

“A Living Sacrifice”
Daniel 3:1-30

To anyone with a knowledge of church history, the names of Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli are closely associated with the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s. These men advocated for a return to the authority of Scripture as the standard for salvation and church life, but they did not go as far as teaching the complete separation between church and state.

But there were others, who had been students of these men, who understood the Scriptures to teach that the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the state were two totally separate entities. They rejected infant baptism and membership in the state approved churches. They taught and practiced what they called “believers’ baptism.”

They argued that biblical baptism reflected a genuine faith and repentance that could only be experienced as adults. They rejected infant baptism and required all who would join their group to be rebaptized. For this, they earned the derogatory name of “Anabaptists,” or re-baptizers. And, they were severely persecuted by the followers of Luther and Zwingli.

Martyr’s Mirror is a book that contains many stories of the sufferings that occurred during this time in history. One story recounts the experiences of Anna Jansz.

In 1538, a fellow traveler heard Anna and another woman singing a song that was commonly sung among the Anabaptists. He reported what he heard to the authorities and Anna and the other woman were arrested and imprisoned.

Anna and Christina were sentenced to death by drowning on January 23, 1539. The authorities in Rotterdam planned the executions for the following day.

As she was being led to her execution, rather than renounce her faith, Anna pled for someone in the crowd to care for her 15-month old son. She offered the whole of her considerable fortune as a reward for raising him. A local baker responded to her request. He agreed to raise her son Isaiah, and when he was old enough to give him a letter Anna had written for him while in prison.

The *Martyrs Mirror* account records that the baker who accepted Anna’s son and her fortune became very prosperous, and that Isaiah grew up to be the mayor of the city that had killed his mother. The man who betrayed Anna and her friend to the authorities by reporting their singing, on the other hand, was killed when a bridge he was standing on collapsed while he was on the way

to witness Anna's execution.

From the beginning of time God's people have suffered for their desire to be faithful to Him. The patriarchs, the judges, the kings, the prophets, and all who were faithful to God experienced the opposition of the ungodly. Some suffered in obscurity, their names aren't even recorded for us in Scripture. The suffering of others, and sometimes their deliverance, is recorded in accounts that became some of the earliest Bible stories we remember.

As we continue our study in the book of Daniel, we come to chapter 3. This chapter records the experience of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace. As I studied this text, I was newly impressed and challenged by their firm faith in God. I've titled our study, "A Living Sacrifice."

To begin our study, I will read Daniel chapter 3. It's 30 verses, but it's an account that will, hopefully, inspire us to similar devotion. Listen as I read God's Word.

Daniel 3:1-30

As I reflected on this text, my mind was drawn to Romans 12:1 and 2. Here are those verses. *"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."*

I find in these verses from Romans, an outline for the experience of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The way in which they presented their bodies as a living sacrifice to God is a worthy example to follow.

The first command in Romans 12:2 is do not be conformed to this world. These young men, far from home and in a heathen culture faced tremendous **pressure to conform**.

We don't know how much time elapsed from the end of chapter two until the events recorded in our text. Recall that Nebuchadnezzar had said to Daniel, after he interpreted the king's dream, *"Truly your God is the God of gods, the Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets, since you could reveal this secret."* Yet the events of chapter 3 quickly reveal that the king had not had a thorough change of heart!

In fact, I wonder if it was the king's dream, in chapter 2, that was the impetus for the erection of this imposing image. Daniel had told the king, "*you are this head of gold.*" But the dream also revealed that Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom would not endure! It would be succeeded by kingdoms that would be inferior. Is the king attempting to defy God's revelation by making a whole image out of gold? I'll let you be the judge.

The image itself must've been remarkable. Nine feet wide and ninety feet high are unusual proportions. The typical proportions of a human being are 6 to 1, not 9 to 1. Some scholars believe that the total height included a base of about 30 feet high. Whatever the case, the king wanted the image to be SEEN by a large crowd of people.

The timing of this event historically is after the fall of Jerusalem. The biblical record implies this was at the height of Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom. The text records seven classes of officials who were summoned to this feast of dedication for the image. They came from the far-flung provinces of the empire, from Ethiopia to India!

