

The Great Set Up!

Daniel 3:1-18

3 Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its width six cubits. He set it up in the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. ² And King Nebuchadnezzar sent word to gather together the satraps, the administrators, the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces, to come to the dedication of the image which King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. ³ So the satraps, the administrators, the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces gathered together for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up; and they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. ⁴ Then a herald cried aloud: "To you it is commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, ⁵ that at the time you hear the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, you shall fall down and worship the gold image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up; ⁶ and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace."

⁷ So at that time, when all the people heard the sound of the horn, flute, harp, and lyre, in symphony with all kinds of music, all the people, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the gold image which King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

⁸ Therefore at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and accused the Jews. ⁹ They spoke and 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, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, shall fall down and worship the gold image; ¹¹ and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. ¹² There are certain Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego; these men, O king, have not paid due regard to you. They do not serve your gods or worship the gold image which you have set up."

¹³ Then Nebuchadnezzar, in rage and fury, gave the command to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. So they brought these men before the king. ¹⁴ Nebuchadnezzar spoke, saying to them,

“Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the gold image which I have set up? ¹⁵ Now if you are ready at the time you hear the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, and you fall down and worship the image which I have made, good! But if you do not worship, you shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?”

¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. ¹⁷ If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. ¹⁸ But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up.”

In our sermon text last week we read that Nebuchadnezzar, had proclaimed that Daniel’s God was *“truly a God of gods and Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries.”* In passing, I mentioned that this proclamation, though great, was not an indication of a changed heart. Nebuchadnezzar will have his heart changed, but I want us to notice a couple of things in today’s text. Even after this proclamation that God was a God of gods and Lord of Kings, idolatry was right there to ensnare not only Nebuchadnezzar, but also many of the people who had been delivered by God’s miraculous wonder working power.

Remember, our Bibles today are divided into chapters and verses. This is not a bad thing, but it is something that often causes us to put divisions in stories and accounts where they should not be. We have this proclamation about God from Nebuchadnezzar. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are also placed into positions of high honor, as the text says, ‘...over the affairs of the province of Babylon.’ Daniel is given high honors and elevated to the position where he is ruling over the whole province of Babylon. We are also told that Daniel remained in the court of the king.

This last verse of chapter 2 brings up an interesting but temporary change of focus in chapter 3. Daniel has been the central focus of everything that has happened up to this point. They were all carried into captivity and Daniel took the lead with his three friends in their dispute over the

king's food. Daniel is the one who was the central focus regarding King Nebuchadnezzar's dream and the interpretation. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were there to pray with him for the dream and its interpretation, and they even praised and blessed God with Daniel. Up to this point, however, the one who has stood tall has been Daniel. At the end of Chapter 2 Daniel remains at the King's court, and in Chapter 3 we are going to see Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego literally placed in the fire. One of the questions that always comes up regarding this account is why is Daniel not mentioned in this story. The idea that Daniel remained in the King's court I believe is necessary to understand as we deal with the setting up of this image.

Chapter 3 then begins with these words. "*Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its width six cubits. He set it up in the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon.*" The abruptness of this image of gold being built is the first thing that strikes me about this passage. Perhaps Nebuchadnezzar had read too much into Daniel's interpretation of his dream. "*You, O king are the head of Gold.*" As we discussed last week, and I believe the text makes clear, the central focus of the dream that Nebuchadnezzar had was the stone cut without hands that strikes the base of the image and turns everything in it to chaff, and then becomes a great mountain that fills the entire earth.

People, even great people, are often very selective about what it is they hear. The meaning of the dream was that all kings and kingdoms would be done away with by this stone cut without hands, but Nebuchadnezzar seemed to stumble at the point where he was called the head of gold. He acknowledged God with his lips and then he began the construction of a great image made with gold so that all the peoples would worship and honor him, as though he could somehow circumvent the plan and the will of God.

It was John Calvin who said that the heart of man is an idol factory. Men make idols of everything. We make idols of our cars. We make idols of our homes. We make idols of our families, and specifically of our children. We make idols of our ideas. We even make idols of our pastors and our churches. Man is a creature created and designed to worship, and fallen man loves to serve the creature rather than the creator. Bob Dylan put it this way in the first stanzas of his song You Gotta Serve Somebody:

You may be an ambassador to England or France

You may like to gamble, you might like to dance

You may be the heavyweight champion of the world

You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed

You're gonna have to serve somebody

It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord

But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

I was never a big fan of Bob Dylan, but in this song he recognizes that man is a creature that by his nature must serve somebody. It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord is a fascinating phrase, but if we are serving any aspect of the creation and not the creator, we are in trouble. The first two commandments deal specifically with idolatry. Modern man scoffs at ancient men because of their idolatries and yet we are a people just as wrapped up in idolatry as they.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, alone of all the wise in Babylon refused to bow the knee and we fancy ourselves as being those who would stand along side of them, and yet daily, weekly, and even hourly we show by our lives where it is that our trust is placed.

