

Daniel Chapter 3

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[0 : 00] King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold 90 feet high and 9 feet wide and set it up on the plain of Jura in the province of Babylon.

He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisors, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up.

So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisors, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up and they stood before it.

Then the herald loudly proclaimed, This is what you are commanded to do, O peoples, nations and men of every language. As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up.

Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.

Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshipped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

[1 : 35] At this time, some astrologers came forwards and denounced the Jews. They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, O King, live forever.

You have issued a decree, O King, that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into the blazing furnace.

But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who pay no attention to you, O King.

They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold that you have set up. Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, so these men were brought before the king.

And Nebuchadnezzar said to them, Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold that I have set up? Now, when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, if you are not ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good, but if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace.

[3 : 05] Then what god will be able to save you from my hand? Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we need not to defend ourselves before you in this matter.

If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the god we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.

Thanks, Frederick. Well, let's sing again together now from our... Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude towards them changed.

He ordered the furnace to be heated seven times hotter than usual and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace.

So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.

[4 : 54] Then King Nebuchadnezzar leapt to his feet in amazement and asked his advisors, Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?

They replied, Certainly, O king. He said, Look, I see four men walking around in the fire, one unbound and unharmed and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.

Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the most high God, come out, come here.

So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisors crowded around them and they saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies nor was a hair of their head singed.

Their robes were not scorched and there was no smell of fire on them. Then Nebuchadnezzar said, Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who has sent his angel and rescued his servants.

[6 : 25] They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own god.

Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble for no other God can save in this way.

Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon. If you think the wording is strange in that hymn then you should read the original because most of us don't understand a great deal of what Martin Luther was talking about 500 years ago but it's a wonderful hymn of faith and particularly pertinent to our subject this morning.

Now could you turn with me to Daniel 3 to that chapter which was read for us earlier on because we're going to be going through that passage together. And I've left my notes upstairs to my sermon.

So I'm going to go and get them now rather than muddle through. So just talk amongst yourselves for a moment and I'll be back in a minute. As if by magic I'm back again.

[8 : 01] That's the first time that's ever happened to me. Ever. Thankfully I haven't got to study at home I've got to study upstairs. But it is two flights of steps so I'll take my jacket off now.

So we're in Daniel in chapter 3. So much of our news in papers and TV, radio of course is taken up with suffering. Around the world this time there are all sorts of areas where suffering is predominant. Whether it be the Ebola outbreak in Western Africa which is of course causing such great concern and great loss of life. Whether it's the terrorist attacks of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria we are subject to images stories of pain and anguish.

It's something that we can't get away from. More rarely do we hear about the suffering of the tens of thousands of Christians around the world. Not only in areas of conflict of course that was highlighted in Iraq with IS driving out Christians from their villages and so on.

And not just at the hands of terrorists but also governments rulers friends countrymen neighbours suffering of God's people is something which is rarely highlighted.

[9 : 26] And for that reason when Barnabas Fund spoke about a week of suffering church action then as elders we found it was appropriate to set aside at least this Sunday morning for us to really stop and think about these things.

We do pray of course for the suffering church regularly but as I mentioned before there are many organisations that have been working for decades to raise awareness of suffering and to support and care for those who are caught up in it.

But the suffering of God's people in the 20th century and the 21st century is not something new for the church of Jesus Christ from the very days of the apostles if you read the book of Acts you find that there has never really been a time when God's people Christians have not been persecuted or oppressed.

There's never been really a period where they've been free all through the world to continue just to follow Jesus and to preach the gospel. And even before the New Testament when we go back into the Old Testament we find again that God's people faced times of great persecution and oppression and suffering.

Think of those 400 years of slavery that God's people endured in Egypt. And so that reason I've picked here Daniel and chapter 3 because here is an incident of persecution against some of God's people which highlights the reality of what we're thinking about today.

[10 : 50] Now we probably nearly all of us know the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the Fiery Furnace. It's a Sunday school classic along with Daniel in the Lion's Den. But what I want us to do is to draw a line from here in Babylon 400 years BC to some of the people around about the world in the 21st century because we can read a story like this and it can be a little bit detached, it can be a little bit of a fairy story, it's a reality, we know it's a real historical event but we need to see that what is happening then is happening more often today and that God's people are facing opposition.

I want us to do this not because only that I want us to be aware of the suffering of God's people, not only that I want us to also be able to intelligently pray for God's people who are suffering but also I want us to think seriously about how we can support God's people in persecution in whatever way the Lord helps us.

