

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

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Daniel 3 (read vv.1-18) “The Courage of Conviction and Faith”

Intro. I suppose the story of the 3 Hebrews in the burning furnace is one of the most familiar in all of the Word of God. This story not only pulsates with drama, but it is a great story of faith and courage. It is also a great story of deliverance. These three Hebrews learned how to go through the fire, both figuratively and literally.

Now we probably will not literally go through a fire like they did, but we all will face a fiery trial of some kind (1 Peter 4:12). Perhaps you are going through one now. If not, I am sure you will go through one or more at some time in the future. So if you will listen carefully, this story will help prepare you to go through the fire victoriously. The pandemic has been a trial for us all, and I suspect that more difficult trials are yet to come in our country and in our world.

Now I am going to make 3 statements that we can learn from these 3 Hebrew young men which will summarize this story. First of all:

I. WE SHOULD NOT BOW TO UNGODLY DEMANDS

Consider with me the background of what led to their decision. Note:

A. The Construction of the Great Image - The chapter begins with the account of the construction of a great image. We read in v.1, “Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its width six cubits. He set it up in the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon.” We know from archaeology that this king was a great builder. Here we see that he built an image about 90 feet high! That was very tall compared to other structures in the ancient world. Its height was no doubt calculated to impress the worshipers. It must have been quite a sight. The proportions are far too narrow for a normal human figure. So the human image may have been on a pedestal. In the plain of Dura, it would be seen from quite some distance in all directions. Since it was made of gold, imagine how it glistened in the sunlight. That kind of reminds me of the GA capitol building that has a dome of gold. At the time it was built it really stood out among all the buildings in downtown Atlanta.

But why did he build this image? He must have done so for the following reasons:

1. Glorification of the King – There are 7 references in this chapter of that fact that Nebuchadnezzar caused this large idol to be erected (vv.2, 3, 5, 7, 12, 14, 18). No doubt he was the primary one that wanted this image set up. It is quite possible that this image was erected as a result of the human statue in his dream of chapter 2. As we see from 2:38, Nebuchadnezzar was represented by the head of gold. But the king was not satisfied with being only the head. So his image was *all* of gold. Nebuchadnezzar may have regarded the image as representing himself as the embodiment of divine power. In view of his pride, as seen in chapter 4, this is quite possible.

The image also represents the:

2. Deification of Man - This image was in human form. Also, notice the number 6 here (cf. Rev. 13:18). Seven is the complete number. But man always falls short, for six is an incomplete number. So here was man worshiping man. We continue to deify man in a way in our day. Humanism is the modern form of this. Through human government and human scientific

advances, many have been led to believe that we do not need God, and we can solve all of our problems ourselves.

3. Unification – By this time Babylon had become an empire consisting of many nations. So notice in vv. 4 & 7 the bringing together of peoples, nations, and languages to worship the same image. So the worship of the image was intended to be an expression of political and religious solidarity and loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar. Religion was used for political purposes. The king wanted to unify all of the religious devotion of his people. To weld the people together in a common faith is the best way to make them one, however diversified otherwise they may be. And for polytheists, adding one more god is no problem.

We see the world of religion heading in a similar direction. Certain forces are at work to unify religion into a general, politically acceptable form of religion, or shall we say spirituality. And you can be sure that Jesus, as Son of God, will be left out! The U.S. government is already enforcing religious prayers at government locations that exclude praying in Jesus' name. Furthermore, we know from Revelation that the antichrist and his false prophet will use religion to unite the peoples of the world. The antichrist will demand worship from the whole world. But we should understand that there is a difference between union and unity. You can tie two tom cats together, and what you do have? You may have union, but you surely will not have any unity!