I want to list some of the leading idolatrous cries of our day, and we will see that the more things change the more they stay the same.

First, everyone is doing it.

Thankfully, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did not fall for this. Generally, if everyone is doing **it**, **it** is not a good idea. Parents, how well does this excuse work with you, when your children bring it to you. **Mom**, everyone is doing it. I know, it never worked for me.

When a person studies the Bible what we find is that the people of God are generally standing against the crowd. They are fighting upstream. I heard this said and I believe it to be true, 'Even a dead fish can go down stream.' I imagine these three standing alone in the plain of Dura, and as the instruments began to play, there were three solitary figures that refused to bow.

The second idolatrous cry; "all of the 'experts' tell us this is the way it should be done."

Again, listen to verse 2 and 3 of this text:

And King Nebuchadnezzar sent word to gather together the satraps, the administrators, the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces, to come to the dedication of the image which King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. ³ So the satraps, the administrators, the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces gathered together for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up; and they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Everyone who was anyone was gathered in the plain of Dura. They were all gathered together for the dedication of this image. I am sure it was a festive time as they waited. Today, this would have most likely been a black-tie affair. We would have the Hollywood celebrities, the foremost politicians would be there, the real movers and shakers, all of them were there. All of them, and this is a newer term so bear with me, the social influencers would be there as well. The top athletes, all the best of the best were gathered at Dura. The pressure to bend the knee was extraordinary.

Let me ask a question. What is it that makes someone an expert? Generally, the way this is done is at some point or at some time to become an expert in a field of study they have had to pass some sort of review board. I find it very interesting that in certain 'conservative' churches if you hold to a belief in a six-day creation you will be rejected. Here is how it begins. Yes, I love Jesus, I want to preach the gospel, but if I hold on to this belief there is no way I will be accepted by my peers. I am just going to compromise on this one area, and then I will be able to do what I am called to do.

Sometimes we compromise by what we do, sometimes by what we say. Gary North tells about an interview he had with Pastor Milo Jamison in his book *“Crossed Fingers, How the Liberals Captured the Presbyterian Church.”* Jamison was speaking to a Pastor who he knew did not believe in the Westminster Confession of Faith. "How could you tell the examining committee that you believe in the Westminster Confession when you really don't?" He asked him. The man answered: "I kept my fingers crossed." Jamison repeated the man's statement again, as if to affirm it categorically with a double witness.

You see, when compromise to get ahead, or for any other reason, it does not take away from the fact that we have already bowed the knee. Idolatry is a cancer and it is destructive in all of its forms. It always begins small and grows. The experts, and today this takes the form of fact checkers, will tell you things like... “Yes that is what the Bible says, but that is not what it really means.” Pretty soon it leads to disaster.

It begins something like this...

It is not important that we believe in Creation in six days. Afterall the creation story is just that...a story it’s not like it actually happened that way.

This leads to:

There is absolutely no difference in the roles between men and women. Since Paul uses the creation and the fall to explain the difference between men and women, and the creation account in the Bible is just a story as it was recently stated, a woman can do anything that a non-ordained man can do.

Which leads to,

The prohibition against women speaking in Church was cultural and has nothing to do with our advanced and sophisticated time. Pretty soon the church is sounding like the culture. Gender becomes a construct.

Which leads to,

Jesus never said anything about homosexuality, and the Bible never condemns loving same sex relations.

There may be extra steps in there, or different emphasis, but if you want a good look at how our Christian culture has gotten where it is today, look no further than idolatry. We have trusted experts and the culture more than the eternal Word of the Living God.

The Bible tells us plainly, “The Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” If we are bowing the knee to cultural and popular idols there is no fear of God there. If we seek the approval of men above God, we will get neither.

The third idolatrous cry, and this one is huge, We have to obey the law...

*⁴Then a herald cried aloud: “To you **it is commanded**, O peoples, nations, and languages, ⁵ that at the time you hear the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, you shall fall down and worship the gold image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up; ⁶ and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace.”*

⁷So at that time, when all the people heard the sound of the horn, flute, harp, and lyre, in symphony with all kinds of music, all the people, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the gold image which King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Please listen, the command to worship the image was not a suggestion. It was a command and it was issued by the King through his herald. The punishment for not doing so was death. It was not a fine, it was not ridicule from the neighbors, it was not even exile from your elite social circles, the command to worship the image was absolute and it was issued by King Nebuchadnezzar who was the head of gold. Daniel was clear in the chapter 2 that the kingdom that was given to Nebuchadnezzar was given to him by God the creator of heaven and earth. The God of gods. And yet, we know the reaction of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to this unlawful order.

In reading this story, we all know that these men are the heroes of the story and so we are sympathetic to them. In our society today whenever a Christian stands against godless and wicked rule, we will hear fellow Christians quote to them from Romans 13. *Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.* ² *Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will ¹⁴bring judgment on themselves.* ³ *For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same.*

Had this incident taken place in the New Testament era, I am convinced there would have been ‘Christians’ and ‘pastors’ who quoted this verse to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. This after all, is the Word of God. Here is probably what it would have sounded like. ‘Hey guys, you are just being obstinate, and you are making all Christians look bad.’ Or better yet, ‘How will the world ever know that Jesus loves them if you pull a stunt like this?’ It’s you guys that give Christians a bad name. As though Romans 13 somehow negates the entirety of Scripture.

Remember Christians there is always a limit to human authority. I think it is important that we exercise wisdom as we deal with this, but the magistrate, as the next verse tells us: *“he is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.”*

Whenever the magistrate, the king, the President, or the congress creates a law that is antithetical to God and His law you are duty bound to resist. To not do so is to bend the knee. Notice the punishment prescribed for violating this law was that they would be cast immediately into the fiery furnace. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego knew the cost for their action and they did it anyway. I want to be clear, to stand against evil and unjust laws is required by Scripture. The problem with most Christians today is our thought patterns are shaped by the world and thus we are often ignorant about what it means to stand for righteousness. I also want to be clear, to stand for righteousness does not mean that you will escape temporal punishment.

R.C. Sproul told an interesting story about an interaction he had with Francis Schaeffer:

“About thirty years ago, I shared a taxi cab in St. Louis with Francis Schaeffer. I had known Dr. Schaeffer for many years, and he had been instrumental in helping us begin our ministry in Ligonier, Pennsylvania, in 1971. Since our time together in St. Louis was during the twilight of Schaeffer’s career, I posed this question to him: “Dr. Schaeffer, what is your biggest concern for the future of the church in America?” Without hesitation, Dr. Schaeffer turned to me and spoke one word: “Statism.” Schaeffer’s biggest concern at that point in his life was that the citizens of the United States were beginning to invest their country with supreme authority, such that the free nation of America would become one that would be dominated by a philosophy of the supremacy of the state.”

I find it interesting that the greatest problem that Francis Schaeffer saw for the future of America was statism.

Dr. Sproul went on with this explanation: In America, we have a long history of valuing the concept of the separation of church and state. This idea historically referred to a division of labors between the church and the civil magistrate. However, initially both the church and the state were seen as entities ordained by God and subject to His governance. In that sense, the state was considered to be an entity that was “under God.” What has happened in the past few decades is the obfuscation of this original distinction between church and state, so that today the language we hear of separation of church and state, when carefully exegeted, communicates the idea of the separation of the state from God. In this sense, it’s not merely that the state declares independence from the church, it also declares independence from God and presumes itself to rule with autonomy.

A follower of Christ must submit to God even when everyone else does not. The Christian is a person who must see through the smokescreens of modern sophistry. A large image erected in the plains of Dura may seem obvious. ‘Hey guys this is an idol, I don’t think that we should bow the knee.’ But when the state tells churches not to gather we don’t bat an eye. It’s as if Peter never uttered the words “We must obey God and not man.”

American Christians have for a long time functioned well in a state that was nominally Christian. We have spoken of our nation as being under God, and we have even sent our children to be

educated by the state. The problem is that our nation, specifically our government has begun to make exclusive claims that only God can make. George Hegel said, “The State is God walking on earth.” What do we do, however, when God’s collide? And inevitably they will.

This was the dilemma that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego found themselves in. And I would argue we are in the same dilemma today. Will we obey God, or will we obey man?

Now, any chance that the stand for righteousness that these young men took would go unnoticed was done away with by the surrounding culture.

⁸ Therefore at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and accused the Jews. ⁹ They spoke and 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, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, shall fall down and worship the gold image; ¹¹ and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. ¹² There are certain Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; these men, O king, have not paid due regard to you. They do not serve your gods or worship the gold image which you have set up.”

