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## Worshipping the Wrong God

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### **Daniel 3:19-25**

Then Nebuchadnezzar was full of fury, and the expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was wont to be heated. And he ordered certain mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. Then these men were bound in their mantles, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments, and they were cast into the burning fiery furnace. Because the king's order was strict and the furnace very hot, the flame of the fire slew those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Then these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace.

Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He said to his counselors, "Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?" They answered the king, "True, O King." He answered, "But I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods."

**T**his is one of those Bible stories that almost everyone knows. It's about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and the fiery furnace. If you want to read the whole story for yourself, it is in the entire third chapter of the Old Testament book of Daniel.

When you remember this story, you probably remember the fiery furnace most of all. We all know something about the death and destruction in fiery furnaces.

We witnessed such a conflagration several years ago down in a field outside of Waco, Texas, when the Branch Dividian followers of David Koresh went up in flames. We witnessed another scene of death and destruction four years ago when the followers of Al-Qaeda flew hijacked airplanes into the Twin Towers.

We sat in front of our televisions and could only imagine the horror as we watched the steel melt and the buildings fall. We could only imagine the pain and the panic as so many innocents lost their lives.

Those two acts have more in common with the scripture story in Daniel than just a fiery furnace. Because all three are about people choosing to worship the wrong God.

There's always a danger inherent when you choose a God, because you just might be choosing the wrong one.

There are always going to be lonely and searching people.

There are always going to be vulnerable and susceptible people.

There are always going to be gullible and desperate people.

And out of their needs and fears, they're often willing to follow false prophets and eager to worship the wrong God.

At the beginning of Daniel's story, it looked like everybody had chosen the right God. Everybody agreed. The king's God was the one. Everybody bowed down and paid homage to that God. Everybody but Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They refused to worship that God, and everybody else thought they were wrong.

The story starts out just after King Nebuchadnezzar, the all-powerful and mighty king of Babylon, had won a major military victory over his enemies. In the king's mind, that victory proved that his God was the right God.

In order to celebrate his victory, the king built a statue of his favorite God. The statue was sixty cubits tall. That's about 90 feet tall. It would be about as tall as the senior citizens' apartment building on Main Street in Tonawanda. The king had his God-statue gilded in pure gold. In front of the statue he put a huge altar where his priests would sacrifice animals to his favorite deity.

When the God-statue was completed, the king ordered a major celebration. He declared it a national holiday. He closed all the

government offices. He ordered every government employee to attend. So, everyone was there: the king and his queen, the princes, the governors, the senators, the congressmen, the heads of the army and navy, and every single civil service employee. They were all commanded to be there. Everyone else came, too: the bankers and the shopkeepers, the teachers and the school children, the laborers and their wives. Everybody in Babylon was there.

The king was so impressed with the turn-out,  
 so proud of his victory,  
 so pleased with his statue,  
 so sure of his choice of Gods,  
 that he made a surprising announcement.

He said, “As soon as the band starts playing, everybody has got to get down on his or her knees and worship my God.” [Daniel 3:4-5]

Everybody there thought that was a good idea. After all, they agreed with the king - that 90-foot-tall God statue was indeed the right God. They were absolutely ready and willing to choose to worship that God.

Then, the king made an even more surprising announcement. “If you don’t,” the king commanded, “you will immediately be thrown alive into a burning fiery furnace.” [Daniel 3:6]

It was a threat nobody needed to hear because they had already chosen to worship the God. Nevertheless, as soon as the music started playing, everybody was quick to fall down on his knees. I suspect the more pious folk in the crowd prostrated themselves on the ground.

Everybody in the crowd got down: the queen and the princes, the senators and the congressmen, the governors and the generals, the shopkeepers and the housewives. They all got down.

Except for three men: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They were three civil service employees. They worked for the king in one of his administrative palaces. They were loyal citizens. However, they also happened to be Jews.

“We won’t do it,” they said, “we won’t worship the wrong God.” [Daniel 3:16-18]

I can just imagine the scene. At their refusal, the crowd let out an audible moan of disbelief. Those closest to the three slowly backed away

to keep their distance. The band stopped playing. The priests stopped praying. The smiles of adoration turned into frowns of anger.

How dare they refuse the king?

How dare they disobey the rules?

How dare they ruin the celebration?

How dare they stand when everybody else bowed down?

How dare they choose another God?

It wasn't right.

Those three fellows were wrong.

Those three were foolish.

Those three were in terrible trouble.

The king was shocked. He knew those three men. He liked them. They were good workers and good citizens. So, he gave them another chance to worship his God. He even reminded them of the consequences if they refused. [Daniel 3:13-15]

And for a second time, they refused to worship the wrong God. The king flew into a furious rage. He ordered the furnace to be heated up. In fact, he ordered the furnace to be heated up seven times more than it was usually heated. [Daniel 3:19]

Now you need to know something about the Bible. When numbers are used like that (seven times hotter), don't try to multiply hot by seven times. You can't do it.

In the Bible, some numbers mean something else. In this particular instance, the number seven carries the connotation of perfection. It means perfectly hot. It means the hottest anything could ever be. It means there never was before and would never be after, a fire hotter than King Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace. If you could ask the king, he would tell you that even the fires of hell could not be hotter.