So here's the story, here's the events, here's the reality of what happened to three Christians, three believers in the Lord God, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Some of you will know their story, they were three Jews from Judah who'd been taken away from their home hundreds of miles to Babylon, modern day Iraq.

Back in chapter one we're told of what happened. Nebuchadnezzar, the emperor of the Babylonian Empire captured Judah and Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and the city and took a lot of people away into exile including some of the very young men.

We're told the king ordered to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility, young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude, every kind of learning, well informed and so on and so on to teach them and train them that they might work in the civil service.

[12 : 41] We're told later in that chapter among these from Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The chief official gave them new names to Daniel the name Belshazzar, to Hananiah, Shadrach, to Mishael, Meshach, to Azariah, Abednego.

So these three young men along with Daniel who we know so well probably in their teens taken away from their homeland, taken away from their families, brought into Babylon, this country many miles away, taught a new language, educated in a new way of thinking, brought up to serve in leadership in that country.

But amazingly, God had gone ahead of them and they were able to freely practice their faith for many, many years. They were able to eat what they wanted to eat and were not compromised into absorbing the lifestyle, the belief system of those around about them.

But that freedom that they enjoyed, we don't know how long they enjoyed it for, it may have been several decades or several years, we don't know how long, but that freedom didn't remain indefinitely. It seems as we come to chapter three they are faced with a rise in opposition against the living God and they face the toughest challenge of their lives.

So what happened and what does it say about today? Well, we start in verse, chapter one of verse three, King Nebuchadnezzar made an image and he sets out a law, doesn't he?

[14 : 12] A command. Verse four, the herald loudly proclaimed, this is what you are commanded. Nebuchadnezzar was the emperor, an absolute dictator of the Babylonian empire, the largest empire of his day and the man of greatest power of his day.

He had conquered Judah, taken these men into exile along with thousands of others and conquered many other lands as well all through the Middle East as we know it. And so he decides one day he's going to make a new law, pass a new law, a government statute.

And to say the least, it's somewhat severe in its punishment of anyone who doesn't keep that law. Look at verse six, whoever does not fall down and worship the image immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.

Not a slap on the wrist or a small fine or a time in prison, but you don't keep this law, basically you die a hideous, awful death.

And around the world today there are several governments that are severely restricting Christians from living out their way of faith. What happened with Nebuchadnezzar seems to us extreme, but it's actually not all that extreme, sadly.

[15 : 27] North Korea is the most infamously intolerant of all religious groups. Earlier this year, 33 people in North Korea that we know of were killed simply because a southern Korean missionary had spoken to them.

They hadn't accepted anything necessarily just because they had been in conversation with him. They were killed. He was put into a labor camp. There are tens of thousands of people estimated as Christians who are in labor camps and they are the most awful and cruel places in North Korea. But what may surprise us to learn is that there are other governments who are nearly likewise so oppressive. Here's from one of the prayer matters. The Maldives, seen by many tourists as an island paradise, is one of the most intolerant Muslim nations in the world.

No non-Muslim can become a citizen or hold any public position, including in politics or the judiciary. Civil law is based on Islamic Sharia law.

Public statements contrary to Islam are forbidden. Christians, who number less than 0.2% of the population, other non-Muslims can worship only in private and there are no non-Muslim places of worship or public worship services.

[16:42] Expat Christians may not encourage Maldivian citizens to participate in Christian activities. Spreading any religion other than Islam is illegal and punishable by house arrest or imprisonment for up to five years.

Muslims who convert to Christianity are liable to lose their citizenship. Maldivian Christians suffer surveillance, ostracism, and discrimination. They are required to educate their children as Muslims. Foreign Christians may be deported for carrying Christian literature or having Christian symbols. That's the Maldives. What a paradise. Not for a Christian, though, is it? So there are hostile governments around the world where they make laws against Christians and Daniel and his friends were in a country where the law, the government, was hostile against belief in God.

But of course, in many of these countries as we see with Maldives, what lies behind a hostile government is often a hostile religion. The law that Nebuchadnezzar passed was a religious law. It demanded that all people must worship one religion. There was no flexibility or tolerance. They had to worship his religion, his statue, this massive 90-foot statue of gold of himself that was set up in the plain for people to see.

[18:01] Woe betide anyone who refused to share his religious beliefs. There was no freedom. And it's not just the extremism of Islam that is so violently opposed to Christians.

