

Daniel 3:13-30

Introduction

Two weeks ago we saw how King Nebuchadnezzar made Daniel ruler over the whole province of Babylon. Then we saw how Daniel made a request of the king so that he also appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego over the affairs of the province of Babylon. The ironic thing is that these appointments to high positions in Babylon are the result of a dream in which it was revealed that Babylon is destined to be destroyed by the kingdom of God – the very kingdom to which Daniel and his three companions belong.

There's a tension here isn't there? We saw last time that the Bible calls us to a thoroughgoing engagement with the world where we're living in exile – even though this world is destined to be destroyed by that eternal kingdom to which we all belong. And so this same reality is also a constant reminder to us that our living *in* this world must never be the same thing as being *of* this world.

In chapter three, we saw Nebuchadnezzar constructing an image that's composed entirely of gold from head to toe – a massive image ninety feet tall. Set against the backdrop of the image in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, it's obvious what Nebuchadnezzar's doing. He's claiming a kingdom that has no weakness, a kingdom that's followed by no other, a kingdom that's challenged by no one – not even by the God of heaven. Daniel wants us to see the image that *Nebuchadnezzar* "sets up" as that which is diametrically opposed to the eternal kingdom that *God* "sets up." So while on the one hand, we're called to a thoroughgoing engagement with the world in which we live; on the other hand, we're called to see that there's a sense in which this world in which we live and that coming kingdom to which we belong are fundamentally opposed to each other – having nothing whatsoever in common with each other (cf. 2 Cor. 6:14-16). What does this mean practically for us as we live *in* this world?

Daniel 3:2–7 — Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent to gather the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Then the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces gathered for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. And they stood before **the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up**. [SLIDE] And the herald proclaimed aloud, "You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace." Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

The elaborate *list* of officials and the elaborate *list* of musical instruments and the elaborate word for word *repetition* is almost mesmerizing – and I think that's intentional; I think that's the point.

The theme here is uniformity. Everyone's doing it. Everyone's conforming to the same mold. The whole world— "all the peoples, nations, and languages" are bowing down to the image that Nebuchadnezzar set up.

It's against this mesmerizing backdrop of universal conformity that we suddenly have the jarring introduction of three non-conformists – three men who refuse to bow down. Why can't they just fit in and go along with the flow? Why can't they just bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's image *and* still go on worshipping their own God – just like everyone else? After all, they are living in exile *in Babylon* and they have been appointed over the affairs of the province *of Babylon*.

By not bowing down to Nebuchadnezzar's image, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are saying far more than just, "We won't bow down to your image" – though they were saying that (cf. Exod. 20:3-6). They're also saying, "We can't share your values; we can't treat this kingdom of Babylon as though it were ultimate and eternal and God's kingdom were not." "We can be in the world and even have a thoroughgoing engagement with the world, but we cannot be of the world. *Why?* Because we're *looking* for that kingdom before which all other kingdoms will ultimately fall – *including* even yours, O Nebuchadnezzar; including even the kingdom of Babylon."

We ended last time by asking ourselves this question: What are the ways that we've conformed by bowing down to the values and ideals of this world in our hearts? What are the ways that we're living in this world as if it were ultimate and eternal and God's kingdom were not? Are we lovers of pleasure, lovers of money, lovers of stuff, lovers of entertainment, lovers of knowledge, lovers of position and prestige, lovers of relationships? Even as we seek to live in this world, are we willing to be despised and hated as "non-conformists" when we refuse to bow down along with everyone else?

But now we start out this week by asking a different question: Is it really worth it? Is it really worth it to be the ones who go *against* the flow? We especially have to ask this question when we're reminded of the very real threat of the king:

□ Daniel 3:2–7 — The herald proclaimed aloud, "You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. **And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace.**"

That may not be so bad to read about in a story—and especially a story where most of us know the ending, but can we imagine if that was the threat and the punishment hanging over our heads? At what point is it no longer worth it to be the non-conformist in a world where everyone else conforms? We read in verses 13-15:

I. Daniel 3:13–15 — Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought. So they brought these men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, "Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? Now if you are

ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?"

