

Daniel 3:1-30

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[0 : 00] Well, it's a huge privilege to not just get to share with you about the work of Open Doors this morning, but to get to share with you from the Word of God together.

As Joe said, we're going to be reading from Daniel chapter 3. We're just going to read the first 15 verses of that chapter to start with, and we'll come back to the rest a little bit later. So on page 739 of the Church Bibles, if you've not found it yet, it'd be great if you could turn there and we'll read the first part of that together.

This is what it says. King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, whose height was 60 cubits and its breadth 6 cubits.

He set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent together the satraps, the prefects and the governors, the counsellors, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Then the satraps, the prefects and the governors, the counsellors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces gathered for the dedication of the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

[1 : 17] And they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and the herald proclaimed aloud, you are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up.

And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning, fiery furnace. Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshipped the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Therefore, at that time, certain Chaldeans came forward and maliciously accused the Jews. They declared to King Nebuchadnezzar, O King, live forever.

You, O King, have made a decree that every man who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music shall fall down and worship the golden image.

And whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into a burning, fiery furnace. There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

[2 : 35] These men, O King, pay no attention to you. They do not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you've set up. Then Nebuchadnezzar, in furious rage, commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought.

So they brought these men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up?

Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good.

But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning, fiery furnace. And who is the God who will deliver you out of my hands?

To be continued. We'll leave it there just for now. Well, all over the world today, Christians live as exiles. Exiles. Some of them literally have already shared some of the numbers of Christians living in internal displacement camps.

[3 : 45] But in a spiritual sense, that's true of all Christians, isn't it? Peter wrote to first century Christians and he urged them to live rightly as sojourners and exiles.

In other words, this world is not our real home. We are sojourners, that means we're just passing through on the way to somewhere else. And we are exiles.

In other words, we don't really belong here. Someone who had that experience of being a child in North Korea was a lady now grown up called Ji Ho. She grew up in North Korea. Her father was a believer.

And he told her stories quite carefully for fear of what she might repeat at school or elsewhere. stories of a good man on a hill teaching stories about love and about forgiveness.

But she remembers the last time that she saw her father. Guards came to the home. They ransacked the house. They were looking for his Bible. They found it buried in the garden in a plastic bag.

[4 : 46] North Koreans bury their Bibles so they won't get discovered. They take them out every time they want to read them. And they found it. And one of the policemen came inside. He kicked over the table.

He took the father away. She's never seen him again. She said, I didn't see what was so bad about it. My father loved to read me stories and sayings from this book about a wise man who sat on a mountain and began to teach.

Why would a lesson about love be so dangerous in North Korea? Well, people like Ji-ho in North Korea know that they're not really welcome.

They don't really belong in their country. God's people count the cost of following him. And this is a little bit what it's like in Daniel 3 for these three men, isn't it?

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, maybe you know the story. They are all exiles in Babylon. When Babylon conquered their homeland of Judah, they took out the best and the brightest of the young people of that nation back to Babylon to raise them and educate them in a Babylonian way.

[5 : 51] It's a very effective way to subjugate a people, really, isn't it? To reprogram their next generation. The UN, I think, if it was around then... The UN, I think, if it was around then... The UN...

I'm not sure what's just happened exactly there, but we pray for safety and for health of those involved.

Amen. Well, let's carry on. The UN, I think, if they were around today, would be onto Nebuchadnezzar for war crimes.

I think that would be safe to say. But I don't get the impression that Nebuchadnezzar would particularly care about what someone like the UN had to say. Take a look at verse 1 of Daniel chapter 3.

King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold. That's what it says. That was absolutely massive. That's my translation, I guess, of what that verse says.

[7 : 24] 60 cubits high is this statue. That is as high as a blue whale is long. That's six double-decker buses stacked on top of each other. If it gives you a bit of a sense, that's the same height as the Christ the Redeemer statue is in Brazil, to give you a rough idea.

It's even taller than the statues of North Korea's leaders that exist in North Korea today that the North Koreans gather around to worship, much in a similar way to those in Babylon did in this day. This thing is designed to be seen for miles around, isn't it? It's designed to be worshipped.

Nebuchadnezzar puts it on a plane so that all can see it. And we're given the full guest list to this dedication ceremony twice.

We're given the full list of instruments four times in this passage. It's quite repetitive, isn't it? I think it's given like that to give us a sense of the kind of ritual, the pagan worship that's taking place here. And I think there's a Tower of Babel kind of sense here as well, isn't there? If you know that story from the beginning of the Bible, a huge structure that's put there not to point to God's glory and to worship him, but to point to man's glory, man's significance, man's worship.

