

# Daniel 3

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Our reading today is from Daniel chapter 3, which is on page 886 of your Bibles.

King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, 60 cubits high and 6 cubits 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, that's still me, sorry, nations and peoples of every language, this is what you're commanded to do.

As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe, and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had 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 nations and peoples of every language fell down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. At this time, some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews.

They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, may the King live forever. Your majesty has issued a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold.

[ 2 : 1 5 ] And that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a 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.

Your majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold 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 I have set up?

Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe, and all kinds of music, if you are 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. Then what God will be able to rescue you from my hand?

[ 3 : 1 6 ] Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied to him, King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from your majesty's hand.

But even if he does not, we want you to know, your majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.

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. Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisors, Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?

[ 4 : 41 ] They replied, Certainly, your majesty. He said, Look, I see four men walking around in the fire, 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. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their head singed.

Their rows 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.

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.

[ 6 : 02 ] Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon. Thank you. Applause!

Great! Thanks, guys, for doing that. It would be a great help to me if you could keep your Bibles open at Daniel 3. My name is Martin Ayres.

If you've not met, I'm the senior pastor here, and we're looking at that together as we continue our series in this great book, Daniel. Let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word.

Let's pray together. Father God, we praise you for who you are. Mighty, sovereign, good, loving, kind, and that the unfolding of your word gives light.

We pray that your word this morning will be for us a lamp to our feet and a light for our path. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

[ 7 : 08 ] So it's sobering to think that as we gather today in a church, there's people all over the world gathering, but at far greater risk.

Not the risk of catching a virus if they go to church, but risks of being attacked on the way to church or bombed in the service or beaten on the way home. In Myanmar and Niger, church buildings are being burnt down.

I heard this week a dad from northern Nigeria speaking about the day he went to church with his family, and when they got home, they realized they couldn't find their teenage daughter, Hansatu, and they searched and searched for her, and then they were sent a note informing them that their daughter had converted to Islam and been taken away.

Of course, she'd been abducted and forcibly converted. In Malaysia, Pastor Raymond Cole went missing four years ago. He was accused of reaching Muslims with the news about Jesus, and driving along one day, five cars blockaded him to come off the road, and he was taken, and his wife has been pleading with the authorities ever since to investigate and try and get her husband back.

Now, here in the UK, we can be so thankful that we are free from many of those fears, but the church here, at least the visible church in Western Europe, seems to have been in incredibly rapid decline, marked decline, compared to some of those nations where it seems harder to be a Christian.

[ 8 : 40 ] Why is that? Well, we heard in Daniel chapter one, two weeks ago, that one of the strategies that the world has against the church that lures Christians away from their faith is just full immersion in a secular culture.

Daniel and his friends were brought from Jerusalem, where they were living as God's people, Bible-believing people, and taken to Babylon, and they were in exile far from home, enrolled as freshers in the University of Babylon, fully immersed in Babylonian culture, with the promise of reward if they did well.

And we thought about how the world often deploys similar tactics against us as we're fully immersed in the world around us. But this morning, we catch up with Daniel's friends when the pressure is quite different.

There's enormous pressure from them to conform to the world with punishment if they don't do that. And even though in Glasgow, we might not face a fiery furnace, for a number of years now, you could say that the heat has been turned up on wholehearted Christians, authentic Christians.

It's become much more complicated to serve God in politics today in this country. And Kate Forbes, the finance minister, has spoken publicly about how she has to tiptoe around her Christian faith in public life.

[ 10 : 02 ] It's become complicated to serve God in medicine as ethical decisions are changed about end-of-life care and there are value judgments about when life begins and it becomes difficult and complicated for our Christian medics.

There's pressure if you're serving God in education as the curriculum is adapted to a secular agenda. There's pressure if you're serving God in a Christian adoption agency and have to make decisions about what would be best for children.

So what does God say to us when we feel the pressure to conform? We heard two weeks ago that Daniel could be thought of as a tale of two cities. For them, the two cities were Babylon and Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was home. It was the place where God is and they'd been taken from it. Babylon was the world. Babylon was rich. It was the greatest empire the world had ever seen.

It was scary and they were far from home in Babylon. For us today, we could think of Jerusalem as the new Jerusalem that we're waiting for as the Bible describes our glorious future with God as Jerusalem.

[ 11 : 14 ] And meanwhile, for our lives here till Jesus calls us home, we're in Babylon and we're called to be the light of Babylon and let our light shine to be distinctive and attract people to the Lord.

