

# *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego Refuse to Worship an Idol*

Our study today is about three Jewish men. Their names are Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. This well known story is one I often heard as I was growing up. Adults also like the story. In fact, this week I went online and discovered that Louis Armstrong sang a song about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the 1950's. This song was sung by several groups in addition to soloists. I do not think today you would find artists singing "Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and Nebuchadnezzar" on national TV. In order to understand the book of Daniel and for it to come alive, you need to understand some basic facts of history. In the interest of making the book come alive as God meant it to be, we will explore some history.

Why is this story in Daniel 3 popular? I think one reason is that it is very exciting, entertaining and sensational to have three men end up in a fiery furnace. Much of Scripture is not sensational. If you were to read the book of Leviticus, you might find it somewhat boring. If you were to read 1 and 2 Kings or 1 and 2 Chronicles, you might find those books just full of history without any pizzazz to them, so to speak. But when you come to Daniel, chapter 3, the account has pizzazz! You could make a TV show or a movie based on this story and

people would pay to see it!

Our study this morning is about an event from the pages of history. It is recorded for our edification. Turn with me to Daniel 3:1. Verse one opens referencing Nebuchadnezzar. This is Nebuchadnezzar II of the Neo-Babylonian Era, Neo-Babylonian Empire.

Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, the height of which was sixty cubits and its width six cubits; he set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. Daniel 3:1 (NASB)



**Nebuchadnezzar's Image.** There are some very important things in this verse that I want to emphasize to help this passage come alive for you, and so you can understand that this is a true event from history. We are told Nebuchadnezzar made an image "of gold." I want to focus on just the word "image" for a minute. The image that he makes is not your average

figurine that you might place on your dining room table, or in your bedroom. This is a huge, enormous statue. When we are told that it is an image, the Aramaic word for "image" is very unusual and refers to a human form or body. It is the

first clue about this image. Some people have said that this image is just an idol of one of the gods of Babylon. I do not believe that is correct. This Aramaic word translated as “image” was selected for a specific purpose. That purpose was to communicate to us that the image was of Nebuchadnezzar himself. This image symbolizes Nebuchadnezzar II, the king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. I am going to give you some additional reasons as we go through the text, but suffice it to say at this point that the word “image” was selected to communicate that this image was of the king, Nebuchadnezzar.

There has been a lot of speculation as to why he did this. I will give you my view again. I believe the reason he did this, based upon the fact that it is also called an image of gold, is that he remembered the statue of his dream which had a head of gold, a chest and arms of silver, a waist of bronze, legs of iron and feet of iron and clay. Daniel had told the king in verse 37, chapter 2, that,

**You, O king, are the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, the strength and the glory . . . Daniel 2:37 (NASB)**

He said, “You are the king of kings.” Now, if you are Nebuchadnezzar, and you are already the head of an empire, and have conquered much of the known world of that time, this is an ego trip that you are going to be on. It only would have inflated his head to tell him that he is the king of kings. In verse 38 it says,

**. . . and wherever the sons of men dwell, or the beasts of the field, or the birds of the sky, He has given them into your hand and has caused you to rule over them all. Daniel 2:38a (NASB)**

Then Daniel told the king that,

**You are the head of gold. Daniel 2:38b (NASB)**

So Daniel told him that he is the head of gold. I believe that this image of a human form is an image of Nebuchadnezzar.

The second point is that it is made of gold. He remembered that in his dream he was described as being the head of gold, and so he made the statue of gold! My conclusion, though not stated in Scripture, makes sense.

The third piece of information that is important for us are the dimensions. They are huge. This is not a statue you could place on your kitchen table. It was sixty cubits high, and six cubits wide. Now, if a biblical cubit is eighteen inches or one-and-a-half feet, it was ninety feet tall by nine feet wide. It was more like a totem pole, very skinny and really tall. Ninety feet is like a seven story commercial building. That is a huge statue! Since it was of gold, can you imagine how far away people could see it? It would glisten in the sun with a golden glow for miles. That is what Nebuchadnezzar built.

