

Only One King to Serve

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Date: 09 July 2017

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[0 : 00] Today's first reading is taken from Luke chapter 12 verses 4 to 12, which can be found on page 1049 of the Bibles on your seats. I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do.

But I will warn you whom to fear. Fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.

Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, you are of more value than many sparrows.

And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God. But the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God.

And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven. But the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say.

[1 : 22] For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say. So I'm going to be reading Daniel chapter 3, page 894.

King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, whose height was 60 cubits and its breadth 6 cubits.

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 counsellors, 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 counsellors, the treasurers, the justices, 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 commanded, O peoples, nations and languages, that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up.

[2 : 48] And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning, fiery furnace. Therefore, as soon as all the people 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 worshipped 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.

And whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into a burning, fiery furnace. But 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.

[4 : 09] 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. 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.

[5 : 15] 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 counsellors, 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 are not hurt and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods. Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning, fiery furnace.

[6 : 27] 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 counsellors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of these 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 should 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.

Please keep that bit of the Bible open and let's pray together as we start. Let's pray. Lord God, no other God can rescue as you rescue.

[7 : 53] Please would you help us to believe that today. Please may our confidence in you grow. And please may that equip us to be people who live for you in a world that doesn't recognize you.

In Jesus' name. Amen. So with the recent death of Roger Moore, there's been lots of discussion about who you think is the best.

You stole my introduction. I can't have the James Bond introduction so I'm going to give you the hamster introduction. I don't know whether you saw the story that this week a child took their hamster to the vet.

The vet asked what was wrong with it and the child said, well it got out of its cage last week and we eventually found it under the fridge. We put it back in its cage and for the whole of the last week it's not moved.

It's not eaten or drunk. Anything. It's just cowered in the corner of the cage. What's wrong with it? And the vet had it on its table and it seemed to be moving fine, running around okay. And the vet said, well it seems to be all right now.

[9 : 02] The vet examined it further, especially in its bulging cheeks and found not only was there food stored in its cheeks, but also a fridge magnet. And the magnet had held the hamster frozen, motionless against the bars of the cage where it had not moved for the entire week.

He became an internet sensation this week. Now I'd like you to hold that picture in your mind. You'll never be able to get rid of that picture in your mind.

I wonder how many of us as Christians behave a bit like that as we live in a hostile world, namely paralyzed, fearful, keep your heads down, tower stuck in the corner of our own little world as citizens of Jerusalem living in Babylon, as we thought two weeks ago.

And what the book of Daniel does is show us another way to hold on to the reality that God reveals to us, stuff that we can't see, but which God shows to us.

To hold on to that alongside the what you see is what you get world that we live in. And that I think is right at the heart of this story in Daniel chapter three.

[10 : 24] You've got an outline on the back of your service sheets. Let's get straight into the story. And my first headline is this. This is a story about the king who sets up gods.

If you were here last week, you'll remember that the whole of Daniel chapter two is about a statue. A statue that looks grand, but is smashed to pieces.

Do you remember that's the dream that Nebuchadnezzar has. And Nebuchadnezzar, straight after Daniel chapter two, says a statue. Well, that's a good idea. So he builds one, a very big one, 90 foot tall.

That's as tall as six London buses, double-decker buses, one on top of another. So it's not subtle. In a way, it's a kind of sign of how significant he thinks he is.

It's a symbol of his presumption of worldwide dominion. Look at me. I am big. The statue in the dream of chapter two had a head that was made of gold.

[11 : 27] gold. And Nebuchadnezzar was told, you might remember this from last week, that he represented the head of the statue. And now Nebuchadnezzar says, me, gold, yeah, cover me with it all over.

Not just my head, but all of me. Make the statue all of gold, from head to toe. Now, we don't know that it is a statue of him, just that it was an image, a golden image, that somehow is linked to Nebuchadnezzar and serving his gods.

What we do know is that everybody has to gather around his statue. At least, anybody who's anyone. They're listed again and again in verse two and three.