Be in the world, engaged, but not of the world. And as we think about the difficulties for Daniel's friends in Babylon and for us in Babylon, our first point this morning is the pressure of pluralism.

The pressure of pluralism. So Babylon looks invincible, but the emperor decides it's a good idea to make sure that there's political union and to use religion to get that kind of union, that conformity.

So we're on the plain of Dura and this enormous gold statue is erected, 27 meters high, this gold statue, on a plain.

It must have been visible, shining in the sunlight for many miles around. And the call is made, as we heard, without exception, everybody, when you hear the instruments, fall down and worship the image.

[ 12 : 21 ] And the provincial leaders and the satraps and the prefects, they must have loved this. This is the kind of religion that they would support. A religion that's going to bring everyone together under their authority.

There's just one thing. I'm sure they won't need it because, you know, we're all reasonable people around here, but verse 6, there is a blazing furnace. And verse 6, whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.

And it's worth just thinking how easy we would have found it to compromise here because there is no requirement on God's people to stop worshipping the God of the Bible in private.

All God's people have to do, like everyone else around them, is bow down and worship the statue in public. And for most pagans at that time, worshipping different gods, that sounds entirely reasonable.

Keep your own gods, just add this one as well. This is what pluralism does to us, this idea that you can worship many gods, all religions are equally valid.

[ 13 : 31 ] Pluralism says, no one is going to mind you being a Christian as long as you make it a private thing, as long as you conform publicly to what everyone else thinks.

Come on, Christian. Everyone's in the same boat here. Don't say you're being discriminated against. We're all in the same boat. You can do whatever you want at home with whatever gods you want. You can have your church on a Sunday, so long as you also bow down and worship the idols of our age.

The problem for God's people is that Yahweh, the God of the Bible, the Lord, he demands exclusive loyalty. It's why in the early Roman Empire, it was the Christians who were described as atheists, because they would deny the gods of Rome, the gods of the people worship.

They said, we won't go to those temples because we worship a God who is an inner temple. Why does the Christian faith have to be so exclusive on us? Because it's true.

Because there is no other God. And there's no other way to God. 1 Timothy 2, verses 5 and 6, for there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Jesus Christ, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.

[ 14 : 50 ] And today, we don't have something as enormous and obvious and vulgar as this enormous gold statue that you could see shining in the sun. But wherever we give our full loyalty to Jesus Christ in all of life, we will feel the pressure of pluralism.

Pressure from people around us because they find it difficult that we won't bow down to the gods of our age. And if you resist the pressure, you can find that for all the people talk about tolerance, under the surface, there is rage waiting to surface against people who won't conform.

It's good to think maybe just about where a couple of the touchstones might be today and they'll be different for many of us, but maybe this just helps us think through what it would be like for us, where we might feel the pressure.

Jim turns up to work at the supermarket on the checkouts where he works and he gets told, today, it's Pride Week, it's LGBT inclusion week, so can you just wear a rainbow lanyard today and can you give out rainbow pride stickers to the children as they come through the checkout?

What you do in private is up to you, but this is the thing that we really celebrate now in our culture and we want to know, are you going to celebrate well enough for us? Or maybe Andy teaches at a high school and he has to go and speak to the senior management to say that he's willing to support all of the anti-bullying policies in the school, he's all for that, but he's not willing to promote the relationships and sexual health curriculum where it encourages young people to believe that you can choose your own gender and you can change your gender because Andy doesn't think it's kind for the children, he doesn't think it's loving, he thinks it's confusing for them.

[ 16 : 53 ] Or maybe we could think about the idol of success. At work, what would the response be in your workplace if you're willing to say no to careerism because of commitments to your church family or because of a commitment to the cause of the gospel?

How would people react when you take a clear stand on that? Or for those of us who are parents with our children, maybe we'd feel the disapproval of other parents when we explain to them that little Danny won't be at tennis anymore because the matches this year are on a Sunday and we feel that we're honoring the Lord with our parenting while the world says no, you're sinning against the idol of success because you're not letting your child achieve their full potential, make the most of their talents.

So I don't know what the pressure would be for you but I do think it's worth saying that if we feel that we never feel that pressure, it's probably because we've already compromised.

I think if Christians from a different culture came to visit, they would probably see ways that we've all already compromised to the idols of our culture.

So we see Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego under enormous pressure to be seen bowing down to this statue. They're Daniel's friends and they're our friends as we see them face that pressure.