**Critics of Daniel’s Report.** There have been some who have been critical of the statue’s dimensions and that it is made of gold. They say that it is just too large and costly. But if you look at historical records, you will find some really interesting information. The Great Sphinx of Egypt measured 240 long and 60 feet high. It was built roughly in 2500 B.C., and was made of 200-ton limestone blocks. Two-hundred-ton limestone blocks is a lot of weight.

Another very tall structure that was built was the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the Seven Wonders of the World. It measured 98 feet high. Nebuchadnezzar’s statue was ninety feet high. The Colossus of Rhodes is even taller. Herodotus, a Greek historian wrote in his *Histories*, book section 183, that it measured 98 feet high. They made it out of iron bars connected together for the framework. Then they overlaid it with brass plates. Herodotus wrote that they took the brass plates from the armor of warriors who had come as an army to invade the city of Rhodes. The city successfully repulsed the invaders, and then took their armor to build the statue as a celebration of their victory over the invading army. The construction of this statue began in 280 B.C. and concluded in 292 B.C. That means it took roughly twelve years.

If you are wondering why I am going through all the details of this statue, they are important for our study. They illustrate that Nebuchadnezzar’s image was not unusual for its time in history. If the Colossus of Rhodes is 98 feet tall, then Nebuchadnezzar surely could have made his statue 90

feet tall. Those who want to claim that Nebuchadnezzar's statue would have been too costly because they envision a solid-gold statue, fail to realize that Nebuchadnezzar could have just overlaid his statue with gold to keep his costs down. We know that gold definitely was not an issue for Nebuchadnezzar. Herodotus wrote that there were solid gold statues throughout the city of Babylon. One of the statues he reports in his *Histories* was a statue of Marduk that stood 18 feet tall and was solid gold. Now imagine the monetary value of that statue!

Pliny the Younger, in his history *Naturals*, book 33, section 24, reports that Marc Antony looted all of the idols from the city of Babylon when he went through. What have we learned about the statue? The statue could have been built in 10-12 years, maybe longer. It could have been overlaid with gold, and the height is not something that would have been unusual for that time.

The fourth piece of information from this verse that is important is the Plain of Dura. Most readily available

Bible maps do not show the Plain of Dura. A French archaeologist from the 1800's, Julius Oppert [phonetic], wrote in his book, *The Expedition Scientific in Mesopotamia*, on page 238, that there were two potential spots where the Plain of Dura could have been located. One of them was four miles south of Babylon. He discovered in that area a square pedestal, 45 feet square and 12 feet tall. He made the point that the statue could have been placed there. Another possibility was the area, Tula Dura, roughly 16 miles south of Babylon.

Those are four interesting and important pieces of information as we come to our study. Now where would the statue have been located? Would it have been 16 miles south, which

is near the Euphrates River; or would it have been just a little bit south of the city of Babylon? Some speculate that it could have been 4 miles south of the city of Babylon, because the king would have wanted it close so that he could see who was coming to look at his statue. But the advantage of placing it farther away is he could erect it without the public knowing until it was completed and he wanted to reveal it with a big celebration.

There is a fifth piece of information that is important. It is not in the verse, but events in chapter two occurred roughly 603 to 602 B.C. Professor William Shay wrote in the book, *The Extra-biblical Text and the Convocation of the Plain of*

*Dura* on pages 37-50, that this event in chapter 3 could have occurred roughly ten years later. That means it would have occurred about twelve years after King Nebuchadnezzar defeated Jerusalem and took Jews captive back to Babylon. One of the reasons that piece of information is



important is I want you now to connect it back to the Colossus of Rhodes. It took the Colossus of Rhodes twelve years to be built. It was started in 280 B.C. and completed in 292 B.C. Professor William Shay estimates that it was completed ten to twelve years later, after the events of chapter 1 and chapter 2. Time wise, that is similar to the construction of the Colossus of Rhodes.

