

When the Heat's Turned Up

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Preacher: Andrew Price

[0:00] Well, there's a TV show called Candid Camera. Has anyone heard of that TV show, Candid Camera? I didn't realise this, but it's actually really old. It started in 1948.

Now that I've said that, if anyone's born in 1948. It started in 1948, and I thought I'd show you a clip from one of the earlier episodes about pressure to conform.

Let's see if this works. The gentleman in the elevator now is a candid star. These folks who are entering, the man with the white shirt, the lady with the trench coat, and subsequently one other member of our staff, will face the rear.

And you'll see how this man in the trench coat tries to maintain his individuality, but little by little, he looks at his watch, but he's really making an excuse for turning just a little bit more to the wall.

Now we'll try it once again. Here's the candid subject. Here comes the Candid Camera staff, three of them at least. And this man has apparently been in groups before.

[1:24] Now, here's a fella with his hat on in the elevator.

First he makes a full turn to the rear, and Charlie closes the door. A moment later, we'll open the door. Everybody's changed positions. Now we'll see if we can use...

Now we'll see if we can use group pressure for some good. Now, in a moment, on Charlie's signal, everybody turns forward. Notice, they take off their hats.

Ah, that'll do. It's pretty funny. Probably not as funny as the audience thought it was, but it's pretty funny. And I love it how the good, what they say, will get him to do some good, was taking off his hat inside an elevator.

How our society has fallen. But anyway, it illustrates the points that we often face pressure to conform, don't we? It's very common amongst teenagers.

[2:50] It can happen to parents. And we can face it from all sorts of areas, whether it be from friends or work colleagues or family members, and even from society, or sorry, the rulers in society.

And now, to be fair, conforming can be a good thing. After all, God wants us, as his sons and daughters, to conform to the likeness of his son, the son, Jesus, for our good. Even in the world, there are some things where it is good to conform.

So driving on the left-hand side of the road is a good thing to all conform to. But other times, it's not for our good. Other times, there is pressure for Christians to conform to the world's values and beliefs, which compromise our own allegiance to God.

And sometimes that pressure, as I said, can come from even the government. So I don't know if you know, but someone in my Bible study pointed out last week that the Department of Education in Queensland has an unofficial policy, so not law yet, but it's still coming from a government department, where students in Queensland schools will no longer be allowed to use the name Jesus in the playground, nor hand out Christmas cards at Christmas.

Now, it's not law yet, and there have been other MPs who have said that's ridiculous, but here is an unofficial policy coming from a government department, from the Minister of Education in Queensland, which seeks to conform students to the state's no-religion view, belief, and in so doing, compromise their allegiance to Christ.

[4:27] What do you do when that happens? Well, this is a scene which Daniel chapter 3 opens with, a state-imposed law that seeks to conform people to the state's values, and in so doing, compromise the faith of Daniel's three friends.

And as we work our way through this chapter, we'll see what to do or how to respond when the heat is turned up like this. And it starts with the state pressure to conform and compromise.

So point one in your outline, verse one in your Bibles. King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, 60 cubits high and six cubits wide, and set it up on the plain of Gura 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. Here is a huge gathering of officials to dedicate this new statue of Nebuchadnezzar. Now, in verse one, there's a footnote.

[5:40] It's the word wide, which gives you measurements in today's language. So it's 27 meters high and only 2.7 meters wide. So it's tall and skinny. And so if it was a carving of Nebuchadnezzar, it would have been more of a stylized or outline of a human figure.

Perhaps like this on the next slide. You know, perhaps a bit like, so not that one. That's another conforming one. Perhaps, you know, maybe like an Oscar, something like that. That's perhaps what was tall and skinny. Not really a carving of Nebuchadnezzar, but perhaps in the shape of a human.

We don't really know. But this is actually more than a dedication of a statue. This is a new state religion of idolatry. Being imposed on all people by law.

And look at the pressure to conform and compromise. You see verse four? 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.

[7:05] So here are all the nations and they're worshiping this golden statue under threat of death. Now we need to realize at this point that Nebuchadnezzar is not saying that everyone has to give up their own gods and worship only his statue.

He's just saying you have to add this statue to your other gods. In the ancient world, people worshipped many gods. And he's saying you have to add this one to your collection and worship it when I say, when I give the signal for the music to play.

And is this not the type of pressure we find in our own society today? I mean, our society does not pressure us to completely abandon Christ, though it has happened to Christians in other parts of the world.

Rather, our society pressures us to just add some more gods to Christ, doesn't it? You know, like work or money or family. And our society will also say, look, you can worship Christ on some subjects, some topics, like love, but when it comes to other topics, you have to worship our way.

