

## DARE TO HAVE A PURPOSE TRUE



Daniel 3:1-30  
 Third Message  
 Bernard Bell  
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SERIES: ONE KING TO RULE THEM ALL

Dare to be a Daniel,  
 dare to stand alone,  
 dare to have a purpose true,  
 and dare to make it known.

This is the chorus to a song that I sang frequently when I was young. Earlier this year, when I was preaching on the Man of Lawlessness (2 Thess 2:1-12), Christine sang *Dare to be a Daniel* as the children's song. On that occasion Lisa's children's message was about Daniel in the Lions' Den (Dan 6), and our Scripture reading was an abridgment of Daniel 3, our text for today.

Dare to have a purpose true. Do we have a purpose to which we remain true no matter what is going on around us? Are we able to resist pressure to conform? We all face great societal pressure to conform. Teenagers, especially young girls, face intense peer pressure. It's uncomfortable to stick out as different, to swim against the crowd. But if we dare to have a purpose true, there are times we will stick out from the crowd. Paul wrote, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world" (Rom 12:2). Or, as J.B. Phillips so memorably put it, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould."

Today we come to Daniel 3, the well-known story of the fiery furnace. Looking ahead, it is parallel to the story about Daniel in the Lion's Den (chapter 6). Again it is too long to read as part of the sermon, which is a pity, because it is a very fun chapter to read aloud—not that being thrown into a superheated fiery furnace is fun. Again, I hope you have brought your Bible. I shall read only select verses, but I will read the first scene in full to give you a flavor of the chapter:

**King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits 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." 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 worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. (Dan 3:1-7 NIV)**

In the previous chapter King Nebuchadnezzar had seen a vision of an enormous statue or image with a head of gold. Now he made

a huge image of gold. It was 60 cubits tall, that's 90 feet. We don't know what precise form it was, whether it was a statue or some other monument, but it was an image: it depicted and represented the king or the deity or both. Given the close association between Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, and Marduk, the god of Babylon, it doesn't matter which. It was Nebuchadnezzar's image: eight more times we read that it was the image which King Nebuchadnezzar set up. The image was a projection into the world of the greatness of Nebuchadnezzar, of his gods, and of Babylon. It was meant to dazzle.

The king was at the center of a vast empire with a vast imperial bureaucracy. There were satraps and prefects and governors and on and on. He summoned this entire bureaucracy to assemble for the dedication of his gold image. There was immediate compliance: the long list assembled for the dedication. The image was now the focal point of the entire empire.

The king issued a decree through his herald, not just to the assembled dignitaries but to all nations, peoples and languages. When the music starts—and now we have a long list of instruments—everyone must fall down on their faces and pay homage to the image. It's literally an orchestrated worship! Fall down and worship, we hear repeatedly throughout the chapter. Fall down and worship the image; fall down and worship the king of Babylon; fall down and worship the gods of Babylon. And if you don't?

If you don't fall down and worship, there was a penalty. A penalty for non-compliance. A penalty for not signaling allegiance to the image and to the king and gods it represented. Those not conforming to the king's decree would be thrown immediately into the midst of the blazing fiery furnace. This blazing fiery furnace looms large throughout the chapter.

Again there was immediate compliance: the orchestra played and everyone fell down and worshiped the image. The empire was united. Everyone conformed. The king was satisfied. No one was thrown into the blazing fiery furnace. All was well in Babylon.

But not so fast. Some of the king's astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. The unity of all nations, peoples and languages was shattered by singling out the Jews. The astrologers reminded the king of his decree: again we hear the list of musical instruments, the requirement to fall down and worship, and the threat of the blazing fiery furnace. Then they got specific:

**"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." (3:12)**

They singled out the Jews—not all them, just three in particular, the three "whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon." Now we see what was motivating these astrologers. It was not noble jealousy for the honor of the gods of Babylon. It was not noble jealousy for the honor of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. It

was not noble jealousy for the unity of the empire, all nations, peoples and languages. It was evil jealousy towards these three Jews whom the king had promoted at the end of chapter 2.

