

Daniel 3:1-30

Introduction

Last week, we had some friends over for the evening. We ended up playing a game. You'll probably know it. We call it 'The Name Game'. Each person is given a Post-It Note with a name on it of someone whom everyone in the group will know. You put it on your forehead. And then you take it in turns to ask questions to work out who you are. The questions can only have a Yes/No answer. So, for example, Am I human? Yes. Am I a man? Yes. Am I currently alive? Yes. And you go on that way until you've worked out your identity. The first person to get it right is the winner. It's a simple game and a lot of fun. The question you're asking yourself is, Who Am I. And it turned out, on this occasion, that I was Geoff Martin. I found myself asking a similar question as I started to prepare this sermon. One way we could approach the passage is to ask, who am I? Where do I find myself in this story? So, let's do that. Let's ask: who am I?

Who am I?

And I'm confident I'm not the first person we meet; Nebuchadnezzar. Look at verse 1 again.

King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon.

In the previous chapter, he'd had a *dream* of a statue, and Daniel had told him that *he* was the head of gold. And all this talk of gold seems to have *gone* to his head. Seven times, we're told that this statue was made of gold. We're not told what it looked like, but it seems to represent Nebuchadnezzar himself somehow. The gold is meant to impress everyone with the wealth of his kingdom. And he summons all the important people to make sure they see it. The satraps, prefects, governors, advisors, treasurers, judges, magistrates and officials all assemble. They all stand before this huge statue made of gold. And eleven times we're told that this statue is to be worshipped. A herald proclaims that nations and people of every language are to fall down and worship it as soon as they hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music.

So, this is an idol; a false god. Something that's worshipped in the place of God. And, Nebuchadnezzar says, anyone who doesn't worship this idol will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace. In other words, he wants all the people in his kingdom to worship *him*, on pain of death. It's hard to imagine a more brazen act of self-promotion. And he's placing himself in direct opposition to the one true God of heaven, whom, at the end of the last chapter, he declared to be the God of gods and the Lord of kings. He's trying to make a name for himself. And he's forgetting how it ended for those who tried to do the same thing, many years earlier; who tried to make a name for themselves by building the tower of Babel on the very same plain. It didn't end well. It brought them under God's judgement.

Nebuchadnezzar is a real person of history but, in *this* story, he's portrayed in the role of a kind of pantomime villain. And we all know what to do when the pantomime villain steps on the stage. We boo and hiss. And that's what we should do as Nebuchadnezzar builds his

statue and does his tower of Babel thing. So, who am I? Well, I'm confident I'm not *him*. He's the villain. He wants to make a name for himself and be admired and praised. I don't want to be him.

Yet, if I'm honest, I *can* see something of myself in Nebuchadnezzar. There *is* a part of me that would love to make a name for myself and be admired and praised. I'd love to be that Christian author, who's written dozens of books, which are all bestsellers around the world. I'd love to be that charismatic conference speaker, who preaches to thousands of people at a time. Thankfully I'm neither of those things; my ego wouldn't take it. But I *can* see something of myself in Nebuchadnezzar, nonetheless. I'm not so unlike Nebuchadnezzar after all. I'm not immune to seeking my own glory rather than God's. How about you?

Well, this isn't working out too well for me, so let's move on.

Who am I? Perhaps thinking about Daniel's friends will be more promising!

They're the heroes. When they enter the story, we cheer. I like the idea of being *them*. I even share a first initial with one of them. That's promising!

When they're told to bow down and worship the idol, they refuse. In the Ten Commandments, God says, **'You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them...'** (Exodus 20:4-5) So, they don't.

Some of the king's astrologers go running to Nebuchadnezzar to tell on them. And he's furious. But even though a blazing furnace awaits them, they refuse to give their worship to anything or anyone other than God. They're faithful to God, no matter the cost. See what they say in verse 16.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, 'King 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 deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.'

They don't assume that God will save them, but they know that he *can* save them if he chooses to. So, they defy Nebuchadnezzar and refuse to bow down. He's so angry that he has the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual and throws them in. And amazingly, God *does* rescue them.

These three young men are the people I would like to be. They're heroes! But could I really do what they did? Could I remain faithful to God, even if it meant being thrown into a blazing furnace, heated seven times hotter than usual. I would like to think so. But truthfully... I'm not so sure.

Who am I? If I'm honest, perhaps I'm a bit more like the people in the crowd, who simply complied.

In verse 7 we're told: **as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kind of music, all the nations and peoples of every language fell down and worshipped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.**

It would have been very easy for these three young friends to have bowed down with everyone else; to be one of the crowd, who were just going along with it. They could have told themselves that it was just this once. No one would know. And it was just a little thing. It's not as if they were taking it seriously. They might bow down but they weren't worshipping the idol in their hearts. At least they would stay alive this way. And surely, they would be more useful to God if they were alive rather than dead. That's what they *could* have told themselves. It might be what others told themselves. And if I'm being honest, it's what I might have told myself, if I was there. How about you? There will never be a shortage of reasons to bow down with those around us. Perhaps to fit in with our wider family, or to be liked by our friends at school, or to avoid causing offence to our colleagues at work. Perhaps out of fear of being mocked or vilified. Or perhaps just because the idols that others worship appeal to us too. After all, it's not difficult to bow down to the idols of pleasure and comfort and self. And it's so much easier to go with the crowd than it is to remain faithful to God when that means standing out and drawing attention to yourself as a Christian.

