

DANIEL

Part 3: “The Courage to Stand”

Daniel 3

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Summary

Explore Daniel Chapter 3 and the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, whose courage was nurtured through daily choices and the support of their spiritual community. In this sermon, we will dive deep into the power dynamics between rulers and those who resist societal idols. As we consider the famous “fiery furnace,” we will uncover the profound symbolism of fire in Scripture, a metaphor for trials that reveal what truly matters. In this next installment of the Daniel series, learn how to discover “The Courage to Stand” when faced with the beckoning of idols, the fury of kings, and the scorching fires of life’s challenges.

Scripture Reading

“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.” Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought. So they brought these men before the king” (Dan 3:1–13).

Introduction

One day in 1936, a crowd of professional metal workers and shipbuilders assembled at a riverside dockyard in Hamburg, Germany. Normally, this is the very spot where together they would work and labor to construct sea-faring ships. But on this day, they were gathered together not to build boats but to celebrate the launch of a newly completed naval vessel for the Nazi war machine.

The event was a full-fledged affair of state—full of pomp, circumstance, and publicity. The shipyard owners proudly stood alongside prominent Nazi politicians and military officials. And among all the impressive and powerful stood the German Fuhrer himself—Adolf Hitler.

As a show of national unity and patriotism, anytime Hitler appeared before a crowd, he was to be welcomed by shouts of “Heil Hitler!” along with the infamous Nazi salute (a stiff right arm, raised at a forty-five-degree angle).

So, as Hitler emerged, hundreds of the shipbuilders greeted him, saluted him, and expressed their allegiance to him. But a photograph taken at this event [show **iThe German Who Would Not Salute**] revealed not everyone present at this event was willing to express devotion to the German leader or the Nazi regime that he represented. As others extend their arms, one man stands with his arms deliberately crossed.

To publicly deny support and loyalty to Hitler at this moment was not only considered an act of dissent—it was an act of *defiance*. It would have been considered insolent—“how dare he disrespect the leader of our nation.” It would have been considered anti-social—“why can’t go with the flow and do what everyone else is doing?” It would have been considered unpatriotic—“If this guy is against Hitler, then he must hate Germany!” Even more, acknowledging Fuhrer with a salute was *not* considered optional or voluntary—it was legally compulsory. To fail to do so was a *crime*.

But nevertheless, against all the pressure mounted against him, here this man stands alone in defiance of the powers that be.

Who was this man, and how did he find such courage, we might wonder?

For years, the identity of this man was a mystery. And even today, there is debate over his identity. Some thought he must have been a radical thinker or would-be revolutionary fighter; others thought he was a former Nazi who had recently fallen in love with a Jewish woman.¹

¹ Until recently, the man in this photo was almost universally acknowledged as another man named August Landmesser, a former Hamburg resident and Nazi who, upon his marriage to a Jewish woman

But the best evidence suggests that the man who refused to salute Hitler was a shipyard worker named Gustav Wergert.

We don't know a lot about Wergert. But we do know that he worked for this shipyard in 1936. We know that when people greeted him with the words "Heil Hitler," he responded with the words "Guten tag" (meaning "good day"). We know that he refused to give the Nazi salute based on his Christian conviction that only Christ alone is Lord. And we also know that whenever his shipyard would hold a ceremony for a ship launch on Sunday, he would refuse to attend and instead chose to worship with his church. His family and friends remember him saying, "*You should obey God more than man.*"²

There are moments in life when such unflinching convictional courage is encouraged and even praised. There are other moments when it is barely tolerated and quietly resented. Still, there are other moments when such courage is profoundly costly.

The questions for us today are: How is it possible to acquire such courage when it is costly? How can we become a people of deep conviction who are willing to choose allegiance to Christ over against the powers of this world? How can we cultivate a faith that can withstand the fire?

The answers to those questions can be found found in Daniel Chapter 3, in what is one of the most famous stories of the Old Testament. It is the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and the fiery furnace of Babylon.

But this passage is more than a mere legend or tale. It is a story written for our sake; for our encouragement and instruction (cf. Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:11). The story of these three exiles in Babylon offers us a vision of a life hidden in Christ, wherein we too can find the "*The Courage to Stand.*" So, for the rest of our time today, we will see how we can discover the courage to stand **1.) When Idols Beckon, 2.) When Kings Rage, and 3.) When Fires Burn.**

Exposition

1.) When Idols Beckon

King Nebuchadnezzar has made a massive golden statue that stands in the plains just outside of the city walls of ancient Babylon. It's possible that he got the idea for this project from the supernatural dream recorded in the previous chapter. Whatever the

named Irma Eckler, was expelled from the Nazi Party and fled to Denmark in 1937. Eventually, both Landmesser and his wife were arrested. Tragically, Eckler died in a concentration camp and Landmesser died while serving under compulsion in a German penal battalion. With this said, the evidence favors Wergert as the man who refused to salute Hitler, as there is a written record of Wergert's employment with the Blohm shipbuilders and Voss in 1936. There is no such record for Landmesser. Both men bear a resemblance to the man in the photo, but the visual similarity favors Wergert.