I very much doubt that these three Jews were conspicuous in their refusal to fall down and worship, that they made a show of not conforming. I assume that their resistance was quiet and unobtrusive, that they were not calling attention to themselves. They were trying to flourish in a foreign land while still being loyal to the Lord. But the jealous astrologers went out of their way to notice; they were looking for a reason to engineer their downfall.

The astrologers intensified the charge. It was not only that these Jews refused to fall down and worship Nebuchadnezzar's gold image. They don't serve the king's gods.

Their charge struck home, as they knew it would. The king flew into a furious rage, summoned the three men, and they were brought before him. The king 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?" (3:14-15)**

Despite his furious rage, I think the king dealt kindly with the men initially. "Is it true?" he asked. "Is it true that you don't serve my gods or worship my image?" He offered them a second chance, using an "if...if not" construction. "*If* you are ready, when you hear the music, *then* fall down and worship the image." Perhaps they hadn't been ready the first time the orchestra played. But now they are ready: cue the music, and fall down in worship. The end will be that all will be well.

But *if not*, or perhaps we should "*else*." If you don't worship the image, *then* it's into the blazing fiery furnace immediately. Endif. And the end of them.

Then the king adds a zinger to emphasize the finality of the end: "Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" It's a rhetorical question expecting the answer, "None." Surely no god can rescue like this.

How will the three men respond to this tremendous pressure to conform? How will they respond to the king's "if...if not," his "if...else"? If you conform to what everyone else is doing, you'll be fine. If you don't conform, but insist on being different, it's the end. The king was not asking them to stop their worship of Yahweh, their god, the god of the Jews. They could still worship him in private, but now in public they must bow down and worship Nebuchadnezzar's image. They must acknowledge the superiority of Babylon, its king and its gods. They were now in his glorious empire, while Jerusalem lay in ruins. There must be public unity and conformity throughout the empire, centered on Nebuchadnezzar's gold image.

The three men responded to the king's "if...if not" with their own "if...if not."

**"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." (3:17-18)**

If... But what is the "if"? There is considerable difference across

the English translations. The text can be read three different ways.

According to NIV and ESV, "if" refers to what the king has just said, the threat of the blazing fiery furnace. *If* they are thrown in, *then* they are confident that God is able to deliver them and will deliver them both from the furnace and from the king's power. In this reading these three men are superheroes with superhero faith that God is both able and actually will deliver them.

Other translations render this as "*If* God exists, *then* he is able to rescue us and will rescue us." If God exists: perhaps in the sense "If such a God exists," in reply to the king's challenge, "what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" (15).

The third option, given in the NIV margin, is, "*If* our God is able to deliver us from the fiery furnace, *then* he will deliver us." Many don't like this translation, because it suggests the three men doubted the power of God.

My own working rendition is: "*If* there is [a god who is able to deliver us from your hand], *then* our God whose servants we are is the one able to deliver us. From the blazing fiery furnace and from your power, O king, he will deliver."

Next the "if not" clause. "If God does not deliver us from the blazing fiery furnace, we want you to know something, O king: your gods we will not serve and the gold image you set up we will not worship." Not now, not ever, not even when faced with the blazing fiery furnace. They don't know if God will deliver them or not. They leave that in God's hands. Either way, if and if not, they will not bow down. They stand on principle. They dare to have a purpose true and to that purpose remain true.

Nebuchadnezzar had reduced this to a negotiable if...if not: *if* you bow down and worship *then* life, but *if* you do *not* bow down and worship *then* death. He had reduced it to a carrot and a stick, an enticement and a threat. He reduced it to a transaction. The outcome was different: life or death in the blazing fiery furnace. But for the three Jews refusal to worship false gods was non-negotiable. If or if not, the outcome was the same: we will not bow down and worship. Whether God delivered or not was secondary. Whether they lived or not was secondary.

They will not break the first two commandments:

**"You shall have no other gods before me.**

**You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them." (Exod 20:3-5)**

They dared to have a purpose true: to remain true to the Lord, the true God. This confession of the three Jews is the center of the chapter on which everything turns.