[8 : 38] And verse four says that all the different languages are commanded to worship at this statue. It's almost like Nebuchadnezzar's trying to undo Babel here. To stand against the culture and the worship of the day, to swim upstream, if you like, always brings consequences, doesn't it?

Verse six, whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning, fiery furnace. God's people must count the cost. And just like around the world today, there are actually lots of different types of persecution going on in this passage.

The pressure on these three men is not just coming from the government, it's coming from all around them. Verse seven, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the instruments, they all

fell down and worshipped the golden image.

And that's the thing, isn't it, around the world today. It's not just governments that oppress people, it's actually whole communities. I shared with you already that scene in that church building in North Africa, in that living room even, not even a formal church building, where they had been actually chased from their previous home in a previous part of town by the local neighbors.

And that's why they were meeting where they were. There's also spying going on in here in Daniel chapter three. Verse eight, these Chaldeans or astrologers, his advisors, they come to Nebuchadnezzar and they maliciously accuse Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

[10:08] That's the phrase there, maliciously accuse. In the original, the actual phrase means to tear and eat flesh, literally. It's a kind of idea of wild animals, like lions prowling, seeking to devour their prey.

That's how Peter describes our ultimate enemy, isn't it, in his letter to the Christians that he wrote to. And in countries like China today, the government are becoming better and better at spying on Christians and churches, using newer and better technology all the time.

There are CCTV cameras in every registered church. Sermons have to be submitted to the authorities in advance and edited where need be. Small house churches are illegal.

And while we might be downloading another prayer app or another Bible app on our phone to help us in our day-to-day devotion to God, Chinese are increasingly going back to smuggling physical Bibles because it's harder to track by the government than digital means.

Ultimately, these three men face the fury of the king and the threat of violence, don't they? I've already shared with you some of the displacement numbers in Nigeria today.

[11:22] About 12 to 13 people a day lose their lives for following Jesus in Nigeria alone in 2023 to 2024. And we can add up these statistics, these numbers, and literally count the cost of what it looks like to follow Jesus around the world.

But all of these, they're not just numbers, are they? Every single one of those represents a real person with a real family and a real story. All over the world, God's people must count the cost of following Jesus.

Individuals, families, churches. And it's always been that way, hasn't it? Christians have always had to count the cost. Why do people persecute Jesus' followers?

Well, it's because they first persecuted Jesus. Jesus was, of course, Herod's tried to kill Jesus when he was a baby. He was betrayed by a friend.

He was given an unfair trial. He was mocked. He was beaten. He was nailed to a cross in shame, left to die. As humans, we hate naturally, in and of ourselves, we hate to be told that there is a king over us who has the right to demand whatever he likes of us because he made us and he owns us.

[12:46] We hate being told that we are sinners and that our lives need to change. They hated me, says Jesus, so they will hate you too. If you want to follow me, he says, this is the path that you must take.

You must bear your cross. You must deny yourself. You must walk with me on my roads, the road to Golgotha, to be crucified with me. This is the hard reality, isn't it?

It's not like there are two types of Christianity. It's not like there's one where, yeah, things will be hard and you might face opposition for your faith. But there's this other type of Christianity over here where everyone will love you for it and that you'll be really popular in wider society for following Jesus.

Now, this is just what following Jesus looks like. Whether or not your stories of opposition to the gospel ever look like Jiho in North Korea or someone from West Africa, if you follow Jesus, you will be opposed.

Remember a dear sister, I visited her church up in the Highlands last year and she shared how she's the only Christian in her family. She's got non-Christian children and grandchildren and whenever they gather together for mealtime, she tries to share her faith with them and they mock her, they tell her to shut up, they tell her to just drop it and leave it alone every single time.

[14:03] God's people must count the cost of following Jesus. which actually I think makes the response of the men in this story even more remarkable.

You can imagine the scene, can't you? The music is playing, the people, all the people around them are bowing down in worship to this statue and just three figures, three men are left standing facing the scorn of the crowd, facing the fury of this king, facing the heat of this furnace.

They stand up and they are counted. Let's read what happens next. We're just going to read verses 16 to 18 on page 740. This is how they answered the king.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego 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.

[15:25] Wow. Despite the terrifying peril that is before their eyes, maybe they can even feel their heat coming off this furnace, they trust in their God.

Perhaps they could remember God's promise to their people through the prophet Isaiah 700 years, sorry, over 100 years before, as God warned the people about the coming exile to Babylon, he also gave them promises that he would never forget about them.

Here's one of them. He said, when you walk through fire, you shall not be burned. The flames shall not consume you, for I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.

