

Sermon Given by

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At the Morning Service on 25<sup>th</sup> April 2010

### Daniel 3 - "The Cost and Comfort of Discipleship"

Every day of our lives we face choices. At Ridley Hall, my vicar training college up in Cambridge, these choices are of the highest difficulty. Shall I take afternoon tea on the croquet lawn or in the herb garden? Shall I peruse the Church Times in the oak-panelled library or in the cushioned comfort of the Common Room? Shall I pull a prank on the Principal by means of a well-directed stink bomb, or a carefully-placed whoopee cushion? Let no one say that theological training is a walk in the park! But each of us will also face more serious choices, choices which require us either to side with the world, or to stand up for our faith. And to choose to stand up for our faith is invariably the harder option, because it's a decision to walk the costly path of Christian discipleship. The message of Daniel 3 is that when difficult choices have to be made, we do not walk that path alone, for God is with us. As we explore this chapter together, I'm going to flag up four truths from it that speak to us today – the important **choices** we will be faced with, living as Christians in a hostile world; the **cost** that making the right choices will bring; the **comfort** that God promises to all who are persecuted; and the **consequences** that can result from our witness to the one true and living God.

#### **The Choice (vv.1-12)**

Firstly, then, the **choice**. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are exiled Jews trying to live faithfully in a foreign land under a foreign king. And so far, so good – we saw back in Chapter 1 that they had managed to avoid compromising their faith by eating unclean food, and by the end of Chapter 2 they've so impressed King Nebuchadnezzar that they've been promoted, becoming administrators over the province of Babylon. There's an important point here – when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego make their heroic stand in Chapter 3, it's not a bolt out of the blue, but is built on the foundation of their earlier faithfulness. In the same way, we shouldn't expect to have the strength to emulate their courageous witness at times of real testing unless, like them, we've been faithful witnesses back in times of comparative freedom. Chapter 3, then, is their big test, and it all starts when Nebuchadnezzar decides to build a great statue. Now it's easy to see Nebuchadnezzar as little more than the pantomime villain of this piece, corrupted by power and snarling with rage. Yet, though we don't like to think about it, Nebuchadnezzar holds a mirror up to each one of us – he shows us what our human pride looks like in all its ugliness – he makes a great golden idol, just as each of our hearts are by nature idol-factories. Nebuchadnezzar shows us that if God is not kept at the centre of our lives, then we will quickly put ourselves in His place. Now Nebuchadnezzar has already had dealings with the God of Israel. In Chapter 2, he heard, through Daniel, God's word proclaimed. Nebuchadnezzar had dreamt of a statue, different parts made from different metals, which had been smashed to pieces by a great rock. He had been told that the head of the statue, made of pure gold, represented his own kingdom, and that the rock which had felled the statue stood for God's sovereign power over all earthly rulers. But Nebuchadnezzar's actions at the start of Chapter 3 suggest he has come to all the wrong conclusions – he seems to have thought: 'if only the statue had *all* been made of gold, *then* it would have been strong enough; if only *my* kingdom fully prevailed, then it could stand against the might of *any* god. Nebuchadnezzar has done what each of us is so liable to do – his sinful heart has twisted God's message to bring glory to himself. And so we read in verse 1 that Nebuchadnezzar made a great image of gold, and set it on the plain of Dura – he built it to be seen, glistening in the sun, for miles around. At ninety feet high it would have been surpassed in the ancient world only by the Colossus of

Rhodes, which was about 10 feet taller – yet look at its rather odd proportions. 90 feet tall but only 9 feet wide – even with some sort of platform, it would still be a very skinny statue! Perhaps a subtle point is being made here about the foolishness and inherent instability of Nebuchadnezzar's endeavour. We're not told whose image the statue bore – it might have been Nebo, the god from whom Nebuchadnezzar took his name, or maybe Bel, another popular Babylonian deity, or perhaps it was the image of the king himself. Whoever the statue was of, its purpose seems to have been as a kind of national and religious focal point, a way of uniting the diverse peoples of the Babylonian empire through a corporate ceremony to a common god. It was also, of course, a way of placing an idol, of placing Nebuchadnezzar himself, at the centre of all things. And if you're not a Christian here this morning, let me ask you – are you going through life worshipping an idol – are you ultimately making something that's not God the centre of your life? Because the message of Daniel 3 for you this morning is that those idols won't satisfy – and that the living God, who reveals himself in Jesus Christ, is the only Lord who if you find him can truly fulfil you, and if you fail him, can truly forgive you. This statue, then, was Nebuchadnezzar's Tower of Babel, a monument to human pride, to man's desire to 'make a name for himself' – an attempt, by bringing together a diversity of peoples and musical instruments, to overcome division and impose a man-made unity. But look at what lurks behind all the attractive pageantry and beautiful music – a furnace, the threat of violence, which is the ultimate foundation of all worldly power. Everyone must fall down before the image, or else face death in the fire – bow or burn, conform or die.

