

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Faithful in Doubtland**

#### **Faithful and Respectful, in Doubtland**

(Daniel 3)

Study #4

#### **Introduction: Preferences...Opinions...Convictions...**

About various issues, you will have *preferences* or *opinions* or *convictions*.

When it comes to PREFERENCES, you'll shrug your shoulders and say, "*Whatever. I would prefer to drive home on Bandera Road, but if you want to take Culebra, we can.*"

When it comes to OPINIONS, you'll discuss. You'll even argue. You are more committed to your opinions than you are to preferences.

You may have opinions about school choice, about mask-wearing, and about climate change. You've spent time forming your opinions. You respect the opinions of others, but you won't so easily change your opinions.

And then you bring a whole different level of commitment to the table when the talk turns to CONVICTIONS.

When I talk about convictions, I have in mind the short list of things for which you'll go to the wall. You'll take a bullet for your convictions.

Very few of us know for sure how we'll respond when convictions are put to the test, because for many of us "the test" hasn't come yet.

I know that better people than I have failed to live up to their most firmly held convictions when the chips were down (i.e., Simon Peter), so I don't know how I would do if the test came.

But I would love to think that if it came to it, I would be so convicted of the value of Jesus that I would give my life for Him.

His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead has purchased my salvation AND my allegiance. God grant that I would be as willing to die for Jesus as He was willing to die for me.

And I would love to think that when push comes to shove, I would be so convicted of the value of people, that I would willingly give up my life for people.

Jesus gave Himself for people. God grant that I would have the presence of mind, in the moment, to lay down my life for my family, for my brothers and sisters in Christ, for my close friends, and that I would throw myself in front of a bus for an enemy.

We spend a lot of our lives in the world of preference and opinion. Have you considered the third category, that of conviction?

If you've read much of the life of Jesus in the New Testament, you know that He called His followers to be so convinced about Him that they would be willing to suffer for Him, and we know from the book of Acts that the first followers were so convinced that they did suffer for him.

From the letters of the apostles, we know that we who read them are to be so convinced about Jesus that we will live for Him, even when alone, even when opposed.

In lots of places in the world today, our Christian family is so convinced of the value of following Jesus, that they follow, no matter the cost or consequences.

Convictions. They are the things we live for and the things we're willing to suffer and die for.

I think that developing a personal list of convictions is an important exercise for a Jesus-follower. I think this is especially the case when we are living in Doubtland.

In these weeks, Jeff and I are defining Doubtland as a place where lots of people doubt that God is real or that He is all that we say He is.

In Doubtland we who follow Jesus may face risks and dangers - like Jesus' followers have for the last two thousand years and like Daniel and his friends did when they lived in ancient Babylon.

Our assignment from God is to figure out how to navigate life in a culture filled with people who aren't on the same Jesus-following page we are.

We want to honor God, live wisely and lovingly, and *at the same time* hold to our convictions. That's a tough assignment.

But that is what God calls us to do in Doubtland. And that's why we are turning again to the book of Daniel, because he and his friends modeled that life for us.

### **Prelude: Nebuchadnezzar Builds a Giant Golden Image (2:1)**

To review, Daniel and his three friends were taken from Jerusalem to Babylon early in the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar.

There is no time stamp given for the event we're looking at today, so we don't know how long into their stay in Babylon this event took place. But at some point, after Daniel and his friends were fully in place serving on Nebuchadnezzar's court staff, this happened...

***[1] Nebuchadnezzar the king made a statue of gold, the height of which was sixty cubits and its width six cubits; he set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon.<sup>1</sup>***

This statue was big.

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<sup>1</sup> A foundation has been discovered, not far from the city of Babylon, that some archaeologists believe may well be the foundation for Nebuchadnezzar's statue.

*A cubit* in ancient times was about the length of a man's forearm, elbow to fingertip. So, let's call it 12-18 inches, making the statue anywhere from sixty to ninety feet high.

And it was gold. Not painted gold. It was made of gold, maybe solid, maybe plate. The visual impact of this statue would have been breath-taking.

