

# Saints in the Hand of a Saving God

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[ 0 : 00 ] It's really nice to be with you here in Brunnsfield. Today I bring greetings from St. Columbus Free Church. And this is a great part of the world, Brunnsfield. I grew up in Brunnsfield.

Great place to be. On Forbes Road, actually. And so I've always known this church was here and has been a witness to the gospel for many years.

And I'm very glad to be with you. So we'd covet your prayers for our own church as well. We are in the midst of refurbishment and we're not due to be back in the building for a little while.

We're worshipping in the hub at the moment, which is good. We're kind of recapturing the hub for the gospel because it used to be a church, of course, and it's no longer. So that's been great. But we are kind of longing for our own building and to be back in it.

So we bow your prayers for that. But we're going to look for a little while this morning at Daniel chapter 3. You had it gloriously read by David Susha. Much better than I would have read it.

[ 1 : 07 ] And it's a great passage and it's a great story. And the great thing about the Bible, I think, for us, when we come to the Bible, the great thing about it, whether it's Old Testament or New Testament, that it's never out of date and it's never irrelevant.

And I think that's for two reasons. One is very obvious because it's the Word of God. It's the living Word of God. God's alive and this is the Word he's given us. This is what he wants to communicate to us with, his Word.

And so it's relevant, obviously, at that level. But it's also relevant, I think, because it talks about God who is living. He's alive and it's a declaration and an explanation of his character.

But it also deals with people. So it's about God. It's kind of simple, really. It's about God and it's about people. It's about God's story for humanity and God's rescue for humanity.

But it's about people and it's about God. And God doesn't change. And actually, people don't change. Circumstances change. Cultures change.

[ 2 : 08 ] Time changes. But I think fundamentally and primarily spiritually, we don't change. So there's a huge amount we learn when God unpacks the lives of people because we can see him speaking to us and say, well, I recognize that.

And we can see characteristics and traits and things in people that are hugely significant. And challenging for us. And we plug Christ and the gospel and the rescue of Jesus Christ into all of our understanding of God's word.

So I'm going to do a short character study, character studies of the people in this chapter. And they're all kind of different. And I hope that we can see things negatively and positively, maybe challenged.

I don't know many of you, so maybe there'll be things that I don't know about in your lives. I'm absolutely sure that's the case. And things in my own life that we look at from this chapter and say, well, God has challenged me about that in my life.

And God is wanting me to refocus my own thoughts on Jesus Christ and what it means to belong to Jesus Christ. So can I start with Nebuchadnezzar, the king who's in this story?

[ 3 : 22 ] And obviously you've learned a little bit about him already as you come up to here. But what we see, and the great thing about Nebuchadnezzar in this story, or throughout Daniel, is that God's working with him.

Okay? God doesn't abandon him. And God is patient with him. And in this chapter, I think if you were to use one characteristic to describe Nebuchadnezzar, I think it would be that he's completely self-absorbed.

He's entirely self-focused. He loves himself. And he's hugely powerful. Power is a dangerous thing. And he loves the power that he has.

And he is interested in what his life can be like and how great his life can be. Can I just ask you to flick back with me to the previous chapter, to Daniel chapter 2 and verse 36.

Remember, he's given a dream in the previous chapter, which Daniel interprets, which is a message from God for Nebuchadnezzar. But in verse 36, this was the dream.

[ 4 : 26 ] This is Daniel speaking. And now we will interpret it to the king. You, O king, are the king of kings. Stop! That's it. He doesn't listen to anything else in the dream from that moment on.

He has heard what God has said. You, Nebuchadnezzar, are the king of kings. I'm the man. I'm the one. And that's from God.

God has said, I'm the king of kings. He doesn't listen to anything else. His ears are closed to the God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might.

He doesn't listen to any of that. You, Nebuchadnezzar, you're the man. You're the king of kings. And that suited him greatly. And he just went away and thought about that.

And thought about his position and thought about his power. Remember, he was a really most powerful man in the world at the time. I mean, his country was a dominating country and had defeated many nations around about.

[ 5 : 29 ] So he had a huge kingdom. And it was a huge political task for him and governmental task for him to keep control of all these different nations, all these different peoples.

