

Life in a Hostile World: serve the Lord

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[0 : 00] Good morning everyone. That was a great verse that Banda read to us a minute ago. Not to us, not to us, but to your name be the glory. Let's bow our heads and pray.

We do pray Lord Jesus in everything we do and even right now as we read your word and listen to it preached as I speak it, that you would speak to us by your spirit and that you would glorify your name.

And we pray this in Jesus' precious name. Amen. Great Britain's wartime Prime Minister was Winston Churchill, probably Prime Minister at the time of the story that Banda told to us this morning.

And sometime after the war a newspaper editor wrote to him to approve a list of those who had been his teachers. And he sent the list back with this written across the top of it, you've omitted to name my greatest teacher my mother.

And that's not normally how a teenager sees their mum, is it? Not quite there yet. And maybe when we all get to 60 and we've been a world leader, maybe we'll talk about our mums in different terms from where we did when we were back there a bit.

[1 : 14] But it's a great comment and it's a wonderful expression of a mother's significance. I think we all care about significance. We like to think that we make a difference in the world.

Maybe as a mum providing a safe and nurturing environment for her kids. Or a dad providing and caring for his family and leading them in Christ.

Our significance is a really important concept. How we see ourselves matters to life. None of us wants to see our children anorexic or bulimic.

None of us wants to go into a marriage or see our child go into a marriage where they are oppressed and abused. The world certainly cares about significance. You get measured and maybe you measure yourself at the end of high school with a UAI or an ATAR ranking.

We care about things like our job title. We care about our pay. We care about the house we live in. The possessions we stuff it with. The overseas trips we take. We adopt a view of ourselves against other people.

[2 : 25] If we know that we are paid more than them or if we've got more gifts and abilities than them. Or we can do more than them. We see ourselves in the light of the comparisons we make with other people.

And so the need for significance is something which can cross a line. It can easily cross a line and become pride. And in the recesses of our heart, it measures me.

And it quickly gives myself the heart tick of greater significance when I measure myself against others. And we have a very optimistic view of ourselves. Now last week we began a new sermon series in Daniel.

Sam Lowe took us through Daniel chapter 1. He set the scene in a horrific scenario. God's people fall under God's judgment. They're conquered by the greatest superpower in the world at the time, Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar is the emperor. He takes the nation's wealth and treasures. He abolishes the way they worship. Ultimately, eventually, he destroys the temple. He takes the articles from the temple and puts them in the treasure house of his God.

[3 : 36] And in doing so, he effectively declares, My God's better than your God. And so anybody in Judah who wasn't reading their Bible or listening to what God said through his prophets may well have thought, well, that's true.

But those who knew and paid attention and listened to the word of God would have known what was happening. God was punishing his people for unfaithfulness.

Nebuchadnezzar was in God's hands. God was using him as an instrument of judgment. Sam told us about the process of assimilation that Nebuchadnezzar put some of the people through. He took the best and the brightest from the nations that he conquered. He gave them a great education. He trained them in Babylonian culture, arts, literature, religion, politics.

And four young men from Judah are named in chapter 1 in verses 6 and 7. It says, And what you see is these men actually are given wonderful opportunities in this new land.

[5 : 00] They're given position. They're given prestige. They're given opportunity for wealth. They were connected to the elite of Babylonian society.

And they were given a wonderful education to match. And I was thinking about that. Because in Aussie terms it's like being sent to Sydney Grammar or one of our other leading public schools, private schools.

Having all your fees and expenses paid for. And not being taught a scrap of any significance about Christ.

And that made me wonder a little bit more because I thought, Can a Christian person call a Christless education a good education? And the state and so many of our so-called top private schools have very little interest in educating children in the things of God.

And nor do our universities. And we are a Christless society. And so what we model and what we teach about Christ in our families and at our church is crucial.

[6 : 25] We must not outsource the teaching of the faith to others. It's a good place to honour mum because there are some mums in our church family who really get this and dads.

And see the absolute crucial importance of what we nurture in our families and our children about the Lord Jesus Christ. And you do a magnificent thing when you grasp hold of that.

But in worldly terms, there's no doubt about it, these young men from Judah were in a place of great significance in Babylon. In human terms, you could say they fell on their feet.

But significance in a Christless culture brought weighty challenges. Sam brought out last week how they were easily able to say yes to some things in the culture, but no was necessary as well.

And so Daniel very respectfully said no to food from the king's table, for meat from the king's table. It was a moment of crisis. There was a real possibility of him losing his life, his supervisor losing his life.

[7 : 29] The crisis passed because God caused Daniel and his compatriots to be able to survive, to be able to live on a vegan diet. And that's a miracle, isn't it? And then chapter 1 finishes with them entering the king's service.

They've served their traineeship and they're now full time. If we looked at chapter 2, you would see crisis again. Nebuchadnezzar, his advisors cannot interpret the dream.

He has this dream, the advisors can't interpret it. The despot is fed up with the lot of them and so he orders the execution of every wise one in the kingdom. And I was thinking about that, that's like lining up the entire New South Wales public service and shooting the lot of them.

