

Babylonian Idol Daniel 3

Well friends, the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and the fiery furnace is certainly timely as Remembrance Day is just around the corner and we take time to honor the sacrifice of those who put their lives on the line for the freedom that we have in Canada which allows us to openly worship Jesus Christ without fear of religious persecution.

And while Remembrance Day honors our veterans and those who have served in all sorts of military conflicts both past and present, for me personally it is most poignantly connected to WWII.

And you can't reflect on the Second World War, and everything that went on during that conflict without remembering the Holocaust and all the atrocities which the Nazis committed against the Jewish people... and in our story today we can see one of the first examples of this sort of religious persecution against the Jews – albeit on a much smaller scale.

Last week in chapter one, we saw how Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego graduated with honors into the King's service.

We've skipped over chapter two where Daniel interprets a dream for the King and as a reward the King grants Daniel's request to appoint his three friends as administrators over the province of Babylon.

And that bring us to our story today where Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego have been promoted and are working in the province of Babylon and a result their Babylonian counterparts – the astrologers - are green with envy, and bitter and resentful about how these three foreigners have taken what should rightfully be theirs.

But - what to do about it? They can't go and outright complain to the King, that would be too obvious and the King might suspect that they want those positions of power for their own advantage and not his...

However, the astrologers come across an unexpected opportunity in the midst of King Nebuchadnezzar's dedication of his golden statue. They notice that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego have not participated in the ceremony as required and so they quickly bring this issue before the King.

So the stage has set for a showdown - which if all goes according to plan... will result in the destruction of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and the astrologers being promoted instead.

So let's take a closer look at what has happened here and why it is significant... because it's going to help us understand what Christ wants to say to us through this story - and what we learn that can be applied to our lives today.

So we can start with "why?" Why build a statue, why get everyone together and have them bow down in front of it when they hear the music? Well here's the background info that you need to know.

One of the strengths of the Babylonian Empire was their ability to utilize the existing bureaucratic infrastructure of a conquered nation to govern those people for the interests of the Empire – often using local officials who wanted the power and opportunity to rule - this is partly what helped King Nebuchadnezzar create the largest empire the middle east had seen to date.

But, that strength was also be a weakness – this administrative strategy made empire vulnerable and dependent upon the fickle loyalty and allegiance of the local officials who could at any moment decide to rebel and declare independence from the empire. Such a scenario had played out in the province of Judah just a few years after Daniel and his friends were taken off to Babylon.

After his initial conquest King Nebuchadnezzar had left Zedekiah, a vassal king, in charge of Judah – ruling in Jerusalem.

But after a few years had gone by, with King Nebuchadnezzar so far away - Zedekiah began to see himself as a ruler in his own right and he began to plot rebellion against Babylon and made a secret alliance with Egypt in case he needed help.

But Nebuchadnezzar found out about this rebellion and brought his whole army down to Judah – besieged the city of Jerusalem and destroyed it, and burned down the Temple and captured his rebellious vassal King Zedekiah, and made him watch as his sons were executed, then his eyes were put out so that his sons’ deaths were the last things he ever saw, and then he was taken away in chains to a dungeon in Babylon...

and you can bet that the cellphone video footage of this event went viral on Utube and Facebook, so that by the next morning - all the leaders and officials in the other provinces could see what happens to those rulers who are disloyal to their High King Nebuchadnezzar.

Because if all the provincial rulers, like Zedekiah, decided to rebel all at once – King Nebuchadnezzar would be faced with

the disintegration of his empire and it would be an extremely difficult if not impossible situation to recover from.

So it was very important for the King to ensure that all of his officials and nobles and rulers were “encouraged” to stay loyal and govern their territories with his interests in mind.

That’s why King Nebuchadnezzar has built this impressive golden statue – nine feet wide and ninety feet tall! It is a symbol of the power and superiority of his Empire and the authority of his rule, and it represents the glory and supremacy of the Babylonian culture, customs, and religion.

