

Daniel 3:1-30, No. 6
“Believers are Revealers of God”
December 11, 2016
The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

Chapter three is the self-contained narrative of a single episode in the life of the Hebrew exiles, though interestingly *not* of Daniel himself. Was he untouchable because of the favor that he had done for the king? No one can say. It happened, as the previous events, during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar reigned from 605 to 562 B.C. but we are not told precisely when in the course of those years these events took place. It must have been at least some years removed from the events of chapter 2 because the king seems to have forgotten everything he said about the God of Daniel in 2:47.

Text Comment

v.1 The term “image” is the same one used in chapter 2 of the statue that Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream. We are not told what the image was, whether it represented a god or the king himself, not that it would have made any difference. That it was gold – probably gold plated – and that the dream in chapter 2 had pictured Nebuchadnezzar as the head of gold, is an argument in favor of thinking the image was of the king, now being given god-like status as ancient kings often were, or, even better, that the king thought that the dream entitled him to represent himself as a golden god-like statue. [Davis, 51] But, on the other hand, Babylonian kings were not typically divinized as, say, Roman emperors would later be. In the final analysis it doesn’t make much difference. The problem created by the king’s demand is that the Jewish men in his court were being required to assume the posture to offer divine worship to one that was not God. Ancient near eastern idols were thought to be physical manifestations of invisible gods and for that reason worship was addressed to them. There were ceremonies of bathing and feeding the idols as if they were the gods themselves. Among the devout there was a great measure of awe in the presence of such idols. Of course, there would have been then, as now, many people whose religious commitments were only skin deep, who went through the motions without any real seriousness.

As you are aware, the gods of the ancient world were personifications of nature. Baal and his Babylonian counterpart, Marduk, represented fertility brought to the land by rain and storm. Ishtar, the Babylonian counterpart of Astarte in Canaan, represented sexual fertility. In both cases and very obviously the creature was being worshipped as the creator. [Longman, 106] The size was startling, some 90 feet high and nine feet wide. The nearest known statue of such size was the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the wonders of the ancient world, which was, it is thought, 108 feet tall. No one knows where the plain of Dura was, though it must have been in the environs of the city of Babylon.

v.2 This long list of officials is repeated later. The repetition heightens the tension, in each case the length of the list indicates that the Hebrew exiles were certainly included. It also serves to heighten the irony. Everyone else was only too happy to oblige the king. The whole staff, all the court officials did what they were told. These three Jews were going

to stick out like a sore thumb! We all know the power of the pressure to conform. It is difficult to take a stand that separates you from everyone else, especially if everyone else will think you stupid for doing so. [Davis, 52] There is also a sense that in this repetition of all these offices the author is adopting a somewhat mocking tone. All these yes-men are only too happy to conform. The whole thing is a farce!

- v.5 By the way, some of those instrument names are just guesses, and nobody knows exactly what the Babylonian bagpipe would have sounded like, even if “bagpipe” is the proper translation. The command to worship the image would not have struck anyone else the way it struck the Hebrew exiles or strikes us today. It was a polytheistic world and the more devout among the Babylonians would have regularly worshipped a number of gods. Even the nominally religious would have often gone through the motions of offering worship to idols. Adding one more presented no problem. But for a Jew, monotheism had obvious implications and one of the most dramatic in that time and place was that worship offered to any other “god” was, in the nature of the case, blasphemy.

The long list of instruments is repeated several times in the narrative apparently to underscore the “pomp” associated with the image and its worship. [Longman, 99]

- v.12 The impression of vv. 8-12 is that had these colleagues not ratted out Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, they would have escaped notice and their non-compliance would not have created a problem. What motivated those men to draw the king’s attention to the failure of the Jews to bow down to his image is not said explicitly but the fact that they identify the three men by the authority they were given suggests that jealousy was their motive. These outsiders rose to greater positions and wider influence very quickly, had outstripped them, and here a golden opportunity was provided to put the Jews in their place and, of course, open up some positions for others. The Chaldeans, or astrologers, knew their man. They appealed to Nebuchadnezzar’s vanity. These Jews are paying no attention to *you*, they don’t serve *your* gods, or bow down to the image *you* set up. [Longman, 100] Powerful men are often insecure and fear any attack on their prestige.
- v.15 With a deft touch the author lets Nebuchadnezzar himself set the stage for what is to follow, quoting him as saying, “What God can deliver you from my hand?” Remember how the omen-readers had done the same in chapter two: “There is not a man on earth who can meet the king’s demand.”
- v.18 The boldness of these men is remarkable, speaking so confidently to the most powerful man in the world, fully aware of his vanity and his temper, which were both provoked by their response as the next verse indicates.
- v.19 By the way, if you want a good example of the difference in translation philosophy between the NIV and the ESV you can find one here. The NIV renders the phrase, “his attitude toward them changed.” The ESV, as you see, has “the expression on his face was changed.” The ESV is a more literal translation, the NIV something less than a translation and a bit more of an interpretation.

