

We will Not Serve Your gods

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[0 : 00] chapter 3 looking at verses 16 to 18. Let us read through these three verses again. Well, I'm sure this is a chapter or part of it that we've heard and known from childhood.

Most of us know the story of Daniel. We were brought up with these sort of passages in the Bible made very familiar to us. And for most of us, we would turn perhaps to the end of the chapter more so than other parts of it, where we find the incident of the burning fiery furnace, where these three were cast in and where they were preserved by the power of God and where Nebuchadnezzar then came to express his astonishment, as he saw not just three figures, but four figures in that burning fiery furnace.

Anticipating the New Testament age, anticipating the way in which the Lord is with his people in all the circumstances of their lives, however much beyond themselves these circumstances may be. Now, these events are repeated in the history of God's people, in the history of the world, in the history of the church. They're also very much relevant to our own day.

And in fact, this passage itself, verses 16 to 18, you might say, is bristling with relevance for the circumstances today in which we find ourselves, in our own nation and other places throughout the world.

[2 : 01] Because they set out what is a very deliberate and arrogant challenge to the authority of God, to the rule of God, to the way in which these three men represent God as against the paganism represented by Nebuchadnezzar and his people.

And the passage sets out for us not only how that challenge came to these three men, but also how they responded to it, the manner of their responding, and also how they actually stated the matter for Nebuchadnezzar, though he, of course, was such a tyrannical ruler himself.

But they didn't actually in any way feel intimidated by his presence, because they knew that there was a presence with them much greater than he was.

So it tells us the challenge facing us, the challenge faced by the faithful. These three, as they represent the faithful of God, you might say down through all the generations, including our own day, in Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, we find ourselves, and we find ourselves facing the challenges of the age in which we live, the challenges to our standing in the gospel, to our presenting of the gospel, to our witness to the gospel, the standing of our insistence on the truth of God being relevant, as we find it in the Bible, presented to the world of our day, as it was in ages before us.

That's the first thing to look at, the challenge faced by the faithful. And that's going to be taking account of the golden image that was set up, but also the confidence of Nebuchadnezzar and those who governed with him, their confidence in their own authority, in their own status, in their own power.

[3 : 53] Second thing we'll look at is the positive response that the faithful of God gave to this challenge. How did they face this challenge? What was their response to it?

How do we find in their response to it matters which are relevant to our own place today? Well, you can see the account, of course, of the golden image earlier in the chapter, and there is undoubtedly a representation in that golden image.

It is emphasized a number of times that Nebuchadnezzar set it up. He speaks of it as the image that I have set up, the image that I have created, what I have actually set before the people, not just of his immediate environment, but right, everybody over whom he at that time had sway in the Babylonian government.

He is emphasizing, this is the image that I have made, and therefore you must bow down to it. What did that image represent? It wasn't just the arrogance and the grandeur of Nebuchadnezzar himself.

The image undoubtedly was intended to convey a sense of the power and authority of his rule and of his government. The image really, you might say, is a representation of supreme state authority, or a state that seeks to have supreme authority over all its citizens.

[5 : 20] That is what this image really represents. Now, that can be either by a government such as Nebuchadnezzar had, dictatorship, all of those types of government, but it can also happen with a democracy that a government, even elected by democratic means, can still use oppressive ways by which to stem or seek to stem the truth of God, and people living by that truth of God, and that truth having an influence in society amongst human beings in that particular location.

And that is more likely the more you find the Bible put aside, the more you find replacements for the teaching of the Bible in human philosophies, in other religions, whatever places are given to other ways of thinking, of conclusions, of ways of looking at the world, other than in the Christian faith. The more you find the Christian faith put aside, or not actually in any way given an influence in society, the more that type of thing is going to actually be set up.

The more you're going to find the supremacy of state authority coming to show itself more and more in the works of such governments. Now you notice the size of this image.

We're told at the beginning of the chapter, he made an image of gold, whose height was 60 cubits, and its breadth 6 cubits. That was something like 90 feet high, something like 30 meters high, and around 3 meters wide.

[7 : 10] We're not told that it was an image of a human figure. Might have been different to that, but others think that it would have been a human shape or something similar to that.

But in any case, that was the size of it. It was an enormous thing. It was a massive construction. And undoubtedly, that was intended to be very intimidating, to represent the authority, the supreme authority of Nebuchadnezzar, and the government that he presided over, and to represent that to the people, so that as soon as they saw the image, they would think, this is such a massive authority.

