

The Golden Image

Daniel 3:1-30

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Daniel, chapter 3 as we continue our study of this prophet of the exile as he speaks by the divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Daniel, chapter 3. Hear the word of God:

Daniel 3:1-30

Our Lord God, we thrill to hear this story and we thrill to realize that this is the truth. An account of a glorious event in which your power intersected space and time and was engaged in the lives of normal human beings, faithful servants of the Lord, men who love you, saving them, delivering them. Teach us spiritual truths, we pray, from this Your holy word, and we will give You all the praise and all the glory, for we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

When we were together last time, we noted that from Daniel 2 to Daniel 7, the book is written in Aramaic. It switches in chapter 1 from Hebrew to Aramaic. And we said that Aramaic was the international language used by many. It was the language of the trade. The section which is written in Aramaic from 2 to 7 deals with the purposes of God in history, with the rise and the decline of empires, and that chapter 1 and then chapters 8 through 12 deal with the interpretation of God's works in these empires for the people of God. What does it mean for the people of God? And so it makes perfect sense that one section would be written in Aramaic and the other in Hebrew.

When we studied chapter 2 last time, we saw God's sovereignty displayed in the plans that He revealed through the dream to Nebuchadnezzar. God showed us His plan for the establishment of His kingdom even in the dream that He gave to the pagan king, Nebuchadnezzar. And in that passage we learn that even in the midst of the rise and decline of empires, and the reigns of good and bad rulers, and in good times and in bad times, the kingdom of God will be established and will grow and will ultimately triumph throughout the whole earth in the lives of ordinary men and women. That's the beautiful picture of that small stone which comes and destroys the great statue that represents the kingdom of this world.

Now, we come to Daniel 3 and once again we notice a certain repetition. Already

in three chapters, three times we've had a story in which first, the people of God are faced with a crisis because of their faith. Then, having prayerfully and carefully followed the commands of the Lord, the people of God are delivered by the Lord and then the people of God are honored even by the civil rulers. Three times this occurs in Daniel 1, 2 and 3. There is a certain repetition about it. You might even say there's a certain monotony about it. But there's a lesson for us even in the monotony.

The lesson is two-fold. First of all it teaches us that Satan's onslaughts are not occasional activities. Satan doesn't just simply try us once or twice and then leave us alone. Satan's onslaughts are continual. The trials that he brings about are continual. The temptations which he voices upon us are continual and of course only by putting on the whole armor of God, about which Paul speaks in Ephesians 6:10, will we be able to resist such continual onslaughts. Satan operates by this sort of continual activity of temptation and so we must watch and pray and persevere in watching and praying if we are going to resist him.

But there's a second side to this particular monotony or repetition in Daniel. We also see three times God honor His people when His people are faithful to Him. When God's people choose to serve Him, despite the threats of the world, when God's people choose to follow Him no matter the consequences, blessing always occurs. Blessing may occur in different ways and different circumstances, surprising ways even, but God is always faithful. God uses trials and tribulation to produce even more significant fruit in the lives of His people. Listen to what Calvin says, "The church of Christ has been so constituted from the beginning that death has been the way to life and that the way of the cross is the path to victory." That has been shown to be the case with Daniel and his friends. Trial after trial they meet. Does it lead them to despondency and doubt? No. It does just what God intended it to do. It produces men of superb Christian character who believe in God and who are ready to be inflexibly faithful to Him in the face of the stoutest persecution. God has made Christians, if we may put it that way, by the very testing that He has put these men through.

Now the issue before us here in Daniel 3 is very simple. Will the image of God that He has made bow down to the image of man made by man? God created us in the image of God. We are His image bearers. Will we bow down to the image of man which man has made? That's the simple issue that faces us here and it is a glorious passage and I realize as I was working on this sermon over the past few weeks that there were about five or six good sermons in this, at least. Maybe one day we'll come back to Daniel and you'll get the other four. But tonight you only get part of one. So here we go.

