

Faith in the Furnace

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 0 0] Well, good evening, everyone. So glad to see you here. If we've not yet met personally, perhaps we might have a chance to do that after the service. My name is Tommy. I'm a pastor here at Church of the Advent. For those of you who are returning, you know that at this part of our service every week, we turn our attention collectively to God's Word.

We do this as a part of one of the ways that we expect to hear from God. We believe that He speaks through His Word. And for those of you who are just joining us for the first time, we have been in a series the last couple of weeks looking at this fascinating book in the Old Testament, the book of Daniel. And Daniel may be familiar to some of you. If you know anything about it, it's a sort of a crazy, wild book that has beasts and cosmic warfare and visions and dreams and all kinds of things going on. And you may be tempted to ask, what would such a book have to do with us? It dates back to the 6th century B.C. It takes place in Babylon. That's a bit of a distant reality compared to where we are today. But what I think that we've been discovering over the last couple of weeks is actually this ancient document is incredibly relevant for us here in our lives, especially those of us who live in a place like Washington, D.C. Because ultimately this book is about a group of friends, young friends. They're young professionals. They all went to college together. They're very well educated, well trained. And now they've moved together into this sort of what is at this time the biggest city in the world. And they've all gotten government jobs. And they're trying to build a life for themselves. And they're asking this question again and again. And this is sort of the drumbeat of Daniel underneath all the fantastic things that are happening. There's this very practical question. How is it possible to live faithfully, to follow God faithfully, and to thrive in a culture that is either indifferent or hostile to your faith? How is it possible to follow God faithfully and to thrive in your job and family and friends? How is it possible to do those things if you live in a culture and a society that is either indifferent or largely hostile to your beliefs?

So they're asking that again and again and again. And today what we're going to see is this. As we look at chapter 3, we're going to see that it is impossible to answer that question unless we understand idolatry and the role that idolatry plays in our lives. You'll never understand the culture around you.

You'll never understand the city that you live in. You'll never even understand your own heart unless you understand idolatry and the impact of idolatry on everyone. So chapter 3 is all about idolatry. And we're going to ask three things from this passage about idols. Where do they come from?

How do we acquire them? In other words, what leads us to become attached to certain things as idols?

[3 : 1 6] What's involved there? And then thirdly, how can we resist them? Where do they come from? How do we acquire them? How can we resist them? Let's pray together.

Our Heavenly Father, our great temptation now as we open your Word, our great temptation is to rely now only on human wisdom and insight. Our great temptation is to believe that we somehow have what it takes. Lord, we know better. We know that unless you speak, unless your Holy Spirit works in us. There is no hope. And so we pray for you to speak, to illuminate your Word for us, to reveal through this written Word, the living Word, your Son, Jesus Christ. We pray this in His name. Amen.

So first of all, idols, where do they come from? The answer seems pretty obvious in Daniel chapter 3 at face value. It says in verse 1, King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, whose height was 60 cubits and its breadth six cubits. He set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. So imagine a 90-foot tall, nine feet wide version of the Washington Monument only plated in gold. And that's essentially what he built. And he put it on the plain of Dura for everybody to see. And then what does he do? He gathers all the who's who of Babylon, right? You read that list of all the officials who he called. He called all the leaders, all the who's who of Babylon, and he issues a decree. Whenever you hear the music, I want you to bow to and worship this idol. And anyone who doesn't is going to be cast into a burning, fiery furnace, most likely the furnace that was used to create this giant statue in the first place.

So it's clear that he is wanting this statue, something like an obelisk perhaps, to represent a deity of some kind. And so he builds a statue, and then what does he do? He ascribes to it divine significance. So idol worship is essentially that. Idol worship happens when somebody takes something, in this case a statue, but it could be anything, and they take this thing and then they ascribe divine significance to it. They set their whole heart on it. They imbue it. They begin to treat it as though it can offer them things that only God can offer them. We see this happening sometimes slowly, sometimes very quickly, often unconsciously. But this thing we allow to become more important than anything else, more important than God himself. Now it's easy to look at this ancient document and this statue and think about our modern culture and think, well, this is back then, but this doesn't really happen today. But it's interesting if we begin to penetrate into even the Babylonian pantheon and begin to understand these gods and goddesses that we read about in the ancient Near East, gods like Marduk or Ishtar or Anu. What do they represent?