And this just bolstered what he felt about himself, how powerful and significant he was. And so he thought, having received this dream of a plan to control and to govern and to keep all of these different subservient nations, servile nations that were around about him under Babylon's care.

And so he thought of this great plan to make an idol. We're not told what the idol was. It may well have been of himself. I'm not sure.

But he builds this great idol and he encourages out too weak a word. He demands that all the nations, all the subservient nations, and there's a humorous pomposity about the chapter where the writer almost mocks the significance of Nebuchadnezzar, repeating all the instruments that need to be sounded and all the different people that need to respond when these instruments sound.

And they are all to bow down wherever they are to his idol, to his God. And it was a display of his power.

[ 6 : 57 ] It was to be a display of his control. I am the sovereign here and you do what I say. It was a reasonable syncretism that he was engaged in here.

You can worship your own gods the rest of the time. You can worship God of Israel or whoever. But when I say, and when the sound of music comes, you bow down. And you bow down because I'm king.

And if not, there's this kind of underlying threat that you'll just be burnt alive. It's malevolent kind of threat that he has here. And it was an ostentatious display of power.

His idol was half the size of the Scott Monument. It was big. It wasn't just a kind of biddly wee small idol. It was really big. So everyone could write. It was on the plains of Juras.

It was in a flat piece of land. And there was a remarkable amount of organization that would be involved in this display of power. It was to encourage conformity among the people.

[ 7 : 54 ] But also to instill a big brother mentality. So that people would tell on others who didn't worship. Which is exactly what happened.

A sense of mistrust. A sense of power. And a sense of control. He was showing himself to be utterly self-absorbed. And wanting to maintain this king of kings state that he had.

He believed from God. But he was resisting God all the time. You see he chose not to listen. And you know what the rest of the dream declared and spoke about in terms of a kingdom.

In terms of who God was. But his ego was bigger than God. He had this huge ego. And he was hugely independent. And he was the center of his own existence.

And the situation he found himself in allowed him to be one who was self-fulfilling to the very end degree.

[ 8 : 56 ] And that's what we find with Nebuchadnezzar here. Interestingly God continues to deal with him. It's great. And we're thankful for that. God's incredible patience. But sometimes.

And I don't for a moment think any of us really like Nebuchadnezzar. I certainly hope not. We don't have the opportunity. I always think power is a dangerous thing. And I wonder what. I certainly wonder what I would be like if I had any power.

Power is not a good thing. But there's a reflection sometimes of our condition. When we think of Nebuchadnezzar and the way he treated God. I think even with regard to God's word. I think it's easy for us as Christians. And this is a very wide link in many ways between Nebuchadnezzar and ourselves.

But we can be selective listeners to God's word in the way that Nebuchadnezzar was. And we can choose to listen to the bits of God's word that really suit us. That we really like.

[ 9 : 52 ] That actually confirm us in our selfishness and in our self-centeredness. And yet we can attribute that to God. And that's sometimes an easy thing for us to do.

We can be selective in our listening to God's word. I really like that. I love that bit about love and forgiveness. But that stuff about justice and mercy and sacrifice. I'm not so keen on that.

And I don't think that's what God's speaking to me. And we can sometimes attribute to God's will.

Actually, what is really what we want to do. And we just want God to rubber stamp what we want to do ourselves.

And we resist his lordship. And that is exactly what Nebuchadnezzar was doing. He listened to the little bit of the dream that suited him. But he was resisting the sovereignty and the lordship of God in his life, which God went on to deal with.

And that can be easy for us to do also. We can manage God and manipulate God so that we are still at the center of our lives.

[ 10 : 57 ] And we are at the center of our decision making. And that God isn't lord. And there's a challenge then for us as we recognize the depth of self-absorption that we face in our own hearts and lives.

And the great need for God's grace and God's forgiveness and God's love and sacrifice in all that we do. So Nebuchadnezzar. Then there's Daniel, of course, in the story.

No. No. Actually, Daniel's not in this story. And we forget about that when we come to this account. He's not in the story at all. Well, this is the book of Daniel. We've expected Daniel to be here.

