

When Idolatry Dies

Daniel 3:1-30

"If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us...but if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image you have set up."

Introduction: The call to follow Jesus is a call to die. We are called to *"deny self, take up our cross, and follow Him."* (Luke 9:23). New birth in Jesus Christ means that we are *new creations with old things passing away* (2 Cor. 5:17). Jesus lived, died, and rose again so that our sin, shame, and life would die with Him, and His life and righteousness would be given (imputed) to us (2 Cor. 5:21) so that we could get back to what we were created for: *glorify God in all of our life, worshipping Him alone, and obeying Him in all ways*. Repentance by faith is recognizing the lesser Gods we once ran after (1 Thess. 1:9) and turning to serve and obey the living God (1 Thess. 1:10). **Worship is not optional. Obedience is not optional for the believer and follower of Jesus.** In fact, He gave us His righteousness by faith SO THAT we could find our greatest joy in obeying and serving Him. When we believe we can get to God by our obedience apart from Christ, we believe a false gospel. When we believe that we do not have to obey once we've been saved and forgiven by Jesus, we believe a false gospel. This is the heart of understanding how we fight idolatry, and comprehending Daniel 3.

Daniel 3 accounts a timeless story, one recalled each years in Sunday Schools and dinner tables around the world. A king makes an idol, wants everyone to bow down to it, three brave souls refuse, are thrown into a fiery pit of sure death, but are kept safe by an angel of the true God, which causes a catharsis from the same king towards God. Courage, intrigue, dramatic escapes and diametrical changes of course make this a generational tale. But does it touch our life? Will we ever face bowing down to a 90 foot tall gold image? Would we ever face to prospect of being flung into a fiery furnace (or left for dead in the Mojave desert - same thing)?

Paul Schneider was a teenage German soldier during WWI, becoming a decorated lieutenant for his bravery and fierce fighting even after serious injuries. He fought at the same time as a German corporal named Adolph Hitler. Paul was raised studying the Bible but from a Critical View, meaning the Bible was full of mistakes, could not be trusted, and man was basically good, leading to an appeal toward Communism and Socialism. But through his teenage and early 20 years, he had spiritual angst, until God opened his eyes to the reality: *man is a sinner in need of redemption, the Bible is the Word of God, and Jesus was the only mediator*. Gretel, a young woman who would become his wife, commented that when eternal life entered his soul, he was filled with great joy. He became a pastor and preached a consistent message: ***that salvation is by repentance and faith in the crucified and risen Christ.***

As Hitler's influence and Nazi power spread, tension between State and church grew. Never offering a "Heil Hitler" in public since it was a form of idolatry, he also was ousted from a church that was adopting Nazi ideas. He bound together with other faithful pastors to write the Barmen Declaration, which said *"Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and death."* A few weeks later, at a public funeral of a young man out of the Hitler Youth program, the commanding officer, reviving old pagan legends, declared that the young man was not enlisted in Horst Wessel's battalion in heaven." Schneider could not stay quiet and corrected the gathering. This put him on the watch list. He would have people tell when he didn't salute. He was forced to sign agreements that Hitler was justified to take the Rheinland, which he refused to do. He was imprisoned, bullied, and threatened, but he did not stop preaching. Finally, he

was offered to leave Germany with his family if he'd give up his church. He refused, ending up in Buchenwald concentration camp.

On April 20, 1938 the camp was celebrating Hitler's 49th birthday. As a parade passed by all were to bow to the Swastika, "*the guards noticed the solitary figure who would not bow to the swastika -- Paul Schneider. For this he was viciously struck 25 times with an oxhide whip*" He would spend the next 15 months in a 4 foot by 10 foot box alone. After 14 months, he summoned the strength to peer through the bars and preach one of his last sermons: "Our Lord Jesus Christ came into the world to save us from our sins. If we have faith in him, we are put right with God...Our lord Jesus Christ who died for us has promised that we, by faith in him, may participate in his resurrection. He said, 'I am the resurrection and the life. He that believes in me shall never die.' Accept the Lord Jesus as your Savior and God will receive you as his child." Less than a year later, the starved, beaten, bleeding Paul Schneider died when the camp doctor injected a massive overdose of strophanthin. Paul was forty-one years old. Gretel became a widow with 6 kids at 35. Deitrich Bonhoeffer called Paul Schneider "our first martyr."¹

This story did not strike me because of the dramatic outcome, but because of the seriousness and sobriety of one man's commitment to obedience to Christ, His Word, and the gospel, unwilling to yield in worship to anything or anyone else. This is the marrow of Daniel 3.

