

Congregation, one of the favourite Sunday school stories over the centuries has been the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace. Some people have even sang the story, Johnny Cash to name one and Lou Armstrong to name another. And the story is rather simple on the surface. There are basically two types of people in this world. People who acknowledge God and what he has done especially in Jesus Christ, and those who defiantly go to their graves and eternity without God. I have met both types. And I think king Nebuchadnezzar was the latter type. Towards the end of the previous chapter, Daniel had explained what king Nebuchadnezzar had dreamed and its interpretation. And we know that the king honours Daniel and acknowledges His God and promoted his three friends.

Now in chapter three, and we can assume some time had elapsed, the king builds this statue and makes an idol of it by issuing a decree that everyone must bow down to it. But this episode also shows a defiant king. Notice, the previous statue in his dream only had a gold head, but this is either made entirely of gold or is gold plated. And it wasn't some small thing. Sixty cubits (30 meters high) and 6 Cubits wide (2 meters wide). Perhaps the king after hearing the interpretation of his original dream has decided that there will be no 'after this' for his kingdom and that his glory and power that God had given him would continue forever.

This statue may have represented Nebuchadnezzar, his god or both. One thing is repeatedly stressed, this was “the image that King Nebuchadnezzar set up” (Dan. 3:1–3, 5, 7, 12, 15, 18). In other words, even if the statue represented a god, no one was left in any doubt as to whose power lay behind its existence. And the location of the statue is also significant, for the Babylonian plain was the location for the building of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:2. In Genesis 11, the Tower of Babel had a twofold function. First, it was a defiant attempt to make a name for the people who built it as a lasting legacy to their glory. And second, to prevent the people from being scattered throughout the earth, as God had decreed in Genesis 11:4. Nebuchadnezzar's had the same two goals in mind by building this statue.

First, it was designed to establish a lasting testimony to his glory. This is why he summoned all of the leading officials from throughout his empire to gather before the statue for its dedication (Dan. 3:2). And secondly, to provide a unifying focus for the kingdom. King Nebuchadnezzar's desire was for unity and this was to be seen in the common worship of his image. It was a religious unity which he was willing to enforce with the threat of death if necessary (3:6).

King Nebuchadnezzar made this statue an idol by forcing people to bow down and worship it every time they heard some form of music. And if people didn't do that, they decree said they would die. Well not all that much has changed during the centuries. The ancient Romans would force people to choose between Lord Caesar (“Caesar is Lord”) and Christ is Lord”.

Often in countries where dictators rule, pictures or statues are erected of the leader. Before his death, Chairman Mao's statue dominated China. Even today in Russia, there are still images of Lenin. In fact, Russian scientists have kept the Soviet leader, whose embalmed body is on display in a mausoleum in Moscow's Red Square, carefully preserved since his death in 1924. This year, the Russian government will spend up to 13 million rubles of federal funds, or about \$200,000, to maintain the corpse. And there have been others. Who can forget the statue of Saddam Hussein being torn down after the Iraqi war.

Nebuchadnezzar, although perhaps not requiring people to give up their own religion, insisted that people did worship the idol he set up as a first priority. For we read in vv 4-7; that when the music rang out, “all the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Well, it soon came to light that there were at least three flies in the ointment. Three young Jewish men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego would not bow down to this idol when the music played. They were willing to stand up for their faith, even in light of what would normally be regarded as certain death.

There were probably more people that didn't bow down, including Daniel who isn't mentioned, but three are mentioned. It also seems pretty certain that some of the Chaldeans were jealous of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and their promotion by the king to prominent places, for the text said they maliciously accused the Jews. They accuse these men of paying no attention to the King, which is probably an over exaggeration. They were probably very obedient to the King in many areas, except when it came to worshipping an idol; that they refused to do.

The king, in a furious rage demands they they be brought before him and it seems as though he wishes to give them a second chance by suggesting that they worship when the hear the music being played, or be thrown into the furnace.

And then the king challenges these three men that if they are thrown into the fire, “Who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?” Or if you will, save you from the fiery furnace?” Well before the music starts to play, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego respond by basically saying, “The God we serve, the one and only true God, if it is his will to save us, he will be able to do so. These young men were not certain that God would save them, but he could he if willed to do so. They were happy to leave it God to determine their future. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego understood that since God is sovereign, it was his choice whether he opted to be glorified in their deaths or through their dramatic deliverance. Either way, it didn’t make a difference to their decision.

Whether they were miraculously delivered or left to burn in the fire, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego would not compromise their commitment to the Lord. Live or die, they would be faithful to their God. Upon hearing this, the king is no longer just in furious rage, he is now filled with fury. He is absorbed with an intense anger against these men. He orders that the furnace be heated seven times hotter and then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are thrown into the furnace. Unfortunately, the men who threw them into the fire died from the heat. Collateral damage I guess.

Now I am not sure whether there was song about daring to be a Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in your Sunday school days, but I wonder whether I would have been so brave. I am thankful that I, and not too many of us are confronted with these macro life and death decisions for our Christian faith. Having said that, I do think we are constantly faced with micro battles that goes on within our hearts every day.

