

WHEN EVERYONE WORSHIPS

SERIES: WHEN KINGDOMS COLLIDE



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Some of you remember this from years back, but when I was in college, I had long hair. It fell past my shoulders. It was actually fairly curly and a bit wild. I often had some kind of scraggly facial hair going on. One time my freshman dorm had an event where we all learned to tie-dye T-shirts. We had invited someone in to teach us and bring us all the supplies to do it.

The guy who taught us how to tie-dye looked a bit similar to me. We looked like we could have walked out of the same hair stylist. His look was probably enhanced by some less-than-legal substances but mine was all natural. After I tie-dyed my T-shirt, I stuck around for a bit talking to him.

He started talking about some commune near Palo Alto where people lived a free life. His comment about that place stuck in my head. He told me, “There are lots of people like you there.”

I thought a lot about what he said. I looked different than the average student on campus. I guess I probably stood out a bit. What kind of people did he assume I'd relate to? On the one hand, I was different from most people, so he wanted to tell me about a place where I wouldn't be different.

We usually prefer to be around “people like us.” It's hard to be different. Nobody really wants to stand out from the crowd.

We're in the middle of a series on the biblical book of Daniel called *When Kingdoms Collide*. I've suggested that this book describes the predicament of living in the midst of two kingdoms at the same time. There is the kingdom of man that we live in day to day. And there is the kingdom of God: the proclamation that the God who created all that we see is still interested in our daily lives. He is real and present. He became incarnate as Jesus Christ. And he died so that we might be part of his eternal kingdom.

If you believe in Jesus and live in Silicon Valley, you are different than the people around you. That's one of

the reasons we come together in worship. There are lots of people like us here. This can be comfortable. But what do we do when we aren't together? How do we feel about being different than the world we live in?

I spent a lot of this past summer visiting family in Texas. Most people know of the South as America's Bible Belt. It's a place where faith is much more common and certainly more integrated into the mainstream of cultural life. It was eye-opening to spend time in Texas and then to return back to the Silicon Valley.

It highlighted to me how different it really is to follow Jesus in Silicon Valley, how worshipping God is so foreign in this culture. People that go to church here are odd. In a 2012 Barna poll, the Bay Area was ranked 90th out of 96 cities for how Bible-minded an area it is (<http://cities.barna.org/americas-most-and-least-bible-minded-cities/>). Being a Christian in this area makes you different.

But just because people don't go to church doesn't mean they don't worship. Everyone worships something. We're not just living among people who don't worship Jesus, we're living among people who worship someone or something else. It's not hard to see that when you look at how people respond to sports teams and technology and family activities. There is plenty of worship going on in the Silicon Valley. But it's not God being worshipped.

We have to figure out how to live in a culture when everyone worships something other than God. What do we do when everyone worships?

This morning we're looking at a story in chapter 3 of Daniel that will help us with that answer. It's a story about a courageous group of three young men. They faced a situation where everyone around them was worshipping something and they were singled out as being different. For them the stakes of being different were incredibly high. They risked their very lives.

As we look at their story, we're going to think about the situation they faced and whether we face similar situations.

We'll think about how they responded and how we respond. We'll see how God met them in their decision. Finally, we'll see the effect that their decision had on the people around them.

I'm hoping that we gain some insight into how we can be willing to be different in our culture. How to follow Jesus in Silicon Valley. Their example can help us to know when to stand up. It can give us courage when we face similar situations. And ultimately, it will help us to find God in those times.

The Setting

The story begins with Nebuchadnezzar making another curious decision.

Daniel 3:1-7:

King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its breadth six cubits. He set it up on the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. ²Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent to gather the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. ³Then the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces gathered for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. And they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. ⁴And the herald proclaimed aloud, "You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, ⁵that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. ⁶And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace." ⁷Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Nebuchadnezzar starts things off by setting up an image of gold. Coming off the previous story, it's a bit of a disappointment. Last week we heard about a dream that Nebuchadnezzar experienced about a statue that was supposed to remind him of how fragile kingdoms were. It was supposed to point him to the eternal kingdom of God.

I think it had the first effect. He realized how fragile his kingdom was. But instead of being interested in the kingdom of God, he just wanted to bolster his own kingdom. In order to do that, he came up with this idea of having all his leaders bow to the same image.

It was a great idea. Nebuchadnezzar was the king of a huge empire of people conquered from many different ethnicities and geographical regions. He was trying to hold all of that together. So he pulled together all the different types of leaders to integrate them. Both the list of titles and the list of musical instruments are representative of all the cultures that Babylon had conquered.

This event is like the poster you see at McDonald's advertising that it's a great place to work. If there are four people on the poster, there has to be a Caucasian, a Latino, an Asian and an African-American. It's an obvious statement: McDonald's is diverse and we all work together. That's what Nebuchadnezzar is doing.