Wouldn't it be so much easier not to be given that second chance? Maybe at first there was at least the hope that no one would report them to the king. It seems that the only reason they *were* reported was because of professional jealousy. There were "certain *Chaldeans*," we're told, who "*maliciously* accused the Jews" (v. 8). Apparently they resented the fact that three foreigners had been appointed over the province of Babylon when these positions could have gone to themselves (v. 12). So if it wasn't for these jealous Chaldeans, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego might never have been brought to the king's attention. But now here they are standing before the king who, the text tells us, is in a "furious rage." I have to say that I think that's pretty scary. And yet for all his rage, the king still gives them a second chance. This isn't mercy. Publicly it looks better for the king if he can convince these Jews to conform; but if they won't conform then the only way for the king to save face will be to have them "immediately... cast into the burning fiery furnace."

At what point is it no longer worth it to be the non-conformist in a world where everyone else conforms? For us as Christians living in America we mainly ask this question as a simple matter of comfort verses discomfort, of pleasure verses self-denial, of "fitting in" versus looking weird. But for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, they're being forced to ask these questions as a matter of life and death. Isn't this convicting to us who find ourselves so tempted to conform and to bow down just for the sake of an easier, more "normal" life?

After issuing his ultimatum, Nebuchadnezzar concludes: "And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands." That's the ultimate question, isn't it? At what point is it no longer worth it to be the non-conformist who refuses to bow down? At precisely the point that there is no God who is able to deliver out of the king's hands. At precisely the point that there is no God who is able to vindicate and reward those who refuse to conform. If there is no God who can deliver out of the king's hands, then we have to admit that there's no reason in the world not to worship the king's gods. Indeed, let's just admit that *not* to worship the king's gods under the circumstances would be the utmost stupidity and even insanity. Nebuchadnezzar understands that if there *did* exist a God able to deliver out of his hands, and *if* this God was the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, then that would change everything.

But there's one big problem here. The assumption of Nebuchadnezzar is that if the God of these Jewish youths is *able* to deliver out of his hands, then this God *will* deliver them out of his hands (Hebrew: "who is the god who *will* deliver you out of my hands?"). Nebuchadnezzar is a pragmatist in his religion who measures everything by the present. He's certainly not a man of faith who lives in the light of any divine promises about the future. So can you see what this means? Nebuchadnezzar is a mercenary. He's motivated in all his "worship" only by desire for self-preservation, self-advancement, and self-glorification. He's motivated in all his "devotion" only by what's in it for him. So what if there was a God who was really and truly able to deliver His servants out of Nebuchadnezzar's hands, but who chose not to? For Nebuchadnezzar that

would be incomprehensible nonsense. That would be an utterly worthless god and even no god at all. But what about for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego? What about for us? What if God, though really and truly able to deliver out of Nebuchadnezzar's hands, was to choose not to? What if God called them to live by faith – trusting and believing His promises to vindicate their faithfulness in that eternal, indestructible kingdom that He will one day set up and that will one day crush all the kingdoms of this world? Is it “worth it,” then, to still be the non-conformist who refuses to bow down? Is it “worth it,” then, even when the immediate result will be death in a burning fiery furnace?

II. Daniel 3:16–18 — Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

Is the God that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego served the same God that we serve? In the end, that's really the question isn't it? It's not, “Would we be as courageous as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego?” but “Who, really, is the God that we serve?” Is He the God who we know beyond a shadow of a doubt is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace? Is He an omnipotent, all-powerful God? And is He also the God who we know beyond a shadow of a doubt will one day deliver us from the burning fiery furnace? Is He an infinitely good and faithful God? And *therefore*, is He the God who, even if He doesn't deliver and vindicate us in this life, is still inherently worthy in and of Himself of our worship and obedience and devotion?

