

The Sovereignty of God in Babylon (3)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 July 2026

Preacher: Colin Dow

[0:00] Daniel chapter 3, page 739. He set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent together the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the councillors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Then the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the councillors, the treasurers, the justices, and the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces gathered for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

And they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. And the herald proclaimed aloud, you are commander, O peoples, nations, and languages, that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, I'm sure they're not the kind of bagpipes we play, and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar set up.

And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning, fiery furnace. Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Therefore, at that time, certain Chaldeans came forward and maliciously accused the Jews, they declared to King Nebuchadnezzar, O King, live forever. You, O King, have made a decree that every man who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music shall fall down and worship the golden image.

[1:44] And whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into a burning, fiery furnace. There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

These men, O King, pay no attention to you. They do not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up. Then Nebuchadnezzar, in furious rage, commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought.

So they brought these men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up?

Now, if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good.

But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning, fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands? Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter.

[2:55] If this be so, our god, whom we serve, is able to deliver us from the burning, fiery furnace. And he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.

Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury, and the expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated, and he ordered some of the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and to cast them into the burning, fiery furnace.

Then these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the burning, fiery furnace. Because the king's order was urgent and the furnace overheated, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning, fiery furnace. Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste.

He declared to his counselors, Did we not cast three men bound into the fire? They answered and said to the king, True, O king. He answered and said, But I see four men unbound walking in the midst of the fire, and they're not hurt, and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.

[4:24] Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning, fiery furnace. He declared, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out and come here.

Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire, and the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king's counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not any power over the bodies of those men.

The hair of their heads was not singed, their clothes were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said, Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him and set aside the king's command and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own god.

Therefore I make a decree, any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other God who is able to rescue in this way.

Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon. Amen.

Faithfulness is lasting loyalty and trustworthiness in relationships.

[5:57] Faithfulness is lasting loyalty and trustworthiness in relationships. This is somewhat of a summer of weddings, and one of the vows partners take is, I promise to be your loyal and faithful husband stroke wife.

Whatever the circumstances, in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, enjoy orange sorrow until death should us part.

For the Christian, faithfulness doesn't just mean loyalty in friendships and in marriage, but primarily in our relationship to God. We promise to be faithful to God because first and foremost, he has promised to be faithful to us.

And he's proved his promise by giving his son, the Lord Jesus Christ, for us on the cross to take away our sins and give us eternal life with him. Well, faithfulness is easy to talk about when times are easy, but what about when times are dark, times are tough?

It's not so easy then, is it, to talk about God's faithfulness to us and our faithfulness to God? But it is especially in times of crisis, faithfulness is important, especially in times of crisis.

[7:19] These three Jewish boys, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, were in Daniel 3 at a time of crisis. Forcefully invited to compromise their faith in God by bowing down to a statue, they risked death on account of their faithfulness.

But more than that, it was at their time of crisis God showed himself faithful to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

You see, this is a passage not so much about our faithfulness to God as much as it is God's faithfulness to us. However, as we look deeper into this text, it's not just a marvelous story demonstrating the faithfulness of these three young men and the faithfulness of God to them.

It's a story of Israel's captivity in Babylon that despite all appearances, God is with his people in the furnace of their exile.

They may be suffering as we sang in Psalm 137, but God is with them. God's preserving them through the fire of their troubles. It becomes the story of God's salvation because Jesus' ancestors were in exile in Babylon along with Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

[8:46] And he was preserving them so that in some 500 years' time forward from this account, a child would be born in a stable in Bethlehem through whom and from, and in whom, our exile from God would be reversed and our total salvation won.

And it's also the story of how from a pastoral perspective, in our own individual furnaces, when we're suffering, the living Christ is with us, sharing in the experience of the fires and giving us preserving grace to help us win through.

This chapter can be divided into three neat sections, each of which have as their central theme faithfulness.

First of all, we have the challenge of faithfulness, verses 1 through 23. Then the beauty of faithfulness, verses 24 and 25. And then the harvest of faithfulness in verse 26 through 30. Above this whole chapter stands the cross on which God demonstrated His faithfulness to us. [10:04] And through this whole chapter, we're being challenged to be faithful to God whatever furnaces God in this life should choose to throw us into.

We have, first of all, from verse 1 through 23, the challenge of faithfulness, the challenge of faithfulness. Despite Nebuchadnezzar's previous statement in chapter 2 that the God of Israel truly was a God of gods and King of kings, he wasn't a changed man as a result of his dream having been interpreted by Daniel.

He hadn't really been humbled at all. Rather, his pride and ambition only grew stronger. He built a gigantic image of gold. Now, we don't know what this image was.

