

Main Idea: In Daniel 3:1-18, we're confronted with God-exalting radical faith. Let's consider three elements of the story and pray that the Lord will produce this God-exalting radical faith in us.

I. Let's consider the purpose of the story.

- A. It reveals the faith of the godly.
- B. It reveals the folly of the ungodly.
- C. It reveals the faithfulness of God.

II. Let's consider the particulars of the story.

- A. Nebuchadnezzar constructed an image (1-7).
- B. The astrologers criticized the Jews (8-12).
- C. Nebuchadnezzar confronted the Jews (13-15).
 - 1. He had an inflated view of himself.
 - 2. He had a deflated view of God.
 - 3. He had a deficient view of God's people.
- D. The Jews committed themselves to God (16-18).
 - 1. They showed conviction (16).
 - 2. They showed confidence (17).
 - 3. They showed courage (18).

III. Let's consider the point of the story.

- A. God contrasts the options.
 - 1. There is cultural Christianity.
 - 2. There is genuine Christianity.
- B. God calls us to radical faith.
 - 1. Am I willing to die for Him without regret?
 - 2. Am I willing to live for Him without reserve?

Scripture Reading: Philippians 1:12-26

Do you possess radical faith? What do I mean by "radical"? Radical is defined as "Of or pertaining to a root; going to the root or origin, or touching what is fundamental."²

One of the most eye-opening chapters I have ever read is found in Patrick Morley's book *The Man in the Mirror*, entitled "Biblical Christian or Cultural Christian?." Allow me to share with you some of Morley's insights:

"Cultural Christianity means to pursue the God we want instead of the God who is. It is the tendency to be shallow in our understanding of God, wanting Him to be more of a gentle grandfather type who spoils us and lets us have our own way. It is sensing a need for God, but on our own terms. It is wanting the God we have underlined in our Bibles without wanting the rest of Him, too. It is God relative instead of God absolute."³

A cultural Christian bucks at the notion of radical faith, which he sees as being uninviting, uncomfortable, and unnecessary. But churches are filled with cultural Christians. How did this happen?

Morely suggests one key factor, "Modern thinking breaks down, though, by advertising to people that all they need to do is 'pray a prayer' and they will be saved--born again. Everyone, it seems, has 'prayed a prayer'! Prayer doesn't save; faith saves."⁴

So do you possess radical faith? The question, of course, raises another vital question. And that is, what precisely is radical faith? Specifically, what does it look

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this passage, see the Daniel series at WBC in 1996.

² The *Living Webster Encyclopedia Dictionary*

³ Patrick Morley, *The Man in the Mirror*, p. 33.

⁴ Morley, p. 35.

like? We need a living color example of radical faith, and thankfully, God has recorded many for us in His Word, and we're going to see one this morning.

In Daniel 3:1-18, we're confronted with God-exalting radical faith. It's the story of three Jewish politicians, if you will, men who took their faith into the secular arena, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Let's consider three elements of the story and pray that the Lord will produce this God-exalting radical faith in us.

I. Let's consider the purpose of the story.

By turning to Daniel 3 we're traveling back to the sixth century BC. The Babylonians ruled the world under the leadership of King Nebuchadnezzar. Israel, namely Jerusalem, was in shambles, and the Israelites were in captivity. The king recruited four Jewish teenagers for service in his kingdom, their names: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

God tested their commitment in chapter 1, and, though hundreds of miles away from family and godly influences, they passed the test. They didn't go along with the crowd, but chose to stand alone, as shining examples of radical faith.

They did the same in chapter two, during the crunch-time-event of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. When at the dictator's demand others went to pieces, these four Hebrews went to prayer. And God honored their radical faith.

When we arrive at Daniel 3, twenty years have passed. The teenage boys are now grown men with executive positions in the king's cabinet. Several things have changed, but one hasn't. Their faith, by God's grace, is still rock-solid-fundamental. *Radical* faith.

Before we actually investigate the story, I want to lay out the purpose. What's the purpose of this God-given biblical account? I believe there are three primary purposes.

A. It reveals the faith of the godly.

Three god-fearing men drew the line in the sand and said, "We will stand for God." In fact, these three men are commended in the faith hall of fame in Hebrews 11 as men who "quenched the fury of the flames (Hebrews 11:34)."

