

Sermon 5th July 2026 Blazing furnace (Daniel 3)

Good morning, I'm Vanda, Vanda Noble and I'm a member of the Church family here at Davidson's Mains Parish Church.

We're continuing in our series looking at the Book of Daniel. Over the last two weeks Dan has led us to think about Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, his dreams and how he responded to the Living God, the God of his Jewish subjects. Today's passage is Daniel chapter 3 which contains one of the most famous stories from the Book, although Daniel is not actually mentioned at all. So let's read Daniel 3.

King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, (that's about 90 ft tall and 9 ft wide) and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, 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, advisers, 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, "Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are 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 has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace."

7 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 worshipped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

8 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, pipe and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, 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."

13 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? 15 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?"

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.”

19 Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace 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.

24 Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, “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.”. 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 advisers crowded around them. They saw 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.

28 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. 29 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.” Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

Phew, that's all quite exciting for a summer Sunday! And actually the way that the text is written in the Hebrew language shows the build up of excitement and even a little humour - the Bible is far from a boring old history book, it is the living Word of God and he certainly has a humorous side to him. God is far from being a grumpy old man prone to fits of temper – it's King Nebuchadnezzar who fits that description. So let's begin looking at our passage with these list of people, the satraps (political leaders) etc, quite a mouthful to read and the repetition of these lists is designed to help the reader understand that this is all a bit ridiculous and over the top, much as we might joke that every Tom, Dick and Harry was there.

Political leaders and military leaders of the whole country were all summoned and had gathered. Where was this? Well historians are not completely sure of the exact modern day location but the Plain of Dura is likely an area about 6 miles south of where the City of Babylon is thought to have been. Therefore it was easily accessible and central. When was this statue built? Scholars say it's difficult to date relative to the previous chapter, describing Nebuchadnezzar's dream, so we can only say that it happened later in Nebuchadnezzar's reign, maybe 587BC which was about 18 years after Daniel and his fellow Jews were taken in to captivity. Why was this statue built? It is thought that Nebuchadnezzar was wanting to promote unity in his Kingdom perhaps to guard against the destruction of his Kingdom that had been shown to him in his dream – that was the statue with feet of clay, the destruction of which we looked at last week.

V8 shows us that there are clearly leaders in Babylon who are jealous and resent the Jews (v8) and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are named as paying no attention to the King. There's no actual evidence that our 3 heroes had shown any disrespect for the King, so it's probably an exaggeration designed to anger the King and get him to get rid of or at least demote these Jews. After the issue of not wanting to eat the king's food that we read in Daniel chapter 1, the only point of disrespect to the King and his decrees is their refusal to bow in worship to this new statue. But hearing this, King Nebuchadnezzar throws a complete tantrum and the furnace is set ablaze. Hotter than usual and so hot that the soldiers throwing Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego into the furnace are killed (v22)

But let's look at the discussion between the 3 Jews and the King. V15, the King gives the boys a chance to redeem themselves and obey and he asks them 'What god will be able to rescue you from my hand?' Clearly Nebuchadnezzar has forgotten how impressed he was with Daniel's God, the God of the Jews, who gave Daniel the interpretation of his dream. In chapter 2v47 the King says to Daniel 'Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings.' But he's forgotten that now. It's all too easy to forget the wonderful things that God does in our lives once a few years have passed.

Next we come to the v16 which is the central part of this whole event; how do the Jews reply to the King? From the words used in the Hebrew, they are not disrespectful to the king but they are also completely clear that they will not compromise their position in any way. The 10 Commandments begin with 'You shall have no other gods before me' and 'you shall not make any form of idol and bow down to it'. (Ex20 or Deut 5). So we read in verse 17 Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego state clearly to the King that they believe that their God, Yahweh, can save them from the furnace and will save them from the King, but even if He does not, that they will not worship the statue. That's a courageous stance in the face of death, certain death in human terms.

