

Daniel 3

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Date: 09 February 2014

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[0 : 00] I do turn back to Daniel chapter 3. Good to be back. It feels like we've just had a long holiday for something up here.! It's kind of quite strange, really. Turn back to Daniel chapter 3.

We're going to look at this. I'm sure, for most of us, is quite a familiar story. I wonder if we can have that slide up on the screen that I gave through.

If you just look up at the screen, I just want to show you a picture as we begin. It's a picture I'm sure many of you have seen before. It's become a little bit iconic in some places.

It's a photo taken in 1936 at the launch of a Navy training vessel in Hamburg. It's actually a very powerful picture.

I don't know whether you can see it clearly from where you are. There's a kind of faint circle around one man in that crowd. And you notice that actually he is not doing what everyone else is doing.

[0 : 59] Everyone else there are performing Nazi salutes. But one man is there standing with his arms folded. For years, we didn't really know very much about that man.

More recently, people have found out a bit more about him. He's a man called August Landmesser. Soon after this photo was taken, he was actually put into prison. He was jailed for fathering children with a Jew.

I think, wherever we are, I think we look at it and we think it's a very powerful photo, isn't it? Picture one man standing against the tide. You can kind of feel the pressure that he must be under.

One man refusing to give in. One man standing against the pressure of an evil regime. Given what we know now about the evils of Nazism. That photo captures our imagination.

We look at it and think, would we have the courage to do what August Landmesser did? Or would we have just gone with the flow? Well, thankfully, we're not in that kind of situation today.

[2 : 01] It's okay, you can move on to the side now. We live in a free country, don't we? We can worship who we choose to worship. We can exercise freedom of conscience and religion.

I guess we're also aware that to be a Christian today, to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, does involve a degree of going against the flow.

It involves a degree of being different. It's not the kind of pressure you get in a regime like that. But there is that subtle but nevertheless quite powerful push not to follow Christ.

It is being like a salmon flowing upstream. It's hard. Perhaps you're aware of that this morning. If you're not a Christian, perhaps you come along on Sundays and you're thinking through Christianity for yourself.

You're thinking through, look, if I'm going to trust Christ, if I'm going to turn to Christ and turn for my sins, actually I know that's going to be difficult. I know the pressure that's going to put me under.

[3 : 06] Perhaps you think from my family, perhaps from folk back at home, perhaps in my workplace. It's going to be tough. Perhaps if you're a Christian here this morning, you're just aware of those kind of pressures that are there on you.

So how do we go against the flow? What confidence can we have that we will keep going against the flow? Well, I think that's what we see in this chapter of Daniel.

I just want to break down this chapter really into three points, the kind of three main scenes, if you like, in this chapter. The first thing we see in the first scene from verses 1 to 11, is I think the writer is pointing out to us the pressure and humour of idolatry.

The pressure and humour of idolatry. Sure, as you were listening to Chris read the passage, you kind of got what's going on in this chapter.

The incident is straightforward enough, isn't it? King Nebuchadnezzar, this great Babylonian king, the most powerful man in the world, has made this huge image of gods.

[4 : 19] You get some of the dimensions in verse 1, don't you? He calls all of his officials, all of the most powerful men in Babylonian societies, a witness, it being set up.

And he then passes a law, doesn't he, calling on all the people of Babylon to stop everything at certain points in the day and to bow down before it whenever this great cacophony of instruments sound.

I just think what we need to realise when we read through these verses is to put ourselves in the shoes, if you like, of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. It's easy, isn't it, to imagine the great pressure there would have been on God's people in Babylon to conform to this act of idolatry. Obviously, the big pressure is the threat of death, isn't it? The fiery furnace stands behind everything that's going on in this chapter. If you don't bow down, you're going to be thrown in to the furnace.

But actually, even if you take that out of the picture, if you take that out of the equation of what's going on in chapter 3, the pressure to bow down to this idol would have been enormous.

