

Courage In The Fire!

Daniel 3:1-30

Introduction: 1) In Philippians 1:21 Paul writes, “For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” Pastor John Piper calls this the ultimate win/win scenario. If I live I get Christ. If I die I get more of Christ! Either way, I win! This way of thinking, this way of looking at life and death, must have been in the minds of three Hebrew men by the names of Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. We know these men, taken captive to Babylon in 605 B.C., by their more popular names as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

2) As we watch their story unfold in Daniel 3, which is the last time we will see these men in this book, we will see men of courage, conviction and commitment. These are Psalm 1 men, Psalm 101 men. These are Titus 2 men, 1 Timothy 6:11-21 men. These are men sold out to God that our churches so desperately need in our own day. These are men in very rare supply. I will often say a good woman is worth her weight in gold but that a good man is worth twice his weight in gold. Why? It is the law of supply and demand. There are simply too few good men. There are too few persons willing to take a stand for the God who loves them and has saved them.

3) Cassie Bernall was a teenager who was martyred on April 20, 1999 at Columbine High School just outside of Denver, Colorado. She was 17 years old. Several reports of the fatal shootings (11 classmates and one teacher were also killed) suggest that when one of the murderers, Eric Harris, asked Cassie if she believed in God, she said yes. He immediately shot and killed her because of her faith.

4) Cassie's decision to stand for Jesus, like the 3 Hebrew men of Daniel 3, was not a spur of the moment decision with no chance to reflect on the potential consequences. It was a decision she had already settled in her heart long before. In a letter written to a friend less than a year before her death, Cassie penned these words:

“When God doesn't want me to do something, I definitely know it. When he wants me to do something, even if it means going outside my comfort zone, I know that too. I feel pushed in the direction I need to go. . . I try to stand up for my faith at school. . . It can be discouraging, but it can also be rewarding. . . I will die for my God. I will die for my faith. It's the least I can do for Christ dying for me.” (*She Said Yes: The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall*).

5) It is popular to talk of those who show what we call “courage under fire.” In this passage, we will see three men who demonstrate “courage in the fire!” Their faith is amazing. Their confidence in God is stellar. Missionary George Verwer says, “We who have Christ’s eternal life need to throw away our own lives.” (*Expect Great Things*, 50). These men were willing to do just that, and as a result we have one of the most famous and remarkable stories in all of the Bible!

I. God’s people will be confronted with the idols of this world 3:1-7

1) Daniel 3 follows closely on the heels of Daniel 2, though we have no way of knowing how much time has elapsed between them. The Septuagint, the Greek Translation of the Old Testament, says Daniel 3 took place in the 18th year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign (587-586 B.C.). This is the time when he destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and deported, for a 3rd time, Jews to Babylon. This is reasonable but not certain. Daniel had interpreted Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of a great statue (2:31-45), telling him, as the head of gold (2:38), that he would have an awesome and powerful kingdom. But, he was only the head and not the whole statue. It would be a kingdom that would not endure.

Nebuchadnezzar paid homage and praise to Daniel’s God (2:46), but it was a shallow and surface praise that would not last very long. In fact 3:1-7 seems to suggest that Nebuchadnezzar did not accept God’s will that he was only the

head of gold and a temporary king. He wanted it all and therefore he set up a great gold statue “sixty cubits” by “six cubits” (ninety by nine feet), gold plated from head to toe (3:1). It probably looked like a missile on a launching pad, perhaps something like the Washington Monument. Our text goes to great lengths to note the idolatrous nature of this statue of gold. The word “image” occurs more than 10 times in the chapter. Now, whether this is an image to a particular god (Marduk or Nabu) or an image to Nebuchadnezzar we cannot say. It probably involves both! Either way, Dale Davis is right, “the story is first commandment material (Exod. 20:2)....The writer holds before you this episode because he wants you to make the same response as Daniel’s friends: I will believe and obey the first commandment even if it kills me (and it may)” (Daniel, *BST*, 51).

