

Daniel 3

I want to ask you a question: Have you ever stood up for what you believed in and done what you felt was right in a situation, only to have your problems get worse instead of better?

Ever been there, when fuel has been added to the fire of your life; if you have, then you know what I'm talking about! It hurts, doesn't it!

Well, you've done nothing to deserve it, just as Job did nothing to deserve his pain and Jesus did nothing to deserve his. It's what Peter called 'unjust suffering', and that's exactly what you find right here in Daniel 3.

When you look at the opening verse in the chapter we see 'a tremendous statue.'

I suppose it could be construed as a repeat performance. The difference is, he's not going to be outdone, there's no way he's going to play second fiddle, so he goes one step further.

Nebuchadnezzar wasn't content to be seen only as the head of gold, that wasn't big enough for him, that wasn't good enough for him, he wanted to be all of gold. So he had a brainwave, he would build a statue dedicated to himself. This guy was a legend in his own mind.

This was a magnificent monument. Look at the dimensions, they are breathtaking: it was ninety feet high and nine feet wide. It was truly resplendent in the noonday sun. It was like a golden toothpick or the Washington Monument.

Dominated skyline - see it from 15 miles away. This guy was on an ego trip. No expense was spared. He saw himself as the golden boy of world affairs. He has a sense of personal

invincibility, after all he had been on the throne for forty years and never lost a battle.

He thumbs his nose at God and builds this massive idol as a glittering symbol of his sovereign rule. It's an ancient version of secular humanism.

The reality is, and it's a sad one, it was a tangible contradiction of what he had been told in the dream which Daniel interpreted for him sixteen years earlier. It was a flat denial of the purpose of God in that Babylon would pass away. The head of gold would be superseded by the chest and arms of silver.

So far as he was concerned, it didn't matter what Daniel said, it mattered a lot less what God said, the only thing that mattered to him was 'long live Babylon!'

He thought he knew better than the God of heaven. He was too big for his boots! He ended up making a common mistake, an elementary error of judgment, he thought he could change the course of history to suit his own ends.

The chosen site for this glittering showpiece was the plain of Dura. That was a flat stretch of land between mountains, a sort of natural arena. It was conveniently located so that its full potential could be exploited. It was a PR man's dream! There would be no side shows vying for the attention of the people.

And given all the hype surrounding it, there's no doubt, it would be a real money spinner. The old king would be laughing all the way to the bank! A tourist attraction in the desert.

The next two verses lead us to consider 'a typical summons.'

Everybody who was anybody in Babylon was summoned by royal command to be present on this rather auspicious occasion. The invitation was given, that's true, but he wasn't the kind of person you could say 'no' to! You were more or less told, be there, and you had no option, but to be there!

A huge company of civil servants from the lowest to the highest in terms of pecking order were all in attendance. Officialdom was gathered, all were suitably dressed for the event of the year. They were there from every ethnic group and religion under his authority.

It was the place to be seen to be, it would be the talking point in the city square for years to come. This was high society. It was an extravagant celebration of pomp and pageantry. It must have been quite a sight, quite an occasion.

When we come to verses 4-7 we are confronted with 'a terse statement.'

It's a royal edict, a presidential mandate. To all those present from near and far, there was only one message heard. It was loud and clear. They had to toe the party line and bow down to the golden image when the appropriate signal was given. If they failed to do so, it would mean being thrown to the flames. It was pay homage or face the dire consequences. It was prostration or extermination.

In many ways, this image was a subtle and successful attempt by the king to deify himself. He was setting himself up as one of the gods. He yearned for the worship and adulation of his

people. He saw himself as their messiah. He was their deliverer and had brought salvation to many through his war machine.

Yes, it was a political high day. But, allied to that, is the religious element. He's welding together politics and religion in a shrewd move to win and woo his subjects. He's using religion as a tool of the state. He knows if he can conquer their hearts he has captivated their imagination. He knows if he can succeed here, they'll be eating out of his hand for years to come. We've seen them around the world - Mao in China, Lenin in Russia, Saddam in Baghdad, Hoxha in Albania, Castro in Cuba ...

And so the ceremony continues with the orchestra leading the way. The music is heard as each instrument strikes up. The atmosphere is electric as the band keeps on playing. The temperature rises. The sand stirs.

To a man, and they tell us there were 300,000 there, the vast congregation falls down in unison to the golden statue. Backsides in the air, noses in the sand, as they worship the king and pay tribute to his greatness.

Ah, that's only part of the story, it's not all the story. If the truth be told, there were three notable exceptions. A trio of young men who stood their ground, a minority of the radical right.