You have to believe what we believe, you know, topics like marriage or gender or sexuality. You see, the pressure here to conform is similar for us today. It doesn't say get rid of Christ altogether, but don't give your total allegiance to Christ.

[8:21] Worship other gods as well. And Nebuchadnezzar seems to introduce this as a way of uniting his kingdom. You notice that they were all to worship together at the same time when the music sounded.

Do you notice? It seems this was Nebuchadnezzar's way of making sure his kingdom was united and it wouldn't be divided or lost. And particularly after chapter 2 last week, where he had a dream where one day his kingdom would be lost and another kingdom would come up and take over.

In fact, six times in the first seven verses, we are told Nebuchadnezzar set up the statue. You see, this is his attempt to set up his kingdom and make it last forever.

And yet God had told him last week in chapter 2 that it's not humans who rule. It's God who rules. On the next slide, we read this from chapter 2.

It is God who both removes kings and literally sets up kings. Or the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed.

[9:27] In other words, it will last forever. But here's Nebuchadnezzar thinking that his rule is greater than God's. And so already we're in for a bit of a showdown between who really rules, King Neb or God.

Of course, such idolatry or idol worship is ridiculous in and of itself. I mean, to worship an idol or a statue as though it has power to give you life is foolish. I remember being in Sydney one time and I was at some shops, some corner shops in the suburb, you know, like the local milk bar kind of thing.

And the owners of one shop had set up a statue of Buddha outside. And as I was walking past, they were there cleaning off his head bird droppings one day. The idol wasn't even powerful enough to keep the birds from doing their business on its head.

Now, I'm not trying to be rude. I'm just trying to show that it's foolish, is it? Idols are not, sorry, are man-made and clearly not God. And so they can never give true life in this world or the world to come.

Not the life to the full that we heard about from Ali before. Nor can any other state impose set of beliefs and values, I might add. And so to bow to them or to this idol is ridiculous.

[10:42] And the narrator, I think, highlights how ridiculous this is by repeating those long lists. You know, even as we're reading it and you read horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music for the fourth time in a row, you're thinking this is ridiculous.

But that's his point. It is ridiculous. Even the scene is ridiculous. To have all these government officials with their titles of authority and then to bow to a lifeless statue at the sound of music, it's sadly comical.

One commentator said that the scene is like a grand version of Pavlov's dog. You know Pavlov's dog? They ring the bell, the dog just came. They sound the music and they just all bow. It's mindless.

But for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to conform and add another god to their god would not only be ridiculous, but it would compromise their worship of God alone. I mean, the first two commandments, remember the first two commandments, the ten commandments?

Have no other gods but me. And then secondly, don't make an image to bow down or worship. You've got them too. Two of them right here. What's more, the Jews are in this foreign land of Babylon because their fathers worshipped idols.

- [11:54] And so these three are not going to do the same. They don't make a fuss about it, mind you. In fact, presumably Nebuchadnezzar would never have known about what they did or didn't do, except some jealous astrologers do them in.

Have a look at verse 8. 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, zither, 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 the blazing furnace. But there are some Jews who 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. Now, again, in verse 8, there's a footnote next to the word astrologers, which tells you that they are literally Chaldeans, which is a group of Babylonians who studied the stars and were the wise men and so on.

In other words, these men were the local boys. What's more, they are the ones who were shown up last week. Remember, they couldn't interpret the king's dream. And then in comes these foreigners, these Jews, Daniel and his three mates, and he could interpret the king's dream.

- [13:14] And then Nebuchadnezzar places these foreigners, these Jews, over the locals to rule over them. I suspect these astrologers see this as the perfect opportunity to take down these three people of God.

We don't know where Daniel is at this point, by the way. And so they do them in. But it's more than that. In verse 8, where it says, denounce the Jews, the word denounce in the original Hebrew is literally eight pieces of them with their words.

We'd say they tore strips off them. This is more than just telling on them. This is really speaking maliciously of them, defaming their name.

And is this not again what happens today when Christians stand up for God's truth? People ridicule Christians and try and take them down on social media or the like.

Just last month in the UK, Liberal leader Tim Farron resigned because of the constant harassing of the media about his Christian faith. Not about political issues. Well, they asked those as well, but about his faith.

- [14:20] On the next slide, this is a picture of Tim, and this is what he said. He says, from the very first day of my leadership, I have faced questions about my Christian faith. I seem to be the subject of suspicion because of what I believe and who my faith is in.

In which case, we are kidding ourselves if we think we still live in a tolerant, liberal society. It can happen to us too, though, can't it?

