

When The Heat Is On

SERIES: DANIEL: LIVING BY FAITH IN A FAITHLESS WORLD

We come this morning to one of the most familiar and beloved stories in all the Bible. It's the story of how three young Hebrew men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, go into the blazing furnace and by a miracle of God's protection, come out unharmed. While the story is unforgettable, the names can be a stumbling block.

A young man was to give his first sermon one Sunday and he wanted to use this story as an illustration. As we was preparing, he found that he was having trouble remembering and pronouncing the names of these three boys, so he wrote them on a card and put them in the inside pocket of his suit coat. When the time came for him to tell the story he was on a roll, and he pulled out the card and said, "Now you remember the names of the three Hebrew boys - Hart, Shaffner & Marx!"

But the hardest thing about this story is not the names, it's the message. Don't let the familiarity of this story become a barrier to experiencing its hard edge. It's a story about courageous and uncompromising commitment to God at what could have been the highest cost. These three young men trusted God, choosing to go into the blazing furnace rather than bow down at the feet of an idol. We can't help but ask ourselves, would we do the same? And if we would, what could we expect from God? What will God do for those who chose to put their trust in him?

We last left Daniel as he stood before King Nebuchadnezzar and told him the meaning of his bad dream. When the king heard Daniel's interpretation he bowed down before Daniel, called his God "the God of gods and the Lord of kings," and promoted Daniel to be his right hand man. Daniel, in turn, requested that his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, themselves get a promotion, and so they became chief administrators in the province of Babylon. Daniel will not forget his friends who prayed for him. Daniel is a team player.

As we come to chapter three, if I had a camera and was filming this story, I would focus the camera on these three friends of Daniel. In chapter three, Daniel is curiously absent, while his three friends come center stage. In this story, they are what I would call the idol busters. Before we focus in on the idol busters, I want our camera to scan the background of this stage and focus in on three other things: the idol, the idol maker, and the idol lovers.

THE IDOL

"Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, the height of which was sixty cubits and its width six cubits; he set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon." (v. 1)

Let's focus first on the idol. Notice this was an impressive idol. It was impressive in that it was enormous in size. Imagine this thing, erected out there on this desert plain, 90 feet tall, but seeming even taller because it was just 9 feet wide. My nephew attends Biola University, a Christian college down in Southern California. On one of their tallest buildings, they have a kind of giant mural of Jesus holding an open Bible. It extends from the top of the building to the bottom. It's probably just 40 feet, but it's

quite impressive. This statue was even bigger. What made it even more impressive was that it was made of gold. This thing cost the taxpayers some serious money. Whether it was solid gold or just overlaid with gold, this is pretty impressive stuff.

Another thing to notice about the idol is that it was inclusive. In v. 7 we read that Nebuchadnezzar wants "all the peoples, nations, and every kind of language to fall down and worship the image." Nebuchadnezzar was king over a pluralistic society much like our own. His kingdom was a great mixture of ethnic groups and religions. He wasn't necessarily asking everyone to drop their own religion or gods. He knew that policy would never fly. Instead, he was happy to allow people to look at this image and see in it whatever they wanted to see. More than anything, it was symbolic of their commitment to Babylon and to her king. Nebuchadnezzar recognized how important it was, in the midst of such diversity, to have a kind of political and religious solidarity. "You can define god however you like, but let's all unite under this one great symbol."

THE IDOL MAKER

Secondly, let's focus our camera for a moment on the idol maker - king Nebuchadnezzar. On the one hand, we have a hard time reconciling his actions here with where we left him in chapter 2. After witnessing the power of God through Daniel, this guy had a genuine religious experience. He was deeply stirred, so much so that he was willing to bow before a nobody like Daniel and acknowledge that his God was superior to all other gods. But Nebuchadnezzar is the prototype of a man who has a religious experience, and for a while he would seem to be different, but in the long run he's back to his old ways. It's not enough to have a religious experience, even if it's genuine. It's not enough to sit in church and get a good feeling when the music starts and everyone begins to sing. You can have a religious experience but never really surrender your will to God. You can have a religious experience but stay in the driver's seat of your life. You're glad that God would be along for the ride, as long as he doesn't try to take over! This was the case with Nebuchadnezzar.