This event served multiple purposes. Surely, the king would've known that most of his subjects would have no problem bowing down before this image. After all, the very fact that these officials were present at this event was because, in their minds, the gods of Babylon were more powerful than their native gods. That's why they had been conquered by Nebuchadnezzar and his armies. But he was also most likely aware of the refusal of the Jews in his domain to worship any god but their own. So, this was a way to test their loyalty.

And that's really what this was all about. In Nebuchadnezzar's mind this was about him; about his political power and prestige. If anyone refused to bow, they were showing contempt for the greatness of his kingdom. But to the Hebrew young men it was clearly a violation of the first and second commandments.

Picture this scene in your mind. Here are hundreds, if not thousands, of the kingdom's powerful and important people all gathered in this large, flat portion of ground; the plain of Dura. Before them towers a magnificent image of gold; an image, most likely, depicting King Nebuchadnezzar. A herald steps forward and gives the instructions and the ultimatum! When the orchestra plays, everyone must fall down and worship the golden image. Those who refuse will immediately be executed by being thrown into the middle of the burning, fiery furnace. Talk about pressure to conform!

We know from history and Scripture that this ultimatum wasn't an idle threat. The prophet

Jeremiah records that two kings, Zedekiah and Ahab, were roasted in the fire by the king of Babylon; that's Jeremiah 29:22. The furnace referenced in the ultimatum was most likely similar to a lime kiln. It had an opening at the top of a perpendicular shaft where the raw materials were fed into the fire. At the bottom of the shaft was an opening for removing the finished product. This description fits the record of the men being thrown into the mouth of the furnace and falling down, while the king is able to see what is happening inside the furnace at that lower level.

So, the band begins to play, and everyone falls down in worship of the image. Well, not everybody. Can you fathom the courage it took for these young men to remain standing?

Today, you and I are facing a similar test. The gods of Babylon celebrated brutality, sensuality, and raw power. There are numerous gods set up by our culture and they're demanding that we bow in homage to them. Militant sexual deviancy, abortion, materialism, and ecumenism all demand, not just our tolerance, but our promotion. To stand against them is to face the fires of public ridicule, censure in courts of law, and actual physical violence.

We, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, must not allow the world to squeeze us into its mold. The pressure to conform is intense. The hatred and vitriol against those who stand for the truth increases daily. The level of heat continues to rise; but there is no compromise with evil; righteousness makes a clear distinction. Compromise with evil is like the proverbial frog in the kettle; it will eventually lead to death. We must be willing to become a living sacrifice.

Notice what happened next. These men were accused before the king. We can easily see how the jealousy of the other officials led to their accusation against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Here were native Babylonians who had been passed over for leadership positions in favor of these Jewish captives! They were foreigners, outsiders, and yet they had been elevated to strategic positions in the leading province of Babylon.

Now, here's a chance to remove these men from office. The Chaldeans knew the Jews did not and would not worship the gods of Babylon. In their report to the king they infer that the refusal of the Jewish young men to bow to the image is really an act of ungratefulness toward the king. In addition, these men do not serve the king's gods, or worship the image which the king has set up, thereby rejecting him and his authority.

The accusations of these councilors were designed to stir up the king's anger, and to bring about the downfall of these three men. Most likely, the accusers hoped to be appointed to those vacated positions themselves.

If the Chaldeans were hoping to arouse the king's anger by their accusation against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, they weren't disappointed! Nebuchadnezzar responded in rage and fury, demanding that the offenders be brought before him. Oh, he was mad! But to his credit, he did give these men a chance to explain themselves.

It's likely that these men had held their offices for a number of years and had conducted themselves honorably. Remember from chapter one, they were the cream of the crop of the captives of Judah? Their faithfulness in discharging their responsibilities may be the only thing that momentarily checked the king's rage.

So, He asks the men before him; *"Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the gold image which I have set up?"* Notice the two-part question. He makes a distinction between serving his gods and worshipping the image he had set up. While the bowing down to the image is primarily political, it also has religious overtones.

