

We Will Not Serve Your gods

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[0 : 00] Let's turn together to the book of Daniel now, and chapter 3, the final part of the section of the chapter we read there, from the middle of verse 15 there, from the final part of verse 15, but looking especially at verses 16 to 18, where we find Nebuchadnezzar giving this instruction, this command, to these three young Jewish men, about worshipping the image that he had made.

If you do this, he said, well and good, but if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into the burning fiery furnace. And who is the God who will deliver you out of my hands?

And that's the question that was addressed to these three young men, and it's to that question especially that they gave their response in verses 16 to 18.

They 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.

[1 : 23] Now this is a story that most and probably all of us have known from childhood. It's a story that you always find in children's Bibles or in the way in which our children are taught, some of the famous incidents recorded in the Bible.

So most of us have grown up with this incident of Shadrach, Shadrach Meshach and Abednego, and the story of Daniel himself. But they're more than just tales.

They're not just children's stories. They're not in the Bible just so that we can give this to our children, and they can learn these famous stories about these heroes in the Bible, and that will lead them on to something else.

They're real events. They took place in the history of God's people and of this world. They are repeated. This very type of incident is repeated down through the course of history, and you still find it in many places in the world today, not necessarily in the same form, but nevertheless the same thing in principle, where God's people are forced or attempts made to force them to renounce their faith, to be untrue to their God, to bow down to worship human authority rather than the God of heaven.

And one of the great things in Daniel's book, more than once, is that tremendous description or phrase that Daniel himself firstly set before Nebuchadnezzar when nobody was found who could interpret the dream as you find it in chapter 2.

[3 : 11] No, says Daniel, but there is a God in heaven who interprets, who reveals mysteries. There is a God in heaven.

You see, that was the key to his life and the key to these young men's lives. Faced with such tremendous difficulties and opposition, faced with so much danger, faced with all that was around them that was so contrary to what they believed, nevertheless, they never took their eye of this. There is a God in heaven, and this God in heaven is the God we will serve. The challenge to human authority, of human authority, to God's rule, is something, as we say, that has relevance in our own age, as is very obvious to yourselves.

And the book of Daniel is a book that shows us not only that we should not be surprised when certain things arise in our world, such as IS or ISIS, or whatever it is that raises its head at different times in human experience, whatever powers arise to resist the gospel and to seek to overthrow the gospel, whether it's that, or whether in our own country it's secular humanism and atheism, and all the other powers that are at work at the moment, they're all ranged together against this gospel. Yet, the book of Daniel tells us that we should not be surprised about that. But not only that, it tells us how to actually respond to that, how to live in the midst of that, how we must be faithful to God

as we are surrounded by such pressures and challenges and ideas of human authority being supreme.

[5 : 13] First of all, let's look at the challenge faced by these faithful men. Nebuchadnezzar had set up this image of gold. When you look back to chapter 2 and verse 28 there, you'll find that Daniel, as he interpreted this dream that Nebuchadnezzar had on his bed.

As he came to interpret that dream and told him about the dream, you find in verse 38 it is, that he says to Nebuchadnezzar that this figure, this great image that he had seen in his dream, which was different to the image that he set up, but you, he said to the king, are the head of gold.

Now Nebuchadnezzar was a man who had absolute power. Whenever Nebuchadnezzar said something that needed to be done, if you didn't do it, that was it.

He had absolute power. All the power in the government of Nebuchadnezzar was in himself. He had all of these officials that are mentioned there, but ultimately, he was the man who said what needed to be done.

He was the man who gave the commands. And it was only in fear of your life that you would dare resist someone like Nebuchadnezzar with that absolute power.

[6 : 46] So he had set up this golden image, whether it was just in response to what Daniel had interpreted to him of the dream. Maybe he thought, saying he was the head of gold, that this was something that he could now actually go ahead and set up, that he would call everybody to bow to this image.

Well, what was this image about? What did it represent? What is the meaning of this image of gold, this gigantic image that he set up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon?

It represented, really, Nebuchadnezzar himself in his power. And you could say that this golden image represents the assertion of human power, of human government against God in any generation.