And especially verse seven tells us that all the peoples, nations and languages are there. They're all there to fall down and worship Nebuchadnezzar's toy model.

Your Majesty, my Lord Mayor, your Grace, your Excellencies, my Lord, Mr. Sheriff, ladies and gentlemen, welcome. Please get out of your seats and down on your knees. Just look at the society occasion this has become, this great long list of people.

[12 : 41] And of course, when you've got such an impressive gathering, you need the best band you can get. And the band gets listed four times and what instruments there are. Did you not think it's slightly over the top as James was reading it?

You know, you've got the flutes, the fiddles, the trumpet, the tom-tom, the bagpipes and banjo and bell. It's a tremendous cacophony. Aren't you impressed? Well, you should be.

This is Nebuchadnezzar in gold with the band. Can I ask, do you think it is just at all possible that in this chapter this pomp is all being mocked for its pomposity?

Because the thing is, this entire thing, this statue, this occasion is a massive set-up. That word, that phrase, set-up, gets used eleven times in this chapter.

It is a set-up job, as if to make the point, this thing looks impressive, fearful, it's got all the weight of Whitehall behind it, all the government pomp and what's-it you can muster, but it is a farce.

[13 : 53] The whole thing is just a set-up. Because, of course, the previous chapter, chapter two, has already made it clear what God does to state-sponsored images.

And you can see behind the mask, the front, remembering what God has just revealed, what is his future for national posturing.

And you can see the falsehood and stupidity of this scene. Bless him, little Nebuchadnezzar with his little gold toy. And all his little instruments, sweet.

If only you can hear heaven's laughter at it. It is pathetic. Did you see the pictures this week of Prince Charles and Camilla in Canada where they were watching a performance of Inuit throat singing?

And they're sitting there with all the pomp and they get the giggles. And it's like one of those moments when you know you shouldn't laugh, it's terribly serious to somebody who's there but you just can't stop yourself.

[14 : 54] I think there's something like that in Daniel chapter 3. It's terribly serious but it is all a little bit ridiculous. A total set up. You know, you're having your leg pulled.

Don't let the pomp silence you. You know what's going to happen to a big statue of a king. You know, stuff your hanky down your mouth to try to stop laughing as you read chapter 3.

And so this curious version of musical statues begins. When the music starts, notice everybody in the rules, it's not when it stops but when it starts, as the band starts to play, the flutes, the fiddles, the trumpet, the tom-tom, the bagpipes, the banjos, the bell, the messages trumpeted out, bow or burn.

So the crowd gets its collective backside in the air, its noses into the sand and enjoys job security. And suddenly three men are exposed.

Three men who say no. Three men who stand out in the midst of this huge crowd on the plain of Dura. And they stand out because they are still standing, literally.

[16 : 10] What are you doing, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, when they play the tune? Why aren't you dancing to the city's music? And so the pressure on these three begins.

And you can imagine the kind of conversations that would go on. Look, we understand your position. We understand about your private superstitions. You can keep your personal faith.

Nobody's asking you to deny that. But in the public sphere, there is such a thing as political correctness. You've got to submit to that. You know, it's not as if you're asking that much of you.

You haven't got to say you don't believe in God. Just join in with everybody else. Will you buckle under that kind of pressure? Will they manage to coerce you?

Won't you be forced to serve this king? He sets up gods and he can easily flatten dissidents. But my second heading is this.

[17 : 12] That this passage is also about the God who sets up kings and for that matter removes them. Look back to chapter 2 and verse 21, the passage you're looking at last week, which says exactly this.

That this is the God who changes times and seasons, who removes kings and sets up kings. Same word. Well, thank you. So God can set up a king and does do it.

Legitimately, look at chapter 2, verse 27. Sorry, verse 37, I mean, that you are the king. You, Nebuchadnezzar, the king, that God gave the kingdom, the power, the might, and the glory to, to whose hands he's given children, beasts, birds.

God does set up kings. He's the one who gives them the power and authority. And I wonder if chapter 3 follows chapter 2 to make this point, and I may be wrong, but this is my theory on this story, that chapter 2, what we were thinking about last week, poses this question.