And he places this impressive monument on the plains of Dura, just outside of the city of Babylon – where it thrusts upward from the flat landscape, reminding all for miles around of the glory of the empire.

And then he summons all of his officials and rulers – commanding them to make their way to the capital city of Babylon. Many of them would be making the trip for the first

time and they would see this golden monument blazing in the sun as they approach the center of the empire's power – where Nebuchadnezzar's reigned.

And not only would they be sufficiently impressed with his golden statue, remember that ancient Babylon also contained one of the seven wonders of the ancient world - the famous hanging gardens of Babylon.

These provincial rulers from lesser cultures and civilizations that Nebuchadnezzar had conquered would come and see just how great and mighty Babylon was and then the King planned to have them all "literally" bow before his power and might and superiority.

And we're not talking about a simple polite bow or a curtsy or a nod, there's a particular word used in this story for this action the King had in mind, its "*cegid*" and while we translate it as worship, it really means to do obeisance by prostrating oneself on the ground.

Prostrating yourself is where you get down on your knees and put your face to the ground with your arms out in front of you, practically lying down in front of someone you wish to acknowledge as your superior and to whom you will submit.

So the King intends to have every ruler of any sort in the empire – the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces – everyone and anyone who holds office of some sort must bow in this manner to his statue and thus confess Nebuchadnezzar's power and superiority and their submission to his rule, and this will help ensure their loyalty to him.

And anyone who refuses will be burned alive in the nearby furnace that was used in the construction of the statue.

So, everything goes off smoothly according to plan – all the officials come and assemble and they are given their instructions and the music plays and everyone grovels in the

dirt in front of the statue proclaiming that Nebuchadnezzar is king of kings and lord of lords.

Everyone that is except for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who quietly stay away from this ceremony, and they would have gotten away with it to... if it hadn't been for those pesky astrologers and their jealous ambitions.

So, why did Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego not participate in this ceremony?

Well friends - these three men had no qualms about serving King Nebuchadnezzar and the empire with honesty and integrity and loyalty but only because they knew that Yahweh wanted them to.

They knew that Yahweh had raised Nebuchadnezzar up to accomplish His divine purposes in the lives of His chosen people – and so they served the King because it was part of God's plan.

So why not bow to the statue since God wanted them to serve the empire?

And don't be so quick to point out that it was wrong because it was idol worship – could they not have been bowing down to the idol but for them, in their hearts they would really be acknowledging Yahweh... because that's essentially what took place during their training.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had received training in occult-type skills of divination, astrology, reading omens and such – things that Israelites were normally forbidden to do – yet the vegetable test proved to them that Yahweh was with them and blessing them that He was the source of the knowledge and revelation they gained through practicing these occult arts.

So what would be the big deal with bowing down to a statue?

The problem was that the glory and honor would be going to the wrong person.

You see, even though God permitted these three men to dabble in occult arts – it was for the purpose of glorifying His own nation among nations which had not previously known him.

Daniel and his friends are recognized as the wisest and most skilled advisors in the kingdom – but they never take any credit for it themselves, they always publically give credit to Yahweh the Creator of Heaven and Earth, the God above all gods.

That's why Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego cannot bow and submit to someone or something that does not acknowledge the true source of the majesty, power and might of Babylonian Empire – even at the cost of their own lives, and we know how the story goes from there...

So, having explored this background material a bit more enables us to take the main point of the story about not bowing down to anything other than Yahweh, and apply it more precisely in our own day and age.

In our current multi-cultural, multi-faith society in Canada it is now entirely possible that we may find ourselves in a situation or place where we are being asked to make a gesture of respect to a statue of the Buddha, or some Hindu gods, or do something that venerates the prophet Mohammed...

Friends, as followers of Jesus Christ we will have to politely refrain and gently explain that for us to do so would bring offense to our Lord and would be considered disloyal, and we will have to trust in Christ to be with us in whatever consequences may come.