We have to bow to this. We have no option. We've got to actually let this be our master. And of course, you find that down through history. You can still go to places like North Korea today, and you'll find huge statues there, according to photos at least you've seen.

You'll find huge statues of the present leader, the former leader, the leader before that, who are, of course, revered as gods. And the gigantic proportions of these great statues are intended just to keep people's minds focused on their need to bow to the leader, to actually give all due place to his authority, the authority of his government, or else.

And or else is the case with Nebuchadnezzar's figure as well. Because not only did he erect this gigantic edifice, he accompanied it with laws that really are pretty much to do with persecuting anybody who refused to comply with his instructions.

[8 : 59] Laws that are reinforced, you might say, with persecution. Anybody who does not bow down to this image that I have built shall be cast into a burning, fiery furnace.

That is the threat. That is the intimidatory word and declaration of the supreme leader. You have got to do this, or if not, this will be the result.

And you'll note that in the list that are given there, when he sent word out to gather, the satraps, the prefects, the governors, the councillors, a few times these various official figures are mentioned. And the reason for that is that the political and the judicial officers of the nation of the empire are actually all there so that they're all gathered here so that everybody will understand this is the official policy.

This is what all of these figures are themselves vowing to uphold. That is why they're chosen. That's why they're there. Now you can step from that into our present age.

[10 : 17] And you might say, well, there's no gigantic figures like that on the streets of London or in Glasgow or Edinburgh. Yes, but remember, these are representations.

And the principle of this is really what you must take with you. And you see it down through the ages. You don't just look at this as something relevant to Nebuchadnezzar's day. And because there's no such giant figure erected now in our particular society, it doesn't mean these things are not relevant anymore.

State authority is still very much a thing to be watched and to be feared when it's used excessively. And there are arguments and inducements, as you very well know today, to try and present the state's power to us in a way that seeks that we comply with it.

In a way that would cast its shadow over us, if you like, so that we would actually feel obliged to bow to the authority of the state, even when it means that we are required or so-called required to do things which we know are against our conscience or against our Christian knowledge, particularly.

I'm not suggesting in any way that our situation is really in any way at the level of which it was here or in North Korea or something like that. We value the freedoms that we have.

[11 : 46] We value the liberties that we still enjoy in our society. We value the things that we very much take for granted sadly every day, myself included, but that have been bought for us at such great price.

Even people, as we remember recently, going to war and giving their lives in war to protect these freedoms. However, there are very many inducements and pressures brought to bear, even by the state and by figures of the state and by proclamations and laws of the government that are themselves contrary to what you and I as Christians believe in and would want to see upheld and would want to see as the policy of the government, certainly on religious and moral issues, particularly moral and spiritual matters.

Arguments such as, you know, it's fine for people who want to follow their own religion. The state will not bother with that. If you want to keep your own religion, you can actually do that as long as you do it in private.

But of course, the argument following on from that is that you have to keep religion out of public life. You have to keep the Christian religion, especially out of public life, the Christian faith, even to the extent sometimes, and it's happened on this island, where people who are church officers, by that I mean elders in the church particularly, are really regarded as disqualified from public office because they have that office in the church.

Now that has happened in recent times, in our own locality. And the argument being, not only are you a Christian, but you're an elder in the free church, and the free church is against same-sex marriage, seeking to uphold the teaching of the Bible, which excludes that.

[13 : 39] The free church is against many other aspects of immoral lifestyles. And therefore you, because you're an elder or a minister in that church, you shouldn't actually be given a place in any council chamber or in any organization that wants to present things politically.

Thankfully, that's all too rare, certainly in our own locality, but let's not in any way imagine that it can't occur again and even more forcibly.

So state religion, keep it out of public life, keep it out of our education, keep it out of schools, keep it out of universities, keep it out of all of those areas of public life, keep it to yourself, keep it private, follow it by yourself, whatever religion you have, but don't let it actually in any way appear in public life or have to do with how you carry out your public office.

That's the situation we're facing. And I don't need to tell you that state legislation has and is continuing to propose legislation, which you and I know is very contrary to the teachings of Scripture, to the Christian ethic, to our Christian standards on which this nation, this Christian state, is largely founded.

And of course, not only that, but persecution takes many different forms. You don't actually have to have a burning, fiery furnace threatening you before you can think of it being persecuting.

[15 : 32] Discrimination is persecution. Denial of justice is persecution. Laws that are enacted contrary to Christian liberty is persecution.

