



HG8: Daniel (2/5) *'It's Getting Hot In Here!'*

Daniel 3:1-30

Home Group Sermon Notes

25th January 2009 - Revd Paul A Carr

Introduction: A couple of weeks ago we saw how Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (SMA) were taken from Jerusalem to Babylon as slaves to King Nebuchadnezzar but, because they were intelligent and handsome (1:4) were put to work in the Babylonian civil service. They struggled with the many pressures of living in a foreign land but, God was with them and was working through them to fulfil his plans. We saw how they weren't prepared to compromise their faith in a pagan country and, because of this, God blessed them. Nebuchadnezzar, 1:20, found them: ... *ten times better in wisdom and understanding than all the magicians and enchanters in the whole of his kingdom.* In ch2, Daniel was able to interpret a dream that troubled Nebuchadnezzar. A dream that that none of his magicians, enchanters, scorcers or astrologers could make sense of. As a result, Daniel was made ruler over the entire province of Babylon (2:48) and, not only this, he persuaded Nebuchadnezzar to promote (SMA) to be administrators, (2:49). Daniel, however, became a member of the royal court (2:49). What a privileged position for a foreigner to find himself! Nebuchadnezzar's dreams stopped after the explanation was given but, despite the fact he'd received new insights that could have changed his life once and for all, 2:46-47, he didn't make the full commitment to God that, perhaps, he should have done. Sound familiar? It should come as no surprise to read what took place in ch3, where Nebuchadnezzar reacted negatively, as many people do, against the kingdom of God. Instead of using God's help in a positive way, it moved him to independence of God. He allowed the life he'd been living to swallow him up and we find him distorting the very message which God had spoken to him. How many times, I wonder, are we guilty of that? How many times has God answered our prayers; touched our hearts and done some wonderful things in our lives, and we've simply walked away and believed the lie that we can live without him and end up making the same mistakes as before?

Image of Gold, vs1-7: And so Nebuchadnezzar, having learnt nothing from his experience of God, made an image of gold, 90 feet high and 9 feet wide, vs1. Commentators are divided as to whether the statue was meant to be the image of Nebuchadnezzar himself or of some Babylonian god. However, it seems as though it was created to serve as a stimulus for the people to worship the gods of Babylon – something he expected everyone, in some degree, to do. Perhaps, in a bid to win over people's enthusiasm, Nebuchadnezzar put a great emphasis on the musical side of the worship, vs5. I can just imagine those musicians who were 'Top of the Pops' composing special anthems for the occasion. Music is a very effective, and very subtle, cultural medium isn't it? It was then and it is now. Music instantly creates a wide range of emotions, doesn't it? From happy to sad; good to bad! We can listen to a song that we haven't heard for years and it will instantly bring back memories of what we were doing or where we were when we first heard it. And so there was method and reason in Nebuchadnezzar's strategy. *Power corrupts, but lack of power corrupts absolutely.* So said Adlai Stevenson when running against Dwight Eisenhower in the 1952 US presidential election. And Nebuchadnezzar shows this to be true by enforcing his 'scheme' with the threat that anyone who, vs6: *does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.* No messing about there then. The furnace was a deterrent to deal with the lunatic fringe of anti-social cranks – every society has them! It started off well as we read in vs7. The thought that sensible people, even those 'very religious people' from Jerusalem, with their so-called 'supreme God' wouldn't deny that the gods of Babylon had a right to be worshipped within the confines of their own territory. Wrong!

The Resistance of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, vs8-18: Some astrologers told the king, vs12: ... *there are some Jews whom you have set up over the affairs of the province Babylon ... who pay no attention to you, O king. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up.* There's always someone out to tell tales isn't there? I'm sure that SMA weren't deliberately seeking an open confrontation with Nebuchadnezzar's authority. After all, it was him who had promoted them in the first place! It maybe they tried to avoid any open display of nonconformity. Maybe they hoped that no one would take much notice of what they were, and weren't, doing. Maybe they quietly abstained from the more submissive parts of the king's ritual. A reminder, if any is needed, that our actions often speak louder than our words. However, as in ch1, SMA had thought through all the issues, made up their minds, and were prepared to suffer the consequences of their actions.

