

The Gold Rush

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[0 : 0 0] For those of you who have been here for this series, you will know that I have been using a rather spurious link with film titles to title the sermons. This week is no different.

It is called Gold Rush, part one, because Tom is going to look at the second half of this chapter. For those of you who know, that is a Charlie Chaplin film. Actually, there is probably a little more link between the actual title and the nature of the film. This chapter is about a lone prospector who is ridiculed but who has great courage and who does what he does also for love. There are one or two tentative connections between the title and the first half of the chapter. What I want you to do with me this morning for a little while is look beyond some of the cultural incompatibilities that we find here in this ancient Near East narrative and look beyond that and see or look into that and unpack it a little bit and also see some of the unchanging spiritual realities that are very clear and very evident in this chapter and are applicable to our lives because it deals with characteristics and it deals with people and their relationship with God. That is what we do. We are people and we are in relationship with God or possibly not. I hope that you will be, if you are not today in a relationship with God through Jesus Christ by faith, I hope you will be utterly and completely, miserably convicted today to come to know Jesus Christ, who is life and who is joy and who is fulfilment. I want to look at the characters and different aspects of their characters today and apply them in our own life, spiritual, be challenged to do so. It is a great story, it is a tremendous story, a great narrative story. We are going to look at firstly the pride of the king. You have got king Nebuchadnezzar and whatever else is happening in his life, I have distilled it down to this one thing, the spiritual pride that is in his life. It is kind of highlighted in verse 15 where he says, it is not just about power, it is not just about his position, it is about him and God. He says, listen, then what God will be able to rescue you from my hand. There is clearly a spiritual pride in Nebuchadnezzar that is motivating and driving and intoxicating him to do what he is doing.

There is no doubt he is a clever bloke, he is clever and he is wise and he is where he is for a reason. But he channels that intelligence and that wisdom and that gifts that he has, he channels it because of his spiritual pride to maintain his own position and to allow his self-obsession to continue and to develop. We have seen already that he is blind to God.

God has spoken to him very clearly through Daniel in the previous chapter where Daniel, as he attributed to God the ability to know his dream and to interpret it, he has known and seen the living God doing this amazing miracle in his life, telling him about his own position that God has placed him there and the future positions of kingdoms after him. But as we saw last week, it is not about evidence for him, there was plenty of evidence there about the reality of God, it is about his heart. That is often true, is not it?

It is not about evidence that people do not come at faith, it is ultimately because there is rebellious pride in our hearts against God. We might often think that we are good people and we do not do much wrong and we do not feel like sinners. But yet, often it will be a spiritual pride, a rebellion that keeps us from the living God. That certainly was the case at this point with Nebuchadnezzar because what he seems to do is he manipulates the dream that we looked at in the previous chapter to his own ends. God had spoken about what was going to happen in the future and made clear the variety of kingdoms and how these kingdoms would become less powerful and more divided, but his was the kingdom of gold, his was the head and he took that and he said, great, well I am going to make sure that this kingdom, I am not going to fall into the mistakes of these future kingdoms that are going to be divided and are going to be weakened because of that. He took this dream and he saw the future weakness that God had spoken about and he tried to develop a strategy that would allow that not to happen in his own time. And he did that with a strategy to control the many different peoples and tribes and nations that were under his sovereign control as this great world leader. So he did it through cult worship. This was how he would maintain an element of control over the people. He would create this amazing idol, 90 feet high, gold, at least gold plated, gold and 9 feet wide. So it is kind of about 3 metres. It is actually a very ugly kind of looking thing. It is not that big, not that wide, but it is very, very high. It is probably about the height of this church.

[5 : 52] Did you say that is 90 feet high? Maybe a bit more than that. It is just under half of the height of the Scott Monument. The Scott Monument is 200 feet. So it is just under half the height of the Scott Monument, which is probably just a bit less than the height of this church. So it is quite narrow, but it is very high. It was on the plains of Durand.

