

To begin this morning, I want to raise a question that will be central to this message. Do you possess radical faith? What do I mean by "radical"? The Living Webster Encyclopedia Dictionary defines radical as "Of or pertaining to a root; going to the root or origin, or touching what is fundamental."

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 (33)."

A "cultural Christian" bucks at the notion of radical faith, which he sees as being uninviting, uncomfortable, and unnecessary. Morely suggests why this is so, "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 (35)."

Do you possess radical faith? Quite likely you're wondering, "What does it look like? Can you give me a living color example of radical faith?" Thankfully, God has recorded in His Word a vivid account of radical faith. Radical faith is not far-fetched, nor is it impossible. We see it exemplified in the lives of three ordinary men in Daniel 3.

Proposition: In our study of Daniel 3:1-18, our aim is to investigate three issues, which in turn will enable us to understand and develop a radical faith.

- I. 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. 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. The Point of the Story
 - A. God contrasts the options.
 1. There is cultural Christianity.

***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.

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?

I. The Purpose of the Story

By turning to Daniel 3 we travel back to the 6th century B.C. Babylon 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 is still rock-solid-fundamental. Radical faith.

Before we actually investigate the story, I want to lay before you the purpose. What's the purpose of this God-given biblical account? Actually, there are three 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."

B. It reveals the folly of the ungodly.

In stark contrast to the godly, we will see the utter folly of those who trifle with God.

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.

Keep these three purposes in mind as we investigate a second issue.

II. The Particulars of the Story

The familiar story unfolds with four scenes.

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

V 1 begins, "Nebuchadnezzar, the king, made an image of gold, whose height was threescore cubits (90') and the breadth of it six cubits (9'); he set it up in 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? We can't be dogmatic. It may have been in honor of the god of Babylon, either Bel or Marduk. Or, the king may have regarded the image as representing himself, and his aim was to 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 (Walvoord, 81).

Don't miss the connection to 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. The problem was that Nebuchadnezzar missed the point of the dream.

The image he saw in chapter 2 had a gold head, which represented his kingdom. But the image he constructed in chapter 3 was gold from head to toes. By making this image, Nebuchadnezzar had both a political and religious aim. We see his egotism, as well as proof for the superficial nature of his confession in chapter 2. In 2:47, he said, "Of a truth it is that your God is the God of gods, and the Lord of kings." Like many in our day, he said one thing but did another. His words gave honor to God, but his life gave honor to himself.

When the construction of the image was complete, Nebuchadnezzar planned an elaborate dedication ceremony (as described in v 2). V 3 records the details of the event, "Then the princes, the governors...were gathered together unto the dedication of the image that Nebuchadnezzar, the king, had set up; and they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up." The image was to be a tool of political solidarity.

A herald gave specific instructions in verses 4-6 (LB), "Oh people of all nations and languages, this is the king's command: When the band strikes up, you are to fall flat on the ground to worship King Nebuchadnezzar's golden statue; Anyone who refuses to obey will immediately be thrown into a flaming furnace."

Notice the part that music played in this. Six musical instruments are mentioned by name, a collection of both wind and string instruments. Lehman Strauss made an interesting observation (92), "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."

Nebuchadnezzar knew the power of music, and used 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 fall and worship the image. If anyone dared refuse, he would be immediately thrown into fiery furnace. Everyone followed the king's orders to the tee (see v 7), everyone that is, except for three Jewish men.

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

Watch what happened in v 8. Some "Chaldeans" (or "astrologers," NIV) came to the king and "accused" three Jews. The word translated "accused" is revealing. It comes from a common Aramaic expression which literally means, "they ate their pieces," hence, to devour piecemeal (Walvoord, 86). They slandered the Jews, and tore them apart piece by piece with their words.