In v. 13, before this confession, Nebuchadnezzar was furious and threatened the Jews with the blazing fiery furnace. Now in the parallel paragraph after their confession, he "was furious" and "his attitude toward them changed" (19a), literally the image of his face was changed. His face was as red hot in anger as the blazing fiery furnace was red hot in heat. But the furnace wasn't hot enough for his red-hot anger: "He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual" (19b). The furnace was probably a brick kiln. Mesopotamia had no stone for building, but ample mud and clay for making bricks. As we read in the Tower of Babel story, "'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar" (Gen 11:3). The brick kilns reached 1000° C to bake the clay bricks into fired bricks. Seven times hotter is hot

indeed.

Nebuchadnezzar ordered his strongest men to bind the three Jews and throw them into the blazing fiery furnace, fully clothed—another list: robes, trousers, turbans and all. In they went. The super-heated furnace was now so hot that it killed the men who threw them in. After repeated warnings of the penalty of being thrown in, in they went. They fell into the midst of the blazing fiery furnace. What god will be able to rescue them?

The king peered in, eager for the satisfaction of seeing these rebels burnt to a crisp. But he leapt up in astonishment:

**“Weren’t there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire? ...Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.” (3:24-25)**

Not only are the three Jews not burnt to a crisp, their bonds are gone, they’re walking around, and they seem fine. And there’s a fourth person in there, one who “looks like a son of the gods.” This is often interpreted as the pre-incarnate Christ, but I prefer to keep the second person of the Trinity away from the earth until he enters as the Word of God incarnate. Instead, this is an angel, a messenger sent from God to be present with his people, even in the midst of the blazing fiery furnace.

Addressing them as “servants of the Most High God,” Nebuchadnezzar ordered them to come out. And out they came. All the officials crowded around to see and to smell. The fire had not touched them, not even the smell. The king praised the Jews and their God for their obstinate defiance!

**“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.” (3:28)**

They were willing to give up their lives, rather than compromise; willing to die rather than break the first two commandments. They dared to have a purpose true. As they sought to flourish in a foreign land, they remained true to the Lord their God. They would not give their allegiance to another. God and God alone.

Then the king issued a new decree:

**“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.” (3:29)**

The king who had rhetorically asked, “What god will be able to rescue you from my hand?” (15) now confesses that “no other god can save in this way.” He was not calling for all his peoples to worship the God of the Jews. But the Jews can now continue to serve and worship their God without harassment. Anyone who does harass them, and here he perhaps looks directly at his astrologers, will suffer the same fate he threatened against his astrologers in the previous chapter if they couldn’t tell him his dream (2:5).

Finally the king promoted the three in the province of Babylon (30), no doubt much to the chagrin of the astrologers who tried to destroy the three.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego told the king, “we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up” (18). They refused to break the first two commandments, prohibiting other gods, and making, bowing down to and worshiping images.

But the very reason they were in Babylon was because Israel had failed to keep those two commandments. Indeed, Israel broke those commandments almost as soon as they were given. Moses came down from Mount Sinai carrying the two stone tablets on which the Lord himself had just inscribed the Ten Commandments. He found the people worshiping a golden calf which Aaron had made for them. Moses hurled the tablets to the ground and they shattered. The covenant between God and his people lay broken. But thanks to Moses’s bold intercession God spared Israel and wrote on a new set of tablets. But Israel remained prone to idolatry, to switching its allegiance to other gods, false gods. Again and again and again. Israel failed to follow the Lord wholeheartedly. Finally the Lord removed his presence from the temple, and removed Israel from the land, sending them into exile in Babylon.

It was during the exile that the Jews finally got serious about keeping the commandments, about living life according to God’s Law, about not giving their allegiance to other gods. Three weeks ago Tim directed our attention to Nehemiah 8. Back in the Land, nearly a century after the end of the exile, Ezra the scribe, the teacher of the Law, stood in front of all the people in Jerusalem and read the Law, and the Levites instructed the people in it. The people bowed down and worshiped the Lord. It was a day of tears: of great weeping but also of great joy. Weeping in realization of how much they had broken the Law. But great joy because now the Law was put back in the center of their lives, they understood it, and they were worshiping the Lord and him alone. It was a time of restoration.