Can he do that? I mean, really? Is he really allowed to, entitled to? Can God produce a stone that's cut from a mountain not by human hands that's mighty enough to break down every other kingdom, the Babylonian, the Persian, the Roman, the Greek, the British, the American?

[18 : 40] Can he do that? Can he put a king on the throne just because he wants to do that? If it's currently occupied by somebody as mighty and powerful as Nebuchadnezzar, can, is God allowed to do that?

Can he deliver on all of that? In fact, can he deliver his people from Babylon and get them back home again? From prison chains to royal crowns?

Can he? Is he able? And the answer of chapter 3 is, yes, he can. And all the world who gathers on the plain of Dura is being shown that he can.

He is able to deliver and rescue. For what this story tells us is that our God is stronger stronger than the mighty will of earthly empires.

For the might of Babylon, the might of the Persian Empire that followed it, and every subsequent kingdom, each layer in the dream sequence of chapter 2, each kingdom, each king, each mighty power structure may set itself against God and his people.

[19 : 51] Their mighty state machinery directing their brutality against the Lord, against the saints of the Most High. But God has a wrecking rock that is mightier than all these kingdoms.

And this rescue here in chapter 3 demonstrates God's rule. His rescue here gives us confidence about his ultimate rescue to come at the end of time, the rescue that we look forward to.

This God rules and this rescue proves that he does. Look how the story sets this up. Chapter 3, verse 15. When Nebuchadnezzar is giving another chance to the three rebels, if you're ready when you hear the sound of the to fall down and worship the image I've made well and good, but if you do not worship you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace.

And, here's the line, who is the God who will deliver you out of my hands? Go on, bring him on, let's see him. Now, who's going to rescue you? You and whose army?

Do you see what Nebuchadnezzar's claiming? I'm stronger than any God. What God have you got that can deliver anybody from me? The king with enough might and power to blow your socks off.

[21 : 23] Opposite him, all the images and the gods you might care for, all the things that might impress the least religious. And yet, the thing is, Nebuchadnezzar says, all of that, any religious system with all its religious paraphernalia doesn't stand a chance against me.

They can't deliver you from me because this king is more powerful than his big statue. Remember, of course, he knows, we know, the whole thing is just a big put-up job.

Nebuchadnezzar knows he's bigger and better and all the gods are weaker and wetter. And so now look on to see how the story ends in verse 29.

the end of the story is that Nebuchadnezzar has to come to realize any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the god of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb for limb and their houses laid in ruins.

Why? For there is no other god who is able to recognize in this way. It's a kind of slightly grudging thing. There's no god able to, well, there's no other god able to rescue.

[22 : 32] But it is recognizing there is a god who actually is powerful enough to defend you from me. This god can, the god of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego can.

You see, the story is not just showing us that he can rescue, but that he can rescue. He's strong enough and mighty enough and powerful enough and ruler enough.

He can go for ten rounds with Nebuchadnezzar and Nebuchadnezzar is knocked out. In the first second, God is demonstrating here in chapter three that he is the god of chapter two, the great god, the god of gods, the lord of kings, the one who we saw back in chapter two, changes times and seasons, removes kings, sets up kings, gives wisdom to the wise, he gives knowledge to those who have knowledge.

Do you know anything? God gave it to you. He knows what's in the darkness, light dwells with him. To you, oh god, belongs wisdom and might. Blessed be the name of God forever and ever.

I mentioned two weeks ago about my friend who said that he thinks the Bible is written to persuade us that God rules, that God is in charge, because we don't really think he is.

[23 : 53] Chapter three is part of the persuasion. This story is telling us what God is like to so preserve his people in the incinerator that they can emerge without the slightest whiff of bonfire.

Is he not the God who sets up kings and kingdoms? Is he not mighty? God sent his angel, presumably the same angel that he will send in chapter six to shut the lions' mouths, and these three were fully persuaded, strong in trust in this God, confident about who their God is, that they could quench the power of fire.

you see, will you walk by faith in this reality? Sure that this is our God. Let chapter three persuade you that all that stuff we saw last week in chapter two, those claims about God's might, are here demonstrated.