The impression of the text is that the furnace was already nearby and already burning, for what purpose we don't know. It must have been large and the king saw to increasing the fire far beyond what was ordinarily required.

- v.22 The vanity and the foolishness of the king caused the death of otherwise innocent men. How many times has *that* happened in history!
- v.25 Who was the fourth figure? He looked different than the other three; Nebuchadnezzar described him as "like a son of the gods." Later, in v. 28 he will describe him as an "angel." Of course, those are Nebuchadnezzar's descriptions and he was hardly a biblical theologian. Whether the fourth man is to be identified as a pre-incarnate appearance of the Lord Christ or as simply an angel of God we cannot say. Arguments by good men have been made on both sides. But whether it was the Lord himself or his angel, it was the Lord Yahweh who had intervened on behalf of the three men!

Why are there so many unbelievers, so many atheists? Why are so many utterly unimpressed by the claims of the Christian faith: what it proclaims about God, about Christ, about salvation, and about the Bible as the word of God? Why do they not wish for the transformation of life promised in the Word of God to those who believe in Jesus and follow him? Well such questions can be answered in many ways, but surely one way, one important way of answering such questions is this: so many don't believe our message because too much of the time *it doesn't appear that we believe it either*. If we Christians don't take the Bible's message seriously, why should they?

Perhaps you've heard the story of the little Jewish boy who grew up in a small German village in the first half of the 19th century. His father would talk to him from time to time about God and about the importance of believing in God and obeying God, and the little boy believed him as boys usually believe their fathers. But then the family moved to another town. Unlike the town where they had lived before this town was not predominantly Jewish; it was mostly Lutheran. The Jewish community there was, in fact, very small. It soon became clear to the boy's father that being Jewish was bad for business. So when the boy was six, the family converted to Lutheranism. The boy never forgot what the father had done, trading in *his* God for a better paying one. The whole experience, as he reflected on it as a young man, confirmed him as an atheist. God is not real; he is not to be taken seriously. The proof of that is that even those who claim to be devout believers in God don't take him seriously. If the devout don't really believe, why should the skeptical? The devout will dispense with God, and with their belief in God – apparently with very little psychological pain – or with his ethical standards should he or they become inconvenient. Perhaps you've never heard the story, but you've certainly heard of the man, Karl Marx, the influence of whose life and thought upon our modern world was as great as that of any other man. We can only speculate how things might have turned out differently – for millions of people – if Karl Marx' father had been a Jew like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Theirs was a different God, a real God, *the* God, and their conduct revealed God powerfully and unmistakably to all around them. In fact, at the end of the chapter that is what Nebuchadnezzar is talking about - Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's God!

We have heard the story many times before, thrilling, memorable as it is. It describes an almost unbelievable act of heroism on the part of those three men, their unshakeable faith, and then its reward in a deliverance that sends chills up and down our spines, if only we read the text with eyes wide open and believing hearts. No wonder that throughout history this single piece of history has nerved and steeled multitudes of Christians to do things similar to that which these three men did on the plain of Dura.

John Chrysostom, the great preacher of the 4th century, was exiled from Constantinople twice by the faithless and worldly empress Eudoxia, a woman who despised John and his gospel preaching, and, even more, his public denunciations of her behavior. What makes this all the more relevant to our text this evening is that the tension between bishop and queen was greatly exacerbated when she, desirous of receiving the homage which from pagan times was granted to the ruler of the empire, placed an immense image of herself in the square in front of the entrance to the cathedral. In a letter to a friend at the time of his first exile, he wrote,

“When I was driven from the city, I felt no anxiety, but said to myself: ‘If the empress wishes to banish me, let her do so; the earth is the Lord’s.’ If she wants to have me sawn asunder, I have Isaiah for an example. If she wants me to be drowned in the ocean, I think of Jonah. *If I am to be thrown into the fire, the three men in the furnace suffered the same.* If cast before wild beasts, I remember Daniel in the lion’s den. If she wants me to be stoned, I have before me Stephen, the first martyr. If she demands my head, let her do so; John the Baptist shines before me. Naked I came from my mother’s womb, naked shall I leave this world. Paul reminds me, ‘If I still pleased men, I would not be the servant of Christ.’” [Cited in *NPNF* (First Series), vol. 9, p. 14]

All Christians have understood that the example set by these brave men, convinced as they were of the truth of their faith, was meant to inspire us to do the same: to stand up for our convictions as they did, to adorn them as they did, and to prove them true as they did.