He knows that worship brings people together. Worship creates loyalty. He doesn't care about religion. That's why we don't even know what this statue is of. It could be of him. It could be of some Babylonian god. It could be of anything. Nebuchadnezzar is a pragmatist. It doesn't matter to him what they worship. He just wants them all to worship the same thing. He knows that worship is the best way to unify people and make them loyal.

Our culture does the same thing.

I picked on Google at the beginning of this series, so now I'll pick on Apple. A few weeks ago Apple unveiled their newest lines of products. A new iteration of the iPhone and the all new and much-anticipated Apple Watch. Apple makes good products, but their greatest strength lies in breeding loyalty. They don't just want you to buy an Apple product. They want you to become an Apple kind of person. And they are incredibly skilled at it.

They use all the same techniques that Nebuchadnezzar did. They hold large events where a diverse group of people gather around manufactured objects that are dramatically

revealed. People “ooh” and “aaah” when the objects are presented. For the week after Apple’s latest event, 4 of the 15 or so featured articles on the CNN app were about the iPhone 6. Is it really that newsworthy?

What happens next is straight out of the ancient world. First, they marvel at this product. Then they offer sacrifices to it. All sorts of people from all walks of life willingly give up time and money to them. In fact, they fight for the right to give money to them. They sleep on sidewalks overnight to be first to offer their sacrifice.

If you were able to magically transport someone from sixth century BC Babylon to an Apple product launch event, they wouldn’t be confused at all. They would have no idea what a smartphone was. But they would recognize an idol instantly when they saw it. They would immediately understand that worship was happening.

And they would want to be a part of it. Because everyone else was worshipping, they would want to worship too.

Living in the technology age means that you need to know certain acronyms. There’s a story going around the Internet about a mother who texted her son, “Your aunt just passed away, LOL.” Her son texted back, “That’s terrible — why is it funny?” She was confused until he explained that “LOL” meant “laughing out loud.” She thought it meant “lots of love.”

There’s an acronym that people use to describe the kind of pressure that we feel when everyone worships. It’s FOMO: Fear Of Missing Out. People are afraid to miss out on what everyone else is enjoying. There is great pressure to enjoy what everyone else is enjoying. That’s what drove these government leaders to participate in this Babylonian nationalist party. It’s what often drives us to worship false gods. We don’t want to miss out on what the people around us are enjoying.

What kinds of situations do we face like this, where everyone is all excited about something and we are pressured to join in, or some object or person or idea where the loyalty around it becomes worship?

What does everyone around you worship? Intellect? Achievement? Being busy? The latest gadget? Money? Position? What are you tempted to worship? When are you tempted to join in because you don’t want to miss out on what everyone else is experiencing?

We all face these temptations. How do we respond? What do we do when we are invited into this kind of worship?

The Conflict

The next section of the passage answers our question. The way the story is told, we don’t know at first whether Daniel and his friends joined in with this worship. Verse 7 says *all the people fell down and worshipped*. We only find out what happened when some of Nebuchadnezzar’s other advisors complain to him.

Daniel 3:12–14, and 16–18:

There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men, O king, pay no attention to you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

¹³Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought. So they brought these men before the king. ¹⁴Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, “Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up?

¹⁶Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. ¹⁷If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. ¹⁸But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

We have to assume that Daniel wasn’t in the area when this event happened, but three of his friends were. They refused to bow and they got caught. But it’s not like the Bible picture though where everyone is bowing and it’s clear that three people remain standing. Nebuchadnezzar didn’t see them disobey. They were turned in.

These three men had recently been promoted to a high position because of Daniel’s success in interpreting King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. No doubt their colleagues

were resentful of that promotion. So they caught them disobeying this command and ratted them out because of professional jealousy. They wanted to bring them down. It's the same motivation that we find in Daniel chapter 6 when Daniel gets thrown into the lion's den.

This is classic peer pressure. The group itself makes sure that everyone conforms. Apple doesn't enforce the loyalty it creates. It's all your friends. It's the culture at large.

We talk about peer pressure as though it's an adolescent problem. Something you only face in middle school and high school. But that's a lie. We are all affected by peer pressure. It doesn't get less powerful as you get older; it goes underground and gets more subtle. We are all affected by what the people around us do and expect from us.

How do we decide how much to spend on a car? What kinds of restaurants to eat at? Where to go on vacation? How to educate our children? What careers to choose? All of this is conditioned by the community we live in.

The three friends in our story faced incredible pressure to conform to everyone around them—to do what they were doing. They faced FOMO and peer pressure and even the threat of death. But they didn't bow down. These three friends stood up for what they believed in.

We love the story of the lone voice that refuses to give in to totalitarian ideology and stands alone against the face of conformity and oppression.

