

“When Gold is Bad”

Daniel 3:1-18

July 7th, 2019

Jack Williamson was a long time member and ruling elder of First Presbyterian Church in Greenville, Alabama. He was a founder of the PCA, and Moderator of our denomination’s first General Assembly in 1973. He also chaired the committee that drafted the *PCA Book of Church Order*.

“Mr. Jack” and I served together for a time in the Southeast Alabama Presbytery. He was a member of the presbytery credentials committee, which was charged with examining all the men entering into pastoral ministry training, being licensed to preach, and ordained as pastors. Jack was a gracious man and a tenacious defender of the faith. The expert in the *Book of Church Order*, Jack used his time for examination as a time to teach in addition to examining.

Though he was 90 years old at the time of his death in 2009, he came regularly to hour-long Sunday morning prayer meetings with the pastor and elders. Mr. Jack was an American hero, not just a PCA hero. During World War II, he was a B-24 Liberator pilot and a prisoner of war in Russia. After the war, he studied law and became an attorney in Alabama. Over a long, distinguished career, Mr. Jack argued cases in local, state, and federal courts—including five church property cases before the United States Supreme Court. He won all five in favor of the churches.

In addition, Jack Williamson was on the board of *World Magazine*, he taught at Reformed Theological Seminary, and—perhaps most importantly—Jack Williamson taught Sunday school for 60 years.

Despite all of his credentials, Jack was a humble man. Listen to this. His pastor, Jeff Hamm, said of Jack, “He would ask for prayer regarding his complacency in the cause of Christ.” And, Jack Williamson left instructions for his family NOT to have a lengthy funeral service to mark his death. Instead, there was a simple graveside funeral service alone - and it was just 11 minutes in length.

Jack Williamson was a man of integrity who would not compromise on the gospel of Jesus Christ. In that sense, he is a modern day illustration of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (who are known in today’s passage by their Babylonian names - Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego).

We’ve still 3 or so topics to examine in our sermon series on the Book of Proverbs, and we’ll return to that next Sunday morning. For today, and a couple other Sundays this summer, we’ll be studying some of my favorite passages of Scripture. I’ve always taken comfort from God’s protection of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego; but their faith in God is simple, yet extraordinary.

Daniel 3:1-18:

“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. 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. 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. Then a herald cried aloud: "To you it is commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, *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; and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace." 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.

Therefore at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and accused the Jews. They spoke and said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, live forever! 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; and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. 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." Then Nebuchadnezzar, in rage and fury, gave the command to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. So they brought these men before the king. 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? 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?"

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. 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. 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."

This story in **Daniel Chapter 3** exists to bolster the courage of God's people as we face what can seem to be overwhelming odds. Are you there presently in your life? I'd venture to guess you have been at one point, and for sure, you will again as we live in a fallen world.

The stakes for the conflict between Nebuchadnezzar and God's people start right in the first verse. "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."

Upon first read, the most noticeable thing is the height of the gold image the king had built. "Sixty cubits" equates to 90 feet - this image was about twice as tall as the courthouse tower! And, it was 9 feet wide!

King N. gathers the leaders of his kingdom together for the dedication ceremony – btw – a 'satrap' is a lieutenant or a prince. These officials learn the king wants them to bow down to this image every time they hear the sound of music piped throughout the kingdom. Every person who does not bow down upon hearing the music would be "cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace" as verse 6 teaches.

We mustn't miss this. Making an idol and bowing to it is wrong. *You know the First*

Commandment, don't you? "You shall have no other gods before Me." The second commandment prohibits the making of idols and images.

We are not to erect idols in our lives, nor to bow down and worship them. Yet, it's likely all of us are idol worshippers, through and through.

Pleasure can be an idol, and serves as one of the most prevalent in American society. Where to get the next high - alcohol, drugs, sex, pornography, or some other cheap thrill - is the main aim of many people.

Power (and the pursuit of it) can be an idol. We may make **relationships**, or one particular relationship, an idol. **Seeking knowledge** can be an idol. **Money** and the pursuit of it is the idol of many Americans. There are many more possibilities, but suffice it to say that "When the masks are ripped away, behind every idol is the *self*." (Longman, 110)

Our sinful nature would have us serve self - our desires and perceived needs - and no one else. Apart from the grace of God intervening in our lives, apart from Jesus Christ, we are precisely that.

How did Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego react to this king's decree? Verses 8-12 reveal they did not obey the king's command. This is an Old Testament application of the teaching we find in **Acts 5:29** - "We ought to obey God rather than men."

Verse 12 reveals their words - "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."