It doesn't have to be an actual image of gold like it was in Nebuchadnezzar's day. But when you read this passage, what you're seeing in it is a representation of human authority in such a way as it elevates itself in its own thoughts to be supreme against every other authority, including any who claim authority for God as the God of heaven.

In other words, this golden image of Nebuchadnezzar represents the supremacy of state authority when the state dictates how things must be.

[8 : 19] The state orders people to bow to that power, to that authority. Yes, we know as Christians it's a usurping of the authority of God.

It's a deliberate flouting of the authority of God, even if the state says we don't believe in God. This is what it represents. The supremacy of state authority when the state says I'm in charge and there is no higher authority to appeal to.

Now that can actually be in different ways. It can take the form of dictatorships. You could say in a sense that Nebuchadnezzar was a dictator, but just because you've got a democracy such as you have in our own land, that does not mean that the state will not set itself up as the final judge and jury over human decisions.

decisions. It doesn't mean that the state will never come as a democracy to demand that you bow to its authority, to demand that you don't dare put God above the authority of the government on the authority of the state.

Human authority in its asserted supremacy takes different forms. And it doesn't matter what form it has, whether it's a dictatorship or a democracy, there will be times when the state will want to be God.

[9 : 49] When the state demands that you bow to it as you bow to God and that you comply with its commands, whatever your own ideology is, whatever your own freedoms may be.

You know, and the more we actually deny the supremacy of God, the more certain it is that this is what you're going to be left with. Because when you deny or put aside the supremacy of God, when you throw out the Bible, when you do away with God's laws, when you turn away from the teaching of Scripture, when you turn away from a Christian basis for any society, such as our own has had historically, when you deliberately turn from that and want to replace it with something, you're not going to be left with neutrality, you're not going to be left with a vacuum, you're going to be left with human authority, with human wisdom, with mere human government, and with human beings' ideas of themselves.

when it is not reined in by the teaching of God's truth. That's what you find in our own nation right now.

We're aware that not only does human supremacy take different forms, so too does forms of, so too there are different forms of persecution.

The persecution here was very obvious. If you didn't comply with Nebuchadnezzar's command to worship the golden image, to bow to the supremacy of the state, as that was embodied in himself, you were thrown into a fiery furnace.

[11:49] You were instantly killed. No questions asked. No trial, just instant death. Now, you don't find that in the UK.

Not that we're aware of, at least. Persecution takes sometimes far more subtle forms, and it's still persecution. When Christians are denied their rights, when Christians are denied their freedoms, when laws are brought about deliberately that are against the laws of God, when laws are brought about that restrict you in your Christian assertion as to who, indeed, is the ultimate authority. When you find discrimination, when you find people because they're Christians actually denied justice, that's persecution.

And there are many other kinds and forms that we might think of. And the Bible gives us the authority and the right to include these things in our preaching and in our thoughts.

We have to take the word of God and apply it to the circumstances of our day. There's no point in teaching from the word of God something that just doesn't apply to the situation that we're facing in the world today.

[13:18] And whatever topic it is that God's word gives us, it will always have to be made relevant and applicable to our age, to our circumstances, to what you and I are facing as a people.

Even if I and you are not facing it personally for ourselves, we belong to a nation and to a people and to a society where this is very relevant and where there are Christians who will go to work tomorrow and will face persecution and discrimination and hatred and even violence.

just because they insist that they worship and serve the Lord Jesus Christ. And one thing to notice in this, it's very obvious when you look at it, is that when Nebuchadnezzar ordered these officials to be gathered in his presence, you read there that they came and included the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces gathered together in his presence.

Why? Because he wanted to make sure that every single avenue of authority as that authority in him was sent out to govern the people, every single avenue by which his authority was registered amongst the people was included in bowing to this image.

He wanted compliance from every single layer in society including the magistrates, including those who sat in the courts of justice. That's what makes it relevant today.

[15:04] because that's where you find the Christian message and Christian principles greatly challenged.

Unbelieving government knows that the most effective way to stifle the gospel is to have it in the courts of law.

If not outlawed, certainly sidelined. That's why you find so many laws that have been introduced.

First of all, you see, you begin with questioning the authority of the Bible.

You actually do that in a system or in an environment of doubt and then it moves to unbelief and to atheism and then to humanism and to secularism.

