WE WILL NOT WORSHIP THE IMAGE

Daniel 3:1-30

Key Verse: 3:17-18

“If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want to you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”

We thank God for Christ’s kingdom that will endure forever. In Daniel’s interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream this kingdom is the rock cut of a mountain, but not by humans hand, that crushes all kingdoms of the world and brings them to an end. No man or human power or kingdom can stand before the kingdom of Christ. May we keep this vision of the rock in our hearts and live a life of obedience to Christ our King, the Lord of kings so that the power of his kingdom be displayed in our lives.

In Chapter 3, the word “worship” is written 11 times (5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15 (2), 18, 28) and “image” (1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 10, 12, 14, 15, 18), 10 times. This passage deals with a fundamental issue of mankind, worship, whom to worship and how to worship. All human beings are born to be religious, that is, to worship the true God or some false substitution, including the self. There is no exception in this matter of worship. And people’s lives are patterned according to whom they worship. In other words, they become like the one they worship (Psalm 115:8). Let’s study this chapter with the title, “We will not worship the image.”

Verse 1 says, “King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, ninety feet high and nine feet wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon.” Now the plain of Dura is just about 10 km southeast of Babylon. The plain of Dura would be visible as a flat area. We don’t know how much time had passed since the king had the dream of a large statue and a rock. Through Daniel’s interpretation God showed him the vision of the rock that crushed the statue of the gold-head, sliver-chest and arms, bronze-belly and thighs, iron-legs, iron and clay-feet, which represented the kingdoms of the world. The statue was crushed and smashed, completely gone with the wind. Nebuchadnezzar probably only remembered the words, “You are the king of kings, the head of that gold.” So, he erected a huge statue/image of gold. Certainly, the statue was not made purely of solid gold but was a wooden statute overlaid with gold, which was common at that time. Nebuchadnezzar 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. The invitation for the dedication ceremony covers all sorts of leaders of the Babylonian empire. What was the response of this grand invitation? Verse 3 says, “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.” Here is the exact repetition of the sorts of people, who were invited and came. It could have been written that all those who were summoned came. However, this repetition seemed to be redundant but very significant, indicating that all sorts of the leading group of invitees, came. They were not a crowd of people, but a thoughtful people of high positions in the Babylonian Empire. Yet, no one could refuse it. They all lacked personal integrity and character. They were there for the dedication of the image, standing before it.

How then was the image-dedication going? It says in verses 4-6, “Then the herald loudly proclaimed, ‘This is what you are commanded to do, O peoples, nations and men of every language: As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.’” What a thunderous proclamation! This is a very powerful pressure to fall down and worship the image of gold at the cue of all kinds of music with all these instruments. When the music started, everybody was to instantly fall down and worship the image. If they did not worship the image, they would be immediately thrown into a blazing furnace. Worship should be done according to one’s internal principle or conviction. However, here is a tremendous external pressure with almost no choice for the individual.

What is the effect of the proclamation? Verse 7 says, “Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.” The king’s plan worked powerfully and perfectly. Here we see clearly why the king set up such an image? On the surface, it seemed to be for the purpose of solidifying and unifying the empire. However, evidently the desire to be worshipped came from Nebuchadnezzar’s strong ego. Through his dream and Daniel’s interpretation of it, Nebuchadnezzar confessed, “Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries.” He knew that he had to worship the true God, the God of gods and the Lord of kings. However, when he supressed this inner conviction, his strong ego drove him to make such an image for the worship of himself by as many people as possible. This is self-glory and self-glorification.