[5 : 33] There would have been a visual pressure, I think, to bow down to this idol. This image that Nebuchadnezzar set up was enormous, and it looked incredibly impressive.

It was gold. Now again, just remember who you are. In this situation in Daniel, if you're one of God's people, you are away from your land.

You are in exile. The Babylonians have come, and they've invaded, and God has given you as God's people into their hands. The Babylonians have taken over Jerusalem.

They've taken you back to Babylon. You can't see. Well, you've never been able to see your God. You can't see the markings that God is your Lord.

The temple has been destroyed. You're away from the land. What can you see? Well, you can see this idol. This idol which is great. This idol which is huge.

[6 : 30] It would have been tempting to think that your God has abandoned you, but actually all you can see is the impressive marks of the Babylonian gods. Then it would have been the social pressure to conform to bow down to the idol.

One of the points this chapter is making is simply that everyone else did it. The most powerful people in Babylon bowed down to this idol that had been set up.

All of Nebuchadnezzar's officials bowed down to this idol that has been set up. Your next door neighbours, when that noise sounded, they would have bowed down to the idol that had set up.

Visual pressure. A social pressure. And if that wasn't enough, if you did stand your ground for a while, like these men did, there was a verbal pressure, a kind of bullying pressure to conform.

People weren't happy, were they? Just to live and let live. If you didn't bow down. Now, so you look at verses 8, 9 and 10. The people who noticed that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego weren't bowing down, well, they drew attention to Lebuchadnezzar's attention to that fact.

[7 : 44] They told on them. They maliciously reported these men to the king. It's interesting some of the things they said. There's real fear there. That Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego aren't doing what everyone else is doing.

There's that sense that they are different. They're going against the flow. So, therefore, we should be scared of them. Nebuchadnezzar should be scared of them. What do they say?

They pay no attention to you, O king. They must be a threat. They're doing something different.

That kind of verbal bullying pressure to conform to the rest of the society and what everyone else is doing.

And as well as all of that, I think there's one more thing we need to see about this decree, which kind of adds to the pressure Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are under. I think it's to see that it would have been very easy for these men to obey and to bow down to the idol, but somehow to justify their obedience to themselves.

After all, when you look carefully, the king's decree didn't say that they had to stop worshipping the Lord, did it? What they did in their own time, how Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego lived in between those moments when the instrument was sounded, well, actually, that was their own business.

[9 : 10] All they needed to do was, whenever they heard the instruments, was to bow down to this idol. Put yourself in their shoes. It would have been very easy, wouldn't it, to think, well, it's only a few times a day.

I'll stop, I'll bow down, but actually I won't really be worshipping in my heart. Or perhaps to think, well, I'll bow down, because after all, what use am I going to be to the Lord dead? That kind of mixed obedience, that kind of outward show, but a kind of thinking you're inwardly being committed to the Lord, it would have been very tempting.

It would have been quite easy to do that, wouldn't it? Now just think about all of those pressures.

And just perhaps for a moment, take out of the picture the threat of the fiery furnace.

I think what we have here, for Shadrach, Meshach and Medi, is the kind of pressure, I think, that is on all believers, at all times, to worship other gods.

Sometimes we think of idolatry just as what happens in other countries and other cultures, where there is obvious kind of metal or wooden idols. But actually, idolatry is simply kind of worshipping something else as God, putting something else in the place of God.

[10 : 31] And this kind of social pressure, to kind of bow down and live life in the way that everyone else is living, without reference to the Lord, without reference to the Lord Jesus Christ, well, that kind of pressure, I think, affects every Christian, at every time, in every situation.

We might not be sentenced by death, but we all feel, don't we, something of the visual pressure to build your life on what we can see. After all, you can see, can't you?

Your bank balance. You can see how your career is progressing. You can see the house that you're living in. That kind of temptation to build your life on those things.

After all, everyone else does it. You certainly feel the kind of social pressure, don't you? To live the life that everyone else is living. Perhaps we feel it from colleagues at work, or friends.