This is our God. And it's absolutely crucial that these friends do because they are facing the fiery furnace, but they fear God more.

I still don't think we've got to the heart of the reason why we're told this story. Why we're told a story like this alongside the chapters telling us that God reigns.

[25 : 25] I mean, obviously this is a story of rescue, that God can deliver his people from the monster rulers who are in charge, from the flames.

He can. But it surely isn't the case that we can therefore say to our children, darling, it's fine for you to play with matches. We're Christians.

We know God will always rescue us from the fire. It won't hurt us. I mean, that would be an obviously ridiculous conclusion, wouldn't it? It's clearly not true. See, I wonder if these stories are also about something else.

Before we talk about rescue, this is a chapter about God's people living in a world of power, of powerful kings and powerful kingdoms, of ever more ferocious kingdoms who come and go, as we saw last week in chapter 2.

In other words, this chapter is a chapter about the reality of the people of Jerusalem living in the city of Babylon. For in this chapter we see the might of Babylon, and later in the book we'll see the might of the Persian empire, just the same, setting themselves against God and his people.

[26 : 46] And in chapter 3, the state has fire. And in the parallel story in chapter 6, the state has teeth, lion's teeth. And these flames are and those teeth, they are set to consume the faithful.

Before we get to these stories being a story about rescue, they are first a story about endurance. God's people enduring the roar of the monster anti-God state that is terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong and is firmly set to persecute the Christian.

how do they do these friends in this kind of hot water? And here we come right to the very heart of the chapter in verse 16.

Let's look down there. Here again their bravery. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter.

If this be so, that you will throw us into the fiery furnace, 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.

[28 : 03] But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you've set up. Now look again at those three words at the beginning of verse 18.

But if not. Do you notice that? So what they're saying is we believe our God can deliver us, no doubt about his ability. We believe God will deliver us, that's what we think he's going to do.

But if not, even if he doesn't, we're still not going to serve your gold covered plastic imitation gods.

In other words, they don't know how it's going to turn out. And given the extreme heat that's coming from the fire, there's little room for doubt about how it's very likely to turn out.

They didn't know how it would turn out and yet they're willing to take the risk. How could they do that? How could they take such an immense risk? How could we do that? Well, here again, the words from our first reading in Luke 12.

[29 : 06] Don't be afraid of those who want to kill your body. They can do no more to you after that. I'll tell you whom to fear. Fear God, who has the power to kill you and throw you into hell.

Yes, he's the one to fear. See, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are clear about who their God is. They knew who really rules. They knew who they should really fear.

They believed the dreams and the visions like the one we were looking at last week. they believed Daniel chapter 2 and they walked by faith, in other words, in the reality that God revealed to them.

And not just by the sight of what they could see and feel with the immense heat coming from the furnace. And I want to suggest that this is the big message of Daniel.

Since this is who God is, since you've been allowed to see his rule, since God has given Daniel understanding, a glimpse behind the curtain, and since God, through Daniel writing it down, has given us that same understanding of that reality, that same glimpse behind the curtain, since we know all this, live logically.

[30 : 25] In other words, there's an appropriate way to live, if this is all true, a fitting way to organize yourselves, a logical response to this.

You wouldn't throw in your lot with the people with the plastic toy statue, would you? You wouldn't back the Babel builders, not when you know there is one to whom the people who built the Tower of Babel must give an account.

There is one before whom Nebuchadnezzar must stand, there is one who has power and authority over every powerful person. When you can see how the pieces all fit together, when God has revealed that to us, when we can see the whole picture from now to the end, when all is finished, live logically.

And the Bible's word for that kind of logic is wisdom. Wisdom in the Bible isn't being clever, though it is about knowing stuff. It means living life, life in response to all that God has done, in response to his character, in response to all that he's revealed to us.

That's stuff that we hold on to firmly alongside what we know and see and experience all around us in the world. Wisdom like that comes from what God has said to us.

