

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 4 May 2008

No. T0520

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21st Century challenges from Daniel: Putting God first

We live in a world where it is becoming increasingly difficult for a Christian to be faithful to God. The authority of God is set aside. Biblical standards of behaviour, once commonly accepted by the nation as a whole, are increasingly set aside as no longer relevant in this 21st century. The gods of greed and materialism rear their ugly heads, clamouring for our attention in the media. In such circumstances, we may well be tempted to ask, Is it still possible for the Christian to be faithful to God? The answer to that question must be a resounding 'Yes'! God's promise to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:9) is as true today as it was nearly 2,000 years ago!

Perhaps the greatest challenge to faithfulness to God was that faced by the three friends of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. The story is told in the book of Daniel, chapter 3 and it is that which we are going to look at this morning. The story concerns events that occurred more than 2,500 years ago and is one of the most dramatic in the Bible. But it is not just a story of high drama - it has important lessons for us in this 21st century. Interestingly, the book of Daniel has been described as "the greatest book in the Bible on godless kingdoms and the kingdom of God".

By way of background, we should say that the last two of the twelve tribes of Israel, Judah and Benjamin, had been finally carried away captive to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. Amongst the captives were Daniel and his three friends. In chapter 1, we learn how Daniel and his three friends, together with other selected young men of the Israelites and some young Babylonian men, were specially brought to the palace to be educated, in what might be described as the University of Babylon at that time. As a result of that education, they would fill positions of responsibility in Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom. While in the palace, all these young men would be fed with the best of the king's food, food that would have first been offered to idols. Here was the first test. Could Daniel and his three friends have anything to do with that idolatry? So we read, "Daniel said to the steward... 'Please test your servants for ten days, and let them give us vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our countenances be examined before you, and the countenances of the young men who eat the king's delicacies; and as you see fit, so deal with your servants.' So he consented with them in this matter ... and at the end of ten days their countenance appeared better and fatter than all the young men who ate the king's delicacies" (Daniel 1:11-15). I don't know about you, but I would have found a diet of vegetables and water to be difficult indeed! In this powerful way, God vindicated the faithfulness of Daniel and his three friends. That power is just the same today!

In chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar has a dream and calls all his wise men and asks them to tell him both the dream and its meaning. Failure to do so would result in death! What an impossible situation! But not to God! So we read, "Daniel went in and asked the king to give him time, that he might tell the king the interpretation. Then Daniel went to his house, and made the decision known to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, his companions, that they might seek mercies of the God of heaven concerning this secret, so that Daniel and his companions might not perish with the rest of the wise men of Babylon. Then the secret was revealed to Daniel in a night vision" (verses 16-19). Daniel goes in to the king and tells him the dream. We read, "'You, O king, were watching; and behold, a great image! This great image whose splendour was excellent, stood before you; and its form was awesome. This image's head was of fine gold ... You, O king, are a king of kings. For the God of heaven has given you a kingdom, power, strength, and glory ... you are this head of gold. But after you shall arise another kingdom inferior to yours.' The king answered Daniel and said, 'Truly your God is the God of gods, the Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets...' Then the king promoted Daniel and ... made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon...and he set Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego over the affairs of the province of Babylon..." (verses 31-49).

So we come to chapter 3. It will be convenient to consider this under the headings:

1. The pride of Nebuchadnezzar (verses 1-12)
2. The power of God (verses 13-30)

The pride of Nebuchadnezzar

Daniel's interpretation of the dream to Nebuchadnezzar - "You are this head of gold" (2:38) - seems to have given Nebuchadnezzar an inflated sense of his importance. Not content with the power entrusted to him by God, Nebuchadnezzar builds an enormous statue of gold - 90 feet high on a plinth 9 feet wide; like a 10 storey building

today. In part, this was meant as a representation of one of the many Babylonian gods but probably also as a representation of Nebuchadnezzar himself. We read, "Then a herald cried aloud, 'To you it is commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that at the time you hear the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, you shall fall down and worship the gold image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up; and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace'" (verses 4-6).

In Babylon at that time, there would have been many different nationalities - not only the Babylonians themselves but also many who had been brought captive to Babylon from other countries. Hence the reference to "peoples, nations, and languages" (verse 4). Nebuchadnezzar might have hoped that the idol would represent a rallying point and so help to unify the nation. You may recall that, similarly, when the 10 tribes split from Judah and Benjamin, they set up their own centre of worship to replace Jerusalem and so help unite them (see John 4:20).

Nebuchadnezzar takes to himself what belongs to God alone - that He should be worshipped. The king would later learn, at tremendous cost to himself (see chapter 4), the folly of such pride. He learned the truth of the saying, "Pride goes before a fall"! So today, the gifts and abilities given by the Lord are not for the glory of the recipient but for His glory. Let us learn this lesson well!

The power of God.

But what should Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego do? From boyhood, back home in Israel, they would have learned the Ten Commandments. The first two of those commandments, given by God to Moses shortly after the Israelites left Egypt, would now speak so tellingly to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself any carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments" (Exodus 20:2-6).

