

## **DANIEL 3    CBC 25.10.2020**

Daniel and his friends were captives in Babylon, but at the end of ch.2 things seem to be looking up for them. They've escaped execution and been put in charge of Babylonian affairs. "*You guys are the best! I want you to write the report! You make the recommendations for future policy!*" That sometimes happens to Christian believers. But we shouldn't be surprised if our report is never read, or if our recommendations are ignored. Babylon is still Babylon. And in ch.3, things become dire again. But God is still the Saviour of His people. ***Read Dan 3:1-30 ...***

### **1. ARROGANT KING (vv.1-15)**

We've all met people who bow to God when they're in trouble and then go back to their old ways when the storm has past. That was Nebuchadnezzar. God had shown him in a dream the fragility of all man-made kingdoms (ch.2) and for a moment Nebuchadnezzar's arrogance was shaken – but it was only a brief pause in his self-glorification. He experienced conviction without genuine conversion. Unlike the Thessalonians, he didn't turn from idols to serve the living and true God (1Thess 1:9). Instead, he resisted God's revelation.

He'd seen a dream in which his kingdom was superseded by others and reduced to dust. But why should that be inevitable? He decided to hold something like a Festival of Babylon, to strengthen his diverse empire and make everyone proud to be Babylonian. And at the centre was a great statue, set on a plain just outside Babylon, a colossal eyesore visible for miles around. It was just like the one in his dream – except that instead of it consisting of many different metals representing different kingdoms, it was gold (or at least, gold-plated) all the way down, representing just one kingdom – *Nebuchadnezzar's* kingdom. In this way he defied God and said in effect: "*My kingdom will not be destroyed. My kingdom is the one that will last.*"

And what a fuss he made of it! Daniel 3 is basically laughing at the pomposity – that's what's intended by the repetition in this chapter. All these important people (twice, vv.2,3)! All these musicians (four times, vv.5,7,10,15)! Such splendour! But we're told the whole thing is a set-up – *nine* times we're told the statue is "set up" by Nebuchadnezzar! It looks impressive, but it's a farce because God has told us in ch.2 what He does to pompous governments – He blows them to the wind, and replaces them with a kingdom of His own.

And if only you can remember what God has revealed about the folly of national posturing, and hear heaven laughing (Psalm 2:1-4), then you'll live differently. When the band plays, which city's music do you dance to? Babylon's? Or Jerusalem's?

So this was Nebuchadnezzar's great plan for strengthening his kingdom. Make everyone dance to the music of Babylon! Bow down – or burn. *And it never occurred to Nebuchadnezzar that some might be loyal to the Lord even if it killed them.*

We're not told where Daniel was while all this was happening, but his three friends had to decide whether or not to go on trusting in God. What pressure they were under! Pressure from above – the king's death-threat. Pressure from their peers – everyone else was bowing down. Pressure from concerned friends: "*Look, it's only a symbolic gesture – just do a quick bow and then you can go on serving God.*" Did they also have pressure from families who said, "*What will happen to US if you don't bow down?*" Don't think the three men didn't suffer.

But they didn't bow down, and jealous colleagues – the same people whose lives Daniel had saved in ch.2 – reported them (*think of your own experience of office politics ...*). And they found themselves hauled up before Nebuchadnezzar and given his ultimatum: bow or burn.

## **2. FAITHFUL BELIEVERS (vv.16-18)**

Their response is magnificent. vv.17-18: “*If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it ... But even if He doesn't, ... we will not serve your gods!*” They know that God is able to deliver them because it's taught throughout scripture that “nothing is impossible with God.” But they don't know if he will (v.17 *can equally be translated: “He is able to deliver us from the furnace, and He's able to deliver us from your hand – but if not ...” - that makes more sense contextually*). They know God *can* deliver them; they don't know if He will.

And frankly, not knowing makes no difference to what they should do. Their faith doesn't depend on an escape hatch – it depends on *revelation*. They know that whatever happens, God is faithful, wise, powerful (Daniel 1&2). They don't believe that circumstances change this.

And notice this: they don't think, “*God owes us deliverance because we've been standing up for Him.*” That's important, because we often fall into the trap of thinking that if we've been serving God, He's now obligated to do us favours and keep us from harm: “*I've done my bit, now God must do His bit.*” But this is a dreadful way to think, because if things go well we proudly think it's down to our efforts, and if things go badly we have the even worse idea that God has failed us. But God is faithful, wise and powerful *whatever* we're going through. He's not committed to my comfort, even though I keep thinking He is – He's committed to my salvation.

So please don't teach yourself that you deserve to escape from trials. Teach yourself that God promises to be your God forever, and He knows what He's doing. Because if we were left without any trials we'd not be anything like the people God has planned for us to be.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego don't have this slot-machine theology – that they put in their good works, and now what **MUST** come out is a bottle of miracles. They're operating with a biblical framework and that's why they say, “*God can do it, but if He doesn't, we'll still trust Him and not bow down.*”

It's important to grasp this, because the sober truth is that most Christians aren't rescued in this life from suffering and death. And if our discipleship rests on the assumption that we will be, we won't be Christians for long. We'll give up disillusioned.