And without a doubt, Islam is the most violently opposed. I'm sorry to say, but there is no moderate Islam outside of the West. No country that is ruled by Islam is tolerant of Christians or gives freedom to Christians or equality to Christians.

Wherever Islam rules, it is anti-Christian and intolerant and persecuting. But it's not just them. Other nations as well.

Other religions as well. In Sri Lanka, we have from, again, this prayer letter, something that happened. And it's this. Pastor Pradeep was out when a violent mob of Buddhists descended last year on his home, which is used to worship.

The assailants vandalized the property and threatened the pastor's wife. She called the police but they could not contain the mob. The attack continued for three and a half hours. This onslaught followed a series of other forcible attempts to end Pastor Pradeep's ministry.

[19:13] Sri Lanka's constitution affords Buddhism the foremost place. The elevated status is exploited by the powerful Buddhist national lobby. The lobby particularly is opposed to Christianity and campaigns for the introduction of anti-conversion laws that hinder Christian activities.

It goes on to say at least 65 anti-Christian incidents including mob attacks on churches were recorded in 2013. Church leaders are particularly at risk of violence and harassment and churches will be forcibly closed.

Pressure from Buddhist monks closed down over 40 churches and house churches in Sri Lanka in 2013. Buddhism people think of peace and everybody it's all about niceness and gentleness.

Well we see when man gets hold of religion man made religion then he is always intolerant and acting evilly. So King Nebuchadnezzar he was the government of the day that was hostile.

The religion of the day was hostile. But of course what often happens isn't just that governments and religious groups attack and persecute Christians but individuals as well.

[20:21] Look at what happened to Shadrach and Co in verse 8. At this time that's the time of the law being passed astrologers came forward to denounce the Jews. These so called astrologers were some of the government officials some of the supporters of King Nebuchadnezzar some of his lackeys that worked with him and for him and had authority and clearly they worked in the civil service almost certainly with Shadrach and his friends and they had a dislike of them because of their faith and they used that to stir up trouble for them and to grasp them up to Nebuchadnezzar

hoping that they would get the punishment that they ultimately did get and so we find it's very painful for Christians who are living in communities to find that their neighbours and sometimes so called friends turn on them attack them kill them or even just simply dob them in to the government of the day.

Here's something that happens in Nepal not that long ago last year in fact Christian leader in Nepal was called in the early hours of the morning to the home of a Hindu family to whom he'd been witnessing.

He never returned. As Debalel that was his name who was 36 was praying for one of the family man who'd claimed he needed prayer for healing got up attacked him and killed him.

Hindu extremist groups such as the Nepal Defence Army are intent on making Nepal a Hindu nation as it was in 2006 and so on. So there we are. If you witness or share with Christians or share with people there may be the cost of your life in these countries.

People who are neighbours people who said we want prayer and he'd gone round in the middle of the night with care was attacked killed. So there we find Shadrach and Meshach and the others hostile governments hostile religion hostile individuals and so they are brought aren't they before Nebuchadnezzar and to be fair in one sense to Nebuchadnezzar he acts quite fairly with them doesn't he in verses 13 though he's furious with rage he doesn't just immediately throw them in the fire he gives them a second chance he says well you know it is an opportunity to in one sense denounce your faith in the living God it is an opportunity bow down worship my image and we'll say no more about it it's an easy get out isn't it for him many Christians as well face that same difficulty and problem yes if you accept and convert to Hinduism or you convert to Islam or you give up the faith in the Lord Jesus and following him then we'll say no more about it you can go on with your life and be a good citizen there's a choice that they have to face worship the idol deny the true God or refuse to worship the idol and stay faithful to the Lord but be thrown into the furnace now in their response to Nebuchadnezzar we find some wonderful faith being spoken of but we also find as well the response which we need to pray for in the hearts and lives of God's people this helps us to pray for them that we can pray that what happened with Shadrach and Meshach and the others may also happen with them particularly in their strength and so one of the things that Barnabas has been asking us to pray for is this that those who have been persecuted and opposed may remain faithful may be strong enough to continue to be faithful in spite of such persecution and oppression here's what happens doesn't it to Shadrach and Co even if he doesn't rescue us we want you to know oh king we will not serve your gods worship the image of gold that you set up these three men don't yield to the threats of the king they don't yield but they reaffirm their faith in the Lord their God here's something that happened in Pakistan to a church last year a bomb blast tore through [24 : 31] All Saints Church in Peshaw in Pakistan killing more than a hundred people many of the Christians were badly hurt and some lost their entire families yet remarkably they continue to testify to their present blessings and future hope in Christ they are models of faithfulness in the face of acute hostility amazing isn't it that they should continue to trust the Lord and continue to be faithful to him that's what we need to pray for these brothers and sisters in Christ when they're under so much pressure that the Lord would sustain them we know that faith is a supernatural work isn't it it's not our own faith it's not something that we generate or make so they need that supernatural help of God the Holy Spirit to keep them faithful don't we need that ourselves in the face of mockery or temptation when we are surrounded in our present communities by people who might ridicule us don't we need that same help of the Lord to be faithful to witness for him and to speak for him and not to as it were convert at least in the world's thinkings to doing the things that they do and acting in the way they act the second thing we need to pray for one of the things we see which is evident in the lives of these three men is this that they have a peace to trust God with the outcome of their lives and that's what they say if we are thrown into the blazing furnace that God we serve is able to save us but even if he doesn't we want you to know oh king they've got this incredible peace that they can trust God that he can save them if he wants to and yet if he also chooses he may call them to suffer and to die and be martyrs there's a peace that pervades them in the sovereignty of God they aren't afraid to trust him with their lives they declare that he is in control he's the greater power than Nebuchadnezzar the greatest most powerful man of the day and again