2) That the pressure on these now young Hebrew men would have been enormous cannot be overstated. Note the following details:

1) It was “set up” in a unique location on the plain of Dura near the city of Babylon (v.1). Dura simply means wall or fortress and so we cannot be certain of a specific location (Longman, *Daniel*, *NIVAC*, 97). The plain near Babylon recalls the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:2) and its goal of unifying all the nations, all the *ethnes* on the earth.

- 2) The “Who’s Who,” the “movers and shakers, of Nebuchadnezzar’s vast empire were invited to the dedication service (v.2).
- 3) Nebuchadnezzar set a precise moment when national and religious allegiance to him would be put on public display with everyone participating (v.3). This was a service of national, political and religious unification.
- 4) Great and emotional music was to accompany the moment of dedication adding a powerful emotional and psychological element to the service (v.5).
- 5) A precise moment is specified for the time of submission and worship (v.5).
- 6) There is a “death warning” to anyone who refuses to “fall down and worship” (v.6). [see HCSB note on 3:6]
- 7) When the moment of commitment came, it appeared that everyone present pledged their allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar and his idolatrous image (v. 7).

Practical Application

While we may not be confronted in the precise way that these Hebrew men were, you can be certain the idols of our day will present themselves to us again and again. Some may come quietly and without much attention. Others, however, will be very public and put on display for many to witness. When that happens, what will you do? We may not live in the ancient city of Babylon, but we are exiles in a foreign land that is not our home. And remember: idols can be very seductive. The fact is many idols are good things when properly viewed and used. But when a good thing becomes a god thing it then becomes a bad thing. It becomes an idol. And do not be in doubt or deceived: God's people will be confronted with the idols of this world.

II. God's people will be criticized by the people of this world 3:8-12

1) Honoring and obeying God is not always popular. Sometimes it gets us into serious problems and even life threatening situations. While the latter may not often be the experience of Christians in America, it is a daily reality for many of our brothers and sisters around the world. Simply trying to live a life that is faithful to the God and Savior they love, they are criticized, ostracized and hated. Still with the apostle Peter they will declare by words and actions, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

2) When the time came to bow down and “worship the golden image that king Nebuchadnezzar had set up,” three men conspicuously remained standing (v. 12). There was no fanfare or outburst of protest in this instance, just a quiet and simple act of civil disobedience. Who was it? It was the three Hebrew men known in Babylon as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Quickly their enemies spring into action. “Certain Chaldeans” (NIV, “astrologers”) came forward. Andrew Hill notes, “The accusers are either Babylonian officials generally or members of a special guild of diviners or priestly class of wise men” (Daniel, *EBC*, vol. 8, 79). I have no doubt that they were rivals to the three Hebrew men and jealous of their significant positions in Nebuchadnezzar’s administration. It is possible they were also anti-Semitic (e.g. like Haman; Esther 3:5-6; see also Ps. 83:1-5). They stepped forward and “maliciously accused the Jews.” Literally, “they ate their pieces!” They chowed down on them! They ate their lunch! They sunk their teeth into them!

3) Their approach was a strategic one. The evil one is a schemer and wise serpent. They buttered up the king with a common but reverential word of praise, “O King, live forever” (v.9). But then they gave him a subtle and backhanded word of criticism that would appeal to his “mega-pride.” You gave the command to everyone to bow and worship your idol (v.10). You warned everyone that failure to do so would result in immediate execution (v.11).

Well, and here it comes, “*There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon*” (emp. mine). These boys are your boys and did you hear, see, what they did not do?! #1) “They pay no attention to you.” They don’t respect you and who you are. #2) “They do not serve your gods.” On this one, they were correct! #3) “They do not worship the golden image that you have set up.” Right again. Interestingly, the idea of the king setting up his idol appears seven times in this passage. This stands in striking contrast to Daniel 2:21 where Daniel tells Nebuchadnezzar, “[God] changes times and seasons, he removes kings and sets up kings.”

Nebuchadnezzar is playing a role that only God plays! And, in the process, he is “setting up” a showdown that he is going to lose. Oh, it appears that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are now in a no win situation. The critics have come out in the open, they have carefully called out the king and now he must do something to save face. The stage is set and things do not look good or promising for these three Jewish men, this devoted disciples of “the God of heaven” (2:18, 28, 36, 44). He gave them favor and wisdom in chapter one. The pressing question before us is, “now what will He do?”