It's the story of Chinese students in Tiananmen Square who refused to go along with the dictatorship in power. It's the story of Rosa Parks, a young black woman who refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white passenger. It's the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who went back to Germany during World War II in order to support resistance in the face of Hitler's world conquest.

What do you stand up for? How are you willing to be different than the culture around you? What are you willing to miss out on in order to maintain your integrity?

Not many of us will face situations as drastic as the one that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced in Babylon. But we do face the same kinds of situations every day.

A Chinese-American friend told me a story about her dad who was a faithful Christian. When his mother passed away, he attended the funeral in China. In that culture it

is customary to bow in worship at the casket and to the ancestors. He refused to do so because of his faith in Jesus. He wouldn't worship what everyone else worshipped. That was a huge deal. Many people were offended. How could he not show respect in that way?

He was willing to miss out on being understood and doing what was expected of him for the sake of worshipping Jesus. What peer pressure do you face? What are you worried about missing out on?

The Punishment

For these friends in Babylon, standing up didn't just mean they missed out on something. It meant they were punished for it.

Daniel 3:19–23:

Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with 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 usually heated. ²⁰And he ordered some of the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. ²¹Then these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the burning fiery furnace. ²²Because the king's order was urgent and the furnace overheated, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. ²³And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace.

King Nebuchadnezzar is really mad. In the previous section, it says he was in a *furiosus rage*. Here it says he is *filled with fury* and the *expression of his face was changed*. He heats up the furnace seven times more than normal. It's like he went crazy all of a sudden. It's like he is out of control.

Why does he react this way? It seems like he is overreacting. What is going on?

It's the issue of loyalty. He had just recently promoted these three men. He feels as if they have betrayed him. They have done more than refused to worship a statue. They have said that they won't play ball, that they are

independent. They aren't going to bow to peer pressure. They won't conform.

The powers of the kingdom of man operate through promise and fear, the carrot and the stick: give you good stuff for doing what they want, give you bad stuff for doing what they don't like. This is what the king is doing. If you worship the statue, you get solidarity with other powerful people. You get the experience of being part of something. You get respect and inclusion and acceptance. If you don't worship, you get killed. The worst threat possible: execution.

But these three friends don't need Nebuchadnezzar's carrots and they aren't afraid of his sticks. They don't care about being part of this group and they aren't scared to die. That is what is so powerful about their statement in verse 18: *Our God is able to deliver us ... But if not, let it be known that we will not serve your gods.*

They have completely undermined the power of the kingdom of man. And when someone's power is undermined, they get mad. Really mad. That's why King Nebuchadnezzar is so furious. His power has been taken away.

This is what it takes to live well in the kingdom of God. It takes a willingness to miss out on some of the promises that the kingdom of man makes and to not worry about some of its threats. Following Jesus means enduring negative consequences. Standing up for what we believe in might get us punished. We might miss out on the carrots and get the sticks.

How does this work in our kingdom of man? How are we punished for standing up for Jesus?

I'm always amused by the response I get when I tell people that I'm a pastor. I'll be having a nice conversation with someone at a soccer game or school event. I'll ask what they do for a living and they'll explain. Then they'll ask me. When I tell them I'm a pastor, it gets really quiet. They don't know what to say.

I've thought about being creative in my answers to change this patter. Maybe tell people that I'm a "shepherd" and see how they respond. Or a "spiritual advisor." But I can never quite bring myself to do it. So I say "pastor." And there is an awkward silence. One woman once even asked, "People still do that?"

There's a lot of ways our culture might punish us for standing up for Jesus. But one of them is with awkward pauses. Confused silence. They just don't understand. They don't get it.

On the surface, that doesn't seem so bad. It's hard to compare an awkward pause to getting thrown into a fiery furnace. But here's the thing. Even the fiery furnace didn't stop Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Awkward pauses, on the other hand, are all it takes to stop many of us.

Let's suppose there is someone trying to stop people from talking about Jesus. Why would they go to all the effort of making a fiery furnace if all it takes is a little awkward pause to do the trick?

We talked before about the acronym FOMO—Fear of Missing Out. I'd like to introduce a new one. F-O-B-I-A, "FOBIA": Fear Of Being Incredibly Awkward. That's what drives many of us. That's the fiery furnace for a lot of us. We don't want to stand up and be different because it feels awkward. Unfortunately, that's all it takes for a lot of us.

It's worth remembering though, that there are people today who endure a whole lot more than awkward pauses to declare their faith. There are Christian men, women, and children who are being slaughtered in the Middle East. The stories are heart-wrenching. We have to stand in solidarity with our family in Christ. Remember them. Pray for them. Tell their stories.

We're having an evening prayer event next Sunday night to pray specifically for our brothers and sisters in the Middle East. Look for more information in your bulletin if you're interested in attending.