The world is full of idols and my heart is a factory of idols. Even this past week, people seem to bow down to AFL or NRL teams. For some people, their idols are entertainment, work, or pleasure. We need to make decisions every day to ensure that God remains on the throne of our hearts and not some idol. And ministers are not immune to these pressures. Hardly a week goes past when I am not challenged to measure the success of the local church and my own ministry? Is the church growing? It’s one of the questions we had to answer for the church visitors. If not, perhaps you need to change your style or your message. Perhaps the sermons too heavy doctrinally? Perhaps I should be more light hearted and be more palatable to seekers rather than preaching to the converted. Ian Duguid suggests that Pastors need to be careful that they don’t invite the wolves to dinner.

The unexpected death of the soldiers in this text was not the big surprise, but what Nebuchadnezzar witnessed is the big surprise. Not only did he see Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego fall into the fire, but they were joined in the fire by a fourth individual who had the appearance of a divine being (vv24–25). God did not simply rescue his servants from the fire, he sent his personal assistant to pass through the fire with them. As a result of his presence with them, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego emerged safely at the end of their time in the furnace. These three young men were not merely physically unharmed, but their clothing did not even smell of smoke, a powerful testimony to the comprehensiveness of their salvation by God.

It was no doubt a great relief and comfort for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that their trust and faith in God was vindicated. They didn’t have to bare the agonies of the fire. The angel of God, perhaps the pre-incarnate Son himself was with them and protecting them and bringing them safely through. And again, what a great encouragement for the people in exile when they read about this account. Their God had not abandoned them to the flames of Nebuchadnezzar. Further, what a great encouragement for these exiles to recommit their lives to their faithful God, the only true God.

Well, we’re NT people and we know what Jesus has done for us and our ultimate salvation and protection from the unquenchable fire. We know he suffered the agonies of hell on the cross for us. When the fire of God’s wrath burned him to the core and blazed unchecked over him, he was entirely alone. There was no companion to share his burden! There was no angel sent to relieve his agony! In the Garden his disciples slept while Jesus prayed, and even then Jesus could end his prayer by saying, not my will be done, but yours. There was no saving hand from God stretched down to preserve his faithful servant in his moment of greatest need. For Jesus, there was no deliverance from experiencing the power of the final enemy, death itself.

It makes one ask, why would God be with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, but not with his own perfect Son? Why would he be faithful to his promise to be with us, sinners that we are, and abandon Jesus, his perfect chosen one? You would expect it to be the other way around. The answer to that question is simply God’s mercy and grace towards us. On the cross Jesus was taking into himself the fiery pains that we deserve for our compromise and idolatry. And as a result, because there was no intervention, we don’t have to experience the eternal fires of hell and the gnashing of teeth. Of course that doesn’t mean we don’t need to go through trials and sufferings now. But even if we walk through the valley of death, we know we don’t have to go through them alone.

Jesus himself said he would never leave us. We know that we will never be abandoned. Paul reminds us in Romans 8. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Implying, that God will surely bring his children home. All this is only possible because on the cross Jesus felt the utter aloneness of total abandonment by God. By the way, Nebuchadnezzar is not the only one who condemns to the fire those who will not bow the knee to him.

God rightfully demands the wholehearted homage of those whom he has created. And his call goes out, repent and believe, bow before the Son, escape the eternal fire that is being kept for those who do not bow the knee in true repentance now. There is going to be an 'after this' for all of us, so don't keep defiantly rejecting what God has done for us in Christ.

Finally, the unity that Nebuchadnezzar tried to achieve through a decree to worship an idol or face death, is now accomplished by God through Christ. In the church, God brings glory to his name by saving sinners, of which I am the worst. And all he saves, are united in thankfulness to him. People from every tribe, nations, language, and race are being drawn to the Son and have their unity in him. Together, we stand before the throne of the Lamb, a united multitude from all nations, gathered to sing praises to the God of heaven and earth.

In light of our great salvation it is now our joy and delight to worship and sing his praises and tell others about the glorious news of Jesus Christ. Of course, we cannot force people to sing and worship our God. Nor can we force them not to say anything against our God as Nebuchadnezzar did at the end of the story. In fact, we cannot even promote people who stand up for God as Nebuchadnezzar did with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. And we certainly don't want to threaten people with retribution if they don't worship or bow down or that their houses will be turned into a pile of rubble.

On the contrary, we have been saved by grace in love and we wish to show that same grace and love to others. So we pray that the Holy Spirit will change hearts of family, loved ones, friends, work colleagues that when we speak to them about Jesus and what he has done, they will willingly, and genuinely embrace Him as Saviour. I mention genuinely, for it is one thing to say that God is great as Nebuchadnezzar did, it's quite another to have a heart change. Sadly, there are many, even in our society that when you tell them what the Lord means for you and what he has done that they are happy for you and that is as far as it goes.

But don't despair, don't stop reminding people of what the Lord has done for you and what he means for you. It's the Holy Spirit job to convict. In the mean time, let's allow God's power to continue to work through us and purify us. Congregation, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.