

On May 21st, 1980, 20th Century Fox released the second film of an epic trilogy—can anyone tell me the name of the movie? **The Empire Strikes Back.**

In the first movie, *Star Wars*, we are thrust into a space-aged universe, containing many planets and people groups. The many planets and peoples are languishing under the oppressive rule of the Empire, none can stand against it—that is, except for the “Rebel” Alliance .

This group of freedom fighters refuse to bow the knee, instead, they shake a fist in the face of the Empire’s cruelty, oppression, and injustice. For Empires to retain power, they don’t need to destroy every freedom fighter, what they need to destroy is hope. Empires use power to crush hope, which in turn crushes rebellion before it begins. When resistance appears futile, the Empire has done 90% of the work to retain power.

But what we find in Han Solo, Chewbacca, Princess Leah, and Luke Skywalker is an unshakeable hope—they aren’t afraid to die in the cause of something greater than themselves. By the end of the 1st movie, their activity has demanded the attention of the Empire; in the second movie, the Empire Strikes Back. That brings me to Daniel chapter 3.

The last three weeks, I have been preaching through the book of Daniel—we’ve been looking at how he and his friends remained faithful to God while living in a land that did not know, nor honour, God. I’ve been suggesting that as followers of Jesus, we too are living in exile—by and large, God is neither known, nor honoured, in our West Coast culture. What that means is the call to remain true to

Jesus will set us apart—at numerous points, we will think, desire, speak, and act differently than the culture around us. Through us, Jesus intends to offer North Shore residents a radical alternative to the life they are living.

We tend to think of our lives as being independent and autonomous—you live your life, your way, and I’ll live my life, my way. But every Empire—no matter how invincible it appears—has a way of life that is constantly under threat. Any allegiance to a higher authority is perceived as a threat—such an allegiance betrays the obedience (conformity) the Empire demands. Such threats must be eliminated—the Empire will strike back.

In chapter 3, Daniel’s three friends choose allegiance to God over allegiance to the Empire, and the Empire strikes back with the threat of death. What will our three exiles do? Will they stand firm? Will they cave to the Empire’s demands? What will God do?

If you have your Bibles, I’d like to encourage you to turn with me to Daniel 3. **Read.**

“King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, [90 feet high and 9 feet wide], and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. 2 He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. 3 So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it.

4 Then the herald loudly proclaimed, “Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: 5 As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. 6 Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.

7 Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the nations and peoples of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.”

The king constructed an idol of gold which stood 90 feet tall and 9 feet wide. This impressive idol was accompanied by an impressive gathering—the leaders of his realm, people from every nation and language, assembled before him.

There is a curious feature of this text—one that modern readers may perceive as unnecessary—I’m talking about the detailed repetition found in vs 2-3, and 5, 7, This repetition underscores something important, namely, that Nebuchadnezzar’s power is absolute. What he commands, down to the very last detail, comes to pass. When he commands the satraps, prefects, and governors to come, they come. When he commands the horn, flute, and zither to play, they are played. When he commands all people to fall down and worship, they worship—no one refuses him. Well, almost no one.

After the event, a few officials come to inform Nebuchadnezzar that three of his leaders refused to fall down and worship. Verse 9, “*May the king live forever! Your Majesty has issued a decree...But there*

*are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up.”*¹

Verse 13-15, “*Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, “Is it true...that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?”*

Two things are clear to me at this point: first, Nebuchadnezzar is not used to having people refuse him; and second, Nebuchadnezzar has not yet learned the limits of his power. Let’s keep reading.

Verse 16, “*Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. 17 If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. 18 But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”*

“We do not need to defend ourselves.” Is it just me or was this was the perfect time to defend themselves? They could have pointed out

¹ Daniel 3:9, 10, 12.

their usefulness to the king—remember, God had given them wisdom that was superior to all of the advisors in the kingdom. Instead, they don't waste words that will not be received.

Perhaps this was their way of saying, “King, you won't understand even if we explain”. You see, apart from the threat of death, Nebuchadnezzar's command wasn't particularly onerous or offensive. In a culture that believed in many gods, bowing down to the king's idol wasn't really a big deal—*just bow down and everything will go back to normal.*

But here's the problem, the king's demand directly contravened the first two of the Ten Commandments: “*You shall have no other gods before me.*” And, “*You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.*”²

Let's play the “**what if**” game for a few moments. *What if* Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego bowed down but kept their fingers crossed behind their backs? Would it really count as worship? *What if* they bowed down but asked God for forgiveness later? After all, God is forgiving. Or, *what* did it really matter *if* they bowed down? There's only one God and Nebuchadnezzar's idol was just a lump of gold.