Nebuchadnezzar was furious with rage, vs13&16. SMA didn't hesitate to answer 'guilty' when they were charged. They refused to give even one sign that there was any possibility of compromise, vs18: ... *we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.* It was the first commandment. Exodus 20:3: *You shall have no other gods before me* (Read also Isaiah 44:-23). Their answer, under such a fierce and determined threat, took great courage and was given, it seems to me, with great dignity. It illustrates how being faithful and loyal in less important matters, can come to a wonderful fruition in a tremendous witness to God in the hour of more severe and open trial. They stress that they are not going to argue with the king, vs16: ... *we do not need to defend ourselves ...* Indeed, this reply is a declaration that it's time to answer not in words but in deeds. Nebuchadnezzar needed to know that the God of Israel was not a mere talking point for religious discussion, but the living Lord of history. He required, above all, to know that the God of Daniel and of SMA could inspire practical resistance and undefeatable faith and courage.

There is, Ecclesiastes 3:7b: *a time to be silent and a time to speak.* And, as with SMA, speaking has to come to an end and what we believe has to be demonstrated by action. Jesus gave himself to a speaking/preaching ministry but there were times when he was silent too. When he stood before his accusers he was silent (Mark 14:60ff; John 19:9ff). When he stood before Herod he was silent (Luke 23:9). Isaiah 53:7: *He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.* When it came to the time of his crucifixion he was silent. Few and brief were the words that came from the cross. His final answer was to be given, like that of these three young men, in faithfulness and love and suffering. Nebuchadnezzar heard their message more loudly and more clearly in their silence than if they had each preached a lengthy sermon. He knew already what they could hardly have put in better words. He knew all about their God. He knew of their laws and traditions.

Yet the few words that SMA give are deeply significant. Vs17, they call him our God. He is theirs, and they are his, for their hope that he will save them from the furnace is based on the deep covenantal, and personal, relationship they have with him as individuals and as members of God's chosen people. He is our God whom we serve. Their confession of personal faith, coupled with the deep and close relationship with God, moves them to recognise that He has the power to do whatever it is he chooses to do in their lives. He is able to deliver us. It has always been part of their belief from the beginning of their nation's life that nothing is impossible to God. They showed the same characteristic reverence to the wisdom of God, as we saw in ch1.

So strong is their faith in His hands, that they cannot imagine any harm at all coming to them from a pagan emperor, vs17: *He will rescue us from your hand, O king ...* It's interesting how their concern is for the glory of God. SMA believed that God could, if He chose to do so, deliver them unscathed and, even if he didn't, they wouldn't bow the knee.

The Miracle of Survival, vs19–27: Nebuchadnezzar's initial reaction was one of rage and fury, vs19. Was he angry at what he'd found out about himself in this moment of truth? The lies and deception and rejection of what he knew to be right? How often do we deflect our mistakes (even our vengeance) onto 'innocent' people as if, somehow, that absolves us from personal responsibility for our own actions? The case of Nebuchadnezzar is one of several examples in the Bible of how misdirected anger leads to tragedy. Remember the story of: Cain who, angry with God, unleashed his hatred on Abel (Genesis 4:8); the ten brothers venting their anger on Joseph without any just cause (Genesis 37:19ff); Jonah, angry at the plant when he should have been angry with himself for being angry (Jonah 4:1;9); And it all moves on (as so much of the Bible does) to what happened when Jesus was the focus of human frustration and hatred, that had been stored in the heart of a humanity for centuries - whose deepest curse has been its own hatred of God and true goodness. There can be no cure for us until we recognize what our disease really is. Nebuchadnezzar was so angry that, vs19b: He ordered the furnace to be heated seven times hotter than usual ... and, not only that he, vs20: commanded some of the strongest soldiers in the army to tie (them up) and throw them into the blazing furnace. And, just to illustrate how hot the furnace was, vs22: the soldiers who took them up to the furnace were killed by the heat. And so they were thrown into the blazing furnace, 23. Nebuchadnezzar, vs24-25: *... leaped to his feet in amazement ... Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed and the fourth looks like the son of the gods.* It's a fulfilment of that wonderful promise in Isaiah 43vs2b: When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. Nebuchadnezzar realises there and then that no matter what he did, nothing would prevent their God from delivering them. The more he persecuted them, the more he confirmed their witness. Remember our text, Joshua 1:9: *... Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go*

