

Daniel 3 - The Worship War in Your Heart

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Turn with me this morning to Daniel chapter 3. We're returning today to our study of Daniel after a week off, so let's remember where we are, what we've seen so far.

We saw in this book that a stage was set for a clash of kingdoms. Which king is stronger, Nebuchadnezzar and the kingdom of Babylon or Yahweh and the kingdom of Israel?

Today we're essentially going to watch round three of that fight unfold. And in that setting, as these kingdoms have clashed, we've seen God's people, including Daniel and his friends taken into exile in Babylon.

And they face what it looks like to live in a culture with values and priorities very different from theirs. We've been asking together how we engage in a pluralistic culture with a singular devotion to God.

[1 : 13] And we've learned from Daniel already that we need a proper perspective of what's valuable as Daniel declines the king's food plan. We learn God is so valuable that knowing him is greater than having all the treasures of the world.

To live faithfully in a culture like ours also requires a proper perspective on strength. Through Nebuchadnezzar's dream and Daniel's interpretation of it, we saw that God's unlimited strength is especially for weak people like me.

Today in chapter 3, we reach that classic Mother's Day passage of the fiery furnace. And timed so beautifully today, we'll encounter a giant statue, an enraged king, all sorts of frightening things like fiery furnaces.

And it can all seem very distant from us, can't it? Any of you concerned about being thrown in a fiery furnace this week? No, nobody? Okay.

How about an enraged monarch is going to order you to bow down to a golden idol? No, not that either? Although I actually come to...

[2 : 31] No, no, definitely not. Anyway, the seemingly distant challenge that doesn't seem to have anything to do with our lives that would be far away is actually a challenge that we face moment by moment, daily.

It's the story, the question of what is worthy of our worship. We'll see that's actually at the heart of the entire chapter here, and it's at the heart of our lives all the time because we're always worshiping something, aren't we?

But what or whom are we worshiping? Shaping our lives around, valuing above other things, seeking fulfillment from.

That's the question this morning. What are we worshiping? We'll read through the story as we go, but first let's pray and ask for God's help as we open His Word.

Pray with me. God, Your Word is true. And it is true not just because this story really happened a long time ago, although we have lots of evidence for that, but it's true because it teaches us about You and about You things that are still true of You today.

[3 : 57] So God, we need to hear from You. We long to know more of You, to know You better, to follow You more faithfully, to extend Your glory more fully.

And so would You teach us by Your Spirit this morning as we look to Your Word. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. We need to remember how chapter 2 ends before we jump into our story for this morning.

In chapter 2, Daniel has just interpreted King Nebuchadnezzar's dream for him, a dream where the king and his kingdom are the head of gold on a statue that will over time be replaced by other

kingdoms, silver and bronze, etc.

And all of those kingdoms will eventually be destroyed by a very small stone. And the king, upon hearing this, has thanked Daniel and praised the God of Daniel for this dream.

And then chapter 3 opens, strangely, with the king making an image. The same word, their image for the statue in chapter 2, it's used several times.

[5 : 11] Nebuchadnezzar decides to make a statue, maybe like the one in his dream. It's an image of gold this time. And he sets the image up and requires everyone to worship it.

It's going to be idolatry on display on a massive scale. A huge idol, 90 feet tall and 9 feet wide. You could picture it to give you a little bit of an idea, just slightly wider than the center aisle here, and then an idol that goes up and smashes through the roof of the ceiling.

Pretty huge, right? 90 feet tall and 9 feet wide, all of gold. But what the passage tells us is most important about the idol, and it tells it in an almost humorous or sarcastic way in the number of times it's repeated, is that Nebuchadnezzar set it up.

The chapter opens with him making it, and then he sets it up. Look at the first seven verses of Daniel 3. King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, and then he sent to gather all of these people together, all these officials to come to the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

They stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and he had a herald proclaim aloud, you're commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, you're to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up.

[6 : 42] And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning, fiery furnace. This is Nebuchadnezzar's great idea, and in seven verses, six times, we're told that this is an image King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

It's all about him, isn't it? You know, he's had this dream, and maybe he's thinking, that statue with the golden head, that was nice. I liked being told I was the golden head, but wouldn't it be even better if you had one that was all gold?

