

# Daniel 3

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Date: 18 September 2016

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[ 0 : 00 ] I'm going to give you more passages this morning for Daniel chapter 3. I encourage you to turn there with me. Daniel chapter 3 is at page 739. You can get my help from the wall there.

Let's do something to do. A little stretch, because I'm going to go for a long time this morning, and you're going to need it. Just kidding. All right, Daniel chapter 3.

Let's start, since it's a bit of a longish passage, I'm just going to read the first 23 verses, and we'll pick up from there. Okay? Verse 1. King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold whose height was 60 cubits, and its breadth 6 cubits.

He set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent together the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Then the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces gathered for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. And they stood before the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

[ 1 : 11 ] And the herald proclaimed aloud, You are 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 are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up.

And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning, fiery furnace. Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshipped the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Therefore, at that time, certain Chaldeans came forward and maliciously accused the Jews. They declared to King Nebuchadnezzar, O king, live forever. You, O king, have made a decree that every man who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music shall fall down and worship the golden image.

And whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into the burning, fiery furnace. There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

These men, O king, pay no attention to you. They do not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up. Then King Nebuchadnezzar, in furious rage, commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought.

[ 2 : 29 ] So they brought these men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? Now, if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good.

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.

Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury, and the expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated.

And he ordered some of the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and to cast them into the burning, fiery furnace. Then these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the burning, fiery furnace.

[ 3 : 50 ] 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.

Go ahead and sit down. God, we do ask for your help now as we come to your word, that you would allow us by your spirit to have an understanding of what you're saying to us and teaching to us about you and about us and about your gracious provision for us.

And Lord, what it means to respond faithfully to who you are and what you've done. Be with us now, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. In 1934, in Barman, Germany, a group of church leaders, theologians, and laymen gathered to consider how they would respond to the greatest crisis they had ever faced.

Almost immediately after the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, Protestant Christians faced pressure to arianize the church, expel Jewish Christians from the ordained ministry, and adopt the Nazi Führer principle as the organizing principle of church government.

Sadly now, just one year later in 1934, many churches had already bowed to Hitler's ideology. And now, here, how would these church leaders respond?

[ 5 : 33 ] Would they capitulate to the theological claims of the Nazi state, perhaps in the name of German unity, or in the name of church unity, or a great risk to their churches and their lives, would they resist?

Well, in great courage, they chose the latter. And they drafted what's become known as the Barman Declaration. We reject, they wrote, the false doctrine that the church could and should recognize as a source of its proclamation beyond and besides this one word of God, yet other events, powers, historic figures, and truths as God's revelation.

We reject the false doctrine that there could be areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords.

The Barman Declaration stated in no uncertain terms, in the face of a totalitarian regime, that the church gives exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ.

No other powers, no matter what their threats, will take the place of Christ as Lord. And our chapter this morning is meant to inspire such unconditional allegiance to God.

[ 7 : 04 ] But you know, it's meant to do so not just for church leaders and theologians, and not just at momentous events and moments in history, but it's meant to do so for all of us.

You see, friends, the book of Daniel is a lot about what it means to be the church in the midst of the world. Not separated from the world, not assimilated into the world, but being the church in the midst of the world.

What does it look like to live as citizens of the kingdom of God in the midst of the kingdoms of this world, especially when the kingdoms of this world seem to have the upper hand?

And we're going to learn three things from this text about living as citizens of the kingdom of God in the midst of the kingdoms of this world.

First, the pressure we will face. Second, the confession we should give. And third, the assurance that we can have.

[ 8 : 11 ] So first then, the pressure we will face. When chapter 3 opens, these three young Jewish men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, are not priests, not religious leaders, not super all-star saints.

They're civil servants in the Babylonian Empire. In fact, at this point, they've become high-ranking officials in Nebuchadnezzar's administration. They're out working in the world. And it hadn't been all smooth sailing to this point.