However - what's more likely to happen, and is probably happening already, is that your day to day conversation with co-workers, friends, or family statements are made about life and what it's all about and how it works... and you have an opportunity to respond to these statements, but first make sure you listen to what's actually said.

Because friends – the heart of idolatry is revealed in our words, King Nebuchadnezzar unashamedly reveals the idolatry

behind his commands when he says *“But if you do not bow down to the statue, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?”*

Did you catch that? *“What god will be able to rescue you from my hand?”* It’s at this point where Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego speak up and respectfully counter the King’s idolatry.

And friends we need to realize that in our conversation with other, when we hear idolatry and refrain from speaking up to respectfully counter it – in essence we are tacitly bowing down to it.

So when someone says something to you like *“well the universe must trying to be say something here”* I hope we catch the idolatry in that... and we ought to say a quick prayer for the Holy Spirit to give us the right words to respond so that the right person - Jesus Christ – gets the glory.

Maybe something like *“maybe not the universe, but probably the Lord of the universe wants to say something...”*

Or I’m sure you’ve had a conversation with something about *“karma and what goes around comes around”* and that statement is just hanging there waiting for you to respond, so instead of just being quiet or saying *“yeah – I guess so”* pray for the Spirit to give you the right words to counter this idolatry.

Karma doesn’t pay anything back – scripture teaches us the Lord says *“vengeance is mine I will repay”* (Romans 12:19)

So listen carefully to what is being said to you in conversation friends – don’t be out to pick fights over words - but do speak up when you hear idolatry. Don’t just tacitly bow down to it by letting it pass by and saying *“yeah –I guess”*

We would never do this in conversation for a statement that was racist or anti-Semitic... and it’s even more important with regards to idolatry because it reinforces what we personally

believe about who is ultimately Lord and ruler over all – it strengthens your belief.

And finally friends – the story of the fiery furnace teaches us to pay attention to the “ultimates”

Idolatry is about the “ultimates” in life and King Nebuchadnezzar’s statue was ultimately about who was responsible for the power and might and success of Babylon. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego recognized that if it didn’t ultimately point to Yahweh – then it was idolatry and they weren’t bowing down to it.

So friends – you need to examine the “ultimates” in your life as well. Who or what is ultimately responsible for your success, for your blessings, even for your trials and failures – who or what is ultimately in control of your life? Who or what do you ultimately bow down and submit to?

Are we building our own little empires, and erecting our own golden statues which we want others to see and admire, or

are our lives a testimony to point to who is ultimately in control of this world?

Friends I can’t answer those questions for you – that’s for you and the Holy Spirit to sort out later today and throughout the rest of this week.

But I can tell you this friends – if you don’t know who, or if you are uncertain about who is ultimate in your life... then please let me speak up and tell you the good news

That the God who ultimately stepped in and saved Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego has also stepped in to ultimately save us.

And instead of a golden monument ninety feet high representing all the power and glory and majesty of his Kingdom – He became one of us, born as a helpless baby in a dirty stable to an unwed mother...

And so the apostle Paul writes *“And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, (ultimates!!!) that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow... (Phil 2:8-10)*

Friends you don't have to be uncertain about who is ultimate in your life - the truth is that Jesus Christ is Lord of the Universe, He has conquered death – so that no matter what happens to us in this life – we will be with him in the next – Jesus Christ is the ultimate friends and this morning you can bow to him and acknowledge Him as King of kings and Lord of Lords – and most importantly Lord of your life.

So I want to invite you to pray with me friends – sing the words of the song “we bow down” as your acknowledgement of Jesus' Lordship over your life this morning.

And we sing “we bow down” don't just say it – do it... Do something, some sort of physical gesture that shows Jesus He is your lord.

Because friends, in the end - when you've experienced the joy and peace and love that comes from bowing down to our Lord Jesus – you won't want to bow to anything or anyone else!

Let's pray...

“we bow down, we lay our crowns at the feet of Jesus, the greatness of his mercy and love at the feet of Jesus and we cry holy holy holy, we cry holy holy holy, we cry holy holy holy is the Lamb”