On the other hand, his action makes perfect sense. In chapter two he had a dream about a huge statue. Its head was made of gold and Daniel said that Nebuchadnezzar was that head because God had given him power and strength and glory to rule over man and beast. Nebuchadnezzar's thinking, "If the head was made of gold, and I'm the head, why not make the whole thing gold? It will be far more sturdy!" He forgot the part about his kingdom being succeeded by four other kingdoms. Nebuchadnezzar says, "Why don't I rewrite history? I'm not just the head, I'm the whole statue!" And so v. 2 tells us, after he made this image of gold and set it up in the plains of Dura, he said, "Let's all get together and have a big party. We'll invite all the important people in my kingdom. It will be the cultural event

of the decade.” So in v. 3 we see that they all gathered together.

Nebuchadnezzar's methods are full of drama. Verse 5 tells us he's got an orchestra. The herald says, “When the music begins we'll all bow down at the same time and worship this wonderful image of gold.” Nebuchadnezzar's trying to charm these people into conformity and what better way to do that than some good music? Music is powerful, isn't it? It can stir feelings and evoke responses that are powerful and deep. Nebuchadnezzar knew that. So he's got his orchestra on the one hand, but then v. 6 says he has this blazing furnace for those who won't bow down: “If I can't charm them into conformity, I will scare them into it.” Of course, he never expected to have to use the furnace. No one would risk being dropped in there. It's all just for effect.

THE IDOL LOVERS

We've seen the idol and the idol maker; let's focus for just one moment on the idol lovers. Verse 3 says after they received the invitations, they assembled and “stood before the idol.” It's kind of a pathetic scene, isn't it? I mean, here they are standing out there in the desert, looking at this enormous image. I can see them whispering to each other, “Does it DO something? Does it talk? Does it move around like a giant wind up toy? It's kind of gaudy, isn't it?” And then they heard the plan about the music and the furnace and they started to get the picture. “The king wants us all to be one. We can do that.” The orchestra began and they all hit the deck. It's really a pathetic scene.

We who have been tracking this story can't help but think of Daniel and his friends and however many other Jews were in the crowd that day. What did they think about this whole scene? Certainly in the back of their minds is a recollection of the Ten Commandments: “**You shall not make for yourself an idol...You shall not bow down to them or worship them...**” (Ex. 20:4, 5). But perhaps many of them had a more pragmatic side: “This is really just a political thing. We can bow down and still worship only our own God. After all, he knows our hearts. We're in Babylon now. We have to be willing to bend a bit. We have to go along to get along. Let's not do anything stupid.”

We might ask ourselves where we might fall on this one. Would we take the strict view - “you shall not bow down to them...” means you shall not bow down to them, period? Would our practical side win out? “It's no big deal. God knows our hearts. He sent us here. We might as well make the most of it.” But, of course, we have no statues. We have no kings like Nebuchadnezzar telling us to bow or burn. We have no blazing furnaces. But, do we not still live in a world full of idols? John Calvin called the human mind a “factory of idols,” and there is plenty in our society for our minds to feed upon. An idol is anything of ultimate concern in our lives. That means that whatever we are most concerned about, whatever we think the most about, whatever we worry the most about, whatever we find ourselves ordering our lives around, at least has the potential of becoming an idol for us. It's a fine line, but a relationship can be an idol: a child, a husband, a girl friend, a parent. A job can be an idol: your success, your reputation, your security. A house can be an idol. A ministry can be an idol. A sport can become an idol. Pleasure can be an idol. The list is vast, and the line is thinly drawn, which is why the danger

is so real. I think our battle with idolatry is greater than it was for these Jews because it's so much more subtle. It's not a golden statue we're prone to worship, it's a golden parachute. When does a good thing become an idol? It becomes an idol when you can't let go of it. It becomes an idol when you won't let go of it even though you know you think more about it than you do about God.

THE IDOL BUSTERS

A. Their quiet non-compliance: Now let's focus our camera center stage. We don't know where Daniel is, but we do know that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were conspicuous for their quiet non-compliance to the king's plan. I think they had spoken together. I think they knew what they would do if it came to this. They didn't make a lot of noise about it, they didn't try to organize a resistance movement, they didn't get a petition going, but their quiet refusal to bow was noticed by more than one of Nebuchadnezzar's men. Look at vv. 8-12,

“For this reason at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and brought charges against the Jews. They responded and said to Nebuchadnezzar the king: ‘O king, live forever! You yourself, O king, have made a decree that every man who hears the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, and bagpipe, and all kinds of music, is to fall down and worship the golden image. But whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire. There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the administration of the province of Babylon, namely Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men, O king, have disregarded you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up.’”

