

This morning, I am in the fourth week of a new sermon series through the Old Testament book of Daniel that will take us up until the summer. To recap, God has allowed Israel to be conquered by Babylon as discipline for their sins. The main characters in this story are Daniel and his three friends, commonly known as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who are attempting to remain faithful to their God despite being in exile and being faced with the attempts of the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar, to reprogram them into loyal Babylonian servants. This morning we will be looking at Daniel 3, a familiar story if you grew up in the church, which focuses on Shadrach, Meshach and Abenego:

***Daniel 3:1–30** - King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. ² He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image **he had set up**. ³ So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it. ⁴ Then the herald loudly proclaimed, “Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: ⁵ As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King **Nebuchadnezzar has set up**. ⁶ Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.” ⁷ Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the nations and peoples of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. ⁸ At this time some astrologers came forward and **denounced the Jews**. ⁹ They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, “May the king live forever! ¹⁰ Your Majesty has issued a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, ¹¹ and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. ¹² But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention **to you, Your Majesty**. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up.” ¹³ Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, ¹⁴ and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? ¹⁵ Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image **I made, very good**. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able*

to rescue you from my hand?" ¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, "King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷ If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from **Your Majesty's hand.** ¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." ¹⁹ Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual ²⁰ and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them **into the blazing furnace.** ²¹ So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. ²² The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, ²³ and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace. ²⁴ Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and **threw into the fire?**" They replied, "Certainly, Your Majesty." ²⁵ He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods." ²⁶ Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!" So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, ²⁷ and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers **crowded around them.** They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them. ²⁸ Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god **except their own God.** ²⁹ Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way." ³⁰ Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

The book of Daniel is full of these kind of dilemmas, where Daniel and his friends, who have been captured by Babylon, have to discern what it looks like to be faithful to God in the midst of exile, how they can be respectful to the authorities over them while reserving their primary loyalty for their God. And while we may not be living as slaves in captivity, the themes of exile and Babylon are very relevant today, for if we belong to Jesus, then this world is not our home, and the

main concerns of our culture are not honoring God. There are three things in particular we learn from this passage about faithfulness in exile.

- 1) We will be pressured to bow to the idols of the age, and resistance will take great courage

It is incredible to me that after the dream that Daniel interprets for Nebuchadnezzar in the previous chapter, about how all of the glory and dominion that Nebuchadnezzar enjoys has been given to him by God, and that he will not live forever but will be succeeded by many other kings and kingdoms, **that he would respond this way:**

***Daniel 3:1** - King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon.*

Instead of bending the knee to the God who is above him, Nebuchadnezzar sets up an idol and commands everyone to bow down to it. Interestingly, he chooses the same place where the Tower of Babel once stood, the ultimate testimony to the glory and kingdom of man. And he commands that anyone who refuses to bow down and worship the idol will be thrown into a blazing furnace. Shadrach, Meshach & Abednego refuse, and some jealous astrologers turn them in to the king, who commands them to bow down or face the fire. Look again at v. 16:

***Daniel 3:16-18** - Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷ If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from **Your Majesty’s hand.** ¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”*

And the three young men are thrown into the furnace, where God miraculously saves them.

Now, put yourself in Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s shoes. Couldn’t you have just bowed down while in your heart telling the Lord that you are bowing down to Him? Couldn’t you reason that what good would it be for the Israelite cause if you were killed? Why not just bow down and pretend to worship? Wouldn’t God have understood?

We may live a few thousand years after Babylon, but some things have not changed. There are still idols being set up, and you are still going to be pressured to bow down to them, to give your allegiance to them. And resistance will take great courage. These idols may not take the form of a 90-foot golden statue, but they are just as real, and just as revered. Some may be cultural idols, and some may be idols set up by your workplace, or family, or even, dare we say it, the church. Let me name a couple:

The idol of tolerance

Babylon was a pluralistic society. It was okay for the Israelites to believe in their god, but they needed to also bow down to the Babylonian gods. When they refused, they put themselves in danger of execution. In the same way, it's okay to be a Christian in 21st century America. The problem comes when you begin to say that Jesus is the only way to salvation, or that the truths and morality found in the Bible are true for everyone, regardless of what they believe. In a culture that says "you do you," and proclaims that no one has the right to tell another person what is right or wrong for them, to refuse to bow to the idol of tolerance is to risk the flames of ridicule and disdain.

How do you feel when you hear these words?

*John 14:6 - Jesus answered, "I am **the way** and **the truth** and **the life**. No one comes to **the** Father except through me*

Acts 4:10–12 - It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.

¹¹ Jesus is "the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone." ¹² Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

These words offend the idol of tolerance and risk the flames of ridicule and disdain. The irony, of course, is that tolerance is intolerant at the center. In other words, the idol of tolerance proclaims that we will tolerate you as long as you are like us, as long as you share our view of tolerance. But if you believe in a standard of right and wrong that is different than ours, well, that's intolerable.

The idol of individual sovereignty

A second cultural idol that is related to the first one is the idol of individual sovereignty, that each individual should be able to live as they believe is right without anyone else saying they are wrong. Charles Taylor called this a mark of the age of authenticity, which he explained this way:

I mean the understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late-eighteenth century, that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.

Another great term for this is “expressive individualism.” As Carl Trueman puts it, “*Expressive individualism particularly refers to the idea that in order to be fulfilled, in order to be an authentic person, in order to be genuinely me, I need to be able to express outwardly or perform publicly that which I feel I am inside.*”

In other words, the most important rule is “to thine own self be true,” and no one else has the right to tell you otherwise – not parents or church or government. This is certainly most evident these days in the realm of sex and gender, where the prevailing belief is that one must be true to their sexual desire or feelings about their gender, and to dare to question that is to risk offending the idol of the age.