Idolatry calls for cultural conformity: Bow or Die (1-7)

Motives of a King: Loyalty through worship

We are going to spend much time with King Nebuchadnezzar in the next weeks. He was unquestionably the most powerful person in the entire world, and he knew it. To break someone of pride at that level takes an act of God, which is what happens in these chapters. You'll remember that at the end of chapter 2, the king was singing the praises of Daniel's God, since only Daniel would give him the answer to his question about his dream and its interpretation. But it did not take him long to grasp onto the first part of the dream, which was the head of gold, which Daniel said was him. It's not a big leap to see the mind of the king who tried to reproduce this statue of his dream and make it a reality, and that is exactly what he did.

The measurements of the monstrosity was 90 feet high and 9 feet wide, most likely overlaid in gold. It was placed outside of Babylon on the plain of Dura so that many could gather round and see it for miles. He gathered 7 different levels of leaders, from all different lands, and had at least 6 different types of instruments played, ones from the conquered lands. As the band played, all were to bow. This is what the pride of idolatry does. The king demanded **loyalty to himself and his gods**. Anything short was insubordination and an act of sedition. For him, even **forced loyalty was better than nothing**, since his true idol was himself. BTW, this is why we have such a hard time living in the tension of disagreement in our country and even our churches: when we idolize ourselves in pride, any disagreement is actually a mark of disloyalty to our god (which is us!)

Motives of populace: Capitulation to keep Status Quo

I want you to notice the crowds of supposed leaders who bowed to worship like lemmings here. These represented the best of the best, brightest leaders of the day, and yet when the band played they willingly bowed to this effigy that they saw being built for months! It was built out of wood, brick, stone, and melted gold in a furnace set up next to it. They watched the laborers build it, saw the parts that

¹ Adapted from "War and Grace", short biographies from the World Wars, by Don Stephens, published by Evangelical Press, Faverdale North, Darlington England.

were crooked or misshapen, and yet with the harp was strummed and horn blew, they stretched themselves out. Why? For the same reason we capitulate to our idols today. These leaders wanted to keep the status quo and keep their ranking in the kingdom. They did NOT live by conviction but by compromise. There was not something greater they were living for, so if they had to do the dance of bowing to some stupid king's idol, so be it. It's a small price to pay to keep what we have. True conviction when faced with gain for compromise is rare. How rare? Only 3 would not yield.

Idolatry tempts through intimidation: *Death over Compromise* (8-18)

Anger produced when idols are exposed

We now get to the crux of the story. It was clear that the promotion of Daniel followed by the appointment of Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego over the affairs of Babylon (2:49) had sent shock waves throughout the ranks of leadership. Not only were these foreigners rather than Chaldeans (remember the Nebuchadnezzar's father was a Chaldean), but they were young and inexperienced. So what happens when your idol of power and rank gets messed with? You have to **cancel that person**, or in this case, **become a tattletale**. Some of the Chaldeans came to the king to inform him that these 3 high ranking officials were 1) not paying attention to him, 2) not serving his gods, 3) not bowing to the image he set up. **Remember, when you live a convictional life, it will fly in the face of others, reveal their idols, and they WILL TURN ON YOU.**

When the king heard this, he was red-faced angry, so much so that the language suggests his face was contorted. How dare they?! The audacity! The unmitigated gall! But perhaps out of a little humanity or because he actually knew who these 3 were, he gave them one more chance to prove their loyalty. So he had the band play one more round, imaginably with everyone else stopping and watching what would happen next. The king did not mince words: bow or die, for *who is this god who will deliver you out of my hands?* (v. 15). What was really going on? A battle of gods through the battle ground of worship. It was obvious that this was not simply bowing to a statue, it was a declaration of worship to a man and his supposed gods. Paul reminded us that an idol is really nothing but a piece of wood since there is only one true God (1 Cor. 8:4), but behind idols are demons (1 Cor. 10:20), so worshipping idols is the worship of demons.