This was a defining moment, and not just for the exiles—it was a defining moment for king and country. It was a test for the exiles, but it was much more than a test. God sovereignly orchestrated events so that at this moment, before the king of kings, three exiles might demonstrate God's ability to intervene in human history. If they had

bowed down, this moment would have been lost—their faithfulness created the environment for God's glory to be revealed. The same is true for us—our faithfulness creates environments for God's glory to be revealed.

The king's mind was made up—bow down or burn. (1) They knew they could sell out and save their lives by bowing down. (2) They knew a refusal would mean certain death. (3) They knew that despite Nebuchadnezzar's conviction, their lives were in God's hand. (4) They knew that God could save them. (5) They knew there is a difference between what God can do and what He will do—**but even if He does not rescue us, we will not serve your gods.**

Predictably, their response infuriates the king. They claim allegiance to One who is higher than Nebuchadnezzar, and this claim—in every Empire—is both offensive and threatening. Nebuchadnezzar ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual, and the three bound exiles were pushed into the flames.

But something remarkable happened—a miracle of addition—three became four. Verse 25, “[Nebuchadnezzar] said, ‘*Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.*’” Many have asked, “who is the 4th person?” Some have suggested an angel, some suggest the pre-incarnate Christ, but the text doesn't answer our question. What we do know is that this 4th person is a visible sign that God is with them—the fire doesn't singe a single hair on their heads.

² Exodus 20:3-5.

Once again, faithful living created the environment where God revealed Himself to king and country. And once again the king responds, “*Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king’s command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way.*”

In the time remaining, I want to move into an application of the text, and I want to frame my application around the following three questions: (1) *who will you worship?*; (2) *who stands with you?*; and, (3) *where is your hope?*

1. Who will you worship? I want to talk for a few moments about idols and allegiance. In current West Coast culture, there is very little danger of anyone constructing an idol and demanding that we bow down to it, on pain of death. Idolatry today is more subtle, more difficult to diagnose, and even harder to stamp out. Tim Keller writes, “Anything can serve as a counterfeit god, especially the best things in life... The greater the good, the more likely we are to expect that it can satisfy our deepest needs and hopes... What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.”³

³ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, Introduction, xviii.

⁴ Tremper Longman, *The NIV Application Commentary: Daniel*, 110.

You can make an idol out of your relationships. If you are looking to your friends, your spouse, to a boyfriend or girlfriend, to your kids, or your pastor to meet your deepest needs, you may have an idol in your heart. One of my uncles once said, “I don’t need God—*my family is my god.*” Better than most, my uncle understands what an idol is. If you have set your significance or security upon making the team, or your next degree, or getting a promotion at work, or on a shiny new car—whether you know it or not—you are bowing down in worship.

West Coast culture may sneer at our belief in God, but many people have simply replaced the traditional notion of God with a replacement god—the god of self.⁴ Making a god of self leads predictably to self-worship. Self-worship leads to the insistence that my needs, my rights, my preferences must reign supreme. And so the great danger, of course, is anyone or anything that threatens my needs, rights, and preferences.

Is it any wonder then, that the Christian notion of “truth,” “right,” and “wrong” flies in the face of West Coast Culture? Is it any wonder that the Christian notion of marriage and sexuality is considered offensive and oppressive? Anyone that threatens the freedom of the self is a threat to Western Culture—the Empire will strike back; the threat must be marginalized or eliminated.

Back to the question—*who will you worship?* Who or what are you trusting to satisfy your deepest needs and desires? Is it Jesus, or something else?

My dear people, we have been called, we have been consecrated—that is, we have been set apart by Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, that we might live for God the Father. We are His very own possession. Our faithfulness honours Him, but more, it creates the environment for God's character, His purposes, and His glory to be revealed in our city. *Who will you worship?* Question 2...

2. Who stands with you? In the fiery furnace the king saw a miracle of addition—three became four. Some of God's best miracles are the ones He repeats over and over again—the miracle of addition, the miracle of His presence in our lives.

Sometimes our obedience to God brings us into conflict with our culture, and Daniel 3 reminds us that God's presence doesn't shield us from the experience of suffering. More often than not, we don't see what God is doing—not in us, not through us, not around us, not in difficulty, not in our pain. But our inability to see does not mean God is absent. If Daniel 2 reminds us that God holds the future, then Daniel 3 reminds us that God intervenes in human history—we are not on our own.

We find the strength and courage to remain true in the fire, in Jesus Himself. God could have saved the three friends from the flames but He chose instead to preserve them in the flames—God walks among us in the place of pain and persecution.

A number of you have shared your own painful stories with me—there has been a price for remaining true to Jesus. For some it has been family members who make fun of your faith, or, disowned you. For others, it has been friends pulling away, or being left out of social functions at work, or being labelled as weak-minded, brainwashed, and judgmental.