They knew what they were doing, they knew they were guilty of treason, they knew they were putting their head on the block. They stand out as plain as three pikestaffs. So what, they reckoned! A totalitarian regime would not dictate to them nor would the threat of a horrible death deter them. Talk about pressure, they knew all about that! The

old cliché springs to mind, 'everybody's doing it!'

Well, in this case, everybody wasn't doing it!

These guys were swimming against the tide.

And, in verses 8-12 you can read all about the outcome. We have 'the accusation' that is levelled against them.

These young men were not prepared to sell their birthright, their principles weren't up for auction.

They have a different set of values. There was no way they were going to bow down to some cultic image, and they know they have the backing of God's word (Deuteronomy 5:8-10).

They were conspicuous for they stuck out like three sore thumbs. Every eye could see them, you couldn't miss them. They had abuse hurled at them, fingers were pointing in their direction. They were surrounded by an angry mob, they were easy meat for the more militant in the company.

These guys were living dangerously.

They were denounced in the king's presence by a handful of astrologers who were bent on revenge, they were determined to get even; by hook or by crook they were going to get their own back.

These guys have short memories! You can detect it, an ill wind was blowing. A conspiracy was planned and a plot was hatched to oust them and get rid of them.

In verses 13-15 we read of 'the attitude' of the king.

He was livid, he couldn't control his anger. He demanded that the impertinent trio be brought before him. A few minutes passed, it must have seemed like hours. Eventually they were rounded up and frogmarched before the most powerful man on the face of the earth. His voice was

breaking with untempered fury as he challenged them about their defiant stand.

The three young men were confronted with a triple charge: number one, they disregarded the sovereign; number two, they disobeyed the statement; and number three, they disapproved of the statue.

In other words, they showed the utmost contempt for the king, and as well as that, they showed total disrespect for the king!

Now, let's give credit where it's due, in spite of his vehement manner, he was prepared to give them the benefit of the doubt. They would have a second chance. That was rather diplomatic on his part, you would think! Maybe he was trying to be a little conciliatory!

At the same time, in the next breath, the verbal abuse was undiluted as he threatened them with the furnace if they maintained their intransigence. He adds salt to the wound by cynically reminding them of their fate from which there would be no escape.

He falls for it again, in an outburst of blatant arrogance he sets himself up as one who is greater than God. He has a short memory as he tries to cut the Lord down to size, he belittles Jehovah!

Next three verses, 16-18, give us 'the answer.'

Humanly speaking, their backs are to the wall.

They're in a strait jacket - they can't wriggle out of the predicament they find themselves in. The stark choice is one of life or death. The decision is theirs alone. No one else can make it for them.

They offer no defence. They tender no apologies.

They make no excuses. O yes, they're guilty.

And, second time round, they would do exactly the same. They will not recant! Their minds are made up. They stick to their guns. They won't give an inch in spite of the unrelenting pressure upon them.

Even though the crowd is baying for blood, and the king is precariously perched, they are emphatic in their determination to stand up and be counted for their God.

Their faith is real. They have an implicit trust in God. It's a childlike confidence. They know he can perform miracles, they know he can deliver them from it, and if he chooses not to do that he can deliver them in it, and if he doesn't want to go down that road he can deliver them out of it!

Their God specialises in rescue missions, these men knew their OT history, he has done it before, and he can do it again! They understand, as God's people throughout history have always known, that the battle is the Lord's. At the same time, they are earthed to reality. They know there is the possibility he may choose not to intervene.

Whatever happens, they are genuinely resigned to the will of God. They know his way is the best way even though it may not be the easiest route to follow at times. Their God is sovereign, and their loyalty to him is in death as well as in life!

Jim Elliot and his four companions followed their example when they went to reach the Aucas in the steamy jungles of Ecuador in early 1956. On 8 January they were speared by those men who they were trying to reach with the gospel. That famous one-liner: he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. That's why they were willing to become martyrs ...

The second half of the chapter, 19 to 30, is all about freedom in the fire. In 9-21 we come face to face with 'the madness of the monarch.'

The three dissidents stand before him, they're unflinching, they're unyielding. They don't bat an eyelid! Same as before! The king changes colour as his anger reaches boiling point. Same again! If looks could kill, they would drop dead at his feet. He had been humiliated by three Jews and that was more than he was prepared to take.

The fire was raging internally as he signalled to the stoker to switch up the temperature seven times hotter. It would be a cauldron. Blt daft on his part - if he'd wanted to really hurt them, he should've turned the temperature down 7 times. His elite guard were commanded to bind the so-called infidels and hurl them into the inferno.

These guys offered no resistance, the three of them complied with the death sentence, there were no complaints from them. There was an air of dignity about them as they were carried to the fire. Faithful in life. Faithful in death.

Verses 22-25 give us a wonderful opportunity to reflect on 'the magnitude of the miraculous.'