III. God's people will be challenged to worship the gods of this world

3:13-15

1) One of my mentors in ministry, Jerry Vines, is right. People who have convictions will not like you and they will try to persuade you to compromise. Further, it takes courage not to compromise and your mind needs to be made up before the pressure comes. If you wait until “the moment of truth,” you may find out it is too late.

2) Nebuchadnezzar set up an image made of gold to glorify himself and unify his kingdom. Everything was moving along nicely until these three Jews (v.8) refused to go along to get along. To say that the head of the Babylonian government was not impressed by their religious convictions is an understatement.

3) Nebuchadnezzar was “in furious rage.” The three Jews had resisted the herd mentality and bravely stood alone (apparently Daniel was not present for there is no doubt he would have stood with them). He commanded they be brought before him (v.13). He questioned them asking if these accusations were true, that they would not serve his gods or “worship” (eleven times, v. 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 18, 28) the golden statue he had set up (v. 14). But before allowing them to answer, he gave them a second

chance (v.15). Maybe he suspected they had been accused by jealous rivals. Perhaps he genuinely liked them and was looking to provide a way out of this political mess. If they would simply repent of disobeying the king, bow down and worship his idol, all would be “well and good.” But if they did not, they would be immediately executed by being burned alive in the fiery furnace. The options are clear and plain.

4) Then Nebuchadnezzar asked the question that is the key to the entire episode, “And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?” If you are so foolish to ignore my gracious offer, who is going to save your hide? Now, I know we don’t naturally incline ourselves to identify with Nebuchadnezzar at this point, but I suspect we should. Do we not sometimes exalt ourselves beyond what we should? Do we not often act as if matters of destiny are in our hands and not God’s? Do we not draw attention to who we are, who we know and what we have done? Is not the same pride that is in the heart of this king lurking in our own? Oh, I want so badly to identify with these three Jewish men, but before I do I must first ask, “Who is the God who will deliver me from sin? Pride? Arrogance? Who will deliver me from me? The three Jews know the answer to the king’s question and they will give it in verse 17. They will not trust in themselves, and they will not trust in the powers of this world even if it cost them everything. They will

stand strong and trust in “the Most High God” (see Gen. 14:18-20, 22).

Nebuchadnezzar’s question indeed is the question of the ages. “Who is the God who will deliver? The three Jews were glad he asked. The questions had been settled in their hearts long ago. If challenged to worship the gods of this world and be praised or worship the One true and living God and be burned to a crisp, it is no contest. As Joshua said, so would they, “But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” (Joshua 24:15).

On September 27, 2015 the president of the United States of America spoke at a Democratic National Committee LGTB Fundraiser. Speaking in the context of Same-Sex marriage, the president stated, “We affirm that we cherish our religious freedom and we are profoundly respectful of religious traditions.” So far so good. However, the president went on to say, “But, we also have to say that our religious freedom doesn’t grant us the freedom to deny our fellow Americans their constitutional rights (David Jackson, *USA Today*, 9-28-15). So, is the president saying that in the final analysis government trumps God? Is he saying the constitution must be obeyed above Christ? Such questions should not surprise us. They were raised in Babylon 2500 years ago.

IV. God's people must be courageous in the face of danger in this world

3:16-18

1) In His passion to get the gospel to every nation, tribe, peoples and languages (Rev. 5, 7), God sends us to the nations. And sometimes, in His wondrous providence, he sends the nations to us. The latter is what he did on this fateful day in the lives of his three faithful servants in Babylon. Note the crowd in verses 2, 3, 7. All the nations will hear what these men are about to say. Now note the confession of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in verses 16-18 before the most powerful political and governmental official on the earth in that day. These men have embraced a counter-cultural lifestyle with full and complete confidence in God's power and God's purposes.