Nebuchadnezzar's Repentance, vs28-30: The triumphant and miraculous witness of SMA, their resistance and indestructible zeal reminded Nebuchadnezzar, once again, about the dream, ch2, which had brought him so much pain and the God who was sovereign. But this time it wasn't in a dream or words in a sermon, it was right in front of him challenging his political and personal authority. Perhaps this painful confrontation was the beginning of what was to be the catalyst for the break-up of his plans for universal rule. Might the resistance of these three men, and God's miraculous deliverance, be one of the worst mistakes of his life? Nebuchadnezzar had to make a choice of either humbling himself or being offended by the truth. We know he ceased to resist and allowed himself to be humbled and accepted the wounding of his pride and self-confidence, and surrendered. But at the same time he could have closed his mind, hardened his heart and stubbornly resisted. We know all about that don't we? His situation and his response illustrates what Jesus meant when he said, Matthew 11vs6: *Blessed is the man who does not fall away from me.* Jesus knew that to those who were deeply committed to the structures, the wealth, the power and the lusts of this present world, the presence and challenge of the kingdom of God would call for radical change, and would be as deeply disturbing and as threatening as SMA were to Nebuchadnezzar. The king gave in and broke out into some wonderful words of praise, vs28: *Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God.*

Their survival meant his own personal deliverance too! And since he is an emperor, he accepts the political implications of his conversion and immediately begins to make amends, vs29: *Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way.* A blazing furnace seems a better option doesn't it? But it shows something of the fear of God that Nebuchadnezzar possessed. *The fear of God is the beginning of all wisdom,* Psalm 111:10. Amazing, isn't it, how God can transform the lives of those who are confronted with his power? From being a self serving, hate filled, man of corruption to a man who is willing to fully submit his own life and his entire fortune and reign over to the God who walks through fire to save his children. That's a pretty amazing story isn't it? And, just to endorse his public acceptance of SMA, Nebuchadnezzar promotes them again, vs30. People often focus in this story on the fact that God delivered SMA from the furnace - rewarding them for their faithfulness. However, I want to suggest that one of the reasons God chose to intervene so powerfully was because he knew that it would bring Nebuchadnezzar to faith in him and the power that this King wielded among the people of the earth could be turned into a great evangelistic influence on behalf of the Kingdom of God.

Conclusion: What lessons can we learn from this today? One thing we can be certain about is that following Jesus will cost us. We'll face trial after trial as we seek to live by God's standards and morals. Some times trials are there to test us as to our commitment to God and what we're prepared to do to follow him. Sometimes we come through a trial and receive a greater blessing than the ones we knew before the trial began. James 1:2-3: *Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.* It may be no coincidence that God uses fire as an example of trials in the Bible. However, in scripture it is often used as a symbol of God's presence and an illustration of His power. (See Exodus 3:2; Isaiah 6:4-5 and Ezekiel 1:4-5; Hosea 5:10.) Fire speaks of cleansing, renewing and purifying and is often symbolic of the presence of the Holy Spirit (See Isaiah 4:4; Isaiah 12:43; Malachi 3:3; John 7:37-38; Acts 2:3-4.) It's a reminder to ask for a continual presence of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives. A continual refining and cleansing as we seek to be the people he has called us to be.

⇒ **Can God rescue us?** Yes! The power of God has not diminished one atom since the moment he brought the universe into being. It is the same power that delivered the Children of Israel from Egypt; that delivered SMA from the furnace; that enabled Jesus to still the storm; that released Paul from his chains; and causes our own very hesitant prayers to be answered.