The furnace probably resembled a modern day lime kiln with an opening in the top for the flames and smoke and another opening at ground level for stoking the fire. The soldiers carried the three rebels up the incline and tossed them into the excessive heat.

Now, before the military personnel could get back down, they were burned alive! It was like an incinerator for them on the outside as they went up in smoke; if that's what it was like on the

outside, what must it have been like on the inside?

Well, the three of them plummeted to the bottom of the furnace. Within a minute fraction of time they would be cremated, burned alive! But, the end is not yet!

The wily old king can't resist the temptation to get the last laugh. He looks through the keyhole and the shock is just like the fire, it's too hot for him to handle. He's baffled and bewildered. He tried to reconcile what he saw with what he knew. He can't believe his eyes.

Three young men were thrown into the flames, but he saw four people in there! I can see him rubbing his eyes and looking a second time, and a third time, but no, there were four people walking around in there!

That leads us on to verses 25-27 where we're introduced to 'the mystery of the man.'

The key question is this: can we identify the fourth person in the furnace? Well, I believe we can! Nebuchadnezzar said he was like 'a son of the gods.' That was his pagan way of saying that this person looked like a divine or supernatural being. He had no evangelical vocabulary. He wasn't familiar with the language of Zion. He was quite rational as he sought to explain this unusual event within the confines of his own religious framework. They were tied up, not tied down. We know it was a Christophany. That's a technical expression which means it was an appearance of Christ in the OT era. He didn't see a son of the gods, far from it, he saw the Son of God. That's who he saw! Jesus was in there with them.

They found liberty in the flames as they were unbound. They found freedom in the fire as they were able to walk around. They were miraculously kept by their God. These young men proved the promise we read of in Isaiah 43:2 – God preserved them in their hour of trial.

The old gospel song puts it like this: 'when through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie; my grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply; the flames shall not hurt thee, I only design; thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.'

The king shouted through the aperture for them to come out. And, when they emerged, they were hemmed in by a crowd of interested observers. It had never happened before. It never happened again. They were spectators to a miracle and they never knew it!

These guys came out triumphant. He expected to see them burned to a cinder, writhing in anguish. But no, he saw them walking in victory, they were unmarked. They were unscathed. These men who wouldn't bow, who wouldn't budge, who wouldn't bend; thank God, they wouldn't burn. There were no scars on their body, there were no sores on their flesh, there was no smell on their clothes, and not a single strand of their jet black hair was singed. At the end of the day, God undertook for them!

The drama comes to a finale in verses 28-30 when we are informed of 'the musings of the monarch.'

It seems to me, his sentiments are worth noting as they are an expression of praise. He sees God as a personal being and one who is interested in

the individual even to the point of being willing to snatch them from the jaws of death.

He has come to appreciate that God has a vast company of unseen hosts at his disposal and upon whom he can call at any time to act on his behalf. What began as a monument to his supremacy has become a reminder of his subordinate status to a king greater than himself.

Isn't it ironic, the mighty king who ordered the world to bow before his image now bows before the King of the world.

It's a matter of regret though, he has failed to recognise that God is the only God. He seems to have a mental block when it comes to grasping such a fundamental truth as the unrivalled uniqueness of the Most High God. There's nothing unusual about that, there's a lot of people in our day who grapple with the same issue.

Nebuchadnezzar was bowled over with the dedication and commitment of these young men. He was impressed with their clear stand even when it came to the point of accepting martyrdom. What really dazzled everyone that day wasn't the gold on the statue, but the golden faith of three young men.

Then he issued another edict to the nation, he readily acknowledged the deliverance God engineered before his own two eyes. It was an attempt to christianise the thinking of other people by forcing them to adopt a particular lifestyle.

Promotion to higher office was the outcome for Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego. It was a tough way to get it, but that's a principle often found in scripture, the path of suffering is the path to promotion.

Well, you've heard the old saying before, I'll say it again, all's well that ends well!

You know, for them and for each of us, it can be a journey from trial to triumph. Man's extremity is often God's opportunity. It shows beyond any shadow of doubt that when we are at the end of ourselves we're only then at the beginning of God. That's when your life and mine becomes an audio visual of the power of God.

I love the way the writer to the Hebrews put it, he may have been thinking of these three young men when he recorded in chapter 11:33-34 ... 'who through faith quenched the fury of the flames.'

These men could testify with Psalm 66:10-12, 'You have tested us O God; you have purified us like silver melted in a crucible ... we went through fire and flood. But you brought us to a place of great abundance.'

That's where God wants to bring you and me as his children - to a land of plenty, to a place of ample abundance - fruitfulness in life and in death. To get us there, there will be twists and turns along the road, humps and hollows, but when you stand for what is right, you never stand alone. God always stands with you.