Terrible. Terrible. Terrible. Does anybody work? One or two of you. I said this morning, I think we'll spare the nurses and we'll spare the teachers.

And I'll apologise to anybody else later. But the executioner turns up at Daniel's place to do the deed.

[8 : 38] The short story is that God allows him to interpret the dream. Daniel brings a very severe word from God to Nebuchadnezzar.

And then the chapter finishes, verse 47, the king said to Daniel, Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords and a revealer of mysteries.

For you were able to reveal this mystery. And then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him and he made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men.

And moreover, at Daniel's request, the king appointed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego administrators over the province of Babylon, while Daniel himself remained at the royal court.

The king is actually a Hindu at this point. He's still got a cupboard full of gods that he worships.

[9 : 51] But what he's done is he's bowed and called Daniel's God, God of gods and Lord of kings. And so he's taking him as well and adding him to the cupboard.

Sometimes you've got to be careful when you talk to Hindu people because they do that. They'll accept the name of Christ but haven't necessarily cast the others out of the cupboard. And chapter

1 ended with Daniel and his mates in the king's service.

Chapter 2 ends with Daniel elevated to ruler in Babylon and all his mates from Judah are administrators under him. And you get this picture of their moving up in the world.

In worldly terms, they've risen like stars in their professions and they have been placed in positions of huge and increasing significance. Chapter 3 introduces a new crisis.

I'm reading from the beginning. King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold 90 feet high, 9 feet wide and set it up on the plain of Jura in the province of Babylon. And then he summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisors, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image that he'd set up.

[11:10] 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.

Now, this is written afterwards, okay? And they're celebrating the moment. And whoever's writing this, Daniel's writing this, he's drawing out the detail and telling the story. And all these people are assembled and all this great stuff's going on.

And the herald loudly proclaimed, From a secular point of view, it is probably really clever politics. Babylon is a multicultural society. People from all sorts of nations have been conquered and brought there as Nebuchadnezzar has taken them over.

And it might be that maybe in the city of Babylon they can continue their religious practices and traditions as long as everyone in the nation prostrates themselves to the image in the centre of the city.

[12:25] It's a way of unifying the nation. It's also a way of emasculating religious belief. It's sort of like what we do in Australia. You know, the prevailing view out there, everybody's allowed to believe whatever they like to believe, that's okay.

Just make sure you don't elevate what you believe above what anybody else believes. And that sort of thinking and that sort of philosophy of its own very nature is a backhand way of saying that religious belief doesn't really matter.

We can put up with a few quaint people believing funny things gathering in a strange building in Chatswood on a Sunday morning just as long as they don't disturb the rest of society.

And so this is a crisis for the people of God. Our problem is we believe in the idea of truth. We want to live our lives on the basis of what is real. We fix our eyes higher.

We want to know the creator God of the universe. We want to know the one who has revealed himself in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. And our God is intolerant of people worshipping anything other than himself.

[13:36] So to worship anything other than the truth is to worship something less. And you put yourself in God's shoes.

If you had created the universe in all its intricate detail and beauty, would you put up with people designing their own religion and leaving you out?

Would you put up with people glorying in what you made but ignoring you? And God tells his people very clearly what his attitude is.

Exodus chapter 20 verse 1, God spoke all these words. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.

[14:38] You shall not bow down to them or worship them because I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

You see what happens here? Nebuchadnezzar's command forces the young men from Judah to make a choice. They know what God requires.

They don't bow. And it doesn't matter how many times this fancy orchestra strikes up, they don't bow. And you presume that they're going about their jobs in the king's service in a faithful way, but on this issue, they do not bow.

And guess what? The king doesn't even notice. That's cool. But other people do. And they go to the king and they do.

Verse 12. There are some Jews that you've set up over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego. And they pay no attention to you, O king.

[16:05] They neither serve your gods or worship the image of God that you have set up. They've been noticed. They've been dogged in by people who may have been jealous at their rapid rise in the public service.

They've stood out because they've continued to be faithful to the created God of the universe. They haven't compromised their faith in their God and they now appear to be in really deep trouble. Twice this week, I have known Christian people who have ended up in quite a dilemma at work. They weren't trying to stand out. They just ended up in the middle of it. And in one situation, someone was asked by a superior to write a report about an incident in a particular way. And they wouldn't because it wasn't what they saw. And in the other, a person witnessed a terrible injustice to a powerless person and they reported it.

[17:28] They were both forced out of their comfort zone because of their relationship with God. In this case, he protected them. Both cases, he protected them.

They weren't just trying to be goody two-shoes. They were trying to honour the Lord Jesus Christ in how they went about their life and their work. And in both cases, they're okay, but it's not always like that.

In Daniel 3, the king's furious. Gives an opportunity to repent and then an ultimatum. Turn or burn? And then verse 15.

What God will be able to rescue you from my hand? See, he's got this clear view of his own significance. He throws down the gauntlet. He confidently and arrogantly asserts his power over any God.

Nothing stands over him. He's powerful. He's intimidating. And the young men reply, verse 16, 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 save us from it.

[18:36] And he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he doesn't, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.