² <http://wegert-familie.de/home/English.html>

case, we know this is no mere statue to be appreciated—this is an idol to be worshipped [show [2The Image of Gold](#)].

The king calls forth all the officials of the empire, and the list is long: “..*satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials...*” (Dan 3:2). In our day and age this would be like calling a national assembly where everyone from senators to state governors to city mayors and county clerks are in attendance.

As the crowd gathers before the golden image, a herald announces that when the music plays, they must all fall down before the idol to worship it—or else face the consequences.

Despite whatever these Babylonian officials believed personally, the pressure to fall in line and do what was commanded would have been immense and overwhelming. That is why these long lists of satraps and prefects and governors are emphasized throughout this passage. It is why the list of musical instruments that would be played are also repeated again and again. All of this repetition shows how this was a very public even with high expectations, high pressure, and fanfare.

This shows us something that is crucial for us to understand about idols. An idol is, of course, anything that is not God that we functionally worship as a god. But idolatry is not just an individual matter of the heart—idolatry is communal in nature and communal in practice. If we live in culture that exalts certain idols or within a community of people who are prone toward certain idols, those idols will be amplified in the power and pressure they exert in our own lives.

In Daniel Chapter 3, all the social, emotional, and even spiritual energy would have compelled just about anyone to fall in line and just bow down in submission.

And this is what almost everyone does—all except for three men named Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego [show [3Refusal to Bow](#)]. These men are all Jewish exiles. And though they live in the land of Babylon, they are still a part of God's people, and they have committed themselves to be faithful to the Lord above all other gods.

So when all others bow down, these three make the decision to stand together.

How is it, we might ask, that these three men are willing to stand when everyone else bows in worship? From where do they derive the courage to say “no” when everyone else says “yes” to the idol placed before them?

I would argue that the courage that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego display in Chapter 3 was first inspired and nourished by decisions they made back in *Chapter 1*. For it was at the beginning of the book of Daniel that they made the decision to forgo the fine food from the king's table. It was back in Chapter 1 when they made a commitment to one another that they would resist compromise by denying themselves food that had been offered before the idols of Babylon.

In other words, the day they refuse to bow before Nebuchadnezzar's golden image is not the first time they have said "no" to an idol in Babylon. They have been saying "no" to the idols of Babylon on a daily basis. They have remembered their true calling as God's people on a daily basis. And they have done so, not in isolation, but in shared fellowship and spiritual community with one another.

The story of these three men reminds us that qualities like holiness, integrity, and courage are not personality traits that some people are simply born with—they are habit-formed virtues that are cultivated through *practice*. Moreover, in the same way that idolatry is something that is amplified by community, so too, faithfulness is something that is empowered by community as well.

That means if you want to have integrity that will not wilt idols beckon, if you want to have the courage to stand when the world around you bows down, you must begin by resisting the small, daily compromises that would lead your heart away from God. And you must find fellow spiritual community among fellow believers who help you remain faithful to Christ.

So, what are the ways you can practice saying "no" to the small, seemingly insignificant compromises of this world so that you can remain steadfast so that when the temptation to make a big compromise comes your way? Who are the people you need to walk alongside so that you can stand alongside them when the trial and temptation come your way?

2.) When Kings Rage

Now remember, up until this point in the story, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego have received supernatural favor and privilege from those in authority in Babylon. They've been promoted and given authority. They have access to power and prestige.

You can imagine that some of the native Babylonians would grow resentful to all these foreign exiles of a conquered kingdom getting so much attention and acclaim. But now, they have a chance to either put Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in their place or even get rid of them for good.

So with jealousy and malice in their hearts, they go to the king—and they *tattle* (Dan 3:8). They do not want the king informed—they want the king *enraged*. So, they speak words that are designed to provoke his fury. They say, “These men that you have so graciously give power and privilege and authority are spitting your face, O king! They don't care about you. They don't respect you.: And here is the kicker: they say, “*They do not worship your gods* and they refuse to worship the golden image that you have set up” (Dan 3:12).

Predictably, Nebuchadnezzar is filled with what the words of Scripture call “*furious rage*,” and he commands that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego men be brought before his presence at once so they may stand trial for this accusation. And when they

arrive, he immediately attempts to bully and coerce them into complying with his demands or else face certain death.