These are personifications of what? Love, fertility, wisdom, power, wealth, right? Agricultural success.

[7 : 07] So these are personifications of things that existed then that still exist today. They were personifications that were then ascribed divine significance. They're created things that hold divine significance. Which tells us what about our first question? I mean, our first question is this, where do idols come from? What this shows us is this, that idols don't actually come from anywhere out here, right? The statue that Nebuchadnezzar builds isn't automatically, when the workmen forge it and build it and assemble it and it's laying there, it's not automatically an idol, it's just a statue.

When does it become an idol? It becomes an idol when Nebuchadnezzar ascribes divine significance. Right? So in other words, idols don't actually come from anywhere out there, they come from in here.

The source of idols is actually the human heart. That's where they come from. The human heart has the ability to turn anything into an idol. This is why John Calvin, the reformer, famously said that the human heart is an idol factory. Right? It's continually cranking out idols.

Human beings, by nature, are worshipers. We are, by nature, worshipers. And that's something that's very important for us to understand. In other words, we don't get to choose whether or not to worship.

The only choice we get, because we're human, is what we worship. Father Alexander Schmemmann, who's an orthodox priest and writer and thinker, brilliant, he says this, and I think he's spot on, he says, secularism is not ultimately about a rejection of God or the transcendent. You know, we think the secular age, secular culture, that ultimately what secularism is about is a rejection of the transcendent, rejection of God. He says, no, no, no, no, that's part of it. But here's what he says, secularism, I submit, is above all a negation of worship. If secularism in theological terms is a heresy, it is primarily a heresy about man. It is the negation of man as a worshipping being. So he says the great lie at the heart of secularism is that we, as human beings, choose whether or not to worship, that it's like a switch that we can flip.

[9 : 34] But if what he's saying is true, then saying that a human being can choose whether or not to worship is like saying that water gets to choose whether or not to be wet.

Right? So believers, atheists, we all worship someone or something. That's what hearts do. That's part of what it means to be human on an ontological level.

And the Apostle Paul in Romans 1 lays out the reality of idolatry and the fact that it's not just one sin among many, but rather that idolatry is actually the core problem of the human heart. This is the reason why we do the bad things that we do.

Right? All of you have integrity. All of you want to live a good life. All of you have values and principles and morals. Right? All of us, nobody thinks of themselves as a bad person. I don't know anybody personally who wakes up and says, I want to do a lot of bad things today. Nobody does that. So think about it. You don't wake up one day and say, I'm going to find a really good opportunity to lie to somebody today. You don't do that.

You wake up assuming that you're going to be honest and have integrity. And then what happens? A few hours into your day, you're standing with a group of people and it's people that you really admire and you want to be a part of that group.

[10 : 50] And they're all in on the fact that they all read the same article in The Atlantic. Right? And they're all talking and discussing about and kind of laughing and then they turn and they look at you and they say, well, did you read it? And just in that instant, you don't know why, you say, yeah.

That's amazing. Oh, I totally read it. Yeah, I totally read it. The day it came out. Right? And then like five minutes later, you're sitting there like, why in the world did I lie about that? What a stupid thing to lie about. And you're like Googling it so that you can read it so that nobody will find out that you're lying your pants off. Why do you do that? It's not because you woke up and said, I want to lie.

You do it because in that moment, the acceptance and approval of those people mattered more to you than your values. Mattered more to you than your integrity. Mattered more to you even than God.

