

1.9.22

Who Or What Are You Worshiping

Daniel 3.1-30

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3 **King Nebuchadnezzar made a golden statue** whose height was sixty cubits (about 90 feet) and whose width was six cubits (about 9 feet); **he set it up** on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. 2 Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent for the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces, to assemble and come to the dedication of the statue **that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up**. 3 So the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces, assembled for the dedication of the statue **that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up**. When they were standing before the statue **that Nebuchadnezzar had set up**, 4 the herald proclaimed aloud, “*You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, 5 that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, you are to fall down and worship the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. 6 Whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire.*” 7 Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, **all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up**.

8 Accordingly, at this time **certain Chaldeans came forward and denounced the Jews**. 9 They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, “*O king, live forever! 10 You, O king, have made a decree, that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, shall fall down and worship the golden statue, 11 and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire. 12 There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These pay no heed to you, O king. They do not serve your gods and they do not worship the golden statue that you have set up.*”

13 Then Nebuchadnezzar **in furious rage** commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought in; so they brought those men before the king.

Nebuchadnezzar said to them, ***“Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods and you do not worship the golden statue that I have set up? Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble to fall down and worship the statue that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire, and who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands?”*** Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, ***“O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.”***

Then Nebuchadnezzar **was so filled with rage** against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego **that his face was distorted**. He ordered the furnace heated up seven times more than was customary, and ordered some of the strongest guards in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to throw them into the furnace of blazing fire. So the men were bound, still wearing their tunics, their trousers, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the furnace of blazing fire. Because the king’s command was urgent and the furnace was so overheated, the raging flames killed the men who lifted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. But the three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down, bound, into the furnace of blazing fire. Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up quickly. He said to his counselors, ***“Was it not three men that we threw bound into the fire?”*** They answered the king, ***“True, O king.”*** He replied, ***“But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the fourth has the appearance of a god.”*** Nebuchadnezzar then approached the door of the furnace of blazing fire and said, ***“Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, **servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!**”*** So 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 tunics were not harmed, and not even the smell of fire came

from them. Nebuchadnezzar said, *“Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him. **They disobeyed 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 utters blasphemy 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 deliver in this way.”* Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon.”

What do you think about when you hear the word, “worship”? Many people think about **a place and time**, like Sunday morning in the sanctuary in their home church. They envision some music, a message, and being with other people. For the Jewish people at the time of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego worship had meant a very special place, the temple in Jerusalem. But that place was gone, destroyed by the Babylonians. Not only did they lose a special place of worship, but they were also in exile in a foreign land. Everything was different than life had been just a few years ago.

In some ways, the pandemic has created a type of exile for us. Many of you are watching online at home because of COVID and out of a concern for health and safety. Some of you have been worshipping that way exclusively for what will soon be two years which has meant not worshipping in the place you’re used to and not being with other people in community. It can lead to a feeling of isolation. However, one of the things we learn about worship is **worship isn’t about a place, it’s about a priority. Worship isn’t done only at one time in the week, it’s about the choices we make every day.** That truth is reflected in today’s story from Daniel 3.

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had **set up** a huge golden statue. At the service of dedication all the political officials were to be present to worship the golden statue the King had made when the music played. Anyone who refused would be burned alive. At one level this is a story about ego, the abuse of power, and a leader’s need for adoration and complete unquestioning loyalty like is present in a cult of any kind. Anyone who demands or expects this sort of behavior from his or her subjects or followers is dangerous. At a deeper level, this is a story about worship. When the music

played all the people from all the nations and languages dutifully fell down and worshiped the golden statue. Well, almost everyone.