They'll work for him, but they won't serve his gods. And it's a clear and it's a wonderful expression of faith. They will cling to God even to death.

We don't have to defend ourselves. The implication is that God can look after himself and his people. Their reply is defiant of Nebuchadnezzar.

The God we believe in is able to save us from your furnace. And if he doesn't, we want you to know that we won't serve your gods or your image.

The line is drawn. The potential consequences are fearsome. I think their faith is an echo of the same faith that Jesus showed in the Garden of Gethsemane.

[19:40] Father, all things are possible for you. If possible, take this cup from me. But not my will, but yours be done.

Like Jesus, they put themselves in the safest place in all the world. They don't demand from God. They don't tell him what to do.

They submit themselves to the purposes of God. They put themselves in God's hands. They put God's significance ahead of their own. They trust him.

And in Jesus' case, his life is lost, although vindicated at resurrection. And here in Daniel, God works the most extraordinary deliverance.

Nebuchadnezzar goes into a furious rage. Turn the thermostat up to the max. The Bible actually talks about his face contorting. He's so angry with what's gone.

[20:46] He loses some of his strongest soldiers who are incinerated just as they throw the young men into the fire. It's hot. Nebuchadnezzar looks into the furnace and he leaps to his feet in amazement.

Look, I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound, unharmed. The fourth looks like a son of the gods. There's a lot of ink which has been spilled about who that fourth man was.

Some people have speculated it's an appearance of Jesus in the Old Testament. But rather than deciding what we probably can't decide, it's better to say God didn't leave them alone in this moment of trial.

He was with them. And he or one of his messengers was keeping them safe. And so they were never abandoned even in the midst of the furnace.

Nebuchadnezzar calls them out of the fire. Everyone sees not a hair of their head singed. You know, I cook Mother's Day. I'm a great guy. I cooked Mother's Day dinner last night on the barbie. [21 : 49] I singe every hair off the back of my hand every time I light the barbecue. These guys came out without a smell on them. And it's really, really interesting because Nebuchadnezzar doesn't say, Oh, wow, Pharaoh, how did you do that?

Where did you get the invisible asbestos suits from? He just praises God. And he addresses God. And in verse 28 he says, 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.

And 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 ruin, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way.

One of the things that you can see in these chapters, as you go across a few chapters in Daniel, is the impact of authentic faith on those outside of Christ's kingdom.

It's one of our value statements, that we be authentic Christians, not people of hypocrisy and pretense, but just authentic. And Nebuchadnezzar had boasted, verse 15, What god will be able to rescue you from my hand?

[23 : 21] Who's got the power? And now at the end of this chapter he yields to the majesty and power of God and he says, There is no other god who is able to rescue in this way.

And it's interesting, I don't think he's of the faith yet. See, he recognises that the young men trusted, he's looking on, he's seeing those people at the back of church, they really did trust God and they trusted him with their lives.

He knows God saved them from something which was unsavable in terms of circumstance. He acknowledges God's power but he hasn't yet changed sides.

He doesn't actually call God or speak to him personally or speak about him being his God. Worth thinking about, isn't it?

How do you speak about God? My Lord and my God. It's a fantastic movement, it's a great thing that's going on for Nebuchadnezzar but he's not all the way yet.

[24 : 29] It's not saving faith. Coming to Christ means dying to self, yielding our significance, no longer finding consequence in who we are, finding it in Christ.

God has increasingly raised the significance of the young men from Judah. You know, I've been down here and he has been lifting them up and lifting them up and lifting them up and he is glorifying himself through them.

I think they could only risk their life because they find their worth in Christ. Who they were is rooted in who God is.

The Lord Jesus said, if any person would come after me, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. I think we can only really do that if you are far more confident in Christ and who he is than in who you are.

True significance is to be found in Christ alone. I think one of the lovely things in Daniel is that Nebuchadnezzar is brought to a real faith in the living God and in chapter 3 he's not there yet.

[25 : 54] But in chapter 4, and I can say this because we're preaching chapter 6 or 7 next week so we're jumping. But in chapter 4, God sends him mad for a period of time and he eats grass like a beast of the field.

He's humbled. God brings this great despot king down low. And Daniel's advice to him, this is chapter 4 verse 27, renounce your sins by doing what is right and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed.

It may be then that your prosperity may continue. And the chapter finishes, Kings brought low and in his own words, chapter 4 verse 34, this is now Nebuchadnezzar speaking.

At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes towards heaven and my sanity was restored. And then I praised the Most High.

I honoured and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion. His kingdom endures from generation to generation.

[27 : 14] All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him, what have you done?

And now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven because everything he does is right and all his ways are just and those who walk in pride, he is able to humble. He no longer says, what God will be able to rescue you from my hand. He's been humbled. He finds his significance in Christ. I don't know where you are at in your attitude to God. I'm far off and glad to be so.

Come near, but not all the way yet. I know in this church family that there are many who have already yielded their lives to the Lord Jesus Christ.

[28 : 29] But for all of us, wherever we stand, the safest place in all the world is to be brought low and humbled into the safe hands of the Lord Jesus Christ.

and in the end, he is the one who rescues us from his own hands and his own judgment. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.