In that moment, for five minutes, it became an idol. Right? Or if a friend of yours is in a destructive dating relationship and, you know, a lot of us know people in situations where they're dating somebody, living with somebody, sleeping with somebody, and it's an unhealthy relationship and it's destructive and you have a lot of red flags and a lot of concerns that this is not leading to a good place.

And yet, every opportunity that you might have to share your concerns, you don't say anything. And the only thing that you say is, I'm so happy for you. I'm so happy for you.

[12 : 13] Well, if you're happy, that's all that matters to me as long as you're happy. Now, why do we do that? Right? Nobody wakes up in the morning and says, I want to be an enabler today. You know, nobody wakes up and says, I'm going to put my friend at risk for lasting harm and regret.

We don't do that. You find yourself in this situation and then keeping the peace is more important than your friend, more important than your values, more important even than God.

For five minutes, that becomes your idol. Right? So this is how idols actually work. So the reason that I'm not more generous is not because I need to be told to be more generous.

Everybody tells me I need to be more generous. I'm not more generous because maybe, maybe I've made an idol out of financial security. I don't want to risk it. If I gave sacrificially, then I might not have enough.

Right? The reason I nag my spouse to death is not because I want to be that way. It's because I maybe made an idol out of control. And it terrifies me to love somebody and to be connected to somebody and to not be able to control them.

[13 : 19] I'm at their mercy. Right? The reason that I never ask for help, even when it's obvious that I need it, and the reason that I will just flame out by myself rather than ask somebody for help, maybe I've made an idol out of competence.

I don't want anybody to know that I need anything. Right? The list goes on and on and on. So the question, where do idols come from? They come from the human heart.

They're continually coming out of the human heart. And here's the point, sort of the first point I want to make. If we deny our nature as worshipers, right, if you persist in thinking that you have a choice, that you can decide whether or not to be religious, that you can decide whether or not to have a God, you're going to be blind to the role that idolatry plays in determining your behavior.

You're going to be controlled. And we will never change, never grow, never become free until we begin to recognize and reject the idols in our lives, these things of ultimate importance.

But here's the problem. Idols are very, very, very hard to resist. They're very hard to remove. We'll talk about that in a minute. On the flip side, they're quite easy to acquire.

[14 : 30] And this is what we see as we enter our second point, the second question. If idols come from the heart, then how do we acquire them? And what determines which idols take hold in our hearts?

King Nebuchadnezzar, you've got to give it to him. Not very spiritually insightful. Again and again and again, he kind of misses the point. Right? I mean, for example, in chapter 2, he has a great dream about a big golden statue that God brings crashing to the ground.

And then in chapter 3, what does he do? He builds a great, big, giant golden statue. So not very spiritually insightful, but brilliant when it comes to strategy and understanding human nature.

He understands that coming to worship an idol isn't an intellectual choice that we make. He understands that if he sets this statue up, commands everybody to worship it, that they might fake it, they might bow when they're supposed to, but they're not actually going to worship this thing in their hearts.

Unless, what? He employs a two-pronged strategy. He uses seduction and fear. Seduction and fear.

[15 : 41] The first thing he does brilliantly is to seduce them. How does he do it? Where do you see it in the chapter? The music.

The music. He could have just said, bow five times a day. He could have said, bow whenever you hear the gong. You know, he could have said, bow when I bow.

He could have said any number of things, but he says, no. It repeats again and again throughout the passage. When you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, you are to fall down and worship the golden image.

Why the music? Behavioral conditioning. Right? The association that is forged in the heart. Music has a very seductive power. And here's the thing we need to understand.

A lot of idols become idols not because we chose them. We don't even know what's happening. They become idols because we're seduced, because our hearts and imaginations are captured.

[16 : 42] And music is one great way to do just that. But imagine if Nebuchadnezzar lived today and he had all of the various forms of media at his disposal that we have. Right?

Look at popular music today. Look at video games. Look at popular books. Look at movies. Right? All of them are filled with idolatrous content.

