

Daniel 3: Standing Firmly

Persecution, even martyrdom, for holding to faith in Jesus Christ is as old as the gospel. Most of apostles died for their faith and the growth of the early church was fuelled by their sacrifice and many others like them.

In AD 155 Polycarp, the venerable bishop of Smyrna, was arrested and carried before the proconsul for his trial. Having been declared guilty as a Christian he was condemned to be burnt in the market place. But he was so well respected that the proconsul then urged him to recant, saying, "Deny Christ and I will release you." Polycarp answered, "*Eighty six years have I served him, and he never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, who has saved me?*" His faithfulness, even as he died, encouraged many others to be faithful too.

And in this account from Daniel chapter 3 we have an example that, like Polycarp and many other martyrs like him, should add steel to our backbones and encourage us to stand firm in our faith. Of course in this account God brings about a mighty rescue, but Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego didn't know that would happen. Their task, like ours, is simply to stand firm and trust God.

It's not very clear how much time has passed since the events of chapter 2 but it seems that Nebuchadnezzar's amazement at the power and might of Daniel's God has certainly faded. In fact it's possible that as time went by the King put his own spin on Daniel's interpretation, twisting the words to suit his own purposes and the desires of his own heart. Daniel said that Nebuchadnezzar was the head of gold, so Nebuchadnezzar built a statue made entirely of gold. Daniel explained that the fourth and final kingdom would be divided kingdom, but here we see Nebuchadnezzar trying to ensure that his kingdom is completely united: and what better way to make sure of that than for everyone to worship together.

The description of the image he built in verse 1 is both imposing and rather vague. At some 27 m high this would have been taller than any other statue in the known world at the time, and standing on the plains of Dura it would have been visible from miles away. But the writer is vague about who the image resembled. Was it Nebuchadnezzar himself? Or was it a statue of one of the Babylonian gods? I suspect it may have been a deliberate ploy by Nebuchadnezzar so that everyone could make their prayers to their own gods whilst facing this statue. They might be worshipping different gods in their hearts but on the surface there would be a tremendous unity.

To sweeten the deal Nebuchadnezzar dressed it all up in a festival of music and pageantry. No doubt there were food stalls lining the way, and all kinds of stallholders selling lucky charms or festival T-shirts. Think Glastonbury without the mud!

And for those who were rather reticent to come and bow before this golden image, behind the music and the warm invitation was the threat of the fiery furnace. Put those things together: a great cultural experience, the desire we all have to go with the crowd and conform and the threat of death and ad it's not hard to understand why almost everybody put their scruples to one side and were prepared to worship this golden image when the sound of the horn, flute, zither, liar, harp, pipe and all kinds of music filled the Babylonian air.

Now for those who believe that all religions are just paths up the same mountain to the same god this isn't a problem. But having read the scriptures Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego knew that was not the case. They knew that the Babylonian gods and the gods of all other nations and religions were nothing more than empty idols and that there could be, and only was, one true God. The one true God was the creator of heaven and earth, the God who had led his people Israel out of Egypt with his mighty hand, given them his Law and established them in the Promised Land. The one and only true God is the God of the Bible; the God who had revealed through Daniel the dream and interpretation for King Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 2. This is the God who said in Isaiah 45: 5 "*I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God.*" And they had the words of this God written on tablets of stone forbidding them from making idols and worshipping any other God but Him. They may have been educated in Babylon and promoted to high positions in Babylon, but they would not bow to Babylon's idols or disobey the Commandments of God to save their own skins.

Now it's pretty clear that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego didn't want to make a scene. They had been prepared to serve in Nebuchadnezzar's government after all and by all accounts they did a great job. They just wouldn't bow

before the statue the King had set up. In fact, so unobtrusive is their protest that it's only when some of the astrologers brought their complaint to the King that Nebuchadnezzar knew anything about it.

Now it's not clear what motives these astrologers had, but I suspect that they were jealous that these outsiders had reached such a high position so quickly. And they are quite clever with their language aren't they? They make it clear that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego haven't just broken a law but that they have defied the King's own authority. Unsurprisingly Nebuchadnezzar flies into a rage.