On trips I've taken to Russia, I've seen the gold domes of Russian Orthodox churches. They are blindingly bright on a sunny day and so would Nebuchadnezzar's golden statue<sup>2</sup> have been blindingly bright on the plain of Dura.

The king made the statue in his own image and likeness,<sup>3</sup> and he called the power brokers of his realm to come and see.

### **Worship the Image - OR ELSE! (vv. 1-6)**

#### **The Assembled Throng (vv. 2-3)**

***[2] Nebuchadnezzar the king also sent word to assemble the satraps, the prefects and the governors, the counselors, the chief treasurers, the judges, the magistrates, and all the administrators of the provinces to come to the dedication of the statue that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up.***

In short, anybody who was anybody in the Babylonian Empire was summoned. And all who were summoned showed up, because, in Babylon, you did whatever the king summoned you to do.

Then, with the whole group gathered on this lush fertile plain between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, they all learn the point and purpose of the summons.

#### **Assembled and Assigned (vv. 4-6)**

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<sup>2</sup> In his conquering of other kingdoms, Nebuchadnezzar may well have accumulated gold sufficient for building such a statue.

<sup>3</sup> There are other opinions, though. One commentator believes it may have been an image of the god, Bel. Or perhaps it was a statue that somehow symbolized the Babylonian Empire. (Keil)

*The commandment (vv.4-5)*

***[4] Then the herald loudly proclaimed: “To you the command is given, you peoples, nations, and populations of all languages,<sup>4</sup> [5] that at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe, and all kinds of musical instruments, you are to fall down and worship the golden statue that Nebuchadnezzar the king has set up.***

This is a crystal-clear command. Everyone was to bow down. And while there was no reward for bowing down, there was quite a penalty for *not* bowing down.

*The penalty for disobedience (v. 6)*

***[6] “But whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be thrown into the middle of a furnace of blazing fire.”***

This furnace may have already been in place on the plain, or it may have been built for the occasion. The furnace is mentioned to assure everyone that the king will not allow the insult of a refusal to bow down. He will put to death anyone who doesn't worship his statue.

As we might have expected, the thought of being thrown, alive, into a furnace worked like a charm. There was a lot of bowing down going on.

### **(almost) Everybody Worships the Image (vv. 7-12)**

#### **The Submission of the Majority (v. 7)**

***[7] Therefore as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe, and all kinds of musical instruments, all the peoples, nations, and populations of all languages fell down and worshipped the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up.***

Nebuchadnezzar was forcing the highest allegiance from the people on the plain of Dura. He was forcing worship of himself, the king, and of his kingdom, Babylon. And worship the people did.

I don't picture much joy as they worshipped. I imagine something more like a grudging bow just to avoid the furnace. But they bowed. For the most part...

In the middle of the crowd of bowing Babylonians was a threesome of young men who stood out because they stood up.

Three men did not bow - and a group of Chaldean (magicians and sorcerers) tattletales let the king know about it, first reminding him of the decree he had made.

#### **A Troublemaking Minority (vv. 8-12)**

*“Remember your decree...” (vv. 8-11)*

***[10] “You, O king, have made a decree that every person who hears the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, and bagpipe, and all kinds of musical instruments, is to fall down and worship the golden statue. [11] But whoever does not fall down and worship shall be thrown into the middle of a furnace of blazing fire.”***

And there's Nebuchadnezzar nodding his head. *“Yep, that's what I said all right.”*

And with that, Chaldeans break their news to the king.

*“Look! Three Jews are standing!” (v. 12)*

***[12a] “There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the administration of the province of Babylon, namely Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego.”***

Notice that they highlight the insult of not bowing.

<sup>4</sup> There is an emphasis on the universality of representation here.

**[12b] “These men, O king, have disregarded you; they do not serve your gods, nor do they worship the golden statue which you have set up.”**

It looks like these Chaldeans are really, really concerned for the honor of the king. But I suspect that there’s more going on than that.

I think they’re still smarting from these Jews having won the “Reveal the King’s Dream” contest. I think they resented the fact that these foreigners held higher positions than they did in the king’s court.

Jealousy is at work here. They’re trying to get these Jews in trouble. And I’m sure that the response of the king was exactly what the Chaldeans were hoping for.