There were Jews living in Babylon. They were strangers in a strange land and I'm sure they felt isolated as many of you may feel today. They were some of the best and the brightest of Judah who had been carried off into exile in a foreign land after the defeat of their nation. Among them were Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Because of their obvious ability, these men had risen through three years of training with Daniel to become appointed leaders over the province of Babylon. Not only did these foreigners take jobs away from native Babylonians, but they also brought different religious beliefs. They refused to bow to the golden statue. The king was told by jealous astrologers, ¹² ***“There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These pay no heed to you, O king. They do not serve your gods and they do not worship the golden statue that you have set up.”***

For Jews and Christians, **worship is about God being first in your life.** Earlier in Daniel chapter one Daniel and his three companions drank water and ate vegetables and didn't eat royal food from the king's table. It was a small way of resisting and asserting their will in a foreign land. It was a way that they could demonstrate their belief about God and the Lord being first in their lives. Now it's three years later, and they've been faithfully persisting in taking the road less traveled in Babylon. They have been resisting the temptation to bow to political, economic, religious, and peer pressure. Think about what these young men were up against. The three Jewish men were taken as captives from their own land, given new names, and put to work in the service of their masters. There was economic resentment among the Babylonians that these foreigners had taken three high profile positions. The three young men were oppressed, their ethnicity is implicit in the accusation, ***“There are certain Jews...”*** That wasn't said as a compliment. Finally, they're suffering religiously because they would not obey a law that violated their first and primary loyalty to God which is above every other loyalty including that owed to the king or any ruler or country.

For Jews and Christians, worshiping God is grounded in the first of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:3), ***“You shall have no other gods before me.”*** When

Jesus was asked, *"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"* He answered by quoting Deuteronomy 6.5, ***"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind"*** (Matthew 22:37).

Worshiping God is about God being first in your life 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If people followed you around with a video camera for a week, what would an impartial observer determine was of first or greatest importance to you? Would it be your relationship with God? Would your relationship with God be evident in how you treat the people you interact with at home, work, or school, in how you spend your time, what you look at online and read, what you share with others, in how you use your material resources, in what your behavior says you believe? Part of being a child of God in a time when fewer people are affiliated with a church or believe in God is that you understand you and your life don't belong to you, they belong to God. While many people claim not to worship God, everyone worships someone or something. The three young men in Daniel are facing execution because they believe in God with all their heart and soul and God is first in their lives.

The king used the threat of violent death to force them to conform asking, ***"and who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands?"*** In one of the great statements of faith in the Bible, the men reply, ***"17 If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. 18 But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up."***

Think about the faith and courage it takes to defy a selfish powerful leader. The story tells us **nine times** that it was King Nebuchadnezzar who set up the statue. There is no doubt what they're risking or what's at stake. Who or what to worship was not merely a theological matter for these young men. They're not like people in a small group talking about worship and whether they liked the music or the preaching, or even how to worship God throughout the course of each day during the week. Who or what to worship for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego was truly a matter of life and death.

The King *"was so filled with rage that his face was distorted"* and he ordered the furnace to be cranked up seven times hotter than usual. He was using fire and smoke to get everyone's attention. His power was not to be opposed, his will was not to be

crossed, what he said had to be done, and he would use and encourage violence to force people into submission and to get his way. He was used to being surrounded with “yes men” and flunkies. Who did these guys think they were defying him? This is how authoritarian leaders and dictators still behave to this day.

Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego were bound and thrown into the fiery furnace. To the king’s astonishment he saw four men walking in the middle of the fire and they were not hurt; and the fourth had the appearance of a god. The king called for them to come out and the three of them did. To some people their deliverance is clearly a miracle; to others the story seems hard to believe. But an important question is: **what does this story tell us about where God is when people are suffering in the fires of oppression?**

When some people hear the words “fire” and “God,” they envision a wrathful God condemning people to the fire of hell. But in this story God is not on the outside putting people into the fire, God is **with people in the fire**. God is **with those** who are being oppressed like Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego because of their religion, race, or ethnicity; God is with us in the midst of our suffering. God is in the fire with the three young men and God is with those who are being oppressed today wherever they are and whatever they look like. **Part of worship is being where God is, and God is with those in the flames of suffering.**