Idolatry, as you know, was a constant stumbling block to Israel. Everyone else in her world worshipped gods by means of images and again and again Israel succumbed to that pressure to conform. What made sense to everyone else soon and too easily made sense to her as well. *But never again after the exile.* The lure of idolatry was forever broken in Babylon. And surely among the reasons why idolatry was never to tempt the Jews again, that monotheism was now fixed in Jewish bones, that the worship of the living God by images was ever after abhorrent to them, was the conquest of it by these three faithful men, who proved for all time what Israel should have known from the beginning:

“Why should the nations say,
‘Where is their God?’
Our God is in the heavens;
He does all that he pleases.

Their idols are silver and gold,
The work of human hands.
They have mouths, but do not speak;

Eyes, but do not see.
 They have ears, but do not hear;
 Noses, but do not smell.
 They have hands, but do not feel;
 Feet, but do not walk;
 And they do not make a sound in their throat.
 Those who make them become like them;
 So do all who trust in them.” [Psalm 115:2-8]

If any Jew still doubted that, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego put paid to those doubts. Or, better, the Lord himself put paid to them by honoring the faith of these men who refused to give worship to an idol. *Now it is worth noting that these men did not provoke the contest of wills with the King.* They didn’t go looking for a fight. They no doubt had heard of his decree, but they quietly went about their business while simply ignoring it. Perhaps they naively thought that, after the episode of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and Daniel providing the interpretation, they would be exempt from the King’s demands. But there were those who were glad to take the opportunity to push them forward, to make their disobedience public knowledge, and to force the King to choose between these men and his own vanity. But when the issue was joined, when the King demanded their obedience – which would amount to public disobedience to the first of the Ten Commandments – the three men refused, fully aware of the likely consequences. Think of the arguments they might have advanced for accommodating themselves to the King’s demand.

They might have said to themselves that their position in the government was simply too important to the exiled Jewish community to lose it over mere body posture. How could they protect the Jews if they were dead and their positions filled by men who would have no sympathy with Jewish convictions and practices? After all, they didn’t have to take the gesture seriously, and if they didn’t, would it actually be a violation of the first commandment? You know how this goes in our modern politics: a representative or senator tells us that he or she is *personally opposed* to abortion, but will vote for it anyway for this reason or that. It would be a simple accommodation to the requirements of their professional employment. [Davis, 55] Think, for example of Naaman, who, after his healing from leprosy and his confession of Israel’s God as the only true God, asked Elisha if it would be acceptable, as a member of the King’s staff, indeed, as one on whose arm the Syrian king actually leaned when in the house of his god Rimmon, that he bow as well. Naaman would know that Rimmon was no god, but his work required him to participate in temple rituals. And Elisha seemed to accept that such would be acceptable for the Syrian general. [2 Kings 5:18-19] But these men were Jews and were being ordered to practice idolatry, a very different set of circumstances. They were being told to make public their reverence for the image.

Now, to be sure, they had some help in making their decision and taking their stand. Surely it clarified matters for them that the request was so absurd! As we read in v. 15, they were ordered by Nebuchadnezzar to worship the image *he just made*. How dumb does someone have to be to imagine that something *he just manufactured* is a god to be worshipped? The author is reminding us with the King’s words that what they were being asked to do was to worship *as a god* a metal pillar that had just come from the manufacturer! The Bible, as you know, is full of the sarcastic mockery of idolatry of the ancient near eastern type. You take a good piece of wood and made an

idol from it and with the rest of piece, the wood you didn't use, you warm yourself by the fire. There is something genuinely idiotic about that kind of idolatry. But then, all idolatry is like that, even the kind that is most tempting to us today: money, pleasure, power, fame, security, and so on. Can we ask of any of those things help with what we truly need in life? Can they save us from the power of death? Are they truly worthy of our reverence, our love, and our obedience? Does anyone really believe that they are? In a crisis, in a time of great need, does anyone pray to money or to pleasure? When one's child is deathly ill, when one is himself or herself diagnosed with a deadly disease, when one's circumstances turn awful, when finally one is on his or her deathbed, does anyone then turn to money or to power for grace to help or for life in death?

