Good morning! Please take your bibles and turn with me to Daniel 3. As we have done for the first two chapters, we will be reading the entirety of this chapter. Let me just remind you a little of what we’ve studied so far.

In chapter 1 we said that Daniel & his friends were taken into exile in Babylon. And Nebuchadnezzar’s goal was to make them Babylonians; to get them to capitulate and become assimilated into the culture, specifically, to embrace the gods and religion of Babylon. Yet we also saw how Daniel & his compadres had resolved not to give up their faith.

In chapter 2 we saw the vision Nebuchadnezzar had. It was a dream of a multi-sectional statue, which expressed that there would be several kingdoms that would arise, one of which would be an the everlasting kingdom which Christ would inaugurate.

In our passage today (chapter 3), we have the famous story of the

What a story we have today. It’s no wonder that this is one of the textbook Sunday School stories. The drama of this story is perhaps one of the greatest in all the Bible. You have the intrigue of despotism, a full fledged police state, and a radical act of civil disobedience. Then you have a record of one of the most amazing acts of deliverance in all of Scripture.

This story is so great it is entered in the sacred pages of Hebrews 11. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego get a line in the great Hall of Faith, where it says that by faith they “quenched the power of fire.”

This is truly a story that inspires. And that was what it was intended to do. This story was penned to be a morale booster. When you’re in exile it is easy to get lulled to sleep. It’s easy to just fit in and go along with the flow, isn’t it?

We live in a world that is filled with idols. And every day we see the masses of people serving those idols. And we might be tempted to jump on the bandwagon. All the lemmings are going over the cliff, they are enjoying the pleasures of life.

And the government isn’t helping matters, is it?

That’s the thing about governments, they don’t care if you have your Jesus. They don’t care how spiritual you are. You can be an atheist; you can be spiritual; you can be a Christian. It doesn’t really matter. When it all boils down, as long as you don’t say “Jesus is Lord” and really mean that, then it’s all fine and dandy. So long as the religion of the state takes precedence over your religion and your religion doesn’t interfere with the state’s demands, then everything will be okay. As long as you toe the line and put the demands of Caesar or Nebuchadnezzar first, all is fine.

But you can’t do that, can you? Jesus is Lord. And that’s why today’s passage is all that much more meaningful. Today’s passage is here to help galvanize our devotion to the Lord. And we who are living in Babylon as exiles can be encouraged to maintain that faithful, stout hearted devotion because of the great lessons found in this passage.

Exiles may be encouraged because this account tells us of a kingdom that is triumphant

1. **A triumphant kingdom**

Our passage starts out by telling us that King Nebuchadnezzar made an enormous image of gold. He set it up in the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon.

Just to get a little idea, this would have been almost 100 feet tall. So you can picture the two silos just outside the church, on the side of the factory next door. Put one of those on top of the other, and that’s approximately the height you’re looking at.

Now, this is more than a mere religious relic though. You have to understand what this image really stands for. This image was not so much an idol as it was a statement. It was a statement by Nebuchadnezzar that his kingdom would never end.

Now there are two items of context that we have to consider. First, we might be made to recall Genesis 11. Remember the tower of Babel. We remember that there was already one attempt to build a very large structure in defiance to God in the land of Shinar (1:2). Of course, that was where the languages were first introduced. Interestingly, Nebuchadnezzar wanted to unite the “peoples, nations, and languages.” And therefore, it’s almost as if we have a hint that Nebuchadnezzar is attempting to resurrect this defiant Babylonian kingdom.

But you also have the immediate context of the book of Daniel. We just saw in chapter two the dream Nebuchadnezzar had of this looming image. It was partly of gold, silver, bronze, and iron. And you’ll remember that the gold stood for Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom.

In response, what does Nebuchadnezzar do here in chapter 3? He sets up an image made *entirely* of gold. It’s not just the head that’s made of gold, but it’s the chest and legs too. We can’t help but think that Nebuchadnezzar is attempting to say, “No, actually, my kingdom will stand. I know what the vision said, but we’re going to make history go in a different direction. After all, I am powerful. I’ve conquered even more lands since the dream. And, let’s face it, I beat the Judean God once already (when I took Jerusalem). I can do it again.”

And to ensure that his kingdom will be a lasting kingdom, he takes some steps to ensure that everyone knows their place. That’s what the worship of this idol is all about. Nebuchadnezzar, like most all tyrants, uses a religion means of building unity and keeping the people in subjection.

