

Called to Worship, But Whom?

Daniel 3

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Good morning. It's good to be with you. If we haven't met, my name is Penny, and I'm the senior pastor here. It is good for us to gather, and if you are new, if you are visiting with us, maybe you're passing through town, maybe you've just come across us recently, we're glad that you're here and glad that you would spend your morning. And if we haven't met, I would love to meet you after the service if you have time to stick around for a few minutes just to greet one another. But we are in the midst of a sermon series in the book of Daniel, and so we are in Daniel chapter 3 this morning.

So if you have a Bible, you can turn to Daniel 3. And as you're turning there, just a reminder of what we've been talking about in the book of Daniel. So Daniel is this Old Testament prophet who is writing about a time in the people of God, the time of Israel, where they are, excuse me, living in exile. So God's people, Israel, because of their rebellion against God, because the ways that they have sinned against him, have been sent off into exile. And so they're living in Babylon, a place not their home, and they're living under a king who is not of them. This is where they are. They are far from their houses. They are far from their cities. They are far from these places that were familiar to them. They are exilic people.

Now, one of the reasons why we're reading this and going through this book isn't simply because this is the story of God's people. It is that, right? This is part of the redemptive history that God has revealed to us. But also because this idea of exile and being an exilic people is our story as well, because that's who we are, right? We've said this every week so far in this in the sermon series, and we'll probably say it every week to come, to remind us that if you are a believer in Jesus, if you are trusting in Christ, then regardless of where you were born, regardless of where you reside, that this is not your home. That actually our citizenship is ultimately in heaven. And so what that means is that we too are exiles. That's how the New Testament describes us.

We are an exilic people. So how do we live as exiles? Well, one of the things that we've been talking about and that I brought up last week is that we are not to be a people who assimilate to the world nor separate from it, right? That's what we've already seen in the book of Daniel, that Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, they're not assimilating, they're not becoming like the Babylonian world, but they're also not separating themselves from it. They're living in the midst of it and bringing blessing. That's what we saw last week. Daniel sought the good of Babylon. And in seeking the good, we had this amazing statement that Nebuchadnezzar made to Daniel at the end of our passage last week. He said, truly, your God is a God of gods, and Lord of kings, and revealer of mysteries. Now, that's an incredible statement being made by this pagan king, right? Because he is acknowledging the truth of who God is. Now, this isn't a statement of faith, at least not yet, okay? But it is Nebuchadnezzar recognizing some of the truth of who God is.

But as amazing as this is, that he's starting to reflect upon the God that has revealed to Daniel the dream, that he's starting to think about this God who is the God of the Israelites, as amazing as this is, Nebuchadnezzar is going to quickly forget. Because in our passage, Nebuchadnezzar is going to call all the people, whether they're Babylonian or Jew, whether they are Chaldean or Gentile, no matter who they are, he's going to call all the people of

Babylon, all the people living there, not to worship the God that Daniel worships, but to worship the gods of Babylon. And that's where our passage begins in Daniel 3. So, let's pick up our reading in verse 1. I will let you know, it's a long passage, so we're going to break up our reading in two sections.

We're going to read all of chapter 3. We're just not going to do it all right this minute. So, when I stop, don't be surprised, okay? So, Daniel 3 beginning in verse 1.

“King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its breadth six cubits. He set it up on the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent to gather 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 Nebuchadnezzar had set up. 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 worshiped 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 a 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.” (ESV)

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Let me pray for us.

