

Idolatry's Demands

Daniel 3:1-15

The shift from Daniel 2 to 3 is one of jumping out of the frying pan into the fire.

We are not sure when after the dream of Daniel 2 this event took place. We don't know why the king did this evil thing – perhaps to advance his own power and name. We cannot pinpoint exactly where the Plain of Dura is – the most likely spot being 16 miles southwest of Babylon.

But we do know that this all took place a long, long time ago, and in a place far, far way from us. Aren't you glad we don't have power hungry rulers in our modern time? HA!

Our forms of idolatry have grown more sophisticated for sure. But not entirely. Just 80 years ago Stalin had a man arrested for being the first to sit down during an ovation to himself. Just 70 years ago Eleanor Roosevelt toured the labor camps of the Gulag and praised them as a humane institution for curing criminals. Who knows the number massacred for not bowing down to the state in China, Cambodia, Vietnam or North Korea? How many are on death row right now for their refusal to bow the knee to Kim Jung-un?

But idolatry is more seductive in freer cultures like ours. They are called idols of the heart in Ezekiel 14:4, 7. And their names are legion.

A book was written just over 30 years ago called “Idols of Destruction,” where the author segregated the various houses of worship into idols of history (man's achievements in the past), idols of

humanity (social idols of status), idols of mammon (producing wealth, worshipping the economy), idols of nature (materialism and worship of science and technology), idols of power (state worship, as in Babylon), Idols of Religion (Man-made, man-centered religion), and we can add idols of education (bowing down to the image of knowledge). The Apostle John had good reason to close his first Letter with – “beware of idols.”

We will be looking only at the first of three messages in Daniel 3 – “Idolatry’s Demands” in 1-15. Next week, consider the stand of the three Hebrews, with “Idolatry’s Denial”. Lastly, we will come to the wonderful rescue by the Son of God in the furnace, with the “Idol Deniers Delivered”.

To begin, we are within bounds to find a connection between the king’s dream of his being the head of gold head, to the gold going to his head and making this gold-plated statue.

It is more likely that it is an idol of his god, Nebu, than of himself. This would have been what’s called an “obelisk” – standing 90 feet tall, and 9 feet wide – a pretty weird proportion if it were a statue of a man. But what is unquestionable are the demands of idolatry upon the believers.

We follow the decision to make the image, with the dedication ceremony in 1-3; followed by the decree for all to bow to it – 4-7; then, the dangerous disobedience of the three Jewish administrators, who refuse to bow down, in 8-12; concluded by the demand of the king in 13-15.

The first thing to recognize are the pressures that are here. This is compulsive idolatry – worship, bow down, or die. Here is the pressure of leadership caving in, as all these officers obey the command to bow before the image. The text repeats their actions to get across the universality of the false worship. Nobody resisted. The title of the king is repeated 6 times in 7 verses for emphasis. So here is the influence of authority in our lives – whether by the state or by example in parents, in teachers, in the work place; all of it is powerful.

2nd – the joining of all these representatives together, in one, supreme act of humility before the false god. Again, pressures of conformity seek to throw us in its mold.

Add 3rd this symphony of musical instruments – again, mentioned repeatedly, to bring pressure upon all to bow that knee and fall down.

Then 4th – the malice of those who superintend this festivity of idolatry. Verse 8 introduces a special class of men, the Chaldeans, no doubt put out that Jews had been given authority in the realm. The last lines of verse 12 are emphatic and intentionally personal to the king: “your gods they will not serve, and the image of gold they will not worship”. Their maliciousness drips with blood.

In the 8th verse, they ate the pieces of the Jews – that is, they devoured their flesh. What does that mean? We have a word in English similar to it – “backbiting.” Not literally, but it is a word picture, graphically telling us better than other words what we are doing.

Lastly, the obvious threat of death is immanent; and not just any death, but to be cast live into the fire! This is cruelty, of the highest order.

