

The Fiery Furnace

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[0 : 00] We're going to look back today at the passage that we read together from Daniel chapter 3. I have to say it's probably the first time since I've been here in 17 years that I actually wished the bagpipes were going.

When I was reading this passage about the bagpipes, just to make sure you didn't bow down and do anything unclear. But they'll probably knock in halfway through the sermon.

But this is a great story, and the key to this great story is actually in the previous chapter. Because the previous chapter makes clear to us that this story in chapter 3 is a story of two kingdoms, two realms, two worlds that still exist, and therefore it brings it immediately into our own experiences. Two different worlds. One is a temporary world and one is a permanent world. So we have these two contrasted in the previous chapter in verse 36, where Daniel is interpreting the dream that King Nebuchadnezzar had about this great idol of gold and then silver and then bronze and then with feet of iron and clay.

And as he introduces his interpretation, Daniel says, The King of kings to whom the God of heaven is given, the kingdom, the power and the might and the glory.

[1 : 24] And it's speaking about this earthly kingdom that Daniel was part of and the others and also Nebuchadnezzar was king of. But then he compares it with another kingdom in verse 44, where he says, when he speaks of the future that is being prophesied, and in those days of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end and it shall last forever.

So as an introduction to this chapter, you have this interpretation of the dream that Daniel had given to Nebuchadnezzar of two worlds.

And in many ways, as we seek to bring this immediately into our own context, the question for us all is, to which realm, to which kingdom do we belong as human beings?

Because there's only one king and there's only one kingdom and one world that is permanent. We do live in a very impermanent day and age, yet we are hardwired for permanency.

We actually want to know and experience permanency and yet everything around us is impermanent. But which world do you belong to and which kingdom do you subscribe to and who is your Lord and Master?

[2 : 49] Because Jesus Christ is the King who we serve and worship this morning. And it's not to be a vague or a passing acknowledgement that you're to have of the reality of this kingdom, but to know His transformative power on a day-to-day basis in your life.

Because one of the kingdoms is marked by death, the other is marked by life through death. And this morning what I want to do just for a few minutes is look at the difference between the two types of citizens that we have in this Old Testament account that belong to the two different kingdoms as they reflect faith and unbelief.

So can we consider that this morning? First of all, looking at those who were living without faith in this account, there's two different characters.

Well, there's Nebuchadnezzar the king and there's also the astrologers. So Nebuchadnezzar, interestingly, absolutely lived for the kingdom that he was king and head of in chapter 2.

As Daniel interpreted the dream, he spoke of the statue with the head of pure gold and the defeat of iron and clay, and it represented different kingdoms. But Nebuchadnezzar was obsessed with finding the meaning, because dreams are very significant in the ancient Near East.

[4 : 12] But he stopped listening after, well, he wasn't listening at verse 37, but as it's recorded in verse 37, he stopped listening. All he heard from Daniel was, you, king, you're the golden head, in

other words.

You're the one to whom God of heaven is given, this kingdom, the power and the might and the glory. That was tremendous. That's all he wanted to hear from then on. He didn't listen to anything else that was being said, because man, that was exactly what he hoped the dream would mean. That he would be the golden head and the God of the living God was the one who'd given him all the power and glory and significance. And that interpretation, or listening simply to that book, is what provoked him to build this great statue in the chapter that we read.

Because it was reflecting the dream that he, the image in the dream that he'd had, except he made his one of pure gold. He didn't, he didn't, you know, mix up the elements and he didn't have silver and bronze and then iron and clay.

His was all gold and it was hugely ostentatious. It was about as half the height of the Scott Monument. It was a huge, massive big idol and what he was doing in creating this idol of gold was he was displaying his power and his glory.

[5 : 33] As you know, I came back, or some of you know, I came back from Rome, I've been a conference in Rome. And that's very much what the architecture in Rome is like. It was declaring power and beauty and magnificence and opulence.