I. Unchecked power running spiritually amok.

In the first seven verses we see the tyranny of King Nebuchadnezzar and we see

the threat that his actions have caused for the people of God. In fact, verses 1 through 7 of Daniel, chapter 3, are a beautiful picture, or maybe we should say an ugly picture of unchecked power running spiritually amuck. You couldn't find a better example of unchecked political power running spiritually amuck. Nebuchadnezzar seems to be, in setting up this statue, enlarging upon one aspect of the dream that Daniel had interpreted. You remember Daniel had told Nebuchadnezzar that that head of gold represented him. Well, Nebuchadnezzar goes out and sets up a 90-foot statue completely overlaid in gold. It's difficult to say what Nebuchadnezzar's motives were. Clearly, he has all the various nations that are under control of Babylon there. Perhaps he was attempting to consolidate his power. Perhaps he was actually attempting to foster some sort of cult or worship of himself. Surely he was saying, however, by setting up a statue of gold, representative of the power of Babylon, that he was attempting to resist precisely the message that God had given in Daniel, chapter 2. Daniel had bravely looked Nebuchadnezzar in the eye and said, "Nebuchadnezzar, you're the head of gold and you're going to pass away. There's going to be a kingdom that comes behind you and your kingdom is going to pass away and there's going to be another kingdom after that, and another kingdom after that. And then God's kingdom is going to be established." Could this statue of gold be Nebuchadnezzar's attempt to deflect and resist precisely the will of God revealed in that dream? There's every evidence in Daniel 2, 3 and 4 that that is precisely what Nebuchadnezzar is doing. He is attempting to force the will of God and to say that his kingdom will endure forever. And so this head of gold and the dream of Daniel in chapter 2 has become a gargantuan statue, a ninety-foot statue of gold in the plain of Dura.

It's very interesting as well, isn't it, looking at verses 1 through 7 that six times, six times it is repeated that Nebuchadnezzar had set up this statue to worship in the plain of Dura. Now the author, you notice, throughout this passage uses repetition to drive home points. It's almost comical, isn't it, after Nebuchadnezzar says, "Okay, whoever doesn't worship is going to die." And then you have listed all the people who are brought there. And then immediately you're given that same list again and they all fall down and worship and you almost feel like it's naming the seven dwarfs and all these people fell down and worshipped. There's a comical aspect to the repetition. But there again, in the very repetition of the fact that Nebuchadnezzar had set up this statue, it is stressed that Nebuchadnezzar is opposing the Lord God, because every good Jew reading this passage, just like every Christian, is very well aware of the first two Commandments: "You shall have no other gods before Me" and "You shall not worship any graven image." The first two Commandments pop immediately to our minds when we read this passage. In fact, when we read this passage we immediately know that this scenario is going to set up a conflict with the people of God in Babylon. We know that they're not going to be able to obey this particular command. We know that this is going to have horrendous consequences in their lives if it's carried out.

I want you to note two things that we learn about Nebuchadnezzar in this first section. First of all we see that he had immense power and that he misused it. In Daniel, chapter 2, verse 37, we're told the kind of power that Nebuchadnezzar has. And in Daniel, chapter 4, when Daniel is speaking with him in verse 27, Daniel makes it clear that Nebuchadnezzar has not used the power that God entrusted him with in a proper way, to establish justice and righteousness in his land and to care for those who were abreast. Nebuchadnezzar's very making of this statue is megalomaniacal. It's vain. You couldn't imagine a more vain thing for a person to do. And it's something that political leaders continue to do today.

It's interesting also, isn't it, that he shrouds the dedication of this statue with a religious veneer. There are religious overtones to the dedication of this statue in the plains of Dura, and that in and of itself reminds us of a couple of other things.