The king then goes on to give them another opportunity to conform to his edict. He actually repeats the whole set of instructions so there's no misunderstanding of his intent. Just do what I say, and you'll be fine.

And notice the final words he adds to his ultimatum. *"And who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?"* In other words, Nebuchadnezzar assumed his power was absolute. Since the gods of Babylon had delivered the kingdoms of the world into his hand (at least in his mind), there were no gods more powerful than them. How quickly he has forgotten the revealer of dreams he lauded in Daniel chapter two. Or perhaps he hasn't. He just cannot fathom a god who would have the power to deliver these three men from his hand.

But as those words pass over the king's lips, I can imagine God in Heaven on his throne saying, "There's someone you're forgetting."

Talk about pressure to conform to the world's system; here it is in full force! The message is unmistakable; do what I say or be burnt to a crisp!

But rather than cower in fear of the pressure to conform, they used this test as a **privilege to confirm** their faith in Jehovah God. This corresponds with the second command of Romans 12:2 to "prove what is good and acceptable..."

They said, "O king, we have no need with respect to this matter to make a defense before you." This was their response to the initial question of the king in verse 14; "Is it true?" They were not disrespectful, but neither were they cowed by the king's anger or his threats.

They stated confidently that their God was able to deliver them from any fiery furnace and out of the hand of the king himself. But they also recognized the sovereignty of God. Their statement “but if not” is a reference to their deliverance, not to God’s ability. Even if God chooses not to deliver them from the furnace, it will not change their decision. H. C. Leupold writes “The quiet, modest, yet very positive attitude of faith that these three men display, is one of the noblest examples in the Scriptures of faith fully resigned to the will of God. These men ask for no miracle; they expect none. Theirs is the faith that says, *‘Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him,’* Job 13:15.”

Today, we’re facing tremendous pressure from a hostile world outside the church, and weak, compromising Christians in the church. They want to force us to conform to the gods of this age. We’re being pressured to worship (in the words of the songwriter), the gods of “ease, enjoyment, pomp, and power.” We’re being pressured to celebrate what God condemns and condemn what God celebrates.

Those who refuse to compromise truth face harassment, ridicule, fines, loss of employment, and even jail time. Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego we have the opportunity and privilege of confirming our faith before a skeptical, unbelieving world. But too often, we cower in fear. We say we believe our God is all-powerful, that all people and things are subject to him. But our choices often send the opposite message, or at least a mixed one. It is time for us to take a bold and courageous stand for the truth!

Now, the king is truly enraged, so much so that even his physical appearance changes. And like most angry people he makes foolish, irrational decisions without thinking of the consequences. He had promised the men they could have another chance to obey him, but now, he immediately commands their execution. He orders the furnace to be heated seven times hotter than was originally planned. If he was really looking for maximum pain, less heat would’ve provided a slower, more tortuous death. All his foolish decision accomplished was the needless death of some of his most valuable military men.

They immediately bound the Hebrew men hand and foot, still fully clothed in their official court garb, and threw them into the opening at the top of the furnace. It seems that there would hardly have been time for the fire to reach its maximum force, yet it was so intense that the men who cast the captives into the fire were killed outright. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego fell down, tightly bound, into the midst of the fire. No hands or feet were available to brace their bodies against the force of the fall.

Nebuchadnezzar's decree had been obeyed, and he could leave to the fire the task of consuming those men who had challenged his authority and the power of his gods. Evidently, the king took a seat where he could look into the furnace from a safe distance. I really don't know what he expected to see. A fire so intense would incinerate whatever was thrown into it rather quickly. I can imagine him sitting there, surrounded by a crowd of fawning officials, pleased that his decrees had been fully performed; perhaps even congratulating himself for his victory.

But now, God intervenes with **the proof to convince**. This corresponds with the final phrase of Romans 12:2 to "...prove what is the perfect will of God."