Following God costs something. Isn't this what baptism means? Baptism isn't just a cute piece of symbolism. We're putting our signature to a cheque which may one day be cashed. It's likely there'll come a time when we'll be asked to take a costly stand – and if we won't, all our previous talk looks phoney.

Usually the test comes at a lower level than a blazing furnace – “*Our God is able to provide me with a satisfying marriage ... children ... a better job ... heal my cancer ... protect me from Covid-19 ... BUT even if He doesn't ...*” We don't *have* to marry, have children, have a job, be healed – but we *have* to obey.

That's what Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego grasped. And so they said, “*But even if he doesn't*” – not words of doubt, but of faith. You and I regard being burned alive as unthinkable, but they knew that it's idolatry that's unthinkable. By comparison, being burned in a furnace is *thinkable*. We don't have to survive; we do have to be faithful.

**How come they were so brave?** If my vision of God is small, then the people around me will look big. And under pressure, I'll fear the people rather than God. So what's the answer? To have a great

God. They kept in mind what God had revealed in ch.2: that the kingdoms of this world will crumble to dust, and only God's Kingdom will last. The way to handle the clash of kingdoms is with your eyes on the future.

### **3. MIGHTY SAVIOUR (vv.19-30)**

At last the blazing furnace takes centre-stage. It's ferocity is well-trumpeted: eight times we're told it's "blazing". And Nebuchadnezzar ordered it to be supercharged. It was so hot it killed the guards who'd thrown Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego bound into the flames.

But Nebuchadnezzar looked and saw Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego strolling around the furnace unharmed, enjoying the company of a fourth person. His servants were frantically searching for the instruction booklet that came with the furnace: "*Where's the troubleshooting section? This furnace doesn't seem to be working properly! Is it still in warranty?*"

The identity of the fourth person is left unexplained. Was it an angel? Was it a pre-incarnate appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ (as I'm inclined to believe)? We're told only that he looked like "*a son of the gods*" (v.25): a supernatural being. God shows that as we stand with Him, He will stand with us. God will not desert us.

I've said that Daniel 3 is not the normal experience of Christians. So why are *they* given this unusual deliverance? Partly, it's God showing He can do it. He wants all Babylon to know that He is the King. But He's also giving us the gospel in a nutshell. This is a picture of salvation: a rescue from death. It's an escape from a mini-fire – still very wonderful – but when we come to the New Testament we learn of an escape from a maxi-fire – the judgement of God. And we can escape from the judgement of God because Jesus didn't escape it.

It's interesting: we're told that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire unharmed (vv.26-27), but we're not told that the fourth person comes through unscathed. What happens when the fire of judgment hits Him? We know from the New Testament that He does not come through unmarked – that in heaven there'll be an eternal reminder in His nail-pierced hands of the fire of judgement through which He walked so that we might come through unscathed. And the person who puts their faith in Jesus will never feel the fire of God's judgement. There is no condemnation because of our Rescuer.

So remember that this deliverance is a *token*, not a blueprint. Like the miracles of Jesus in the gospels, it's anticipatory – a sign of the final rescue of believers. But we can be comforted: the last enemy, death, can do us no harm. It will finally be seen (v.27) that "*the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.*" In heaven there'll be no smell of fire on us!

### **CONCLUSION**

And so the story ends on an unexpected note, with Nebuchadnezzar praising God's name and promoting God's servants (vv.28-30). And we're left with a picture of a great God, and a call to keep the first commandment even if it kills us. Living this side of the empty tomb we have added encouragement to remain faithful.

But still we wonder what we'd do if our life was threatened. Perhaps your loyalty to Christ is being tested at the moment in some much smaller way. You're under pressure to bow to someone's idol – maybe even to an idol your own heart has manufactured. And you're struggling to stay strong even

in this relatively small thing – you think you’d never cope with a blazing furnace! We’re not heroes, are we?

Well, our Lord Jesus Christ didn’t come into the world to save heroes, but people who are weak and sinful. You think you couldn’t face it – but neither could they, in advance. God doesn’t help us in theoretical situations – He helps us in real situations. He has promised us grace in our time of need (He 4:16).

*When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,  
His grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply;  
The flame shall not harm thee; His only design  
Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.*

*The soul that on Jesus doth lean for repose,  
He will not, He cannot, desert to his foes;  
That soul, though all hell should endeavour to shake,  
He’ll never, no never, no never forsake.*

**PRAYER:** Heavenly Father, in Jesus Christ You have given us a firm foundation and a sure hope. Help us by Your Spirit so to live for Him that we may serve in this world, but never bow to this world or its idols; for Your glory’s sake. AMEN

#### **FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION**

- Where is your loyalty to Christ under pressure?
- How are you going to stand firm?
- How does it reassure you to know that God will be with you in the fire?
- Who needs you to encourage them with this truth today?