In chapter 1, you remember, they had to negotiate ways of maintaining their Jewish identity in the midst of their Babylonian training. In chapter 2, their lives were actually in danger, along with all the other Babylonian wise men and counselors, because of Nebuchadnezzar's dream.

But through it all, God had preserved and even promoted them. They flourished in their training, with their prayers. Daniel was able to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's dream. So they had hit some critical bumps along the way, but through it all, God had put them in positions of authority and influence, even though as a people, the Jews were in the midst of exile.

So far, so good. But in this chapter, things take a turn. Up to this point, they were able to navigate their allegiance to God and their position in Babylon without much conflict.

[ 9 : 28 ] In fact, they were sort of the rising stars of the empire. Then Nebuchadnezzar builds a 90-foot tall golden image and demands that all the officials of his kingdom bow down and worship.

And suddenly, the pressure to conform, the pressure to abandon their exclusive allegiance to God comes barreling down on these three young exiles. Now, you see, Nebuchadnezzar in this chapter had a problem.

You see, he had conquered this vast number of nations and people groups and had consolidated them into his empire. But the problem was, how would he keep the whole thing together?

What would he do to bring unity and ensure common loyalty from such a diverse group? What would keep his empire from splintering apart? And his answer, of course, is the golden image.

The image, by the way, probably didn't represent Nebuchadnezzar himself. It probably represented one of the Babylonian gods. But still, it was the image he had set up, as the narrator emphasizes over and over again.

[ 10 : 37 ] So he was going to take personally any rejection of the image. You see, this image was a test of ultimate loyalty to him and to the power of his state, to the power of Babylon.

And of course, Nebuchadnezzar wasn't saying that they had to stop worshiping their own gods. The ancient Near East, much like the modern West, was very pluralistic.

You can keep your gods in private, whatever works for you. But here, you better worship this one. You better prove your loyalty.

Now, my guess is that few of us have had to confront the pressure to bow before a 90-foot-tall, nine-foot-wide, gold-plated totem pole. But the pressure to worship some other god than God is still alive and well today, isn't it?

We just don't make statues of them anymore. You see, friends, what the Bible tells us and what our experience shows us is that the human heart will always worship something.

[ 11 : 52 ] The natural tendency of the fallen human heart, whether individually or corporately as a society, will be to exchange the worship of the Creator, the one true God, for some created thing.

To make ultimate something in the place of God. And as Christians living in the midst of the world, as we should be, seeking to be salt and light, seeking the good of our city and our communities like these three young exiles, serving faithfully in the positions God grants us, as we live in the midst of the world as citizens and ambassadors of God's kingdom, we will face pressure to conform to the gods of the world around us.

At work, in pursuit of the common goal of profit, will there be challenges to go against your conscience, to let slide your loyalty to God as the pursuit of profit becomes the God of profit? Maybe by fudging just a little bit on those quarterly reports. That's what everyone does after all. Be a good team player, your supervisor says. At school, when your friends are all eagerly talking and agreeing about their views on sex or gender or religion, and then slapping each other on the back, they turn to you and say, you agree, don't you?

You're with us on this, right? You're not one of those, are you? Again, that pressure to conform. Or you're in the studio or in the lab, and the God of success or approval means that all your peers are putting in 60, 70, 80 hours a week.

[ 13 : 39 ] And you, are you really going to leave this early? Are you really serious about being here? Do you really deserve to be here?

Or maybe even in your family. This is the way we've always done things. This is what it means to be a part of this family. The pressure to conform. And look a little more closely at the anatomy of this pressure here in chapter three.

First, this idol is very impressive, is it not? 90 feet high, covered in gold. Second, it seems to me a real need. Unifying the empire.

A well-organized government's a good thing, right? Getting everyone on the same page. Keeping conflicts at a minimum. It's seeking a good goal, right? Third, literally everyone is doing it.

