

A Fear to Overcome our Fears

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[0 : 00] Now friends, welcome back to our time of worship together, of hearing God and his word, of prayer and of singing praise to him.

I want to begin reading from 1 Peter. Peter was writing to Christians who were suffering, beginning to face persecution. And as we think about the experience of Daniel, Daniel's three friends, it's helpful for us to hear.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.

So Peter says to us, here's our hope as Christians, that through the resurrection of Jesus, we have a living hope and an inheritance that can never be taken from us.

And he goes on to say, he talks about suffering, but in all this, you greatly rejoice. Though now for a little while, you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

[1 : 13] These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire, may result in praise, glory and honour.

When Jesus Christ is revealed, we will see three friends whose faith was tested through the fire and it brought praise, glory and honour to the one true God.

So let's sing praise to our God now. Daniel chapter 3. King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, 60 cubits high and 6 cubits wide and set it up on the plain of Dura 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.

[2 : 22] Then the herald loudly proclaimed, Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, lither, 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.

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, lither, 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. 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 then, you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lither, 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.

[4 : 07] Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand? 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 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. 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?

[5 : 15] 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 the hair of their heads singed.

Their robes 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 house 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. So thanks to both of you for your help. Now let's think together about those words that Darius read for us in Daniel chapter 3 and thinking about a fear to overcome our fears.

[6 : 42] Some of God's people are remembered through history for their courage and bravery. Perhaps you've heard of Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna in the second century who was facing execution for his faith but was given an opportunity to reject Jesus.

And he said, 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?

Or we can think perhaps of Martin Luther in the 16th century at the diet of worms surrounded by all the powerful figures of the Catholic Church threatened with excommunication because of his new understanding of what the Bible taught, the truth about justification by faith, the life of repentance and other things.

And Martin Luther said, It's true for these three friends, isn't it?

When we think of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, we think of them facing the fiery furnace with courage and seeking to honour God.

[8 : 18] But it's not the case for most of us as Christians. We don't find ourselves confronted by those life or death scenarios.

But each one of us in our own different way will come under pressure to conform, whether that's our behaviour, whether that's our patterns of thought or words.

And we will, I am sure, find at times a physical fear that stops us talking to someone about Jesus, perhaps. We will feel a fear that will make us want to blend in with our actions.

So that fear is something that we all have to wrestle with. The question then becomes, how can you and I, if we are Christians, how can we take our stand to seek to live for the honour and glory of God, set against the backdrop of the furnace of public opinion, which can be ruthless at times?

And the answer is, like these three friends, we need a greater fear. We need the fear of the Lord by which we are willing to submit to him, to trust in him, to obey him as king, to stand in awe of his glory, of his grace and of his love so that he would have the loyalty of our hearts.

[10 : 07] So we're going to think about that today. So let's learn from these three friends who find themselves facing the furnace. The first thing to draw our attention to is the image, Nebuchadnezzar's image.

Now, if you were listening in last week, you'll remember that in chapter two, Nebuchadnezzar had a dream, a dream representing different empires.

And at the top, there was a statue, it was the centre of his dream. And this statue had the head of gold, which represented Nebuchadnezzar. And now, what do we see?

We see Nebuchadnezzar making an image of gold, about 27 metres high and almost 3 metres wide. This is a defiant statement.

Saying, my glory will not end. Here is pride. Nebuchadnezzar is not someone who is going to bow to the superior glory of the God who revealed the meaning of the dream.

[11:17] Rather, he wants to assert his own glory, and greatness. And so what we see in verses two and three, the great and the good are summoned to this dedication of the image.

It's unclear exactly what's going on. Perhaps Nebuchadnezzar has the idea of his whole empire being united together under one religion. And some of us, we know this in our countries, that there is, and we know around the world, there is the pressure from certain governments, one country, one religion, and it leads to persecution for Christians.

But certainly what's going on here is that Nebuchadnezzar is putting his power on display. He is the one who sets up the image, it's his, and he is the one who commands worship.

And so what happens? Verses four to seven, and the music begins to play, and the nations, and the people, bow the knee.

There is a total and immediate response. Because here is a test of loyalty from the most powerful man on the earth.

[12:32] And in a sense, there's a very great incentive given in verse six. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.

So perhaps there's no great surprise when the summons comes, bow or burn, that the nations and the peoples bow the knee.

Two related ideas to notice. First of all, where is this image built? Verse one, he's set up on the plain of Jura.

This is the same place where the tower of Babel was built. Genesis chapter 11. And what is the goal of this image?

It's worship. It's God-like status. For Nebuchadnezzar. Do we see what's going on here?