By the time Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are brought in the King does seem to be calmer; they are 3 of his trusted officials after all. And graciously he gives them an opportunity to deny the rumours and to pledge allegiance to him by bowing in worship to the image he has made. Of course Nebuchadnezzar thought he had the upper hand because when he issued them with a 'bow or burn' ultimatum he said at the end of verse 13, *"then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"*

But Shadrach Meshach and Abednego were unmoved. They were not rude in their defiance, but their hope, faith and their resolve are extraordinary. Look down at verses 16 to 18. *"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."*

It is interesting in verse 16 that they don't offer any defence. They knew the time for talking is over and that however clever their arguments the King is not going to be swayed. No doubt the King had already heard many words from Daniel about the glory and majesty and power of God, and if he wasn't convinced by those or by the interpretation of his dream in Daniel chapter 2 then he wouldn't be convinced by them. The time for words was over. This was the time for deeds.

Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised by the level of their faith; after all they worshipped a God who had saved his people many times. They may have been away from home and living in a pagan culture but their faith in God did not waver.

Their hope in God's saving work on their behalf was perhaps far more astounding. Perhaps from their personal experience they had incredible confidence that God would act to save them. They had been in that prayer meeting with Daniel when God had spoken to him in a vision when their lives had hung in the balance, so they knew God was able to rescue them, and it seems they truly believed that he would. But they had also seen the fall of Jerusalem and the capture or killing of many of their fellow Jews so theirs was not a blind hope where everything always turns out well.

I suspect that the Christian martyrs we spoke of earlier knew that at any moment God could have broken in and rescued them physically from their oppressors – he is after all a rescuing God. But they also knew that even if he didn't they would still be rescued through death for eternal life. That amazing hope for Christians is made very explicit through the resurrection of Jesus and the New Testament, but it is far less clear in the Old Testament. But perhaps that thought was present in the minds of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego as they stood firm; confident in God's saving power either from death or through death.

Either way, they would not bow. They had tremendous faith, they had incredible hope and they had an iron resolve: *"but even if our God does not deliver us from your Majesty's hand, we want you to know that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."*

What would you have done in their situation? Would you have bowed the knee to save your life or would you have stood firm and faced the fire? I suspect it's a test that we would all hope to pass but that none of us want to face. Perhaps when the choices are that stark it's easier to recognise the surpassing worth of our salvation in Jesus Christ; perhaps in that situation the gulf between these few fleeting years of toil and the joy of being in God's presence for all eternity is easier to grasp. Whatever they knew it's clear that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did not fear death. Facing this perilous choice they placed their hope firmly in God and would not be moved.

But for us although the choices are more subtle, the pressure to conform is just as strong. No one is likely to issue us a bow or burn ultimatum, but for some the ultimatum is to bend or lose your job; conform or be cut off; agree, or be called a bigot; celebrate with us or be labelled a homophobe or Islamaphobe.

Perhaps you've already come under pressure at work or with your family or friends about the absolute truth claims in the Bible for Jesus to be the only way to God. Perhaps you've been invited to take part in a multifaith service and you don't want to appear rude. Perhaps some gay friends or family have asked you to celebrate their relationship with them and you don't know what to say. Perhaps people you love have threatened to have nothing more to do with you if you continue to talk about Jesus.

Or perhaps it's the pull of materialism that is your hardest battle. Perhaps it's the desire to chase after more wealth or possessions, maybe even forsaking church and working on a Sunday so you can buy that better house or car or holiday. Perhaps it's pressure from family to spend time with them rather than staying true to your commitment to God and meeting with his people each week. Perhaps it's the siren call of success and finding your value in personal glory rather than in Christ that is subtly but increasingly pulling you away from obedience to God. Those are the kinds of pressures that we are under today. And although those pressures and choices may not seem as stark, very often the more subtle the pressure, the smaller the next step, the easier it is to give in. We say to ourselves "I'll give in here but I still believe in my heart!" But our lives tell a different story.

Many church leaders in countries where there is real persecution of Christians have commented that persecution, whilst painful, has led to a far stronger church full of Christians who know the cost of obedience and yet who, because of the riches that are ours in Christ, are prepared to stand firm and trust the glorious promises of God. And whether or not persecution rises in the UK, if the church is going to grow then that is what we need to see here. We are not to run away from the world, we are to be in it but not of it. As Christians we are called to be a holy people, dedicated to God. Like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego we can enjoy the music and clothes and language of our culture and learn what we can from it, but we must not be moved from a full and total obedience to God.

So how are you standing right now? Are you bending with the breeze and going with the flow? Are you slowly but surely taking on-board the values and standards of our culture, or does your heart belong to the King of Kings? Are your will and desires shaped most by slick advertising campaigns or by Jesus and his kingdom? Faced with the same choice as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego; what would you have done?