Particularly acute, isn't it? When it's family. Perhaps you've got parents, or children, or husbands, or wives, who simply don't understand why our main passion, our guiding concern in our life, isn't the kind of main passion and guiding concern that everyone else has.

[11 : 45] Why aren't you so concerned about career? After all, that is what everyone else is living for. Why aren't you so concerned about your relationships, or your health, or your family as your number one guiding concern?

Certainly more broadly in society, isn't there? There are idols that if we don't bow down to, there is a very kind of, it's kind of socially questionable, isn't it?

The idol of equality, as it is defined by the media, and by the political situation. If you stand against that, or even raise questions, it's seen as odd, and we're seen as a threat.

But like in Babylon, there is subtlety there. Most people are happy for us to carry on worshipping the Lord as well, as long as it doesn't interfere with those things.

The pressure of idolatry, which I'm sure we feel, and certainly Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego felt. But there's something else in this first scene that I think the writer is wanting to make clear to us as we read about what is going on here.

[12 : 58] It's not simply the pressure that's there to bow down to the ice, but it's also, in some sense, the humour of what's going on. Not so that we don't take it seriously, but so that actually we can just take a step back from time to time, and just see a little bit of how ridiculous the situation is.

So often when the biblical writers record what happens in history, they often don't pass direct judgment on what's going on, but they let you know kind of their view on it subtly in the way that they write, in the way that they explain a scene.

And I think as you read through these first 11 or so verses, it's written a bit more like a satirical comedy sketch, I think. Perhaps you noticed it as Chris read through the chapter.

There was an awful lot of repetition, wasn't there, in these first few verses. It's actually quite difficult to read this chapter out aloud. You've got all these lists, and then they come again, and they come again.

It's quite an important repeat of phrase in these first few verses. The writer wants us to see that this great idol is something that Nebuchadnezzar has set up.

[14 : 19] Do you see that expression? It's there in verse 1, it's there in verse 2, it's there in verse 5, verse 7, verse 12, verse 40. Nebuchadnezzar has set up this idol.

And do you see the point the writer's making by repeating that phrase again and again? He's saying, look, this great idol that everyone has to drop everything and bow down to, well, don't forget, it is homemade.

Nebuchadnezzar has set it up. Isn't it ridiculous that people are worshipping something someone has set up? It's the point the prophet Isaiah makes again and again when you read through his

book.

When he talks about idol makers taking wood that won't rot and making sure idols don't tip over. It's not a powerful goal, it's just a bit of metal or just a bit of wood.

It's under men's control. Isn't it crazy? And then there's a couple of other repetitions. There's the repetition of the list of powerful people. It's quite exhausting to read, isn't it?

[15:27] Verse 2 and verse 3, you've got that whole list and you read it and you think, wow, these people, they're so great, they must be so intelligent, they must be so magnificent.

But again, I think you get the point that the writer's making is he's slightly laughing at the situation. Look at all these powerful people in powerful jobs bowing down in front of a homemade idol.

Yes, there's pressure there for taking away from that, but take a step back, just look at the scene, just see how slightly ridiculous it is. And again, I think that's underlined by the other repetition in these verses.

I don't know if you wondered why the writer of the book, probably Daniel, didn't just say in verse 5, when you hear the sound of the instruments, it would have been a lot easier for Chris to read rather than repeating all of those instruments in verse 5, and then in verse 7, and then again in verse 10. But again, I think that's probably underlining not just that this would have been an enormous noise, but again, just how over the top, just how ridiculous this is.

[16:44] As if the Lord is seeing what is going on from an eternal perspective and say, in a way, it's just slightly amusing. And although that doesn't in any way take the pressure off Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, what it does do is, should do, encourage believers to say, actually, when you take a stand, you're kind of doing what is right.

You are doing what is right. And actually, it's everyone else who is doing things that actually, from God's perspective, from an eternal perspective, it's just a little bit funny.