### **The Showdown Where God Showed Up (vv. 13-27)**

#### **Three Friends vs. a King (vv. 13-18)**

*The king questions (v. 13)*

**[14] Nebuchadnezzar began speaking and said to them, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, that you do not serve my gods, nor worship the golden statue that I have set up?”<sup>5</sup>**

Notice that rather than immediately throw these three into the furnace - like he said he would do - Nebuchadnezzar questioned them.

He didn’t have to give these guys the time of day. So, I think that he spoke to them tells us that he hoped they would reconsider.

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<sup>5</sup> A question that arises naturally in this episode in the book is, “Where was Daniel?” Among the answers: (1). Daniel might not have been present but was elsewhere in government service; (2). Daniel might have been present and joined his friends in not bowing. Then, due to his higher political office, the Chaldeans did not report him. (3). Others have wondered - John F. Walvoord among them - if Daniel was present and did bow to the image, not as an act of idolatry, but as his expression of loyalty to the king. An intriguing option, and, if true, evidence that believers could then and can today hold to differing convictions. (See Romans 14) I am more inclined to believe that Daniel, for whatever reason, was not present.

He valued their service. He didn’t want to lose these three. After all, they were ten times better than all the other magicians and conjurers in the realm. (1:20)

Like Daniel, they were choice servants. So, he gave them a second chance.

*The king threatens (v. 15)*

**[15] “Now if you are ready, at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, and bagpipe, and all kinds of musical instruments, to fall down and worship the statue that I have made, very well. But if you will not worship, you will immediately be thrown into the middle of a furnace of blazing fire...”** - and then, suspecting that they would be depending on their God to save them, he added - **[15b] “and what god is there who can rescue you from my hands?”**

Now, let’s listen carefully to the response of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego. Here is where we start to learn what it looks like to wisely and lovingly stand up for our convictions in Doubtland.

*They respectfully decline to bow (vv. 16-18)*

No answer needed (v. 16)

**[16] Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego replied to the king, “Nebuchadnezzar, we are not in need of an answer to give you concerning this matter.”**

They answered with calm composure, no long-winded speech necessary. They knew that the king wouldn’t be satisfied with anything but their worship, so, they didn’t explain WHY they wouldn’t fall down before the image. This was a “*Just say no*” moment.

As they continue, we notice their confidence in God’s power.

Confession of God’s power (v. 17)

***[17a] “If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to rescue us from the furnace of blazing fire...”***

There was no doubt in their minds that God was able to deliver, that a furnace posed no problem, and that God could defeat heat.

But what they go on to say, says something else.

***[17b] “and He will rescue us from your hand, O king.”***

There is a difference between stating what you know God *can* do and what you know God *will* do.<sup>6</sup>

These three young men know that on this day God will rescue them from the king. And we are to read that “*one way or another.*”

It might be by a miracle and it might be through the crucible of suffering. But they will be rescued from King Nebuchadnezzar.

It is crucial that we see this. They didn’t know that they wouldn’t burn in the furnace.

Their confidence in God’s power was intact. But they didn’t presume that God was under obligation to keep them alive. They didn’t dare to put God in a box of requiring that He do this or that. (Remember. These three had seen thousands of their fellow Jews not spared by God when Jerusalem was sacked.)

God hadn’t promised that He would always protect His people from physical harm. God’s hands weren’t tied. He could deliver through life or through death. These three knew and rested in that.

And that is the essence of biblical faith. Trusting that God will do something He hasn’t promised to do is presumption / superstition. Faith is obeying regardless of consequences.

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<sup>6</sup> Their confidence that God could deliver them from the fire is commendable and shows the orthodoxy of their theology. But their commitment to stand firm in their convictions for Him *regardless of consequences* stirs something deep within us.

The faith to which God calls us today is a firm confidence in what God CAN DO tied to a firm confidence in God’s GOODNESS tied to a refusal to NEVER DEMAND anything of God.

When you are facing some daunting challenge or a terrible hardship, remember Daniel’s friends. Remember that God is all-powerful and that He is all-good. Trust and obey Him, come what may.

