

*James Knox Polk was elected as the 11<sup>th</sup> president of the United States in 1844. During Polk's four years of service, it is said of his accomplishments, that of all American presidents, only George Washington had a stronger record of success while in office.*

*Polk's wife, the former Sarah Childress, became the first presidential wife to serve as her husband's secretary. Sarah was a very strict religious woman, and she banned dancing, cardplaying, and all alcoholic drinks from the White House. Something else also perturbed her. President Polk was five feet six inches tall, and he would often enter a room full of dignitaries, perhaps even at the White House, and go unnoticed for several minutes until someone would say, "The president is here."*

*In an effort to solve this problem of dishonor and disrespect, Sarah requested a song be played each time the president entered the room in order to announce his presence. Someone chose what we now call "Hail to the Chief." Since the days of Polk, it has announced the presence of every president to call the people's attention to him.*

We are continuing in our series through the Ten Commandments. Last week we looked at the first Commandment which tells us *who* we are to worship, and this morning we are looking at the second Commandment which tells us *how* we are to worship. Now to begin this morning, I thought I would introduce this Commandment with a well-known story, so if you have your Bible, turn to **Daniel 3**. This should be a familiar story to you, but I still need to set it up.

The Babylonians attacked Jerusalem in September 605 B.C., and it was on this occasion that the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar ordered that the best and the brightest of Judah, the royalty, the "cream of the crop" be taken back to Babylon. Daniel and his three teenage friends were among those who were kidnapped, presumably so that the Babylonians could take advantage of their influence and skills and talents and train them for future leadership positions.

Sometime later, Nebuchadnezzar made an image that was 90 feet high and 9 feet wide, making it really tall and really thin. I'm not sure if it was something like the Washington Monument or a really distorted statue of himself – no one really knows, but it must have been an awesome sight because of its size and because it was made of gold. It was set up a few miles south of Babylon, and Nebuchadnezzar summoned all the rulers and the officials, likely thousands of people, to attend a ceremony to dedicate the image and to swear their allegiance to

him, but for whatever reason, Daniel was not there. At this ceremony, it was proclaimed that when the band played, all the people were to fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Since no god was mentioned that was associated with the image, and they worshipped many false gods – it would appear that Nebuchadnezzar wanted to start something new to unify the people where he was the religious head. Now at this ceremony, it was also clearly explained, that if anyone did not fall down and worship the image, the penalty was sudden death – specifically, they would be cast in a furnace of blazing fire.

Well, the band played and on cue, thousands of people fell to the ground like they were told to do, everyone bowed down to the image except for three Jewish young men – the friends of Daniel – Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego. They alone were left standing among the thousands in attendance. Surely, these three stood out for standing up, and it was reported to the king.

So, let's pick up the story at **verse 13**.

**<sup>13</sup> Then Nebuchadnezzar in rage and anger gave orders to bring Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego; then these men were brought before the king.**

**<sup>14</sup> Nebuchadnezzar responded and said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? <sup>15</sup> Now if you are ready, at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery and bagpipe and all kinds of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, very well. But if you do not worship, you will immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire; and what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?"**

The king was told about the disobedience of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, and he seems to have taken aback that these three had refused to bow. So, the king explains his rule again just in case they did not understand it the first time, and he gives them another chance to fall in line – essentially, it's bow or burn – adding there is no god who can deliver them out of his hands. In that statement, Nebuchadnezzar is placing himself above all gods, saying in a sense "*I am more powerful than any other god, so worship me and my image.*" This sounds like something out of **Revelation 13** that will happen in the future, **doesn't it?**

Well, these three young men have something to say to the king. Look at **verse 16**.

**<sup>16</sup> Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego replied to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. <sup>17</sup> If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. <sup>18</sup> But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”**

Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego make no attempt to defend themselves or give excuses, instead they respectfully say that their God can deliver them from the fire, but even if He chooses not to, they would still honor Him. They had no doubt in God’s ability to deliver them, but they also understood the outcome was totally in God’s hands. Whatever God did or did not do was up to Him for they understood that God is sovereign, He has a purpose for what He does and does not do, and His ways are not their ways.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego stood their ground, and they refused to take advantage of this second chance to bow down offered by the king. Well, Nebuchadnezzar was already furious with them, but now he completely loses his mind. Look at what happens beginning with **verse 19**.