Bowing down to an idol rather than worshipping the Lord. It's kind of Psalm 2 territory, if you remember Psalm 2. The God of heaven laughs as people take a stand against him. There is a kind of humour in the pressure not to worship the Lord.

There is a kind of satirical humour about the idolatries that we face in our world. So if you just think about it, the recession of the last few years, the ongoing recession, has shown, hasn't it, that a trust in money is foolish.

There is something a little bit amusing about governments printing non-existent money to prop up the idol of an economy. The idolatry of equality in the kind of wrong sense.

[18:18] Actually, when you do take a bit of a step back and look at some of the statements that people make and occasionally some of the laws that are passed, they are slightly amusing.

Now we shouldn't laugh in a proud way. There is something very ugly about Christians kind of pointing the finger and kind of laughing at the world around as if they are better, as if we are better than others.

But what it should do is it should give strength and confidence to stand and to trust God when actually the whole world is going against the Lord.

The pressure, yes, but also the humour of idolatry is what we see in these first few verses. How then do you stand against it? Well that's what we see in the second point.

In verses 12-18 we see the boldness and obedience of faith. How do you deal with this pressure of idolatry even when this pressure includes a death sentence?

[19:16] That's what Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced. And we see their boldness, we see their faith in obedience. Now I think the central point of this whole passage isn't actually in the miracle of rescue at the end but it's more in what Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego say.

I think we see it in verses 16-18. It's right at the heart of the passage. It's right there centrally. It's as if the writer has constructed this whole chapter to draw attention to this central point, these faithful words that these men say.

And then because of a first fact at the end of the chapter to show it's really what they say is the most important thing in this chapter. And what they say when they stand before Nebuchadnezzar is incredibly revealing, isn't it?

Nebuchadnezzar shows that actually the issue for him in getting people to bow down to his idol isn't so much that he is a kind of religious man but actually he is concerned about his own power.

He has set up this idol to show his power over people. So men should bow down to it when he says so. He has ultimate power. He has power over their life and over their death.

[20 : 33] You see the question he asks at the end of verse 15. Who is the God who will deliver you out of my hands? Obviously he doesn't believe there is such a God.

Just notice what the men say. Notice how they respond. For all the pressure, for all the bluster of Nebuchadnezzar, they know what the real issue is.

And the issue is who is king. Really that's what the whole of the book of Daniel is about. Right from chapter 1 through to chapter 12, the whole message of the book of Daniel is that God rules.

God is king. It's not just a nice set of stories about how to dare to be a Daniel. No, it's making a big point about God's everlasting kingdom and his greatness.

The writer has made that clear right at the very start of the book of Daniel. So if you've got time, perhaps later this afternoon, go back to chapter 1 verse 1 and 2 and just ask yourself how does the writer show that God is king even though Babylon seems to be so mighty and so impressive.

[21 : 42] And that is the issue that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego recognise is the big issue. They don't worship Nebuchadnezzar. They recognise that God is king, that God is powerful despite all the pressure there is to conform.

They're not going to worship Nebuchadnezzar. They're not going to worship his God. They stand their ground, don't they? We have no need to answer you. We will not serve your gods.

And notice what is really important about their speech in verses 16 to 18 is that actually they are not standing because they simply trust that God is their saviour.

It's really interesting, is it? They don't stand and have the confidence to make this stand because they know that God is going to rescue them from the fiery furnace no matter what.

They know that God has the power to save and rescue but that's not why they make their stand.

They're not summoning up all their powers of faith and imagining the flames being stopped.

[22 : 49] They're not standing there and imagining a miraculous intervention of God before they get to the fire. They know that God can do all those things but that's not what they're relying on.

Look at verse 18 but if not be if known to you O king that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.

The issue is worship. The issue is that God is the Lord that God is the king. Even if they're God even if God has other plans and they burn they will still trust him because he is king.

He is the ruler. They will still obey him. That's the issue that they've got settled in their minds who rules and they know that they are part of God's kingdom. So they won't bow to another king who wants them to commit treason against their Lord.