You know how hot is hot. You've probably used your oven at home and felt the heat singe your face at a mere 400 degrees. Down in Waco, Texas, the police estimated that that fire reached 2,000 degrees. When the Twin Towers burned, the fire was so hot the structural steel of the buildings turned to liquid. Scientists will tell you when a fire is that hot, death is instantaneous. Some will even tell you that some of the human bodies are completely consumed. Nothing is left to bury.

According to King Nebuchadnezzar, his fiery furnace was at least that hot. The story tells you about the soldiers who tied up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The story says that when the soldiers took them and threw them into the furnace, the fire was so hot that the soldiers burned to death. They just got close to the furnace, and they were consumed. [Daniel 3:22]

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego should have died immediately. Their bodies should have been completely consumed. However, when the king looked into the furnace, he saw those three men, walking around in the fire, unharmed. With them was a fourth man. The king said that fourth man looked like the son of God. [Daniel 3:25]

They said their God would deliver them [Daniel 3:17], and He did!

It made the king wonder: who was worshipping the wrong God after all?

Today, in this fast-paced and fragmented world, with war, destruction, and hatred all around; many people feel lonely and isolated. They're searching for answers, and they're seeking some guarantee for tomorrow. Some people grow so afraid of the world that they wall themselves off in some compound of their own making.

They separate themselves from people who are different.

They seek out people who think, and look, and act the way they do.

They stay with people who believe the way they believe.

And in their desperation to find such an enclave, they willingly follow any one who will promise them a better tomorrow.

Out of their fears and insecurity, they follow false prophets and fall down on their knees to worship the wrong God.

There is comfort found in huddling together in a small community of like-minded folks. There is security delivered in being counted among the true believers. There is promise fulfilled when hiding behind self-built walls that separate one from and shut out the rest of the world.

Oh, yes, there is nothing like being a true believer, sure in one's choice of God. But you've got to make sure you're not worshipping the wrong God.

Look at what Jesus had to say about that. He made it plain. The last thing He said to His disciples before He ascended to heaven was, "*Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations...*" [Matthew 28:19]

He didn't say they should be sheltered from the world.

He didn't say they should be separated from society.

He didn't say they should band together and turn their backs on everyone else.

Jesus told His disciples to go out into the world, to live among all those others who were worshipping the wrong God. He wanted them to tell the good news. He wanted them to bring about change. He wanted them to baptized everyone in His name and teach them to worship the right God.

Jesus knew their lives would be difficult.

He knew some would be stoned and killed,  
 some would be destitute and afflicted with disease,  
 some would wander the deserts and climb the  
 mountains,

some would face trials and tribulations.

He knew there was no cheap and easy way to be a Christian.

What do you know about being a Christian?

I'll bet you know:

- it takes courage to be different,
- you can't be just like everyone else,
- you can't just give-in and follow the crowd.

You know that being a Christian makes you different from everybody else. But being different doesn't mean pulling away. It means staying right there in society and working to build bridges that bring people together.

Worshipping the right God doesn't build an armed compound on a field in Texas.

Worshipping the right God doesn't hijack air planes and crash them into city towers.

Worshipping the right God doesn't tell you to kill and burn.

Worshipping the right God calls you to love: not just the people who are like you, but to love people who are different, too.

Worshipping the right God calls you to have enough courage to reach out to the ugly and the diseased, the stranger and the enemy, the outcast and defeated.

Do you have the courage it takes to worship the right God? The Apostle Paul wrote, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do

what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” [Romans 7:15] If being a Christian, if following a different path, if worshipping the right God were easy; you’d do it all the time. But, it’s hard work. It’s also a habit you have to develop.

Daniel was in the habit of getting down on his knees three times every day, looking out through an open window facing far off Jerusalem, and praying. [Daniel 6:10]

Jesus Christ was in the habit of going to the synagogue every Lord’s day to pray and worship God. [Luke 4:16]

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were in the habit of worshipping the one, true God their whole lives. [Daniel 3:16-18] And they kept to their habit even in the face of an angry king and the presence of a fiery furnace.

What kind of habit are you in?

It is easier to join some cult in Texas. It is easier to follow the Taliban. It is easier to obey Al-Qaeda. It is always easier to worship the wrong God!

But when you get in the habit of worshipping the one, true God; the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; the God of Jesus Christ; the God of the Apostle Paul - then, you will gain the courage you need to face your own fiery furnaces.

When the day comes that you need it, it would be a disaster to discover that you don’t have enough spiritual currency in your soul. You can’t spend what you don’t have.

When some earthly king orders you to worship his pagan God,  
and you don’t have enough moral courage  
to stand tall and refuse -

- the only thing left to do

is fall down on your knees,

like most of the people around you,

and worship the wrong God.

Jesus Christ calls you to stand tall and go out into the world to share His good news!

And when you go, don’t be afraid to be different.

Don’t give-in to some temporal king’s orders.

Don’t follow any false prophet.

Don’t cut yourself off from the world.

Don't bend you knees to the cheapest price,  
or the easiest solution,  
or the most expedient action.

Have the courage you need -

- to trust your savior,
- to follow His lead,
- and to worship the right God.