And more and more as the Bible is displaced and put aside, the more and more people are given to understand that these things are after all just stories. They were fine hundreds or thousands of years ago but nowadays they're no longer relevant to an age like ours.

[16:20] And things steadily move on year by year, decade by decade, until you get things reaching the level they're now at. I'm not saying they're going to stop with that.

it may go a lot worse yet and a lot further before you and I will see a change in the spiritual climate of our day. But here's where we're at.

There are laws that protect sinful behavior. And I'm not just talking about same-sex marriage. And there is the intention on the part of some to introduce other laws that would make it legal to do what God forbids.

That's what we're facing. That's as believers the society that we live amongst today. And these words of verses 4 to 7 are very much alive in our society today.

The Herald proclaims aloud, all you people are commanded to worship and fall down and worship this golden image. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace.

[17 : 45] That's what secular humanism and unbelieving government would have you to do. That's what the powers even within, those who rule us at this time, who don't believe and don't want the scriptures and want it removed from public life.

This is what they're after. You have to bow down and worship human authority, worship us, we know best. I know it's given the name freedom.

It's given the name democracy. But putting God out of the picture is no freedom. And denying Christians justice is no justice.

the challenge faced by the faithful. And not only is there that golden image and all that it represents, but you know, it's the arrogant confidence there in verse 15, where Nebuchadnezzar finishes off by addressing this question to these three men.

Who is the God who will deliver you out of my hands? That's what it comes down to at the end of the day. the more human authority gains in its estimation of itself or its own self importance, it really says, I actually have power over human lives, over human destiny.

[19 : 04] And Nebuchadnezzar is saying there, I know the God you claim to worship, but where is the God who will deliver you out of my hands?

and reminds us of the arrogance, of unbelief, of secular humanism, of atheism, that you find around you today.

It's not just that they resist the teaching of the Bible and want to throw it aside, it's not just that they ridicule Christian ideas and ridicule our Christian history and our Christian past, it's not just that all of these things are very obvious and open in the way that they speak, but there's such arrogance about we're confident there is no God, we're confident that our secular way is best, we're confident that this is the way to secure human freedoms.

Arrogance, confidence, human authority brought to a sense of its own importance. and the more the sense of God and God's authority disappears from any society, the more it is inevitable that this will be what replaces it.

Where is it going to end? We don't know that. How are things going to develop over the next few years? We don't know that. But we do know this, that there is a God in heaven, a God we appeal to, a God like in the days of Daniel they prayed earnestly to, a God who is able to show himself supreme as he has done in the past.

[20 : 57] Our hope is in him. Our hope is not in any human ingenuity. Our hope is not in any religious leader as such. Our hope has to be in God.

We have to cast ourselves before him and express in our prayers sorrow for the sin of our people and hope that God in his grace will respond.

Secondly, there is a positive response on the part of these faithful people of God. Notice first what I've called a dynamic knowledge of God in verse 17 there.

If this be so, he said, supposing he's really saying, well fair enough, if it is the case that we will be thrown into this furnace of fire, 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.

In other words, they have absolutely no doubt whatsoever about God's ability, about God's power. They know absolutely and surely that God is able to deliver them and keep them from this burning fiery furnace.

[22 : 13] He can do this. They have no doubts about that. And not only that, but they also make it known that they will continue to serve this God.

God whom we serve. Don't miss out those words as you read these verses because they're so important.

Our God whom we serve. You see, he is saying to them, unless you bow down and worship this image that I have made, this will be the outcome for you. And they're quietly, yet respectfully, saying to Nebuchadnezzar in reply, no, we serve our God.

And the God we serve, he's able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace. Now we're confident in our God tonight. We're confident that God can turn things round just by lifting his little finger.

That God can actually hear our prayers and come with demonstration and power and might through his spirit and turn us as a nation back to himself. We're confident that God can do that.

[23 : 19] We're confident that God can keep the people from the worst kinds of persecution. We know that. And that's what these men are saying.

And you notice, they're not afraid, actually, to specify for Nebuchadnezzar his own inferiority to their God.

I like the way that that comes across quietly and respectfully. And that's important. We don't respond to the arrogance and to the challenges of atheism and secular humanism in the same way of brashness and arrogance and boldness that they present their case.