And that's exactly what Nebuchadnezzar was doing here. It was, for him, it was an act of control. Because having set up this great idol, he said, you know, I'm going to be a pretty reasonable guy. You only need to worship this idol when the music goes, the bagpipes. Who'd have thought bagpipes? But anyway, these were the instruments and when these instruments went, that's when people had to get down and worship.

He didn't say worship the idol all the time. You can have your own gods, you can worship them. It's kind of reasonable syncretism. But as he did so, he was encouraging a sense of a spirit of fear and mistrust one for the other so that maybe someone would tell on someone else if they didn't worship. And a desire to bring conformity to his people by dictate. So he was self-absorbed and he was God-resistant. He simply didn't listen to the rest of Daniel's interpretation.

[6 : 44] It didn't suit him and it certainly didn't worry him. Verse 45 of that chapter says, the king, this is a great God as made known to the king, what shall be after this? The dream is certain and it's interpretation sure.

So maybe he listened to that bit as well, which said, the rest is for the future. But I'm not concerned because I'm this great king who has great power and great control.

He didn't listen to what Daniel said about the great God. For him it was all about the here and now. His ego was bigger than the reality of God and his own life was the center of his own existence. Is that familiar? That level of unbelief? Now, I recognize it doesn't express itself in a similar way where none of us are similar in culture or in position to Nebuchadnezzar or extreme.

But there are surely some shared tendencies there. In the society we live in and in our own lives, we see it today in the misuse of state law.

[7 : 53] As he misused state law, it's a power play and it's there to satisfy a specific agenda, sometimes to create fear, mistrust and conformity. Recently we've seen the government straying into all kinds of dangerous fields of social engineering, telling us what we should not only do but how we should think, seeking to change gender identity and terminology by dictate redefining marriage.

But it's no place to do so as a pre-political institution. It has not only set Christians but many others on a collision course with them.

We need to pray about that and be alert to that and be aware of the circumstances that have often brought these realities to bear. But at a more personal level, we can be guilty also of being selective listeners to God's word, as Nebuchadnezzar was here, to God's interpretation.

If you're not a Christian, maybe it is that today you're not willing to commit. There's bits that you like about the Bible, there's bits that you like about church, but you're happy with your law as it is and you're not willing to consider what God has said about the future and your future without Him. Because maybe all is just good as it is at the moment and you can choose the bits that are easier, acceptable or that are self-defining.

[9 : 23] Or as Christians, we have equally a temptation and a danger to do that, to just focus on the bits that are easy for us to focus on, that encourage us to continue the way we are.

But we struggle with the perfection of God's judgments, the reality of justice, the need for transformation and for rescue. And His great invitation to us to be non-conformists. And there are parallels in Nebuchadnezzar, but also at one level, I think, again at a broader level, if we look at the astrologers who hear the Chaldeans, as they're called here, who are very jealous. They hated the position that Daniel had managed to achieve and also Shadrachmi sheikh and Abednego. So they realized that these guys were filled with spiritual power and exposed their helplessness and their impotence to actually interpret the dreams that Nebuchadnezzar came with. And so they use very destructive language about them. There are certain Jews who you have appointed over the affairs of the province and they deliberately use their Jewish names, rather than the Chaldean names that they'd been given, because there was an underlying subtle racism and a religious intolerance about them.

[10:55] They wanted to manipulate Nebuchadnezzar to say, these guys are dangerous. They're not really from our people and they're not willing to obey you for who you are.

And that same mentality is something that we, I do believe, need to be aware of sometimes. There's a spiritual malevolence today against the gospel and against faith and against Christians, particularly against God.

And that can make us feel very uncomfortable in the world in which we live. There may be increasingly moves to outlaw Christian faith and Christian belief.

And many will seek to use the law to expose their own deep-seated hatred of God and of Christian faith and what they think Christian faith stands for.

But I hope that you're encouraged not to be paralysed by that and certainly not to be paranoid about it. We can get all kinds of weirdy, paranoid feelings about that and become very isolationist or alarmist.

[12:01] Let's just be realistic and prayerful and loving in the world in which we live and seek to follow Christ and love and serve Him as powerfully and as gently and graciously as we can, no matter what the circumstances are outside.