Why would they do that? They resented the Jews for three reasons. First, they were jealous over the fact that nearly 20 years earlier Nebuchadnezzar had given the Jews higher positions of authority in his court (see 2:49). Second, they resented the Jews because of their race, and thirdly because of their radical faith, both of which we see in their accusation in v 12 (after repeating the king's decree in vv 9-11), "There are certain JEWS whom thou hast set over the affairs of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; these men, O king, have not regarded thee; they serve not thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up."

The astrologers accused the Jews of three crimes in v 12. They criticized the Jews for: 1) Not paying attention to the king (that was 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.

The "crime" then was both political and religious. On the one hand, the astrologers made the Jews refusal to bow to the image appear like treason and insurrection (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, a devotion they determined many years earlier to give to God alone.

"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 there are several possibilities (Archer, 55): 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 of 20 years. And fifth, it's possible that Daniel did not belong to any of the special groups of advisors and political leaders, as listed in v 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).

V 13 "Then Nebuchadnezzar in his rage and fury commanded to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego..." Instead of executing the Jews on the spot, as the herald said would happen back in v 6, Nebuchadnezzar called for an audience with the three men (perhaps because they had been so loyal so long).

Then he interrogated them (14), "Is it true...do not you serve my gods, nor worship the golden image which I have set up?" Finally, he gave them a second chance, an opportunity to recant (15, NIV), "Now, when you hear [the 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's a proud man. Listen to his boasting, "What God can deliver you out of MY HANDS?"

2. *He had a deflated view of God.* "What god will be able to rescue you?" In his question, Nebuchadnezzar reveals two misconceptions about God: One, God's not powerful, and two, He's not interested. He's not able nor willing to help. Wrong.

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; 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 not the only person who has lived with faulty views of faith. In 1936 (Strauss, 93), 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 serves Adolph Hitler, the fuhrer, serves Germany, and whoever serves Germany serves God."

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 answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee 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. "We do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter (NIV)."

What was the source of their conviction? 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. That settled it. There was no need for further discussion.

2. *They showed confidence (17).* "If it be so, our God, whom we serve, is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king." These men were gripped by three truths about God: God is personal ("our God"). God is powerful ("He is able"). And God is interested ("He will deliver us").

The omnipotence of God was more than a doctrine for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They staked their lives on it. Psalm 9:10 (NIV) records, "Those who know your name will trust will trust in You, for You, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek You." What is your confidence in life? What are you trusting? Who do you turn to when the crunch times hit--your parents, your bank account, yourself?

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. "But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve your gods, nor worship the golden image which 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.

You know, when things go as we plan and want, it's easy to trust God. When they don't, however, we discover the true quality of our faith. Never forget that the God Who gave His life for us at Calvary is good. He Who took our penalty and our 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 see His goodness. "God, why didn't You give me that job?" "God, why did You take my health?" "God, why did you take my spouse?" In those times, we must resolve to trust Him. Job said (13:15), "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him."

What happened to the three Jews? We'll see...in two weeks!

III. The Point of the Story The point of the story is twofold.

A. God contrasts the options.

1. *There is cultural Christianity.* 2. *There is genuine Christianity.*

Nebuchadnezzar is "Exhibit A" for cultural Christianity. He was a syncretist. His view of religion was "a little here, a little there." He gave lip-service to Yahweh back in 2:47--In essence he said, "Oh, I believe in God, but don't expect me to be radical about it." That's what a cultural Christian does. He goes with the flow, with just enough religion to be dangerous.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are "Exhibit B" for genuine Christianity. They're not self-focused, but God focused. They could care less what is expedient, only what is right. Theirs was a radical faith.

B. God calls us to radical faith.

The following story is a vivid account of radical faith. The story is told by Willard Stull, veteran missionary to Brazil for over half a century (from his March newsletter): "About 40 years ago a dying woman asked Grace [Willard's wife who is now 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 R.V. 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..."

How can we tell if we have radical faith? Ask yourself 2 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 you willing to die for Christ without regret?

2. *Am I willing to live for Him without reserve?* Radical faith answers
"Yes! I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back."