A person from our congregation a couple of weeks ago told me how a colleague at work was having a go at him because he still believed the Bible, ridiculing him in front of others. You see, when Christians stand up for what we believe, people defame our name publicly, even more than other religions.

But how is Nebuchadnezzar going to respond to these three? Well, point to verse 13. Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned these three, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

And 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, if 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.

- [15:35] But if you do not worship it, you'll be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what God will be able to rescue you from my hand?

Nebuchadnezzar is furious when he hears, isn't he? After all, he was the known ruler of the world. So how dare they defy him? What's more, he promoted them back in chapter 2.

So how dare they refuse him? But because they had proved themselves, because in the words of chapter 1, the end of chapter 1, they were 10 times better than all the other wise men, if you remember, then he's willing to give them another chance.

But he adds a warning in verse 15. And notice the implicit challenge to his question in verse 15. He says, then what God will be able to rescue you from my hand?

Now here's the showdown again between King Nebuchadnezzar and God over who really rules. And Nebuchadnezzar's question here implies that there is no God more powerful than his hand.

- [16:36] No God's going to be able to save you from my hand. I'm more powerful. I rule. But notice how the friends respond in verse 16. 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.

Despite his rage, despite the king's second offer of, you know, to worship the statue again, the friends resolve to stand firm, don't they?

And worship God alone. And this is really the key message of the chapter. In fact, the narrator highlights this, by the way, is structured the chapter. On the next slide, I've got a kind of structure.

We'll leave it up there for a bit, Gil, if you want to look at it. We don't have time to explain it. But the very fact that this is the only time the friends speak in the whole chapter highlights what they say is important.

- [17:47] In a chapter where there's so much repetition, you know, the sad traps, prefects, governors, the musical instruments, even the Babylonian names of these friends, there's so much repetition, yet these friends only speak once.

And it highlights what they say as important. And so what do they say? Well, no matter what, we're going to stand firm and worship God alone.

I mean, most people would take Nebuchadnezzar's offer, wouldn't they? But they don't. They answer his question, verse 15, by saying, Our God is able to save us from your hand.

He will deliver us if he chooses. You know, our God rules, not you. And notice verse 18, they resolve to stand firm and serve God, even if God decides not to save them.

You see, they knew that God had already made them his people. God had saved Israel from Egypt, made Israel his people, and he their God. And so serving him was really in response to that big salvation event in history.

- [18:54] It did not depend on God continuing to save them from future furnaces. Rather, they would serve and worship God alone regardless. Why? Because he had already made them his people.

He was already their God. And that meant he was able to save them from the furnace, yes. But it also meant that he had the freedom to choose if he would or not, for he was their God.

And I wonder, is this our view of God? I mean, if we trust in Jesus, then God has already saved us from the penalty of sin, which the Bible says is the fire of hell. Christ has already paid for that at the cross in history.

So when we trust in Christ, God counts his death as payment for our sin. And he makes us his people, and he becomes our God. And so in response to that big salvation event in history at the cross, we are to serve Christ and Christ alone.

As we'll sing in our last song, when I survey the wondrous cross, a love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all. We're to serve God and Christ because of that event in history at the cross.

[20:07] And yet, will we continue to do that like these friends, even if he decides not to answer our prayers the way we want? Will we continue to do that even if he allows us to suffer a fiery ordeal of our own?

Will we continue to do that even if our loved ones suffer more than others, and we don't know why? I find myself saying, yeah, I'll serve you, God, because of Jesus, because you've saved me at the cross.

But then if something happens, I'll say, why'd you do that, God? I wouldn't have done it like that. I would have done it like that. You should have done it my way. As though God answers to me. But these three friends don't do that, do they?

Rather, they acknowledge that God is their God, who is both able to save, yes, but also free to choose if he will or not. Either way, they resolve not to conform, but worship God alone.

Now, this is not what Nebuchadnezzar wanted to hear or expected to hear, I think. And so he's furious again. Have a look at verse 19. Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and his attitude towards them changed.

[21:16] He ordered the furnace heated up 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.

I don't know about you, but when I read this, it sounds like Nebuchadnezzar has a tantrum and he kind of spits the dummy. He says, I'll show you who's boss. Heat it up seven times. Crank it up. You know, tie them up with the strongest men.

Make them wear all their clothing for maximum flammability. It's always comical the way he's so determined to show who is boss, especially because we know what happens.

Point three, verse 24. And then the 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? They replied, certainly, your majesty.

[22:21] 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, 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 a hair of their head singed, nor their robes were scorched and there was no smell of fire on them.