That was all about me and my kingdom? Ninety feet, all gold? He's grasping for power and fame, isn't he, having been told that his kingdom will eventually be taken away.

Nebuchadnezzar doesn't actually think this idol is the great thing, does he? What does Nebuchadnezzar think is great? He wants everyone to know that he is great.

That's one way to think about what an idol is. It's something we worship to get what we really want, to build the kingdom of self.

[7 : 50] In other words, it's false worship. Not actually treasuring the thing itself that we're bowing down to, but what it can get us. The people of Israel, for example, many years before, wanted to fit in.

They wanted a God like the nations around them. Wanted one they could see and touch and carry before them in battle. So in Exodus chapter 32, they build an idol in the form of a golden calf. Nebuchadnezzar wanted power, control over people, fame among the nations, and he uses the idol to promote his kingdom of self, right?

Now at this point, we need to recalibrate our thinking a little bit because in the story of the fiery furnace, at least the one I've heard since I was in three-year-old Sunday school, who am I in that story?

Which character do I relate to when I hear the story of the fiery furnace? Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, right? I am the hero. I am going to stand strong and trust God and be faithful.

[9 : 04] And we'll get there. But what I've realized this week is how prone I am to being like Nebuchadnezzar. Worshipping idols to get things that I really want.

You can think about it in terms of money being an idol. There's a classic one we talk about, having an idol of money. And when we talk about that, what we don't mean, I don't think many of you go home and what you do is you collect \$1 bills and \$100 bills and build a tower of them with quarters at the base of it and bow down and say, oh, this green paper is just the best stuff I've ever seen. I just worship it. That's not what it means to have an idol of money, is it? No. What we're actually worshipping is what the money can get us.

The money is something you use to get what you want. Security, perhaps. Prestige, perhaps. Comfort, perhaps.

Barbie dolls, perhaps. Legos, perhaps. Whatever builds your ideal kingdom of self, maybe money can get that for me.

[10:19] Remember when we talked about building our own kingdoms of self and the way we like them to be? Mine included obedient children, adoring congregants, peaceful relationships in all of life, all part of the kingdom of will, remember?

Remember, I'll worship anything some days to get that kingdom to be just that way, to make those things happen. I'll make an idol of work, for example, to get the praise of man.

I'll shape my life around work, around time in the office, prioritizing that to gain what I think I really need to be fulfilled, and in that moment, it's the praise of man.

That's idolatry, isn't it? Building the kingdom of self. It looks just like Nebuchadnezzar, just without the gold statue. Nebuchadnezzar is demanding that everyone bow to his kingdom and make him feel powerful and important.

Idolatry on display. But as the story goes, not everyone agrees to bow down to his idol, right? In fact, some of his most important government officials refuse to bow down.

[11:37] They don't follow the king's command. And it's reported to the king, in a furious rage, we're told, the king drags the three friends in. He demands to know what's going on, and he gives them one more chance.

If you'll bow down now, it'll all be forgiven. Verse 15, but if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning, fiery furnace. And who is the God who will deliver you out of my hands?

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, O 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, O king.

But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up. But faith is on display here, isn't it?

Here are Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced once again with a choice to maintain their distinctive identity and obey God who's told them not to bow down to man-made idols, or to compromise and disobey God by bowing to the king's idol.

[12:55] The choice, of course, is complicated slightly by the whole fiery furnace idea. There are potentially life and death consequences for their choice, right?

So what we see played out is not the false worship of idolatry, but rather true worship. That God himself is valuable to these friends.

He himself is worthy of their worship, their trust. They're shaping their lives around his ways and the things he has called them to. You see, they want God, not something else that God can give them.

Listen again to what they say in verse 17. 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, O king.

But if not, but it is, on the other hand, possible that he won't deliver us in this way from the fiery furnace. But you need to know that even if he doesn't, we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.

[14:01] Know this. As I said a couple of weeks ago to the younger generation, it's not going to get any easier to make difficult choices to follow God.