Here, then, was the choice that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had to make. But notice that their first response seems not to have been public defiance but quiet nonconformity. It looks as though they just didn't attend the ceremony, since Nebuchadnezzar only finds out about their resistance when he's informed by some ambitious astrologers, perhaps envious of these Jews' senior positions. No worldly king, of course, can tolerate anyone who refuses to serve his gods. It's the same for Christians today. The apparent openness of our diverse, pluralistic society hides its deeper intolerance of anyone who claims that there is one truth and one Lord. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego's choice, then, is just a sharpened version of our own. We are all encouraged – and indeed expected – to bow, day by day, before the gods of this world – the god of wealth, the god of security, of health, of power, of popularity, of success. And we are faced with choices, big and small, that test our consciences – the choice to lie for our company, to insult others behind their back, to be economical with the truth, to fudge an enquirer's question about the uniqueness of Jesus or the reality of hell. For us, as for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, we could come up with a dozen excuses for going with the tide – 'we can bow before these worldly gods without really meaning it', 'if we keep our jobs, we can keep this great opportunity to have a godly influence', 'this is just a trivial thing so it doesn't really matter'. Hauled up before Nebuchadnezzar, any of these responses would have saved the three men, but they choose the harder path, the more costly path – and so should we.

### **The Cost (vv.13-18)**

Secondly, then, the **cost** of witnessing. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are brought before the king, and reminded again about the blazing furnace. Nebuchadnezzar is utterly sure of his own mighty power – no god could rescue anyone from the fires of *his* judgement. The three men's reply is worth reading again in full (v.16): '*O 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, and he will rescue us from your hand, O King. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O King, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up*'. Now there's something really significant here – Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego do not make their stand knowing for sure that God will protect them from the consequences – for that would just make their apparent courage a kind of play-acting – but they do trust that God is utterly sovereign in whatever happens next.

He is powerful to save us, but in his providential love he may not. The big message of these early chapters of Daniel has been, after all, the radical sovereignty of the God of Israel over all human affairs. You can imagine how the exiled Jews would have been mocked – where was your god when Jerusalem fell? How pathetic and weak a god that cannot even save his own city! And yet from the first verse of the Book of Daniel, the God of Israel is indeed in charge – the exile was his doing, and Nebuchadnezzar was merely his chosen instrument; kings may set up statues, but it is Israel's God who sets up kings and brings down kingdoms. So the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is not, ultimately, the story of great faith, but of faith in a great God, and it teaches not that God's intervention will always save us from the costliness of taking a stand for Him, but that the costliness is itself part of God's sovereign plan, and he is working through it to bring about his good purposes.

2 Timothy 3.12 tells us that **'everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted'**. Our willingness to make the choice to live distinctively Christian lives is not meant to rest on the assumption that God will always act as a kind of divine safety net. True Christian discipleship is marked by a commitment to the *'but if not'* of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego – 'I pray that if I make this stand you will protect my reputation, my job, my family, *but if not* I will still not bow before the god of cowardice, or bend the knee before the pressures of this world'. We think of Job, terribly afflicted yet still trusting in God – 'though he slay me, yet I will hope in him'. We think of Jesus in the Garden – 'Father, if it is possible let this cup be taken from me, *but if not*, may your will, not mine, be done'. The story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is one of the earliest Bible scenes in Christian art – it appears on the walls of the Roman catacombs, giving solace to those second- and third-century Christians undergoing persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire. And, let's be clear about this, there are many Christians throughout the world today for whom witnessing to their faith is *still* a matter of life and death. In fact, there were more Christian martyrs in the twentieth century than in any previous century – men and women who stood where Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego stood, who looked into the fiery furnace, and who did not waver. And even if we are not faced with such dangerous situations, our attitude should be the same as those who are. It is the attitude beautifully captured by the confrontation between the young St Chrysostom, later to become one of the great Greek preachers of the early church, and the hostile Empress Eudoxia. The Empress threatened him saying, 'If you persist in being a Christian, I will banish you from your father's land'. Chrysostom replied 'Your majesty, you cannot, for the whole world belongs to my Father'. So she, getting angry, cried, 'Then I will take away all your property', but Chrysostom replied 'you cannot, for my treasures are in heaven'. 'Then I will send you to a place where there will not be a single friend to speak to'. 'You cannot, for I have a friend that sticks closer than a brother'. 'Then I will take away your life'. 'You cannot, for my life is hid with Christ in God'. The Empress exclaimed 'what do you do with a man like this?!' So let us, like Chrysostom, like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, fearlessly witness to Christ in our daily lives, bearing the cost as the cross that we carry, and trusting in the loving sovereignty of God.

### **The Comfort (vv.19-25)**

But there is yet more – and this takes us to my third point – God is not only sovereign over us as we bear the costs of discipleship, but is present with us as we do so – with the cost comes the **comfort** of God with us. Let's return to the story. The courageous stand of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego has driven Nebuchadnezzar into a rage. He will demonstrate once and for all that he, and not this God of Israel, holds the power of life and death. He takes no chances – the fire is heated to a quite stupendous temperature, the strongest men in his army bind Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the flames. There's a little irony here, isn't there, in the fact that the soldiers themselves are killed by the heat – despite all his claims, Nebuchadnezzar is unable, unlike God, to preserve the lives of his chosen servants. And so Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are thrown in, and that is that. Only the story, as we all know, doesn't end there. For what Nebuchadnezzar sees next makes him jump to his feet in amazement.