You could see it from miles around. It was a sign of his power, a sign of his glory, a sign of his control. He brought all the important people together, all the civil servants from all the different places, and he said to them, look, you get your guys to bow down when the music plays. And it would seem that the variety of instruments that are used is reflecting the fact that he is taking different instruments from the different nations and the different cultures. So he has been very reasonable. He is involved in this kind of religious syncretism, reasonable syncretism. He says, look, all I am asking is when the band plays that you bow down and worship this image of gold, whether it is an image of Nebuchadnezzar himself, we do not know, but it was certainly an image that was to reflect his power and his glory, culturally inclusive with all these different instruments and the bands playing.

And it does not say anything about not carrying on worshiping your own gods. You can do that in your own time. But when the music sounds, when the band plays, you bow down to this God, to this idol as a declaration of my authority and my control over this whole kingdom. And of course with it went a benevolent fear. If you don't, you are going to get thrown into fire. So it is a gentle kind of coercion if you don't do it. It was kind of the big brother mentality, wasn't it? Because what he was doing, he was saying you need to do this and I will have people out there making sure that that happens. He was developing loyalty among kind of spies who would want to go and clipe to the king and who would show their loyalty. So he was building this sense of loyalty. It is that kind of big brother mentality. It is 8.45 in the morning. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego have not bowed down to the idol. It is that kind of thing, isn't it? That they come and he wants to tell people, wants people to tell if they are not worshiping in the right way. And this is clearly an outworking of his pride. He is having seen the previous dream where God was clearly revealed as a sovereign God of all gods. He is saying, no, I am divine. I am in control and I will say what I will say and what God is going to stop me then. He is number one. He is self-obsessed.

He has spiritual pride which is not broken. Now, I don't suppose any of us have the opportunity or the extreme pride to act in a similar way to Nebuchadnezzar. But it is spiritual pride, however extreme or however reasonable, it is spiritual pride that keeps us from bowing the knee to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is spiritual pride that says, I don't need God today. I don't need to worship today. I don't need rescued by God and by his grace. That is not for me. I don't need his morality. I certainly don't need his lordship. I am at the centre of my life and I will make the decisions. And that is a spiritual pride that keeps us from bowing the knee to the living God. And it may be that there are many things not as crude as the idols that Nebuchadnezzar was putting into place or the idols that were spoken about in the Psalm we were singing. But as we know, there are many things that we can put in the place of God and his lordship that keep us from serving and following and bowing the knee to Him. And we can see a kind of societal application as well, can't we?

The same pressures that we will go on to see Shadrach, Meshach and the Bednego must have had. We can often have also in the society in which we live, where there are many kind of idols that people say that are significant and that can live alongside your own personal faith. You know, the idol of relativism where there is no absolute truth and where there is no fundamental realities, that you can just believe what you choose to believe, a reasonable syncretism, you know. You can choose to worship your Jesus but let other people worship their gods and we can all live together and we can go and move towards that path to heaven with a reasonable syncretism. But we will be tied to you if you don't accept the dogma of the society in which we live. All dogma is banished and banned from our society apart from that dogma itself. The idolatry of the majority rule or the idolatry of pleasure seeking, hedonism, wealth creation, materialism, the worship of science as the only answer to anything that there is today. It's all reasonable and there's a great threat to any non-conformity. There's a quote from Dale Ralph Davis from one of the commentaries that I'm going to need to put my glass to read this. The pressure, and this is one of the commentaries on Daniel that I've been using, the pressure came for conformity. The raft of civil servants are gathered, told and threatened, therefore all the peoples, nations, languages fell down and worshiped just like that. The praise band plays and not the crowd gets, it's back sides in the air and it's noses in the sand and enjoys this job security. They felt they had no choice, they had to do it. There's a tremendous invisible coercion that comes from being among a whole mob of flattened worshipers. Very often we are tempted to idolise other things and indeed our own hearts because of spiritual pride.