[ 18 : 16 ] Let's pick things up again in our second point. The points are on the sheet. The courage of God's people. So we've seen the pressure on them from the powers that be from Nebuchadnezzar, magistrates, counsellors, prefects, advisors but we also see the pressure now in verse 7 of everyone else joining in.

Verse 7 As soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music all the nations and peoples of every language fell down and worshipped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Everyone else just goes along with it. Imagine the pressure not to make a fuss. Why do you Christians have to make a scene? When everyone else is joining in and you don't you look so unreasonable.

You look bigoted. You look bonkers. And the astrologers notice that some people have taken a stand. So we pick that up in verse 12 they say but there are some Jews whom you've set over the affairs of the province of Babylon hints of jealousy there Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who pay no attention to you your majesty.

They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up. And then we get the reaction the fire and the fury verse 13 furious with rage Nebuchadnezzar summons them.

[ 19 : 46 ] Is it true? He asks and it is true. How have they managed to resist? I think it's worth seeing a couple of things already that show us how they managed to resist the pressure.

They have noticed that under the bravado Babylon is ridiculous in all its pomp. That's how it's written chapter 3 for us to bring that out.

This is like the emperor's new clothes isn't it? Just waiting for someone to point out how silly this is in verse 5 the way we're told about the instruments that it's the horn the flute the zither the lyre the harp the pipe and all kinds of music and then we're told again in verse 7 and then they're repeated in verse 10 and then in verse 15 Nebuchadnezzar has nothing to do except say the whole thing again in verse 15 when you hear the sound of the horn flute zither lyre harp pipe and all kinds of music if you're 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 this is God scoffing at how preposterous human displays of power can really be the parades in front of the leadership of North Korea the rules about saluting and curtsying and bowing in all the right ways it's ridiculous and behind it all is deep insecurity another key for these three faithful men here they're probably in their late 30s now this is probably about 20 years on from Daniel chapter 1 and another key is they just keep needing to remind themselves that this massive statue is not real it's not a real God it struck me reading Daniel 3 this week that with all the repetition the thing I think is repeated most in the whole chapter is set up did you notice that so in verse 1

Nebuchadnezzar makes the image and then we're told in verse 2 at the end it's the image he had set up in verse 3 the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up in verse 5 again it's the image he set up at the end of verse 7 the image of gold that the king had set up it's in verse 12 it's in verse 14 why is it there again and again to remind God's people there is no real spiritual power anywhere else it's man-made things and when the living God has revealed himself to us why would you worship anything else anything that's man-made but despite that we can see how scary it was to take a stand and it makes verses 16 to 18 perhaps the greatest statement of faith in the whole Old Testament let's pick things up again at verse 16 Shadrach Meshach and Abednego replied to him King Nebuchadnezzar we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter if we are thrown into the blazing furnace the God we serve is able to deliver us from it and he will deliver us from your majesty's hand but even if he does not we want you to know your majesty that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up so folks if the message of Daniel is that our God the Lord reigns these verses show us what it looks like to live that out when we're under pressure to compromise total confidence in God's ability total acceptance of God's decision you see that total confidence in God's ability total acceptance of God's decision so they stand before the most powerful man in the world and they say that God can save them they think that God will save them and then they say but even if he does not we will stay loyal to him that's where they take their stand it's that but if not faith that says we're committed to God just for who he is not for what he can give us he is my king and that's enough not saying

I'll love God and I'll trust him just so long as he gives me this just so long as my life turns out the way I think I need it to in this area rather it's saying I know God could do this for me I long for him to do this for me but if not I'll still serve him and folks I know that's very difficult for all of us it takes courageous faith to pray but if not prayers today Lord protect me but if not Lord give me a life partner but if not Lord give us children but if not Lord give me a job but if not Lord give us the salvation of our loved ones but if not because we're saying because it's true that the Lord reigns I'll choose him no matter what and once they've taken their stand like that they've already won Babylon can do nothing to defeat faith like that but Babylon won't stop trying so that's our third point the rescue of the living God in verse 19

[ 25 : 26 ] Nebuchadnezzar is furious and we read that his attitude towards them changed he ordered the furnace to be heated seven times hotter than usual and he gets his special forces to tie them up and verse 20 throw them into the blazing furnace they're thrown in fully clothed firmly tied up it's so perilous just look what happens to the soldiers in verse 22 the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach Meshach and Abednego suddenly it doesn't seem such a safe thing to fight for Babylon Babylon might look powerful but it turns you into a slave and it won't die for you and for the three men of faith there's a visitor in the furnace I take it the furnace must have had a way that they were dropped in and a window of some kind that they could be viewed inside and have a look with me at verse 24 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 your majesty he said look