It's painful, I know. Every time I meet someone new and they ask me what I do for work, I wonder if I will be rejected the moment I tell them I'm a pastor. I wonder some times, will my job, will my faith in Jesus, make things difficult for my kids at school? I wonder, will some parents keep their kids from visiting our home? I could never be ashamed of Jesus, not after all He has done for me, but it hurts when I feel the sting of ridicule and contempt. *Who stands with me?* Jesus—in Him I, and we, we find the strength and courage to stand.

As things "heat up" in our culture, and it becomes more costly to follow Jesus, there is also a growing need for the church to stand together. This too is the miracle of addition—we are not alone, so don't try to go it alone.

The practice of community is one of the most important spiritual practices of our time. At a time where individualism and autonomy rules, more than ever, we need to gather together, to encourage one another, to pray for one another, to share one another's burdens. We need to develop a herd mentality—we are in it together, we are stronger together. We need to see ourselves like live coals in a fire, when we remove ourselves from the community of God's people, the coal predictably grows cold—we need each other in order to remain true to Jesus.

Let me ask you, *do you have a community that is standing with you?* Perhaps it's time to get connected to one of our small groups. Let's move on to our final question...

3. Where is your hope? Lewis Smedes, in a little book entitled "*Standing on the Promises*," argues that the vast majority of our hopes are little more than "*preference hopes*". We hope it won't rain, we hope we will get a raise at work, we hope the Canucks will win the Stanley Cup. If these hopes don't come to pass, we may be disappointed but our lives aren't seriously affected.

We also carry what Smedes calls "*vital hopes*." These are the hopes that promise to bring us serious benefits—if they come true—and serious loss if they don't. We know a hope is vital when we come to believe that the thing desired is vital to our well being. For example, I hope my wife and I have a long, deep, marriage. Or, I hope I can maintain my health, I hope I can pay the bills, I hope, etc.

Many of us have vital hopes, things we are working for, and maybe even praying for—*God if You would grant me this outcome then I could be happy, healthy, joyful*. In this life that we live, all of us are faced with a critical question: *how will we respond when our vital hopes are dashed?*

Smedes writes, "When we hope for something that we want more than anything in the world and that something is taken away from us, we need a third kind of hope"—Smedes calls it a "*fall back hope*."

This is not a plan "B" kind of hope— it's a hope that supports all of our vital hopes and still survives when those hopes are dashed. It's that move of heart where we no longer hope for **something**

particular, but we hope in **Someone** particular. It is that move where hope becomes trust.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stood bound in the presence of the king—in one sense, their lives were in his hand. But in another sense, these three were free because their faith wasn't tied to being rescued, it was tied to a deeper trust in God's purpose and goodness. *Our God can deliver us, but even if He does not, our hope is in Him.*

This kind of faith makes us dangerous in every Empire. Why? Because the greatest weapon any Empire holds over its citizens is the threat of death—if you do not comply, we will demand your life. But those who know God, those who know where all of history is headed, know that beyond this life, there is a life with God that has no end. When the Empire demands our life, we can stand and say—*do your worst, take my life—it will not be the end for me.*

Where is your hope today? Is it in a particular outcome, or, is it grounded in the unshakeable reality of Jesus Christ?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer—Christian theologian and pastor—was arrested by the Nazis for his part in a plot to overthrow Hitler. Just days before the Allies won the war, Bonhoeffer was executed. Just a few years earlier, Bonhoeffer preached a sermon in London, reflecting on the hope that is ours in Christ.

He said, "No one has yet believed in God...no one has yet heard about the realm of the resurrected, and not been homesick from that hour, waiting and looking forward to being [with God]... Whether we are young or old makes no difference. What are twenty or thirty or fifty years in the sight of God? And which of us knows how near he

or she may already be to the goal? Life only really begins when it ends here on earth...all that is here is only the prologue before the curtain goes up”.

He continues, “Who knows whether, in our human fear and anguish we are only shivering and shuddering at the most glorious, heavenly, blessed event in the world?” “Death is not wild and terrible...Death is grace, the greatest gift of grace that God gives to people who believe in him. Death...beckons to us with heavenly power, if only we realize that it is the gateway to our homeland”.

All things are subject to God. All Empires, all rulers, powers, and authorities—even death itself is subject to God. God holds our past, our present, and our future in His hands. And Jesus has intervened in human history—He laid down His life on the cross. Jesus didn’t die for His own crimes, His death served a higher purpose—to rescue us from sin and death—to prepare us for a life with God that has no end. My dear people, this is our hope.

May you find your hope in this unshakeable reality of Jesus Christ.

Pray