Just last week, a candidate for Liberal Democrats and constituency in England, just last week, he said that he had faced what he called direct harassment and hostility from activists in his own constituency party, the Lib Dem constituency party in that particular constituency.

Now, he's a former BBC journalist, a man called David Campanal, and he has himself reported from places where there has been war in Europe in recent times.

But he said that in facing this direct harassment, he's now facing the very strong possibility of removal as a Liberal Democrat candidate because of his Christian views.

We're supposed to be a country of liberty of speech and liberty of thought and liberty of religion.

This is the reality. This is what you get when that is pushed aside. And he went on to say that there is a movement in Britain that wants to undermine the Christian foundations of our constitution, that wants to remove all references to Christianity from the way in which our national life is guided and built.

[17 : 08] It's happening in education. It's happening in the council culture at work in universities. It's there in business. It's in the law and in schools.

So he said, I want to rally all people. Step up. Now is the time to engage. Well, there's a man who knows the Nebuchadnezzar situation.

There's a man who can actually relate directly in his own experience to verses 16 to 18 of Daniel 3. There's a man who doesn't look at that as just a fact of history.

There's a man who knows that that opposition, that attitude is alive and well in our present society. And he's calling on people to stand up, to get real, to realize that this is a movement that's underway, that has been underway for some time.

And that if we don't actually stand up for our Christian values and our Christian ethic and our Christian principles, then we're going to be swamped one of these days if this movement and these similar movements are allowed to carry on.

[18 : 25] So there's the challenge facing the faithful. Here is the command. Fall into line with these proposals.

Fall into line with our view of marriage. Fall into line with our view of the sanctity of life or otherwise abortion on demand. Fall into line with our policies on whatever else subjects they may be, even if they're contrary to our Christian understanding.

And if you don't, then we'll make it really difficult for you and your work, your employment, your access to justice, all of these things.

These are real things. That is the real situation. And I'm not using this pulpit, God forbid, as a political platform. Far be it. I have never taken the view that I should in any way align myself with any political party, even if there was a political party that I might be strongly inclined to support, which there isn't.

This is something that the preaching of the gospel has always sought to include when injustices abound, when there are threats to liberty of conscience, to liberty of speech.

[19 : 42] That is part of the gospel message by which we counter that. And you can see the arrogant confidence that's in Nebuchadnezzar's insistence on bowing to this image.

See the last part of verse 15 there. If you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning, fiery furnace.

And then he says, and who is the God who will deliver you out of my hands? Who is the God who will deliver you out of my hands?

And that's the same, pretty much the same feature that you find in anti-gospel movements today, especially when they gain in political influence and political power. You see, when you lose things like biblical humility and a biblical attitude to the views of other people, when you lose that freedom that's given to people's choice of who they follow and what they believe, not talking about freedom just now in terms of relationship with God, but freedom in a free society, once you lose these, you don't set up a vacuum.

You set up things such as arrogance and pride and self-assertion and even subversion. And you'll find them all in our society around you today.

[21 : 19] The threat, the challenge faced by the faithful. And you don't have to go very far in the world in our day and age before you come across that thing challenging you to your views.

Challenging you rights as a Christian. Challenging why it is that you think you're right and not other people. The challenge faced by the faithful.

But look at, secondly, the positive response of those faithful to God. Ch'adrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said, O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. And it didn't mean that they weren't going to answer. They were refusing to answer. These words really mean that the matter is plain enough. They didn't need to think too much about it. They didn't need to really think how they were going to respond to this.

It was actually there already in their minds. They were so firmly in their view of their God that that's what really immediately came to the fore. So the first thing you find here on that part is a deep knowledge of God.

[22 : 33] How do you face this movement in our society? How do you face ungodliness? How do you face movements that seek to usurp the Christian principles on which this nation and our society was founded?

How do you face that arrogance? How do you face that pride, that self-assertion, that subversion, that challenge to authority itself? How do you face it? First of all, you face it by a deep knowledge of God.

These men had a deep knowledge of God. You cannot go out and face that world without having a deep knowledge of God, without seeking that your depth of understanding of the Bible is something you add to day by day, something that you actually find increasing day by day.

You don't actually set out as a Christian to face the things in the world without really thinking too hard about where you are in your Christian knowledge, where you are in your relationship to God or to Jesus.

The more you and I are schooled in the things of God, the more you will actually be then prepared as these men were to face and to respond to the challenges that they faced and we face in our age.