The heat will continue being turned up. Worshiping God will continue to cost you something. You will be choosing the reproach of Christ over the treasures of Egypt.

In the terms of that passage that we read. You will be choosing God and some costly pain or loss over an idol and some reward temporarily.

And so if that's the choice you're going to be faced with, God must be of supreme value to you or it's not going to make any sense. It's God and loss over idol and gain.

God better count a lot. If you're only worshiping God to get something else you really want, there will be many, many times where the idols appear to get it for you more easily or more certainly than God would.

[15:13] Think about the three friends in this passage. Imagine they loved God only for the safety and security he provided them as his people. They admit themselves it's possible God won't save them physically from the fiery furnace.

They don't really know, do they? So the easiest and the most certain way to save their lives if what they want is safety and security is just to bow down to the idol for a second. I mean a pretty small

compromise.

We'll do it this one time, then we'll go back and hope we don't get caught again. What about their potential impact for God's kingdom? What a noble thing to have as their goal.

Look where God's placed them, right? These are guys who have risen to the top in a pagan government. They're positioned to influence this nation for God.

And so certainly it seems reasonable that just a little nod of the head here, it's not very much. And they can keep their jobs. They can be used for the kingdom in ways that, hey, if they asked for advice from you or me, we might say, yeah, yeah, yeah.

[16:22] Yeah, you need to keep that. You need to stay in there. Do what it takes. God's placed you there for a reason. Just stay. You see, false worship turns God into an idol that gives us what we really treasure.

True worship treasures God himself. Here's what these friends are saying. Even if we found out that it would cost us our lives, we will not serve your gods or bow down to your idol.

That's what they're saying in these verses. Can you say that? Even if we found out that it would cost us our lives, we will not serve your gods or bow down to your idol.

Even if we found out it would cost us our position, our success, our planned kingdom impact, we will not serve your gods or bow down to your idol.

We see that the three friends have faith in God, not in the outcome. There will come times for us when the circumstances would tempt us otherwise.

[17:30] And if we are to worship God rather than our idols, we must have faith in God, not in the outcome. They don't know whether they will burn or not. But they know they can trust God and that He is worth it.

This is what really breaks my heart about the heresy of what is often called the prosperity gospel. The health and wealth preaching that's so popular in our day.

It's not merely that it's unbiblical, which it is. It's not merely that it ignores the reality of suffering, which it does.

But the thing that really is most grievous about it is that it uses God as an idol. God is to be trusted to get something else that you really want.

And if you're not getting the home, the healing, the help you need, then you're not trusting Him enough. That's what He's there for.

[18:34] The message is not that God Himself is enough to fulfill you, but that God will get you enough other things that will fulfill you, and then you'll be happy.

To be honest, though, what angers me most about this heretical teaching is that it's in my heart, too. We don't have it on the books here at our church, but we have it in our hearts, don't we?

The ability to use God to get what we really want. I hate hearing someone teach the prosperity gospel because it exposes that I, too, use God for my kingdom.

Pastors are especially bad at this. We're positioned to be able to do this in my kingdom. People respect and admire me as a model of spirituality.

And so it's a temptation for a pastor to get on Facebook, let's say, or Twitter, and just throw something out there that can be shared, not so much to encourage or shepherd God's people to share what God is teaching me, but to see how many people are going to like this comment that I make and say wonderful things about it and think, oh, what a spiritual guy.

[19:55] What a godly thing he said on Facebook. And so to feel validated by how many people respond positively and find me so spiritual.

I'm right back with Nebuchadnezzar, using God as an idol to get what I really value. Not him, but the respect and admiration of men.

Many of us do this as parents. We use God to get the moral or obedient children that we so desperately want. Some of you are actually here for that very reason at this church.

I know not because I'm so wise, but because you told me so yourself. That you came, that you wanted to go to church, to have a place where your kids could be raised in an environment that teaches the values you grew up with, so that they would have that experience too.

What you really wanted was not God himself, but something else that he could give you. Listen, if that's you, I'm not trying to run you off.

[21:04] But I'd invite you to consider that God might have something for you too, not just for your kids. God himself is what's valuable. He is the one worthy of our worship, which means that I need

him and my kids need him.