The list of officials in verses two through three are representatives of the entire empire. All the people, nations, and languages of the empire have their highest ranking officials present.  
[ 14 : 49 ] Talk about peer pressure, right? Even the band is an international ensemble. Instruments of every kind from every place. Wouldn't it be rude? Just a bit culturally insensitive not to just go along?

No. But of course, those three things are just the tip of the iceberg, aren't they? Not content to just wow the attendees by the impressive height of the image or the international makeup of the ensemble, Nebuchadnezzar issues a threat.

If you don't worship, you'll be thrown into a burning, fiery furnace. So much for freedom of conscience. And suddenly we realize that we're not playing games anymore.

Refusal to worship will cost you your life. You know, some of us have encountered this story so often in children's Bibles or in Sunday school that it's become so sanitized in our minds.

We've almost become immune to the horrible threat that these men faced. Real and certain death if they did not comply.

[ 15 : 59 ] And you know, at first, when we get to verse 7, it seems like these three young exiles are able somehow to get out of the line of fire.

Perhaps as officials in the very province of Babylon, they weren't required, like these dignitaries gathering from all the far-flung corners of the empire, perhaps they weren't sort of required to prove their allegiance in this way.

They were already on the team, you see. Maybe the ceremony didn't quite include them at first. And so, wisely, they kept quiet and kept their heads low.

We don't know for sure. We're also not sure where Daniel is while all this is taking place. The text is silent, so all we can do is speculate. Was he away on the king's business? We just don't know. But we do know that in addition to the threat of the furnace, these men also face the jealousy of their co-workers, and the pressure mounts even more.

Their low profile is suddenly blown. In verses 8 through 12, certain Chaldeans, that is Babylonian officials, counselors, scholars, maliciously accuse these three men.

[ 17 : 10 ] And what's their motivation? Well, we see from their conversation with Nebuchadnezzar that it seems to be wanting to get some professional revenge on these foreigners who've been given such high position in their city, at their game.

And all this leads to a confrontation with Nebuchadnezzar himself. The pressures, the threats, the accusations bring everything to a crisis. Nebuchadnezzar surely can't have members of his own administration embarrassing him before the gathered officials of his entire kingdom, right?

And so, justly, he gives these three men a chance to come and bow and make things right. Let's brush this under the carpet, fellas. But if they won't prove his authority, he will.

He will prove his authority and absolute rule by casting them into the fire. And who, he says, is the God who will deliver you out of my hands?

Now, many of us won't face such a literal life-or-death confrontation. Although, for Christians worldwide, this is a reality for many.

[ 18 : 34 ] And we ought to be in prayer for our brothers and sisters globally. But for us, the threat, the accusation, the confrontation still will present us with a cost.

Maintaining our loyalty to God will at times be very costly. Our physical lives may not be at stake, but perhaps our reputation will be.

Or our professional success, our job security, our family's approval, maybe even a close friendship. The fire will threaten to consume something costly, something dear to us.

And as we stand in a position of weakness, outnumbered, at the mercy, it seems, of those in power over us, that taunt will become a doubt in our hearts.

who is the God who is able to rescue us? So how should we respond to the pressure?

[ 19 : 47 ] That brings us to the second point, the confession we should give. In verses 16 through 18, we're given the incredibly brave response of the three young exiles.

It forms sort of the center of the whole text. And what we see in their confession here is a picture of robust, biblical faith.

Dale Ralph Davis, in his commentary on Daniel, summarizes it this way. This sort of faith, he says, knows the power of God, guards the freedom of God, and holds the truth of God.

It knows the power of God. In the height of his pride, Nebuchadnezzar declares, who is the God who can deliver you out of my hands? And the men reply, the 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.

We have no need to answer you in this matter. The men have no doubt that the creator of the universe, the almighty Lord of all, is able to snuff out this flaming furnace as easily as you or I would blow out a birthday candle, whether it be seven times hotter or 70 times hotter.

[ 21 : 02 ] This is the God who created the stars and the planets and every living thing with a simple, sovereign word. He is able. Nebuchadnezzar can't even keep his empire from falling apart.

