

In the Fire: A Daniel Study
The God of the Fire

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The other day I was running around town doing errands with my little girl. We went to Home Depot, Chick-fil-A, Kroger, and when I noticed she wasn't making noise anymore, I looked in the rearview mirror and realized she had fallen asleep. Even though we were making pit stops every 10 minutes, she just couldn't stay awake. I was talking with a co-worker this week and she shared that her son can fall asleep doing anything, even while eating chocolate ice cream! Take a look at this kid who just couldn't make it to bed. How about this little kid—he wants to make sure chiropractors never go out of business. Or my personal favorite, this kid who said boys aren't good at multitasking. (Please view the video recording of this sermon to see these images.)

We know little kids can fall asleep in almost any situation. Today I want to talk about how important it is for us to not be lulled to sleep by the spiritual realities all around us, but to be aware, awake, and alert, specifically when it comes to decisions about the loyalties and affections of our hearts. God wants us to see with clarity all the demands for devotion at work in our world and to have the courage to be faithful to Him alone, no matter the cost.

What we have seen so far in our study of the book of Daniel is that as that Daniel and his friends Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael (who are given the names Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) lived as exiles in Babylon, they refused to be assimilated into Babylonian culture; they kept their character. Again and again, they honored God, and God elevated them to positions of incredible leadership and influence in the kingdom. Now we come to chapter three, where these men will be put through the most intense test of their lives.

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. 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. (Daniel 3:1-2)

As we are reading this passage, two things jump out right away. First, take note that the king made an image of gold. If you remember from chapter two, in the dream that the king had of a great image, it was an image of a statue with the head of gold, chest of silver, waist of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of iron and clay. And the meaning was that Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom were the head of gold, but eventually his kingdom was going to fall and be inherited by another, and that kingdom would fall and be inherited by another, and that kingdom would fall and be inherited by another, right up until the kingdom of God came to earth through Jesus, and these worldly empires would be forgotten and the gospel of Christ would fill the whole earth. That's Daniel 2, so what did the king do in Daniel 3? He made an image that was entirely gold! He said, "There ain't no way my kingdom is going to diminish, no one is going to defeat me, no one is going to undo what I've built. Who cares about that dream? My legacy will endure forever. And I want everyone to appreciate what I've done and pledge their loyalty to me."

The next thing I want to show you is the dimensions of this statue. If you look at the text again, we are told the image was 60 cubits high and 6 cubits wide. In a day when they didn't have tape measures handy, a cubit was the length from your elbow to the tip of your fingers, basically about a foot and a half, 18 inches. So this image was 90 feet high and 9 feet wide. But often when it comes to numbers in the bible, we're not supposed to count them—we are supposed to weigh them. We are supposed to look at the meaning of the number. All throughout the Bible six represents evil. Goliath was 6 cubits tall and his spear weighed 600 shekels; King Solomon amassed an ungodly amount of wealth, collecting 666 talents of gold every year; the number of the beast in Revelation is 666. In the Bible, six represents evil and

wickedness, In these numbers, we are learning so much more than simply the dimensions of the statue; we are learning about the essence and nature of this statue, that it is idolatrous.

And listen to what the King demanded the people do:

Then the herald loudly proclaimed, “Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: 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. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.” 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. (Daniel 3:4-7)

That was a threat that no one wanted to test! Everyone there worshipped the statue. Everyone, that is, except Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The first commandment God gave His people was not to worship any god beside Him. The second was this: ““You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them...”” (Exodus 20:4-5). This is literally the exact thing Nebuchadnezzar demanded they do: bow down to an image and worship it. So even though everyone else took a knee and went along with the king’s request, they refused. And the people who they had been promoted over, who had been jealous of them and their influence, turned them in.

At this time some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. They said to King Nebuchadnezzar..., “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.” (Daniel 3:8-12)

The Bible tells us that when the king heard this, he was furious with rage. He had the men brought before him and said, “I can’t believe this! This can’t be true! Not after all I’ve done for you. I’m sure it must have been a misunderstanding. And look, you know I am a generous man—I am going to give you another chance. I am going to play the music again, and make no mistake, there will be no third chance. If you refuse to bow your knee, that will be the last mistake you ever make. I don’t care about your petty little faith. There is no god who can rescue you from my hand.”

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. 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. 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.” (Daniel 3:16-18)

“Look king, you think that our God can’t rescue us from your hand, but that’s because you don’t know our God. There is nothing that our God can’t do. We don’t know whether God is going to deliver us or not, but we do know this for sure—we are never worshipping anyone besides Him.”