God's people need to be prayed for that they might have that peace to trust the Lord with the outcome here's something again else from one of the prayer notices it's about a group of pastors in Kyrgyzstan who faced persecution from local Muslims attending they attended a conference about

the place of suffering in the Christian life afterwards one of them said now I understand that I need to face suffering with joy and gratitude for many of us when we face trials and difficulties one of the things that comes to our mind is God what are you doing doubts fill our hearts and minds don't they why are you letting me go through this trial or this difficulty this problem well the reality is this of course is if we believe in the living God we believe in a God who's in control a sovereign God a one who rules over all things and if he chooses to call us to go through times of great suffering and trial then we are to trust him and to rejoice in him not rejoice in the suffering and say thank you that this is so terrible but rejoice in him and trust him and it may well be that God brings us through times of great suffering and trial and rescues us but if he doesn't does that change him does it change his love for us no it doesn't faith in a sovereign God so we need to pray for God's people there they might have that peace

Lord if you call me to suffer Lord I trust you as we sang in that lovely hymn I trust in him I trust in him now of course something wonderful happens doesn't it to Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego not wonderful to begin with because we're told that they're tied up bound up then strong men take hold of them and no doubt have to carry them to the opening to the blazing furnace and throw them in the furnace is made seven times hotter than ever before so you can imagine how hot that was so hot was it we're told and the king's command so urgent that the strong soldiers who took them and threw them in were killed by the blaze so things are getting worse rather than better to begin with but what happens isn't it in verse 24 the king Nebuchadnezzar leapt to his feet weren't there three men we threw in the fire how is it that I see four what's happening here well we know what's happening isn't it here we have

God with his people in suffering this is we believe to be Christ the son of God he appears from time to time in the old testament he appeared to Abraham and to Joshua when Joshua was around the walls he was the captain of the Lord's host other times the angel of the Lord it's Christ the son of God he's there with them he's not standing aloof he's not standing to one side and gazing at them or calling to them words of encouragement the Lord Jesus Christ of course is the one who is with us always that's the theme we've been thinking of particularly this morning and that's surely what we must pray most of all for God's people in times of great persecution that they may be aware of and sense the very nearness of the Lord Jesus with them Paul spoke about that himself at times when he was on his own the Lord alone stood with me and many Christians who have been persecuted and suffered for Christ have also been able to say that they've been aware of the presence and the nearness of the Lord Jesus Christ if you've ever had chance to read and I would encourage if you never have read the testimony of Richard Wurmbrand who is a pastor in Romania his book is called Tortured for Christ you've got to have quite a strong stomach in one sense to read it because he doesn't spare any of the details of the suffering he and other Christians went through but he I was able to watch on YouTube a clip of him from the 60s I imagine speaking about being in the prison cell and how it was one of the most blessed times of his life when he knew the nearness and presence of Christ more than he'd ever known at any other time surely that again he spent three years in solitary confinement and another 11 years in imprisonment surely that's what we must be praying for that that promise of God I will never leave you or forsake you may be a reality to God's people and that's a comfort to us as well isn't it dear friends because you know there are times when we do feel where are you Lord we're going through suffering or difficulty or opposition where are you Lord well here's the reality whether we feel it see it or really know it Christ is with us he is with us he will never forsake us and leave us let us pray for one another as we pray for our dear brothers here that we might know