God had redeemed their souls by His grace, so they placed their total trust in Him. We're about to see what real faith looks like, the faith of the godly.

B. It reveals the folly of the ungodly.

In stark contrast to the godly, we will also see the utter folly of those who sort of dabble with God. Being religious does not mean you believe in God. Saying you believe in God does not mean you believe in God, as we'll see.

C. It reveals the faithfulness of God.

In actuality, Daniel 3 is not so much a story about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, as it is about the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, a God Who is faithful.

Matthew Henry has said that a steadfast faith in God will produce a steadfast faithfulness in God.⁵ God is always enough for His people, and in the crisis moments of life, as in Daniel 3, His faithfulness shines.

Let's keep these three purposes in mind as we ponder the story. We're going to see the faith of the godly, the folly of the ungodly, and the faithfulness of God.

II. Let's consider the particulars of the story.

⁵ Quote taken from sermon on Daniel 3 by Ligon Duncan. <http://www.fpcjackson.org/resource-library/sermons/the-golden-image>

The familiar story unfolds with four scenes.

A. Nebuchadnezzar constructed an image (1-7).

Verse 1 begins, "King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, ninety feet high and nine feet wide⁶, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon."

Dura is a common name in Mesopotamia which means "walled place." Most conservative scholars believe the sight was located six miles southeast of Babylon

Why did Nebuchadnezzar build this image? Of course, we don't know for sure because the text doesn't tell us. But we can suggest some plausibilities.

One, it may have been in honor of the god of Babylon, either Bel or Marduk.

Or two, the king may have regarded the image as representing himself, and his aim was to persuade/coerce people to recognize his power and divine-like control. In light of his problem with pride in chapter 4, the latter view certainly supports this suggestion.⁷

Or three, perhaps there's a connection with chapter two. What happened there? The king had a dream, and in his dream what did Nebuchadnezzar see? An image, a statue that represented God's plan for world history. Daniel interpreted the dream for him, but apparently Nebuchadnezzar missed the point of the dream.

The image he saw in chapter 2 had a gold head (2:32), which represented his kingdom (2:36-38). Beneath the gold head were chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay (2:32-33), each representing kingdoms that would succeed his, the Medo-Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans. His dream climaxed with a rock that struck the image and broke it to pieces and became a huge mountain filling the earth, representing the coming of God's eternal King and kingdom.

But Nebuchadnezzar missed everything after the gold head. Pride does that, of course. The image he constructed in chapter 3 was gold from head to toes.

Why? I can't prove this, but I think Nebuchadnezzar had a political and religious motivation for making this massive image. A gold head? That's not good enough for me. I am all there is. There will be no successive kingdoms. Everyone will bow to me.

We see his egotism. We also see proof for the superficial nature of his confession at the end of chapter 2. He said in 2:47, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings." Sounded pretty impressive at the time. The king has become a believer in the Lord.

Or has he? Actually, like so many who've made professions in churches across our country, his actions proved otherwise. For while his words gave honor to God, his life never stopped giving honor to the one who was truly his god.

When the construction of the image was complete, Nebuchadnezzar planned an elaborate dedication ceremony described in verse 2, "He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up."

Verse 3 indicates that the event took place as planned, "So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it."

⁶ According the Bible Knowledge Commentary, about the height of an eight story building.

⁷ Walvoord, 81.

So all the whos-who are there. All the powerful leaders of the mighty Babylonian empire. They're all standing in front of this impressive image of gold as commanded by their leader.

Notice what happened next in verses 4-6, "Then the herald loudly proclaimed, 'This is what you are commanded to do, O peoples, nations and men of every language:⁵ As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up.⁶ Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.'"

Please note the part that music played in this. Six musical instruments are mentioned by name, a collection of both wind and stringed instruments.

In his commentary Lehman Strauss made an interesting observation, "There is something about music that stirs and grips our emotions. There are professing Christians who will attend church to listen to a musical program but who find an excuse to stay away when the Word of God is to be preached. Music is wielding tremendous influence in the religious world."⁸

You can use music to get people fired up to do things that they otherwise might not do. It happens in the lockerroom before the game, or on the bus on the way to the big race.