Imagine the king sitting there looking into the furnace, and all of sudden he leaps out of his seat, startling the men around him! He couldn't believe his own eyes. He thought he was seeing things. So, he asked his councilors; "didn't we cast 3 men, bound, into the middle of the fire?" They immediately affirmed that this was the case. Then the king said, "but I see four men, loose, walking in the middle of the fire and they're not injured. And the form of the fourth person is like a son of the gods."

Instead of 3 men writhing in agony in their death throes, they were up walking around unbound and unharmed in the middle of the fire! And they were making no attempt to escape the flames. Unbelievable! Preposterous! But there they were; and what's more there was a fourth person there with them. I can imagine that as Nebuchadnezzar stated what he saw, his officials crowded around him to see if they could catch a glimpse of what he was seeing.

It is indeed possible that the fourth person in the fire was a preincarnate appearance of Christ. But it is doubtful whether the king would've understood this. The preferable translation is literally "a son of the gods." Even though the king later acknowledges that there is no other god who can deliver in this way, he doesn't become a believer in Jehovah – not yet.

Going as close as he dared to the opening of the furnace the king calls to the three faithful men in the furnace; "you servants of the Most High God come out and come here." The fact that these men survived this amazing ordeal was proof in the king's mind that the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego was higher and more powerful than the gods of Babylon.

These men, who were unwilling to obey the king's command to bow to the image, immediately obeyed his command to come out of the furnace. The king's officials who had gathered to witness this execution became reliable witnesses to the amazing miracle God had performed. I can only imagine how quickly the report of this tremendous miracle spread through that whole

crowd of people who had gathered on the plain of Dura.

Imagine the amazement as the onlookers gathered around these three men. Not a hair was singed, their clothing was undisturbed and didn't even smell like smoke, and there was no physical injury. The only thing that perished in the fire was the ropes that had bound them; the symbols of Nebuchadnezzar's unbelief and wrath. God had faithfully protected His own and convincingly proved His superiority over all other gods.

I believe the reign of Nebuchadnezzar is symbolic of the entire period of time known as "the times of the Gentiles." In a similar way, the deliverance of Daniel's friends is symbolic of the deliverance of Israel during the period of Gentile domination. The Scriptures prophecy that as the Gentile age eventually closes, Israel will once again be enveloped by fiery affliction. But by God's miraculous intervention, He will preserve a remnant for His eternal glory.

Just as Nebuchadnezzar had extolled the virtues of Daniel's God in chapter two, here in the end of chapter three he recognizes the amazing power of the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He recognizes the miraculous deliverance afforded to these three men, and he belatedly commends them for their trust in God. He admits that God's intervention brought his decree to nothing.

Further, he makes an imperial decree *"that any people, nation, or language which speaks anything amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made an ash heap; because there is no other God who can deliver like this."* While Nebuchadnezzar is greatly impressed with the power of this God, he is not yet at the place where he is willing to put his complete faith and trust in the God of Israel.

The faithfulness of these three men was amply rewarded. Whatever their former rank was, the king promoted them in the province of Babylon. Their position was consolidated and secured by the decree of the king.

This chapter is a thrilling account of young men who remained true to God under incredible pressure to conform to the heathen culture around them. In spite of separation from godly parents and the corrupting influence of the culture around them they refused to compromise their convictions. They are a role model for all godly young people today. Daniel may have recorded this account to remind Israel of the evils of idolatry and the need to obey God rather than men. We need that reminder today.

But the main thrust of the passage is the picture of a God who is faithful to those who

choose to become a living sacrifice. He preserves His people even in times of severe trial, and always stands ready to deliver those who put their trust in Him. As we know, that deliverance doesn't always guarantee physical life, but it does guarantee eternal preservation. The contrast between the idols of Babylon and the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is a reminder that the god of this world, behind Gentile domination, is ultimately doomed to judgment at the hands of the Most High God.

So, I must ask you; are you, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego offering yourself as a living sacrifice to the Most High God? Or have you placed your confidence in the gods of this age? Are you allowing the world to squeeze you into its mold, or are you willing to take a stand for Truth, no matter what the cost? Your choice will make an eternal difference in your life and the lives of many others. What will it be?