It's his inner insecurity and anxiety that drives him to build this idol and that's also why he bursts into rage when his rule is threatened. He knows deep down, just like all of us, that we aren't in control.

But God, God orders and preserves all things according to the counsel of his will. What are the hands of Nebuchadnezzar compared to the hands of almighty God?

God. The confession of faith knows the power of God, but it also guards the freedom of God.

Perhaps the most powerful moment in the whole chapter are those three words that begin verse 18. But if not.

[ 22 : 09 ] They know God is able to deliver them and still they confess, but if not. God may not choose to do so. You see, these young men don't treat God like we so often do, like a cosmic vending machine that if we just insert the coins of religion, out-clunk the soda bottles of God's blessing.

It's an easy exchange, isn't it? But no, they don't presume to know what God's plan is in this moment. They don't presume to tell God what he must do or not do, and they don't think that they deserve to be saved because they've been so faithful to God.

They're utterly open to the possibility that God may not choose to deliver them. Faith in God, real robust biblical faith in God means guarding God's freedom and entrusting oneself to him whatever he decides.

And third, the confession of faith holds the truth of God. These men may not know what God's sovereign will is, what he's decreed to happen in this moment, whether he will save them or not, but they know what God's revealed will is.

That is, they know what God commands them to do. You shall have no other gods before me, God says, and they resolve to obey.

[ 23 : 46 ] Now, imagine how they could have responded in this moment. I mean, it would have been pretty easy to just justify bowing down to this stupid statue, wouldn't it have been?

After all, what's a ten-minute bow? We know we don't mean anything by it. The gods of the nations are nothing. We serve the one true God.

A simple little act of prostration isn't going to change that. And besides, hadn't God put them in this important position? Didn't God have a purpose for them there?

Didn't the other Judean exiles need friends like them in high places? Wouldn't it be better for them to keep their position and remain useful to God?

Wouldn't it be much more expedient here? Much more useful for God's kingdom to just take a little bow. What use would they be to God if they were burnt to a crisp?

[ 24 : 48 ] We can often reason the same way, don't we? But listen to what Charles Spurgeon has to say in a sermon on this same text.

He says, if an act of sin would increase my usefulness tenfold, I have no right to do it. And if an act of righteousness would appear likely to destroy all my apparent usefulness, I'm still to do it.

It is yours and mine to do God's will though the heavens fall and to follow the command of Christ whatever the consequences may be. That is strong meat, you say.

Well, be strong men and women and eat it. You could only get away with that in the 19th century in London, I think.

And yet so often we don't eat it, do we? In those moments when the pressure mounts and the cost is high, I know my own heart, friends.

[ 26 : 07 ] I waver and I falter. We aren't brave like these three men, we aren't courageous. When our boss tells us to fudge the numbers, we fear losing our jobs and so we go along.

And when our friends are all assuming that we'll just agree with their views and their ideas, we fear losing their approval and their friendship or afraid of being alone. And so we laugh along with them in the moment and say and do things we know we shouldn't say or do.

So often we aren't Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. When the band plays and the furnace is lit and everyone is bowing down, down we go too.

But thankfully there's more in this passage for us to see. Yes, this text is meant to inspire us with the example of these three young men.

It's meant to model the strong, bold confession we should give. But friends, even more than that, it drives us to our third point, the assurance we can have.

[ 27 : 24 ] The assurance that will empower our weak hearts to stand strong when they're weak, to be brave when we're afraid.

And what is that assurance? You know, it's not immediately what you might think. The promise of this passage is not that God will rescue us from the furnace.

Sometimes we will suffer. Sometimes we will even lose everything. Everything. God doesn't always save us from the furnace, but He meets us in it.

Let's pick up in verse 24. Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. 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.

[ 28 : 34 ] Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning fiery furnace. He declared, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out and come here. Then 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 head was not singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said, Blessed be 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 except their own god.

Therefore, I make a decree, any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb and their houses laid in ruins, for there's no other god who is able to rescue in this way.

Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar looks into the furnace and to his surprise, he sees a fourth man with them in the midst of the fire.

And they are all unbound, walking, unscathed. And this fourth man to Nebuchadnezzar looks like a son of the gods, which for a pagan Babylonian like Nebuchadnezzar means a divine being, or as he says down in verse 28, an angel.

[ 30 : 07 ] And you know, commentators for centuries have wondered about the identity of this fourth man. Was it just an angel or could it be someone even greater?

The text doesn't tell us for sure. But we do know one thing. The point is that God was present to them in the fire.

God was with them. And you know, the real reason that fire didn't consume them was because centuries later there would be another young Jewish man who also lived in a time when God's people were under foreign rule.

And this young man would demonstrate courage and obedience not just in one moment, but he would be perfectly obedient to God his entire life. But when his moment came to face the greatest test, instead of having his friends with him at his side, making the good confession with him, they would deny and desert him.

And instead of knowing God's intimate presence in the midst of his torture, the father would turn his face away. Why?

[ 31 : 33 ] Because you see, friends, when Jesus Christ died on the cross, he was taking the only fire that could really destroy us.

In complete faithfulness to the father, he was bearing the flames of divine judgment that all of our unfaithfulness deserved. For all of our wavering, for all of our treachery, our king came and he bore it all.

And because he quenched that fire for us and rose again in victory, we know that if we're trusting in him, then, friend, there's no fire left that can truly harm us.

Even if we lose our very life itself, we cannot ultimately be consumed. because of what he's done. Because of what he's done, friend, there's no fire that this world can throw at you that he will not take and turn into a refining fire for your good.

[ 32 : 52 ] He'll meet you right in the middle of it. Isn't not this the great promise with which the New Testament opens? Emmanuel, God with us.

In the midst of the furnace, his fellowship, his friendship, his presence will meet you there. And in the end, it will be for his glory and for yours.

When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego step out of the furnace, there in verse 27 are all the officials of the nations. And there are all the king's counselors. And they all see how great God is. They all witness the great deliverance, the great vindication of God's servants. And even Nebuchadnezzar glorifies God. The one who scorned their God now turns and blesses him. There's no other God who's able to save in this way. Friends, one day, all of God's creation will witness the vindication of God's church.

[ 34 : 13 ] In the new heavens and the new earth, we will be raised with Christ. And God will make all things new. One writer put it this way, Christ did not keep them out of the furnace, but found them in it.

He does not always shield you from all distresses and dangers, but it is in the loneliness, in the betrayal, in the loss, that the fourth man comes and walks with you.

He has the knack of both exposing you to, yet keeping you through waters and rivers and fire and operating rooms and funeral parlors and an empty house.

The fourth man can always find his people. And so, friends, when the pressure is mounting, and when it seems like the whole world is bowing down, stand fast.

fast, stay firm, don't give in, don't lose heart. The only flames that can really harm you, the only furnace you really need to fear has been quenched by your faithful Savior.

[ 35 : 40 ] And now these fires you face can only refine you. The fourth man, the Lord Jesus Christ, will meet you in the flames, and you will not be alone. When through fiery trials thy pathways shall lie, my grace all-sufficient shall be thy supply.

The flame shall not hurt thee, I only design thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine. The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose, I will not, I will not desert to its foes.

That soul though all hell should endeavor to shake, I'll never, no never, no never forsake. Let's pray.

Oh Lord Jesus, what a promise we need to hear, that you are with us in the flames. Oh God, by your Holy Spirit would you take that truth and bury it deep in our hearts.

Make it come alive this week to us God, as we seek to be your ambassadors and servants in this world. God, you've placed us here to love this city and to love our neighbors and to see peace and justice flow like rivers.

[ 37 : 09 ] But God, we know at times we face the pressure and we face the furnace, so God, help us remember in those moments Jesus, who took the flames for us so that we might be refined.

Amen.