I see four men walking around in the fire unbound and unharmed and the fourth looks like a son of the gods and then it's like the tomb of Lazarus in verse 26 that it's Nebuchadnezzar approaches the opening of the furnace and he shouts Shadrach Meshach and Abednego servants of the most high god come out come here so Shadrach Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire they crowd around them and verse 28 there are no burn marks there's no singed hair their clothes are intact you can't even smell smoke on them and through the courageous faith of these men and their rescue the gospel advances the news about Jesus Nebuchadnezzar asked a key question for the whole chapter in verse 15 just have a look back up there you see his question in verse 15 then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand what did he mean by that you see that if Babylon is against you your god is of no practical use and now he can answer his own question in verse 29 verse 29 at the end he says no other god can save in this way and he praises god in verse 28 praise be to the god of Shadrach

Meshach and Abednego who was sent his angel and rescued his servants 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 it's a fulfillment of a promise made by god through the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 43 he said do not fear for I have redeemed you I have summoned you by name you are mine when you pass through the waters I will be with you when you walk through the fire you will not be burned the flames will not set you ablaze for I am the lord your god the holy one of Israel your saviour and what does god say to us through that rescue well in first peter chapter 4 peter writes to persecuted christians and he says this dear friends do not be surprised at the fiery trial you're going through to test you as though something strange were happening to you one of the things that makes us cave in in our culture when it turns against us or collapse is that we're surprised we get surprised when people give us a hard time for being a christian when people speak lies about our church when people speak against us in our communities when someone complains at work peter says don't be surprised don't react as though something strange is happening to you it's what happened to jesus who said if the world hates you keep in mind that it hated me first if you belong to the world it would love you as its own so to live for the god who reigns in babylon will mean we go through the fire but let's picture again that full figure in the furnace is it the angel of the lord is it some sort of pre-incarnate son of god we're not told specifically but clearly what we can see is this is god drawing alongside his people that's what we're seeing and through that figure in the furnace we hear that we have a god who doesn't save us from the fire but saves us through the fire he doesn't take us out of the fire but he comes to be with us in the fire to protect us and preserve us through the fire and living this side of the death resurrection ascension of jesus we have a much clearer picture than those three friends had of how christian hope is sustained on the other side of death we see these men emerge from the death of the furnace and we think of jesus stepping out of his tomb on resurrection morning and we trust the words of first peter chapter one that god says that he can use our fiery trials in this life that they won't burn us up they will refine us in daniel chapter three here i wonder if maybe this furnace was the furnace that was used to cast the gold for the statue the apostle peter says that when we go through fiery trials it's our faith that's more precious than pure gold and god uses the fire to refine our faith and we can trust that thanks to jesus having gone through the fire of persecution for us not even death can separate us from him like john chrysostom in the fourth century the early christian who was said to have stood before the empress eudoxia and he was threatened with being banished for being a christian and he said you cannot banish me for this world is my father's house and she said but i will kill you and chrysostom replied no you cannot for my life is hidden with christ in god and she said then i will take away your treasures and he said



no you cannot for my treasure is in heaven and my heart is there and she said but i will drive you away from your friends and you will have no one left and chrysostom said no you cannot for i have a friend in heaven from whom you cannot separate me i defy you for there is nothing you can do to harm me and she said what can you do with a man like this and he like us was simply following a savior who endured the fire and the fury of the sanhedrin and the roman cross so that he could reassure us with his words in this world you will have trouble but take heart i have overcome the world let's pray together just a moment of quiet for us to reflect on god's word to us as we think about the pressure of pluralism the courage of god's people and the rescue of the living god we praise you lord jesus that you reign that you withstood the pressure of every trial and temptation and that by your death and resurrection you have overcome the world would your spirit strengthen us that our prayers for this life would be marked by but if not faith would you strengthen us not to be afraid and as with daniel's friends would you use our faith and your protection to show the world that you reign that the people around us would seek you for your namesake amen prayer so dear friends do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you as though something strange were happening to you but rejoice in as much as you participate in the sufferings of christ so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed lord we recognize that we've got many struggles and trials in this life but we look to jesus we thank you that you are with us in the furnace we thank you that through it you are refining us to be the people that you want us to be please help us to draw near to you day by day please help us to sing and look to your glory as we go wherever we go please be with us this week to your praise and glory in jesus name amen amen