But Daniel's nowhere to be found. The guy whose name, the attribution of the name of the book is his. And yet he's not in the story. You know, like you go down to England, the premiership.

And Manchester United and Manchester City and Tottenham Hotspur. You expect them to be top of the league. The first three places, they're not there. They're not to be found. It's strange. What's wrong?

[ 12 : 02 ] But it's Leicester City. And so Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are the kind of Leicester city of this story. They're there at the top. They're important.

And they're significant. They're the Old Testament equivalents. And we love the story of Daniel. We love the story of dare to be a Daniel. And it's great. I'm not so sure about striving to be a Shadrach.

It's the same kind of oomph about it as dare to be a Daniel. But actually, it's very important.

Because this story of Daniel isn't about Daniel, ultimately. Or primarily.

And it isn't about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, ultimately. It's actually about God's grace.

And God is the main player in the story.

And there are different characters and important individuals, unique individuals, significant individuals. But this is about God's redeeming power and his grace and his glory at work in these people's lives.

[ 13 : 02 ] And that's a great encouragement to us. We don't need to be Daniels. We don't even need to be Shadrach, Meshach and Abednegoes. Or the equivalent Babylonian names that were given.

We are just ordinary punters. We're ordinary people. But God, in his grace and in his glory and his goodness, transforms our ordinary lives.

And we can be tremendously useful in his service. Then I want to come briefly, before we look at the lads themselves, to the astrologers. And this is just a very small, short point.

But just as Nebuchadnezzar's main characteristic in the story is self-absorption. And then you have the astrologers whose great downfall here is pride.

Not pride, as it was with Nebuchadnezzar. Pride and self-absorption. But jealousy. They don't come across particularly worthy. And it's a miserable characteristic.

[ 13 : 59 ] Jealousy. In anyone's lives, particularly within the Christian community. It's a horrible thing to see and to experience and to know in our own hearts. These powerful people didn't like Daniel.

They didn't like his rise to power. They didn't like the influence that he had over Nebuchadnezzar. And they wanted to see him completely destroyed.

And they wanted to get rid of him. They hated his position. They hated his nationality. They hated his faith. And they hated his success. But rather than attacking Daniel, they know that he's got friends.

And they know they can get to Daniel through them and through what they are doing. And they very subtly set a trap for them. And it's filled with jealousy and it's filled with destructiveness, which we should note.

They use destructive language. In verse 12, they say to King Nebuchadnezzar that these guys don't care about you in any way at all.

[15:13] They are... If I can find it, yeah. These men have no time for you whatsoever. And they don't bow down to you in their lives and in their worship.

Sorry, I was going to the next chapter. That's why I couldn't find it. I'm next week's sermon already. And so there's this rage within him. They pay no attention to you, O Daniel.

They pay no attention to you, O Nebuchadnezzar. They don't worship you. They don't serve you. They subtly remind Nebuchadnezzar that they are Jews, that they come from a defeated nation. They don't even use their new Babylonian names. They use their old Jewish names. And it's all very subtle. And it's all very racial. And it's all very religious antagonism.

It seems that anti-Semitism was as alive and well then as it is now, as we've seen in the newspapers over the last number of weeks.

[16:16] But that jealousy is to bring destruction to the people, bring destruction to their lives. And jealousy in our lives is a very quick explanation for us.

Jealousy is a very destructive thing in our own lives, particularly within the church family. When we are jealous or covetous or disloyal or manipulative, it can be very subtly tearing us apart.

And it is from the pit of hell. Remember and recognize anything within the Christian community that separates us from one another, whether it be jealousy or pride or anything else, it comes from the pit of hell.

And we're doing Ephesians this morning in our morning worship. And the whole core of that letter is about what Christ has come to do is to unite all of heaven and earth together under him.

So there's unity bringing together. And from the very beginning, Satan has sought to divide us from God, separate us from God and from one another. And so it's a great challenge. But now let's come to the lads very briefly this morning.

[17:31] What a situation they find themselves in. They must have been under great temptation. They had risen to this great position of authority and significance.

And they knew God had brought them there. And they must have been tempted. Well, if they weren't, I certainly would have put myself in their shoes to just keep a low profile.