As for the king’s threats and the furnace, these three friends would rather burn than bow.

Regardless... (v. 18)

***[18] But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods nor worship the golden statue that you have set up.”***

The path they have chosen doesn’t hinge on the certainty of what God will do for them. They won’t bow down. Period. They will live, first and foremost, as God’s people.

Impressive, right? Well, you and I are impressed and inspired by their courage and faith. Nebuchadnezzar? Not so much.

He thought their reply was offensive and insulting. He had treated them well in Babylon and this was their thanks?

The king was hot, so he ordered the furnace to burn hotter.

**Into the Blazing Furnace! (vv. 19-23)**

*Nebuchadnezzar’s rage! (v. 19)*

***[19] Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with wrath, and his facial expression was changed toward Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego. He answered by giving orders to heat the furnace seven times more than it was usually heated.***

Sure, the furnace would have killed them without superheating it. But, by adding fuel to the fire, he was ensuring that they would be REALLY dead.

And pity the poor soldiers who were assigned to throw the three Jews into the furnace.

*Nebuchadnezzar's punishment (vv. 20-23)*

The fate of the soldiers (vv. 20, 22)

***[20] And he ordered certain valiant warriors who were in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, in order to throw them into the furnace of blazing fire...***

The furnace was built into a hill and was fed wood through an opening at ground level. Then, there was a hole in the top that vented smoke and flames.

The soldiers approached from the top to push the captives in through the opening.

We read that ***[22b]...the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego.*** Then, down into the fire they tumbled.

The fate of the three friends (vv. 21, 23)

***[21] Then these men were tied up in their trousers, their coats, their caps and their other clothes, and were thrown into the middle of the furnace of blazing fire...[23]...still tied up.***

With that, the drama on the plains of Dura concludes, with the great crowd seeing the fate of those who oppose the king.

We don't know whether the king was thinking, *"Good riddance! They got what was coming to them!"* or *"Nuts. They were great servants. Why couldn't they have just bowed?"*

But it doesn't really matter what the king was thinking. The deed is done. And he saw the whole thing from his perspective on ground-level in front of the furnace's opening.

But as he kept looking, he saw something that completely changed his perspective.

## Thriving with Christ in the Fire (vv. 24-27)

*The king's gloat turns to stunned disbelief (vv. 24-25)*

***[24] Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astounded and stood up quickly; he said to his counselors, "Was it not three men that we threw bound into the middle of the fire?" They replied to the king, "Absolutely, O king." [25] He responded, "Look! I see four men untied and walking about in the middle of the fire unharmed, and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods!"***

The three young men had not instantly been consumed, nor were they writhing in agony in the flames. They were walking around, freed and untied, inside the furnace.

And they were joined by a fourth "man" who seemed to the king ***"like a son of the gods."***

It is my opinion (and the opinion of most Christians who study this passage) that this fourth Man was the pre-incarnate Jesus, visibly present in the fire with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego. God was there in the furnace, miraculously rescuing them from the flames.

I'm going to make a couple of observations about what's going on here.

First, remember the rhetorical question the king asked these three, the one he asked as if he knew the answer, ***[15b] "what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?"***

That question was a Babylonian slap in God's face. It was the king saying, *"I can. YOU can't."* To which God replied by this amazing miracle, *"No, I can. You can't."*

God contradicted Nebuchadnezzar's assumption. There WAS a God who could deliver these three Jews. And the king was also delivered from his too-small understanding of God and from his too-large understanding of himself.

God was showing His power to an arrogant king so as to teach him the first law of the universe: THERE IS A GOD, AND IT'S NOT YOU.

All of this was a mercy to the king. It is mercy when God opens our eyes to see our place in the world and to see His own sovereignty, and this is something we'll see much more of next Sunday.

Second, God was with the three Jewish young men in the fire.

God was in their hearts when they were the last men standing on the plain of Dura. He was present with them when they assured the king, "No, we won't bow."

And in the one place where the king believed God couldn't be with them, He was with them. In the superheated furnace.

Psalm 139 assured the Jews that no matter where they went - highest heaven or depths of Sheol - God was with them. We who have believed in Jesus have promises in the New Testament that God will never abandon us (Hebrews 13:5)

That's truth to treasure when you're in the fire.