Because that brings us to the people here in this story and I want to look at their faith and see what we can learn from that in ourselves. So Daniel, well actually Daniel is not in this story.

So Daniel, the book of Daniel, and you know we dare to be a Daniel and it's all these kind of great stories of heroes, he's not even in this story. This isn't about Daniel nor even actually is about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, although their faith is a tremendous encouragement to us. It's about what God has done and is doing and is rescuing power. But it does challenge us to act responsibly as Christians with the way we deal with our faith in maybe an aggressive or an antagonistic context.

Because their faith is our faith as well and there's nothing different because it's God's gift to them as it is to us. They are ordinary heroes by God's grace and we are encouraged to be the same in our Christian life.

[13:21] So we find these lads, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, they find themselves between a rock and a hard place, don't they? They've risen to this place of great prominence in Babylon, they're significant, they're influential, they've been consistent to their God.

And now it all is in danger of being just taken from them and it's a difficult place for them. Maybe the temptation for them in this position of political power and authority would just be to compromise, just to keep a low profile.

When the music sounds just scurry indoors or somewhere and not be seen or not be found out, it's only when the music sounds. When the rest of the time we can still worship the living God.

He wants us here, surely He wants us here and that is more significant. That must have been a temptation for them, that is not how they responded.

And I think there's great lessons for us in our own Christian world. For them there's a line in the sand moment for them as believers and the line in the sand moment is that they recognize that what they've been asked to do is idolatry.

[14:38] They've been asked to worship physically this great idol and they're not willing to do that in chapter 3 and verse 18. In fact verses 16 to 18 are absolutely wonderful verses but 18 says, you know, we will not serve your God or worship the golden image you have set up.

So their line in the sand moment was they recognized that it was idolatry and the reason that the people of Israel were exiled from the promised land was because they engaged in idolatry and they

recognized they couldn't go with it.

It was the great sin of their people and so there could be no compromise for them even though they interacted wholeheartedly with this pagan society in which they lived. They weren't monastic, they didn't just stay in their own ethnic or cultural or religious groups.

They were hugely involved in the society but this was the line in the sand moment. And they give this tremendously powerful testimony, oh Nebuchadnezzar we have no need to answer you in this matter.

If this be so our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fire of furnace and he will deliver us but if not be it known to you. Okay, we will not serve your gods.

[15:51] That is a great testimony and we can learn great things from that. They had a superb understanding of their God and of His covenant keeping love and protection over them.

He was their God and it was a personal relationship they had with Him but they knew He was. They didn't demand of Him. They didn't name and claim the deliverance.

They didn't say that God would absolutely make this tremendous act of miraculous intervention on their behalf. They didn't know, we know, but they didn't know at this point.

They made no ultimatum. It was so, I did look up this and I couldn't find this word in the dictionary so it is another but they were so unmanipulative.

They didn't manipulate the situation, they didn't manipulate God. They simply stated things as they were. You know, God can deliver as we know He can but even if He doesn't, we're still not going to bow down and worship your idols.

[16:57] It's so matter of fact their trust was in God, not in the temporal comfort or even in the hope of rescue because for them martyrdom was very much a reality here.

Remember the situation they were in. So these are not cheap words that we have here. These are powerful and significant words and so it's a kind of polite rebellion.

They didn't seek confrontation. They didn't go out of their way to be antagonistic. It's graceful subversion. They're reluctant dissidents but along with that they're simple and clear headed obedience to the living God.

And they're united, the speakers one together. They didn't break ranks and in all they said there's just simplicity. You know, these are potentially their last words.

They didn't know if they were going to be able ever to speak again in public or in private but there's no great drama either before or even after when they're delivered. No triumphalism is recorded.

[18:03] Yeah, I showed you. That's our beauty. And everyone wasn't like that. It wasn't that they say, yeah, brilliant. It's just a simple obedience.

They walk out and the glory is given to God. It's understated because they have this great relationship with the living God. What an example of faith inspired courage they give to us.

And it's one that we need today, I believe, in our day to day living in the classroom, in the workplace, in our neighbourhoods, politically and culturally.

