

# **Lesson 1: No Idols**

## **The Story of King Nebuchadnezzar and his Golden Statue (Daniel 3)**

A long time ago, there were many Jews who lived in Babylon. This was after they had lost their homeland in a war, and many of them were carried off to live in a foreign city. But even though they lived a long way away from their home, and their Temple was destroyed, the Jews still worshipped God. One of the important things that God had taught them was that they were not supposed to worship idols—images or depictions of other gods. The first commandment said: do not worship anyone or anything but God alone.

In Babylon, there was a king named Nebuchadnezzar (neh-boo-kad-NEZ-zar). He was a terrible man. He was completely obsessed with himself, and believed that he was so great that people should worship him like a god. In order to prove that point, he had a giant statue to himself built—it was 100 feet tall and 10 feet wide, completely made of gold. He then ordered all of the important people in his kingdom to come and bow down and worship this golden statue. He also ordered that if anyone refused, they would be thrown into a furnace and burned to death!

There were three Jews among the leaders he commanded to worship this statue, named Shadrach (SHAD-rack), Meschach (ME-shack), and Abednego (a-BED-neh-go). However, these three were good Jews who remembered the first commandment: do not worship idols. They refused to bow down to King Nebuchadnezzar's golden statue.

The king was not happy about this. In fact, he was furious. These three were refusing to agree that he was such a great man that he deserved to be worshipped like a god. The king brought them in front of him and told them he would be gracious and merciful, and give them one more chance to worship the golden statue. If they refused again, he would have them thrown into the furnace.

The three refused. They even said, "even if God won't save us from the fire, we will not bow down. God alone is God."

So the king, absolutely furious, had the furnace turned up seven times its normal heat, and had them thrown in. What happened next amazed the king. He saw the three weren't burned, and it looked like there was a fourth person in the furnace with them! He called them out, and they didn't even smell like smoke.

The three were freed, and they never had to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's statue.

## **An Idol is More Than a Statue**

In the Old Testament, we hear about idols all the time. In Exodus 32, the Israelites construct a golden calf idol and worship it as the god who brought them out of Egypt. The Canaanites in Joshua and Judges as well as Queen Jezebel in the book of Kings worship Baal using statues. The Philistines in 1 Samuel worshipped a god named Dagon, whose idol kept falling down in front of the Ark of the Covenant in 1 Samuel 5. Idols were carved images or statues of gods, and people would equate the presence of a god with the presence of their statue.

We also heard about a giant idol in our story from Daniel 3. King Nebuchadnezzar didn't just build a ridiculous statue; he built an idol. It was an object that was worshipped, and it wasn't God. This story is all about idols and how there is a temptation to worship them just because everyone else does, or because there is danger in not doing so (remember Nebuchadnezzar's threat with the furnace). This story reminds us that we can stand firm against idols.

However, idols aren't just statues. If they were, then we would never have to worry about idols anymore, because who worships statues? Instead, we know that idols are what Martin Luther said about them: "A 'god' is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. *Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God.*" We can see that it's not just something we worship in the sense of going to church, singing hymns, saying prayers, and listening to sermons about. What makes it an idol is how deeply you trust it or how important it is to you.

Think about King Nebuchadnezzar again. The obvious idol was the giant statue he built to himself, and commanded everyone to bow down and worship. There was, however, another idol in the story. The king was making his ego—his own sense of self-importance—into an idol. He worshipped his own self, thinking *he* was what the people ought to depend on and not God. This is where idols get tricky, because they become things that you can't necessarily touch.

Martin Luther claimed that money and property were the world's most common idols. People rely on and trust their money to take care of them, as if having enough of it will save them from sickness, pain, suffering, and perhaps even death. They will go to great lengths to get money and property, and they will make bad things happen to people who might keep them from getting more money and property. The same could be said of any idol: it's anything we trust in to give us what we need (the things God gives us), and makes us willing to harm others (whether physically, emotionally, socially, or however) in order to get it. An idol is anything we treat the way we should treat God.

Another way to put it is to ask yourself: if God asked you to give up something—anything from your phone, your home, your family, or your opinions—how would you respond? If your first response would be to say "no," and especially if that "no" is a very *strong* no, you

may have found an idol. When we start expecting things to give us happiness, hope, certainty, security, or safety, we are starting to treat them like gods.

## **How does this affect the real world?**

Idols hurt people. The story of King Nebuchadnezzar shows that in really obvious ways. The king demands that everyone worship this statue—a stand-in for himself—or else they'll be burned alive! He even follows through on the threat when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refuse to worship the king's idol. When we worship an idol rather than God, we become willing to hurt others—directly or indirectly—in service to that idol.

Imagine a popular kid who has turned their popularity into an idol. They feel safe and secure in being popular. They imagine that the way everyone looks to them for advice on what's cool, the way everyone races to be the first to like their Instagram post or TikTok video, or the way they can get anyone they want to date them will make them happy. Remember Luther's definition of an idol—anything on which your heart relies and depends. What happens when their popularity is threatened by some new cool kid?

Their first reaction might be to make sure this new kid doesn't take away any of their popularity. They might get their friends and followers to turn against this new kid. They might spread rumors to hurt the new kid's reputation. They might even get into fights if they feel threatened enough. Why would they do this? Because they expect their popularity is the thing that will make them feel safe, secure, and happy. If someone takes that away (like this new kid), they won't have that feeling anymore. When our idols are threatened, we become willing to hurt people.

Idols distract us from trusting in God. God invites us and calls us to love our neighbors, share the abundance of goodness that God gives us, live humbly, and serve others. By worshipping God, we do the opposite of hurting people, because God doesn't need us to hurt anyone on God's behalf. An idol can't defend itself, so it needs us to do that for it. But it's more, because an idol is just a thing—it can't give us anything. It can only take. God can actually do the things that God promises!

It's important to know how to identify an idol because of what it can make us do to others. If we trust a thing more than God, we will always be disappointed by that thing. It can't give us anything. It can't satisfy our hopes. It certainly can't keep us safe or bring us life. God gives us this commandment: "I am the Lord, you shall have no other gods before me." When we follow that commandment, it makes us more able to care for our neighbors. It makes us less willing to hurt others. It makes us better able to serve God and make the gospel known in the world.