[12 : 41] We need to remind ourselves that the society in which we live has no place for conviction, no place for the seditious truth of the Lord Jesus Christ. There's a huge pressure on us to conform all the time and it's the same pressure that these lads faced. We'll come on to them briefly at the end. The second characteristic that I want to mention is the jealousy of the astrologers. Just by looking at these two destructive spiritual pride but also jealousy of this astrologer. Remember the previous chapter, they had been let off the hook as it were from the death penalty. They couldn't interpret the dreams but Daniel could on their behalf. Daniel was concerned for them and he said he didn't want them to die and his three friends didn't want to die. His dream had given them their position and maintained their jobs. They have this miserable characteristic that reveals itself following Daniel's reprieve for them. They hated him. They hated him even though he had done this great thing for them. They hated his gifts, they hated his position, they hated his loyal friendships, they probably hated his popularity before King Nebuchadnezzar and they hated his gods, his god and they felt greatly threatened by him and by his wisdom and by his knowledge and by his gifts. How has it worked? Well it was outworked in the kind of manipulative language that they used, this kind of big brother. There are some Jews that you've set King Nebuchadnezzar, you've set over the affairs of the province, they pay no attention to you and they kind of manipulate the situation so it seems very personal against

King Nebuchadnezzar. Interestingly you may have noticed Daniel's not in this story.

There's no Daniel at all in this story. It's just his three mates, three friends this time and maybe that's deliberate, maybe they chose deliberately not to involve Daniel either because he was too powerful or because he was too popular but they threw to him through his friends and subtly did you notice, I don't know you may have noticed or you may not have, that they returned back to the Jewish names of the three friends rather than use their new Babylonian names with its racial and religious undertones. These Jews that you've brought who believe in God and whose God is in their names, they're the ones that are seditious and they're the ones that are going to break your kingdom. Jealousy is so hugely destructive isn't it? Desperately destructive characteristic, envy. I'm not going to say anything about envy in the world or jealousy towards Christians in the world but it's a relentlessly ugly reality within the Christian church. Envy and jealousy of one another can reveal itself in so many destructive ways. You put other people in a bad light, you come across as great and you put them down in a bad light, you manipulate facts about people to make them worse than maybe they are. It's disloyal isn't it? It's very often self-centred that maybe goes back to pride. It undermines the whole of our understanding of who we are in

Christ and the grace He's given us. That means we shouldn't be envying and jealous of others in our Christian family, in our Christian church. It rebels against the whole concept of being content in Christ, whether I have or don't have that Christ is with me and we'll go on to see a little bit about that with the three lads as we come to a conclusion. It's from the pit of hell. Please remember that jealousy and envy will not only destroy the church but first of all it will lead into your very soul and heart and it will destroy you. It's a desperate, desperate characteristic. There's no place in our Christian hearts and if you're jealous and envious and destructive in your thinking towards other Christians or towards anyone then please pray for that. Pray against that. Pray that it would be dealt with and taken from you as we all must do. So there's the jealousy, the astrology. And then lastly we're going to look at the faith of the lads. Shadrach, Misha and Abednego.

What a dilemma they were in. Were they not? A terrible dilemma. They were all of a sudden greatly intimidated by the society around them and by the king's command. They were absolutely in the minority. They were being threatened for their very life. There was probably, if they were like Daniel they were probably very popular, they were decent, respectable, nice guys and they probably had a lot of friends and these friends were probably saying, listen guys, just on this one you can bow down but you don't mean it. You can still worship your God. There was possibly a great deal of pressure on them just to conform, keep a low profile, bow quietly. Don't mean it, compromise. Your God will understand. It's your God that's brought you to this position. Your God's brought you to this important. If you bow down you're going to wreck it all. You're going to just blow the whole thing out of the water and it's going to be a disaster. Surely God wants you here. You're going to have to be like us in order to win us and there would have been huge pressure within themselves also.