So another aspect of our worship is being in relationship with those in the flames of hardship. Meshach’s Hebrew name was Mishael which means, **“Who is what God is,”** a God who stands with and delivers people from the fires of oppression. Abednego’s Hebrew name was Azariah which means, **“Yahweh has helped.”** We have to acknowledge however, that many times throughout history right to the present day there have been those who held to their faith and convictions and stood up for what was right, and God did not deliver them from the fire, the sword, the firing squad, the gas chamber, or some other violent death. Yet we’re called to hold onto our faith and convictions and believe God can and will help and we are to be instruments of the Lord’s help and deliverance when and where we can. Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego we’re called not to give in to peer pressure or the temptation of power and the idols of our culture whether they’re made of gold or anything else. We’re to put our

faith and trust in God no matter what. Remember that God is with you and with the oppressed in the midst of their suffering.

Graham Kendrick who has written several songs we sing, wrote, *“Worship has been misunderstood as something that arises from a feeling which “comes upon you,” but it is vital that we understand that it is rooted **in a conscious act of the will**, to serve and obey the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Worship is what we’re created to do for all eternity, not just something we do once a week for an hour. Ed Jarrett wrote for Christianity.com, *“For many Christians, worship is what we do on Sunday morning. Singing a few songs, listening to a teaching, sharing communion/Eucharist, and doing whatever else is scheduled for the Sunday morning meeting time. But worship is so much more than that. We evaluate the effectiveness of worship by how it makes us feel. **But worship is really about what we give. Not what we receive.** Worship is bowing before our superior, in this case, God. True worship costs us something. **In Romans 12:1 that cost is described as the sacrifice of self.** When we come before God in worship, we humbly give ourselves up to his Lordship, proclaiming that he is worthy and exalting him in praise.”*

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego understood that worship is about what we give and that it costs us something, the sacrifice of ourselves. Yet we believe that sacrifice of living worship is well worth making. As Christians, we believe that a time will come when all recognize the worth of and worship Jesus Christ and God. Because we believe that, we want people to have the benefit of being in relationship with and worshipping God as soon as possible. In **Philippians 2.9-11**, the Apostle Paul quotes what had already become a well-known Christian affirmation of faith, *“Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father..”*

In **1 Chronicles 16:29**, we are told to *“ascribe **to the Lord** the glory due his name; bring an offering and come before him. **Worship the Lord** in the splendor of his holiness.”* The Lord alone is worthy of your adoration and worship. Jesus also tells us, “It is written: *‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’*” The Psalms are filled with

calls to praise the Lord including **Psalm 95:6**, *“O come, **let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!**”*

Our worship of God is both personal and communal. One of the challenges of the pandemic for those of you who have been faithfully watching from home is missing the communal aspects of seeing people, having conversations, and even giving and receiving appropriate expressions of physical touch. Whatever your situation, you can still worship God if you're at home, in the hospital, in pain, in grief or near the end of life's journey, or just starting to learn about God. Worship happens at a time and place, but most importantly it is **a priority** as you put God first in all aspects of your life. Part of your worship is how you serve and give of yourself throughout the week and that service and worship is preparation for what we will be doing in heaven.

John tries to describe the indescribable scene in **Revelation 7.9-12**,

9 After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, **from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing** before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. 10 They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

11 And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and **they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God**, 12 singing, *“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”*

One day we will be like those in heaven in **Revelation 4:10** and we will, *“fall down before him who sits on the throne **and worship him who lives forever and ever.**”*

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Why do you think King Nebuchadnezzar insisted that everyone worship the statue or idol of gold? What do the king's words and actions reveal about his own ego and insecurity?
2. What does the story reveal about the character of the officials serving the king and the astrologers who denounce the Jews (Daniel 3:8-12)?

3. How could Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be so bold and courageous?
What do you think gave them the ability to do and say what they did?
4. According to Daniel 3, where is God when we are in the furnace of suffering?
5. Can you recall a time when you felt like you were in a very difficult situation, and you sensed that God was with you?
6. What do we learn from the experience of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that shapes how we are to live and worship today?