We need to know what our line in the sand is as Christians. You need to know in your profession what the line in the sand is going to be for you. That you will not step over because it will involve you in compromise to your living faith.

You need to be in that position as they were and we all need to be in that position of being willing to give all that we have attained and managed to reach culturally or academically or professionally or in our career.

[19:11] We must be willing to give it all up with a steel that comes from trusting the living God in the midst of impossible situations. Because there's a line in the sand that you and I as Christians cannot cross.

Confident in our God despite the bleakness of the circumstances they didn't and we shouldn't look to dictate to God always. This is what you should do. This is how you should deliver me.

This is what I want from you. I want to get out before him the desire and the faith and the belief that he can but also the recognition that he might not.

Would we be able to state this statement in our lives? As you go to your workplace tomorrow or your place of study or whatever it might be, are you a Christian who could make the same statement in an impossible situation that you may be faced with tomorrow?

That you know God can deliver you? He may choose not to. But nonetheless we will not compromise in our living faith. So we see the lads but also what we see in conclusion here is the

kind of God we have that we have put our faith in.

[20 : 31] Because He's an intervening God. Many people struggle with the idea of God because they think He's distant and far away and is interested in our lives and does not meet us at the point of our need.

And here we have an example in the midst of the Old Testament of an intervening God because we have this divine being who finds himself associating and walking with the three guys in the midst of the furnace.

And it's interesting because it's a worst case scenario. The furnace is not just an ordinary furnace, it's been heated up greatly and it's as nebulous as the most powerful man in the world is enraged by what they have said.

And so the flames have been fuelled, they are bound, they are wearing all kinds of clothes that would quickly ignite.

The soldiers who throw them in are consumed because the fire is so great. It's a possible situation they find themselves in and yet we recognize and see that there's a presence with them, that God is present with them.

[21 : 47] I see four men unbound walking in the midst of the fire. This coming king that is predicted in the previous chapter comes early to meet with his own people.

He's beside his citizens. The king of this great everlasting kingdom provides the power and the protection for everyone, including all these officials to see.

And so there's a kind of double testimony here because as they are faithful, God honored them and used them both in the fire and in the miraculous rescue from the fire.

It's this great, this great, kind of double testimony. He didn't do what he wanted, but he did do what he wanted.

He didn't rescue them from the fire, but he did take them from the fire. And there's a really significant theological reality that is expressed in that for our lives, that he often doesn't and does.

[23 : 06] He often doesn't do what we expect and doesn't do what we ask him to do, but as we go through the fire, as we go through the trials and difficulties, he miraculously transforms them into something that becomes a powerful testimony to our living faith in God, sadly, even with that, Nebuchadnezzar doesn't understand.

And that tragic reality of the human heart, even with that powerful testimony, and even more gloriously, God isn't finished with him, because he does become a believer before he dies, but it takes more, even in this great miracle, to bring Nebuchadnezzar to a living faith.

But that story of the divine presence with the guys in the fire reminds us of the God who is the intervening God, most powerfully, of course, that we see and understand and recognize on the cross, that Jesus Christ comes, which we will remember in the incarnational truths that we think about in these months, that he comes and he lives, and then he dies, he intervenes on our behalf very powerfully, displaying his presence, his power and his protection for everyone who will believe in him.

So the fiery furnace is a glorious illustration of so many spiritual truths that we can unpack from the reality of Jesus and his victory in the cross.

And we have that great truth that the gates of hell will not prevail against Jesus Christ and against all who trust in Jesus Christ. Satan, you know what, Nebuchadnezzar does his worst, doesn't he?

[24 : 53] He fires it up, he's enraged, he does all that he can to make sure they're bound, and he does his... the most powerful man in the world does the most powerful thing he can to destroy these people, and it doesn't work.

It does the most powerful thing he can. It sends all his forces against Christ on the cross, but the gates of hell are unable to prevail from Jesus Christ, and the victory that his kingdom assures Satan on the cross has done his worst, and he was defeated by Jesus Christ.