Of course, he starts with his minions. It isn’t the populous that is brought in. It’s the satraps, prefects, governors, magistrates, et al. It’s all the officials. Nebuchadnezzar knows that he’s got to have his brown shirts. He’s ensuring that his underlings will be reliable to enforce his demands on the ordinary men and women of the empire who would be under them. It’s a classic top down, tyrannical structure that he’s attempting to create. If all the powers that be are in line, then all the empire will be easy to control and keep in subjugation. So bend the knee.

And to add just that little bit of incentive. If you don’t acknowledge my new rule (and my new state religion), you’ll be burned alive. Bow or burn.

So Nebuchadnezzar has made a statement: I will reign supreme. And he’s putting in place the structural dynamics that will ensure that.

But in steps the bright and glorious figure in the fire. After Daniel’s boys are thrown into the fire, there appears one who to Nebuchadnezzar looks like a son of the gods. There’s a celestial figure in the fire. Some how he stands out. Maybe he’s brighter than the flames. I believe this was an appearance of Christ in his pre-incarnate state. A Christophany, as you may call it.

Now you have to imagine this grand figure giving a little wave to Nebuchadnezzar. And you have to ask yourself, why does he appear? Yes, it’s to save Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. But it’s more than that. And that comes out in verse 26. It says, “Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning fiery furnace; he declared, ‘Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here!’”

You’ll notice that Nebuchadnezzar recognizes the “Most High God.” Remember back in chapter 2 what he said of Daniel’s God. Daniel’s God was called “the God of heaven.” And Nebuchadnezzar, at the end of chapter 2, said, “Truly your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings.” Being called the Most High God is pretty much the same thing.

So you understand what you have going on here. Nebuchadnezzar says, “My kingdom is going to last forever.” Then the Lord responds by basically saying, “No, actually, it won’t.. I have power over the fire. I have power over my people. I have power over your rage. Ultimately, I have power over history. There’s no possible way you can change what I have decreed.”

We may be encouraged because we not only have a testimony of a triumphant kingdom, but it’s an account of a faith that was defiant.

1. **A defiant faith**

This passage sets forth a classic case of civil disobedience. These guys were bold to stand for what they believed in. They were so convicted of what was right that they would not give in to the King’s demand.

As a matter of fact Nebuchadnezzar even says in verse 28, “blessed be the god of these guys who *set aside* the king’s command and yielded up their bodies rather than worship and serve any god except their own God.” The NASB says that they “violated the king’s command.”

This was an act of insurrection; it was a direct rebellion against the state. And it is beautiful, isn’t it? And their willingness to stand for their faith—to stand for their God in the face of imminent death, is inspiring.

These guys are held forth, not just because they did a good thing, but because they were examples. Their story is amazing and it serves to give people like you and I courage. Every bone in your body should be saying, “Yes! Praise God! What a great testimony!”

You know it is interesting that the only speaking part that these guys have is found in verses 16-18. That’s the portion of the text where they give their stand. They have no other speaking part in all the book of Daniel. It’s like they are mute until they have to stand before the king and give their testimony. And that serves to highlight their boldness all that much more.

Now, part of what makes their testimony so graet is that they don’t know if they will be spared or not. They say, “Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace., but even if he doesn’t, we are not changing our minds. We are not going to serve the god that you have set up.”

This is beautiful because it really shows you that these three guys were just normal guys. They don’t know if any great miracle is going to occur or not. They are not looking to the benefits of the religion. They are not in it just for the perks. They have their eyes set fully on their duty. The only thing they desire is to worship and serve the true and living God. And they are willing to give their lives for it.

That’s a bold, defiant faith. And it is a faith that is set forth so that you have an encouragement to do the same—so that you will be bold to be a living witness and a die hard servant of Christ in whatever situation you find yourself.

Whenever we see or hear of stories of people standing for the faith, those are the living epistles, are they not? They are used by the Spirit to fortify us. Take up a Foxes’ Book of Martyrs and you get that. Sure, some of the stories in there are very difficult to read. Some of the persecutions and deaths are not for the faint of heart. But there’s something about that which makes the fainting heart less faint. It provides some drive to be bold yourself.

And this passage is calling you to be bold and be faithful; it’s calling you to not to worry about the consequences, but to be concerned about what is right.

Stoddard Kennedy was a chaplain during World War II. He was often thrust in the frontlines of battle, where his ministry to the troops endangered his life. One day, while he and the armies were moving through France, Chaplain Kennedy wrote this letter to his 10 year old son. He said, “The first prayer I want my son to learn to say for me is not ‘God, keep daddy safe,’ but ‘God, make daddy brave. And if he has hard things to do, make his strong to do them.’”