This infuriated the king:

...He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace....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, and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.” (Daniel 3:19-23)

And right when you think it’s the end of the story, look at the next verse:

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.” 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.” (Daniel 3:24-25)

So the king called them to come out. Everyone crowded around them and stood in amazement—their hair wasn’t burnt, their clothes weren’t scorched, there wasn’t even the smell of smoke on them. The king promoted them to greater leadership, he declared they were servants of the Most High God, and he even said that anyone who spoke against their God would be cut into pieces. His rationale was, “...for no other god can save in this way” (Daniel 3:29).

This event took place 2600 years ago, but it has so much relevance for our lives today in the 21st century. There are three specific elements in the story that we need in our lives today. Here’s the first: *spiritual discernment*. This story begins with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego having spiritual discernment: they were able to see what was really going on with the request made by the king, the evil of it, the idolatry behind it. Everyone else in the kingdom bowed down. They just went along with it and didn’t think anything of it. If everyone else is doing it, what’s the harm in it? These men had spiritual discernment. We are in desperate need of that today. In some ways, these men had it easier than us. The idol they were asked to worship was a 90-foot-tall, solid gold statue. That kind of idolatry screams, “Warning! This is wrong! Don’t do it!” The idols we face today are much less conspicuous. The idols of our day camouflage themselves and try to go undetected, falsehood misrepresenting itself as truth. We need to be particularly mindful of undercover idolatry in two particular areas.

There is the *idolatry of individuality*. There is a pervasive and strong message these days that the most important decision you can ever make is to be true to yourself. We are told that what we really need to do is look inside, follow our emotions, and allow our feelings to determine our sense of identity. Your life is about you and whatever you want it to be. That is the idolatry of individuality. We don’t give ultimate allegiance to the 90-foot-tall idol in Babylon; we are way too refined and sophisticated for that. Instead, we give ultimate allegiance to the 6-foot-tall reflection we see when we look in the mirror every day. We need discernment to know when we are giving ultimate allegiance to our desires and our emotions and our preferences and our feelings. Do you know what is way more important than being true to yourself? Being true to God! And more important than being true to yourself is being true to your family and your close friends to whom you have a life-long obligation.

Not only do we have the idolatry of individuality, we have the *idolatry of identity politics*, which is where allegiance to whatever group you are a part of becomes the predominant reality in your life. During intense political cycles have you ever seen a Christian appear more committed to the cause of the Republicans or the cause of the Democrats than to the cause of Christ? When you look at the LGBTQ community, or certain minority communities, or a white nationalist community, these are all communities—some of which people are born into, some of which people join—that demand fierce loyalty. Be true to us above and before anything else.

To faithfully worship the one true God, we must have spiritual discernment to see any and every expression of idolatry in our day. We can’t be lulled to sleep and be unaware. We must be alert and engaged. The Bible tell us that when Paul walked through the city streets of Athens and saw all the false

worship, “he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols” (Acts 17:16). Our city, nation, and culture are full of idols, too, and we not only need the discernment to see the idols that are cleverly camouflaged in our culture, we also need the discernment to realize that not everything someone says is an idol is actually an idol. I see a lot of Christians spending a ton of time on social media and certain news networks getting worked up into an emotional frenzy, but they are following misleading reports and slanted articles, not credible sources. I have seen a lot of Christians not only give Jesus a bad reputation for the crazy things they have believed, but I have seen them also get off their mission of loving God, loving people, and making disciples because they are so deep in an internet rabbit hole trying to unearth some so-called deep state conspiracy theory. We need spiritual discernment!

In addition to spiritual discernment, we need *resilient devotion*. These three men not only had the discernment to spot idolatry, they refused to give in to it because of their devotion to God. Even when they were told they would be thrown into a furnace and burned alive, they said, “We are not going to bow down to your statue.” They were willing to be faithful even to death. They loved God more than they loved their own lives. As hot as that fire was, the intensity of their love for God burned even hotter. Don’t you want that to be true for you?

We don’t face persecution today in America like they did, which of course is a wonderful thing, but the lack of persecution comes with its own set of challenges. From about the year AD 60 until February of the year AD 313, the Roman Empire made worshipping Jesus a capital offense. If you were a Christian, you knew you might be arrested, imprisoned, tortured, crucified, or thrown to the lions in the Colosseum. In 313 Constantine issued a decree recognizing Christianity as an acceptable religion. Within years it became the favored religion. And in 380 it became the official religion. It was a wonderful thing that Christians were no longer losing their lives, but it also drastically lowered the bar in terms of the devotion and commitment required to be a follower of Jesus. Before 313, you had to love Jesus more than you loved your life. After 313, many people claimed the name of Jesus to get a better life, because of the social and cultural benefits that came from being a part of the dominant religion, so devotion was diluted.