You treat every human opinion, even if you completely disagree with it, and find it obnoxious, you treat it respectfully. You treat the person at least respectfully.

And of course, this man as an absolute monarch, monarch, you had to treat him respectfully when you spoke to him. And this is what they did. They gave him the respect that was due to him as king, as the ruler.

[24 : 28] But this is what they said, Our God, whom we serve, is able to deliver us, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king.

You see, that's a direct answer to his question, Who is the God who will deliver you out of my hands? What they're really saying is, O king, we do respect you as our king, but we don't serve you ultimately.

And actually, the God we do serve, he's able to deliver us out of your hand as well. They remained true to their God against such challenging circumstances.

And the inferiority of Nebuchadnezzar comes across in their statement. But then you go on to not only this dynamic knowledge that they have of God, they move on to something even more remarkable.

This is what they've said, he is able to deliver us out of your hand, O king, he is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, but if not, you see, not only are they saying, God is able to keep us from this furnace, and he is able to deliver us out of your hand, but we also know that he may not do that.

[25 : 59] We also accept the fact that God in his wisdom may not deliver us from the furnace, and may not in fact deliver us from your hand, O king, and if that indeed will be the case that God sees fit not to deliver us, let it still be known to you, O king, we will not worship your gods.

We will not bow down to them, or worship the golden image that you have set up. In other words, their acknowledgement that God may not in fact deliver them from the furnace, keep them from going into the furnace, it made no difference whatsoever to their allegiance.

They were still 100% committed to God, even if God did not keep them from the furnace. That's what's remarkable. That's what's amazing.

That's what strikes you as just simply incredible. They were given the strength from God to say what they said and to do what they did.

And of course the king is filled with fury and orders the furnace, as the story goes on, to be heated more times than it usually was. You know the outcome of that for yourselves, how they were kept in the furnace, though they were not kept from it.

[27 : 28] and the king could, and the way the story is, the way the account is there, it really puts across to us very strongly this very important point.

The king, you see, could give all of these orders as this mighty monarch, as this powerful individual, this dictator, he could order all of these things and could have all of these thousands of people actually bowing to this image and complying with his command.

He could order these three men to be killed, which is really what he gave as an order to be thrown into the fiery furnace, meant as far as king Nebuchadnezzar was concerned, that was an order to put them to death.

He didn't know then that the outcome was going to be very different. But he could not compel them to bow their knee to his image.

he couldn't do that. He had no power to do that. He had power over many things.

[28 : 39] He had absolute power in many respects. He could not actually make these people in their heart of hearts be untrue to their God.

Take encouragement from that. There is no power in the whole world that can induce you or compel you to be untrue to your God if you don't want to be.

And if you and I want to remain true to our God as we do, be persuaded of this, that the God you serve, if he's not able to keep you from persecution, if he's not able to deliver you from the power of the persecutor, he will certainly keep you in it.

He will certainly demonstrate that he has the power to maintain you in your integrity as a Christian. Come with me. And there are many arguments and inducements that are used still to try and get people to bend to the authority of state power or whatever else challenges the authority of God. Think of how some might even have felt like persuading these three young men. The kind of arguments they would have used such as, well, are you not just wasting your life?

[30 : 06] Are you not just throwing away your young life? Think of the influence that you could be in this society. Why don't you just bow down to this image? What are you going to lose by it? You can do that outwardly, but in your heart you can still go on trusting in your God and worshipping your God.

All you're doing is just a simple outward act. It doesn't mean actually in your heart that you're giving way to Nebuchadnezzar, that you're worshipping him, that you're really in your heart being untrue to God.

All you've got to do is just bow outwardly and think of your families. Think of the loss to your families. If you're going to lose your lives, who's going to care for them?

Who's going to provide for them? When you put all of that together, they might have such arguments put to them, and people are facing these arguments in parts of the world today. It's not such a big deal just giving way to authority when that authority denies God. So what? You can keep in your heart your own obedience to God. God. They would have none of that.

[31 : 14] Why? Because they knew that bowing to this image was sheer idolatry. Be it known, O king, we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.

the king demanded that they worship his authority, that they bow to him as supreme. And as believers in the God of heaven, they could not do that and dishonor God.