Remember, what we have already learned from Daniel is that this great story is first and foremost a story about God – even Nebuchadnezzar understood that – about his presence, his power, and his faithfulness. What chapter 3 is first of all is a revelation of God, a demonstration of his presence with his people. Like other biblical miracles, this sort of situation is almost unprecedented in human history, it is certainly not the sort of thing we are taught to expect in our own lives, even in the Bible. Indeed, these three men made their stand perfectly well aware that God might not come to their aid that they would lose their lives as a consequence of their refusal to bow to the King's image and that there would be some excruciating pain before death overtook them. They acknowledged that openly, as we read in v. 18. They were ready to refuse the King's demand no matter whether Yahweh would intervene on their behalf. Their confidence was in *him*, not in some expected result. Their obedience was *for him*, not to pry out of him some spectacular deliverance for themselves. I'm sure that as they were finally dragged nearer to the furnace they fully expected to die. Their testimony lay in their loyalty to God come wind, come weather, a God so real to them, so present with them, so much the devotion of their lives, that it made sense to them to accept death rather than betray him.

Most Christians facing death on account of their faith and their consistent practice of their faith have not been rescued. They were thrown into the fire and died there. But the term we use for them – *martyr* – doesn't refer to their death; it refers to their *witness*. They did what these three men did: they preferred God to life itself; they bore witness to him and to their faith in him. For us, as for those men, the crucial issue is never whether we will be delivered, but whether we will obey and demonstrate our loyalty to God. It was Jesus, remember, who said that those who confess him before men he would confess before his Father. As one commentator put it, this account in Daniel 3 is *a token not a blueprint*. That is, it won't always turn out as it did in the plain of Dura; there will not always be a spectacular deliverance. But, whether or not there is, the Lord is always with his people; he is with them even if they die. The fourth man is always near us and always with us in the flames. But that encouragement is intended to nerve us, to steel us to this lesson: we are to keep the 1st commandment even if it kills us. [Davis, 58]

How many times have God's people done and gloriously done what these three men did here! Paul Schneider was one of the first Christian pastors to suffer the wrath of the Nazi government in 1930s Germany because he refused to temper his criticism of the Nazi ideology and refused to stop teaching his congregation its terrible errors and its incompatibility with the Christian faith. A Lutheran pastor, husband, and father of six children, he was arrested several times and finally sent to Buchenwald Concentration Camp in 1937. To be released all he had to do was to sign a paper agreeing to the Nazi order banishing him from his state of the Rhineland and removing

him from his pastorate. But he refused what he took to be an illegal order. Nor was he willing to entrust his congregation to such a pastor as the Nazis would have put in his place.

On the 28th of April, 1938, Hitler's birthday, the camp prisoners were ordered to stand at attention, remove their caps, and venerate the Nazi swastika, in other words, to bow to an image that represented the gods of the Nazi pantheon. Paul Schneider was the only one who refused to remove his hat or to venerate the flag. He was whipped and then placed in solitary confinement for 15 months. He was fed on bread and water only, not allowed to wash, and forbidden a Bible. For his constant refusal to do the will of the Nazi commandant he was repeatedly tortured. Finally in July of 1939, less than two months before the start of the Second World War, Pastor Schneider was executed by an overdose of drugs administered by the camp doctor. When the news reached Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was in London with his sister at the time, Bonhoeffer told his nieces and nephews, "Listen children. You must never forget the name of Pastor Paul Schneider. He is our first martyr." [Stephens, *War and Grace*, 61] His wife, Gretel, lived the remainder of her life as a widow, dying in 2002 just days shy of her 99th birthday. How like the situation of these men in Babylon. It wasn't Nebuchadnezzar who discovered that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were not bowing to the image and it wasn't Adolf Hitler who murdered Paul Schneider. It was the little men, the underlings who relished the misery they could cause another man, especially a man they all knew, deep down, was better than they!

Many of you will have heard of the prisoner of war camp in Thailand where British prisoners were housed, tortured, and where they died by the hundreds of tropical diseases, lack of even the most rudimentary medical care, and inhumane treatment while being forced to serve as slave labor building the Japanese army a railroad through the jungles of Thailand and Burma. There were some Christians in the camp who quoted Daniel's prophecies to prove to their fellow inmates that the War would soon be over. How wrong they were. They had no influence in the camp and got no respect. But there were other Christians who made terrible sacrifices to practice their faith by caring for their dying mates. Ernest Gordon, for example was left for dead, until three Christian men nursed him back to life, selling what little they had left to acquire some simple medicines to treat his dysentery. At one point Gordon was so emaciated that he could get the fingers of his hand around his thigh. He had no interest in the Christian faith until those men practiced theirs and by their own sacrifice saved his life. He survived the war and went on to serve the Lord as a Christian minister. Some of the men who saved his life did not survive the ordeal of the camp.