Heavenly Father, as we come to your word, we need your help. We need your help to see your grace, your goodness, to understand what you have given to us. And so, I pray that you would be with us, that you would be with me so that my words would honor you and they would be clear to those who hear them, that you'd be with all of us, that we would beat back the distractions of the world, and we would focus upon your word, and that we would know what it means to be your people. And so, we ask help us. Be with us. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

Called to Worship

Well, Wright Thompson is a senior writer for ESPN. He's a writer that I really love reading. He's written lots and lots of articles about sport and the intersection of sports and culture, but he's also written three different books. All three of his books I've read. I love them all. I

would recommend all of them to you. And they're not all about sports. One is *The Cost of These Dreams*. That one's about sports. But he wrote a book recently called *The Barn* about the murder of Emmett Till. It's a wonderful, I mean, it's a difficult book, but it's a wonderful book. But my introduction to Wright Thompson was a number of years ago with his first book called *Pappyland*. Has anyone read *Pappyland*? Just Joseph? Okay. And John. So, *Pappyland* is a book which Wright Thompson is describing and talking about the elusive bourbon that is Pappy Van Winkle. So, Pappy Van Winkle, some of you may or may not know, is a very rare and hard to find whiskey. And at some point along the history of it being created, it actually almost went away. Like, the recipe was almost lost. The family almost forgot about it. Like, it almost went by the way of the dino. Okay? But through the family, they were able to maintain it and to start to make it again. And so, Wright Thompson describes this. How this family was able to persevere and to continue the production of this drink. But the book really ultimately isn't about Pappy Van Winkle. It's really not about bourbon or whiskey. It's actually about family. See, as you read the book, it's about family. It's about fathers and sons. And through the course of the book, it becomes actually very memoir-esque about Wright Thompson himself. And at the end of the book, he's reflecting and he's thinking about his family. And he's reflecting about his father. And he's thinking about the daughter that is soon to be born to him. And this is what he writes. He says, "I've been ordering my life foolishly. The voice of warning has been growing louder as I consider what being a father actually means. I've put satisfying bosses above myself or the needs of my family. I've put worldly success at the top of my hierarchy of needs. I feel like I am forever making bad trades." And then a few pages later, he's describing how he's walking with a friend along a trail through the woods and they're talking. And he says, "we talked about the idea that all of our human vanities, obsessing about bourbon or writing about sports or food or anything really, are just our attempts to fill a God-sized hole in our lives."

That's pretty interesting, right? Now, what's really interesting is that I've read all three of his books. I've read a lot of his essays about sport. I've read things that he's published online and things that he's said publicly. And as far as I can tell, he is not a believer. He's not a Christian. And yet, when he looks at his own life and he looks at the things he's been giving his life to, he realizes there is a void. That there is a vacuum. And he's been trying to fill it. He's been trying to satisfy it with profession, with pleasing others, with vain pursuits. He has given and devoted his life to serving himself and to serving things. In other words, Wright Thompson has worshiped at the altar of career and boss's approval and success. That's what he's done. He's given his life over to these things. He has sought to give himself to them. He has worshiped them. And there are countless things that are going to invite us to worship. And the truth is, is we will worship something. Another writer, David Foster Wallace, another non-believing writer who wrote *Infinite Jest* and took his own life a number of years ago, he has a famous speech that he gave at Kenyon College where he says, "in the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only thing we get to chose is what to worship."

And they're right. We will give ourselves to something. We will worship something. So what will we worship? Because we will be called to worship. And we, it's not just we that are called to worship, but that this has been going on since the very beginning of time. In fact, our passage began with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego being called to worship. But they're being called not to worship the God of the Bible. They're being called to worship this golden image and the gods of Nebuchadnezzar, right? That's how our passage began. Nebuchadnezzar builds this statue, this golden statue, right? And he's calling people to worship it. Now, as soon as we hear that he's building this golden statue, it's easy for us to

think, well, this is probably a statue of himself, right? It'd be easy for us to think that because we remember in Daniel chapter two, he had this dream, this vision of a statue, and the head was gold, and Daniel said, "the head that is gold, it is you, Nebuchadnezzar, and it is Babylon." And so maybe, you know, he's like, "well, I know it's coming tumbling down, but maybe I'll build it anyway," right? And it's not hard for us to imagine a leader doing this, because this is what leaders have done throughout time. They build statues of themselves, and they name things after themselves, and they plaster their picture all over the country, right? I mean, it is the height of narcissism, and it is not shocking that leaders would do this. And yet, I'm not actually sure it is a statue of him. It might be, but the text doesn't tell us. I'm actually more inclined to think that this is a statue of his gods, and that's because almost every single time, as far as I can tell, that the statue is talked about, it's in reference to the statue and to his gods. Now, it could be a statue of himself. It could be a statue of the gods. But the point is, is that he has created an idol, an image of God, and calling people to worship it.