Who, *really*, is the God that we serve? Is it “worth it” to be the non-conformist who steadfastly refuses to bow down to the values and the ideals of this world? Or deep down are we mercenary Christians – “worshiping” and obeying God only so long as it somehow “makes sense” in the here and now? If that's the case, then the god that we serve cannot possibly be the same God that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego served. If that's the case, then the god we serve can't be any better than the gods that Nebuchadnezzar served.

Once again, the question is not how courageous *would* we be, but who, *really*, is the God that we're serving? Is the daily living of our life today the expression of a heart that's even *now* identifying with and answering with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: “If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. *But if not*, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.” Because of who our God is (omnipotent [all-powerful], omniscient [all-knowing and all-wise] and good), Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are willing to live by faith – trusting God's promise to deliver them—whether sooner *or later*—from the burning fiery furnace and to vindicate them eternally in the kingdom that He will one day set up.

Brothers and sisters, is this God that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego served truly the God that we're serving today? Is it *always* “worth it” to you and to me to be the non-conformists who refuse to bow down even when everyone else does?

III. Daniel 3:19–27 — Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury, and the expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated. And he ordered some of the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. Then these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the burning fiery furnace. Because the king’s order was urgent and the furnace overheated, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace. 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.” Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning fiery furnace; he declared, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here!” Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king’s counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men. The hair of their heads was not singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them.

We need to be clear that the Bible presents this *not* just as a fantastic story, but as a sober historical record of an actual historical event (cf. the historical narrative of 1:1-2). Some people try to say that even though this is a “*made-up*” story it’s still meant to encourage God’s people by communicating a theological or a spiritual lesson. In fact, they say, it was “made up” specifically for this purpose. But you can see, can’t you, that if this isn’t a real event in history, then it’s emptied of any power to truly encourage or instruct us at all. What we need to have firmly fixed in our minds is that the worth and value of this story depends entirely on its historical veracity – that it really did happen in space and time, for real. And why shouldn’t this happen if there really is a God who “in the beginning... created the heavens and the earth”? To borrow the thought of the Apostle Paul: Why should it be thought incredible by us that God should quench the power of fire – even a burning fiery furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated? (cf. Acts 26:8)

Yes, we say, we can agree with all this in principle, but isn’t there still something about this story that troubles us deep down? This isn’t usually what God does. In fact, it’s rarely ever what God does. So why should He do it here? Do we sometimes feel that this story is misleading – giving a kind of “false hope” to God’s people? What’s the point of a story like this if we know the chances are almost zero that the outcome would ever be the same for us? Brothers and sisters, the answer to this question is both simple and powerful.

The point of this story is not at all to encourage us that we, too, may be miraculously delivered from death. If you read through the book of Daniel you’ll find that one of the main themes is actually the persecution and suffering of God’s people without any hope of deliverance in this life.

- Daniel 7:21, 25 — As I looked, this horn **made war with the saints and prevailed over them...** He shall speak words against the Most High, and shall **wear out the saints of the Most High... and they shall be given into his hand** for a time, times, and half a time.
- Daniel 8:24 — His power shall be great—but not by his own power; and **he shall cause fearful destruction and shall succeed in what he does, and destroy** mighty men and **the people who are the saints.**
- Daniel 12:7 — I heard the man clothed in linen... he raised his right hand and his left hand toward heaven and swore by him who lives forever that it would be for a time, times, and half a time, and that **when the shattering of the power of the holy people comes to an end** all these things would be finished.
- Daniel 11:33 — The wise among the people shall make many understand, though for some days **they shall stumble by sword and flame, by captivity and plunder.**

No matter how famous the stories of “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and the Fiery Furnace” and “Daniel and the Lion’s Den” may be, the main theme of Daniel is not one of miraculous deliverances from death in this life, but the exact opposite; it’s the theme of God’s people being “given” over in this life to the sword *and flame*(!), to captivity and plunder. Daniel himself understood that this quenching of the power of fire was an exceedingly rare exception to the rule. So then, we ask, *why* does it happen here and what’s it supposed to *mean* for us?