Notice how they appeal to the king's vanity. “YOU, O king, have made a decree...these men, O king, have disregarded YOU...they do not serve YOUR gods or worship the golden image which YOU have set up.” Notice also their motive becomes clear in v. 12, “There are certain Jews you have set over the administration of Babylon.” These guys are jealous. They didn't like these foreigners moving up the corporate ladder.

If God prospers you, you can bet that you will be a target of someone's jealousy. What they said was true, but it was not motivated by loyalty to the king, it was motivated by their own lust for power and position. Some of you have been the target of the same kind of envy. Don't be surprised when it happens. It probably means you are doing something right. And don't sweat it. God may have plan to use this as he did with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

B. Their interview with the king: Nebuchadnezzar responds to the report in a rage and has the three guys immediately brought to him. We can feel the hush of the crowd as they are escorted up the aisle to the king. Look at what he says, “**Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego; that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up?**” (v. 14). He is incredulous. He can't believe that anyone would defy him and risk being thrown into the furnace. How could someone be so stupid?

So, before they can answer, he gives them another chance, “**No 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 will 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?" (v. 15).

Maybe last time they just missed their cue. Maybe they didn't quite understand what was at stake. "Here, let me start the music again." But, he has a feeling he knows why they didn't cooperate: "What god is there who can deliver you out my hands?" He says, "I know you Jews. I know you believe your God can do some amazing things. I've heard your legend about the Red Sea. I'm quite aware of that. But, listen, he couldn't keep me from bringing you to Babylon, why do you think he'd save you now?"

How would you respond? The king could have just tossed them into the fire, but here they have another chance. They could have thought, "Perhaps God has given us this chance. Maybe just a small little nod to the statue and this whole thing is over."

C. Their response to the king: In vv. 16-18 we read of the response of these three men and it's classic,

"O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this. 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. 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."

I love how they start out: "Nebuchadnezzar, this is not a time for words. This is not a time to argue. This is not a time for a theological debate. This is not a time for us to try to convince you that our position is right." There is a time to just shut up and put up. There are some things you just don't negotiate. There are some times you just don't get into it with someone. There are times when you have to let God do the talking.

I see three things that gave these men resolve to stand their ground. First, God's word - God's word said, "You shall not bow down to them or worship them." No situational ethics here. No "when in Babylon, do as the Babylonians do." Second, God's power - "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us. You say, 'what god is there who can deliver you,' we say that our God can." And third, God's will - "He will deliver us out of your hand, O king, but even if he does not...we are not going to serve your gods..." There is a wonderful balance here. They truly believed that God could and would deliver them, but they did not presume to be infallible judges of the mind and will of God, so even if he didn't, they were ready to die. Oh, that we had such balance in the church today. To believe he CAN do the miraculous. To believe he WILL do the miraculous. But to be humble enough to say, "I don't always know his will. Whether he does or not, I will still do what's right."

We should stop right here and think about this. Are there things in our life that are not open to negotiation? Like these men, do we know what they are and have we made that decision beforehand? Think of the rationalizations they could have made at this point:

"Doesn't God want us to be happy? We won't be happy in that furnace, so it must be okay to bow down."

"Bowling down really won't hurt anyone, and that's what God cares the most about."

"We certainly won't be any good dead. God wants to use us for his glory here in Babylon. If we bow down, we'll live and be more useful for his cause."

"Our forefathers worshipped idols and God forgave

them. I mean, we're all sinners, right? No one's perfect. We'll confess our sins when it's all over."

"We know there are no other gods. So we can bow down to it and God knows our hearts are with him."

"The Bible says to obey the governing authorities. So if they force us to bow down, it's their fault not ours."

"Let's get real. We live in Babylon now. We have to adapt. We have to flex."

The rationalizations could be endless, but they all would have been wrong because the Word is clear: "You shall not bow to them or worship them." The only way you can decide what those things are that you won't compromise is through the Word of God. So you get into a relationship with a young man and he wants to fool around and you say, "Sorry, God's word says I don't fool around before I'm married. I don't care how much you say you love me, that's never right." You have to be willing to trust God for the outcome. So you risk losing the relationship with the guy. You risk losing the job because you won't lie. You risk not getting into the university because you won't cheat. You risk losing the friendship because you won't laugh at the filthy jokes.