I still remember not long after I became a pastor a well meaning brother instructing me on how to get lost people to respond to the gospel. "You have to use music. Music primes the pump," he told me.

But there's a problem. The pump to what? Sure, music can stir the emotions and even produce a response of sorts. But it can't go deep enough. It can't touch the sinner where the sinner's problem lies. The sinner is dead spiritually, his ears are plugged, his eyes are blind, his will is hardened and incapable of responding to the things of God.

Sure, music can stir his emotions, but his emotions are not the problem, nor the solution. He has a heart that is dead to God that needs to start beating for God, to start believing in God.

How will that happen? Music can't do it. Only the Spirit of God can do that, and the instrument He uses is the objective truth of the gospel.

"Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit," said Jesus in John 3:6. "You must be born again," John 3:7.

"Faith comes by hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ (Rom 10:17)."

So music isn't important? No! It's very important. It's a God-given means by which we communicate and memorize and celebrate His objective truth. Which is why we sing a lot as God's people. We speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Eph 5:19), singing and making music in our hearts to the Lord (Eph 5:20). And we sing knowing it's not the notes that change hearts, it's not the sound, nor a certain tempo, or style. It's the wonderful truth of the words.

Nebuchadnezzar tried to hijack God's gift, to accomplish a lesser goal. He knows the power of music, but he wants to use it to prepare the hearts of people to give their allegiance to him. The instructions were clear. When the band began, the people were to

⁸ Lehman Strauss, p. 92.

fall and worship the image. If anyone dared refuse, he would be immediately thrown into fiery furnace.

And so they did. Verse 7, "Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up."

So everyone followed the king's orders to the tee, everyone that is, except for three Jewish men.

B. The astrologers criticized the Jews (8-12).

Watch what happened in verse 8. "At this time some astrologers [AV, 'Chaldeans'] came forward and denounced [AV, 'accused'] the Jews." The word translated "denounced" is revealing. It comes from a common Aramaic expression which literally means, "they ate their pieces," hence, to devour piecemeal.⁹ They slandered the Jews, and tore them apart piece by piece with their words.

Why would they do that? In a word, resentment. These Chaldeans or astrologers resented the Jews for three reasons.

First, they were jealous over the fact that Nebuchadnezzar had given these men higher positions of authority in his court. And that was probably some twenty years earlier. According to 2:49, "Moreover, at Daniel's request the king appointed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego administrators over the province of Babylon, while Daniel himself remained at the royal court."

Second, they resented these men because of their race. Verse 8 says they denounced "the Jews." That seems to be more than an identification tag. They denounced them because of their race. We hear it again in verse 12, "But there are some Jews..." Anti-semitism is nothing new.

And third, they were resented because of their radical faith. Notice verses 9-12, "They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, 'O king, live forever!'¹⁰ You have issued a decree, O king, that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold,¹¹ and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace.¹² But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, O king. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up."

So the astrologers accused the Jews of three crimes in verse 12. They criticized the Jews for: 1) Not paying attention to the king (this was certainly a misrepresentation; these men had been very loyal to the king); 2) For not serving the gods of the king, and 3) For refusing to bow down to the image.

This alleged "crime" then was both political and religious. On the one hand, the astrologers made the Jewss refusal to bow sound like insurrection and treason (for us it would be like not putting your hand over your heart during the Pledge of Allegiance).

However, if the act of bowing had only political connotations, the Jews would have had little problem (they were model citizens). But it went beyond that. Bowing before the image was an expression of religious devotion, and that was something they had determined many years earlier to give to God alone.

⁹ Walvoord, 86

"Where was Daniel?" you ask. "Why didn't he join his three friends in defiance of the king's edict?"

We don't know for sure, but Archer identifies several possibilities.¹⁰ One, he may have been on government business in some other part of the kingdom. Two, he may have been closeted with other members of the king's cabinet, working on legislative or military plans. Three, he may have been too ill to attend since 8:27 indicates that on another occasion, sickness interfered with Daniel's government business. Fourth, it may have been assumed that since Daniel was the king's prime minister, he was not required to demonstrate his loyalty by worshiping the image. After all, there is no indication that Nebuchadnezzar himself bowed to the image, so perhaps he exempted his most loyal assistant. And fifth, it's possible that Daniel did not belong to any of the special groups of advisors and political leaders listed in verse 2 that the king called.