Now we have the historical pieces together. Let us move on to verse 2:

**Then Nebuchadnezzar the king sent word to assemble the satraps, the prefects and the governors, the coun-**



selors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates and all the rulers of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up. Daniel 3:2 (NASB)

The guest list is like a *Who's Who* in the kingdom. Probably hundreds of people showed up. The Babylonian Empire was huge at that time covering a lot of territory. We are told that the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the counselors were all invited. Then it says, "and all the rulers." So he mentions the important individuals and then just adds "all the rulers." All of the important people in the empire would have come. Satraps ruled over major geographic areas. During the Persian rule, there were twenty-three satraps over the entire Medo-Persian Empire. The Babylonian Empire was a little smaller. The satraps were the top rulers in terms of geographic area. Prefects were mid-level administrators. Governors were responsible for areas similar to the counties we have in the United States. Verse 3:

Then the satraps, the prefects and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates and all the rulers of the provinces were assembled for the dedication of the image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up; and they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Daniel 3:3 (NASB)

It becomes clear at this point this was not an invitation, because some of the men would have had to travel a long distance. Can you imagine if you were hundreds of miles away back in those days, you would not have been able to just get in your car and travel there in three to four hours. If you are traveling on donkey or camel, it is going to take you a long time to get there. So if all of these people show up, it tells you right up front this was not an invitation you could ignore. Attendance was required.

Professor William Shay adds some other interesting information. There is a Babylonian record of a revolt. Remember the timeline. We mentioned that the statue probably took about ten to twelve years to build from the beginning of his reign. The Babylonian records reveal to us that there was a

revolt during the tenth year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign. There is speculation that these administrators, or politicians, were invited to come and worship this statue just after the revolt occurred as a sign that they were loyal to the king. If that is true and you are a satrap, a prefect, or a governor, and you receive an invitation to the dedication, you had better show up as a sign of loyalty. If you were King Nebuchadnezzar, you were watching to see who was loyal to you. Verses 4-5,

Then the herald loudly proclaimed . . .

When we are told "the herald," it is someone who calls out - an announcer.

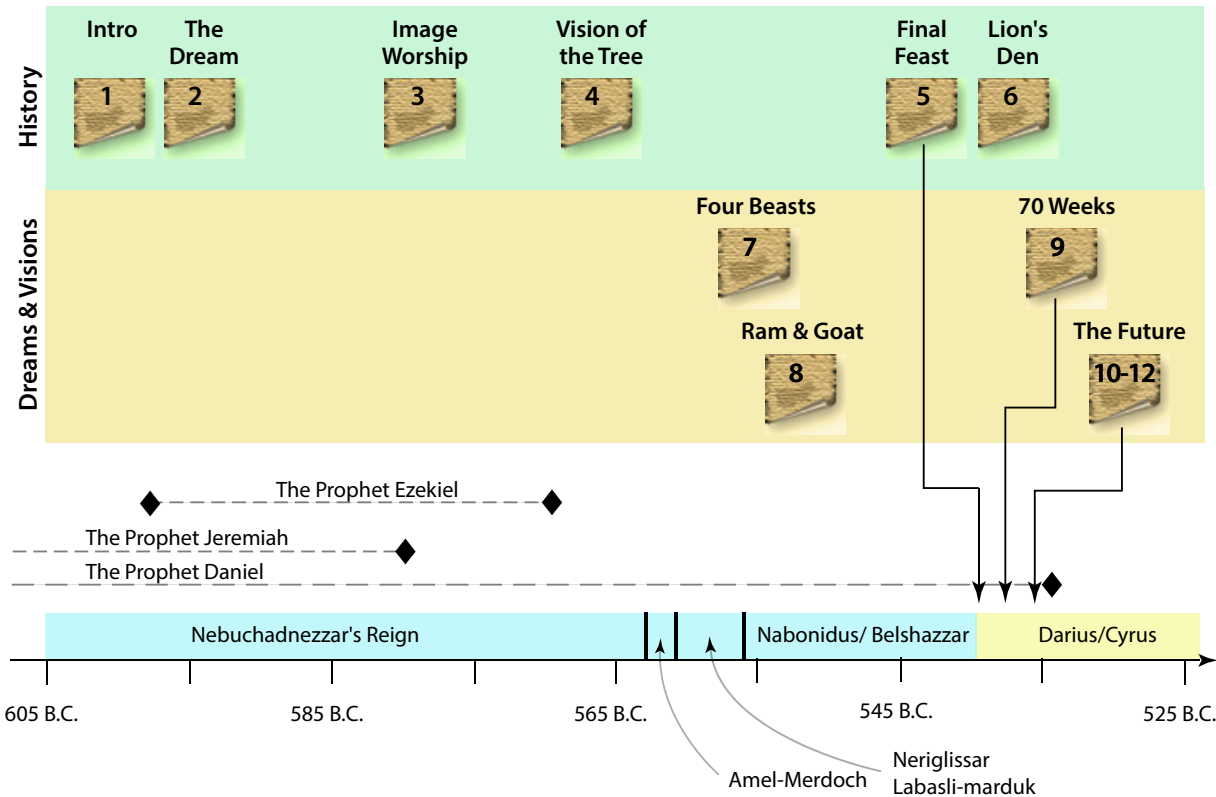
. . . "To you the command is given, O peoples, nations and men of every language, that at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe and all kinds of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king has set up. Daniel 3:4-5 (NASB)