[13:36] Way back in the Garden of Eden that the sin of Adam, pride, overreaching, seeking to be God-like, not content to be an image bearer, wanting to be God-like.

The sin of Babel. Let's make a name for ourselves. Let's show our glory without God. It's exactly the same sin that we see in Nebuchadnezzar.

A desire that the self be the centre. Desire that he have worship and he have glory. It's pride.

We've also got a contest of the gods going on. We've got a battle for worship. We've got the one true God who deserves worship and Nebuchadnezzar who doesn't, but he demands worship.

And so we'll see it with these friends. Who should we fear? When we think about stories like this, it helps us to think and to pray for the persecuted church as well because they have a pressure to conform that is enormous.

[14:53] There are some of our brothers and sisters in Christ where the power of an emperor or a ruler or local authorities or a police that are trying to demand that everybody can form a dominant religion that would seek to quell Christianity.

I wonder if we are aware of those pressure points for us when it comes to conforming.

I was listening to a short podcast this week on a thing called toxic productivity. And the psychologist on that, she was saying that, you know, there is such an, she didn't use the word idle, but success is so important.

She says there's a huge pressure on people, even during lockdown, to think that unless I've learned a new language, developed a new skill, achieved huge amounts in work or in personal life, then we are some kind of failure.

And she calls it toxic productivity because it means people are very stressed. People find it hard to rest. And it's a really unhealthy motivation. But that's one way that we can feel the pressure to conform and to look to show a successful life.

[16:23] And there is, of course, being highlighted for us, the battle that we all have with pride.

The sin of pride that we look to remove God from his rightful place of worship, the central place in our hearts, to replace God with self, where we're thinking about our plans and our priorities.

And we have to deal with that sin. So we all feel the heat of the furnace in some way, the experience of Daniel's three friends in some way.

Let's see how they deal with it. Let's look at the stand that they take. So while all the nations are bowing down, you've got in verse eight, some astrologers who come forward and denounce the Jews.

And it seems like this is an extreme example of workplace rivalry. They are jealous that Nebuchadnezzar has promoted these foreigners.

[17 : 39] And so they want to take down the competition that they most likely would then be raised up. Verse 12, There are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon who pay no attention to you, your majesty.

They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up. They are rejecting your gods. They won't worship your image.

They keep their own faith. Nebuchadnezzar, you need to deal with these guys. And so in verses 13 to 15, we see a furious king again. He was furious that his wise men couldn't give him the dream and its meaning.

Now he's furious again. So he calls the three friends to him and he demands their total loyalty. He gives them an ultimatum.

He says, this is your last chance. When the music starts playing, you better bow or you'll go into the furnace. Verse 15 is another one of those great verses in the book of Daniel.

[18 : 47] When we think about that contest of the gods and for worship. Towards the end it is, if you don't worship it, you'll be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what God will be able to rescue you from my hand.

This verse again is going to allow us to lift the roof off so that we get to see the one true God, the only one that King Nebuchadnezzar, the three friends, everybody should bow down to.

You know, he sets the context, what God will be able to rescue. He's saying, your life and death, it's in my hands, not your God's hands.

Look at the power of the empire. Give yourself to the dark side. It is the challenge being put to these three men.

Let's pause for a moment. Here we have three friends confronted by the force of a furious emperor who's quite happy to issue death sentences here and there.

[20 : 02] The power of the greatest empire in the world is behind him. And they're standing for God. And that reminds us that standing for God sometimes can be lonely in our school or university, in our workplace, even in our family, it can be lonely.

Standing for God can be costly. We see the cost involved for these three men. They were certainly going to lose their positions. They were going to lose all their comfort and security.

They were going to lose their lives except for God's miraculous intervention. So here are three friends confronted by the greatest physical fear we can probably imagine.

But how do they respond? Verse 16. King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter.

They're not going to try and defend themselves. They have made their choice. They will take their stand. They have two certainties. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it.

[21 : 24] And here's their other certainty. We will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up. So they're not going to participate in idolatry and their God is mighty to save.

But they do not know if saving them now is part of God's plan. God is able to save but they don't presume that God will save.

But they take their stand. How are they able to do that? When life for them hangs in the balance, we can almost imagine them weighing their fears in the balance.

So it would be unnatural if they didn't have the fear of death. But yet there is a greater fear in their lives, the fear of the Lord.

that sense of awe at who he is and what he has done for them. His greater truth and reality so that they would sooner die than stop trusting and obeying their God.

[22 : 40] They feel the call to bow to the idol and the risks involved for saying no but they have a greater call in their heart to bow to their Lord.

to listen to his promises to trust in his salvation. That rather than placing their lives in the hands of King Nebuchadnezzar they place their lives and their honour and their identity in the hands of God the King.

