

Daniel 2 – Living Courageously

Daniel 3 and 4

Whenever I go for a day trip to London, it's wonderful to gaze up at the increasing number of magnificent buildings. The city of London, like every major city in the world, has its fair share of iconic buildings. Dominating London's skyline are the Swiss Re skyscraper, affectionately known as the 'Gherkin', the 'Shard of glass' south of the river on London Bridge, and the Pinnacle, affectionately known as the 'Helter-Skelter' which, at 75 floors, is one of London's tallest residential towers. They are all magnificent buildings, indicative of the best of human achievement in design, engineering, aesthetic impact and commercial success. Undeniably impressive, the sight of them invokes a sense of awe, especially when you stand close up at the foot of these great towers reaching up to the sky.

In the Ancient World, the image of gold, ninety feet high and nine feet wide, set up by King Nebuchadnezzar on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon, would have been an equally impressive sight. The magnificence of the city of Babylon epitomized by its Ishtar Gate and Hanging Gardens was surpassed by this magnificent golden statue, dedicated as an object of worship to the might of King Nebuchadnezzar.

Today's story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is dated around 580 BC. Nebuchadnezzar would have been at the height of his power, and Daniel's three friends are probably in their late 30s/early 40s. Promoted with Daniel after his 'dream decoding' exploits at the end of chapter 2, they have come to a place of prominence in Nebuchadnezzar's empire. But prominence brings its own complexities. There are rivalries and jealousies amongst the civil servants of different faiths, and the high profile given to the exiles draws stark attention to their distinction as Hebrews. They are pitted against the overwhelming power of Nebuchadnezzar himself, as he calls all his loyal servants to bow down to his image of gold.

Whilst in chapter 1, Daniel and friends, through their refusal to eat the king's food and drink, were looking for an opportunity to make their allegiance to God known, here in chapter 3, the situation is quite different. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego face a direct and hostile challenge to their faith – bow down and worship the statue or die! Nebuchadnezzar's bold and brutal decree necessitates a bold and courageous stand in open defiance to the king.

In contrast to chapter 1, which was pretty low key, the events described in our Bible reading today are high profile and dramatic. If it were today, the TV crews would be camped out on the plains of Dura, every main news channel represented, covering the events as they unfold. It's high intensity right through the chapter: the manipulation and control to force people to worship the statue; the denouncing of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego; the fury of Nebuchadnezzar; their defiant stand; the nature of their punishment; the heating up of the furnace; the sight of the divine being in the furnace; and their dramatic deliverance. If we weren't calling this week's service 'Living Courageously', we might well call it 'Fire Escape' instead!

The pressure on the Hebrew Three was intense. Death by fire was a common mode of punishment in Babylon. This is *not* a children's story. The awful furnace stood ready – commentators usually assume it was cast in metal and beehive-shaped, with an opening on the top into which the men were thrown, and a door at the side through which the horrors inside could be viewed. The drama is heightened by the detailed description of the heat of the furnace which was blazing, seven times hotter than usual, and so hot that soldiers guarding the three were killed. This was a fiery trial, quite literally. But the three men stood firm in faith.

I love the Street Bible's interpretation of what Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego say to the king in verses 17 and 18:

'If we're chucked into this blazing oven, the God we work for could pull us out alive. He'll rescue us from your cruelty, King. Even if he doesn't and we fry, you should still know, there'd be no regrets – no way are we bowing down to your gods or your overgrown gold Action Man.'

Last week we saw how through Daniel and his friends living distinctively, God advanced his kingdom. After Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in chapter 2, the king falls prostrate before Daniel saying, 'Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries', his first faltering step in a long journey to faith. We see this again in this week's readings. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego's recklessness opened the community to their message. Their stance against the forces of the culture were the initial tremors which brought the lord of culture to his knees and Babylon face to face with the Hebrew's God. They refused to bow the knee and a miracle happened. Not only were they saved from death but the king sent out a letter – circulated around the earth – speaking of what the true God had

done. Three men said no, and said yes to God, and the world felt the reverberations.