In other words, the king already considered Daniel's loyalty beyond question, so he was exempt.

C. Nebuchadnezzar confronted the Jews (13-15).

Verse 13, "Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king."

So instead of executing the Jews on the spot, as the herald said would happen back in verse 6, Nebuchadnezzar called for an audience with the three men, perhaps because they had been so loyal so long.

He addressed them in verse 14, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up?"

So is it true? he asks. And then he gave them a second chance to get back in his good graces. Verse 15, "Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"

That final question tells us three important things about Nebuchadnezzar.

1. *He had an inflated view of himself.* He is a proud man. Listen to his boasting, "Who can... rescue you from my hand?" He sees no rival to himself.

2. *He had a deflated view of God.* "What god will be able to rescue you?" With this question, Nebuchadnezzar reveals two misconceptions about God.

One, God is not powerful. And two, He is not interested. He's not *able* nor *willing* to help. Wrong, of course, on both counts.

3. *He had a deficient view of God's people.* You see, Nebuchadnezzar thought the three Jews viewed their God as he did his own gods. He used his gods, but he didn't serve them. He manipulated them, but he certainly wasn't committed to them. He feared them, but he didn't love them. And he assumed everyone felt the same way about "God."

He assumed wrong.

He's certainly not alone in his misconceptions. In 1936, Herr Baldur von Schirach, who was in charge of the entire youth program in Germany, said in an address to the German youth, "One cannot be a good German and at the same time deny God, but an avowal of faith in the eternal Germany is at the same time an avowal of faith in the eternal God. If we act as true Germans we act according to the laws of God. Whoever

¹⁰ Archer, 55

serves Adolph Hitler, the fuhrer, serves Germany, and whoever serves Germany serves God."¹¹

Many Germans bought the propaganda hook, line, and sinker. So did the multitudes in Babylon, except for three men. What made them different?

D. The Jews committed themselves to God (16-18).

Here's radical faith in action. Notice three qualities that accompany radical faith.

1. They showed conviction (16). "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, 'O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter.'"

Do you see the conviction of these three men? They are standing before the most powerful man in the world of their day. Their lives are in jeopardy. Their critics are jeering. Yet they do not hesitate. In the AV, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter."

What was the source of their conviction? It came from the Word of God. They knew Exodus 20:4, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any carved image...thou shalt not bow down thyself to them."

God said it. So there was no need for further discussion.

2. They showed confidence (17). "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king."

These men were gripped by three attributes of God. God is personal (in the AV, "our God"). God is powerful ("He is able"). And God is involved in the lives of His people ("He will rescue us from your hand, O king").

The omnipotence of God was more than a bookshelf doctrine for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They staked their lives on it. Perhaps they had Psalm 9:10 in mind, "Those who know your name will trust will trust in You, for You, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek You."

Where do you place your confidence in life? In what are you trusting? Who do you turn to when the crunch times hit?

"Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God (Psalm 20:7)."

3. They showed courage (18). One thing God is NOT to those who have radical faith. He is not a puppet on a string. He wasn't to these men. Verse 18, "But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

That's courage. Courage is not the same thing as presumption. These men didn't put God in a box and say, "God, you have to get us out of this mess." They knew God *could* deliver them, but whether He *would* was up to Him. And they affirmed that.

When things go as we plan and want, it's easy to trust God. It's when they don't, however, that we discover the truth about our faith.

Friends, the One who sent His Son to die the sinner's death at Calvary is good. Indeed, the One who took our penalty and pain on the Cross is good. He who is good always does what is good for us.

At times though, since our perspective is limited, we may not be able to recognize His goodness.

¹¹ Strauss, 93

"God, why didn't You give me that job?"

"God, why did You take my health?"

"God, why did you take my precious loved one?"

It's okay to bring our questions to God. He knows we can't see the whole picture. But He wants us to affirm that He can, that He is good, wise, and loving. And that we trust Him. Job put it this way in Job 13:15, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him."

So what happened to these three Jews who trusted God? We'll see...next week, the Lord willing. We've looked at the purpose of the story, and the particulars. Now...

III. Let's consider the point of the story.

I see a couple of lessons.

A. God contrasts the options.

In Daniel 3 we discover that...