Let's just not say much just now. Let's just be under the radar. And we can compromise on this one, surely, because it's not like he's stopping us worshipping our God.

We can just turn up and when all the sound of music starts and we'll do a little bow down. But we'll not really mean it. We'll not really worship his idol. God has surely brought us to this place.

He doesn't want to rip us away from here. Now he's placed us here. We'll just quietly do what we're commanded and we'll have great influence as leaders, as political and dynamic leaders in this nation.

[18:32] That must have been a great temptation. But what we see in these guys' lives, and I think it's a great characteristic for ourselves, and one which we often lack, is tremendous courage.

Because they recognized, and the story that we had earlier of Joseph was very relevant as well to this, there was a line in the sand for them. There are some things that we can compromise on in our lives, in our lives in the world.

But here we recognize and see that for them and for their people, idolatry was always the great sin of Israel.

And it was the great sin that had driven them into captivity. And they simply could not bow down and worship a false God. There comes a time in our lives, in our relationships, in our choices, in our interactions with the world, where we must stand up and be counted, where we must recognize that our faith and the honesty and the significance of our faith is being challenged.

And these guys stand up here, although there's great potential risk for them so to do. They have a great relationship with their God, and they love their God.

[ 19 : 54 ] I think the verses 16 to 18 are some of the best verses in the whole Bible. O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve, or it can be translated, our God is able to save us, and he will rescue us from your hand, O King.

But even if he doesn't, we just want you to know we're still not going to bow down. That's a fantastic apologetic for their faith.

And they are standing with great courage. They know their God. They love their God. They serve their God. He is someone they know intimately and personally in a covenant relationship.

He's saved them. He's redeemed them spiritually. He's forgiven them. And they have this unswerving loyalty to him, which is tremendous. There's no pride.

There's no spiritual kind of arrogance. There's no naming and claiming of a deliverance. God, we serve you. They didn't know the end of the story at this point. It wasn't that they were saying, this is easy.

[ 21 : 01 ] God's going to take us out of the fire. And martyrdom was a real reality for them. They had no knowledge at this point that they were going to be set free in a miraculous way as they were.

They didn't call down the divine waters to quench the flames. They didn't make an ultimatum with God. Well, God, we're going to be loyal here. And you've really got to deliver us.

You've got to show your power. They simply said, look, if he delivers us, we love him. If he delivers us, that's great. If he doesn't, we're just going to let you know we'll be burned alive, but we're not going to bow down and worship your idol.

And that needs astonishing, astonishing courage. It's the most, I think it's the most unmanipulative thing I've ever read. They don't in any way try and manipulate God to kind of reward them for what they're doing.

They simply state it as it is in humility and they have faith in their God, not in the circumstances they find themselves in. Or they don't question or test God and say, we will carry on serving you, but hey, man, you've got to deliver us from this fire.

[ 22 : 10 ] The solution wasn't theirs. They left the solution to God. They simply trusted him in the bleakness of that moment and in the fear of that moment. They knew God was good.

I think there's obviously great lessons for us there, which we'll briefly come to. Theirs was a polite rebellion. I like the idea of rebellion.

I like it. I like the whole concept of rebellion. But in a grace-filled way. Okay? And I think sometimes we mix up rebellion as Christians with just being a pain in the neck.

And I don't think that's what it means. They didn't seem to seek any confrontation. There wasn't any petitions that they laid out about how terrible it was to worship idols. Don't worship idols.

It's a bad idol. They just got on with their life. And there's a graceful subversion about them. There's a sweet sedition. They were divine dissidents.

[ 23 : 15 ] But they reflected the grace of God. They were quiet revolutionaries. And their radical behavior was obedience.

Was simple obedience. They didn't want the front page. They didn't want to be dramatic and miraculous. They simply were obedient. And that was the most radical thing they could do.

And it outworked in what happened, of course. And I think we learn. I hope we learn from... I certainly learn from the example of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

The importance of not compromising to whatever it is that is challenging us to put something else other than God at the center of our lives and hearts, which is, of course, idolatry for us.

There doesn't tend to be big, ugly idols that we are asked to bow down and worship physically in our postmodern, sophisticated, scientific society.