The three men are still alive – more than that – they are unbound and unharmed, and walking around in the fire. Now this is in itself a great miracle, a great testament to the God of covenant faithfulness and love – but there is still more. The king sees a fourth man walking in the flames. Who is this man? Nebuchadnezzar himself clearly thinks that it is a divine figure, ‘like a son of the gods’, or, in some translations, ‘like the Son of God’. Now I think there’s a lot to be said for the traditional interpretation here, that this figure is the pre-incarnate Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity comforting his friends and servants in the flames. The scene then becomes not just a picture of the fellowship of Christ with all believers, especially in times of persecution, but a foreshadowing of Jesus’ earthly ministry – his entering into the world, his being made man that he might walk alongside men, his acceptance of the punishment of the cross that we might be rescued unscathed from the eternal death of the fires of hell.

Well even if we don’t take this particular view, the broader point of this part of the story is clear – *God is with us* in the flames of persecution, in the times of trial. God does not deliver his children *from* the fire but *in* the fire. What great news for the Jews of the exile to hear, those suffering in the furnace of affliction! What a marvellous fulfilment of God’s promise in Isaiah 42: **‘when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you, for I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour’**. And, for us, it is often in the experience of facing hardships for our faith that we have the keenest awareness of Jesus’ presence with us. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians: **‘as we abundantly share in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too’**. Our lives are hidden with Christ in God, and as we draw closer to our Lord in his earthly sufferings, so we draw closer to him in his heavenly comfort. Let us not, then, be nervous at the thought of suffering for Christ’s sake, in whatever way that might be, for the path of faithful witness, the walk of Calvary, is not just the path of suffering but is also the way of glory.

### **The Consequences (vv.26-30)**

My fourth point, finally, concerns the **consequences** of the stand that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego make for God, the power of their witness and of God’s mighty act. For it’s not just Nebuchadnezzar who has seen what’s just happened – it’s all the imperial officials who have come to bow before the statue. They have all seen Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego emerge from the furnace with not so much as a hair singed, or a robe scorched, or even the small of fire on them. And the heart of Nebuchadnezzar, and perhaps the hearts of many of these onlookers, is moved to praise the God whom he had thought weak and powerless. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are promoted, and the God of Israel is publically honoured. Of course, it’s not a complete conversion for Nebuchadnezzar – the violent punishment he threatens to those who insult the God of Israel – to be cut into pieces and their houses turned to rubble – is the same as he levelled at the astrologers in Chapter 2. The leopard has not yet quite changed his spots – he still speaks, at the end of this chapter, of ‘the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego’ – it’s still *‘your God’*, not *‘my God’*, the God of mighty deeds, but not yet the God of personal commitment. Nebuchadnezzar must undergo his own time of trial, as we shall see in Chapter 4, before he can truly know this God for himself. If you’re not a Christian here this morning, then perhaps you, like all the royal officials, might like to peer more closely into God’s great works in history, and the salvation he holds open to us in Jesus Christ – there’s a Christianity Explored course starting on 19<sup>th</sup> May which gives you a chance to ask questions, so do mention it to Simon or Tony or me at the end of the service if you’re interested.

The main point here, then, is that to be *persecuted* Christians is to be *witnessing* Christians. When we make that choice, when we endure whatever cost comes our way, when we know the comfort of our Lord Jesus with us in that suffering – when we do all this – *we proclaim the gospel*, and we provide opportunities for onlooker’s lives to be changed. Some 300 men,

women and children died in the fire for their faith during the reign of Mary Tudor. Across England the Queen demanded her subjects to bow before what many saw as idols, and these 300 made a choice to burn rather than bow. Two of the most notable, Bishops Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley, walked to their death together. God did not save them from the fire, as he did Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, but he did give them the strength to endure it. Before they died, they had embraced and prayed with each other, and Latimer's voice had broken through the tension of that moment with these words – 'be of good *comfort*, Master Ridley, and play the man, for we shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England as I trust shall never be put out'. That witness, amid the flames of persecution, had an effect that lasts to this day; that candle, lit with their own bodies, has never been put out. All those, myself included, who train for ministry at Ridley Hall do so knowing that our college stands today because Nicholas Ridley made his stand 450 years ago, just as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego made their stand some 2000 years before that. In reading Daniel 3, then, let us recognise both the cost and comfort of Christian discipleship, and ask that God might give us the *wisdom* to make choices for *Him* against the demands of the world, that he might give us the *strength* to bear the cost as part of that witness, that he might give us the *gift* of Jesus' presence comforting us and walking with us in our pilgrimage of faith, and that he might give us the *opportunities* to use that witness to bring others to turn to him for salvation.

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(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)