2) Regardless of what the immediate outcome might be, three things were clear? First, God's servants will bow down only to Him and no one else; Second, God's servants will trust in God's sovereign purposes no matter what; Third, God's servants will trust in God's power and protection and leave what happens to His providential plan. Though the words of Jesus would not be spoken for another 600 years, I wonder if the Holy Spirit had already put Mark 13:9-11 in the hearts of these three men, "But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to

bear witness before them. And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations. And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.”

3) Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego tell Nebuchadnezzar the king that “we have no need to answer you in this matter” (v.16). The facts are clear, we did not bow down and worship. Furthermore, our hearts and minds on this issue were made up a long time ago. Finally, we will not adopt some spineless compromise that says something like this, “Well, we will bow on the outside but we are really standing in the inside.” That is not an option for us!

4) If things proceed as you have threatened, “Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us...and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king,” (v.17). We know beyond a shadow of a doubt our God’s power. However, we do not always know His plans and purposes. So, know this, and this one of the greatest affirmations of faith in God in all of the Bible, “ 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.” Wow! What faith in God they have! Wow! What faith they demonstrate before the nations! This is a missionary declaration to the nations of absolute trust in their God and only their God. Deliverance and rescue is not the issue. Confession and obedience is, even if it cost them

their lives. Their God and only their God “is worthy of the ultimate sacrifice” (Ronald Pierce, *Daniel*, Teach the Text, 57).

5) I love the ESV Study Bible’s note on verse 18, “There was no doubt in the three men’s mind as to God’s power to save them (see 2:20-23). Yet the way in which God would work out his plan for them in this situation was less clear. God’s power is sometimes extended in dramatic ways to deliver his people, as when he parted the Red Sea for Israel on the way out of Egypt (Exodus 14); at other times, that same power is withheld, and his people are allowed to suffer. Either way, they would not bow down to Nebuchadnezzar’s image.”

6) Nate Saint (1923-1956) was martyred as a missionary to the Huaorani people group, the Auca Indians, in Ecuador in 1956. His willingness to die for Christ should not surprise us when we consider these words of his: “The way I see it, we ought to be willing to die. In the military, we were taught that to obtain our objectives we had to be willing to be expendable. Missionaries must face that same expendability” (*Expect Great Things*, 51).

I would simply add, every follower of the crucified Nazarene should have that same sense of expendability. He is worth it. And, he will give you the courage and strength to do it. After all, our God is able!

V. God's people can be confident the Lord is with them no matter in this world 3:19-30

1) The great missionary to Burma, Adoniram Judson, writes, "How great are my obligations to spend and be spent for Christ! What a privilege to be allowed to serve him. . . and suffer for him. . . . But in myself I am absolute nothingness. . . . Soon we shall be in heaven. Oh, let us live as we shall then wish we had done!" (Expect Great Things, 50). Oh how I love this man's heart. I think our Hebrew friends would love him too!

2) Once again the head of state is "filled with fury" (cf v.13). "The expression of his face (lit. "the image of his face") changed" against the three Hebrews. "He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated," meaning "heat it as hot as you possibly can" (v.19).

3) He ordered "some of the mighty men of his army", his Army Rangers, to bind the three men and "to cast them into the burning fiery furnace" (v.20). Most certainly they would have dropped them down in an opening at the top of the furnace. Another opening at ground level and in front would give the king and his subjects a clear view of what happens to those who put their trust in puny gods and disobey the gods of real power. Remember, Nebuchadnezzar had soundly defeated Israel. Therefore his gods clearly were superior to any

god these Hebrews had to offer. Their immediate cremation would certainly leave no doubt!

4) The three Hebrews were bound and ‘thrown into the burning fiery furnace’ fully clothed (v.21). No doubt this would add fuel for the fire. The furnace was now so hot these “mighty men of the army” were immediately consumed and killed (v.22). As they perished, their last act of submission and obedience to the megalomaniacal king was to push Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego “bound into the burning fiery furnace” (v.23). Nebuchadnezzar and his loyal, pagan, idolatrous subjects could now sit back and watch what would certainly be a brief human barbecue, an object lesson for all who pledge their allegiance to a god no one can see, above the gods of this world who wield true power.