Christians have clearly lost a lot of social influence the last few decades, and though part of that is a bad thing for our culture, it might be a good thing for Christians. People won’t just assume they are Christians because they live in America or grew up in the Bible belt or had believing parents—it’s going to have to be a choice, maybe even a choice that comes at a cost. Our culture these days claims to be very accepting, our culture claims to be generous and affirming and magnanimous, and it is—right up to the moment you don’t go along with the prescribed talking points. No matter how loving and gracious you are, these days, if you say what the Bible says about the sanctity of life in the womb, you are labeled a misogynistic oppressor of women, even though slightly more than half the babies you are advocating for are female. These days, if you say what the Bible says about gender and relationships, you are labeled a bigot. These days, if you calmly and rationally point out the logical errors and double standards of certain agendas, you are just cancelled. Your company will be boycotted. The culture claims to accept and affirm everyone, but the moment you don’t go along with it, it shows you its teeth. Like King Nebuchadnezzar, it turns up the heat in the furnace and says, “Bow down like everyone else or face my wrath.”

Last year, the leader of the largest church in Chicago said, “The way things are going, I suspect most Christians alive today will die comfortably in their beds. In the next generation, they will die behind prison bars. In the next generation, they will die as martyrs in the public square. And in the next generation, they will emerge to pick up the pieces of a ruined, shattered culture and rebuild it, just as the church has always done.” Whether he is right or wrong, the call is to be faithful to Jesus alone, wherever you might find yourself on that continuum.

How can we have resilient devotion to Jesus in our cultural moment, like the men in this passage did in theirs? I think the answer to that question has everything to do with love. When it comes to anything that could look like an inappropriate relationship with women, I have accountability, guardrails and boundaries set up in my life, as we all should. But to be honest, I've never even gotten close to those guardrails and boundaries because I love my wife so much. I delight in her; I cherish and adore her. I don't want to be unfaithful to her. If we want to be as faithful and as devout as these men, it's not like there's a pill to take to get supernatural courage. Got my vitamin C, got my calcium, got my cholesterol medicine; can't forget my courage pill! Their courage was simply the courage of their deep love for God. Because they loved God more than life itself, they were faithful to God when their lives were on the line.

I am almost out of time, but here is the last thing we have to see: in addition to spiritual discernment and resilient devotion, these men had *divine presence*. When they refused to bow to the image, the king was so furious he had the furnace turned up seven times hotter than usual and he had the men thrown in. The fire was so hot that the servants who threw them in died in the flames, but then the king rose to his feet and everyone stood in awe as they looked in the furnace and saw the men walking around, unbound and unharmed. And suddenly, there weren't three, but four. Someone who looked like the son of God was with them. God did not deliver them from the fire; He showed up and delivered them in the fire.

I think God wants you to know today that whatever fire you are walking through, His presence is with you. Just last week Keren and I were on a date at a local coffee shop. We were talking to each other and suddenly she burst into tears. I said, "Keren, is everything ok?" She said, "That man who just walked in—when I saw him, I felt God tell me that he has just suffered a great loss, and God wants him to know that he is not alone." I said, "You should go and talk to him." So Keren very tentatively approached him, had a several minute conversation, and then came back to our table. I said, "Well?" She said, "When I told him I sensed God told me that he lost someone he loved, his jaw hit the floor. And he said, 'I just got back from my brother's funeral.'" Keren went on to tell him, "I think God is making it very clear to you that He sees what you are going through, He understands, He loves you, and He is here with you." I know there are a lot of people who feel like they are walking through a fire right now, and that the heat has been turned up seven times hotter than ever before. God has a message for you: He knows what you are going through, you are not alone in that fire. He is with you.

The ultimate way God showed us that he is with us is through Jesus. In Daniel 3 the king said, "No other god can save in this way." How much more true is that in what God did by sending His one and only son into the world to bear our sins and die in our place on the cross. The salvation of God is on display in the furnace, but it's a prelude to the salvation of God that will reach its climax on the cross. Jesus suffered the worst trial that could ever be endured and He overcame so that, in our entire existence, there would be no trial, no matter how great, He could not deliver us from. There is no other god who can save in this way!

As we close today, I want us to be able to worship the God who meets us in the fire.