Now, there's something we need to remember as we're thinking about this passage, something about Babylon. Babylon is polytheistic in nature, and so that means that they had many gods, and you could and were allowed to worship any one of the gods. Now, this is important, because it's going to come into play in understanding what Nebuchadnezzar is actually saying and what he's calling them to. You see, he doesn't have a problem with there being the God of the Bible, or Daniel's God, or Yahweh, right? He has no problem with this God existing in Babylon. He's already acknowledged his existence and claimed that he is God, right? "The God of gods and the Lord of kings." That's how he described him. So, he doesn't have a problem with the polytheism. Now, this is important for us to remember, because when Nebuchadnezzar is calling them to worship this idol, he is not calling them to abandon their gods. He's simply calling them to worship his gods over and above all the other gods.

Does that make sense? It's like Nebuchadnezzar saying, "sure, you can worship your God at home, in private, with your friends, so long as you worship mine first." And y'all, that's the message that continues today, isn't it? I mean, that's the of our world. Your Christian faith? No problem. Worship as you please on a Sunday morning, in your churches, read your Bibles in your homes, so long as that's where it remains. I mean, that's what we hear. And the subtlety of this idolatry, it's inviting us, it's so subtle, this idolatry, because what it's inviting us to do is not actually abandon worship of God, but to make that worship of God and to make God himself subservient to the other things that our culture would worship. Things like career and country, political party and leaders, the gods of money and athletics, of power and beauty, the list goes on and on of the things that we are invited to worship. And when we're invited to worship these things alongside of our God, what we're being invited into is syncretism. Christianity plus fill in the blank.

And it's incredibly seductive, because it's actually masking what it really is. Because even though it's saying we don't have to abandon our faith, it's inviting us to do that. Because God has said we will not worship anyone other than him, that we will have no other gods before him, right? He can't just be one of many, he must be the only one. And this is incredibly seductive, because it's calling us to abandon the true faith for a faith that's made by man. I don't know if you noticed, but in the reading this morning, that the passage eight different times says that the golden image was set up by Nebuchadnezzar. Eight times Nebuchadnezzar set it up. I mean, it said it like four times in like three straight verses, right? It was like, again, Daniel's wanting to make sure we understand that this idol, this God, has been created by human hands. And that's what Nebuchadnezzar is forcing the people to worship. A god of man's own creation.

So, what are we to do with that? I mean, what does Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego do? Let's pick up our reading in verse 13.

Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought. 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. 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. 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 are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods."

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 heads 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 is no other god who is able to rescue in this way." Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon. (ESV)

Standing with Faith

It's a lot. But we see what happens, right? We see what they do. How do Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego respond? By ignoring the call to worship and standing with faith. That's what they do, right? They understood what was required of them. They understood what Nebuchadnezzar was demanding of them, and they would have nothing to do with it. They will not assimilate. They won't engage in syncretism. They will only worship the God of the Bible, even if it means going to their death, right? And they make this abundantly clear in verse 18. Be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up. I mean, it's an incredible thing that they're doing, right? I mean, they're not just talking to their neighbor. They're not just talking to their co-worker. They are talking to the king, and they are saying, we will not obey you. We will not follow this command. They stand, even with their life in jeopardy, with faith. Faith that God is the true God. Faith that Yahweh is the only one that has to be worshiped. Faith that is better to die worshiping the Lord than to live bowing to another.