Right? What are we bowing down to? Is God our God or is God an idol we would use for what's really valuable to us?

It may seem easy to talk about faith being in God and not in the outcome in a passage like this, where what happens?

I mean, you know how the story ends. We already talked about it with the kids. God delivers, doesn't he? He shows up. They're saved. So, of course, that was nice. They just trusted God. It didn't matter what happened to them because he saved them anyway.

No big deal, right? What about all those times he seemingly doesn't deliver? There's sometimes much longer conversations that I'd love to have.

[22 : 11] When you're facing death, the loss of a loved one, the brokenness of a relationship, any suffering that seems interminable or final.

Longer conversations, certainly. But for now, know this. Here's where this passage helps us here. This is why God continues to show himself in this book and throughout his word as the most powerful, the most wise, the most trustworthy one.

We need him to be that because sometimes it takes an eternal or sovereign perspective that we don't have to understand how some awful suffering could be working for the good of God's people. Sometimes it takes that, doesn't it? Sometimes we don't have a perspective to say, oh, let me explain to you how this is a good thing. No. No. Often, God's sovereign, eternal perspective is required.

Sometimes it requires faith in things we can't see to trust that God didn't abandon his people because from all we can tell, he did. But these three friends point us, even before they are delivered, before they know God's going to show up in the furnace and protect them, they point us to the fact that God can be trusted even if he doesn't deliver in the way we expect.

[23 : 39] We see that in many other places with God's people who endure deep pain, seemingly without rescue. Fiery trials, Peter calls them. Many Old Testament believers go through them.

Paul endures some of them. Jesus endures some. But in all of them, what God promises is to be present with us.

And that's the real hope of the end of this passage where we see God on display. The king, Nebuchadnezzar, enraged even more by the response of these three friends, orders the furnace heated much hotter.

We'll pick it up at verse 22. Because the king's order was urgent and the furnace overheated, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning, fiery furnace. Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste.

[24 : 41] He declared to his counselors, Did we not cast three men bound into the fire? They answered and said to the king, True, O king. He answered and said, But I see four men unbound walking in the midst of the fire, and they're not hurt.

And the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods. Nebuchadnezzar says, What's going on? This is not what was supposed to happen. The three friends come out of the furnace completely unharmed.

The king praises Yahweh and orders protection for God's people. God in dramatic fashion wins round three of the clash of the kingdoms. He's on a roll now.

The question often asked is, Who's that fourth person that the king sees in the furnace, right? We all want to know. Who is it? It's possible that it's one of the few Old Testament Christophanies, a pre-incarnation appearance of Jesus himself.

That could be. The text doesn't really make that clear. What is clear is that the person showing up in the furnace represents God himself showing up in the furnace with his people.

[25 : 52] That's what we talked about with the kids earlier. They've already filled in the blanks. God is always with us. Even in the hard times. That's what's happening here.

Because these are hard times. Facing the wrath of ungodly leaders. Facing severe physical pain. Facing severe hopelessness and despair.

God promises to be present. In fact, that is the promise. Not that the suffering is going to go away. Not that it will never happen.

But that he will be with you. Not his mere physical presence with you. But biblically, God's being with you means he's working for you and for your good in the midst of the suffering. Notice God does not deliver by keeping the friends out of the furnace, does he? He delivers by being with them in the furnace. If you're seeking to honor God, life in this world will be difficult. [26 : 55] He promises that too. But he will not leave you alone. And he will not leave you ultimately unprotected. I remembered this week a song I used to hear on the radio back in high school.

It's not necessarily the best song I've ever heard. But this part of it is true, I think, and helpful. And this is written by Benton Stokes and Tony Wood. Sometimes he calms the storm.

With a whispered peace be still. He can settle any sea. But it doesn't mean he will. Sometimes he holds us close and lets the wind and waves go wild.

Sometimes he calms the storm. And other times he calms his child. He will not leave you alone. The fire may well come.

The storm may well rage. But you won't be in it alone. Even when from everything you can tell you actually are. He will not leave you ultimately unprotected.