Confidence produced by faith in an Uncommon God

Now we come back to these three Jewish young men. Daniel was apparently back at the palace keeping affairs in order or off on business somewhere else, so just the three are in view here. They saw the statue being built. They knew what was coming, but they came to festivities anyway, not faking a tummy ache to stay away. They could have faked bowing, justified bowing to each other like their many other exiled friends apparently did, or found another way around the standoff. But as they were escorted to the king and sure consequences, they spoke in a **united, calm, respectful, and clear manner**:

"O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so (if our God exists) our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king.

But if no, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods, or worship the golden image that you have set up."

This is one of the most profound, clear, and resolved responses in the face of death ever recorded. Now the **whole key to their response** is a proper view of God and His purpose for their lives. This not only gives conviction in what **we live for but also what we are willing to die for**. For the 3, death was far

better than disobedience, and worship of God far better than keeping their skin, and their lives were better to lose rather than to gain them in this life.

Notice that their statement separated **God's ability and His purpose**. God was powerful and able to save them, this they knew. Whether His PURPOSE was to do so, they did not know. This is the difference between what we'll call God's **circumstantial will and his revealed will**. His REVEALED will was clear to the three: *they should worship God and have no other gods beside Him*. There was no gray for them in this. When we are seeking **God's will for our life, we always start with His revealed will!** He reveals that He desires all people to be saved, to grow in holiness, to not giving up the meeting together with believers, to flee idolatry, etc. Far too often we **skip these in making decisions, or relegate His revealed will to secondary status**. Is it God's will to marry this person? First questions: *are they a believer and are you walking in purity?* (2 Cor. 6:14; 1 Thess 4:1-7) Should I take this job? Does it take me away from regular and habitual worship with fellow believers? (Heb. 10:25). Should I purchase the next bigger better thing? Am I content with what I have and fleeing the love of money? (1 Timothy 6:6-12). These are the first type of questions that should be asked in decision making.

***If we are not obedient to His revealed will in decision making, we can guarantee that whatever decision we make
IS NOT HIS WILL FOR OUR LIFE.***

What we do not know is God's **circumstantial will**. We always know that God makes decisions consistent with His character, that He cannot lie, and that He will do all things for the sake of His glory (Ps. 115:3). We know that to live is Christ and to die is gain (Phil. 21). So we know and can trust His purpose, but we do not know what that will specifically be in the present. For **Job**, he said *"Though He slay me, I will hope in Him."* (Job 13:15). **Esther** declared *"Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish"* (Esther 4:16). We follow God in obedience regardless of the outcome, if it means we get out unscathed or risk everything. **Obedience in death is better than disobedience in life**. What did this mean for the **big 3**? They stood confidently in God's revealed will and were able to accept God's circumstantial will, knowing they could trust Him.

Dale Davis called out how people are uncomfortable with this thinking about faith: *"In their view, faith involves being far more sure about God's ways. Their kind of 'faith' is allergic to any uncertainty about details. If they could re-write the chapter, they would have the friends declare: 'Nebuchadnezzar, we are going to call down God's deliverance; we O king, are going to bind the fire!' But the Bible doesn't do that. Faith does not predict God's ways; it simply holds to God's Word; faith obeys God's truth, it does not manipulate God's hand; faith is not required to plot God's course but only obey God's command. Faith's finest hour may be when it can oppose Nebuchadnezzar's three words (burning fiery furnace) with three of its own: 'But if not'²*