[ 24 : 20 ] There are many other things that take the place of God in our hearts. Very simple, invisible things. And unless we are willing to be courageous and stand up for Christ Jesus in these matters, then we will find ourselves falling in love with all kinds of idols that take his place.

There's a phrase that has just been rumbling around my mind for a long few weeks now, which is that we will always find time for the things we love.

We will always find time for the things we love. And that is reflected in our relationship with Christ and the preeminence and the priority he has in our lives.

If we love him, if we understand him as he is, we will make time for him. And very often when we think about that, we are challenged by actually what we idolize, what we spend our time. I'm not speaking about things we have to do, like work. But the things that we choose to do will often reflect the condition of our hearts and the priorities and the choices that we make in our lives. [ 25 : 31 ] So these were guys who were not blustering Christians. They simply were dependent and quiet and real in their faith. And they had a great trust in the goodness of God despite the bad circumstances they were in.

And I think that also for us is the great challenge. How many of us are tempted to say, you know, I thought I was going to be a Christian. I thought life was going to be great. And when trouble and difficulty and trial and darkness comes into our lives, we question God's goodness. And we say, well, why will he do this? And we recognize that our trust is actually in our circumstances and in the pleasure of our lives rather than the God himself who is good and gracious and kind and gentle.

We often spend time telling God what he should do, how he should rescue, that he must rescue, that he must change my experiences and my circumstances.

And yet here we have this remarkable faith of these guys which says, look, I may burn alive here, but I'm not going to bow the knee to this idol.

[ 26 : 49 ] And that's a backbone and a courage that our 21st century society, Western society probably struggles with a little bit, which focuses so much on, you know, self-fulfillment and having a great life and da-da-da and all these things.

So the lads are a great example. And I'll just finish with our amazing God. And we must finish with this because that's the whole point of the story here is that God does intervene.

God is with them and he walks with them in the fire. And Nebuchadnezzar recognizes that. He's not an ignorant man. It's not that he doesn't know that there's a God.

He's already had clear indication of that. And he knows that God is involved in these guys. Like, he still isn't a believer. And, you know, you'll see in the next chapter he goes on and continues to pat himself on the back for being the greatest man that ever lived.

So God has to really humble him. But nonetheless, he does see that God is there. And this concluding section is really written in such a way to remind us that it's utterly and completely a miracle of God.

[ 28 : 12 ] There's nothing that's noted in this section that is insignificant. So you've got the, you know, the real rage of the king, the most powerful man in the world. He is the one who's powerful.

Well, he's going to destroy these guys, the upstarts. Who do they think they are? And he's going to destroy them. He's so angry at what they've done. And so he heats up the furnace seven times hotter.

Remember, when it was seven times less hotter, it still burned people alive. So it's seven times more hotter and it burns people alive and the people that throw them in. So it's really hot.

And he doesn't care about the soldiers that are burned alive. And there's this lovely little phrase which reminds us that he throws them into the fire and he throws them in with all their clothes on. And with their turban and with their cloak and with all these loose fitting clothes. Now you might, that's just an insignificant piece of information. But it is quite interesting because they would have gone up just in an instant in that fire.

[ 29 : 12 ] All the clothes. It's not like they went in naked. They've got all these added clothes. You know, turbans and coats, they burn quickly. They burn easily. So they're all wearing all these things and the soldiers are burned up.

They're tied up. There's no way this could be a kind of magic trick. There's nothing in here that allows for that. And then, of course, they throw three people in and there's four of them in the fire. Someone with them in the fire. And, of course, Nebuchadnezzar recognized that as God, as a pre-incarnate recognition of Jesus Christ. It may be one of the angels.

But God in his presence is there. And they come out. Now their hair isn't singed. Their robes weren't scorched. There's not even the smell of fire.

Have you ever been in a room that's been ablaze and you come out? Oh, your clothes and your turban and your coat and everything else. Oh, smell of fire. Nothing. Nothing like that. There's nothing. It's a complete and absolute and total miracle.

[ 30 : 14 ] God is the one who has protected them for everyone to see at this hugely significant time. And there's a great, we finish with that great recognition of the nature of Jesus Christ and his rescue.