Blasphemy can be disguised by the trappings of religion. Something can look spiritual and still be blasphemous. Listen to these sober words from Sinclair Ferguson, "The clearest indications of this kind of blasphemy are when individuals, not God, are at the center of worship. Whenever much is made of a person, less is made of our Lord." It is a great mistake to think that blasphemy needs to be carefully planned and thought out. Blasphemy is natural to the fallen, human heart and it will, therefore, manifest itself in our religious activities unless it is deliberately rejected. We can easily slip into blasphemy and God can be moved off of the center of our worship and when God is moved off of the center of our worship idolatry always follows.

Notice also that in this scenario there is a danger of assuming that the aesthetic effect of worship is the most important thing about it. This whole dedication ceremony had apparently a very powerful physiological effect upon everyone who was there. Isn't it interesting that with musical accompaniment all the worshippers are to fall down. And when Nebuchadnezzar is attempting to persuade the three Hebrew men that they should worship this image, he says, "Look, I'm going to play the music again," thinking that he can use the same sort of psychological effects thinking that they will be impressed by the beauty of the music into worshipping this false God. But it's wrong to assume that the important thing about worship is its aesthetic effect. The important thing about worship is ascribing to the Lord alone the glory due His Name. And it doesn't matter what the aesthetic effect of that is, the important thing is doing that.

Notice also about Nebuchadnezzar that he himself had experienced religious conviction previously but not conversion. Already in Daniel, chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar had been mightily impressed by this incredible revelation that had been given to him by God and interpreted for him by Daniel. And yet there is no evidence of a spiritual conversion of Nebuchadnezzar. The events of chapter 2 show us that the impact of Daniel's interpretation of the dream on Nebuchadnezzar had only been superficial and temporary. In fact, it was only a temporary setback to his self-glorification. Nebuchadnezzar, by chapter 3, is right

back in the business of statue building to his own glory. Indeed in his actions in chapter 3, he actually goes further than his previous blasphemy. He goes further than his previous conceit.

Sometimes the worst and most cynical persecutors of Christians are those who are themselves ex-believers, people who have had a previous spiritual experience of some sort and yet now they have turned their back on whatever truth they had grasped and they hate with a burning intensity those who believe. Many of you will have heard of a book that was written a number of years ago by a man named James Barr. It's called *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, and it's a brutal attack on the historic Christian doctrine of scripture. One of the things that shocked most people about that book is that the man once was the secretary of the Christian Union at the University of Edinburgh. It would have been like being a Reformed University Ministry leader and then suddenly writing a book that attacks everything that you had ever stood for. What happened to that man? Those who are ex-believers sometimes bring a bitterness and a cynicism and a hatred for Christians that is far beyond those who have never claimed to have had true spiritual experience. And Nebuchadnezzar is like that.

We must not be surprised when we see this kind of unchecked political power wreaking havoc on the spiritual life of the people and it is something for us today not to be unwary about. We must challenge through every legitimate course that we have the unchecked power of government interfering with the religious life of its people. We have a Constitutional Amendment that was designed to protect that but it's being undercut at every place we can see in our society. We must not be unwary with regard to that.

We also know, of course, that the scene that is painted for us in verses 1 through 7 shows us that there is going to be a conflict between the people of God in Babylon and between Nebuchadnezzar because the people of God cannot compromise the first and the second commands.

II. True love for God and true faith in God illustrated

Notice also in verses 8 through 18 that here we have a picture of God's faithful servant now caught in the crossfire. We see an illustration in verses 8 through 18 of true love for God and true faith in God. These three Hebrews had been faithful to the Lord, they had not bowed down to the statue, they had not attempted to draw attention to themselves, they had not picketed the assembly, they had not sent out pamphlets decrying the activity of Nebuchadnezzar, they had organized no national group of Jewish believers protesting the imposition of this on their right, but they had not gone along with what Nebuchadnezzar had commanded. And it was the Chaldeans who reported them to Nebuchadnezzar, and their faithfulness in spite of Nebuchadnezzar. Their faithfulness in spite of Nebuchadnezzar's threats has been a constant encouragement to God's people

through all ages.

