

Selections from Daniel 3

King Nebuchadnezzar made a golden statue whose height was sixty cubits and whose width was six cubits; he set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon.

Accordingly, at this time certain Chaldeans came forward and denounced the Jews. They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, “O king, live forever! You, O king, have made a decree, that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, ... shall fall down and worship the golden statue, and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire. There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These pay no heed to you, O King. They do not serve your gods and they do not worship the golden statue that you have set up.” Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought in; so they brought those men before the king.

Nebuchadnezzar said to them, “Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods and you do not worship the golden statue that I have set up? Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn ... to fall down and worship the statue that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire, and who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands?”

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.”

Then Nebuchadnezzar was so filled with rage against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that his face was distorted. He ordered the furnace heated up seven times more than was customary, and ordered some of the strongest guards in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and to throw them into the furnace of blazing fire. So the men were bound, still wearing their tunics, their trousers, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the furnace of blazing fire.

Because the king’s command was urgent and the furnace was so overheated, the raging flames killed the men who lifted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. But the three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down, bound, into the furnace of blazing fire. Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up quickly. He said to his counselors, “Was it not three men that we threw bound into the fire?” They answered the king, “True, O king.” He replied, “But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the fourth has the appearance of a god.”

Nebuchadnezzar then approached the door of the furnace of blazing fire and said, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!” So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king’s counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men; the hair of their heads was not singed, their tunics were not harmed, and not even the smell of fire came from them.

Nebuchadnezzar said, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him. They disobeyed the king’s command and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. Therefore, I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that utters blasphemy against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins; for there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way.”

John 18:36-37

Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.’ Pilate asked him, ‘So you are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.’

Last week Jeremiah wrote a letter to the exiles in Babylon, telling them to build houses, to marry, to be part of the community there in Babylon. For in the welfare of the city where they live, they will find their welfare.¹

This week, we see the flip side of those instructions. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego live in Babylon at about the same time as Jeremiah.

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon has ninety-nine problems, but a tragic lack of self-esteem is not one of them. He has a golden statue of himself cast, a little over a hundred feet high and ten feet wide,² and set up on a plain just southeast of the city of Babylon.³ Then he issues a decree that, whenever the horn sounds, everyone must fall on their knees and worship this golden statue. Those who do not will be burned alive in a furnace.

We need to define a term here. Worship.

¹ Jeremiah 29.

² A cubit was approximately 20.24 inches, making the statue approximately 101’ 2” tall and 10’ 1.4” wide. The idea that the statue was cast rather than, say, bolted together from forged pieces, is my conjecture based on my limited metal-working experience, but it is reasonable. A huge sand-casting mold would be unwieldy, but they had the technology and it could do what is described here.

³ <http://biblehub.com/topical/d/dura.htm> for the location of “The Plain of Dura.”

What is worship? It means to bow down to something or someone or to treat them with the reverence and adoration appropriate to God.

When you really worship something, it represents your ultimate value, what you value more highly than anything else. Who you are, your very identity, is closely tied up in what you worship.

There is a purpose behind Nebuchadnezzar's whole statue exercise. It is not just the man's ego, though I'm sure that that was some small part of his motivation here. That purpose is to unify his Empire. Nebuchadnezzar has conquered many tribes, who worshipped many tribal deities. He sees potential fracture lines in his empire here. To prevent that, he wants to eliminate the cultural and religious differences between all the different tribes, and make everyone into proper Babylonians. He wants them to worship him and, through him, the Babylonian Empire.

So, he has the statue built and he issues his decree. Of course, someone immediately games the system and uses the decree for their own gain. It seems that there are some Jews who are taking Jeremiah's command very seriously, the one about looking to the welfare of the city. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego have reached high ranks in the city government.

These three young men have done all that you might expect ambitious servants of the king of Babylon to do. They dress Babylonian. They speak the Akkadian language. They have even taken Babylonian names – the names their mothers gave them were Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.⁴ Together with their friend Daniel, they have distinguished themselves by their wisdom and their service to the king.⁵ The one thing that they do not do is worship King Nebuchadnezzar's golden statue.

⁴ Daniel 1:7

⁵ See Daniel 1-2 for this story.

“Certain Chaldeans,” looking to get ahead, go to the king and denounce their rivals in the civil service.