Then why did all the invited high-ranking group of people worship the image of gold? Certainly, the alternative consequence was too much for them to bear, being thrown into a blazing furnace. They did not want to lose their lives. Also, they did not want to lose their position. They did want to get out of the system under the rule of the king. So they fell down and worshiped the image. Interestingly, in Revelation 13:8 it is written that all the inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast, the final antichrist—all whose names have not been written in the blook of life.” And the further description in 13:14-15 is that the second beast makes the image of the first beast and force people to worship the image, causing all who refused to worship the image to be killed. And the number of the beast is 666, which is man’s number. It is notable that the image Nebuchadnezzar made was sixty cubits high and six cubits wide. Here are two sixes, 66. Babylonians used a sexagesimal system rather than a decimal system. It’s as if it starts out with two sixes and ends up with three. It is good to know that Nebuchadnezzar was the first ruler of the times of the Gentiles (Lk 21:24) and the beast in Revelation was the last one. Nebuchadnezzar is like a preliminary picture of the antichrist.

When people do not worship the right of object of worship, the Creator, they worship created things. In God’s creation, God made man in his image so that man might worship God the Creator. But man creates gods in his own image. Human beings worship such images of themselves, fallen images, and rush into this fallen state. When people reject worshipping the right object of worship, they gradually become degraded, even to the level of animal with no moral standards. Paul wrote in Romans 1:21-26, “Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools…They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator….Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way, the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another.” Now, there is then a constant conflict in the world, and that constant conflict is between the worship of the true God and the worship of false gods made out of the imagination and mind of man. And deities made by man always express the sinfulness of man.

Then how does the story go in this passage? Some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. They exactly cited the proclamation of the herald, the king’s decree. And then they said, “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, O king. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up.” The astrologers must have been very jealous of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who were more recognized by the king, and now they had this opportunity to denounce them and ruin their lives. By citing the king’s decrees exactly they want to make use of it to denounce the Jews. However, the important thing is that they were such people who refused to worship the image of gold the king had set up. They are Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

Now in verses 13-18, there is a serious conversation between King Nebuchadnezzar and the three men. First, Nebuchadnezzar, furious with rage, said to them, who were brought before him, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, 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, pipes 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?” We see that the king was giving them a second chance in his mindfulness, not willing to throw them into a blazing furnace. This kind of the king’s favour could be a temptation.

Then how did they respond? In verses 16-18, “Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, ‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king.” They showed their confidence in God’s salvation. They had full trust in God who can save them from any situation, even from a blazing furnace and from anyone’s hand. They had absolute faith in God’s power. God says in Isaiah 43:2, “When you pass through he waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.” This is the God they served and believe. This is our God who is right there in our sufferings and can rescue us from any harm.

Yet, they were not overconfident. They spoke further, “But even if he does not, we want to you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” It was not out of their weakened faith, but out of their assurance of God’s love. They had absolute faith in God’s power and in God’s love. By refusing to worship the image, they chose to worship the LORD God out of love for God, being assured of God’s love for them. We see in them a true worship.

In Hebrews 11, we see two kinds of victors of faith. One kind had external victory revealing God’s power. They conquered kingdoms, being powerful in battle and routing foreign armies. Some women received back their dead, raised to life again. Another kind had internal victory, although they seemed to be losers to the eyes of the people of the world. They were those who were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. And some were stoned; some were sawed in two; some were put to death by the sword. The author commented, “the world was not worthy of them” (Heb 11:33-38). In Revelation 15:2, we also see those who had been martyred because of their faith and were standing beside the sea of glass in heaven. The description is this, “those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name.” Apostle John says in 1 John 5:5, “Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.”

Martin Luther in loneliness on his way to face the inevitable hour of excommunication at what is known as “The Diet of Worms,” to appear before King Charles V, the Roman prelate, and all of the princes assembled, said, “My cause shall be commended to the Lord, for He lives and reigns who preserved the three children in the furnace of the Babylonian king.  If He is unwilling to preserve me, my life is a small thing compared with Christ.  Expect anything of me except flight or recantation.  I will not flee, much less recant, so may the Lord Jesus strengthen me.”