And that's important for you and for me too. it's all too easy to think that we can maintain our inward integrity, even if outwardly we kind of conform to the world and to the values of the world.

You just cannot do that. Jesus himself made it clear, you cannot serve God and mammon. You cannot have one foot in God's camp, the other foot in the world's camp.

And Jesus made it clear that following him meant putting him first. Now, another important thing that arises just in passing, but it's an important point.

[32 : 40] Here were these three men facing this great challenge. And they knew their God, they were confident in their God, they knew that if God didn't rescue them from the furnace or from Nebuchadnezzar, he would still keep them, he would still be with them.

And in any case, even if he didn't, they were not going to serve Nebuchadnezzar's image. They had to make that decision.

God does not deliver us from having to make the decisions for ourselves. We have access to him in prayer. We have the guidance of his word. We have communion with him through prayer and through his word.

We have the support of other people. They can give us advice. They can give us counsel. But at the end of the day, God is being true to himself and to his creation of us as responsible, answerable human beings.

When we have decisions to make, even of this kind of magnitude, you and I have to make them. And they made their decision.

[33 : 50] They decided what the outcome should be. God won't rescue us from having to make decisions. But he will help us towards making them.

He has given us the resources through which we come to make our decisions. And these three men made their decision for God, in favor of God, in favor of his service.

before the end of this day, or certainly this week is out, I guarantee that I and you will hear a voice. And that voice will entice us to be untrue to God.

It will tell us it's only a small thing. It's no big deal. Every element of being untrue to God is serious. And these three men remind us, this passage reminds us, that the cost of resistance, resisting opposition and persecution may be very, very high indeed.

[35 : 11] do. But the cost of denying God is catastrophic. You can't measure that. It's a catastrophe.

If you go to Oxford, maybe have been to Oxford, maybe some of you have seen it. But if you go to Oxford, make a point of going to a spot outside Balliol College, part of Oxford University.

Because just outside Balliol College, on the street, there's a little part of that street where the surface of the street does not cover, or has within it, a very small, round kind circle, with cobbled stones and a cross, made out of stones in that very small circle.

It commemorates something very important. It commemorates the death of those who came to be called the Oxford Martyrs. Three men, two bishops, and an archbishop, who were burnt to death on that spot, for their allegiance to Christ.

In 1555, October 1555, bishops, Hugh Latimer, and Nicholas Ridley, were put to death for what they believed.

[36 : 45] Some months after, March 1556, archbishop, Thomas Cranmer, was also put to death on that spot.

This was during the reign of Mary Tudor, a persecutor of genuine Christians. Why did they not recant? Why did they not say, well, it's no big deal us just falling into line with what Mary Tudor wants?

because they would have denied the lordship of Christ, and the headship of Christ over his church, and the supremacy of his authority over Christian life, and over the things of his worship.

When you and I go to that spot, many thousands of people have walked over and probably never stopped to look at it. but for anyone who knows the story of Daniel and Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego, they will realize that that spot is very much in continuation with that stream of witnesses. And so it goes on, right through to our day today in the world. People will have been put to death for the sake of Christ, and just because they would not bow to the image that the world had set up.

[38 : 26] May that for you and for me be enough to give us the resolve to say that we will serve the Lord in our generation faithfully as they did in theirs.

Let's pray. Almighty God, we give thanks for your faithfulness and for the way in which we can depend upon you in all our circumstances.

Help us, Lord, not to be afraid. Help us not to fear what man can do, even though man can do much against us, even though the power of man may be at times formidable and intimidating and frightening, even though we ourselves may be challenged deeply as to what we believe.

Lord, our God, help us to be true to you, to remain true to you privately and publicly. Help us always to come to that other spot on earth, recorded for us so eloquently in your word, where another death took place, where faithfulness to God reached its ultimate price, the person of your dear son, who gave himself in obedience to the truth, so that we might be saved.

Forgive us, Lord, we pray, for every element of unfaithfulness in the light of such faithfulness on his part, and grant that as we leave this place this evening, we too may have the resolve that we will serve the Lord, that we will be able each day to say that for us to live is Christ and that to die is gain.

[40 : 22] For Jesus' sake, Amen.