Another Christian soldier admitted to have stolen a shovel – there had been no theft of a shovel, it was soon after discovered that the guard had miscounted – but he admitted that he had stolen the shovel because the guard, in a rage, was threatening to kill them all unless the shovel was returned. He knew he was probably going to be executed for his supposed crime but there is no greater love than that of a man who lays down his life for his friends. He was immediately beaten to death in front of the men he had saved from a similar fate. Another Christian man gave his meager rations to a man who was dying of malnourishment, though he was weak enough himself - too weak, as it turned out, to survive without food. The sick man recovered, the Christian died of starvation. Buddhist monks walked by the suffering men on the road as they spent up what remained of their lives working on that railroad and showed no concern or mercy. Non-attachment was their spiritual principle. But Thai villagers who had become Christians through

the ministry of missionaries exposed themselves to great danger to get the prisoners food and medicine. Everyone in the camp *noticed that!* How could anyone *not* notice that? The effect of such Christian behavior in the fires of suffering, such grace and goodness under pressure, such assured conviction that there really was a Savior who had suffered and died for sinners, that he loved them, was really present with them, that he would reward their faith in him, made a great many Christians out of former unbelievers in that terrible place. Their example ignited what we would call a revival. In that kind of faith, in that kind of love, in that kind of obedience God reveals himself!

Would you do that? Would you be willing in the fires of your own suffering to make such sacrifices on behalf of others in loyalty to the Lord who had died for you? *Do you want to be that kind of Christian?* Do you really believe the words of the Lord, “Blessed are you when you are persecuted for righteousness sake, for yours is the kingdom of heaven”? Through the ages, in the red-hot fires of persecution men and women who had a reputation for piety abandoned the Lord and made peace with the world to save themselves; at the same time some who were thought weak Christians, if Christians at all, rose to the challenge and in the name of Christ defied even the threat of death. Look at these three young men. Their lives were before them. They had hopes for the future; but when overtaken by a severe test, they rose to meet the challenge. They *knew* that God was with them and so they did not consider their earthly lives so important that the prospect of death or even of greater suffering justified setting aside the calling of God. You young people, would you do what those men did in Thailand? Many became Christians in that camp *because they saw Christians proving their faith and revealing their God! They saw God in the lives of these men. No one would ever have seen the fourth man in the furnace if the three hadn't proved faithful to God.* And no one would have seen God in that miserable jungle prison, if God had not appeared to them through the love and sacrifice of his servants in the camp.

Can any of us believe that there would not be many more Christians in our land today if only *this* were the impression everyone had of Christians and the Christian's God? If when they thought of Christian believers they saw in their mind's eye people who were *that beautifully, impressively loyal* to him, regularly proving their love for him and his presence in their lives by their words and their deeds, especially deeds that reflected the love that he had shed abroad in their hearts. How real and how wonderful must God be to produce such faith and love and goodness in his children!

We are all tempted by idols. Not nowadays to be sure, at least in the Western world, images of wood, stone, or metal. But an idol – as the New Testament makes clear when Paul reminds us that greed is idolatry – is anything that commands our devotion, anything in which we invest our hope for happiness and for salvation, whatever we understand salvation to be. It was Calvin, with his rare insight, who observed that the human heart is an *idol factory*. It is always inventing ways to direct our devotion elsewhere than to God and Christ. It is always attracted more to the creature than the creator.

The easiest way to unmask our ultimate loyalties is simply to put the same question to ourselves that Nebuchadnezzar put to the three men: are you willing to die in order to remain loyal to your God? Are you that serious about your God? Do you really believe him present with you and worthy of any sacrifice you may be asked to make for the sake of his honor? It is, alas, entirely

true that people will die for false gods. Some have died in the hope of immortalizing themselves. Others have died, taking foolish risks for money or fame or power. But what we have here is something different. Here their death was not to gain something for themselves, but to honor the God they loved, to serve him, and to demonstrate their loyalty to him, come what may.

Christians ought to be different in many ways from the unbelievers around them; noticeably different, pleasingly different. But supremely they ought to be different in this way: that the love of God and their confidence in God constrains or controls them to make them do any number of genuinely attractive, impressive, kind, honest things unbelievers would never do. The world can do very little to someone; it can add very little to someone who is willing to surrender his life for the honor of God.