After erecting this great golden image, we see in our story:

B. The Dedication of the Image – Whenever a great structure is built, we see from our text that having a dedication ceremony goes all the way back into thousands of years of history.¹ We read in v.2, “And King Nebuchadnezzar sent word to gather together the satraps, the administrators, the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces, to come to the dedication of the image which King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.” Nebuchadnezzar gathered the principal officials of his empire for its dedication. Now when the king says come, you can be sure that all would be present. So they are there by the hundreds, or even thousands, these leaders of the whole empire. There is no explanation for the fact that Daniel himself does not appear in the story. After being promoted as one of the King's high officials (2:49b), he may have been out of the empire on business for the king, or he may have been ill. Now when all the people were gathered together, notice what happened. First, there was:

1. A Minister – Notice in v.4 that “a herald cried aloud” with the message the king had given him. In other words, they had a preacher. Here he is referred to as a herald, who had a strong, loud voice.

2. Musicians – Notice in v.5 that they would “hear the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music.” The Babylonian Begees were on hand. Music is a wonderful gift of God. But instead of being used to promote the worship of the true God, it was being used to promote false religion. This was an improper use of music.

Music is still being used to promote false religion today. Listen, just because a religious service draws a crowd doesn't mean it is of God. Music alone can draw a crowd. Satan knows how to use music for evil, because it can have a powerful influence upon people. He will use music to

¹ This was not just a pagan practice. Numbers 7:11 says, “For the LORD said to Moses, ‘They shall offer their offering, one leader each day, for the dedication of the altar.’” Ezra 6:16 says, “Then the children of Israel, the priests and the Levites and the rest of the descendants of the captivity, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy.” Nehemiah 12:27 says, “Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings and singing, with cymbals and stringed instruments and harps.”

appeal to the flesh, and draw people away from a true worship of God. He knows how to use music to influence people into sin.

Next, we see in our story:

3. A Mandate – In v.6 we read, “and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace.” It’s as if Nebuchadnezzar said, “Oh, by the way, as an aid to worship, there is a hot fire waiting for you if you do not attend and bow to my image.” What an aid to worship! Years ago we would sing the invitation hymn “Almost Persuaded” and a few would come; they played “Almost Cremated” and most everyone fell down to worship! Some of you remember when you were made to come to church as kids.

By the way, the government sure is good about making mandates. Have you noticed that? Governors have issued a number of mandates relating to the coronavirus. There are plenty of federal and state mandates our local schools have to follow. Yet true faith can never be mandated. It is voluntary, from the heart.

This is why the first of the Bill of Rights is that the Federal government shall not make any mandates that interfere with the “free exercise of religion” and the fundamental right to follow your conscience.

So when the music started playing, a whole multitude of people fell down before the image and began to worship. Now that leads to:

C. The Repudiation of the Image – In the crowd, there were 3 who remained standing. They must have stuck out like a sore thumb among that part of the crowd. It reminds me of the times only one stood for the national anthem on a team while everyone else took a knee. Or this picture show everyone saluting Heil Hitler except one. So some of the other officials accused the 3 Hebrews before the king in v.12, “There are certain Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego; these men, O king, have not paid due regard to you. They do not serve your gods or worship the gold image which you have set up.” The Hebrews’ refusal to worship the image was not an act of disloyalty toward the king personally. It was their recognition of a higher authority—they were obedient to their God. These boys had convictions. They were schooled in the 10 commandments, the first 2 of which forbid idolatry (Ex. 20:3-5). What courage! Can you imagine the pressure they felt when they went against the crowd?

Now we see here an important principle: We should not follow the crowd and do wrong. Exodus 23:2 says, “You shall not follow a crowd to do evil....” Rom. 12:2 says, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind....” Have you ever had the courage to go against what everybody else seemed to be doing? Often the world will try to pressure you into doing wrong! They will use various pressure tactics. The world will want you to think like it thinks, and act like it acts. Now, they use cancel culture as a way to pressure you to go along. You can lose your job or get kicked off of social media. In Canada, pastors are being imprisoned because they choose to obey God and gather for worship.

Now when you dare to be different, notice what happened. In v.8 “accused” literally means to eat the pieces of. This connotes slander or malicious accusation which devours the accused piece by piece. But why did they make such a big deal over just 3 out of thousands? Why do they demand absolute conformity? And why does the world pay so much attention to the Christian who does not go along? Why is it that when everyone else is standing around telling dirty jokes, that they are so bothered by the one Christian who doesn’t join in on it?