[18:31] Surely guys it's not that black and white. Surely we can still believe in your God and not bow down to this idol. Well what we see is along with all that pressure they're courageous, real courageous obedience. It's like last week, it's like one of the last two weeks, Daniel it's the line in the sand. They were a people who knew that the covenant people of God had lost their position in the promised land because of idolatry because they did not worship God as God and see Him as the living God. They recognized and saw that Israel's great sin was the sin of idolatry and on this there could be no compromise. It's like marriage.

The faithfulness in marriage. It doesn't matter what people will say about how right it might be to break your vows and to have an affair or do something because of unreasonableness or because no one will know or because it's okay as long as we feel. We know that absolutely there's a line in the sand that faithfulness must be the core of our marriage. And this my friends, their attitude, their response in these great verses towards the end of 16 to 18, that's the great miracle of this chapter. I don't know if Tom's here today but I'm just to apologize for him. He hasn't got the great miracle next week. I've got the great miracle this week. Okay. We know about the fire next week and what happens and that is an amazing miracle. But this is the great miracle. Their spiritual courage and their strength. Now Samuel Rutherford as code is saying, you bring that quote up.

You might be able to read it. You will not get leave to steal quietly into heaven and Christ's company without a conflict or a cost. And that's the reality, isn't it? And there's another one from John Stott on the same passage. Oh, it's quite a long one.

We should not suppose that self denial is giving up luxuries during Lent or that my cross is some painful and personal trial. We're always in danger of trivializing Christian discipleship as it were no more than adding a thin veneer of piety to an otherwise secular life. Then prick the veneer and there is the same old pagan underneath. No becoming and being a Christian involves a change so radical that no imagery can do justice except death and resurrection, dying to the old self, centeredness and rising to a new life of holiness and love.

They knew that. They absolutely knew and understood that courageous obedience. On this issue, it was about faithfulness to the living and true God. And we see not only their courageous obedience but also their personal faith, you know, the God we serve, our God, our King.

[21 : 25] They, it's brilliant, you know, they had a covenant relationship based as we saw in the previous chapter on the mercy of God, covenant love for God, the God they served. They dealt with their pride. There was no jealousy here that was destructive. Nor indeed interestingly is there any kind of spiritual presumption. I love that this is one of the best couple of verses in the Bible, you know, in terms of doing and knowing God's will when it's not revealed to us. You know, if we're, you know, we don't need to defend ourselves if we're thrown in the blazing furnace. Our God is perfectly able to save us from it. And he will rescue us from your hand, whatever that involves. But even if it does not, we want you to know that we will not serve your gods or worship them. Isn't that great? Isn't it great because they say, you know, they don't say, well, Nebuchadnezzar, we're calling down God's deliverance. Bind the fire, God. Bind the fire. They're not saying that. They're not demanding that God releases them. They're not saying that God must act. They're aware that they may not be delivered. They may be martyred at this point. But even if they are, whatever the outcome they're trusting in this God, isn't that so unmanipulative? Don't we often so often pray to God, yes, God, as you will do this, when you do this, as long as you do this, then I will serve. But they're saying, look, it doesn't matter what you do.

It doesn't matter if I get burned alive or if you miraculously deliver us. We're still not going to bow down and serve your gods. They knew that martyrdom would change things as well and would be to God's glory. Faith is in God, not their circumstances. Isn't that a great reality? And so often our closeness to God seems to be related to how good things are going for us. You know, and if things start going bad for us, we immediately think, well, God can't possibly love us. He says, stop loving me. He doesn't want me anymore because He's not giving me what I've asked for or what I want. But our relationship with Him is based on His mercy and His grace already clearly written out in the blood of His Son, Jesus Christ, who has died on the cross to set us free and to give us life. So there was this personal faith, but also kind of linked into that is they're just their polite rebellion.