And we know the outcome of the story well; God saves them. The only thing burnt

are the ropes that tied them up so the fire was hot and it could burn and destroy, but the destruction was only to set them free. And they were seen by Nebuchadnezzar walking around inside the furnace (v25) with a fourth person with them. The text says it was an angel but this is considered to be a theophany, an appearance of Jesus right with His people in the midst of the fire, walking with them.

So what can we learn from this narrative? Does God always save people from life-threatening danger when they pray? No, our experience tells us, He does not. If people are really spiritual and pray with great faith are they guaranteed the answer to their prayers? No, they are not. Is it possible to look back and see why God didn't answer our prayers in the way that we asked? Sometimes and maybe it will be possible when we get to Heaven, but in this life, not always. We can't always understand why God says, 'No' to some of our prayers.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian known for his opposition to Nazi Socialism. His ties to the July 20th 1944, conspiracy to overthrow the Nazi regime led to his execution in 1945. He was hanged, with other conspirators, at Flossenbürg concentration camp on April 9th 1945, only about two weeks before the liberation of his prison camp. Could God have prevented his death for another couple of weeks, 'yes' God could have saved him from death but 'No' God did not. Why? In this life we don't see and understand everything, sometimes I feel I understand so very little of what God is doing and that's the crunch point. If God does not answer our prayers in the way that we want, in the way that I/we think He should, then will I/we still trust Him?

In Scotland today, we can meet freely to worship God in person and online. But in some countries around the world, Pastors are imprisoned for preaching the Bible, believers are imprisoned and tortured for having a Bible in their possession and any form of gathering to worship Jesus is dangerous. In some countries people will face certain death if they refuse to deny Jesus to the authorities. Christian organisations like Open Doors document the persecution of Christians that goes on today and seek to support believers in countries where it is dangerous to be known as a believer in Christ.

Here's a photo looking across the border at a country where this is the case. Can anyone identify the flag showing which country this is? The photo is taken from South Korea looking across the Demilitarised zone to North Korea which is considered as the most dangerous place to be a Christian in the world today. Also visible across the border is this statue of Kim Il Sung. He died in 1994 and in North Korea he is called the 'Great leader', the 'sun' and the 'eternal president'. The statue is 66 ft tall it's made of bronze and was erected in 2011 just before his son Kim Jong Il passed away. Everyone in North Korea is required to worship these leaders who have died. Yet Christians, bravely, do not. If they are discovered, many die or are sent to work camps along with their family members. So why do Christians in North Korea still follow Christ? They say He is worth any persecution.

There are even stories of people who escape over the border into China, leaving the desperate poverty in North Korea, but after they are helped to become Christians, they choose to go back to their country to tell others of Christ. How humble that makes me feel as I read of their courage.

And many Christians do suffer for their faith in our world today and many too are the miraculous stories of God's intervention and protection. Whatever the outcome, we can be absolutely sure that Jesus is with us, walking in the fire of pain and suffering. May we be challenged in our own lives to share Jesus wisely and boldly. May the Holy Spirit challenge us to pray for our brothers and sisters who do not have the freedom to believe in Jesus that we have.

In our culture we are not forced by law to worship idols but that doesn't mean that we don't. Are there idols in my life, in your life that stand in the place where Jesus should be? Do things like money, self-worth, family, work take a place of greater importance than Jesus in our lives? We can ask him in prayer and He will show us.

Let us pray now before we sing our final hymn;

Almighty God you are holy and awesome. You are King of all Kings and Lord of all Powers on the earth and in heaven and we choose to worship you.

Lord Jesus, You paid the most costly sacrifice ever, by pouring out your blood in death, because you think that each one of us is worth dying for. Thank you that as you walked in the fire alongside Shadrach Meshach and Abednego you also walk with us through all the difficult times of our lives.

Holy Spirit we ask that you show us what there is in our lives that distracts us from worshipping God as we should. Thank You that You live in us and please help us to become more like Jesus everyday.

In His powerful name we pray

Amen