**<sup>19</sup> Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with wrath, and his facial expression was altered toward Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego. He answered by giving orders to heat the furnace seven times more than it was usually heated. <sup>20</sup> He commanded certain valiant warriors who were in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego in order to cast them into the furnace of blazing fire. <sup>21</sup> Then these men were tied up in their trousers, their coats, their caps and their other clothes, and were cast into the midst of the furnace of blazing fire. <sup>22</sup> For this reason, because the king’s command was urgent and the furnace had been made extremely hot, the flame of the fire slew those men who carried up Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego. <sup>23</sup> But these three men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, fell into the midst of the furnace of blazing fire still tied up.**

This is pretty much self-explanatory. Out of rage, orders were given to increase the heat in the furnace. Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego were tied up, and they were tossed into the fiery furnace by soldiers. We are told the furnace was so hot, that the soldiers who were standing by it after tossing the three into it were killed by the intense heat. **So, that should be the end of the story, right?** If those outside the furnace died, then surely the three inside the furnace died. Well, it’s not the end, in fact, it’s just getting started. Let’s continue beginning with **verse 24**.

<sup>24</sup> Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astounded and stood up in haste; he said to his high officials, **“Was it not three men we cast bound into the midst of the fire?”** They replied to the king, **“Certainly, O king.”** <sup>25</sup> He said, **“Look! I see four men loosed and walking about in the midst of the fire without harm, and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods!”** <sup>26</sup> Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the furnace of blazing fire; he responded and said, **“Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, come out, you servants of the Most High God, and come here!”** Then Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego came out of the midst of the fire. <sup>27</sup> The satraps, the prefects, the governors and the king’s high officials gathered around and saw in regard to these men that the fire had no effect on the bodies of these men nor was the hair of their head singed, nor were their trousers damaged, nor had the smell of fire even come upon them.

That must have been something to see. Everyone expected Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego to be engulfed in flames, burned to a cinder like charcoal, but here they are walking around and the only thing burned up by the fire were the bonds they were tied up with and the soldiers who tied them up. Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego are doing well, they’re just out for a stroll, walking in the fire – and oh, they have company – a fourth person has joined them in the fire.

We are not told who this fourth person is; although, Nebuchadnezzar describes him **“like a son of the gods.”** From this passage, the identity of this fourth person can’t be determined; however, some suggest this could be an angel and others believe this is a preincarnate appearance of Jesus. There are several times in the Old Testament where it is believed Jesus appeared – but whoever it was, whether Jesus or an angel – we do know this for sure – there was another in the fire. They were not alone.

<sup>28</sup> Nebuchadnezzar responded and said, **“Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, who has sent His angel and delivered His servants who put their trust in Him, violating the king’s command, and yielded up their bodies so as not to serve or worship any god except their own God.** <sup>29</sup> **Therefore I make a decree that any people, nation or tongue that speaks anything offensive against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego shall be torn limb from limb and their houses reduced to a rubbish heap, inasmuch as there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way.”** <sup>30</sup> Then the king caused Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego to prosper in the province of Babylon.

I love that story – a story that likely served as a reminder to God’s people who were in captivity in Babylon for 70 years that God may not rescue them *from* the fire, but He can rescue them *in* the fire. God is still faithful to His people even in their captivity, and He is able to deliver those who put their trust in Him – and the only reason we have this story is because three young Jewish men honored their God – the One True God. They did not fall to the ground and worship the image because everyone else was doing it. They didn’t compromise and bow down intending to somehow rationalize or justify their behavior, they didn’t look for an excuse or a loophole to avoid the fire, instead they knew God’s will, they knew God’s moral standards given in the Ten Commandments, and they set their hearts on obeying God rather than Nebuchadnezzar.

Last week we looked at the first of the Ten Commandments, where God told His people, **“You shall have no other gods before Me.”** In other words, *“You shall have no other gods in My face, none beside Me, none after Me, and none except for Me,”* and that surely applies to our story about Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, but so does the second Commandment. So, if you have your Bible, turn to **Exodus 20:4-6**.

As a reminder, God is speaking to all the Israelites who are standing at the foot of Mount Sinai, and God tells His people beginning with **verse 4**,

**<sup>4</sup>“You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. <sup>5</sup>You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, <sup>6</sup>but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.**

This second Commandment speaks about idolatry, ironically one of the sins that led to the captivity of God’s people in Babylon in the first place. Now, before we can understand what idolatry is, I think we first have to define what an **idol** is. The dictionary defines an idol as *“an image or a material object representing a deity to which religious worship is addressed.”* I think we have all seen movies and documentaries and pictures where people are worshipping some sort of religious object like a statute or a shrine, and for the most part, we might feel pretty good about ourselves, for none of us would ever think of bowing down to worship a piece of carved wood or stone. But that’s not the only definition given in the dictionary. Another part reads that an idol is *“any person or thing regarded with adoration and devotion.”* That hits a little closer to home because now we are

talking about matters of the heart, and our hearts can worship just about anything we value. So then, at its core, an idol is anything we value that takes our devotion from God. An idol is a substitute, a replacement that steals our hearts away from God.