In the Garden of Eden God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die” (Ge 2:16-17). When God gave this command, God granted man freedom of choice so that man would choose to honor and worship God as God, which would be the matter of life or death. In Genesis 22, we see Abraham’s worship. One day, God commanded Abraham to offer his son, his only son Isaac, whom he loved so dearly, as a burnt offering on a mountain in the region of Moriah.” This was a thunderous command. It was to test him whether he loved Isaac more than God, Isaac being his idol. On the third day of the agonizing and painful trip, Abraham said to his servants, “Stay here…I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.” (Ge 20:5). Reaching the place, in his worship to God Abraham was indeed about to slay his son in obedience to God. This was the demonstration of his love for God that he loved God more than Isaac, not withholding his son, his only son. At this act of worship of sacrifice God stopped him and promised to bless all nations on earth through his offspring because of his obedience to God.

We also see true worship in the Magi. At the time of Jesus’ birth, Magi from the east, probably wise men of Babylon inspired by the story of the lives of Daniel and Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, came to worship the baby Jesus lying in a manger. They found in the baby Jesus their Saviour whom they had been searching for so long throughout their lives and worshiped him, offering gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh, their most precious gifts to him (Mt 2:11). Their worship involved pure wholehearted giving.

Worship is the most important matter to God and to us. The Ten Commandments starts with these words, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything…” (Ex 20: 2-4). In our time, people are apt to worship money, pleasure, others’ recognition and praise, etc. Materialism and seeking pleasures of the flesh are like a rushing torrent in this world that sweep away everything. People become more and more lovers of money, lovers of pleasure, lovers of themselves rather than lovers of God as Paul stated in 2 Timothy 3:1-4. In short, worship is the matter of loving God or loving oneself, self-love, that is, ego. In order to truly love and worship God, we should keep the crucifixion of Jesus in our hearts, which shows how much God loved us and how to love him. God’s love is that he sent his one and only Son into this world as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:9, 10). God sent his one and only Son into this world and let him be killed in the very place Abraham was about to sacrifice his one and only son Isaac. God stopped Abraham’s act of killing his son, but he could not stop his act of slaying his own, for it was the only way to atone man’s sin. And in Revelation 5 we read, “You are worthy…because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God…” By his blood, shed on the cross (Col 1:20) he redeemed us and purchased us as the holy people of God. After talking about the love of God, Apostle John ends his epistle of 1 John with these words, “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21).

In the love of God and of Christ we are to love God and worship him, now through self-crucifixion. So Apostle Paul said in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me”, and 5:24, “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature/the flesh with its passions and desires.” How important it is to believe that I have been crucified with Christ, for when he died, he died for all and so all died (2 Cor 5:14) including you and me through faith in him: my old self was crucified, my weak and fatalistic self crucified, my proud self crucified, my lustful self crucified, and my selfish self crucified. We need to have this kind of mindset, counting ourselves in that way (Ro 6:11). This is the reason Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Lk 9:23). Paul tearfully said in Philippians 3:18-19, “…many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.” May we be true worshipers of God holding to the cross of Christ!

Now in the following verses in this passage we see God’s miraculous rescue. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, wearing their robes and other clothes, were bound and thrown in the blazing furnace, which the king made seven times hotter than usual. The king’s command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up these three men. Then the king saw an amazing thing that four men were walking around in the fire and the fourth looked like a son of the gods. Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, “Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!” Interestingly, this is the first occurrence of the word “the Most High God” in the Bible. It is used by King Nebuchadnezzar in his saying, “Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God.”

What happened to them? When they came out of the fire, the people who crowded around them saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their hearts singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.” Wow! What a complete rescue!

Then Nebuchadnezzar said, “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 God.” He continues, “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.” Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

The trend of the world is to worship the image, manmade images, and the self. May we keep the cross of Jesus in our hearts and worship the only true God and be true worshipers in our time. The cross of Jesus shows that God is with us in our sufferings and can rescue us from any harm and the cross of Jesus enables us to overcome our self-love, that is not to lose our lives and not to sacrifice anything. With the crucifixion of Jesus, we will not worship the image.