I'd like you to note two leading characteristics of their faith and you'll see it in verses 17 and 18. Remember that Hebrews 11:34 tells us that Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego had the kind of faith that could quench fire. What kind of a faith quenches fire? Well, Daniel tells you here. In Daniel, chapter 3, verse 17, first of all he tells us that they had confidence in the power of God. "Our God... is able to deliver us," they said. They were utterly confident in God's power to deliver them. They trusted in His abilities to do that which was entirely supernatural.

And secondly, they were completely submissive to God's will. They didn't say, 'We're going to trust in God because He is going to deliver us.' They said, 'We're going to trust in God even if He decides not to deliver us.' Their faith was not in their deliverance, their faith was in their God. And there is no more awesome passage in the Bible when these men look the most powerful monarch in the face and say, 'Even if he doesn't deliver us, we're not going to worship your god or bow down to your statue.' That ought to send the chill up the back of every believer that reads it, because that's the kind of loyalty and faith that the Lord God is calling us to tonight. Faith does not regard death or any other tragedy to be a mark of its failure, either of God's faithfulness or of ours. We are called to follow Him, to trust in Him and leave the events to Him.

As previous trials had prepared those three Hebrew men for this great test, so our previous trials are meant to prepare us for the test of our lives. It's very interesting isn't it how this passage parallels to the passage we studied in Matthew, chapter 10 today. The Lord Jesus told the men, "Don't you prepare a pretty answer ahead of time. The Spirit will speak in you." That's precisely what these men say. These men say to Nebuchadnezzar, "Nebuchadnezzar, we don't even need to give you an answer. If this is what you've decided, then it's already decided. We're not going to bow down to the idol. We don't need to give you an answer. You just need to know that we trust our God to deliver us and even if He doesn't, we're not going to do it." No eloquence in that remark, only faithfulness to the Lord.

III. A picture of Christian testing.

Notice also in verses 19 through 25 we see the actual trial by fire that these faithful servants of the Lord had to go through. There we see the perfect picture of Christian testing. These men nobly respond to Nebuchadnezzar. You know, you can't help but think that even if these men were my enemies, I'd have to have some sort of grudging respect for them. Talk about overwhelming odds, I mean, here you are surrounded by the king's guard and all the king's officials and the king looking you in the eye and saying, 'Worship or die,' and these men say, "Guess it's gonna be 'die' because we're not going to worship." You can't help but

think that there would be a grudging respect even from a pagan. But not from Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar is enraged by this. I mean they've undercut Nebuchadnezzar's whole purpose. His purpose is to gather an assembly there to show how great he is and how great this kingdom is and to make all these people that he's conquered consolidate in their loyalty to him, and suddenly here are these Jews that he has appointed in his own court saying, 'Oh, by the way king, we're not going to do what you said.' I mean these men really have made Nebuchadnezzar look bad in front of this entire assembly in the plains of Dura. And so Nebuchadnezzar is enraged and he gives orders for the kiln to be super heated. By the way, we have found kilns in this ancient area of Babylon. Archaeologists have found kilns out in the various areas of the plain. In fact there are some who suggest that they can locate the precise site of which this event speaks. In fact there are some who suggest that the mound on which this statue was built is still visible today. I don't know about that. I've never been to Iraq, but that's what the commentators tell me.

But the scene itself underlines the helplessness and hopelessness that sometimes members of the kingdom of God seem to face. I mean, sometimes we seem to be called into a service that just looks like it's not going to work. Sometimes the odds seem overwhelming. And the deliverance which God gives to Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego is a miraculous in breaking of the future triumphant kingdom of God to vindicate his servants and his message. And the very fact that there is one like a Son of God in the midst of the fire with them reminds us how God draws near to His people in the midst of their trials. We read from Psalm 23. Isn't it interesting how, in the very midst of the very valley of the shadow of death, there is a second person *singular* discussion going on between the Psalmist and God. "You are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. God draws near to His people in the midst of their persecution.