5) But then something unexpected happens. The king himself is “astonished and rose up in haste” (v.24). “Did we not cast three men bound into the fire” he asked his counselors? They responded in the affirmative. Well there is a problem the king said. First, they did not die. In fact, they are no longer bound, they are walking around like being in a burning fiery furnace is no big deal, and they are unhurt (v.25). Second, and more important, there are now four guys walking around in the furnace and the 4th has the appearance “like a son of the gods.” Later in verse 28 Nebuchadnezzar calls the 4th person an angel. However, I think there is a better answer. Some believe this is a

theophany, a manifestation of God's presence. I believe it is this, but more. I believe what we see is what is called a Christophany, a preincarnate appearance of the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God. The Lord was in there with them. The God who did not delivered them from the fire was the God who met them in the fire and delivered them out of the fire!

6) Nebuchadnezzar invited the three Jewish men out of the furnace for all to see "that the fire had not had any power over [their] bodies" (v.27). In fact "The hair of their heads were not singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them." He rightly attributes this to "the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego" (v.28), the God he calls "the Most High God" (v.28), the One he earlier called "God of gods and Lord of lords" (2:47). It is this God who "quenched the violence of fire" (Heb. 11:34), it is this God who delivered those who "trusted in him" (v. 28), it is this God who saved those who "yielded up their bodies, rather than serve and worship any god except their God" (cf. Rom 12:1-2).

7) As a result of the miracle in the furnace, the king issued a universal decree that if anyone spoke against this God, they would be summarily executed and their houses destroyed (3:29). Since only the Most High God can deliver in

this kind of way, their fate would be sealed. They would die with no hope of rescue.

8) In the process of events, the king promoted the three Hebrews in their positions in His kingdom (v. 30). It is clear that Nebuchadnezzar experienced once again (like chapter 2) conviction when he met the Most High God. However, conviction is not conversion! Like the beast, the antichrist of Revelation 13, he still will have an image citizens must worship or they will die. Like that beast, he thinks he will have a kingdom that never ends. Like that beast, he too is badly, badly mistaken.

Charles Spurgeon said it so well, “Beloved, you must go into the furnace if you would have the nearest and dearest dealings with Christ Jesus” (*Sermons on the Book of Daniel*, 43). These Hebrew men did just that. And, they experienced exactly what Spurgeon says will happen when we do. When you walk into a fiery furnace rest assured; Jesus is already there waiting on you.

Conclusion: How Does Our Text Point to Christ

When Nebuchadnezzar looked into the fiery furnace, he saw four men not three. Of the fourth he said, “the appearance . . . is like a son of the gods” (v.25). Later he says he is an “angel” (v.28). That is not a bad guess for a pagan polytheist. We, however, know better. We, with confidence, can say the 4th person in the furnace

was the One we know as “Immanuel,” “God with us.” Some are hesitant to make a specific identification with the heavenly being as a preincarnate appearance of the Son of God. In all honesty, I feel no such hesitation. I believe the One who walked with them in and through the fire is also the One who walked through the very fires of hell on our behalf, that we too would not have a single cell of our soul singed by the fiery flames we actually deserve. This should not surprise us. The promises of an ever present Savior with His people are a resounding theme throughout the Bible:

Exodus 3:6, 12 — “And he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. He said, “But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”

Isaiah 43:2 — “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.”

Matthew 28:18-20 — “And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of

the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.
And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Romans 8:37-39 – “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Hebrews 13:5 – “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”

1 Peter 4:12-14 – “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.”

I love the way James Montgomery Boice closes his sermon on Daniel 3 entitled, “Faith in the Furnace.” It brings encouragement, hope and joy to my soul, and it is my prayer it will do the same for you as you demonstrate courage in the fire for the One who has delivered us from an eternal fire, a fire He endured in our place!

“It is not difficult to know who that fourth person was. He was Jesus Christ in a preincarnate form—perhaps the form he had when he appeared to Abraham before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah or in which he wrestled with Jacob beside the brook Jabbok. It is a vivid portrayal of the fact that God stands with his people in their troubles. We sing in one of our hymns:

When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
The rivers of woe shall not thee overflow:
For I will be with thee thy troubles to bless,
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

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.”

(Daniel, 47)