Is God ABLE to cure our cancer? Yes. Will He? According to His own will. If so to His glory, and if not, to His glory in our life. Is God ABLE to save? yes. Will He? According to the purpose of His glorious will! Is God ABLE to DELIVER us through any situation or my pain? Yes, to the praise of His glory, **but if not, we will continue to obey and worship Him alone**. Can we pray and ask for specifics? Absolutely, but we cannot force or manipulate His hand, and trust Him that whatever the outcome, it is for the praise of His name, the glory of His will, and the goodness of His people

² Dale Ralph Davis, "The Message of Daniel", p. 56

Idolatry lacks real power: *Salvation through Fire* (19-27)**Irrationality of trusting in idols**

The story goes on with Nebuchadnezzar's anger unleashed. Heating the furnace (an opening at the top but also openings on the bottom where smelting would take place) seven times hotter (or just REALLY hot), he had the **big 3** bound immediately without even stripping them of their formal garb. Here is where Nebuchadnezzar reminds us of how **anger produced by trusting in idols leads to irrational thought**: instead of just killing these guys, he wanted them *REALLY dead*. In heating the furnace he ended up killing his own trusted mighty men, soldiers who loyally defended the king with their lives. When anger or fear grip our minds and hearts, **irrational thought and action follow**, especially when the reaction is not consistent with the actual decision.

Impotence of idols in comparison to God

Trusting the Lord, the **big 3** accepted the outcome and were thrown from the top opening down into the fiery inferno down below. To the astonishment of all who were there but especially for the king, he observed **4 men**, who were *unbound, walking, and unhurt from the flames!* As the king called the men out, not only was their flesh unharmed, but their clothes didn't even smell of smoke. Anyone who's ever sat in front of a fire while camping can acknowledge that being *around a fire* will be known by all by how you smell. But **verse 27** captures exactly what happened: ***the fire had not any power over the bodies of these men.*** God is able and powerful, and He showed that without a doubt as He delivered these men out of the fire. The 3 believed this, but walked by faith through it.

Idolatry dies with real knowledge: *God above all Others* (28-30)**Reality of the true God seen**

Notice Nebuchadnezzar's second great response to the true God: *"Blessed by the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered His servants, **who trusted in Him**, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god other than their own."* What a testimony that came from a pagan, prideful, idolatrous king who was coming to grips with the reality of the true God! The **big 3** could have compromised and found an easier path, but they would have missed the point of following God with their whole heart! God not only set them on a path of promotion, but used them to reach this king as God brought him to repentance. The king still wasn't ready to bow his knee to the Lord (though he slightly overreacted and said he'd rip people limb from limb if they said anything against the true God - yikes!), but God was drawing Him to Himself by revealing His power, character and glory through faithful servants.

Realization of the demands of the true God

One thing that Nebuchadnezzar's response does acknowledge as he completely understood: *following God is a total, all in, whole hearted path*. The king demanded complete loyalty from those in his kingdom, but understood that if there was ONE GOD to rule them all, that God demanded complete and utter worship.

Is that how we approach our God? His demands are clear, total, and without compromise. And they are impossible! We can't do it! Which is why He gave us Jesus Christ, who was willing to condescend from His heavenly glory and become a servant to the point of death on a cross. He took our place, bearing God's wrath so that God could offer us forgiveness of sin and reconciliation to worship Him fully.

Nothing else will do. He demands us to love with our heart, soul, strength, and mind. Only Jesus allows us to do this, so we yield by faith to Him in ALL AREAS OF LIFE.

Heading into the 1924 Summer Olympics, **Eric Liddell**, a British sprinter was challenged by his sister Jenny about his love of running rather than focusing on his goal of becoming a missionary. He told his sister, "Jenny, God has made me for a purpose, but he's also made me for a purpose, and when I run, I feel His presence." During the Games, one of the heats for his primary discipline, the 100 meter dash, was held on Sunday. Liddell refused to compromise his convictions and accepted NOT winning a medal rather than break that commitment. He went on to capture gold in the 400, a race he had no business winning. But that is not the end of the story (although its the end of *Chariots of Fire*), but ended up dying on the mission field in a Japanese internment camp in 1945. He obeyed God in the small and great, willing to live by conviction and die by it, because obedience to God was better than any idol could hold.