Their faith isn't in how God will act in a particular situation. It's in who the Lord is. The king, the ruler of their universe, the king.

[23 : 56] They're going to serve him. They are not their own anymore. God will rule. What's the key to having this kind of faith? Well it's knowing who God is, having rock solid convictions about the reality of his kingdom.

Don't think of these stories as making a kind of moral point. Dare to be a Daniel. No, the reason Daniel and his friends here can stand alone is they've got a clear vision of who God is.

He rules. His kingdom never ends. That leads to an unshakable commitment to that kingdom which lasts beyond this life. And so they entrust themselves to his rule.

Even if they don't know quite how that rule is going to pan out in the here and now. That's what leads them to say, but if not, in verse 18.

It's easy to think that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego saying that phrase, but if not, that is a sign of weak faith. They don't really trust in the Lord. But actually when you think about it, it is a sign of very strong faith, isn't it?

[25 : 08] What are they saying? They are saying we know God. We know his promises and power. But also we know he is greater than we are. We know his wisdom is greater than we are.

We know that he knows the world more than we do. We know that he is God, that he is sovereign, and that means he is free. Yes, he's bound to his word, he's bound to his promises.

But at this point, they don't know whether their living or dying is part of what it means for him to fulfil his promises. They simply trust themselves to his sovereignty and to his power.

And that's what true faith looks like in this kind of situation. Perhaps we struggle with that. Perhaps we struggle with that phrase, but if not.

Perhaps we kind of think of some of the struggles that we face as believers, that pressure that we have to conform. We struggle with it, with actually what it means to take a stand for the Lord.

[26 : 10] We would far rather that phrase, but if not, wasn't there. Perhaps we think we want more than a perhaps. We want to know that if we do the right thing, God will immediately step in and make things easy for us.

But I think what Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego realise is that actually that isn't obedience and trust at all. That is simply a contract that we believe we've made with God.

What these men know is that they belong to God, the King, who loves them, who's rescued them, who rules them, and they belong to him no matter what.

It's a hard truth, isn't it? But I think until we grasp that, we are going to crumble in the face of pressure, boldness and obedience of faith.

But thirdly, the story wonderfully doesn't end there, and we also see the power and presence of Jesus in these last 12 verses. What hope is there then if we do stand? Well, that leads on to this great climax.

[27 : 21] They're connected with livid, isn't he? And what they say, it's not that surprising if you put yourself in his shoes. He turns up the heat of the furnace, he binds Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and has them thrown in to the fiery furnace.

The furnace is so hot that his guards are killed as they push them in. You can say the worst has happened. They've said, but if not, and they're proved to be right, they weren't delivered out of Nebuchadnezzar's hands.

But then something very strange happens, doesn't it? look down at verse 24 and 25, Nebuchadnezzar peers in to see what's going on. And when he looks, he doesn't see three men, does he?

He sees a fourth walking with them. Although they are in the flames, they are free, they are secure, and they're with someone else.

At this point, obviously, we need to ask the question, who is this fourth figure? We don't have a great deal to go on, actually, in this chapter. Nebuchadnezzar is simply told, he says he looks like a son of the gods.

[28 : 35] God's. But I think what I want to suggest, that given all that we see in the Old Testament, and all that we see in the New Testament, is that I think who else must can it be other than that figure that we see in the Old Testament, who is the angel of the Lord, who I think is God himself who comes to meet with his people.

The pre-incarnate appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the midst of the fire, God comes to his suffering people.

You see, God hasn't just left Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to stand firm for him and to face this furnace alone. That wouldn't really be a comforting message, would it? The obedience in the face of pressure, it might lead to difficulties.

And then you'll be on your own. No, actually, when we stand, when worse difficulties perhaps come because of our stand, the comfort I think we can take from Daniel 3 is that the Lord Jesus Christ is with us in those difficulties no matter what happens.

Even if that means going into a furnace. You see, one of the Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are released. Miraculously, they are saved from the heat of the flames.