So we see by their example that we should not bow to the idols of this world. We should not follow the false religions of this world. We should not bow to the mandates that violate our Christian beliefs. We should dare to be different!

Next we see from their examples that:

II. WE SHOULD NOT BEND

The accusation of the Chaldeans had a telling effect upon Nebuchadnezzar, who regarded the disobedience of Shadrach, Meshack, and Abed-nego not only a threat to his political security but also a personal affront. This led him into a tremendous fit of rage. He was getting hotter than the fiery furnace! Many non-Christians get upset when a Christian stands firm, and refuses to go along with the crowd into sin and disloyalty to God. So they will take several steps to try to pressure you into going along. That's what Nebuchadnezzar did. So notice:

A. The Attempt to Bend Them - Nebuchadnezzar felt that everyone had his price. He probably had never run across anyone whom he could not bend. In v.14 we see that the king was amazed that they would resist his authority. Perhaps these three didn't understand the price of disobedience to his command. So he gave them another chance, but this time personally warning them of the consequences. He said, "If you won't bow, I will burn you" (v.15). Many Christians will compromise their convictions if the price is high enough. But some Christians just can't be bought. The world will do whatever it can to bend you into conformity. They may laugh at you, or get ugly with you. They may try to fire you from the job. It is an amazing fact that Nebuchadnezzar adds the challenging question, "Who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands?" (v.15). What a prideful statement! He should have remembered the fact that the God of the Hebrews was superior to the Babylonian gods in interpreting dreams, but he cannot bring himself to believe that the God of the Jews would be able to deliver these three men from his fiery furnace. The fact is that Nebuchadnezzar feels supreme in his power and does not expect any god to interfere.

B. Have Faith to Resist - In v.16 it is evident that they realized that they could not do any good explaining to the king why they could not obey the king in this matter. Their minds were made up, and the king's mind was made up. They knew there could be no compromise on this issue. So in v.17 they gave a great expression of faith which would be a greater witness to the King. I love those words, "God... is able...." He must be some kind of God! Eph. 3:20 says that "God is able to do exceedingly abundantly above what we ask or think." What faith! They stood taller than the image of gold that day.

What would you do in a similar situation? Would you compromise, or rationalize away conformity by saying, "I will bow outwardly, but not inwardly." Or "A brief bow to an idol will enable me to live on and do much good for God." Let's follow the example of these three young men. We can believe that if we will stand for God, God will stand for us, and deliver us from many trials.

Because they had faith, they exemplified another lesson:

C. Resist the Pressure and Obey God – Notice what they said in v.18, "But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up." They did not doubt that God was *able* to deliver them. They only were uncertain concerning God's *will* to deliver them. The expression, "but if not," should be understood as

referring to the deliverance and not to the ability of God. This is a deeper commitment. None of us would bow if we knew for sure that God would deliver us from the fire. But these men would not bow even if it meant burning in the fire. We should not be fair weather Christians, i.e. we will serve God only when things go our way. These Hebrew young men had a commitment to God that nothing would shake. Even if things do not work out well, they would still obey their God [apply to healing]. Job said, "Though He slay me, yet will I serve Him." The common excuses for moral and spiritual compromise are contradicted by the faithfulness of these men. In spite of separation from parents and of the corrupting influences of Babylonian religion, political pressure, and immorality, they did not waver in their hour of testing.

So we see from their example that we shouldn't bow, and we shouldn't bend. Now because they did neither:

III. THEY WOULDN'T BURN

Instead of giving Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego another opportunity to refuse to bow before the image as he had originally proposed, he now immediately commands that they be burned. He foolishly commands that the fire be 7 times hotter. This actually would have made their suffering even briefer. If he had wanted to add to their pain, he would have *lowered* the temperature of the furnace, and *slow* cook them! And then in v.22 we see that some of his best men died throwing them into that exceedingly hot fire. Indeed, when a man gets full of fury or any other emotion, he gets full of folly. So let that be a lesson to us, and when you get angry, don't say or do anything until you cool down. Otherwise, you will say or do something that you will later regret.