Now it's worth noticing for a moment that God does not save them from entering the fire. They still go in, don't they? Rather, God keeps them safe in the fire and brings them through the fire to life on the other side.

Second, God does this by sending someone, a son of the gods, to be with them and help them. In verse 28, Nebuchadnezzar will say that this person was an angel and perhaps it is Jesus before he became human.

Either way, God brings them through the fire by sending someone to be with them in the fire. But the main point here is that their salvation is so comprehensive that it proves God really rules and they were right to worship him alone.

[23 : 44] I mean, look at verse 27. Look at how their salvation is so comprehensive. Fire had not harmed their bodies. Not even a hair of their heads was singed. Their robes were not scorched and there wasn't even a smell of fire on them.

That's hard to achieve when you go camping, isn't it? But their salvation is so comprehensive it proves or vindicates that God really rules.

And so they were right to worship him alone. I mean, even in verse 24, we miss it in our translations where it says, then the king Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet. It literally says the king Nebuchadnezzar set up in amazement.

Remember, the king is trying to set up a kingdom, set up an idol. Last week we heard it's God who sets up kings and kingdoms and now he proves it by getting Nebuchadnezzar to literally set up in amazement. God really rules.

They were right to worship him alone. And this is what Nebuchadnezzar himself now declares. You see verse 28? Then Nebuchadnezzar said, praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who has sent his angel and rescued his servants.

[24 : 50] 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 houses turned into piles of rubble for no other God can save in this way.

See what he says? God is God. Their God is God. No other God can save like this. Nebuchadnezzar also declares that the three friends were right not to conform but worship this God alone.

And then he decrees that every nation is to respect this God who is able to save. And the message for us today is the same as it was for God's people back then.

We both live in a foreign land. Ours is this world. And when the heat is turned up and there's pressure to conform or compromise we must stand firm and worship God alone.

For he really is God who has power to save. And what's more, he will be with us in the fires of this life by his spirit. And he will bring us through the fire to life on the other side.

[26 : 11] Whether it be life in this world or life in the world to come. And on that last day when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord his rule will be vindicated and our worship will be seen to be right.

In May this year you'll remember the 29 Coptic Christians in Egypt who were taken off the bus and told from what I understand to announce their faith in Christ and conform to Islam and yet they stood firm and continued to trust in Christ alone.

And no doubt God was with them enabling them to stand firm during their furnace experience and God brought them through it through the fire but not to life in this world but to life in the world to come.

For one person from our church they sit on a school council of a high school not far from here with a principal and so on and the school council was asked to have a school-wide rainbow day to promote the LGBTI sexuality where the students would all wear rainbow colours instead of the school uniform.

Now please hear me I'm all for respecting people's right to choose how to live loving them either way but this would be to officially promote one ideology which is contrary to God's word and promote it amongst all students and so this person from our church said that he could not support it.

[27:37] He pointed out I think that the school would be unlikely to hold a school-wide hot cross bun day at Easter to promote Christianity when I suspect there are more Christians in the school than LGBTI students.

The point is he did not conform but stood firm and lovingly stood firm and copped some flack for it and yet I have no doubt that God was with him and brought him through this experience and things have settled down now.

I don't know what it will be for you perhaps there will be pressure from your family to renounce such old-fashioned beliefs or perhaps it will be pressure at work to compromise your faith you know to worship God on Sunday and then the world during the week or perhaps there will be pressure from the state with new laws like there is in this chapter or like we are seeing in China like the suggested laws in Queensland about banning Christmas cards at Christmas and the use of the name Jesus at school.

I wonder if that would stop people from using his name as a swear word or perhaps even the state imposed safe schools program which has become compulsory here in Victoria this year I believe although I think schools have time to implement it and the like there is a bit of confusion about that.

Now I should say it has been renamed Respectful Relationships and having looked at some of the curriculum myself there are lots of helpful things in it but it does teach as normal that gender is something you can choose and that labels like boy and girl are not very useful is the word they use and because of this the state I think have now been forced to conduct a review of the material happening at the moment or about to happen.

[29:30] Whatever it is we must make sure we do not conform to the world's beliefs when they compromise our own or more importantly when they compromise God's word rather we must lovingly stand firm and worship God alone knowing he will be with us and bring us through whatever furnace experience we face for our God is God who has power to save.

Let's pray. Our gracious heavenly father we thank you for this pertinent reminder this morning from your word that we will face pressure around us to conform to this world in ways that compromise our faith in you.

Father when that happens help us to recognize it but also help us to then resolve to stand firm and to worship you alone for you are God who is able to save.

We ask it in Jesus name. Amen.