So, who am I? Well, the answer isn't very encouraging. I'm more like Nebuchadnezzar and the people in the crowd than the three friends of Daniel. It's great to have heroes like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the Bible. We love to cheer them on. But the reality is that I'm not like them. If I'm honest, asking who I am leaves me feeling deflated and defeated. It leaves me feeling as though I need to pull my socks up, whilst knowing that I can't. But of course, to ask who I am is to ask the wrong question... because the Bible isn't about me.

The first question we should ask when we read the Bible isn't, what does this teach me about me? It's, what does this teach me about Jesus? The Bible isn't primarily about *me*, it's about *him*. So, we're going to find it far more helpful to read the story again, but this time to ask, where can I see Jesus?

Seeing Jesus

J. C. Ryle, who was at one time the Bishop of Liverpool, wrote that Jesus stands in the Old Testament like a figure in the mist. But in the New Testament, he steps forward into the bright light of day. That's such a helpful way of thinking about the whole of the Bible and how it shows us Jesus. Well, we're in the Old Testament. So, if Jesus stands behind this story like a figure in the mist, where can we catch a glimpse of him. Where can we see him? And when we ask *that* question, suddenly the passage starts to take on new life. Suddenly, I look at these three friends differently. Whilst I can't see *myself* in Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, I can certainly see Jesus. We're told in Matthew's Gospel that when he was tempted in the wilderness **the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me.'**

But Jesus said to him, ‘Away from me, Satan! For it is written: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.”’ (Matthew 4:8-10)

Jesus refused to worship anyone but God. These three friends chose faithfulness on this occasion, and we cheer them for it. But they were flawed human beings just like you and me. Their faithfulness will have faltered at times. But Jesus is the one perfect man who has ever lived. He was faithful every day of his life, without ever faltering once. He chose faithfulness to God, even though others turned against him as his enemies. He chose faithfulness to God, even though it meant going to his death, even death on a cross. He chose faithfulness to God, even though it meant experiencing the burning fire of God’s anger at sin, so that we will never have to. He did all of that for you and me, to win our forgiveness and open the way to heaven.

In these three young friends, we can see the figure of Jesus like a man standing in the mist. They show us Jesus. And it’s because of Jesus that we can read this passage and not feel defeated. By nature, we may be more like Nebuchadnezzar or the people in the crowd, but when we belong to Jesus, he gives us a new identity. He makes us brothers and sisters in his family, sons and daughters of the living God. And as we follow him, the one who was perfectly faithful on every occasion, we can pray for the courage to be faithful like him and like Daniel’s friends.

We will fail. I know I will, certainly. But Jesus has won our forgiveness. We’re weak. Our faithfulness will falter. But Jesus has placed his Spirit inside us to help us and give us the power we need to change. As we follow him, we find that he gives us the strength we need to resist the idolatry of the world. And as we follow him, we find that he gives us the courage we lack to be faithful, even if that means facing fiery trials of our own... which we will. So, as we end, let’s consider the blazing furnace itself and what it can teach us. That’s our final heading: the blazing furnace.

The blazing furnace

It’s an extraordinary climax, so it’s worth reading it again. Nebuchadnezzar has the three friends thrown into the furnace. It’s so hot that it kills the soldiers who take them. But then we’re told, in verse 24: **Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisors, ‘Weren’t there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?’**

They replied, ‘Certainly, Your Majesty.’

He said, ‘Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.’

Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, ‘Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!’

So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, and the satraps, governors and royal advisors crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies,

nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.'

People have different views about the identity of the fourth man in the furnace. Some think it is a preincarnate appearance of Jesus. Others think it's an angel. I don't know. Either of those could be right. But the point is that through this fourth person, God was present with the three friends in the furnace. He was with them. And he delivered them through it. I think the apostle Peter must have had this story in mind, when he wrote in 1 Peter 4 verse 12: **Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you, as though something strange were happening to you.**

He's saying that if you remain faithful to God, you will face trials. That's normal Christian experience. You may not be thrown into a furnace, but you will face fiery trials. You might find that you have enemies who stir up trouble for you because of your faith. You might be mocked by your friends because you don't do the things they do. You might face the displeasure of your family, because you prioritise involvement at church over the things they want to do. You might be regarded with incomprehension because you give away your money to support gospel ministry. You might be vilified by your colleagues because you hold biblical beliefs about things like the sanctity of life, and marriage, and the uniqueness of Christ. You might be told that you're bigoted and intolerant because you refuse to adopt the beliefs of those around you. And that will all be hard. It will be painful. But you can be confident of this: God will see you through those trials. He won't abandon you. He won't forsake you. He will be with you in them. And he will bring you safely through them, with your faith intact. In his mercy, he will even use those trials to strengthen your faith and make you more like Jesus. And in due course, he will bring you safely home to heaven.

Nebuchadnezzar was amazed when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the furnace completely unharmed; without even the smell of smoke on them. He had asked **'...what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?'** And now he'd got his answer. Surely he's right when he declares, at the end of the passage, that **'...no other god can save in this way.'** As we stand firm through the fiery trials we face, it's a testimony to the world that there is a God who saves.

Conclusion

This week ahead, as you seek to follow Jesus, ask God to give you strength to resist the idolatry of the world. Ask him to give you the courage of Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to remain faithful to him despite the pressure to go with the crowd. And be confident that he is with you and will deliver you, come what may.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, we're sorry for the times when we bow down before the idols that the world worships and we thank you that Jesus has won our forgiveness at the cross. Please help us to be like him. Strengthen us by your Spirit. Give us the courage we need to remain faithful to you as he was faithful to you. And as we do, please be glorified in us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.