In the Bible miracles are always connected with significant moments in the progress of redemptive history and of redemptive revelation. In other words, the point of miracles isn’t just to amaze us and neither is it just to make people’s lives better. Miracles in the Bible always have a larger redemptive-historical (history of redemption) significance. That’s why we don’t expect to see the miracles today that we read about during the days of Israel’s birth as the Covenant community (in the exodus from Egypt and the wandering in the desert and the entrance into the Promised Land). That’s why we don’t expect to see the miracles today that we read about during the days of Elijah and Elisha. That’s why we don’t expect to see the miracles today that the Bible records during the days of Daniel and his three companions in exile. And that’s why we don’t expect to see the miracles today that we read about during the days of Jesus and the Apostles and the birth of the New Covenant community. All of these periods in history were unique times of redemptive-historical significance. And now the history of redemption has already reached its culmination historically in the coming of Christ and the new creation. We shouldn’t be expecting another outpouring of miracles or even “miracles” in general until that next and final redemptive-historical event which is Christ’s second coming and the resurrection from the dead and the new heavens and the new earth. (This is not to say that God no longer works miraculously or that we cannot pray for the miraculous healing of cancer, etc.)

Are you seeing, now, how we’re to make sense of the miracles in Daniel? Remember that the exile of God’s people is described in the Bible as the *death* of God’s people. So can you see how the exile is an event of massive redemptive-historical significance? If God is to be faithful to His promises, then the exile of God’s people will require nothing less than a resurrection from the dead – the regathering of God’s people in a New Covenant community and ultimately even being physically and bodily raised to life again. That’s the main theme of Daniel: The sovereignty of God *in death and* in resurrection. So while the book of Daniel begins with the theme of death in

exile, it ends with one of the most explicit promises of the resurrection in the entire Old Testament.

- Daniel 12:1–3 — “...*At that time* your people shall be **delivered**, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”

What is the point of this miraculous temporal deliverance of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the power of the fire? It’s not to give us false hope that this will also be our own experience in similar circumstances. The point is rather to fill us—and all of God’s people who’ve ever read this story—with the absolute certainty that the God who delivered Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego *will* also vindicate and deliver us on that final day. And this deliverance that we’re all still waiting for will be no less real and no less “historical” and no less awesome and miraculous (in fact, it will be infinitely more so!) than the one we’ve just read about here in Daniel chapter three. By faith we see that the deliverance of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is the guarantee of our own deliverance in the resurrection and the final regathering of God’s people from exile into that eternal, indestructible kingdom that God sets up.

Conclusion

Is it really “worth it” to be the non-conformist in a world where everyone else conforms? Is it really “worth it” to be the non-conformist who refuses to bow down to the values and ideals of this world – when everyone else is bowing down? The answer to these questions can only be found in the answer to this question: Who, really, is the *God* that we’re serving? Deep down are we mercenary Christians – worshipping “God” only so long as it somehow “makes sense” in the here and now? Or have we come to truly trust in the God who is in and of Himself worthy of our worship and obedience and devotion and who *will* ultimately vindicate and deliver all those who live by faith? Is the daily living of our life right now the expression of a heart that’s even now identifying with and answering with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: “If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. *But if not*, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.” Because of who God is (omnipotent [all-powerful], omniscient [all-knowing and all-wise] and good), are we willing to live by faith – trusting God’s promise to finally, miraculously deliver and vindicate His own? Brothers and sisters, is it *always* “worth it” to you and to me to be the non-conformists who refuse to bow down even when all the world around us does?

Chapter three ends with a picture of the final triumph of God’s people in the kingdom of God. More than that, chapter three ends with the pagan Nebuchadnezzar summing up the main theme and lesson of this story for all of God’s people.

IV. Daniel 3:28–30 — Nebuchadnezzar answered and said, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him,

and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way." Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon.