

The pressure to bow before false gods can be enormous, especially when faced with threats and the prospect that God will not miraculously deliver. God may choose to save, vindicate, and exalt in this life those who entrust their lives to him, but if not he will certainly walk with them through every trial.

Introduction: Compromise can be a very good thing...sometimes.

## I. Abounding Idolatry

### A. Bad news for God's people (vv. 1-6)

Setting: exile in Babylon, the city that became the biblical paradigm of wickedness. King Nebuchadnezzar's empire is impressively vast and glorious. God says he and his kingdom are "gold" compared to lesser kingdoms that would come later. So he made a giant gold statue (probably representing his god), set it up on a plain outside the city, and called for all the governing officials to prove their loyalty to his majesty. The test? Fall down before the golden image and pay homage. Translation: worship the idol. The price of noncompliance? Execution by cremation.

### B. What if everybody's doing it? (v. 7)

When the moment arrived to hit the floor, it seemed every single person fell in line with the king's command! How could groupthink and herd morality become so comprehensive? Now the pressure to comply really begins to mount. Without conviction to the contrary, people naturally and easily change their beliefs and thereafter modify their behavior. Even when we know it's wrong, we still tend to justify our actions by rationalizing that good will come of going along.

## II. Opposing Idolatry

### A. Quiet subversion vs. loud accusation (vv. 8-15)

Three Jewish friends (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) didn't make a public show of their noncompliance before the king. Their godly unassuming defiance contrasts with the jealous and boisterous protests of the Chaldeans, who are probably astrologers who work alongside the three accused in the royal court. Opposing idolatry means standing firm when everyone else is falling down, but it doesn't require drawing attention to your subversion. As model subversives these three men also show us how to oppose idolatry. Nebuchadnezzar still raged at them, even daring them to call on a god who might have the power to deliver them from the burning fiery furnace, but their calm composure demonstrated loud and clear they feared their God more than their king.

### B. A hard answer to an easy question (vv. 16-18)

To a believer, the king's question is easy if you remove all the external pressures. "Will you bow to this golden image that I set up?" Don't worship other gods. Don't bow down to idols. They didn't even have to think about how to answer. But that was the easy part. The remarkable thing about their response is they didn't feel the need to stop and consider how to soften their words. No diplomacy, no compromise. They know God will deliver them out of the king's hand (escaping the temptation to worship other gods). And they believe Almighty God may even deliver them from the fire. "But if not," they will still not bow the knee to worship the king's idol. God strengthened them to give a hard answer to an easy question.

### III. Defeating Idolatry

#### A. By mitigating the danger through ridicule

Chuckle at the repetition (governing officials, musical instruments, the image the king set up). Laugh at the irony (the king's image is meant to control others, but he cannot control the image of his own face). Mock the mindless action (when the music plays, everyone falls on cue). Roll your eyes at the pomp masking the pomposity (dedication ceremony to stroke the king's massive ego).

#### B. By being faithful whatever the cost (vv. 19-23)

Keeping the first and second commandments is worth dying for (and you might). How did these faithful men find the courage to pay such a steep price? Because they were faithful in the little things first, God strengthened them through small tests to prepare them for big tests. It turns out that refusal to pay homage subverts the idol's power to crush integrity and suppress truth. Mother Teresa said, "Be faithful in small things because it is in them that your strength lies." She understood Jesus who said, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much" (Mt 25:21). This means getting serious about the nitty-gritty of God's commands is like cultivating and sowing seed with a future harvest in mind. Pay careful attention now to the gentle promptings of the Holy Spirit and heed the call of repentance and new obedience. When you pay the cost to be faithful in small things, you train your heart to not compromise in big things. It will always cost you to be faithful, but consider the high cost of unfaithfulness. Consider the rewards and blessings you will miss.

#### C. By receiving vindication from God and men (vv. 26-30)

Nebuchadnezzar and his governing officials were watching the furnace to see what would happen to the three men. And they got the message. God had preserved his servants because they had been faithful not to betray their God. Their total and complete deliverance from the fire was God's seal of approval. God always vindicates his faithful servants—mysteriously in this life but obviously in the next. But that is not all. The king and his men undermine idolatry when they publicly vindicate God's servants. And so Nebuchadnezzar issues a new decree in effect neutralizing the danger of state-compelled idolatry, and promotes Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Earning vindication from men also had the effect of defeating idolatry.

#### D. By expecting to walk with the Fourth Man (vv. 24-25)

"Images" are everywhere in this story. The golden image is mentioned 11 times. In verse 19 the "image" of Nebuchadnezzar's face becomes disfigured with rage. And yet there is a glimmer of the true image of God in this story. The fourth man, God's "angel," who appeared in the midst of the fiery furnace with God's servants, walking with them and protecting them from the fire, looked to the king like "a son of the gods." You absolutely need the Son of God, the Fourth Man, to walk with you through your trials and temptations, to give you strength to resist serving other gods and to resist the pressure to pay them homage.

Conclusion: As hot as Nebuchadnezzar's furnace was, the cross of Christ was a crucible infinitely hotter. Jesus, faithful to the end, died on the cross alone. The furnace of God's wrath against idolatry consumed him, but three days later God raised his Son from the dead because Jesus bowed before no other gods and trusted instead his heavenly Father. Now Jesus lives to walk with God's servants through their fiery trials (Isaiah 43:1-3a). He opposed and defeated every idolatry that abounds in this world. And so can you through him. Actually you must or this world will eat you alive with all its pressures to worship other gods. Remember the four tools to defeat idolatry. (1) Ridicule it. (2) Decide now to pay the price of faithfulness. (3) Look forward to vindication. (4) Expect Christ to walk with you and deliver you through the fire.