The second Commandment forbids idolatry – the worship of anything other than God and prohibits the creation of any man-made image that might lead us to bow down, even in our hearts, to worship and serve it. This can be applied to us in a couple of ways. First, this speaks to the worship of false gods and their idols and secondly, it speaks to the worship of the right God in the wrong way, and in that context, some take this command as prohibiting any kind of image, such as a painting of Jesus or a picture of a dove to represent the Holy Spirit, or any other symbols like wearing a cross claiming it is idolatry – but that's not what God is saying here.

This has nothing to do with artistic expression, rather it's about worship. It's about making an image that will be worshipped. For example, we have a wooden cross right over there. Is that an idol? Are we engaged in idolatry? If we worship the cross, then it is idolatry, but if understand it's not about the cross, rather we worship the Savior who had hung on the cross, then it is not idolatry. Here's my Bible. If I worship a Bible, and there are people who do, it is idolatry, but if I worship the God the Bible speaks about – it is not. Do you see how careful we must be even with Christian objects? Just as Jesus has to be the object of our faith, He also has to be the object of our worship, and there can be absolutely no substitutes.

The Apostle Paul had something to say about this as well. In **Romans 1**, beginning with **verse 18**, he said,

*<sup>18</sup> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,*

*<sup>19</sup> because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. <sup>20</sup> For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. <sup>21</sup> For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.*

*<sup>22</sup> Professing to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.*

**What is Paul saying here?** If people will not worship God, they will find or make something else to worship. Here, they turned their backs on the One True God – their Creator, and have made idols of worship according to their own liking. In other words, they create counterfeit gods – substitutes – things they devote their loyalty to, most of their time to, most of their effort to, most of their money to, things they think they can control, things that allow them to do whatever they want to do, but that does not last – for in time, their counterfeit gods control them since they feel like they must have them in order to function and for life to be meaningful. In time, it's not that you have them, but they will have you.

God knows this about us, He knows where idolatry leads, and that's why we are told that our God is a **jealous God**. The Hebrew term used here for **jealous** is "*gan-na*" which is only used in reference to God and it expresses intense emotion and might be better translated as *extreme zeal or passion* where God refuses to share His people with any rival. God is jealous not in the sense of being resentful and envious as we can be, but jealous in that He wants to be in an exclusive relationship with us. It's not that God is not jealous *of* us, rather He is jealous *for* us, and I think we can understand this.

A husband or a wife does not want a rival of another man or woman in their marriage – for that is adultery, and likewise, we commit spiritual adultery against God when we worship someone else or something else.

In our passage in **Exodus 20:5-6**, God tells His people that He will **visit the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.**

**Okay, what does that mean?** This is one of those passages where we have to compare Scripture with Scripture. In **Deuteronomy 24:16**, we read,

***“Fathers shall not be put to death for their sons, nor shall sons be put to death for their fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin.”***

We are told here that God does not punish people directly for the sins of their ancestors, so there appears to be a contradiction of sort – but, if you look closer you will see it is not. The important words in **Exodus 20:5** is, **“of those who hate Me.”** If the descendants love and obey God, they will not have the iniquity of the fathers visited on them – instead they will receive God's lovingkindness and mercy. On the other hand, parents can create a cycle of hatred toward God, and if

their children and the grandchildren walk in the steps of their parents in hating God, they too will be punished like their parents.

So, let's tie this all up. Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego surrendered their bodies to Nebuchadnezzar and to his fiery furnace – but never their hearts. Their hearts were devoted to their God – the One True God, and they refused to bow down to worship another. They were solely devoted to the Lord.

*John Kenneth Gailbraith, in his autobiography, "A Life in Our Times," illustrates the devotion of Emily Gloria Wilson, his family's housekeeper. It had been an exhausting day, and he asked Emily to hold all telephone calls while he took a nap. Shortly thereafter the phone rang. President Lyndon Johnson was calling from the White House. He said, "Get me Ken Gailbraith. This is Lyndon Johnson." She replied, "He's sleeping, Mr. President. He said not to disturb him." "Well, wake him up. I want to talk to him." "No, Mr. President, I can't do that. I work for him, not you."*

*When Galbraith called the President later, he could scarcely believe what the President said: "Tell that woman I want her here in the White House!"*

The President was impressed with her devotion to her boss. In the same way, we are to be devoted to God. Our worship and devotion belong to Him and Him alone. No replacements, no substitutes, and no rivals.

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