They're good guys, you know, and there's a polite rebellion. There's no evidence that they saw any confrontation. It's not like they went to the very front of all these civil servants and wouldn't bow down in a kind of proud declaration of their faith. It just seems to me that they were politely rebellious. They didn't offer up any petitions. They didn't say how unjust this law was. They didn't defend themselves before the King. They were gracefully subversive, politely seditious, dissentient in the best possible way. And that politeness, that gentleness, it was mixed with great courage and great strength because it was based on their obedience to the mercy of God who had redeemed them. And, you know, often in our lives, you know, we say, why, I don't get the opportunity to speak about my faith and people don't know about my faith. As we are obedient, we will find opportunities opening up to us. As we stand gently and politely and seditiously, subversively graceful, we will have opportunities to stand up for Jesus Christ against the current idols of our day.

As we know Christ, as we are in touch with Christ, or we are founded in Christ, it will be a gentle subversion. We don't want to be aggressive. We don't want to call people names.

We don't want to make out we're better than anybody else. It's almost a reluctant courage.

[25 : 44] And I don't mean reluctant because we're ashamed. I just mean reluctant because we're sinners and we don't want to be in the spotlight. But yet, as we gently obey, we will find ourselves in that place. And I hope that you are able to find yourself in that place as a believer because he will give you the strength and the wisdom through that. And just very briefly and lastly, they spoke very much as one. And we saw that in the previous chapter with Daniel.

They were fused together. You know, they were united. They needed each other. It was something they'd obviously decided. They declared, they'd prayed about, and they faced the enemy together because they could see together and encouraged each other with a big picture. I think we have a desperate need to remind ourselves of this in our Christian lives. The battle we face when you go from here into the workplace tomorrow and into the, you know, the student halls and the homes and the neighbourhoods that we're in, that the opposition that we will sometimes face for our faith is something that we need to support and encourage and help each other with and over. That we're united. That we're focused. That we're supportive against a common spiritual enemy. Our enemy's not against flesh and blood. Our enemy's against spiritual darkness, against the evil one who wants to fill us with spiritual pride, fill us with an independent spirit and fill us with a sense of despair. So if you're despairing today as a Christian, can I encourage you to speak to a fellow Christian about that?

To ask for prayer and support, to remind yourself that even from this story, it's not the end of the story. It's only half the story. And Tom's got a great passage to do next week.

But remind ourselves of some of the spiritual realities, some of the characteristics like jealousy and like spiritual pride that keep us from God. And I pray that if you have come here with just no thought of God really or no thought that anything you would hear or that you would be part of today would have any effect on your life as you leave from here, that that will be taken by him and turned upside down. And that you will meet with the living God in a really powerful way because he knows you as we saw last week. He knows our thoughts and he knows our needs and he knows the forgiveness that he offers and the love and grace that he's freely wanting us to share. Let's bow our heads and pray briefly about that. Lord God, we ask and pray that you would take your word. There's so much in this chapter, we only really scrape to surface. We thank you that though it was written thousands of years ago, it remains incredibly relevant because it's your living word, because it's part of your redemptive story that it speaks of your purposes for your covenant people before

Jesus just as we now live in these days post Jesus Christ. So help us to learn about the dangers of spiritual pride which says we don't need you and leaves us prayerless and individual and independent or jealousy which spiritual darkness brings into our hearts and makes us divided and divisive and takes our eye off the perspective of the grace and goodness of Jesus Christ that should be our motivation. And grant as we pray in great measure the courage of the faith of Shadrach Meshach and Abednego and greater faith even and the quiet, subversive, rebellious spirit that should belong to us as Christians rather than sometimes the rather spineless establishment principle that we seem to have in our lives about not rocking any boats and not and rather compromising. So help us Lord give us that gentle and attractive and almost submissive courage to stand up for Jesus Christ and bless us as we sing together in response to you and to your word. We do pray as a congregation for those who are unwell today also. We remember them, we remember Dina in hospital and Elspeth Crichton Ken's wife, we pray for them this time and we also give thanks for Katie and this lovely new life in our congregation. We pray for her and for the family, we pray you'd bless them all and remember too all our expectant mothers in the congregation who are due to give birth very shortly, we pray for them also at this anxious time and yet joyful time. So remember us in our worship and in all that we do and may it be to the glory of God. Amen.