Now there are three lessons to be learned from this experience. When you go through the fire, be attentive to see what God wants to teach you through that experience, so that you may grow. So notice these 3 lessons that these Hebrew young men learned:

A. The Lesson of Persecution - All believers must face this if you live godly. 1 Pet. 4:12 says, "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you." Peter says it should be expected. When you stand for God, you can expect to be persecuted. In fact, 2 Tim. 3:12 says, "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution." Also, persecution can reveal what kind of a Christian you really are. But when you are persecuted, you also need to learn:

B. The Lesson of Preservation – Often, God will protect and preserve you. In vv.20-23 we read, "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." As soon as these three were thrown into the furnace, the king must have thought, "Well, that should take care of them!" And through some opening he was expecting to see and hear the men crying out in pain and quickly die. But after a few moments, the king sees an amazing sight. In vv.24-25 we read, "Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished; and he rose in haste and spoke, saying to his counselors, 'Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?' They answered and said to the king, 'True, O king.' 'Look!' he answered, 'I see

four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.” Not only were the 3 still alive, but there was another person in the fire with them. He had the impression that “the form of the fourth is like the Son of God” or “a son of the gods.” Nebuchadnezzar did not understand it, but I believe the fourth person was Jesus Christ!

So I think I know what happened. Everyone else said of them, “They are fools.” But Jesus said, “I don’t think so” and He went with them into the fire and protected them. The only thing the fire burned was the bonds that bound them. Now they were free. So it is with us. When God puts us through the fire, God only wants to burn away what binds us. God sometimes uses a fiery test to liberate you. If you stand for God, God will stand for you.

Notice that God did not protect them *from* the fire; He protected them in the *midst* of the fire. 3 went into the fire, and 3 came out. So Jesus is still there when He needs to be. He will be there for you as well. Isa. 43:2 says, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, Nor shall the flame scorch you.” Since Isaiah wrote those words about 200 years earlier, don’t you think these 3 knew that promise of God? God never promised to keep troubles away. But He *has* promised to help us overcome our troubles, so that we are better off having experienced His presence and grace. My friend, He is with you and me today as we go through our trials. He promises never to leave or forsake His own (cf. John 10:27-28; 17:15). If God kept troubles away, you would miss the opportunity to experience His power and presence in your life. I have learned that if we cling to God and have faith in God, when the hour of trial comes God will give us grace to overcome it or at least to bear it. I have read that the martyrs who faced the fire at the stake, they were so given to God that when they were burning, they did not feel the pain. It is in times of trial that we can experience the presence and power of God the most.

C. The Lesson of Promotion – After it was all over, we read in v.30, “Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed–Nego in the province of Babylon.” The way to promotion is through the fire. If you want to be really used of God, you have to be prepared to go through the fire. There is no exaltation without struggle. There is no victory without a battle.

I have been blessed with a good life. But I have gone through several major trials in my life. They were not pleasant at the time, but as a look back, not one of them ultimately hurt me, and instead, only enriched my spiritual life in the long run. Have you learned the lesson of promotion?

Conclusion: When the silver smith sees his image in the hot, purified silver, then he takes it from the fire. Have you reach the point in your Christian life when God sees the image of His Son in you? There are some things in our lives that need to be burned out to make us more like Jesus.

If you are not yet a true born again believer in Jesus Christ, then I want you to know that it is better to follow God now, though a temporary fire awaits you, than to reject Christ and burn in the fires of hell forever. Why not be saved tonight?

Sources: W. A. Criswell, *Expository Sermons on the Book of Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2021; J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 2 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon on this text); John F. Walvoord, *Daniel The Key to Prophetic Revelation* (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute, 1971); Leon Wood, *A Commentary on Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), vv.1-7 only. Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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