So, the king has these three men brought in. He asks them whether this accusation is true. The three men plead guilty. They go on to tell the King that, “If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.”

The three men don’t know that they will survive the fiery furnace. They don’t know that they will not die horrific deaths of burning and smoke inhalation. But they refuse to worship the statue anyway.

These three men have done all that Jeremiah commanded. They have settled down for the long term and become part of the community. They “seek the welfare of the city where [God has] sent them . . . , and pray to the Lord on its behalf.”⁶ They don’t just pray, they also work, helping to run the city.

What they refuse to do, is allow the Empire or its king to become their object of worship. They will not become “100% Babylonians,” with their identity completely coming from the city of Babylon.

They work for the good of the city, but they remain Hebrews. They continue to worship God. And they will continue to worship God, no matter what King Nebuchadnezzar does to them.

⁶ Jeremiah 29:7.

This is a great story, and I'm sure that Christians who are being persecuted in places like Iraq and South Sudan really get a lot of comfort from it. What's there for us? I mean, Christians are not being persecuted here in the United States. Claiming that we are is, in fact, deeply disrespectful to those Christians who face summary execution for worshipping God.

Well, there's a lesson here about the First and Second Commandments, and a lesson about faith in God.

Those first two commandments not only made God's Top Ten, they head the list. Those commandments, just in case you don't recall the exact wording, are,

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God,⁷

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refuse to break these commandments, even if it might cost them their lives.

Nobody in America today is telling us that we ought to be getting our core identity from something other than being a Child of God, are they?

I hear many people telling us that, and making competing claims upon us.

Some people tell us that what is most important about us is that we are Americans, not like those godless heathens who live in other countries. So, the moment there is a disagreement,

⁷ Exodus 20:2-5.

we need to bomb all those other people, and destroy their communities and their churches, where they, ... wait for it, ... worship the same God we do.

Some people tell us that what is most important about us is that we are middle-class white people, not like those poor people who live over *there*, or those terrible people who did not choose their own ancestry properly. So, we need to act to make government decisions always hurt them and benefit people who look like us, down to and including our skin color and driving cars at least as expensive as ours.

Some people tell us that what is most important about each of us is our profession, and the varying degree of respectability that profession carries with it. So, we ought to admire some people and look down on others not because they are good people or bad, or their work is more or less important, but because, mostly, of how much money they bring home each month.

If any of these things becomes the most important thing about you or where you get who you are, then it has become an idol.

Let me tell you what God says the most important thing about you is.

You are a child of the Almighty God.

And you know what?

So are people of all nations and all races. John says that Jesus came into the world because God so loved the *cosmos*, the entire world,⁸ not just people whose ancestors came from one section of the globe.

⁸ John 3:16. *Cosmos* is the Greek word usually translated “world” in this verse, but, of course, *cosmos* means so much more than the human beings on one planet orbiting a small yellow star on one wing of the Milky Way Galaxy.

So are people who are poor. If you read the Bible, and those of you who have read the whole thing know what I'm talking about, you see, from beginning to end, a systematic bias in favor of taking care of people who are not able to take care of themselves.

So are people of all professions and no profession. Jesus ate with prostitutes and tax collectors, with lawyers and with fishermen.

We share that identity as children of God with all our brothers and sisters, and anything that is more important to us than that is an idol. Allowing an idol to determine how we live our lives is idol worship. It is difficult to follow God's command here, but it is that simple.

The second thing to learn from this story is a lesson about faith in God. Faith is not just trust that everything will be OK. Real faith in God is being OK no matter how it turns out, because you know who is in control of the big picture. That's a lot easier, if your identity comes from being a child of God and you're not worrying about all those idols out there.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego went into that fiery furnace because they refused to worship a golden statue of King Nebuchadnezzar. They went into that fiery furnace not knowing what would happen. I'm sure that they hoped God would save them, but they went, not knowing.

And they were OK. Not because God saved them, though you notice God did. They were OK, because they knew who they were – they were children of God. Children of God do not walk alone, even when they go into scary places.

Jeremiah told us last week to seek the welfare of the city where we live, for in its welfare we will find our welfare. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego show us today the flip side of that commandment – do not let the city become who we are. We are children of God, and we must not let anything else become more important than that.

And Children of God do not walk alone. God may not always save us from the scary or painful, but God walks with us always, even through the scariest times and places.⁹

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.

⁹ Psalm 23.