Faced with the pressure to give glory to Nebuchadnezzar and the fear of denying him that glory he demands. Weighed in the balance they choose the greater glory the eternal weight of glory offered by God in his word to those who love and fear him.

so that greater fear the fear of the Lord is always tipping the scales of their heart they choose what lasts they choose loyalty placing themselves in God's hands trusting in their Saviour God come what may.

It's a wonderful model an example to us to think about how to weigh our fears in the balance because we recognise of course fears come pressures come challenges and temptations come to fold rather than to take a stand and in those moments we need to consider who our God is what our God promises as being greater bigger higher more lasting than what any king or idol or friend or promotion promises.

[24 : 47] Now let's think about the Saviour in verse 19 onwards here is King Nebuchadnezzar he's even more furious we see the king doing his worst to really punish these men super heating the furnace flinging them in and it's made clear the details make clear that there is no human prospect for escape so in verse 21 they're bound and thrown into the furnace we see it's so hot that the soldiers are killed verse 23 these three men firmly tied fell into the blazing furnace but then comes the amazement of Nebuchadnezzar fury turns to wonder weren't there three men that were tied up and thrown into the fire certainly your majesty look I see four men walking around in the fire unbound and unharmed and the fourth looks like a son of the gods a son of the gods this figure who has a god-like appearance even though in human form comes and brings this amazing rescue so that when they're brought out in verse 27

I love the details the fire had not harmed their bodies nor was a hair of their head singed their robes are not scorched and there was no smell of fire on them it's been nice weather so we've had some barbecues and if you've ever cooked a barbecue just to be near the fire means that everything is going to stink of smoke isn't it but for these three friends they're not singed they're not scorched there's not even the smell of smoke on them and the impact on King Nebuchadnezzar is striking again we have a pagan king who turns to praise God verse 28 praise be to the God of Shadrach Meshach and Abednego who sent his angel and rescued his servants he issues a new decree very fierce language 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 he recognises the God who delivers the God who uniquely saves and where does that recognition come from why does he end up praising God it's because in verse 28 of the stand of these three friends 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 their testimony matching up to that of Peter's letter in 1 Peter faith being seen through trials and shining like gold leading

Nebuchadnezzar to realise the one true God offers unique salvation and this leads us to the hope of the gospel now there's a danger here you know we must say be like these three friends live with the fear of the Lord that overcomes all other fears but the danger is if we only say that our own failures will most likely crush us because if your past is anything like mine you can think about times where you compromise your beliefs to fit in at times where you didn't talk to a friend about Jesus times when you gave your heart to an idol and that's not just restricted to our past that's also part of our present reality so if all we had was be like

Daniel's friends we'd probably be despairing so let's finish while hearing that that we are to fear the Lord let's finish with two truths about Jesus to give us hope first of all Jesus perfectly resisted this temptation Matthew chapter 4 tempted in the wilderness by Satan Satan comes to him and says I will give you the kingdoms I will give you all glory if you will bow down to me here's your way to kingdom and glory and power without the cross Jesus how did Jesus respond worship the Lord your God and serve him only he resisted temptation and the fear of the Lord and that concern for the glory of his father that concern for loving obedience would lead to his active obedience all through his life and would lead him to the cross where Jesus would then die for sinners and for sin he would die for all the times that we cave in and fold instead of bringing him honour so that by trusting in

[31 : 03] Jesus that sin is removed and we are regarded when we are in Jesus as if we are perfectly righteous so there is hope beyond failure in the gospel of God's great grace and here's the second way that Jesus gives hope because we remember that Jesus went into another furnace to save us Jonathan Edwards in one of his sermons compares the cross with the fiery furnace and he thinks about Gethsemane as Jesus receiving a preview of the divine wrath that he's going to face on behalf of his people and Edwards says that God the Father as it were set the cup down before him which was more terrible than

Nebuchadnezzar's furnace when he took that cup knowing what he did so was his love to us infinitely more wonderful and his obedience to God infinitely more perfect Jesus who was with those friends in the fiery furnace would again go into a furnace this time the furnace of God's judgment against sin this time not with us but for us in our place as our substitute as our sacrifice and Jesus doesn't come out unharmed Jesus dies on the cross and he does that to secure our rescue that we might stand before the judgment seat of

God and come through that unharmed if our faith is in Jesus the eternal life is ours if we are trusting him and now this Jesus who went through the furnace for us now he is God with us in our fiery trials that strength to stand does not come from ourselves it comes from Jesus so let the fear of the Lord drive out other fears and trust in this Lord who is with us who is mighty to save and who has shown that in sending Jesus forth within what means to for the session the end