

Idolatry's Denial

Daniel 3:16-18

We considered the first 15 verses of this chapter last week and considered “Idolatry’s Demand”. We learn two lessons: that man wants and needs a god, but he does not want the God of Scripture, who is a Spirit. The world has been a history of man falling down to worship the creature rather than the Creator, in spite of all of the failure, emptiness, and folly that comes with it.

We considered the many pressures upon the believer to compromise with false gods and false worship. Today we come to one of the greatest examples of resistance to state-ordered idolatry ever!

Nestled between King Nebuchadnezzar’s two angry demands, stand these three young men in 16-18.

And by stand, I mean they stand alone and stand out. Where are the other Jews? We don’t know. Where is Daniel? We don’t know – maybe he was not commanded to do this or maybe he was away on business. The better question to ask is: where are you?

These men stood out because they first stood up; that is, they knew where they stood. There is a good modern saying: “if you don’t stand for something, you will fall for anything.” It is remarkable that they do so, given their conditions and circumstances.

Albert Barnes has a good word on this that bears repeating: pp 217-218.

“The state of mind denoted by this verse is that of a determination to do their duty, whatever might be the consequences. The attention was fixed on what was right, not on what would be the result. The sole question which was asked was, what ought to be done in the case; and they had no concern about what would follow. True religion is a determined purpose to do right, and not to do wrong, whatever may be the consequences in either case. It matters not what follows – wealth or poverty; honor or dishonor; good report or evil report; life or death. The mind is firmly fixed on doing right, and not on doing wrong.”

What was it that gave them courage? What moved them to such brave resolve and strong obedience? What is it in them which can translate to us, for our needy lives in our needy world?

In a word, it was their faith in the living God, the covenant-keeping God, of the Bible.

Later revelation would record this:

³³ *who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, (Heb 11:33-34)*

There are three points to be drawn from these three verses:

- 1. They believed the reality of God’s power.**
- 2. They believed the mystery of God’s will.**
- 3. They believed the demands of God’s obedience.**

First, they believed the reality of God’s power.

Three words are worth underlining in verse 17: God is able.

I have asked this before: how do you defeat a lion? Get a bigger lion! They served a bigger and greater lion than any Babylon had! *By faith* they beheld a bigger and greater God than Nebu. *By faith* they beheld a greater King than the one upon the throne. *By faith* believed in a greater lake of fire for all idolaters. *By faith* they saw a greater loss than that of their bodies – that is, their souls. *By faith* they beheld a greater gain than preserving their high places – they saw an imperishable crown. In short, they beheld a greater glory than all this world could offer or afford. They could say with Paul: **2 Corinthians 4:17** For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding *and* eternal weight of glory...

The power, promise, and pleasures of Christ held them as a three-stranded cord of love and grace.

The power of God as Deliverer put steel into their souls; they had been delivered by a greater hand from a greater travesty – the guilt and power of sin. They could look back upon a long line of God's powerful handiwork – at the flood, in the exodus, against the many nations who surrounded Israel.

They could look forward to the promise, of what God would do in the future, in sending the longed-for Messiah, to bring in a new age of the Spirit and of grace. The promise of God runs this way:

But now, thus says the LORD, your Creator, O Jacob, And He who formed you, O Israel, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine!"² "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, Nor will the flame burn you."³ "For I am the LORD your

God, The Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I have given Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in your place. ⁴ "Since you are precious in My sight, Since you are honored and I love you, I will give other men in your place and other peoples in exchange for your life. (Isa 43:1-4)

No doubt these men had pleasures before them, eternal pleasures, which were anchored in hope of the life to come, and the resurrection from the dead.

Here is the root of their stance, the strength of their firm resolve – God Himself was with them and for them.

And Nebuchadnezzar had made it a battle of the gods, when he said, and I quote: “what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?” Umm, the God who holds you in the palm of His hand, O great king.

This accounts for the decisive reply in verse 16 – no need for consultation, reflection or even defense. These are the first words recorded from these men, and what words they are indeed! God, and not Nebuchadnezzar, is the Judge and Sovereign Decider of death; when I live, how long I live, and when I die; not man, not fate or chance, but the omnipotent, personal hand of my Creator and Redeemer.

Sometimes the believer opens himself to temptation and sin when he ponders, when he mulls things over. There is no excuse for rashness, but neither is there for being double minded. For this is where the whispers enter in – ‘be reasonable, spare yourself, all these around you cannot all be wrong, what’s the big deal?’ This is the sound of the gas flame being lit beneath the proverbial kettle of frogs. Remember that story: of how the frogs are slowly cooked to keep them in the pot? The martyr Cyprian said: “there can be no deliberation in a matter so

sacred!” There is something more dear or precious indeed; worth a 100, a 1000, a million lives – the glory of God.

Now there is another important element to their faith here.

They believed the mystery of God’s will as well as trusted His power.

They know God is able to deliver when and how He pleases. But they humbly submit to God’s good pleasure and choice as to deliver them here or not. “If the Lord wills” stands over all of our temporal concerns.