I refer to this as the Babylonian Pops Orchestra! Just in case you think this is like a country band, the lyre is an aristocratic instrument. It was typically made of metal or ivory. It had three to twelve strings on it. The trigon was an instrument usually rectangular in shape with varying numbers of strings on it. The king would have brought together the best musicians he could find. If you go to all the effort to make the statue out of gold, and you are calling all of your politicians and all of the important people of your empire together to bow down before this statue, you are going to have the best orchestra there. The herald announced, "When you hear the music, you are to bow down." Verse 6:

But whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire. Daniel 3:6 (NASB)

You had a choice to either come and worship the statue, or you will be put into the furnace. Turn to Jeremiah 29:22. Jer-

# Outline of Daniel



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emiah wrote during the time of Nebuchadnezzar. He told us a very interesting piece of information. It says:

*Because of them a curse will be used by all the exiles from Judah who are in Babylon, saying, “May the LORD make you like Zedekiah and like Ahab whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire. Jeremiah 29:22 (NASB)*

This verse tells us King Nebuchadnezzar took Zedekiah and Ahab and dropped them into a furnace and roasted them. So when we read this verse that the punishment is to be cast into a furnace of blazing fire, this is not the first time this has happened. Zedekiah and Ahab had been treated in that manner.

Stop and think about all those politicians who had come

from various parts of the empire. We have already made the point that in some cases they would have traveled for hundreds of miles to see the statue that rises 90 feet into the air with its gold surface glistening in the sun. There were a lot of people there, along with the king’s orchestra, and King Nebuchadnezzar himself. All of a sudden the herald spoke up and said, “Bow down and worship, or it will be toast for you!” What would your choice have been? Would you physically, visibly, have walked away? Walking away would have been a sign of disloyalty. They had to make a choice. Verse 7:

*Therefore at that time, when all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe and all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshiped the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up. Daniel*

### 3:7 (NASB)

So they all bowed down and worshiped. The word, “worship” is an interesting word. In verses 5 and 7 when it says “fall down,” it actually means that they had to prostrate themselves on the ground. If you did not want to do this, and all of a sudden everybody else fell down flat on the ground on their face—that is the meaning of the Aramaic word—it would have been easy to see who did not choose to prostrate themselves. Everybody could have seen you. Verse 8:

**For this reason at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and brought charges against the Jews. Daniel 3:8 (NASB)**

As we have seen already, the Aramaic word that is translated here as “Chaldeans” actually refers to astrologers, men who studied the stars. But what is more important is to notice that we are told that they brought charges. The literal Aramaic means that they “ate the pieces of...” I just translated that correctly for you: “ate the pieces of.” They want to eat them, chew on them.