Now, at this point, I think it is important to wonder why Nebuchadnezzar is so willing to execute members of his own governmental administration in a fit of murderous rage? Nebuchadnezzar is not acting like a confident or shrewdly calculating king—he is acting like a desperate man who feels threatened.

Why? Why do the kings, powers, and systems of this world react so strongly when the people of God refuse to worship the idols of this world? The answer is power. With worship comes devotion, and through devotion comes power.

Nebuchadnezzar does not just want people to worship his idol because he is proud of his statue. He has set up this idol because wants to unite and commandeer the religious affections of all the various peoples and nations that his empire has conquered. And he knows that he can do this if he can direct their worship toward his idol, his empire, and ultimately himself.

Now, Babylon was not the only empire that tried to pull this move. Early in his reign, Caesar Augustus established what became known as the *Imperial Cult*. It was distinctly Roman religion that would exalt Roman Emperors to divinity upon their death [show 4Statue of Augustus as Jupiter]. That meant that Caesars would have literal temples built in their honor across the Mediterranean world. Later, under Emperor Domitian, participation in the Imperial Cult was considered mandatory for all Roman Citizens to remain in good standing. Citizens were required to stand before a local magistrate, make a sacrifice of incense, and say a prayer of worship to Caesar.

But there was one group of people who refused to make such sacrifices and say such prayers—they were the early Christians. The early Christians believed they were called to submit to their governmental authorities and honor their governmental authorities (cf. Rom 13:1; 1 Pet 2:17). But they could not and would not worship Caesar—because only Jesus is Lord. And it was that conviction that through the powers that be into rage and fury. It was that conviction that led to the Christians being persecuted in the Roman Empire.

But neither these Jewish exiles in Babylon nor the early Christians in Rome were trained soldiers of war. How then was it possible for such normal, everyday people to stand so courageously before the murderous rage of kings?

It is because the Jewish exiles of Babylon and the early Christians of Rome were utterly convinced that God is sovereign—not Nebuchadnezzar, not Caesar, not any king of this world. And it was because of that conviction that they were able to live their lives in response to an abiding fear of the Lord—not the fear of man.

So what is the "fear of the Lord"? Does that mean we need to live in a constant state of fright that God is angry with and ready to smite us? No. The fear of the Lord is an awe-struck wonder that flows from understanding who God has revealed himself to be.

The fear of the Lord is the sense of amazement that flows from knowing that the God who created the galaxies, the God who is transcendent and glorious, and the God who dwells in unapproachable light, knows you by name and loves you! The fear of the Lord is the astonishment that results from the knowledge that God sent his Son to bear the burden of your shame and failure, defeat the powers of sin and death, and make a way for you to know hope and everlasting resurrection life! The fear of the Lord is hope and wonder that derives from trusting that one day Christ will return to bring forth perfect judgment and justice that will end all sorrow and evil forever!

When you believe in this God, what can any man do to you that would make you afraid?

So, if the “fear of the Lord” is awestruck wonder and worship of God, what it is that you are most in awe of?

Are you in awe of Jesus? Are you in awe of the beauty of his life, the power of his love, and the truth of his gospel?

Or has something else captivated your heart? Has there been something in your life that convinced you that it must be feared, attended to, and considered absolutely non-negotiable?

For some of us it may be the endless pursuit of wealth. For others, it may be personal success and acclaim. For others, it may be the need for our children to be significant and successful in the eyes of the world. For others, it may be the simple craving for comfort.

Whatever the case, you will know that you have confronted an idol when you sense the rage and fear of the power that stands behind that idol.

Nebuchadnezzar threatens Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego with the very fiery furnace that forged his golden image. If they disobey again, there is nothing they can do to resist his rage. So he taunts them by asking the question: “*...And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?*” (Dan 3:15).

That leads us to our third and final point.

3.) When Fires Burn

Thus far, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego have only been rewarded for committing themselves to faithfully serving God in Babylon. And sometimes, in our own lives, we will be rewarded for faithfulness. But there will inevitably be times when faithfulness is costly.

This is the moment where the three Jewish exiles must count the cost or else face the fire.

Now, in Scripture, fire is often a metaphor for spiritual trial and tribulation. In the case of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that fiery trial is both figurative and also very literal.

But as they stood before the idol on the plain of Dura, so too they stand before the king with unflinching courage. Courage is not the absence of fear; courage is the commitment to do what is right, even in the face of fear.

For Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, their courage is rooted in something more than intrinsic virtue or willpower. Their courage is rooted in faith that despite their circumstances—whether they live or they die—their lives belong to a God in whom they have a life that is beyond the power of death.

So with the utmost respect and unwavering conviction, they speak to the king, *“Nebuchadnezzar....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”* (Dan 3:16–18).