[23 : 42] And that's why our place in the church is so important. The value we place, I should say, on what the church is to us, what the teaching of the Bible is to us, what Christian fellowship is to us, what worship is to us, what the preaching of the gospel is to us, what sharing together and understanding and discussion on the Bible is to us.

All of that, you see, is part of the strengthening program by which God deepens our understanding, deepens our relationship to himself, deepens our relationship to one another.

You couldn't put a wedge between Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego as three believers in God. They were bound together closely by the truth which they believed, by the God in whom they believed.

Not only that, but you couldn't put a wedge between them and their God either. Because here they are facing this great challenge. Here they are facing this intimidation.

Here they are facing this threat, this threat of persecution. All the things we've mentioned. And what do they do? They express, firstly, their knowledge of God.

[24 : 56] They tell this pagan, authoritative king about their God. O king, Nebuchadnezzar, if this be so, our God, whom we serve, is able to deliver us.

But if not, O king, we will not serve your God. So that's the first thing, the deep knowledge they have of God. They have no doubts whatsoever about God's ability to do the impossible.

What they would regard, maybe, or we would regard as the impossible. That is to deliver them out of a burning, fiery furnace if it so happened that they were thrown into it. We have no doubts whatsoever of God being able to keep us, to maintain us, to protect us in that environment.

We know he can do that. He's our God. We know what he's like. But then, you see, they said, well, even if that is not the case, we are still going to serve him.

And they make it very clear that whatever happens, our God, whom we serve, is able to deliver us and to deliver us from your hand or out of your hand also, O King.

[26 : 12] Not only do they have this unashamed confidence in God, but they're carrying it through into facing the threat of Nebuchadnezzar and facing the authority of Nebuchadnezzar.

They're really presenting the authority of their God as vastly superior, supreme, in fact. Now, it is important that we regard that they are actually respecting the king to a certain extent as the king.

That itself is rather important, I think, in the context. They actually speak respectfully to him and the old Puritan commentator Matthew Henry has some very significant words to say on that.

I'll just read to what you find in his commentary on Daniel. This is what he says. They did not speak out into any intemperate heat or passion against those that did worship the golden image.

They did not insult or affront them, nor did they rashly thrust themselves upon the trial or go out of their way to court martyrdom.

[27 : 31] But when they were duly called to the fiery trial, they acquitted themselves bravely with a conduct and courage that became sufferers for so good a cause.

They keep their temper admirably. They do not call the king a tyrant or an idolater. The cause of God needs not the wrath of man, but with an exemplary calmness and sedateness of mind, they deliberately give in their answer, which they resolve to abide by.

And Matthew Henry is reminding us of whenever we respond to even such arrogance, such self-presentation of grandeur as you find with Nebuchadnezzar or others in this world, even when you find self-confident secular pronouncements, whether it's from government or whatever, we don't actually respond in kind, even if they are unkind to us.

What Matthew Henry was reminding us of is that there is a great need to maintain respect, respectful language, temperate language, tactful language, loving language, all the things that will really in many ways disarm the person who really wants to be provocative, who wants you to be provocative back in response, who wants you to actually lose the plot, so they can then say, well, if that's your Christianity, look at what it's doing to you.

You have to pray that God will keep you calm, keep you in every way as a Christian should be and facing, whether it's, and I'm just talking here, of course, about direct speech between us and those who are against the gospel.

[29 : 25] There was no social media in Nebuchadnezzar's Day, of course, many, many generations afterwards. There is nowadays, and it is not against social media as such, but its misuse is obvious to us all, and one of the things that very much lends itself to is disrespectful language, disrespect of other people's views, talking people down, treating them with contempt, all kinds of nasty language presented to them, and sometimes you don't even know a face, you don't even know who's doing it.

people's people's and we have to be careful with all that, especially our young people, we have to be careful and train them into how dangerous social media can be if we allow it to actually get on top of us.

Anyway, that's by the way, but hopefully not an unimportant by the way. But of course, Nebuchadnezzar, they were facing face to face, and this is nevertheless how they actually respected, in one sense, his own place as king over the whole of the empire.

So the Shandarugan confidence met by a deep response, a deep knowledge of God. But finally, in the positive response, you find a determined commitment to God in verse 18.

You see, this is really so important, so interesting, how it's put and how they put it. He's saying, they're saying, if this is so, if 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.

[31 : 16] That is something we absolutely believe in, they're saying. But if he doesn't, if he doesn't believe, if he doesn't actually deliver us from the burning, fiery furnace, if he doesn't deliver us out of your hand, and in his wisdom and providence, I'm just adding to the words, but this is the sense of them, in his wisdom and providence, he does himself allow this to go ahead, and we be thrown into the burning, fiery furnace, be it known to you, O king, we still will not serve your gods or worship them, the golden image that you have set up.