The king's reaction? "Rage and fury." Incidentally, if you're thinking that Nebuchadnezzar was merely a hot-head with anger issues, consider what Jeremiah had to write about him in **Jeremiah chapter 39** after the Babylonian army captured King Zedekiah who was attempting to escape them - "And when they had captured him, they brought him up to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, to Riblah in the land of Hamath, where he pronounced judgment on him. Then the king of Babylon killed the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes in Riblah; the king of Babylon also killed all the nobles of Judah. Moreover he put out Zedekiah's eyes, and bound him with bronze fetters to carry him off to Babylon. And the Chaldeans burned the king's house and the houses of the people with fire, and broke down the walls of Jerusalem."

Nebuchadnezzar was a wicked man. He had designs to eradicate all who opposed him. Those immediately in his line of fire were Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. In verses 13 through 15 of today's text in **Daniel Chapter 3**, we see the king restating his command for everyone to fall to the ground in worship of his idol when they heard the music.

His words end with the question in verse 15 - "And who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?" Now, place yourself in the situation these three young Hebrews were in, or one close to it (*perhaps you've been in a similar one?*) *What possible justifications (excuses) could you come up with to stay out of that difficult situation?* (Rodney Stortz supplies these possibilities in his

commentary):

* There's the "situational ethics" excuse. In this situation it would be all right to bow down because these three men would get killed if they did not. *God would not want these three young men to die, would he?*

* Then there's the culture excuse. It goes something like this, "The Babylonians are not going to understand the laws of our God. We don't want to offend their culture and ruin our witness. We will bow down so they will listen to us later. Anyway, there's probably nobody we know who'll see us doing it."

* There's also the presumption of forgiveness excuse. It goes something like this. God is a forgiving God who loves to forgive. I'm a sinner who loves to sin. I'll bow just this one time and then ask Him for forgiveness. God is more understanding and forgiving than these Babylonians.

Maybe you're thinking in your heart, "Not me, pastor! If I'm put in a similar situation, I'll be just like they were." I hope that is the case. Consider that you use some of these very same excuses for lesser pressure situations than Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego faced!

In America today, Christians face increasing pressure to keep their faith to themselves. Iain Duguid captures this when he writes, "We find ourselves constantly pressed to keep our beliefs private, and therefore secondary. We are told that the public sphere must be kept untainted by any religion, for any other opinion threatens the unifying dogma of the separation of church and state. We can believe whatever we want, by all means. However, we are strongly discouraged from talking about it or trying to influence the beliefs of others." (Duguid, 48)

Verse 16-18 should cause everyone red-blooded believer in Jesus Christ to stand up and cheer - "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. 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. 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."

These men recognized that God was able to remove them from the fiery furnace. *But, how many of us would stand upon the possibility, maybe even likelihood that He may choose to glorify Himself, not in their deliverance from the fire, but in their deaths from it?* Thousands, if not millions, of Christian martyrs down through the ages are proof God doesn't always deliver His people from difficult situations, to include death.

Sinclair Ferguson puts it this way when he writes, "Faith means trusting in God and His Word. Faith does not mean that we either know or understand what His specific purpose in our lives may be. It means a ready willingness to follow Him whatever He purpose." (Ferguson, 70)

In the 18 years my family and I have been part of the Trinity Church family, we have experienced God choosing to deliver His people from the throes of life-threatening diseases - several of you have experienced God's overcoming deliverance from cancer (especially) as well as

serious heart conditions and painful surgeries/recoveries and other difficult life circumstances.

Yet, we've also seen that God was pleased for His people to glorify Him in their deaths - some of them very premature, unexpected and sudden.

Perhaps you're still enduring unnecessary self-induced pain over those circumstances because you've not been reacting to them biblically. May God give us the grace to stand up under His sometimes afflicting providence and say "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. But if not, praise the Lord!

In his book *Where Is God When it Hurts?* Philip Yancey tells of Brian Sternberg. A nationally acclaimed track star, he held several records in pole vault competition. The 1963 season, when Brian was 19 years old, held unbelievable success. He made sports headlines every week. He remained undefeated in outdoor competition, and he set his first world record.

Then, three weeks after Brian had set his last world record, everything changed. On July 2nd, 1963, while working out on the trampoline in preparation for the U. S. track team's tour of Russia, Brian landed on his neck. There was a crack; then all feeling and movement in his arms and legs were gone.

Brian Sternberg was a Christian, and his faith was put to the test. He faced a crisis that threatened to leave him a quadriplegic the rest of his life, confined to a wheelchair. Brian had faith that God could and would heal his paralysis. Now, years later, he is still paralyzed.

Did his faith fail? Did he not have enough faith? Did God make a mistake? Did God forsake His child?

Less than a year after the accident, Brian was asked to write an article for *Look Magazine*. He ended with these powerful words that describe a Biblical view of faith: "Having faith is a necessary step toward one of two things. Being healed is one of them. Peace of mind, if healing does not come, is the other. Either one will suffice."