[28 : 02] Oh, things may happen that feel to you that you've been abandoned. And that nothing could ever rescue you from what has happened. God is there and is protecting his children.

And ultimately we'll see that that happens. He's strong enough to promise that. Remember we talked about that. He can guarantee that. How would God show us that in this passage this morning?

He doesn't want you walking away thinking this is about heroic Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. No, what's this passage about? It's about a faithful God who is greater than Nebuchadnezzar.

Who alone is worthy of our worship. He protects his servants while Nebuchadnezzars die. He earns the loyalty of his people rather than demanding it.

He delivers from the hottest rage and the severest threats of the most powerful kings. Worship and trust him. He's the only one worthy of it.

[29 : 03] He shows up. He delivers. He gives and only asks you to trust him to do that for you. When has your idol ever been there working for you and ultimately protecting you?

Your job. Your mistress. Your addiction. Whatever the idol is always demands more from you rather than giving more to you.

Those idols never give lasting fulfillment so they continue demanding to be fed. The only one worthy of our worship is the one who is actively present in our pain.

And who ultimately protects his people. That's what this is about. There's a war in all of our hearts for our worship. It's going on today.

Who will we worship? The battle will rage tomorrow in small decisions? In big decisions? Will we bow down to treasure and shape our lives around something man-made that can never truly deliver?

[30 : 17] Or will we bow down to treasure and shape our lives around the God who is always able to deliver and is always with us even and especially in the hard times?

His word this morning would remind your heart that he is the only one worthy of your worship. After all, of all the gods your heart loves to worship, he is the one who has entered in to your suffering.

The only one who has done that. Jesus has experienced your pain. He experienced the brokenness of this world. The pressures of hard decisions.

The attacks of men. And ultimately, of course, the pain and rejection of the cross. Os Guinness tells a story from World War II.

A time in history when dictators were demanding that masses bow down to them, right? He tells the story of a Russian woman who was in church one Sunday morning and KGB agents had been sent to root out Christ worship.

[31 : 32] And they found this particular older woman kneeling and kissing the feet of a wooden carving of Jesus on the cross. And a KGB agent said to her babushka, grandmother, Are you willing also to kiss the feet of the beloved general secretary of our great communist party?

She said, of course. As long as you crucify him first. It was witty. I thought it was good. Witty, but also reminds us of what?

The only one worthy of my worship is the one who's felt the pain that I feel. Who's entered the suffering that I experience. Who is with me in it.

I'll worship him, is what she was saying. She just said it funnier than I do. He's the one who has entered into your suffering. He sets this table before you this morning. To remind you that whatever you're suffering, whatever idol is tempting you to bow down to it, He is with you. He is for you. He is worthy of your worship.

[32 : 45] Remember this whole meal for Him to share with you was His idea. Paul wrote, That I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you.

That Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, took bread. And when He'd given thanks, He broke it and said, This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.

In the same way also He took the cup after supper saying, This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, You proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

This table is the Lord's table. Not the table of Southwood or the Presbyterian church. And so God sets it before us and invites all who truly trust Him, Who worship Him and know their only hope is in Jesus, To come and feast with Him.

He is with you. We have with us this morning several of our young people Who have grown up in this church, Watching us celebrate this together. Learning what it means to see the body and blood of Jesus.

[33 : 57] To know that He's our only hope. Who have recently joined the church. And for the first time this morning, Will not watch as we celebrate communion, But will actually partake and celebrate with us.

They've professed their faith in Christ and said, I'm a sinner in need of grace, Only hoping in the blood of Christ given for me. If that's your hope, you come with them too.

If you've professed your faith and trust in Him, We want to rejoice with you that He is with us. Let's pray and then we'll partake together. Father, we ask that you would set these very common, Ordinary elements aside To holy and sacred purpose this morning.

That they would strengthen in us our faith. That we would taste that you're with us. We have heard it. We have sung it. Would we experience that you're a God Who enters in and meets with us.

And that you're one we can trust. Do that in each of our hearts we pray As we celebrate this sacrament together. In Jesus name. Amen. For more information visit us online at www.southwood.org For more information visit us online at www.southwood.org For more information visit us online at www.southwood.org