Isaiah 43 that comes from. But even if they can remember that, maybe they can, but this is still incredible, isn't it? Incredible courage to stand in the face of the most powerful man in the region with threats of violence against you and to say that, if not, even if God chooses not to rescue us in this way right now, be it known to you, O king, that we will not worship, we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.

They refuse to bow down, they have counted the cost and they have the courage to stand up and be counted. This is what Peter says in chapter 3 of his letter, even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed.

[16:56] Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts, honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.

Have no fear of them, stand up and be counted. Salah is a Christian from Yemen, Yemen is number 5 on this year's, last year's world watch list.

It's illegal for a Muslim to convert to Christianity in Yemen or for someone to encourage Muslims to convert to Christianity. But Salah heard the gospel, he became a Christian and as is so often the case when someone finds new faith in Jesus, he was excited, he wanted to tell everyone he knew about his new faith and he thought to himself, well where can I find the most people to share this good news with?

Well, probably after the mosque ends on Fridays, when everyone's coming out onto the street, I'll go there and I'll tell them about Jesus there. It might not surprise you to know that he had to flee the country, he was put on wanted lists.

Now he runs underground house church networks with Open Doors help. This is what he says and I find this incredibly challenging each time I read this. He says, if we sit at home and do nothing, we would be safe.

[18:15] But what kind of Christians would we be if we weren't risking life for others to know life? He has the kind of trust and faith that is forged and deepened through the fires of trials and persecutions.

Often it's the kind of faith that says, when things don't go my way or turn out the way I planned, I will still trust God. I will still choose to trust God no matter what.

I believe that God can deliver me. But even if he chooses not to in the sense that I want in this way, in this time, in this place, I will still trust him.

Salah wants to stand up and be counted. I mean, the whole book of Daniel in a sense is about how the Lord can be trusted in the fire because the Lord reigns.

That's the whole, that's how I would summarize the book of Daniel. The Lord reigns. In chapter 2, God gave Nebuchadnezzar a dream. You might know the story. It was a dream of a statue made of different parts. Each part represented a different kingdom in the ancient world.

[19:21] One of them was Babylon. But at the end of the dream, the whole statue fell apart. The different parts of it were blown away in the wind like chaff. The point of the dream for Nebuchadnezzar was that only God's kingdom, only the Lord, ultimately reigns.

All human kingdoms will blow away in the end. It would be safe to say that Nebuchadnezzar either somewhat missed the point of the dream or chose to ignore it completely because the very next

thing we see him do is build this huge statue in his own honor.

But the message of chapter 3 is clear. Like these three faithful Jews, stand up and be counted because the Lord alone reigns.

This is what Ji Ho in North Korea came to realize years later. She became a Christian when she found, and went to what the secret police couldn't find. You see, her father's Bible had been discovered but his radio, which they were really looking for, they couldn't find.

He'd hidden it, somewhat ironically, behind the portrait of North Korea's leaders which was hanging like in every good North Korean home on the wall. He'd made an alcove, he'd hidden it behind the picture and Ji Ho heard on this radio, she heard the gospel message proclaimed from a neighboring country by Open Doors partners and she put her faith in the gospel that she heard there.

[20 : 40] This is what she says, Our leaders don't want us to worship anyone or anything besides them. I've realized that's why my father was taken because they saw he had a Lord who is bigger than our country's leaders.

Persecution had come to Ji Ho's house precisely because the Lord reigns and there will always be those who oppose him. Let's read the last part of this chapter starting from verse 19.

Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury and the expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it usually was heated and he ordered some of the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace.

Then these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments and they were thrown into the burning fiery furnace. Because the king's order was urgent and the furnace overheated, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace. Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste.

[22 : 06] He declared to his counsellors, Did we not cast three men into the fire? They answered and said to the king, True, O king. He answered and said, But I see four men unbound walking in the midst of the fire and they are not hurt and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.

Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning fiery furnace and he declared, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out and come here.

Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire and the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king's counsellors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men.

The hair of their heads was not singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said, 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.

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 ruins for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way.

Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon. Well, oh great king, these men have counted the cost, they are standing up to be counted, why don't you count them?

[23 : 46] One, two, three, four, four men standing up in this fire. Is it an angel with them? Is it the Lord himself in some kind of pre-incarnate form?

We don't know, but the thing we do know is that the Lord was with them in the fire. And whatever we are going through, whatever you are going through this morning, Jesus is with you too.

I don't know if you know that, I don't know whether you can feel that right now. But it's true. Maybe you can't always see it. But he loves you and he is with you because he reigns in the fire.

If you don't, if you don't believe me, then you only need to look to the cross. The night before he died in the garden, Jesus was in such emotional distress of what he knew was coming that the Lord sent an angel to comfort him, to strengthen him.