Today, when Jesus-followers are in the furnace of persecution, they cling to the knowledge that God is with them. It strengthens them.

Petr Jasek (from the Czech Republic), was serving with Voice of the Martyrs in Sudan in 2016 when he was arrested, falsely charged with being a spy, and imprisoned for 445 days.

His cellmates, some of whom were members of ISIS, mocked him and beat him mercilessly. But Petr, knowing that God was with him, shared the Gospel with his cellmates and saw some of them come to faith in Jesus.

His story is an inspiring testimony to the power of God's presence when the fire of persecution rages.

And when we suffer in any of the ways that we might suffer in this world, we who believe in Jesus cherish God's presence. We trust

that He is with us in the deepest valleys and even in the dark nights of the soul when we may or may not palpably experience that presence.

But, as God didn't abandon His children in Nebuchadnezzar's furnace, He won't ever abandon us, either.

As the king took in the whole scene, he did what kings do. He gave a command. This time, it was a soft command.

*The king calls the three Jews out of the furnace (vv. 26-27)*

The three obediently exit the furnace (v. 26)

***[26] Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the furnace of blazing fire; he said, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, come out, you servants of the Most High God, and come here!"***

Of course, they were more than happy to obey. In fact, they were ALWAYS happy to obey the king - as long as obeying him didn't violate their conviction to obey God's command.

The condition of the three (v. 27)

***[27] The satraps, the prefects, the governors and the king's counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had no effect on the bodies of these men, nor was the hair of their heads singed, nor were their trousers damaged, nor had even the smell of fire touched them.***

These three Jews hadn't "just barely" survived a harrowing ordeal. They didn't even smell smoky. They hadn't suffered third, second, or even first-degree burns.

The only evidence that they had been in the fire at all was that the ropes that had bound them had been burnt away.<sup>7</sup>

As our chapter ends, we see growth in the soul of the King of Babylon.

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<sup>7</sup> See Isaiah 43:1-2.

- In Daniel, chapter 1, Nebuchadnezzar was so impressed with the God these Jews served that he allowed them to not eat foods that would violate that God's commands (1:14-16).
- In the second chapter, after Daniel revealed and interpreted the king's dream, he declared that their God was a **[2:47] "a God of gods and a lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries."**

Here, his recognition of God's greatness takes another huge step as he blessed the one, true God.

### **Postlude: Nebuchadnezzar Blesses God (vv. 28-30)**

***[28] Nebuchadnezzar responded and said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, who has sent His angel and rescued His servants who put their trust in Him, violating the king's command, and surrendered their bodies rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. [29] Therefore I make a decree that any people, nation or population of any language that speaks anything offensive against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego shall be torn limb from limb and their houses made a rubbish heap, because there is no other god who is able to save in this way."***

### **Conclusion:**

When these three Jewish young men stood up when they were told to bow down, they were doing something *other than* rebelling against a king. They were pointing the way to life.

Their act of standing shouted to all those who were gathered on the plain of Dura, *"God alone is worthy of worship. Life is to be found only in Him."*

And I wonder how many Babylonians on that day saw that all that glitters isn't gold? How many of them turned to the one, true God and believed in Him, not that tall, shiny, dead image in front of them - thanks to three Jews who didn't bow?

This is why we stand for our conviction to live for Jesus, even when they don't conform to our culture. This is why we are willing to

go counter cultural. By leading a distinctively Jesus-centered life, we let our friends and neighbors see that life is to be found in Jesus.

We talk about Him a lot, are all wrapped up in Him, give Him first place in everything, pray, serve, give, love, and show compassion.

How many, today, will see you refuse to bow to the glittering objects and values of our culture, will see you embrace the ways of Jesus, and will see by your words and life that there is a better way?

I believe that there will be people who will see your conviction to live for Jesus as a loving invitation to life, eternal and abundant.

Let's all decide in advance to lovingly stand firm in our convictions, and to honor God, come what may.

The light we shine by the loving courage of our convictions will honor God and bless the people in our Doubtland.