EJ Young draws attention to Babylonian wickedness in Jeremiah 29:

²² 'Because of them a curse will be used by all the exiles from Judah who are in Babylon, saying, "May the LORD make you like Zedekiah and like Ahab, whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire, (Jer 29:22)

As late as the 1600's – travelers in this area observed two great furnaces kept afire for a month at a time, used to consume those who overcharged for food! This is the fearful intimidation placed over the believer.

But there is fire-proof suit against such temptations and threats, which begin our second point – clues in this text that point to the internal vanity, emptiness, futility of idol-worship.

Let us not forget the promise of chapter 2, that however great the statue of gold and other metals are, it is temporal in nature, and destined to be crushed as chaff, and blow away. That's the first thing we see here.

Secondly, the fact that this god is made, tells the tale. Falling down before a dead, dumb idol is contrary to reason.

I believe it was Calvin who outlined the history of idolatry – or the evolution of image worship. It begins with the precious metals – what worth can be mined out of the bowels of the earth are made into gods. We have something of that here. Then it is on to heavenly bodies – sun, moon, stars are adored. But these have no life. So something higher is sought – creeping things – snakes, lizards, cats – favorites in Egypt. And some go higher still – to worship higher animal forms – dogs, lions, horses. Then there is a mixture with human forms, as you see in the grotesque images of Greece and Hinduism. Men with

elephant or bull heads, for instance. At last man is deified – with various elements: intellect, work, passion, pleasure.

Davis calls attention here to the four-fold repetition of the orchestra having an element of folly in it. The splendor is turned by the author into noise, and the dignity of the moment is coated with derision. These serve to put false gods and false worship in its proper perspective.

See how the lie of such sin is brought out. Perhaps the words of Isaiah proved helpful, as they were reminded of these lines:

¹⁹ No one recalls, nor is there knowledge or understanding to say, "I have burned half of it in the fire and also have baked bread over its coals. I roast meat and eat *it*. Then I make the rest of it into an abomination, I fall down before a block of wood!" ²⁰ He feeds on ashes; a deceived heart has turned him aside. And he cannot deliver himself, nor say, "Is there not a lie in my right hand?" (Isa 44:19-20)

But beloved, we have not the best defense if our response to false gods is purely negative. So we want to conclude this point with the golden breastplate against all golden idolatry. What is that? It is that the Lord alone is worthy of worship. Him you shall worship alone.

Bring your gods to the foot of the 1st and 2nd commandments! There we see how the true God is incomparable, and the folly and baseness of groveling before the gods of man's hands, with foolish demands, is shown for what it is.

Look at the sickening worship of the Hindu; how does that compare with Christian light and life, of goodness and holiness and grace? If it

is true that those who worship idols become like them – blind, deaf, dumb, lifeless – then true worship is enlivening, eye-opening, ear-opening, loosening the tongue because it loosens the heart!

Fill your heart with the true God, with the Father’s love and promise; with the Son’s grace and kingdom; with the Spirit’s joy and peace – and what room have you for other gods?

There is a story of a man who sought peace in his life from Buddhism. The priest gave several tasks to perform, and when these failed, he sent him on several long pilgrimages, to make great sacrifices. When these too came up short, he was told to put rocks in his shoes, and walk to a distant shrine, and there he would find peace. Surprisingly he didn’t. But on the way back, he came across a simple man teaching a group of people under a tree near the road, telling them of heavenly peace through One who died to take away what disturbs all peace – our sins. And he found peace in the cross.

The cross is the only spot on earth where God, heaven, grace, life, truth, hope, and worship – genuine worship, is found. In fact, so worthy and glorious is the message of the gospel, that men, women and children have laid down their lives to keep hold of what they could never lose for eternity.

You, believer, have something so great to live for; you have something so wonderful, even to die for. And so did these Hebrew children.

We will have to leave them here today threatened with death – “do this or die” – and await their wonderful denial of idolatry for next time.

But you have such greater freedoms, to make the Savior known to a lost and perishing world. Lift high the cross and proclaim Him Lord of all. Amen.