There is much that we can learn from verses 19 through 25 in our own Christian faithfulness. Samuel Rutherford said, "Duties are ours, events are the Lord's." It is our job to be faithful. It is the Lord's job to decide in His good providence how He's going to work out the consequences of our faithfulness. Shadrach, Meshack and Abed-nego didn't have to make some sort of judgment. Well, if we're faithful we might die, therefore, we're not going to be faithful. All they had to figure out was what was faithful. Faithful is obeying the first and the second commandment. And then how that works out in God's providence is up to Him. They didn't have to figure all that out. All they had to do was do what was right. And God calls us to do what's right and trust that He will deliver. Matthew Henry has said that a steadfast faith in God will produce a steadfast faithfulness in God. It is precisely their ability to trust God no matter what, that enables them to be faithful when the consequences seem for them dire. When you really believe that God is going to take care of you, no matter what, then you stop worrying about the what because you're go focused on the God that you trust and who loves you and who cares for you.

Peter, in the book of I Peter, and that's a book that teaches us a lot about trials, especially chapter 2 and 4, and if you've never read Dr. Lloyd-Jones' exposition of that book, you've missed something. At any rate, Peter teaches us that trials purify and strengthen our faith. He teaches us that in trials themselves it is our faith which enables us by grace to endure and that we are not to be taken by surprise by those trials. And all of those are messages that are taught right here in Daniel, chapter 3.

IV. A picture of God's faithfulness and man's hard-heartedness

There's a final word that I would leave with you. In verses 26 through 30, we see their faith triumphant, God having delivered these three faithful men. But we also see a tyrant still intact in his depravity. His words may seem gracious, but hey, his words seemed gracious in Daniel, chapter 2, didn't they? I mean, you would have thought in Daniel, chapter 2, that he had been converted. They would have said in the country, "He got religion." Well, it looks like it again in Daniel, chapter 3. But again, notice what Nebuchadnezzar doesn't say. He doesn't acknowledge the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego as his God. He simply acknowledges that He's pretty amazing and He's their God. And he doesn't declare that the land of Babylon will henceforth and forever more forego its idols and worship the living and the true God. He just says, 'We'll tolerate your particular way of worship.' Nebuchadnezzar's response is superficial. He was astonished by the miracle and he was no doubt impressed by the courage of these men, but the next chapter, Daniel, chapter 4, proves to us that he has not fundamentally changed in his heart.

Nebuchadnezzar makes a poor attempt to compensate for the wickedness that he had done. He had attempted to kill these men and to put to death all who would not worship this idol. What was his compensation? Well, I'm going to give you religious freedom and I'm going to advance you in the kingdom. For my evil deed I'm going to do a couple of good deeds and that will make up for what I did. That's classic pagan thinking. That's works righteousness, isn't it? We work our way - well, I did this bad thing so I'll do a couple of good things and that will make up for it. Listen again to Sinclair Ferguson, "Nothing is more common and foolish in the unregenerate heart than to assume that God is satisfied with a life in which we compensate for our sins by deeds that we wrongly assume cancel out our sins." Only the work of Christ can cancel out your sins. No deed that you can do can cancel out your sins. There's no *quid pro quo* that we can establish with the Lord with regard to our sins. Only the deeds of Christ suffice to cancel out our sins.

There are so many lessons here. But surely two stand out. God works all things for good for those who love Him. Does that not come through loud and clear in the story of these three men? And surely also the truth that God gives us grace in a time of need comes forth. Perhaps tonight you'll have an opportunity to read

Isaiah 43, verses 2 through 5, or Psalm 66, verses 10 through 12. If you do, you will see the fulfillment of God's promises to give grace in the time of need. May you trust in God to give you grace in time of need and remain faithful to Him no matter what. Let's look to Him in prayer.

Our Father, we thank You for Your word and we ask that You would build in us the kind of faith and character represented in these brave men, all to the glory of Jesus Christ in whose name we pray, Amen.

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