These three friends were willing to be different even in the face of incredible punishment. They prayed for God to save them from it, but they acknowledged that even if he didn't, they would still believe. They would endure punishment to stand up for God.

Salvation

Of course most of you know the story: they were saved.

Daniel 3:24–26:

Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his

counselors, “Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?” They answered and said to the king, “True, O king.” ²⁵He answered and said, “But I see four men unbound, 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.”

²⁶Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning fiery furnace; he declared, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here!” Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. Someone else showed up in the fire. King Nebuchadnezzar is shocked. He can’t believe it. Who is that fourth person?

There have been all sorts of suggestions: Jesus. An Angel. God himself. Everything is speculation. We don’t know who exactly it was, but it’s clearly from the God of Israel. Exactly who it is doesn’t matter. This fourth person brings the presence of God. God met these three friends in the fire.

For centuries this story has become a model for how God cares for us in trials. God doesn’t save us out of the fire, he meets us in it. You see that all throughout the Old Testament. You see it in the life of Jesus when he was on the earth. You see it in the apostles as they spread the gospel throughout Asia Minor. You see it in the early church. And you see it today.

God meets his people in the midst of their trials. He is with them in the fire whether that fire is an awkward pause or something much worse.

Peter, from the New Testament, was no stranger to being punished because of his faith. But he said this in 1 Peter 4:14, If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

This is the way God works. The Spirit of God rests upon you. He doesn’t always take trials away. He goes through them with us. God endures the stick right alongside of us. In fact, he endured many lashings of the stick. He endured the worst there was to endure. So whatever it is that we are suffering under, God is right there experiencing the same thing. Whether it is being awkward or being killed, it happened to Jesus.

They might throw us into the fire, but God will be with us.

The Result

The reason is that something good happens when we are willing to face the fiery furnace.

Daniel 3:28–29:

Nebuchadnezzar answered and said, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king’s command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. ²⁹Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way.”

This is the second time we’ve seen Nebuchadnezzar say something great about the God of Israel. In fact, all throughout the first four stories, he gradually comes to more and more of a realization of who the true God is. The evil king of Babylon is seeing who God is! That’s unbelievable.

When the people of God are willing to let go of the promises and endure the punishment of the world, God is revealed. The kingdom of God is shown to be what it is: over and above, eternal and unchanging, larger and deeper than anything on earth. When we are willing to suffer, God is glorified.

This is why Tertullian, one of the early church fathers said this in AD 197: “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” Nothing demonstrates the reality of something more powerful than the willingness to die for it. In fact, several of the stories of early martyrs describe onlookers believing in Jesus on the spot. When we are willing to suffer, God is glorified.

I was talking with a friend recently who has been married for several years. In the last three months before they were going to get married, they decided to move in together. The biggest reason was because their families were pressuring them. ‘You’re going to get married anyway. Why would you throw \$3000 away for rent when you could save it?’ ‘What does it really matter anyway?—that’s what everyone does.’

Today, they regret that decision. Not so much because it has had devastating consequences in their relationship, but because they gave in to fear. They gave in to pressure. They weren't willing to stand up and be different because of what they believe in.

In particular, their relationship with their family started off on the wrong foot. They succumbed to the pressure of how things work in the kingdom of man. Living separately would have cost them. It would have cost money. It would have cost respect from their families. It would have cost convenience and time.

Now they realize that all of the cost would have been well spent. Their actions would have acknowledged the reality of God. It would have witnessed to his ability to meet them even in costly situations. Their actions would have affected how their family saw God.

When we are willing to be different, we proclaim that God is real. When others see us refusing to worship what the world is so enchanted by, it demonstrates that we believe in something more. When we are willing to suffer, God is glorified.

Conclusion

There wasn't anything heroic about me standing out with long hair. I wasn't even all that different and I certainly wasn't doing it out of principle or some deep moral conviction.

But there are people out there who are truly brave. They are willing to be different and stand up for what they believe in. This morning we heard about three of them. For them, the temptation was to conform to a group of people. To rally around something that takes the place of God. They were being asked to worship just like everyone else.

Nobody could believe it when they refused. Didn't they know that they were going to suffer for it? But God met them in their suffering. Because of that, their suffering served God's purposes. It proclaimed him to a world that couldn't see him.

How are you being seduced to be part of the crowd of the kingdom of man? What is everyone around you

excited about that you're tempted to join in with? What are you tempted to sacrifice to and worship?

What if you refuse? There will be a cost. You have to know that going in. But God will meet you there. He will be with you. And maybe others will see God because of your courage.

Paul says it well in 2 Corinthians 4:18, *We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.*

Look to the eternal things. When everyone worships the temporal, stand firm. It will cost you. But it will be worth it. In the end, God will be glorified.