Right? So if I watch two dozen films, half of which are probably made by Disney, where the story is essentially this, that you have somebody who's sort of oppressed by societal norms and expectations, and they fight the good fight to cast all of those things off, and their character arc is essentially to discover that the secret to happiness and fulfillment is being true to themselves, regardless of what anybody says.

And I watch that again and again and again. Right? Nobody has to tell me to bow to the idol of individualism. Right? Nobody has to tell me that expressive individualism is something.

I'm just going to, my heart is captured by that idea. I begin to assume that this is just the way the world is, that this is what I should be doing. Right? But if you look at today, you know, people say that individualism is sort of tearing the West apart.

[17 : 55] Right? The atomization of society. People's attitude, I come first. Right? My kid comes first. And only, and rejecting the idea that we're an interconnected web of relationships who depend on each other.

Another example. If I watch a couple of dozen movies where people meet, and they fall in love, and there's this deep passion, but the odds are stacked against them.

Right? But over time, they courageously risk everything to overcome the odds, and they end up together. Right? And the message that comes through loud and clear is that passionate desire is the strongest force in the world.

And passionate desire allows you to overcome anything. Right? I'll watch a couple of dozen movies like that, and what? I don't have to be told to bow to the idol of romanticism. My heart has already been taken away by that.

So then what happens when I sort of look around at my real life? You know, I look at my family. I look at my husband or my wife. I look at my kids. Right? You look around, and you sort of look at the movies and this idea that sort of captured your imagination of what things should be like.

[19 : 07] Right? And then you look at your life, and you think, you know what? This passionate desire. Man, they were really crazy about each other, and we just don't seem to be that way. And sometimes I feel the desire, and sometimes I don't.

And sometimes I feel in love, but sometimes I don't. And sometimes I'm not even sure if I like this person. And we're so different in so many ways. And I don't really see us on this adventure overcoming obstacles against all odds.

And unless by obstacles you mean, you know, vacuuming Cheerios out of the backseat of the car. This is really what our life is constituted by, and it's just not. And or you're dating, right? And you're looking at the person that is asking you out or the person that you've been hanging out with.

And we have these unbelievably high expectations, right? That they have to be Photoshopped perfect. Right? And if they're not, if I don't feel that passionate desire like I see up here, if I don't feel that, then something must be missing.

And we're terrified of settling. And so what do we do? We begin to pick it all apart in our brains. We criticize our spouse. We begin to criticize the people that we're dating.

[20 : 13] We look at the dating pool, and we say that there's nobody out there. And yet there's, you know, three dozen people that we're completely ignoring because they don't kind of meet that standard. And we get, and what are we doing when all that is happening?

What are we actually doing? Well, every time we went to the theater, we heard the sound of the horn, the pipe, the lyre, the trigon, the harp, and the bagpipe. And we're bowing.

Right? We're bowing. The music and the movies and the ads of our culture are not spiritually neutral. Right? They're not spiritually neutral. They're full of idolatrous content.

Now, does this mean that we should avoid it all? Absolutely not. That's not the point. But don't be blind to it. Right? Question it. If you're going to criticize somebody, don't criticize the person that you're dating or your poor spouse.

Criticize the content that you're consuming. Always filter it. Always critique it. Always ask questions. What are the assumptions behind this? What are the values that are being put forth in this?

[21 : 15] What does this tell me about human nature and human flourishing? What's the implicit statement about what it means to be me? We don't have anybody these days, you know, nobody like Nebuchadnezzar, would ever say in our country, I want you to bow to this idol now.

Nobody would say that overtly. But listen, our economy is driven by idolatry. Our economy is driven by it. Right? Our economy relies on us being worshipers of consumerism.

Right? Our idolatry regarding individualism. That's necessary for our society to function. It would be bad for the economy if we began depending more on each other so that we didn't have to buy as much stuff.

That would be bad for the economy. Right? So idols can be very, very seductive. That's the first point.