Son, life and death don't matter. But right and wrong do. Daddy dead is daddy still, but daddy dishonored before God is something too awful for words. I suppose you would like to put in a bit about safety, too, and Mother would like that, I’m sure. Well, put it in afterwards, for it really doesn’t matter nearly as much as doing what is right.”

What matters, dear friends, is not safety. What matters is that we are brave and that we are faithful.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are bold. And the situation of these men reminds us that it’s not an easy thing to do. There’s a cost that we must count. There is a world that we must be ready to oppose. There are pressures that we must be ready to face. There are dangers that we must be willing to accept.

In sum, it comes down to the question of idolatry. Here in America, we have the same idols presented to us. They are not the same in form. We don’t have the images and the statues, but we have the same idols. These idols are wealth, pleasure, conformity, greed.

And there are other idols that are very much the same. There are the idols of ease, self-preservation, safety, security, and compromise.

The essence of Christian living is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.

When we look at this passage we are reminded of what Jesus says in Matthew 10:28-33,

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30 But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. 32 So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, 33 but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

It’s interesting that so much of that passage in Matthew 10 has overlap with this Daniel passage. God’s got our hairs numbered. The young men did not have a single hair singed. We are not to fear those who can kill the body, but not the soul. Daniel’s friend’s did not fear those who were about to kill them. We are to acknowledge Christ before men; these men did just that. Jesus says that denying him will result in us being cast into hell. Daniel’s friends were thrown into a hell like furnace.

This passage is a challenge to us not to bow to the idols of the culture. It is also a reminder that we must not bow to the idol of our own hearts either. Specifically, it is addressing the idol of fear and safety. We should not let our desire to get along or get away be that which controls us. Rather, we are to stand firm upon Jesus Christ and be vigilant in our testimony, whatever the consequences may be –even to the point of defiance.

There’s one more dynamic to this passage. It’s encouraging to exiles because it tells of a radical deliverance.

1. **A radical deliverance [24-26]**

The boys get tossed in the furnace. But Nebuchadnezzar says, “What’s the deal? Didn’t we cast three guys in? But I see four men walking around in the fire. And the appearance of the 4th is like a son of the gods.”

And you have to skip down to verse 29. This has completely blown Nebuchadnezzar’s mind. He can’t help but say, “No other god is able to rescue in this way?”

This passage isn’t a promise that God delivers all his people out of their persecutions. It’s not a promise that you’ll never be a martyr for the faith. History tells us that people die for Christ. That’s the norm. The miracle here isn’t the norm.

But you know what this passage does say? It tells us that our God is a deliverer. He does rescue his people. Just as he rescued these three men from the fiery furnace, God would one day rescue his people out of the fiery trials of Babylon. This is a reminder to the people that the Lord would be the deliverer of his people.

I like how a lot of commentators link Daniel three with 1 Peter 4. Peter was writing to people who were suffering; he was writing to Christians who were living in their own Babylon. And he says to them in chapter 4,

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.”

Those who claim “Jesus is Lord” will no doubt find themselves in the midst of a fiery trial. And when you live in a police state, like ancient Babylon, there is all that much more chance that you will be faced with the challenge. Nothing but loyalty to the state is demanded. And you will end up suffering.

But the hope we have is that, as Peter has just said, the glory of the Lord will one day be revealed. The same glory that was evident there in that fiery furnace—the same glory that emanated brighter than the flames is going to appear in the sky. And we’re going to find our deliverance made full.

And we have that hope because we have already experienced the beginning of that deliverance. We have deliverer who has already gone through the extremes of the furnace of God’s wrath.

Again, you have to keep in mind what was said in chapter 2. The enchanters and magicians said, “the gods do not reside with flesh.” No one could give the king the dream because only the gods could do that and they don’t live down here; they don’t relate to us.

But here in chapter 3 we see that the Most High God is also the God who comes down. He comes down and is right there with his people in the furnace. Daniel writes this story to remind us of our Immanuel—God with us. And we know that Immanuel as the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who came down and became flesh. The one who took our sins upon himself and endured the flames of hell on the cross in our place.

Daniel 3 is ultimately telling us the story of Jesus. He was the one who was faithful. He’s the one who would not back down in the face of all the opposition. He came to do the will of God and feared no man; he worshipped no idol. Even when all the kingdoms of this earth were offered to him, he wouldn’t take it. He said, “It is written, worship the Lord and him alone.”

And in the same bold spirit he went to the Cross and entered the furnace. He would there pay the price for sin and become the deliverer of his people.

And this same Jesus will come again and he will deliver us from all our sins and all our miseries.