But now, on penalty of death for disobedience, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were being ordered to bow down and worship this golden idol. What should they do?

God must come first! Cost what it may, they would be obedient to God and defy the king's commandment. They would not bow down to this golden image! Whereupon some of the leading Babylonians, probably consumed by jealousy of the privileged position enjoyed by Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego rush to the king and complain, "There are certain Jews whom you have set over the province of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego; these men, O king, have not paid due regard to you. They do not serve your gods or worship the gold image which you have set up" (verse 12).

In his fury, the king summons the three men to the palace and threatens them, "If you do not worship, you will be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?" (verse 15). The prophet Isaiah ministered in Judah some 100-150 years before the carrying away of the Jews to Babylon. Had Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego when they were growing up back home heard his message being read in the synagogue? If so, they would have heard God's lovely promise, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; you are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you" (Isaiah 43:1-2).

Would the faith of these three be strong enough to trust God's promise? Let's listen to their answer to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up" (verses 17-18). Would to God that each one of us was characterised by that same faith and obedience of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego!

The king in his anger commanded that the furnace be heated seven times more than usual. He would have a ring-side seat to see the destruction of these men who had dared to defy him. Little did he realise that that ring-side seat would give him an unobstructed view of the power of God! We read, "Then these men were bound in their coats, their trousers, their turbans, and their other garments, and were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. Therefore, because the king's command was urgent, and the furnace exceedingly hot, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, fell down bound in the midst of the burning fiery furnace. Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished; and he rose in haste and

spoke, saying to his counsellors, 'Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?' They answered and said to the king, 'True, O king.' 'Look!' he answered, 'I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God'. Then Nebuchadnezzar went near the mouth of the burning fiery furnace and spoke, saying, 'Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here.' Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came from the midst of the fire. And the satraps, administrators, governors, and the king's counsellors gathered together, and they saw these men on whose bodies the fire had no power; the hair of their head was not singed nor were their garments affected, and the smell of fire was not on them" (verses 21-27). What a display of the mighty power of God!

We should notice three things about the effect of this fire. Firstly, it simply burned up the bonds by which they had been bound. The three men fell down bound in the fire. The king saw them walking freely! Sometimes, not always, the trials that come into our lives are allowed by God to set us free from things that bind us. Secondly, not even the smell of fire was upon them! When our children were small, Guy Fawkes night would see us, with our neighbours and their children, gathered around a huge bonfire on some waste ground not far from where we lived. We all stood around the fire, keeping a careful distance. Fireworks were set off and we had a lovely time. But as soon as we got back home, it was evident where we had been! The smell of bonfire smoke clung to our clothes and was there for several days. God's deliverance of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego was total!

Thirdly, and most importantly of all, in the fire Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego proved the presence of the Lord Jesus in a way in which I believe they would never have known it before. Nebuchadnezzar's testimony is striking, "The form of the fourth is like the Son of God" (verse 25). God had indeed kept His promise: "I will be with you...When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you" (Isaiah 43:2). So in Hebrews chapter 11, that great gallery of faith, we read of those who "quenched the violence of fire" (verse 34).

Whatever might be the fiery trial that has come into your life, the promise of the Lord Jesus remains the same, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). The psalmist, David, had that same assurance, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me" (Psalm 23:4). In times of trial, when often we don't know what to do, we are cast upon the Lord in a way in which we sense His presence far more than if we had been allowed to go on in our own independent way. CS Lewis wrote, "God whispers in our pleasures but shouts in our pain". In our pleasure seeking self-sufficiency, we may well fail to hear His whispers. But in our moments of trial we can hear His voice of love, speaking to us clearly and meeting us in our need. Paul writes to the Corinthians, "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it."

Nebuchadnezzar was challenged by what he saw in the furnace and was forced to confess, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who sent His Angel and delivered His servants who trusted in Him, and they have frustrated the king's word, and yielded their bodies, that they should not serve nor worship any god except their own God! Therefore I make a decree that any people, nation, or language which speaks anything amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made an ash heap; because there is no other God who can deliver like this" (verses 28-29).

In the so-called civilised West today, we may not be challenged by material idols of gold, of wood, or of stone, but in our increasingly godless society, we are confronted by the idols of materialism, of pleasure seeking, of sport, of self-sufficiency. Are we to bow down to them or are we to be true to God and to His claims upon us? In a society which by and large refuses to recognise the claims of God, we need to be seen as those who belong to Him, cost what it may.

Let us be assured of the fact that the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is our God too! As He delivered them and kept them, so He is able to deliver us and to keep us. Paul, having been faced by some life-threatening experience, was able to declare, "Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead, who delivered us from so great a death. And does deliver us; in whom we trust that He will still deliver us" (2 Corinthians 1:9-10). Similarly Peter, writing to Christians undergoing great personal trial, could remind them that they were "kept by the power of God" (1 Peter 1:5). May we, too, know that same keeping power!

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