⇒ **Does God always rescue us?** No! God sometimes, for reasons that bewilder us, chooses not to intervene. We need to learn that God may choose to deliver us *through* our trials and difficulties, not *from* them. The courage of SMA before the furnace is a greater encouragement to those who face persecution than the miraculous deliverance itself.

We may never be put in a situation when we call on God to rescue us because our faith has taken us to the point of death, but we will surely encounter demands to bow to a different set of idols - money, pluralism, nationalism, false teaching. How will you find strength to stay on your feet when asked to bow down to these (Acts 4:18-21)? The greatest comfort that we can take from this passage is that this same God can, and does, intervene/intercede on our behalf and, as we seek to be faithful to him, He is faithful to us. When Jesus comes into our lives and we acknowledge his presence and power to forgive sins, then we are looked at differently in the eyes of the world. Just as Nebuchadnezzar saw someone else walking through the fires and it brought him to faith, so too, when others look into the furnace of our lives they ought to be able to witness the one who walks with us. In 1 Peter 1vs7, Peter talks about the trial of our faith being: *... of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire* (and that it) *may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.* I guess the point is that we should accept Christ as Lord and Saviour so that we can be sustained through the fires of life, but then celebrate and acknowledge that God will be glorified in the eyes of the world as well if we remain true to him. SMA weren't the only ones saved that day. Nebuchadnezzar was saved from himself and an entire nation was saved from destructive behaviour. In the same way, when we are faithful, others are brought to salvation by witnessing, in the lives of Christians, the power of the God who is willing to come to us personally and walk beside us through the fire. Life may indeed be a 'furnace' from time to time. But, God can and will be glorified even in the hottest of times. Of this we can be assured!



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COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION **BEFORE** THE MEETING!

Don't forget to take your Bible to House Group along with any previous/other notes that might be helpful.

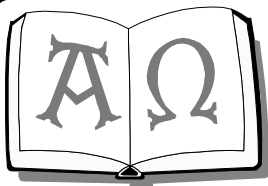
Welcome/Icebreaker (10 mins)

When was the last time you took a risk, and what was the outcome? (Something you bought, someone you helped, a job or project you took on - or ?)



Looking Upwards - Worship (10 mins)

Songs of Worship; Prayers; Bible Readings; Meditations etc.



Looking Upwards - Bible Study (40 mins)

Read through the above Bible reading (and any readings below and the references in the sermon notes) and answer the following questions. You may find it helpful to read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss your answers in your Home Group.

1: In what ways can you, like Daniel in 2:49, look after the interests and well being of other members of the church family in our world today?

2: Have you ever been guilty, like Nebuchadnezzar, of turning your back on God, despite the fact that he has answered your prayers? If so, in what ways might you have done this?

3: How much emphasis does music have in enabling you to worship God, vs4-7? Is this important to you? Why, why not?

4: Have you deliberately used times of silence, as well as speaking, in your witnessing, vs16? Share any experiences of a time when either of these have been particularly effective.

5: Are you still holding on to some things in your life that you know God wants you to let go? Do you worship some things that you know are not honouring to God, vs18?

6: Can you think of a situation in your life where God has intervened in a miraculous way, just as he did with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the furnace, vs19-27?

7: When Nebuchadnezzar submitted to God it radically changed his life, vs28-30. Have you experienced something like this? If so, share with your experience with your home group.



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



Looking Inwards - *Caring for each other* (15 mins)

Is there anything you would like to share with the group:

For Thanksgiving?

For Prayer?

Or for help from the group?

*(Reflect with the Lord on your life at the moment and think if there is anything you would like to share and which you feel is appropriate. This is an **opportunity to share**, not something you have to do, however - 'it's the sharing that enables the caring!')*



Looking Outwards - *Concern for others* (15 mins)

Is there anything concerning someone in: church; family; friends; or neighbours which you would like to share:

For Thanksgiving?

For Prayer?

Or for possible action by the group?

(Please be careful not to pass on anything that is confidential or which you think the person concerned would not wish to be shared).