In other words, they're taking the worst case scenario and they're saying about the worst case scenario, they're saying this is not going to make any difference to our allegiance, it's not going to make any difference whatsoever to our view of this image or change our view of our God.

We will do what we've always done, we will honour our God. it made no difference whatsoever to them, whatever threats they were faced with, and it made no difference whatsoever who was making the threats, even king Nebuchadnezzar.

They knew, you see, that the king could issue a command there and then that their life be terminated. but the one thing he could not compel them to do was to worship the image.

He could take their life, he could not take their conscience. He could take their life, but he could not take their allegiance to their God. And that's one of the great lessons of the story.

[33 : 04] Whatever that world out there will do to you, whatever it threatens you with, whatever finally it may actually impose upon you, the one thing it cannot do is remove your Christ, your Jesus, your allegiance to him and his care for you.

The cost of resistance to oppression and persecution and ungodliness is always set fairly high. and the more the persecution increases, the greater the cost inevitably is going to be. But denying God is catastrophic.

Denying God is catastrophic to any individual, to any society, to any group of people, to any church group, whatever it might be. God is going to be.

And all the way through the days of the apostles, when they were threatened by the religious authorities of that time, and they were told not to say anything or preach again in the name of Jesus.

[34 : 27] They said to them, whatever is right in your eyes, we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard. we are not going to be untrue to our God, despite whatever, despite what you may say to us.

That was their view as well, very much the same in principle with Daniel's views. Now, this really is so relevant and significant, as I said at the beginning today, tonight, on this particular passage. And as you try and bring into your own mind the relevance of this for today, it really raises a lot of questions, doesn't it? How do we respond to any threats? And it's not just a matter of our own life personally.

You may never personally feel the bite of opposition as others do. You may never actually feel what's happening in our society to other Christians elsewhere, such as this man David Campanel that I mentioned that was in the Christian Institute reports last week.

We may never have that personally to stand against. We may never have to experience that personally, but we are bound up together as Christians with the Lord's cause and with such people who stand true to the Lord.

[35 : 49] That's why we pray for them and we remember them and even if possible send messages to them for their encouragement. all of that is so significant, so important.

But the principle is this. Whatever happens in our own experience, in our own nation, our own society, our own locality, the one thing we must never ever even think of doing is being untrue to God.

How we express that, the language we use, all of that is so important. But the truth itself is the most important thing of all. And as we live out the truth, and as we seek to promote the truth, as we seek to witness to that truth, may it be so that you and I, together and as individuals, will find increasingly that spirit of Shedrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who said, in their days we must say devourge.

Even if it's the case that God will not keep us from the persecution from the fiery furnace, be it known, we will not bow down to these images or worship your gods.

And that's not being legalistic, that's not just being thrown religiously, simply being true to God, simply standing on the foundation he has given us, his own truth.

[37 : 35] Because when truth, as Isaiah puts it, has fallen in the street, somebody's got to put it back on its feet. And if you and I don't do it as Christians, well, we shouldn't be surprised if no one else does it.

So here's the Bible's appeal to us tonight. Know what's going on around you, know what's going on in government and proposals for legislation, know what's going on and the events that take place in our land, check out all the websites, the Christian Institute, Christian Concern, all of those that you give where you get access to what's going on and good advice and all sorts of things that help you as a Christian to face up to the reality of what's happening.

And as you do so, be inspired by these three faithful men and be inspired so that their stand will also remain our stand in our day as well.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you that your word has its own way of making an appeal to us to be faithful to you in our day as so many were in days gone by.

Lord, we pray that you would empower us and equip us with the right knowledge, with the right spirit and attitude, but especially with that deep understanding of your word that these three men had in their generation.

[39 : 09] Lord, we ask that every effort that we make to stand for your truth, to promote your glory and your praise in our society, that you would be pleased to accompany that with your power and blessing.

We do pray for those in authority over us, Lord. You have given us that command in your word to pray for those who are set over us. We would want to do it, oh Lord, not out of a mere sense of duty, just because it's required of us, but out of a true and a true and spiritual concern for their well-being, for the well-being of your church in our land, for the well-being of our fellow citizens, who may be bowing down to other gods or none at all.

Grant these mercies to us, we pray now. Hear the prayers of your people, hear silently and also spoken, for Jesus sake. Amen.