That is the literal Aramaic. That tells us there was great hatred and bitterness on the part of these men toward the Jews - Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. More than likely Daniel is back at the palace. Someone has to run the kingdom while Nebuchadnezzar is at the celebration seeing who is faithful to him. All the dignitaries are down there. Someone has to run the palace. We know from the end of chapter 2 that Daniel works in the palace. He assists in running the affairs of the empire. More than likely, that is where he was so he did not have to join the others and submit himself to worship the statue. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had to show up. This verse implies the Chaldeans had a plan or a plot against the Jews. They already knew about the dedication or commitment of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to God Almighty. They had thought this through and realized that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego would not worship the image. They were nearby so that they could watch what Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego

did. The three friends of Daniel, when everybody fell flat on the ground, stood their ground like statues and did not prostrate themselves. Everybody saw their response. The Chaldeans then reported to the king what they had observed. Verse 9:

**They responded and said to Nebuchadnezzar the king: “O king, live forever!” Daniel 3:9 (NASB)**

Now what is interesting in this verse is that we are not told that they entered the throne room of the king. We are just told that they were talking to the king. They secured permission to speak before the king and said, “O King, live forever.” Verse 10:

**You, O king, have made a decree that every man who hears the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, and bagpipe and all kinds of music, is to fall down and worship the golden image. But whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire. Daniel 3:10-11 (NASB)**

They went in and buttered up the king by telling him they want him to live forever. In verse 10 they reminded him of his decree. In verse 11 they reminded him of the penalty. Then in verse 12, they speak of the Jews. “There are certain Jews....” Did you notice that they said “Jews” twice? They did not need to mention Jews. They could have said “certain men.” I thought it was interesting that they called out Jews by saying, “there are certain Jews.” It revealed the bias of their hearts against God’s people. They said,

**There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the administration of the province of Babylon, namely Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego. Daniel 3:12a (NASB)**

I do not think they are trying to blame the king. They are trying to say, “You appointed these men to important positions in the kingdom. They owe you, O King. These men owe allegiance and worship because you have appointed them.”

Professor William Shay added another important piece of information. He stated that there is a Babylonian text that lists all of the individuals who were invited to a convocation on the Plain of Dura. They were directed or commanded to show up at the Plain of Dura for a meeting. He discovered in the list of names three individuals, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They are on the list. The titles of these men are given. Shadrach is the chief of the royal merchants. Abednego is the secretary of the crown prince. And Meshach is one of the overseers—not the top overseer—but one of the overseers of the slave girls. That tells us, according to this document, that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were at that convocation. This is historical evidence that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were there. And now I want you to notice what the charges against them are. The Chaldeans said,

**These men, O king, have disregarded you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up. Daniel 3:12 (NASB)**

There are three accusations here. The first accusation is that they have disregarded you. That is, they do not respect you. In other words, you have appointed them to these positions of authority and they are not respecting you. You did this great honor for them and they did not return it. The next charge is that they do not serve your gods. The chief god of that era in the Babylonian Empire was Marduk. That would have been a negative for the men. It would have been considered arrogance on their part to not worship the god the king thought was important. But then notice the third charge, “or worship the golden image that you have set up.” The image is of the king! That communicated a lack of loyalty to the king. That was a big deal—especially if there had just been a revolt in the kingdom and this has all been designed to discover who is loyal to the king. That appears to be what was communicated by these Chaldeans to the king.

The second reason I think that this image is of the king himself is because of the dream and the interpretation that God had given to Nebuchadnezzar. The king said in verse 47, “Surely your God is a God of gods.” Nebuchadnezzar already had stated that the God of Meshach, Shadrach, and Abed-

nego was more important than all of his gods including Marduk. If the image had just been of one of his gods, that would not make any sense. This is more support to the concept that the image is of the king himself. This is the charge in verse 13:

**Then Nebuchadnezzar in rage and anger . . . Daniel 3:13a (NASB)**

These Chaldeans knew exactly what the king’s hot button was and they were successful. The king in a rage,

**. . . gave orders to bring Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego; then these men were brought before the king. Nebuchadnezzar responded and said to them, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up?” Daniel 3:13b-14 (NASB)**

The Aramaic is really clear. He is asking a question. He said, “Is this true?! I cannot believe that you did this! I cannot believe that you are disrespectful. I cannot believe that you are not loyal. I cannot believe that you did not obey my command.” Verse 15:

**Now if you are ready, at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery and bagpipe and all kinds of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, very well. Daniel 3:15a (NASB)**

In other words, he said, “I am going to give you another opportunity. I cannot believe that you did not obey my command.”