When you stand for righteousness, it will be noticed. I will also add, it will not be appreciated. I can imagine that these, as the text says, certain Chaldeans were eager and waiting for a chance to strike out at these young men. When everyone in a culture is bowing, those who do not become a target. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were friends of Daniel, and they had been elevated because of Daniel’s stand. I am sure they saw this as an opportunity to elevate themselves at the expense of Daniel and his friends. If you don’t drink the kool-aid these certain Chaldeans want to know why and they want you to be punished for it. Notice the language they use when they approach King Nebuchadnezzar. “O King, live forever...” and notice also the way they close their dialogue with him. “*These men, O king, have not paid due regard to you. They do not serve your gods or worship the gold image which you have set up.*” There desire was not that the King was worshipped rightly, there desire was to see these three men were punished. And they appealed regarding the ‘due regard’ that Nebuchadnezzar believed he deserved.

The King we are told reacted in rage and fury. I find this to be an interesting passage. As we read this text it seems that the King is giving them another chance to right their supposed wrong. He is furious and he is enraged, but it seems as if he cannot believe that they actually stood against such a harmless edict. Remember these three were highly favored in Babylon. They had just recently been promoted because of Daniel's revealing of the dream and the interpretation of the dream. He is not giving them direction for anything that they do outside of the plain of Dura, he is asking that they would simply bow the knee at the dedication of this great image. These three men have the world at their finger-tips and they are throwing it away over a trivial matter. He reminds them that this is what he is asking them, along with the sharp admonition that should they not, they will be thrown into the fire.

Oh, for the courage of men like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

For what reason were the early Christians persecuted? There were many faiths in the first century in Rome, why was Christianity singled out? The confession of the early Christians was a simple one. Jesus is Lord. But something we have to understand that was implied in this was that Caesar was not. In a poly-theistic culture, worshipping different deities was accepted and expected. But the reasons the Christians got into so much trouble was that they did not give 'due regard' to the emperor cult. They rightly understood that the King himself, Caesar was under God. And that Christ alone was Lord.

"Jesus is Lord," they would say, and then they would die. These words, "Jesus is Lord," cause kings to rage because if Christ is Lord this implies a limit on their own power. Jesus is Lord is a statement that tells them that they too will face judgment. These simple words cost countless Christians their lives, and we treat this phrase so casually today. If Christ is Lord, then every imagination of man and his own greatness must eventually bow the knee.

Philippians 2:10-11 ¹⁰ *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, ¹¹ and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

We will close by looking at the response that Shadrach Meshach and Abednego gave to Nebuchadnezzar after his offer of one more chance to bow the knee.

O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. ¹⁷ If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. ¹⁸ But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up.”

Notice in their answer there is a recognition of who he is. He is the King. He has authority, and yet there is also the statement that they would never go beyond the honor due to a king to a place of worship. They begin their response telling him that they have no need to answer him... What they are saying here is that it matters not what he says or what he commands they will not change their purpose. Listen to John Calvin on this response:

“we ought not to answer you, the sense will be the same. They imply that the fear of death was set before them in vain, because they had determined and resolved in their inmost souls, not to depart a single inch from the true and lawful worship of God. Besides they here give a double reason for rejecting the king’s proposal. They say God has sufficient power and strength to liberate them; and then, even if they must die, their life is not of so much value as to deny God for the sake of preserving it. Hence they declare themselves prepared to die, if the king persists in urging his wish for the adoration of the image.”

There is an acknowledgement that the God whom they serve is able to deliver them, and a firm recognition that even if God does not, they would never bow to nor serve the gods of Nebuchadnezzar which he had set up. What point is there in living if one cannot live to the glory of God.

The title of the message today is “The Great Set Up.” The history of the world is a history of different nations and different kings setting up false systems and false ideologies. Many of these systems shine brightly for a while, many of them are in fact so prevalent that they seem to block out the true light, and yet the Bible tells us in John 1 that the true light shines in the darkness and that the darkness will never be able to overcome it.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego echo Job when he cried out, “Though He slay me, yet will I trust him.” They feared God, and thus they were wise. The entire world was against them, and they were unmoved. May we like our Christian forefathers, learn to stand against everything that exalts itself against the Knowledge of Christ and may we learn wisdom as we fear God more than man and anything that man sets up.

Let us Pray:

Father God, we thank you for the Word you have given us. We know in Your holy word you have commanded us to worship you, and you alone. The Apostle John in his first Epistle warned us, Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Father you have taught us how to worship you and we pray that we may continuously persist in the right worship of you. Let us refuse to be moved by any threats or dangers or violence and may we be maintained on that path of right worship of you. Guide and direct us in all we do and give us the wisdom and the courage to obey you faithfully, in the name of Jesus we pray.

Amen.