I mean, it's amazing. This faith demonstrated in resisting Nebuchadnezzar and abiding their trust with God. Verse 17, "if this be so, that you will throw us into the fire. 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, we will not serve your gods." I mean, it's incredible, their trust. That as powerful as the fiery furnace might be, as powerful as Nebuchadnezzar's hand might be, they are nothing compared to the power of God. That's what they believe. In the face of death, they believe that God is powerful and able and will rescue them. And there's a little statement here that maybe some of you have clung to. Then maybe some of you, as we're reading through this passage, maybe there's a few words, a couple words that we read that you've just been thinking about, and you haven't listened to a single thing I've said the last couple minutes. And I wouldn't blame you, because there are a couple words here that do jump out at us. That they stand out in stark contrasting to everything that we've seen and everything that we've heard so far, right? In verse 17, they say, "we believe God can and will save us." And then in verse 18, it begins what? "But if not." "But if not," I mean, that doesn't sound like faith, does it?

But if not, I mean, "God can save us. He'll deliver us. But maybe not." Maybe we'll hedge our bets a little bit. I mean, what do you think about this? I mean, I just claimed they're these great men of faith. And it seems like maybe their faith is wavering. Maybe. Well, you know that there's this whole line of thinking in different church circles, different theological circles, that says that when you're in need, when you have to ask for help, when you're calling out to God, you need to name the problem, you need to claim that God can do something about it, and you have to be assured that he'll do it. And as long as you do those three things, then he will answer every one of your prayers. So you want healing? You want a restored relationship? You want a relationship? You want a spouse? You want children? You want promotion? Whatever it might be, ask, believe, and do not even give a hint. Don't even give your mind an option to believe that might not happen, and then it will happen. There is no "but" in this line of thinking.

And yet Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego say "but." You see, y'all, that kind of like "name it and claim it" sort of way of thinking, that's actually faith in our faith. It's not faith in God. Because true faith is faith that is built on the belief that, yes, God is able and powerful, and that God rules over this world, and he is sovereign over all things, and his ways are not our ways, and that his ways are better than our ways, even when we don't know how they are

better, even when we can't understand how they may be better. Faith, true faith, is God is able and powerful, and he remains God and good regardless of whether he delivers, or rescues, or frees, or not. I mean, think about the book of Hebrews, specifically Hebrews chapter 11, right? That great chapter of faith, the hall of faith, right? And in Hebrews 11, the author of Hebrews is describing these people who have done amazing and incredible things through the power of God, right? Like Abraham, and Moses, and David, and some of the judges, and by the power of God they did these incredible things, these great people of faith. And then at the end of Hebrews 11, I think we sometimes forget about this part. We're told that there are others, and these others were told suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn into, they were killed with the sword, they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated, and yet they were still people of faith. I mean, they had been killed, and persecuted, and maligned, and yet their faith held. They didn't get what they wanted. I'm sure they didn't get what they prayed for. And yet they were still lifted up as examples of faith.

You see, faith isn't dictated by circumstance. No, you see, the object of our faith is what allows people to be maligned, and to be persecuted, and to face even death. To face those circumstances, the object of our faith allows us to face them. And that's what we see with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. What they're saying is God can rescue, He is able to rescue, we believe He will rescue, but even if He doesn't, we will still not bow to your false gods. We would rather die serving the true God, not knowing how this is going to work out, not knowing how this might play out in His providential care. We would rather die serving the true God than live worshipping false ones. You see, faith in God is not contingent on God doing what we want Him to do. Faith in God is grounded in Him being the true and good God. And that's what they had faith in. That God is true. He is the one God, and He is the God who is able to save. And in this case, He did. Right?

Nebuchadnezzar, in his flaming fury, throws them in the fiery furnace, and He heats it seven times hotter than normal, so hot that the men who were binding up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, they're consumed by fire. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, as they're thrown in, they're not burned. There's not even the smell of fire on them, which is amazing, right? Like, we have a fireplace, man, the smell is everywhere, right? You can't get away from it, but it's not even on their clothes. They can't smell it. No, he has protected them, he has cared for them. And we see this, Nebuchadnezzar looks into the fire and says in verse 25, "I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt. And the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods." Now listen, there is some debate about who this fourth man is. There are some who think that this is an angel sent by God, and there's good reason to believe that. There are others who think that this is a theophany, or more specifically, a Christophany. And what that means is it's a pre-incarnate revelation of Jesus. So Jesus, in his pre-incarnate state, actually presents himself to the people in a physical sort of way, okay?