**But if you do not worship, you will immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire; and what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands? Daniel 3:15b (NASB)**

He is arrogant. Verse 16. I love it!

Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego replied to the king,  
“O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an  
answer concerning this matter.” Daniel 3:16 (NASB)

The message is, “We are not depending on you, King.”  
Verses 17-18,

If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us  
from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us  
out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it  
be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve  
your gods or worship the golden image that you have  
set up. Daniel 3:17-18 (NASB)

What did they say? They said, “Well, King, we do not need  
to answer to you; we are trusting in our God. Our God can  
deliver us if He wants to, and if He does not, we are ready to  
die.” Look with me at Ezekiel, chapter 33. Ezekiel wrote  
during this same period of time. The response of these three  
Jews is incredible. Look first at verse 21 of chapter 33. I want  
you to notice the date. Verse 21 says,

Now in the twelfth year of our exile, on the fifth of the  
tenth month, the refugees from Jerusalem came to me .  
.. Ezekiel 33:21a (NASB)

This is speaking of the captivity in Babylon, and “the  
twelfth year of our exile” would have been from 605 B.C., or  
when the king took captives from Jerusalem. This is just  
about the right time of the statue, the right time of the rebel-  
lion. Now verse 30 is where I want you to read. We have the  
right timeline, so I want you to see what was going on in this  
timeline, when this statue was built, when Shadrach,  
Meshach, and Abednego took their stand. They have been  
accused and are giving the king their response. Now read  
verse 30 from Ezekiel 33:

But as for you, son of man, your fellow citizens who  
talk about you by the walls and in the doorways of the  
houses . . . Ezekiel 33:30a (NASB)

God is talking to Ezekiel and said,

. . . speak to one another, each to his brother, saying,  
“Come now and hear what the message is which comes  
forth from the LORD.” They come to you as people  
come, and sit before you as My people and hear your  
words, but they do not do them, for they do the lustful  
desires expressed by their mouth, and their heart goes  
after their gain. Behold, you are to them like a sensual  
song by one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on  
an instrument; for they hear your words but they do  
not practice them. So when it comes to pass — as surely  
it will — then they will know that a prophet has been  
in their midst. Ezekiel 33:30b-33 (NASB)

God said in effect, “Ezekiel, my people hear what you say,  
but they do not do it. You are entertaining to them, they like  
what they hear, but that is as far as it goes. They are not really  
committed people.” In contrast, Shadrach, Meshach, and  
Abednego were committed people. There was a vast number  
of people about whom God was speaking living in the same  
general time period in history as this event in Daniel 3. I was  
amazed that these Jews in Babylon had this heart attitude.  
You might have thought that after the deportation to Baby-  
lon that they would have had a change of heart, realizing that  
they had been judged. Many of the Jews listened to the  
prophet Ezekiel and just blew him off! Now here are three  
men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and they stand out  
like stars. These men are ready to die if need be. I cannot help  
but think of Christians today. There are a lot of professing  
Christians today who cannot get out of their house on a  
Sunday morning to go to church because “I am just too  
tired.” Are they ready to die in a furnace if need be? There are  
many of professing Christians who have a very entertaining  
view of Christianity and commitment to the Lord. These  
ancient Jewish men were ready to die for God! They said, “If  
God will deliver us, great! If He will not, we are ready to die.”  
Where you are today? I hope you are ready to die for Him.  
You cannot just add Jesus to your life. He has to have all of  
you, your total commitment!