That's the first way that we see Nebuchadnezzar sort of enacting and bringing this idol into the culture. The next thing he does is he uses fear. Along with seduction, not quite as effective, but fear can be an effective way to drive idols into people's hearts.

[22 : 27] Right? And if you think about your life, you know, Nebuchadnezzar uses fear by very blatantly saying, if you don't bow to this idol, I'm going to throw you in the furnace and you're going to die. A horrible death. Right? So there's your incentive. But we have idols that are driven by fear just as much.

Right? If I'm perfectionistic, I don't know if anybody else struggles with perfectionism. If I'm perfectionistic, maybe it's because, maybe it's because perfectionism has become an idol.

And maybe that's because, maybe it could be any number of reasons. Maybe I'm terrified of falling short. I don't know. Maybe I grew up with parents who always made me feel like I was just almost, it was never quite good enough.

And that instilled in me this deep, deep, deep fear that I will fall short. And so maybe that fear drives my perfectionism. Or if my job has become an idolatrous obsession.

Or if my kids and having a perfect family has become an idolatrous obsession. Maybe it's because I'm terrified that my life won't mean anything without those things. Right?

[23 : 30] Maybe it's the dread fear of meaninglessness, of purposelessness, that drives me to do that. So how do we acquire idols? Well, it's kind of a trick question.

They actually kind of acquire us. Right? They capture our hearts. They capture our imaginations. They play off our longings. They play off our fears.

Most of the time in ways we're not even aware of. So this leads us to the third and obviously the most important question. How do we then resist idols?

If they're generated in the heart and if they're acquired by capturing our hearts and imaginations.

Playing off our longings and our fears. Then how do we actually resist them? This brings us to the climax of the story. Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow to the idol.

[24 : 27] And of course we have some jealous officials over here who resent the fact that they've been promoted. Who rat them out to the king. And so they're immediately brought before Nebuchadnezzar.

And Nebuchadnezzar says, we're going to play the music and I want you to bow. And if you bow, great. If you don't bow, then we're going to cast you into this furnace. And listen to what they say.

Well first I'll point out this. Look at what he says. I think this is actually a key verse in the passage. He then asks this. Who is the God who will deliver you out of my hands?

Who is the God who will deliver you? And I think that's significant because I think that's the core kind of jab that lies at the very heart of idolatry.

And the way it plays off our fears. The belief that without this or that idol there is no hope. Right? That's what our idols tell us. Right? Without this thing, my life is not worth living.

[25 : 25] Without this thing, I can't imagine going on. Right? If I don't get this thing. If I can't be with this person. If I can't have this kind of credential. Or get this job.

Or if I'm not able to live at this standard. Or if I have to face this, then my life isn't worth living. I can't handle it. It's too much. Right? That's the idol. What God will deliver you from that?

If you have to do without this idol, what God can possibly deliver you? It's the lie that without this thing, there is no hope. And then look what they say. They say, Oh, Nebuchadnezzar.

We have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace. And he will deliver us out of your hand, oh king.

Verse 18. Most important verse in the passage. But if not. Two most important words. But if not. Be it known to you, oh king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.

[26 : 25] If not. In other words, they have no idea if God's going to deliver them. They have no idea. But they say, whether God saves us or even if not. Even if he doesn't save us.

We're not bowing to your idol. And of course they're thrown into the furnace. And what happens? Nebuchadnezzar looks in. It's so hot. It's seven times hotter than normal. The people that throw them in are killed by the flames.

But Nebuchadnezzar looks in and sees them walking around. But not just three people walking around unharmed. But he sees a fourth man with them. One who looks, quote, like a son of the gods. And it's easy to make a big deal out of the fact that God saved them from the furnace.

But we need to remember, they had no idea they were going to be saved. They had no idea they would be spared. And yet they were still willing to refuse. So the question becomes, how are they able to resist the idol like this?

How are they able to resist in the face of certain death? It's because they understand the truth about idols. That idols ultimately are empty.