Maybe it was even the same angel that stood in a Babylonian furnace. And then the next day as Jesus suffered in death, he knows what it is to get in the fire with you.

[24 : 56] In fact, more than that, he knows what it is to get in the fire for you. He suffered the anguish of the fire of sin and judgment and death in your place.

the Lord reigns even in the fire, even in death. See, Jesus doesn't promise that following him will be safe, does he?

We've seen that in so many different ways with so many different statistics already today. He doesn't promise to deliver us from death, but he does promise to deliver us through death and out the other side.

That's his story, isn't it? He conquered death. He went into the fire with us, but death couldn't burn him. Not in the end. As he stepped out of that tomb on the Sunday morning, he's like our three Jewish friends in verse 27.

Even the hairs of his head were not singed by death. His clothing was not harmed. Even his old clothes were folded in the tomb neatly. No smell of death had come upon him.

[26 : 06] And here's the truth. If you are in Christ this morning, if you are united to him by faith, then the same is true of you, isn't it? That promise is yours too. That one day we will rise with him, we will be transformed, and all the bruises and the tears of this present world will fall away from us.

Because the Lord reigns. The Lord reigns through the fire. A friend of mine is a woman called Susanna. She is from Malaysia.

Seven years ago, her husband, a pastor named Raymond, he was abducted from the streets of Kuala Lumpur. His car was surrounded, and he was forcefully taken from his car. In Malaysia, you see, it's legal, it's allowed to be a Christian.

There are many churches in Malaysia. A little bit like Yemen, it's not allowed to evangelize to Muslims. Well, Raymond had a very faithful ministry to the gospel.

And for seven years now, more than, Susanna and her children have not seen or heard of Raymond. They have no idea if he is alive or dead. They don't know where he is. Their lives are on hold.

[27 : 19] They're unable to move on. And I asked Susanna last time I saw her when she was in the UK, how do you keep going? How have you stayed faithful to your ministry?

How have you continued his work? How do you continue in these legal battles that you face? And one of the things she said to me was she loves to sing. She sings psalms and spiritual songs that lift her eyes to Jesus.

But her favourite song is this one. Because he lives, I can face tomorrow. Because he lives, all fear is gone. Because I know he holds the future.

And life is worth the living just because he lives. This is what Peter wrote in his letter. Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead we have a living hope.

It's imperishable, it's undefiled, it's unfading, it's kept in heaven for you. And in this you rejoice.

Though now for a little while if necessary you have been grieved by various trials so that the tested genuineness of your faith more precious than gold even more precious than gold statues more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

[28 : 43] That's how our story ends this morning isn't it? It's all for God's glory in the end. It's all for his honour. The whole government all those people we were told about earlier they all gather round to see what God has done.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are even promoted and God even has a plan for Nebuchadnezzar's life. In the next chapter he will be turning Nebuchadnezzar's life around. People all over the world even persecutors today become Christians still.

But we've run out of time for more stories. The question that remains for us this morning is will we stand up and be counted? When you overhear your work colleagues laughing at Christianity and you have the opportunity to maybe gently challenge some of their perspectives will you stand up and be counted?

When your boss asks you to do something that goes against your conscience but it's going to cost you to speak up will you stand up and be counted? When your friend is asking searching questions about life and you know there's a Christianity Explored course coming up but you hesitate you maybe feel embarrassed will you stand up and be counted?

When the Holy Spirit convicts you about something you're doing with your time or your money or your phone will you stand up and be counted? When your kids moan at you because they're fed up

of family devotions will you keep standing up and be counted?

[30 : 09] Or when you just feel weary of the busyness and hardship of sacrifice for Jesus and his church will you keep standing up and be counted? Last one when we hear of our brothers and sisters around the world counting the cost every day will you stand up and be counted by getting on your knees in prayer with them?

Friends the Lord reigns the Lord reigns in the fire he reigns through the fire so will you stand up and be counted? Let's pray will you pray with me now?

Father God we thank you so much for the Lord Jesus Christ we thank you for what he has done we thank you for his sacrifice for us we thank you that he reigns Father we don't need to fear anyone we don't need to fear any power we don't need to fear any authorities we don't need to fear any people because the Lord reigns he has he has reigned through death he has conquered our ultimate enemies already and he sits on the throne in heaven but we are so fearful we are so embarrassed of our faith so often and we pray that you would give us courage and boldness boldness to speak the truth and the good news to those around us we thank you for the many examples we have not only in scripture but around the world today of our faithful brothers and sisters we pray your strength and courage to them too amen as well there is a we pray for everyone