

Daniel ch 3 Facing the Fiery Furnace Part 1

Did anyone notice how repetitive this first reading was, the same words and phrases over and over, almost hypnotic in effect? Almost like if we hear something often enough we don't really think critically anymore, we just go along with it?

This probably wasn't the first time in history someone tried to manipulate a crowd, it certainly wasn't the last. Go to a concert and you'll see how easily a band can get the crowd to sing along. Often it's quite innocent but sometimes it's a lot more serious.

In Nuremberg in the 1930s mass rallies were held by the Nazi Party. Everyone was there, dressed the same, under the same flag. There was dramatic lighting and seductive music and the message of Adolf Hitler repeated with passion again and again.

It seemed to be visionary stuff. The economy was thriving, unemployment was down, everyone seemed to be happy, this was good, right? But before long Germany, a nation with a long Christian heritage was doing the unthinkable.

That was a long time ago. These days we are supposed to be 'free', 'tolerant' and 'progressive', we talk a lot about 'human rights', we celebrate 'equality', 'diversity' and seek to be 'inclusive'. These are the words we hear repeated constantly with more music and colour than ever.

It looks and sounds great on the surface, just like Nebuchadnezzar's orchestra and image of gold, but we need to listen with discernment. History has demonstrated numerous times how if people just 'go with the flow', we could quickly find ourselves trapped with a system that is much less tolerant than we were led to believe! Doing things in Ireland North and South that 20 years ago would have seemed unthinkable.

Perhaps the time is ripe here for people of courage like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to stand up and say No! With all due respect we will not be hypnotised into bowing to the idols of this world. We will not give assent to something God says is wrong. Whatever the cost, we will stand for what is right.

Daniel ch 3 Facing the Fiery Furnace Part 2

So, 600 years BC, Nebuchadnezzar, absolute monarch of mighty Babylon is having a team-building exercise with all his officials.

The king was disturbed in ch2 by a symbolic dream in which he was represented as just one of a succession of empires that would in time be eclipsed by the kingdom of God. Perhaps he's trying to consolidate his power while he can! He's out in the provinces getting together anyone with any authority to take part in a communal act of allegiance to the state, the state religion and himself personally, all represented in this impressive image. Go along with it and it can be a national festival, a real party. Refuse and you get incinerated.

It's all going well for Nebuchadnezzar until a tiny minority of three refuse to take part. These are three of his best officials so he gives them a second chance but no, they refuse to bow. His sympathy towards them changes and he orders them thrown into a blazing furnace but then watches amazed as they *don't burn* but are rescued by one who 'looks like a son of the gods.'

Let me suggest four lessons here for those who are serious about trusting and following Jesus Christ:

Our God saves
We must take our stand
We have to trust, whatever
And Christ is with us in the trial

Firstly, our God is a God Who saves. In Daniel ch 1 we learn God is a holy Judge as He allows His people to be conquered and exiled from Jerusalem for their idolatry. The name 'Daniel' actually means 'God is my Judge'. In ch 2 we learn God is the Revealer of mysteries Who holds the future in His hands. Here in ch3 we learn He is a Saviour Who comes to the rescue of His servants. These three young men who trust Him are miraculously preserved from death.

This is not a new idea for us. We've been celebrating God as our Saviour in the Christian Church for almost 2000 years now. Every day and every Sunday here together we give thanks that God so loves the world He gave His only begotten Son Jesus to suffer for our sins that whoever believes in Him shall not perish in the fires of hell but be given everlasting, heavenly life!

Now because we gratefully love our Saviour God for all His grace and kindness to us that means we will sometimes have to take a stand for Him and the truths and standards He reveals in His Word.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego knew their Scripture. They knew the 10 Commandments. They knew they must worship God and not bow down to images formed by human pride. There will be times when, like them, followers of Christ must dare to put Him first, even if it's politically incorrect.

It's not that we want to be awkward for the sake of it. We try to be good citizens – we work hard, pay our taxes and cheerfully play our part in the community. We certainly don't wish to offend anyone. It's just that we love our Lord and Saviour and want to obey Him rather than simply follow the trends of this world, some of which may be popular but wrong! May the Lord give us courage and wisdom to be distinctive for Him, positively and refreshingly so!

The Lord Jesus did tell His disciples to expect some opposition in this life. Nebuchadnezzar was incensed with rage and frustration because he liked to control things and now he had found something he couldn't control. These men were prepared to die for their convictions. He could kill them, maybe, but he couldn't change them. Followers of God must be prepared for a degree of resentment, antagonism, even persecution from people like Nebuchadnezzar who have yet to learn humility before their Maker.

Believers must be prepared to trust in our God, whatever the risks in the short term. Roman emperor Nero threw Christians to lions in the 1st century AD. The British Foreign Office report in 2019 records that 80% of religiously motivated attacks worldwide are against Christians with acts of violence and other intimidation becoming 'increasingly widespread', in some countries amounting to 'genocide'!

God saved these three from the flames and has sent His angels to protect countless others in countless places through the ages, but sometimes we are called upon to suffer for our Master. Jesus Himself did not shrink from the suffering He had to endure for us at Calvary. The Apostle Paul, imprisoned on 'Death Row' for his faith prayed not for safety but simply that he might glorify Christ by living or dying, either way. We must be faithful and obey even if it brings us hardship for a limited time. Jesus assures us the Kingdom of heaven is ours. Only let us prove fruitful in His service!

One of the most impressive pictures we are given in Daniel ch3 is not proud King Nebuchadnezzar and his large but really quite useless statue. It is the picture of our Lord walking with His loyal servants through their fiery trial. Pagan Nebuchadnezzar struggles to describe what he's seeing – one who 'looks like a son of the gods?' A human figure, but no ordinary human. This man is shining brighter than the flames of the king's furnace. This heavenly looking

man has freed the prisoners from their bonds and, like a good shepherd accompanying His flock, He is walking with them through 'the valley of the shadow of death'!

(In the Old Testament the phrase 'the angel of the Lord' is sometimes used reverently to express the presence of the Lord Himself.)

There is no doubt that God's people may and should take great comfort from this picture. Our Lord is promising to be with us in times of trial. Many are the testimonies of believers who have found that in their times of greatest challenge and difficulty, that's when they have experienced God's greatest presence and comfort. There seem to be a freedom and a peace that surpass normal human logic and understanding as Jesus draws near and walks with His followers through our trials.

So God saves. He delights to rescue with forgiveness and the promise of eternal life those who trust in Jesus, Son of God, the Saviour. We who trust will want to obey His Word, even if it means going against some of the world's fashion and may bring pressure and trouble in the short-term. We are not alone. Our Shepherd is with us through everything.

Let's follow Him with wholehearted commitment, assured that His grace will be sufficient through all circumstances and that to live in His glorious presence will be our eternal reward!