But the Bible tells us that there is a God, and He created us for Him.

Colossians 1:15–16 - *The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.*

We are not sovereign. We are created beings who will only find true meaning and purpose when we live in line with the will of the one who created us. Nevertheless, to dare to offend this idol is to risk the fires of ridicule and disdain.

There may be other idols that are particular to your workplace or family or even church, idols that demand you bow down to them, lest you risk the flames. Maybe this idol is a boss or parent or spiritual leader who can not be questioned, or an unreasonable policy or expectation that must be met. And if these idols are not of God, then resisting them will take great courage.

2) God is able to heal and save, and even if He does not, He is still worthy of worship

Look again at the response that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego give to the king:

*Daniel 3:16-18 - Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷ If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from **Your Majesty’s hand.** ¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”*

God can save us. **But even if he doesn’t, O King, we will not bow down to your idol.** Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego may not be sure of God’s purpose, but they are sure of God’s power and ability.

What would it look like to have this kind of balanced outlook on God and life? To pray boldly, to have unshakeable faith, believing that God can heal and save. But to also pray with humility and with a submissive faith, knowing that God is sovereign and that He will do what He pleases.

Isaiah 55:8–9 - “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. ⁹ “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

As is often the case, there is a truth that resists two extremes. On the one end, we don’t pray for God to heal or deliver, passively accepting whatever comes our way as His will. But on the other end, we pray with a “name it and claim it” approach, refusing to recognize God’s sovereignty and treating him like a heavenly ATM, thinking that as long as we muster enough faith and pray in the right way, God will most definitely heal or save us.

But the faith we see in Daniel 3 is a powerful and balanced faith in God. God can save, and we do not doubt that, and we will pray boldly to Him to save us. But even if He doesn’t, even if He chooses to let us die, He is still good and still worthy of worship. We don’t doubt that He can heal and save, but we would not presume to know His purpose and will in this situation. **What would it look like for you to have that kind of balanced faith – bold and yet humble at the same time?**

Hebrews 11 gives us a powerful example of this kind of faith. Known as the hall of faith, it lists Old Testament saint after saint – Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, and so on – and all the mighty exploits God did through their faith. But then comes a turn:

Hebrews 11:32–37 - *And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and **routed foreign armies**. ³⁵ Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. ³⁶ Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword.*

Some by faith live; some are killed. Some by faith are miraculously saved; others are martyred. God can heal and God can save. But even if He doesn't, He is still good and worthy to be praised. As Job put it:

Job 13:15 – *Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him; I will surely defend my ways to his face.*

Jesus struck this balance in Matthew 7 when He taught us to pray:

Matthew 7:7–11 – *“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. ⁹ “Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? ¹¹ If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!*

Ask, seek, knock. Do not be shy! **Ask boldly** for what it is you want or think you need. But **ask humbly**, knowing that you are a child, with a short-sighted, self-centered perspective, asking a heavenly Father who sees and knows everything and has a plan that involves more than just your life. As we submit our will and our control to His will and kingdom, we also submit our petitions to His wise and loving decision. Remember that even Jesus exhibited this kind of bold yet submissive faith:

Matthew 26:36–39 - Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, *“Sit here while I go over there and pray.”*³⁷ He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled.³⁸ Then he said to them, *“My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”*³⁹ Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, *“My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”*

Pray boldly, yet humbly, for He is worthy of worship even if the healing or salvation or miracle does not come.

3) Jesus does not prevent us from all suffering, but enters into our suffering to overcome it and save us

It is interesting that at its core, this story is about Jewish men being thrown into a furnace to die. The irony is that many people have lost faith in God because of similar circumstances in the 20th century. But as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are thrown into the fire, they are joined by a fourth figure.

Daniel 3:24-25 - Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, *“Weren’t there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?”* They replied, *“Certainly, Your Majesty.”*²⁵ He said, *“Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.”*

This mysterious “son of the gods” is not given a name, but it is probably the angel of the Lord, the pre-incarnate Jesus. This is a theophany – an appearance of God. Jesus is walking with them in the furnace. The angel of the Lord is this mysterious Old Testament figure that is God but separate from God. Here is one example:

Exodus 3:2-4 - There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up.³ So Moses thought, *“I will go over and see this strange sight-- why the bush does not burn up.”*⁴ When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, *“Moses! Moses!”* And Moses said, *“Here I am.”*

The angel of the Lord is God in a visual form. As Alec Motyer puts it:

“The angel is revealed as a merciful ‘accommodation’ or ‘condescension’ of God, whereby the Lord can be present among a sinful people when, were he to go with

them himself, his presence would consume them.... He is that mode of deity whereby the holy God can keep company with sinners. There is only one other in the Bible who is both identical with and yet distinct from the Lord. One who, without abandoning the full essence and prerogatives of deity... is able to accommodate himself to the company of sinners... Jesus Christ."

Jesus does not protect Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, or pluck them out. But He enters in to the furnace to overcome and save them. And in our sin and suffering, Jesus has entered the fire with us. He went through the blazing furnace of the wrath of God when He died on the cross for our sins. This is better than Footsteps – it is Jesus in the furnace to save us.

John 16:33 - *"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*

We are not protected from every suffering, but we have a God who enters into it with us, so that we know that whether we live or die, He has protected our soul and we will live forever. The prophecy given to Isaiah still rings true today:

Isaiah 43:1-2 - *But now, this is what the LORD says-- he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze."*

Whatever trials or suffering you are experiencing, Jesus, the one like the son of the gods, is in the fire with you to overcome it and to save you. Put your hope and trust in Him, praying boldly, for He is able to heal and save. And even if He does not, He is still worthy of worship.