It could have been a statue of him. More probably, it was probably a plain obelisk like Cleopatra's needle. Great leaders leave legacies behind them for the future and Nebuchadnezzar's was this huge, massive golden statue.

And he gathered together all the political and military leaders of the land and through them commanded that every person in his empire who, whatever they were and whoever they were, when they heard the sound of these musical instruments mentioned in verse 5, should bow down to worship this golden image the king had set up.

[11:32] Well, some jealous and vengeful men, eager to see the downfall of the Jews who had been exiled to Babylon, nothing new about this, of course, report to the king in verse 12 that are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

These men, O king, pay no attention to you. They don't serve your gods or worship the golden image you've set up. So these three men were Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

They were brought to the king who commanded them that when they heard the sound of the musical instruments to bow down and worship the image he'd set up. He ended his command with a threat.

He said to them, if you do not worship, you will immediately be cast into a burning, fiery furnace. And who is the God who will deliver you out of my hands? So here then is the challenge of faithfulness.

When faced by the threat of death and a painful one at that, shall Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stand firm in their faith in God. One might understand if they buckle under the pressure.

[12:47] Shall they be faithful to God? Reminds us a little bit, does it not, of the temptation to which Jesus was exposed when Satan offered him all the kingdoms of the world if he would but bow down to worship him.

And Jesus replied, you shall worship the Lord alone. But hundreds of years before Jesus resisted Satan in the wilderness, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, his ancestors, resisted Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon.

Shall we stand firm in our faith in God despite the threat? Like us, none of us here will be threatened by death on account of our faith in Christ. The threats will be more gentle, more subtle. Shall we stand firm in our faith in Christ when threatened with losing an important relationship in our lives on account of our faith in Christ? A boyfriend, a girlfriend. Shall we stand firm when threatened with having to sacrifice career advancement or professional respectability on account of our faith in Christ?

How much are we willing to pay? How much will our faithfulness cost us? Well, King Nebuchadnezzar, he's enraged by the way in which these young Jewish men respond to him.

[14:08] They say, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace and he will deliver us from your hand, O king. But be it known to you, O king, we will not serve your gods, we will not bow down to worship the golden image that you've set up.

He is furious, King Nebuchadnezzar, so he orders that the furnace be heated seven times hotter so that when the soldiers he had commanded to throw the men into the furnace, they were killed by its heat.

Now, these young men, they didn't know that God would save them from the furnace because they said, but if not, but they were absolutely determined that they were not going to worship the golden image Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

They were going to remain faithful to God whatever happened. And given that these soldiers who threw them into the fire died also, it makes it all the more special that such was the determination to stay faithful to God, they went willingly to their deaths.

They would rather die than be unfaithful to God. They knew that there are worse things than death. And when it comes to Christ, it's not death to die.

[15:31] Again, we see the challenge of faithfulness, do we not? Given that we serve the living and true God who has revealed himself to us in the face of the Jesus who willingly chose to die because of his faithfulness to us and to God, shall we remain faithful to him?

Shall we choose the difficult path though it may cost us much? Because one thing's for sure, in no likelihood, I can predict it will never cost any of us as much as it cost Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

And I can 100% say it will never cost us as much to be faithful as it cost Jesus. These boys lived in days 500 years before the cross of Jesus.

we live after the cross of Jesus. We've seen so much more of God than they ever did. We know so much more about how faithful God is than we do.

They were willing to give up everything for God. Are we? So we have the challenge of faithfulness.

Secondly, we have the beauty of faithfulness, the beauty of faithfulness.

[16:48] Daniel 3, 24 through 25 are without doubt some of the most beautiful verses in the Old Testament. The boys have been thrown into the furnace. Daniel wants us to know how hot this furnace is, so he calls it repeatedly the burning, fiery furnace.

It's impossible that anyone should survive the burning, fiery furnace. And yet, an astonished king rises up in haste and says to his counselor, did we not cast three men bound into the fire?

But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire and they're not hurt. And the appearance of the fourth, he's like a son of the gods. Three, miraculously, became four, and they're walking in the midst of the fire and the appearance of the fourth is brighter than any human form. He's like a son of the gods. Now, we talk about miracles, but this goes beyond miraculous, that these three young men were saved by the presence of this unnamed fourth.

It's the presence of this one whose appearance is like a son of the gods who protected Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the burning, fiery furnace.

[18:10] these verses, really, they deserve a hundred studies, far more attention than they get from the church. Let's dig deeper.

The fourth man was none other than a pre-incarnate appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ. A pre-incarnate appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ. From time to time in the Old Testament, he appears in human form, and this is one such.

The mighty Son of God appears in angelically human form, almost, we might say, in the form of the glory into which he was transfigured on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Over 500 years before his birth, the pre-incarnate Christ is in a furnace and he's walking with these three young men. He's preserving them from the burning, fiery heat.