D. The blazing furnace: Now when Nebuchadnezzar heard their response, he got really hot. Remember, this is his party, and everyone is watching these three pipsqueaks defy him. In vv. 19-22 he begins to operate without a whole lot of rationality. His face becomes contorted. He has the furnace stoked so that it became seven times hotter than usual, which would really just make them suffer less! He has some of his lieutenants tie them up with all their clothes on, just to make them more flammable, and to make sure they don't jump out...as if they could! The fire was so hot it fried some of his men as they were dumping them into the furnace. Loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar brought these men death; what will loyalty to God bring Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego?

The king sits back on his throne to watch the show through an opening towards the top of the furnace. He's not sure he's seeing quite so well today. There's a lot of smoke. He rubs his eyes. "What's going on in there?" Look at vv. 24-27,

"Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astounded and stood up in haste; he responded and said to his high officials, 'Was it not three men we cast bound into the midst of the fire?' They answered and said to the king, 'Certainly, O king.' He answered and 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!'" 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. And 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."

I like to think these three guys were waving to the king from inside the furnace. They're walking around! They're having a great time! They're high-fiving one another! The only thing they lost in the fire were the ropes that bound them! The king stands up and sees not three, but four men in there. He can't remember - did he throw three or four guys in? Three! Well then, who is that fourth

guy? Nebuchadnezzar says he looks like “a son of the gods.” Was this an angel? Was this a preincarnate appearance of Jesus Christ? We don’t know for sure, but we do know that God was with them in that fire and God was indeed able to deliver his servants from Nebuchadnezzar’s hands.

Finally, the king comes near to the door of the furnace (no small thing!) and calls to the three men to come out. They come out and everyone is sniffing them and looking at their hair and inspecting their bodies and there is not even a trace of being thrown into the fire. Nebuchadnezzar has another emotional experience,

“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. 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.’ Then the king caused Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego to prosper in the province of Babylon.”

Nebuchadnezzar had asked the question, “what God is there who is able to deliver you from my hands?” Now he answers it, “God has sent his angel to deliver his servants who put their trust in him.” Instead of getting fried, Shadrach, Meshach and Adednego become even more prosperous in the province of Babylon.

What can we expect God to do for those who put their trust in him? What did he do for these men? He went with them into the fire. He didn’t keep them out of the fire, but he did go with them into the fire. Sometimes, we spend far too much energy trying to stay out of the fire when the fact is if we went into the fire we’d know the presence of Christ in a way we’d never dreamed possible! It’s in the fire that we lose those things that bind us. We find freedom in the fire! We have had too many well-meaning Christians in America the last twenty years who have tried to dismantle idolatry so they won’t have to go into the fire. But it’s in the fire where we discover the faithfulness of God. I can’t promise you that you will escape the furnace, but I can promise you that if you go into the furnace he’ll be in there with you. Sometimes that means he will deliver you right out of the fire. I would be remiss if I didn’t say that. But, again, he can’t do that unless we go in. And unless we go in, a watching world will never be able to say as Nebuchadnezzar did, “Blessed be God...who sent his angel and delivered his servants who put their trust in him, violating the king’s command, and yielding up their bodies...” Who can a watching world say that about today?

This is the last we hear of these three men in the book of Daniel. The story ends by saying “they prospered in the province of Babylon.” In one way or another, God will prosper those who trust in him. There are times that means earthly success. There are times that means a heavenly crown. That’s up to God. But, if by his grace and power he prospers you, then be God’s man or woman in that arena he has placed you.

CONCLUSION

And so, I leave you with these questions: What would you do? Are you willing to trust God as these men did? Are you willing to say no to a world which more and more says if you don’t bow down to our gods, our gods of materialism, hedonism, and this sort of all-embracing pluralism, that you are really out of it? Do you think it’s impossible that a day could come in this country when you or your children or your children’s children could be thrown into the fire for not bowing down? Don’t believe that for one second. Get ready. Decide beforehand. Don’t negotiate. Choose today whom you will serve. Say with Joshua, **“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”**