That was after the return from exile. But most Jews remained outside the Land, living in foreign empires, struggling to remain faithful to the Lord. Even those living in the Land were also living under these foreign empires. They faced great pressure to bow the knee to their rulers. This pressure reached its peak in the early second century BC, when Antiochus IV Epiphanes of the Seleucid Empire attempted to eradicate all Jewish practice. He attempted cultural genocide. He desecrated the temple in Jerusalem. This event is part of the background to the Man of Lawlessness in 2 Thessalonians 2. But one man resisted, launching the Maccabean Revolt that eventually retook the Temple, and rededicated it, an event commemorated ever since in the Jewish feast of Hanukkah, meaning Dedication.

The Jews took idolatry seriously as a result of the Exile. They remained true to their God. The Romans learnt that the Jews would rather die than be forced to worship false gods. The Romans could never understand their obstinate attitude, that they were willing to die for this. But they did allow the Jews to pray not to the emperor, as everyone else was required to do, but to pray for the emperor.

Worship is a major theme in the Book of Revelation which our women will study this coming year. The false prophet orchestrates the worship of the beast. Readers in the first century would have seen the Roman Empire, where the imperial cult was rapidly growing. Emperors viewed themselves as divine, and were worshiped as lord and god. Temples were built for this imperial cult, where big statues of the emperors were put up, and they were worshiped.

The stories of Daniel were a great encouragement to the Christians, as they had been to the Jews. The Book of Daniel is a backdrop to the Book of Revelation. These are stories of resistance that encourage others in their resistance, then and now.

In the mid-second century, Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, was arrested and commanded to deny Christ. As the official brought him into the arena, he asked, “What harm is there in saying, Lord

Caesar?” The proconsul, the governor of the province of Asia, said, “Swear by the fortune of Caesar; repent...I will set thee at liberty, reproach Christ.” Polycarp replied, “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury; how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?” He was burnt alive there in the arena, one of the early martyrs. He was a faithful witness (Gk *martyros*) even unto death, whence the word “martyr” came to mean someone killed for their faith.

One of my favorite movies is *A Man for All Seasons*, which we watched again on Friday evening. It’s about Sir Thomas More maintaining his integrity under intense pressure to compromise his beliefs, to approve the divorce of King Henry VIII. He dared to have a purpose true. And he paid with his life. God did not deliver him from death, but More maintained his integrity to the end. He had a non-negotiable that could not be reduced to “if...if not.” If he lived or if he did not live was secondary. The “then” was the same: he would stand before God with a clear conscience.

This month’s cover article in *Christianity Today* is about the Nigerian schoolgirls who were abducted by Boko Haram in 2014 and held for several years. Two *Wall Street Journal* reporters investigated how the girls survived their long ordeal. They write “We saw clearly how the teenagers’ will to survive was inseparable from their religious convictions.” Most were Christians; many had sung in church choirs. They had a Bible which they kept hidden from their captors. And they sang the hymns and songs they knew so well. One was a hymn about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. These girls had a purpose clear as they sang, “We, the children of Israel, will not bow.” They dared to resist, inspired by the Biblical stories of those who had dared to resist. They did not know if they would be rescued. But rather than brooding on “what if,” they equated the “if” and the “if not.” If we are rescued or if we are not rescued is the same: we will not bow. And so they endured. They encouraged one another to be

faithful, and they were faithful.

We don’t face pressure to bow down to statues, golden images and idols. But we are very good at making idols to which we give our allegiance. Our heart is a great factory of idols. Often we wrap a religious garb on these idols. The idol we bow down to might be the God of our cause, whatever that cause might be: God of my comfort, or God of my success, or God of my nation. We cloak God in our own agenda. In one way or another we give our allegiance to one who is other than the God who has revealed himself in Scripture, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

How do we remain true in our allegiance to God and to Christ? As I said two weeks ago, it is so important that we meet together. We gather together and we sing, we pray, we read and hear the Scriptures, we take communion together. Many churches say the Creed together and the Lord’s Prayer together. In all these ways we focus our attention on God and God alone. We go away, refreshed in our allegiance, in our commitment to serve God and worship him, and not give our allegiance to another. May God grant us grace that we might dare to have a purpose true, and to that remain true.

*Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.*

*To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen. (Rev 1:4-6)*

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