He comes into their experience. He walks in the fire with them. Now, you can broaden that. See, that's exactly what Jesus Christ does. When the word becomes flesh.

He walks with us. He knows what it's like to be a punter. He knows what it's like to be ordinary. He knows what it's like to live in this world. He lives the life that we should live.

And more than that, he goes into the fire of God's wrath and God's judgment and our hell to deliver us. So, he goes into that to redeem us.

But you can add to that as well, I think, by saying, but not only does he do that to free us from the judgment that we deserve, but also in this life.

[ 31 : 21 ] And we read at the beginning of the service in Isaiah 43. But I think that Isaiah 43, by the way, I think this is a direct fulfillment of that prophecy that he will, when you, you will not be burned though you walk through the flames.

And I will be with you always. But I think there's a picture there of our Christian lives so often for us, is that he is with us in the fire, not from it.

Now, that's an old application. I know that. But I think it's a valid one, a really valid one. That he doesn't say, you're going to have a fire-free life. You're going to have a problem-free life.

You're not going to get burned. Well, you're not going to get burned. But you are going to be in the fire. And it is going to be, there is going to be, for us in this life, suffering and difficulty and struggle and battle.

But he says, I am with you in it for your peace, for your protection and spiritually for your healing and for your wholeness. Now, that is not an easy thing.

[ 32 : 23 ] And I don't in any way say that glibly or cheaply or by any means try to undermine people's suffering and difficulty.

Far from it. People go through terrible things. We've been praying about some of the things that people are going to do. Christians in Syria and in other places, going through terrible things. They ask their question, where is God?

Why is God? Unless we hold on to his goodness and his ultimate rescue, his rescue in the situation now so that we can glorify him in it.

But obviously, ultimately, his rescue in the new heavens and new earth, which is great, which is going to be wonderful. Then we lose everything. Because if you start thinking, if I start thinking God isn't good, he's not really good.

He's actually evil, which is the only thing we can say. If we're blaming him for not being good in the way that he's treating us in our lives, then we are left really confused and in a really difficult place spiritually.

[ 33 : 31 ] And we want to hold on because no greater love has a man than this that he lays down his life for his friends. And that's what Jesus Christ has done so that we might live. So the key to all of this, in many ways for us, is listening to the whole of the interpretation of the dream Daniel got in chapter 2, which finishes off with this great prophecy of the God of heaven who will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people.

That we are citizens of that kingdom now. That we belong and that there's an eternal dimension to that kingdom. which is going to be outworked in a new heavens and a new earth wherein dwells righteousness.

And he is the one who holds the keys. He is important. And it is great to belong to him in that kingdom. It's a battle. It's a struggle. We'll be asked to do things that we find difficult.

We'll be asked to stand up and be courageous, particularly maybe in the society in which we live today. But he is worthy. He's worthy of us serving him. And there's not another way to life and to life in all its fullness.

There isn't. There's not another way. And if there is, come up, tell me about it, and I will bow down and I will worship you. If there's a way to eternal life that you can show me, that you have, that is different from Jesus Christ and his goodness and love and grace, I will worship you because you'll be worthy.

[ 35 : 06 ] Let's bow our heads and pray. Father God, we thank you for your truth and for your grace. We know it's difficult for us to acknowledge your lordship.

We battle with so much selfishness and pride, sometimes jealousy. We battle with our own significance. We battle with struggles and difficulties and heartache and loss. We don't understand why you treat some people seemingly the way that they are treated. We don't understand why our lives sometimes are so good. We simply hold on to this great knowledge of your goodness, perfect goodness, and of your grace and commitment to us in coming to walk in the flames, to walk in the fires of life, but also to walk through the darkness of the flames of hell, to redeem us and save us from that desperate separation that is the future of those who do not know or bow the knee to their creator and Lord and Jesus Christ. So help us to be humble like Shadrach, Bishach and Abednego, quiet in our subversiveness, gentle, graceful, respectful, but really steely and strong. And using our lives as an opportunity, even when difficulties arise, to witness and worship and point people to Jesus Christ and help us to do that in your name. [ 36 : 47 ] Amen.