1. *There is cultural Christianity.*

2. *There is genuine Christianity.*

Nebuchadnezzar is "Exhibit A" for cultural Christianity. Granted, this is Old Testament, but we're seeing a brand of Christianity here. Nebuchadnezzar was a syncretist. His view of religion was "a little here, a little there."

So he gave lip-service to Yahweh back in 2:47. "Surely, your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings."

But not this king. I believe in Him, but don't expect this king to get serious about the Lord of kings.

That's what a cultural Christian does. He goes with the flow, with just enough religion to be dangerous.

On the other hand, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are "Exhibit B" for genuine Christianity. Rather than being self-focused, they lived with a God-focus. Even if it cost them.

B. God calls us to radical faith.

This story isn't just about three Hebrew men 2500 years ago. This is God's timeless Word, which means this is for us today. We too need a radical faith. Which means we too need the assurance that the God we serve is able to save us.

He sent His own Son into the world to save us. Jesus lived the perfect life we should have lived, and He did it for us, just like He died the death we deserved to die, in our place and for our sins. Then He conquered death and today is alive and comes to the aid of those who call out to Him.

The God we serve is able to save us.

Do you believe that? That's where radical faith begins, by placing one's trust in the God who saves.

But that's just the beginning of a life of trusting in Him.

Many years ago I read a story that illustrates what radical faith is all about. It came in a newsletter from Willard Stull, a veteran missionary who'd served in Brazil for over half a century:

About 40 years ago a dying woman asked Grace [Willard's wife] who was with the Lord, 'Will you please see that my 13 year old daughter, Lucimar, has help to protect her from a worldly, sinful life?' So, Lucimar came to be a part of our family when we lived in Manaus. When she finished Bible College she married a promising young man. He became one of the leading pastors in our

national church movement. He had a church of 400 members, a weekly TV program, a Christian primary school, a medical clinic in the church; had helped establish churches and congregations and was considered a very successful pastor...then, the DEVIL struck. The church organist, married to a Christian lawyer, set her eyes on him, determined to take him away from his wife, Lucimar. She sure succeeded...breaking up two homes, destroying a pastor's ministry, and almost causing the downfall of a church!

While in Fortaleza this time, I visited Lucimar and discovered anew the truths of Gal. 6:7 and Rom. 5:5. Her unfaithful husband is in the last stages of diabetes. He is blind. His kidneys are not functioning anymore. His legs are without feeling. He lives in a wheelchair. His mother and sister take care of him. Lucimar, in spite of the disastrous life he gave her, still loves him and offered to care for him in her home. But he said, 'I married you when I was well. I am not coming home when I am sick!' God's love is very evident in Lucimar's life!!!

It is also seen in her oldest son's life. He is a master musician and a classical pianist. He always wanted a piano and was saving his money to buy one. But, when he learned that his father needed a serious operation, he used the money in his piano fund to pay for it. Oh, the power of God's love that can make people do sacrificial things for those who have tried to ruin their lives. It makes me search my heart to find where I am in this department of giving myself--to share God's love with others. Can I ask you when was it you last shared the love of your home or your life with someone in need? We only begin to live when we share our lives with others...

You say, "That's radical!" Indeed it is, and it's radical faith that the Lord intends to produce in each of His followers.

So how can we tell if we have it? Let's ask ourselves a couple of questions.

1. Am I willing to die for Him without regret?

I had an assignment in seminary in which I had to write down my doctrinal convictions with this guideline, "What would I die for?" Are I willing to die for Christ without regret?

2. Am I willing to live for Him without reserve?

Radical faith says "Yes! I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back."

Is there something God is calling you to do for Him that you've been resisting? Perhaps a ministry He wants you to do. Or a soured relationship that you need to restore by forgiving or seeking forgiveness. Or maybe taking a tangible step like baptism to surrender your life to the One who gave His life for you. Or maybe it's being more faithful to the church in which Your Savior has placed you, both to grow and serve. Or perhaps it's making some changes on the job or at school to have a stronger testimony for Christ.

Let's pray this prayer: "Father, You gave Your Son, Jesus the Christ, to rescue me from sin. Today, by Your grace, I choose to obey You, no strings attached. Holy Spirit, please produce in me radical faith, to the glory of God. In the name of Jesus, amen."