[31 : 47] John Piper wrote a short booklet entitled Risk is Right and he talks about this story and those verses 16 to 18 right at the middle and he's saying how it is right to risk all when you are confident you have a winning hand.

But of course this isn't a risk, is it? Not if you know the God behind the scenes. If you had a glimpse behind the curtain, if you know what the Lord of Kings is like, if you know about the wrecking rock that is rolling down the hillside and you know about the judgment thrones and you know about the eternal reign of King Jesus and with him all the saints of the Most High who will reign, if you know all that then flames, shmames.

That's not risk, that's wisdom isn't it? A while ago I read the story of a Romanian pastor. He was persecuted for his faith under the Ceausescu regime and this is what he wrote.

The greatest threat they have is the power to kill you. Our greatest victory is to die. So whenever they told me we're going to kill you I said I can hardly wait.

I read that story out in another talk once and somebody came up to me afterwards and said I know the bloke who said that, I've met him, he really is like that, I mean he doesn't mean that kind of stuff.

[33 : 24] Death holds no terrors, no fears, no unknowns for us because God has revealed what lies ahead. so that somebody like a Jim Elliott, that story I'm sure many of you know who's a missionary to the Quechua people in Ecuador in the mid 1950s, a totally unreached people group.

He and five other young men in their twenties planning to reach them with the gospel, an unreached people group. They dropped gifts in trying to win the trust of this people, they eventually landed their little plane, they fed a handful of people from the tribe, they met others, until the tribe's warriors came and speared all these five men to death after just a week of being there.

And you perhaps know the famous phrase that Jim Elliott wrote before these terrible events that ended his life, to explain why he would do this, why he would take such risks of going to a dangerous, unpredictable, unreached people group.

Why would he take the gospel to this dangerous tribe? And he said this, he's no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. If we know the future that God has revealed, then we're confident in our God.

Our God can deliver, we think our God will deliver, but if not, there's no many difference. Of course, amazingly, in Daniel 3, unlike in Ecuador 60 years ago, but in Daniel 3, God does rescue Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and it's their oppressors who are like burnt toast.

[35 : 15] Which is all a preview of the final rescue that we looked ahead to last week, a glimpse again behind the curtain at the real reality that God has shown to us, promised us, even if that flies in the face of what we see.

That the Lord Jesus Christ will reign in the kingdom that God, the God of heaven will set up. That kingdom will never be destroyed, it will bring all other kingdoms to an end, and his people will share in his reign.

Do you believe that tomorrow at school? Do you believe that tomorrow as you're walking around Tesco's?

Sorry, waitress? Do you believe that tomorrow as you go into the office? Until then, until that end point at God's final judgment, until the Lord Jesus returns to planet Earth, until all things are removed, we will go through many pressure points at school, work, in our ordinary life.

We don't know what will happen when we turn over to the next page of our life story. We don't know what spears might be thrown or what damage the flames might do.

[36 : 32] But we do know how the story ends. We do know the very last page of the story. So we don't need to be paralyzed by fear like a magnetized hamster.

And if you believe all this, you see, you can say no to food from the king's table. You can refuse to fall down in front of the king's idol. You can even make a stand as an 86-year-old man that takes you to the lion's den.

Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Our Father God, it's so hard in this world to really believe the truth of these stories, how much persuasion we need because we are surrounded by so much in this world that is so in our faces and big and real.

It is so easy for all of our lives to be dominated by what we see and for us to hold you somewhere in the back of our minds. Father God, please would you help us to believe the things that you've been showing us these few weeks.

Thank you for this message of the book of Daniel. Thank you that you are able to deliver. Thank you for the confidence we have that at the end of time you certainly will deliver your people.

[38 : 03] Please help us in the meantime with the uncertainty of living in this world where many oppose you, where many claim greater allegiance than you.

Please would you help us to have the kind of faith, confidence, certainty that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that Daniel had in the God of heaven, the greater God, the Lord over all the kings of this earth.

Please convince us of what we've read today, that that may equip us to live for you in this week ahead. In Jesus' name, amen.