[31 : 25] Christ's nearness and presence all the time he's with them and of course because he's with them something incredible happens doesn't it we know the end of the story Nebuchadnezzar approaches the opening of the blazing furnace obviously he didn't go too close having seen what happened to his soldiers but he calls out come out Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and they came out and all the satraps the prefects the governors the royal advisors and all those people gather around what do we find after being in a furnace which was seven times hotter than normal we find that they were not harmed their hair wasn't even singed some of these hair dryers nowadays are so powerful they can singe your hair but even that didn't singe their hair wasn't singed their robes weren't scorched there was no smell of fire on them they were rescued and delivered they didn't have to die after all they were willing to they wouldn't give up on the Lord Jesus Christ they wouldn't give up on the God they'd put their faith and they were willing to suffer they were willing to die yet wonderfully he sets them free rescues them saves them that's happened

many times as well to God's people

I've been reading this book it's in our library this is the library version actually because I couldn't find mine but I have got it now so this will go back in the library read it it's fantastic it's about the history of the gospel in China and particularly as I'm getting into the 60s and 70s now reading about the suffering and the persecution under Chairman Mao and the revolution there here's what happened to one Christian evangelist we're told this his name was Mao Zitong and he was preaching the gospel and on one occasion only the presence of a sympathetic crowd prevented him being beaten to death and another time he was handcuffed behind his back and instructed to stand on the parapet of a bridge in order to be pushed over it a violent storm blew up at that very instant he was taken back to prison ultimately to be released another Christian called Li Tian became the prime target of the public security bureau who was arrested in 1975 sentenced to death and transferred to prison to be on death row a huge flood in Henan province forced a postponement of his execution the next date was set for the spring of 1976 this too had to be postponed because of the infighting in the communist party after the later on we're told that Li Tianan's sentence was reduced and in 79 he was released there we are

God does set his people free we can pray for that that those who are in prison or on death row or facing execution that the Lord would spare them that he would set them free and he does and has done but of course we know that for many of them there will be suffering and there will be death there will be martyrdom there will be loss of life so we need to pray yes that God would deliver hasn't God brought us each of us through times of trial and difficulty hasn't he delivered us through prayer and helped us of course he has may not be to the point of death some of us it may have been with illness or disease but we can pray for God's people here we need to pray of course for their families and for those who are left behind those who suffer those who are widows and children who are fatherless and so on many many Christian children in that situation and finally here dear friends we can see the outcome of what happened in this situation this hostile government this hostile religion this hostile individuals but the Lord did something didn't he verse 28

Nebuchadnezzar said praise the Lord the God of Shadrach Meshach and Abednego they trusted in him to fire the king's command willing to give up their lives rather than worship any God therefore I decree the people of nation and language he changes the law this government law that he had set up was changed a transformation takes place in Nebuchadnezzar he retracts his oppressive law and calls for people to recognize that this true God has a right to be worshipped and honoured we can pray for that too pray that governments may be changed that laws may be overthrown that freedom may be given that's happened before now and then we see as well that we Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego are promoted they become more important officials we can pray that God would put Christians into places of authority into places of power and of government to bring justice to their nation you know as you read through many of these prayer points and you read through websites of these

Christian charities working with persecuted church at times it can seem hopeless especially North Korea but other places too like China and Islamic countries how on earth can these things ever change but dear friends most of us are old enough to remember Christians suffering under the communist regime in Eastern Europe most of us can remember how impossible it would seem that the Russian federation could ever fall apart and that Romania Bulgaria Ukraine and all these other countries could be free but they are now aren't they and 25 years ago that is now can't God do that in North Korea can't God do that in Indonesia in Sri Lanka in China yes surely he can and surely we are to pray for these things ultimately dear friends when we do this we are obeying God's word you see this isn't just a matter of choice for us we have God's commandment and it's here in Hebrews in chapter 13 verse 3 remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners and those who are ill-treated as if you as if you yourselves were suffering may God make us a useful arm of his church to help his people at this time well let's sing together our final hymn

[37 : 39] I'll receive now let's try and get off