At other crisis points in the history of Israel, he appeared. He appears as a pillar of flame and of cloud to the wandering Israelites in the desert. And now he appears to his faithful remnant in Babylon.

[19:21] And we're stumbling and straying into a beautiful truth here. Where is God when his people are in exile in Babylon? Is God still in Jerusalem in the ruins of a temple?

No, we find him in the precise place where his people are suffering the most. Where is God when his people are suffering in Babylon? He's there.

He's in Babylon. He's in Nebuchadnezzar's throne room. He's in Nebuchadnezzar's head. He's in Nebuchadnezzar's furnace. He's in Nebuchadnezzar's He's in the den of lions with Daniel.

When the people of God are passing through the valleys of the shadow of death, He's there.

Whatever faithfulness Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego demonstrated to God by being willing to die for them is more than matched by His faithfulness to them.

He's with them in the dark valleys and He's with them in the fiery furnaces. And we might suppose that God this evening is present only in churches and in cathedrals, but when is He really?

[20:34] He's where His people are struggling and suffering. He's in prison where His people have been jailed for their faith in Him. He's in morgues where His people have died for Him.

He's in hospital rooms where His people are struggling for breath and scared out of their wits. Whatever the crucible of His people's pain reaches its peak, that's where Jesus is. Never fear that when times get tough Jesus will leave you. He will always be there when you need Him most, always. Now by definition as we read from the text, Nebuchadnezzar saw the fourth man but the text doesn't tell us whether Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego saw Him. Were they aware that there was a fourth man in the furnace with them? That the Son of God was present with them? Maybe. The most important thing was that He was there and He was protecting them.

We're not always aware that Christ is with us in difficult times. The most important thing is that He is seen or unseen. He is present with us in the crucibles of our suffering just when we need Him most. [21:52] That's the thing, isn't it? Christ will always be with us when we need Him most, whether we're aware of His presence with us or whether we are not.

As your minister for decades now, I've seen this many times. Christian is going through unbelievably difficult times and is drowning in the crucible of their suffering and they're flailing in the darkness and they don't know where God is but He's there with them.

Others can see that He's there with them. They can see His strengthening and comforting presence in that person's life but they can't.

Only after the dust has settled can they look back and see that in the darkness Christ was with them, faithfully walking with them in that furnace. Perhaps you're walking through a furnace in your life right now.

Be assured of this, Christ is with you whether you're aware of Him or whether you are not. He has promised in His Word that He would never leave you and never forsake you and He never ever will. [23:04] Take comfort in that. 20 years ago I was doing some gardening when I received a phone call to say that one of our oldest members in the congregation was dying.

I rushed to the royal to find Peter and Marian Morrison sitting by the bedside of old Donald McIntosh who we knew to be the happiest parking warden in Glasgow.

Some of you might remember him. Donald was obviously in the last few moments of his life in one of these nightingale wards of the royal and they were tough moments as we held his hands and listened to his faltering breaths.

And then came the end and Peter Marian and myself were there with him. You remember that Peter don't you? At that very moment that his breath stopped we looked at each other and we knew that it wasn't just us who were there with him.

Jesus was present beside his bed. Jesus was with Donald just as he took his last breath. Jesus was with him in that final furnace. Jesus is with us always.

[24:22] Always. But the theological point of this encounter goes way beyond our personal feelings although that's important. Jesus was present in the furnace to demonstrate that God is faithful to his faithful remnant in Babylon.

He's with them in exile. He will not leave them or forsake them. He has not left them even though their people as a whole had left him. They may be enduring his discipline on account of their unfaithfulness but he has not left them.

He has a plan and a purpose for them and he's with them. When in Psalm 137 as we sang together the depressed exiles sing, how can we sing the Lord's song when in a foreign land they perhaps had not fully appreciated that although they were in a foreign land, God was with them there.

A greater than Nebuchadnezzar is present in Babylon. God is there and he's working all things together for the good of his faithful remnant.

And he wants them to know that he's not finished with them. He can't be because he is working to the plan of redemption. In 500 years time from the events described here in Daniel 3 the Christ who appeared in the burning fiery furnace will become incarnate of the Virgin Mary.

[25:52] He will grow up living faithfully to God his whole life through until finally he is crucified on account of the unfaithfulness of his people. Christ was with his people in Babylon because he will come and save not just the faithful remnant of Israel but the people of the whole world from the darkness of exile from him.

Now these are wonderful and precious truths and I wish we could spend more time on them all but perhaps they're better thought through as individuals. Think through times in your life when you went through a difficult time and at the time you couldn't sense the presence of God but afterwards

you could see how God was with you in it all.