[27 : 28] They're bankrupt. Right? Idols promise, but they can never, ever, ever deliver. They seduce us by promising to fulfill our longings. But they only ever leave us wanting more.

Right? They promise to allay our fears. But they only leave us more and more and more afraid. Idols promise that all they do is foster a greater and greater and greater dependence.

They take. And the situation is fascinating. These men could have bowed and spared themselves the furnace. But in that attempt to save their lives, they would have forfeited their souls.

And what does that sound like? What does that remind you of? What does this situation remind you of? Matthew chapter 16. Jesus tells his disciples, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

For whoever would save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?

[28 : 42] What's he saying? Refusing idols? Resisting the idols that have taken hold? That can very often feel like we are walking right into a blazing furnace of suffering.

This thing that you've been holding on to. That you've been putting your hope on. That has sparked your imagination. The idea that you might have to live without it. It seems to guarantee fiery suffering.

I cannot possibly imagine life without this person. I cannot imagine life if I'm not able to get this job. If I'm not able to do this thing. If I'm not accepted into this program.

I can't. That's going to be a furnace of suffering. What will I be worth? But the profound spiritual truth is this. Is that in doing that. In giving in to that idol.

In saying yes and bowing to spare that furnace. We may win the day. But we lose the war. Right? We lose our souls.

[29 : 40] We're ultimately given over into a spiritual slavery. And the way we know that is by looking at Jesus. Because unlike the idols of the world.

Jesus Christ does not make empty promises. And the way we know that is because what he did. Because when you look at Jesus. And you look at the good news of the gospel. Jesus Christ actually plunged into the furnace.

Right? He went into the furnace of God's wrath. But unlike Daniel 3. Nobody rescued him. Right? Nobody preserved him. He was consumed by it.

Right? But because he did that. He's able to save us. And more than that. He's able to ensure. That one day all of those longings. Will actually be met. And one day all of those fears.

Will actually be overcome. So the question. The question is this. How do we resist idols? Well very practically I'll tell you this.

[30 : 41] Search your heart. Follow your longings and your fears. Begin to figure out and identify. What the idols are that hold sway in your life. And then take those idols. And hold them up to the light.

Hold them up to the light. And compare them to Jesus Christ. Look at the idols that have taken hold. And ask them. What have you ever done for me? What have you ever done for me?

You've promised. Promised. Promised. Promised. You've promised that if I just do this. Then I'll meet this standard. You've promised that if I just get this. Then I'll be happy. You've promised that I get. And you've promised and you've promised.

But have you ever delivered? Is my longing any less? Right? Or my fears any less? All you've done is take from me. Take. Take.

Take. And hold them up and then compare them to Jesus Christ. See all other idols say this. Idols say this. Bow to me or it's the furnace for you.

[31 : 39] Bow to me or it's the furnace for you. You don't want that. Only Jesus Christ says I love you so much. That I went into the furnace. I went into the furnace for you.

Before you even asked. So that you don't have to. So that you'll know that the flames will never overcome and consume you. That they'll only refine you.

They'll only cleanse you. They'll only mature you. In the face of that kind of love. Jesus plunging himself into the furnace of God's wrath. In the face of that kind of sacrifice.

All the idols of the world will simply melt away. They'll melt away. Let's pray. Our Father we do realize again that the things that hold sway in our hearts are deep.

They're spiritual. They're not easily removed. We know that we can't simply yank them out without replacing them.

[32 : 40] That the more we pull them up by their roots. The more others will grow up to take their place. We know that the only way that we can be free from idols. Is if you plant life in us.

That leaves no room for idols to grow. And so Lord we pray even as we are gathered here. Even as we join together in prayer and praise. Even as we receive your meal. Your feast of bread and wine a little bit later on.

That in all these ways you would be planting and growing your life in us. So that no idols have room to grow. That they would starve and die. We pray this in your son's holy name.

Amen.