So just think through this a little bit. Before the incarnation, before Jesus took on flesh, he dwelled with the Father and the Holy Spirit before all time, before there ever was time, he was there with them, existing as spirit. He didn't take on flesh until his incarnation. So there are instances in the Old Testament pre-incarnation that we believe, that some believe, I believe, that Jesus is actually revealing himself in his pre-incarnated state to his people to protect them, to bring a message, to deliver them, etc. Now, it's not every page of the Old Testament, okay? So don't start looking for theophanies and Christophanies everywhere, because they're not everywhere, okay? But there are times when it happens. And so some

think that's what's going on here, and I'll, you know, I'll play my card. Yeah, I think that's what's happening, okay? I think this is a theophany, it's a Christophany. If you don't, that's okay. It's still God protecting his people. That's the point, right? And that's what's happening. God, whether it be an angel, or you want to be right, and it's Christ pre-incarnate, then, um, it's a visual and physical demonstration of God's protection. That's what this is. And so what we're seeing here is that in their time of need, in their pain, in their distress, God doesn't stand far away from his people. He's not distanced from them, but instead, he enters into their distress. And he meets them in their need.

It's as Nicholas Wolterstorff, the philosopher, once wrote, reflecting upon the death of his son in a tragic climbing accident in a little book called *Lament for a Son*, another book I would highly recommend. He wrote reflecting upon God in his time of need, of crying out. He said, "instead of explaining our suffering, God shares it." And that's what he's doing here. God is entering the furnace and rescuing these men. And y'all, that's what God has done throughout redemptive history. He has brought his people out of what Moses called the iron furnace of Egypt. And he promised to deliver his people from what Isaiah called the furnace of affliction. You see, he did it in Egypt, and he did it with the exilic people, and he did it with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. God has continued to enter into his people's need and rescue them, and that's what he's done for us. God doesn't stand outside our pain and our hurt and our fears, but instead, he comes near.

And he comes near not by an angel, but by his Son. He comes near to us through Jesus, who took on flesh and entered this world. And he didn't cast his loved ones into the furnace of judgment, but instead, he quenched the flames of judgment with his very life. That's what Christ has done on the cross. In taking our sin and God's judgment upon himself, he quenched it for you. And y'all, he is the only God who does that. You know, Wright Thompson is right. He's correct. Career in sports, food and fame, anything in this world. We can give our lives in worship to them, but all they are all attempts to fill a hole that cannot be filled by those things. Those attempts will fail. You see, all the gods, the gods of Babylon, the gods of the ancient Near East, the gods of 21st century America, they will call us to bow and to serve them, but they will not save you. And they will not die for you. But y'all, the good news is that Christ has. You know, Nebuchadnezzar asked before he cast them into the furnace, "who is the God who will deliver you?" And then at the end, did you see what he said? He answers his own question. "There is no other God who is able to rescue in this way." And Nebuchadnezzar was right.

And so, friends, go deaf to those calls to bow to idols, to worship these false gods. And instead, we are called to worship with faith. The one who has entered our distress, who has delivered us from sin, we are to worship with faith, the one true God.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have revealed this truth to us, that you are the one true God, the one that we are to give our lives and worship to. And so we do that. We ask that you would help us to go deaf to the calls of this world, that we would go blind to the invitations to bow before other gods. And instead, we would worship you, the one true God, who has entered into our pain and our need, who has come into our lives, and who has saved us by the death and resurrection of your son, Jesus. Let us worship him, and let us live in faith, knowing that he is the one who has given what no other god could give. He has given his very life for ours. And we pray all this in Christ's name, and God's people said together, amen.