But know this, this is the beauty of faithfulness. Not so much the faithfulness of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to God but God's faithfulness to them and to us through it all.

God is faithful. That's the message. Well then thirdly and briefly, from verse 26 to 30, we have the harvest of faithfulness.

The harvest of faithfulness. Having been utterly astonished by what he'd seen, Nebuchadnezzar declared, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out and come here.

[27:22] He had never in a million years expected to say these words. Rather, he'd expected them to come out as pillars of ash. But as we read, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, came out of the fire.

When the king's officials inspected these three young men, they discovered that the fire hadn't touched them. They didn't even smell of smoke. Their faithfulness reaped a harvest in Babylon. They had sowed in tears and now they were weeping in joy. In the first instance, they were promoted. They were promoted. In the previous chapter, Daniel was promoted because he had interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream and now his young friends are also promoted.

Reminds us, does it not, a little bit of Joseph's promotions in the land of Egypt. God was at work in Egypt promoting Joseph. Now he's at work in Babylon promoting Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

Egypt and Babylon, places we wouldn't expect God to be. But also in some small way, it reminds us, does it not, of how having been faithful unto death, the Lord Jesus Christ was promoted.

[28:37] In Philippians 2, we read that he was highly exalted by his Father and given the name that's above every name. It's a small reminder to us that if we want to know Christ, which we talked about this morning, and share in the power of his resurrection, we need to be willing to first share in the sufferings.

Faithfulness to Christ may result in us being put in a furnace, but it will eventually conquer. So the boys were promoted. Secondly, second aspect of the harvest, the king's attitude to the God of Israel was changed.

It was changed. Diana's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream had raised God's profile in his eyes, but now God's profile had been raised further. Nebuchadnezzar now calls him the most high God.

He made a decree. Anyone, any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other God who is able to rescue in this way.

Now, as we've seen, this doesn't mean that Nebuchadnezzar was a converted man. That's going to wait until chapter 4. This decree will also form the groundwork for the later return to the land of Judah under succeeding kings and the reversal of the exile under Ezra and Nehemiah.

[30:11] But the main point is this. God was glorified by the faithfulness of his people. The God who had previously been thought of as having been defeated by the God of Babylon in his destruction of Jerusalem had vindicated himself through the faithfulness of his faithful remnant.

And surely that is our chief end as human beings, to glorify God and enjoy him forever. God was not being glorified in the ruins of Jerusalem.

God was being glorified in the furnaces of Babylon. You know, we underestimate the impact that our faithfulness through sufferings have upon those watching on.

The harvest of our faithfulness may result in those who know us glorifying God for themselves. Perhaps some who are already Christians will be encouraged and strengthened in their faith by watching how we suffer.

And perhaps some who are not yet Christians shall become interested in the gospel for themselves. We may sow in tears, but you know we'll reap in joy for those watching on.

[31:28] Perhaps even those who caused your suffering in the first place will see your faithfulness and give glory to God for it. you've often heard me talking about the American missionary Jim Elliot, who was martyred for his faith in Jesus by a tribe of Indians in Ecuador.

Remember he said he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. After Elliot's death, violent death, his friends traveled to Ecuador to meet with those Indians who had murdered him.

But rather than exact revenge, they wanted to express their forgiveness. And they wanted to continue Jim Elliot's work. Soon after, deeply impressed by the forgiveness of Elliot's friend, the entire tribe converted to Christianity.

Every single one of them, even Jim Elliot's murderers. He was a man who sowed in tears, Jim Elliot, but eventually he reaped in joy.

A faithful man whose faithfulness led to those who killed him, praising and glorifying the Christ Elliot loved.

[32 : 53] Who knows what our faithfulness in the furnace will lead. It will achieve at least this. God will be glorified and his honor will be extended.

Daniel chapter 3 begins with an earthly king trying to glorify himself. It ends with that earthly king glorifying God, and all because of three boys, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and how they resolve to be faithful to God and to death.

Shall we do the same today? We do the same today. Resolve unto faithfulness, even if it means that we might end up too in a furnace. Knowing this, Jesus shall be in the furnace with us.

And it's there we'll discover how faithful he is. Amen. Amen. We prepare for the Lord's Supper by reminding ourselves that in the furnace of this life, whatever we're going through right now, whatever issues we may have, whatever anxieties or whatever worries we have, this is one way in which Jesus wants us to know that he's with us.

The bread and the wine. And it also reminds us that Jesus went through a furnace that we'll never have to go through. He went through the furnace of being sacrificed on account of our sin.

[34 : 25] So as we take the Lord's Supper together, let's remember the furnace, the furnace of Jesus' suffering, and the furnace of how when we're passing through our suffering, Jesus is with us.

But as we approach this supper, I want us together to...