Faith does not seek to predict God’s actions, or demand and call down rescue when we please. These three planks must be kept together:

1. God’s full ability – He can deliver
2. God’s full freedom – even if He does not
3. God’s full obedience – we will not serve/worship your image

See how we are tempted to ease our situation and remove one of these planks. Take away # one – God was willing to save but couldn’t because we or something else hindered him. Take away # two – God must deliver or something is wrong with my faith. Take away # three – God who can deliver, has not done so, therefore I need not obey him in this tight spot.

God doesn’t always deliver the godly from all such afflictions, persecutions, and deaths.

Sometimes He does. John Craig was an assistant to John Knox, and was captured and to be executed by the Pope. But what happens? The Pope dies and so all prisoners, except heretics, are released. Somehow Craig is put with those set at liberty. On his way from Rome to

Scotland, he is recaptured. But the soldier recognizes him as one who had greatly helped his brother and so releases him. He is now penniless, not able to make his way through Europe – hiding in the tall weeds. What happens? A dog with a purse in his teeth appears, and he finds enough money to carry him forward.

Remarkable deliverances belong to our Lord; not least of which is keeping us from falling into the enemies' hands in the first place.

But this is not always the case. A hand did not come down at the last moment and rescue Jan Hus, or Cranmer, or Latimer, or Ridley. God did not rescue Jim Elliot from the Indians he sought to save by the gospel.

And God, though He loves you more than the whole creation put together, doesn't always grant us what we want. As Geoff Thomas has put it:

Every Christian is not given a fully satisfying job, or the spouse of their dreams, or the children they asked God for, or the parents, for that matter. Every Christian has to face it – even if the Lord does not deliver us, we will do His will! Serving Christ for loss, serving Him for loneliness, serving Christ for death, is sometimes our lot. We don't have to be rich – we don't have to be comfortable – we don't have to be married or be parents – we don't have to live – BUT, we have to obey!

It is the certainty of our relationship with Christ that moves us above and beyond such secondary things. And what? Will we trade falsehoods and idols to gain a momentary advantage? "I worship God in spirit, and I do not worship or honor idols," said Bullinger. "Our

religion is from heaven and is certain. Your religion,” speaking to the Roman Catholics, “is superstitious and comes from the devil; it is not certain and possesses nothing good.”

This brings us to the final point:

1. They believed the reality of God’s power.
2. They believed the mystery of God’s will.
3. They believed the demands of God’s obedience.

Obedience mattered more than deliverance to them; worship was more important than their security, says one author. Davis calls this their “Obstinacy of Obedience”.

They know by faith that trials cannot hurt us; afflictions cannot harm you, if God be your God. Such metals as the bronze of hope, the silver of faith, and the gold loving obedience, cannot be burned but only purified by fiery trials. “And who *is* he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good?” (1Pe 3:13)

Recall the reply of a Christian in England being threatened with death by the queen because of his faith: He said, “you will only send me to my Master, where I long to be!”

You can never be losers for faithfully following your Lord and Savior. Spurgeon has such a good but full word for us – can you bear a minute longer?

The manly courage and marvelous deliverance of the three holy children, or rather champions, is well calculated to excite in our minds firmness and steadfastness in upholding the truth in the teeth of tyranny and in the very jaws of death. Let young Christians especially learn from their example, both in matters of religion, and matters of uprightness in

business, never to sacrifice their consciences. Lose all rather than lose your integrity, and when all else is gone, still hold fast a clear conscience as the rarest jewel which can adorn the heart of a mortal. Be not guided by the will-o'-the-wisp¹ of policy, but by the pole-star of divine authority. Follow the right at all hazards. When you see no present advantage, walk by faith and not by sight. Do God the honor to trust Him when it comes to matters of loss for the sake of principle. See whether He will be your debtor! See if He does not even in this life prove His word that "Godliness, with contentment, is great gain," and that they who "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, shall have all these things added unto them." Should it happen that, in the providence of God, you are a loser by conscience, you shall find that if the Lord pays you not back in the silver of earthly prosperity, He will discharge His promise in the gold of spiritual joy. Remember that a man's life consists not in the abundance of that which he possesses. To wear a guileless spirit, to have a heart void of offence, to have the favor and smile of God, is greater riches than the mines of Ophir could yield, or the traffic of Tyre could win. "Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and inward contention therewith." An ounce of heart's-ease is worth a ton of gold. (Morning and Evening, June 24)

Oh, count your obedience by faith precious indeed. Do not allow any to break in and steal such a precious part of your life. Be principled.

Resist the prizes the world would dangle before you. They are like chasing butterflies. Stand up to them, and be faithful, and you shall come forth like gold, no matter the furnace God chooses in your life.

¹ an atmospheric ghost light seen by travelers at night, especially over bogs, swamps, or marshes. It resembles a flickering lamp and is said to recede if approached, drawing travelers from the safe paths.