot or inheritance granted them in the heavens where uses alone rule, since the kingdom of the Lord is a kingdom of uses; and when these rule the Lord rules, since uses are goods, and all good is from the Lord.”

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### Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- J. What became of the people of Judah? *taken to Babylon*
- P. What young prince among the captives wrote a book of the Bible? *Daniel*
- J. What were the names of his three companions? *Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego*
- J. Why did these four young men attract special notice? *refused rich food*
- J. Did their faithfulness to the Lord do them harm? *no*
- J. Who was king of Babylon at the time of our story? *Nebuchadnezzar*
- P. What did Nebuchadnezzar make? *gold image*
- P. What command did he give? *when you hear the music, bow down*
- P. What did Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego do? *refused*
- P. What did Nebuchadnezzar do to them? *threw them in a furnace*
- P. Were they burned? *no*
- P. Who appeared in the fiery furnace with them? *the Lord*
- J. What happened to the men who had cast them into the furnace? *killed*
- J. What order did Nebuchadnezzar afterward give? *no one speak against the Lord*
- I. What does Babylon represent? *love of having one's own way*
- S. What does Nebuchadnezzar represent? *self-praise and pride in our own wisdom*