Whilst Nebuchadnezzar's statement of faith at the end of chapter 3 evidences a greater understanding of God, he is still far from genuine repentance and saving faith. But, through it all, God is gracious and patient with him. But it's in chapter 4 where everything changes. Nebuchadnezzar has another dream which Daniel is called to interpret. Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of his royal palace, the dream was fulfilled and the mighty king is humbled – his power, dignity, sanity and humanity are taken from him for seven long years. When God's judgement on Nebuchadnezzar achieves its intended purpose, he raises his eyes to heaven and his sanity is restored. This upward look reveals a change of heart, repentance and faith and in verses 34 and 35, you read a wonderful hymn of praise to God. The words that end chapter 4 are a powerful testimony from a changed man: *'Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just.'*

What an amazing impact the courage of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had on those around them. Jeff Lucas makes the point in his book *'Singing in Babylon'* that we often fail to see how God occasionally leads us into second-choice worlds primarily for the sake of others. He writes that 'when Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego were facing death, it was all to do with Babylon, their second-choice world. Being able to live through our second choice world often requires us to grasp that *we* are not the point of it; someone or something else is.' Whilst it's highly unlikely that we'll ever face a scenario such as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego faced, *our* recklessness can be expressed in many small choices that add up, choices that say we will not participate in the destructive thinking and practices of the culture around us. As we quietly refuse binge drinking, as we choose to remain faithful to our loved one, as we consider our buying choices where much of what we consume is created in dangerous sweatshops, when we choose what is right over what we know to be wrong... we make a difference not only to ourselves, but to others too.

The story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, in particular their assertion that even if they are not rescued *God is still God* is a wonderful insight into faith under pressure. This is faith grounded not in fantasy and denial, but in determined realism. It's a realism that refuses both the naivety that says God *must* rescue me when bad things come my way, and the cynicism that says

that he can't. It's a faith that holds out for the possibility of miracles, but will not jump ship when miracles are slow in coming.

We know that in some parts of the world, Christians face intense pressure and persecution. But perhaps the most beautiful gift that is given to the church by those who suffer is the 'great discovery' that in the worst of circumstances, joy is found. Anna Lee Stangl, head of Christian Solidarity Worldwide and author of the book 'Tried by Fire' writes of her visits to Christian prisoners in Peru:

'I have seen a light and a hope radiating from inside the dark, damp prison cells of Peru that I have rarely seen in a 'free' church. I have been the recipient of immense Christian generosity and hospitality from prisoners, who invited me to eat the precious food their impoverished family had brought for them on their weekly visit. I have heard the true sound of joy in the signing voices of prisoners who have no rational reason to be joyful. I have heard words of hope uttered in an impossible situation that convicted me of my own puny faith. Paradoxically, it is by going into these prisons that I am reminded what freedom really is.'

So, to conclude, I invite you to engage with this week's teaching by doing three things – to listen, learn and act on something from the Bible reading and sermon. This week, as you listen to the world around you, I invite you to think:

What are some of the small choices *you* make that add up? Choices that help you live distinctively as a Christian, choices that make a difference not just to you, but also to those around you?

As an invitation to learn: Where in the world is it most dangerous to be a Christian? Why not ask this question of your Internet search engine and find out more about the struggles of the persecuted church? Or have a look at the Bible Society website and read some of the stories there.

And lastly: What is God calling on you to *do* as a result of the teaching today? Persecution of the church is not just something that happened in history. Many of our brothers and sisters in Christ suffer *daily* pressure and persecution. Of course it's easy for us to pray, but is God calling you to do more? To give to agencies that co-ordinate support for the persecuted, to write to those who can influence, that they might speak out in the corridors of power on behalf of those who have no voice of their own? To write letters to the persecuted, assuring them of our prayers and support? What is God calling *you* to do that might make a small difference to someone living courageously as a Christian in the persecuted church today?