Now, the rage of the king burns with even more passion. He orders that the furnace burn with a heat that matches his fury (Dan 3:19). He then commands his mighty men to immediately bind the three Jewish men and cast them into the fire [5The Fiery Furnace]. But the king's order is so urgent that the furnace overheats and consumes and kills the very men who throw the Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into the fire (Dan 3:22). But miraculously, the three men themselves are not destroyed by the fire. The same fire that made the metal of the golden idol moldable and pliable cannot melt the faith and courage of the exiles.

You see, there is a reason that fire is often used as a symbol of trial and tribulation in the Bible. The heat and power of fire can consume and destroy some things, but it can purify and perfect other things.

When we endure the incursion of suffering within our lives, the fires of trial will suddenly pull back the veil and expose what is *true* and what is *trivial*. When a loved one suddenly dies, when a job is lost unexpectedly, when you hear the words of that feared diagnosis, suddenly all that pettiness and needless drama that so often occupies our attention and time fades into the background. But whatever is true, whatever is eternal, whatever is enduring comes into clarity and focus.

But for those who know God and are known by God—even when it feels like we could lose everything else—trial can teach us that if we have God, we have enough.

As the Psalmist in Psalm 73 prays, *“Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever”* (Psalm 73:23–26).

If we are to allow the words of Scripture to form our vision and expectation of life, we must understand that the normal Christian life will know times of sorrow and suffering. Sometimes that suffering will be the result of our own sin. Sometimes that suffering will be the result of our choice to remain faithful to our conviction. Sometimes that suffering will simply be the result of living in a sin-fractured world.

In these times, our aim must not be to escape or go around our suffering. Our aim must be to invite God into our suffering so that we might walk through suffering with him, knowing that while our God is never the author of evil, he is able to redemptively use the trials of our life to refine us and sanctify us.

For this reason, the Apostle Peter writes, *“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls”* (1 Pet 1:6–9).

Though you cannot always see him or sense him—Christ is with you in the fires of trial. He is the Shepherd of your soul who has promised to walk with you even though you walk through the valley of the shadow of death (Ps 23:4).

Conclusion

And that, of course, is the great surprise of this story. Not only are Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego not consumed by the fiery furnace—they *are not alone*.

Scripture reads: *“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”* (Dan 3:24–25).

The three Jewish exiles stand up for their God, and their God stands with them [show [Icon of Daniel and the Three Youths in the Fiery Furnace by Adrianoupolitis Konstantinos](#)]. They are unbound and unburnt.

A dramatic reversal takes place. What was meant to expose the powerlessness of the Jews instead exposes power of their God. What was meant to put Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in their place instead leads to their further favor and promotion. What was meant to strike fear into the hearts of all who oppose Nebuchadnezzar instead strikes fear into Nebuchadnezzar's own heart.

The man who once boasted, “Who is the god who will deliver you?” ends this chapter with the words, “There is no other God who is able to save” (cf. Dan 3:29).

What Nebuchadnezzar and royal officials and the three faithful exiles witnessed that day was supernatural and miraculous. But have access to an even more astonishing truth.

They witnessed one who was like a son of the gods [show **7Not Alone**]⁷—but the gospel has revealed that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. They witnessed one who is like a son of the gods endure fire to save his people—but the gospel reveals the savior who endured death so that we might live.

And as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were set free from their bonds—so too we will no longer be bound, even by the power of death. As their clothes were unburnt and their hair was unsinged—so too we will not be corrupted by death. And as the very smell of fire had not come upon them—so too for all who trust in Christ and are united with Christ death shall not remain with us!

For in Christ, we have access to the far greater power of resurrection and eternal life that is mightier and more enduring than the power of any king of this world. In Christ, we have a Savior who is worthy of far greater glory than any glittering idols of this world.

For this reason, there will be a day when all nations and languages and tongues and tribes bow down in worship. But it is not going to be to a golden statue. Instead, every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

- 1) With your group, read the story of Daniel 3 out loud. Due to the length of this chapter, you may want to divide the reading into a few sections with different readers. When you are finished reading, summarize the major events of this passage in your own words.
- 2) The story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego centers around their refusal to bow to a golden image. What are some modern-day "idols" or pressures that people might face that could challenge their faith? How can we resist them?
- 3) In Scripture, fire can be used as a metaphor for trials and tribulations, which God can use to cleanse and sanctify us (see 1 Peter 1:6–9). Can you share a personal experience where facing a trial revealed what truly mattered in your life?
- 4) The story of Daniel 3 highlights the role of community and fellowship in nurturing courage. How can we build and maintain strong spiritual communities that support one another in times of challenge and trial?