So for us, you know what, I'm not underplaying this by any stretch, I hope not in any way that... no matter how bad it seems to get for us, we have an advantage that Shadrachmi Sheikhaberni would never have, is that we have already seen Satan and his power has been destroyed and defeated on the cross.

We have not just a promise of that, but with the reality of that, of God's victory. We see ultimate victory in ways that they could never have seen, and so we have the opportunity to recognize the power of God transforming our day-to-day situations, and doing what he promises is to be with us in

presence and protection.

So this story speaks about incarnational truth in many ways, not just in Jesus coming into this world, but in the Holy Spirit coming into our own lives and hearts by faith that Jesus Christ is with us.

[26 : 31] So we recognize that prayer, that God will answer prayer for us in ways that we don't understand, and in ways that we can't predict, and in ways that are above and beyond what we can ask or even think.

So even from Isaiah 42, 43 verse 2, we have this great promise, you know, when you pass through the waters, I will be with you. Through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned, and the flames shall not consume you.

For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. Written about the same time, roughly as these guys were going through this, we recognize and see and know and understand that God will be with us because he promises to do.

He will transform our sufferings rather than us, generally speaking, avoiding them. And that's a tough truth because none of us look for suffering.

But the reality is he will transform and use and presence himself with us through them. That is our hope and our reality, involves submission and trust and mystery and miracle.

[27 : 49] And I think there's a future, a very future reference here, I think, maybe reading into a little bit too much. But when it speaks about these guys coming through the fire unsinged, it's a remarkable statement because it was a really hot furnace, they were wearing turbans and cotton clothes and everything else.

And if any of you have been near fire, you know that your clothes smell immediately of fire. And we're told here that there's nothing from the fire that touches them.

Their hair is unsinged, their clothes are okay, they don't even smell of fire. And there's a future reference to the reality of the wholeness of God's healing and redemption for us.

We look forward to a future of being unsinged by the effects of sin and death and the grave. And we look forward to that. But until that day, he says, look, I am with you.

You know, Sam 23, even in the valley of the shadow of death. An email from Chris, a text from Chris Lamont this morning, I'm saying, we're praying for them during their time of sadness.

[28 : 59] And he says, we have never felt the closeness of Jesus Christ as we have felt it through this valley of the shadow. That's so often our experience. That's the testimony of what God does for us as we entrust ourselves to Him.

So as I close the challenge is just, do you know this God? This God, the God who reveals Himself, not distant, not a great Santa Claus figure, but who is committed to us through the sufferings that we face every day to the point that He redeems, transforms, and will take us ultimately from them. And we're challenged not only to know this God, but to recognize the obedience that lies behind the testimony of these three men. So the miracle happens in the context of no nonsense, clear, unequivocal obedience.

There's a line in the sand. We will not go beyond that, even if it means our death. And that is the key that opens the door to testimony and to transformation in those around them.

And we often speak about testimony. We're often praying for our friends. You know, the key is our unequivocal testimony of faith, which will open up the opportunities to tell them about Jesus.

[30 : 26] And the crucial question is your citizenship today, to which kingdom do you belong? There's no more vital question than understanding and knowing and committing yourself to the kingdom that is everlasting with King Jesus as your Lord and Saviour.

Amen. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we pray and ask that you would bless us today, that you would guide us, that you would help us to sense your presence, that we wouldn't be weary in doing good in Christ, that we wouldn't be disinterested or discouraged in the truth, that we would be hungry and thirsty after righteousness.

Pray that we would know you in our lives. I pray particularly today for people who are struggling and battling, who may feel the impossibility of the situations they're in, and may not sense God's closeness, but we pray that they would know by faith His promises and would come to recognize and experience His presence and His closeness through what they are experiencing.

And we pray that we would be a support and an encouragement and a help to such by our own lives and by our own testimony. May we acknowledge you as King Jesus today and may our lives

reflect that as we go from here and as we dissipate throughout the city, may we know the presence and the power of God with us in the lives that we live.
We pray for unity and we pray for strength and camaraderie together as we fight the battle of faith.
For Jesus' sake, amen.