Well as we've seen, they stood firm. And although Nebuchadnezzar seemed to have been pretty calm at the beginning of their conversation, their defiance stirred up such great anger that he ordered the furnace to be heated 7 times hotter than usual. And once the 3 friends had been tied up he ordered that they be thrown into the fire.

Nebuchadnezzar must have thought that their act of defiance was both pointless and over, but he was wrong. Verse 24 captures some of the shock when it says that he '*leaped to his feet in amazement*' as he looked into the furnace and saw not just 3 rebels being quickly cremated, but 4 men walking freely around with the 4th man looking like '*a son of the gods*'. But despite the shock, Nebuchadnezzar knew what this meant. He called out to the servants of the Most High God to come out of the fire, and when they did both the King and his advisers were utterly astonished that not only were the 3 men unharmed but their robes weren't scorched and there wasn't even the smell of fire on them.

What a rescue! What a saviour! For us in the post New Testament era it is easy to imagine that this 4th figure was the pre-incarnate Christ, and Nebuchadnezzar's outburst may even point us in that direction. But whether this was Jesus or an angel walking with the 3 men in the flames this is clearly the saving work of God. This is God being present with his people to comfort and save. This is a concrete fulfilment of the words from Isaiah chapter 43:2: "*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.*"

That promise has been precious to Christians across the ages and it should give us hope all so as we stand firm for Christ in our culture. You see, whether or not we are physically rescued from whatever fiery trials we may face, and

there have been many who have faced a literal fiery death, we have the promise of Jesus that God is with us always and that through him ultimately our victory is certain.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were rescued by the physical presence of God with them in the flames; during the storm on the Sea of Galilee the disciples were saved as Jesus stood and commanded the wind and the waves to be still. But we and all Christians have the promise of God's Holy Spirit with us always. And friends, God's Holy Spirit is no less real and no less life transforming than this divine encounter in the flames or the physical presence of Jesus. Friends, God is with us in our struggles; He is with us as we stand firm against the tide of this increasingly godless culture; and He is with us in times of pain and sickness and suffering. God is with us always so we should never be shaken.

But this rescue points us to something else as well. God is not only present with his people in times of suffering and persecution; it is very often through those times of pain and suffering and persecution that he wins the greatest victory. You see just as Jesus' death on the cross in our place was the means by which our salvation was secured, so through the suffering, persecution or even the death of his people, God's kingdom advances. The Centurion at the foot of the cross is a wonderful example of that. He saw how Jesus died and declared "*surely this man was the Son of God.*" And throughout the ages the sacrifice of Christians like Polycarp as they patiently and persistently endured shame and torture for the name of Jesus has had a huge impact on the cultures in which they lived. And the faithful and firm witness of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had a huge impact on King Nebuchadnezzar. As a result of this rescue he issued a decree that no one should dishonour the God of the Jews because "*no other God can save in this way.*"

This is a glorious passage and a fantastic story of faithful believers and the power of God to rescue, but it would be a terrible mistake to go away entertained rather than challenged. So as I close let me leave you with some questions to take away and mull over:

Firstly, how firm is your faith in God? How well do you know him? How much do you trust his Word and his promises? If the answer is little, then you will bend under every pressure from whatever source. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego stood firm because they knew the God they trusted. Do you?

But as well as knowing the God of the Bible we also need to identify the idols that currently take the Lord's rightful place in our life. Paul Tillich said this: "*a person's God is the thing or person that they are most concerned about, think about, or that affects one's life the most.*" They won't be 27 m high statues but they can be just as dominating. And if you value your career, your family, your Facebook ratings, your image, or your sport more than Jesus Christ then when you are faced with a choice between that idol and full obedience to Jesus, you will almost always bend and bow rather than standing firm. And as always when we take a good thing, as many of these things are, and turn them into a god-thing which takes over the Lord's rightful place we end up in trouble. Not only can these things never fulfil our deepest needs, but as we chase after them we run further and further away from the Lord of life and the Lord of eternity.

Friends, there is no other God like our God because all other gods are worthless. And no other God can save like our God because all other gods are powerless. That's why Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were willing to give up their lives rather than bowing to Nebuchadnezzar's idols, and that's why we should be willing to stand firm against the idols of our age also.

So let's get to know our God better and give him his rightful place in our lives. And being confident in his promises and his ability to rescue us, either from death or through death, let us stand firmly in the face of whatever trials or temptations come our way. Amen.