[29 : 59] It was God's will to save them. But I think there's one writer who has said on this passage, what we have in this chapter is a token. It's not a blueprint for how God is going to act in every situation.

I think we have an assurance of how God is with his people in difficulties. But we can't use this chapter to say that God will always rescue his people dramatically.

in the Bible, aren't there, there are instances of people under pressure, believers under pressure, who stand firm and they lose their lives.

The history of the world, the history of our country, shows stories, aren't there, of believers who stand firm under great pressure, who recognise what Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego recognise, and actually go to the stake for trusting Christ.

What does this chapter have to say to us when that happens? Well, actually, it's the greater miracle of the chapter. Christ comes to his people in the furnace. He doesn't always shield us from the worst of dangers and struggles and pains and pressures.

[31 : 09] Life can and does get harder when he rescues us, but the promise is that in those struggles, he is there. He doesn't necessarily take us out of the valley of the shadow of death, but

as the psalmist says, he walks with us through it.

And what we see as he comes to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the flames, is that there is nowhere, no situation, no problem, no pressure that is too hard for him.

Nowhere that he can't find you and comfort you and walk with you through. And that's especially true of those situations where we've obeyed him when it costs us.

When we think, well how can I stand apart from my friends, how can I make a stand on this issue? I don't know what's going to happen. God doesn't say what's going to happen when you make that stand, but the promise of God's word is that Jesus will be with you when you make that stand.

how can I take a stand in my job you might think, I don't know what's going to happen. You might lose your job, but Jesus will be there. It's been the testimony of believers through the generations, that actually he is often there in a closer way in the furnace than he is outside of the furnace.

[32 : 30] Think about the privilege these men had for a moment in the furnace. they met Christ years before he came to earth. You might think I'm kind of labouring a point from a passage and you're wondering whether it bears the weight of what I'm saying.

Just to show another point where this happened, just turn as we close to the end of Acts chapter 7. In some ways a very similar situation.

You've got this man Stephen who takes a stand for Christ who is hauled up before the high priests and teachers of the law under enormous social and verbal and visual pressure to conform, to not believe that Jesus is the Christ.

And he takes a stand. He speaks this most incredible sermon in Acts chapter 7 before the high priests that he is going to continue to worship Christ.

And he's going to stand against what they are teaching. And actually the opposite happens to Stephen than happens to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. He doesn't keep his life.

[33 : 44] It is God's will that he should lose his life at this point. But just notice what happens in verses 54 to 55. When they heard these things they were enraged, they ground their teeth at him.

But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and he saw the glory of God. Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

And he said, behold, I see heavens opened, the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. The Lord Jesus Christ doesn't leave his faithful servant at this moment of incredible pressure.

No, he is there in a special way actually. I think there's something important about the fact that at that point Stephen looks up and he sees that Jesus Christ standing.

We're told in the book of Hebrews that he is sat seated at the right hand of God because his work is finished. But at this point Jesus Christ, if you like, stands up to emphasise the fact that he is at work on Stephen's behalf.

[34 : 49] He is interceding for him. He is drawing near to him. I think we can take these kind of points in the Bible to give us great assurance at that time of great pressure that the Lord Jesus Christ will not abandon us no matter what happens.

And I think the challenge of Daniel 3 is that do we have this same kind of conviction that the Lord is our King and that he will be with us no matter what?

Are we willing, as Nebuchadnezzar says in verse 28, to yield up our bodies rather than serve and worship any God except our own God. We're only going to know it if we have a big vision of who God is, a big vision that he is King, a great assurance of the love of Christ towards us.

As we close, just notice that the Lord uses their experience to impress Nebuchadnezzar, he makes a decree, he doesn't need to protect them, he promotes them. One of those things that I think perhaps the Lord uses to draw Nebuchadnezzar to himself, but Nebuchadnezzar has got a long way to go before he finally recognises the Lordship of Christ.

But that's Daniel 4, which you can read up for yourself. Let's pray. Amen. Amen.