

May God be with You

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Preacher: Archie Winnington-Ingram

[0:00] Thanks so much, Daisy, for reading. Well done with all those various names. It's a tricky one, isn't it? And please do keep that passage open in front of you. I think this is one of those classic Bible stories.

Even if you're not familiar with church or if you kind of grew up in Sunday school, you might know about the fiery furnace. Daniel contains a couple of stories like this. We'll come to the lion's den in a few weeks' time.

But this week, it's the furnace, and it's a belter of a story, isn't it? To get us to the heart of this story, I want to tell you about a friend of mine. It was his birthday just last week. And he's a bit of a Star Wars fan. His birthday is actually on the 4th of May.

Most people get a happy birthday. Certainly, that's what I get. That's what people say to me on my birthday. But he always gets a May the 4th be with you. If you don't know Star Wars, that's a reference to something they often say in Star Wars.

They say, may the 4th be with you. It's almost like a way of saying good luck in the Star Wars films. Sometimes there's this unseen power in those films called the force. And individuals can kind of harness the force to their benefit, whatever it is that they face.

[1:06] And though the force is always there, they wish one another luck like this. May the force be with you. Now, if you remember nothing else this morning from all of what I'm about to say, let it be this.

Whatever it is that you face in life, may God be with you. As we approach this chapter of God's Word together, we're going to see how Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, they drew a line in the sand.

They refused to conform to the culture around them. And so they faced that fiery furnace. And as they do that, they trusted not only that their God was powerful to save, but that he would be with them.

And so that's where we're heading, towards trusting that our God is powerful to save. And that most wonderfully, that whatever we face, as we draw our lines in the sand by faith, that in every trial of life and ultimately as we face that final trial of death, we can be confident that our God is with us. So let me pray one more time to that end. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, I pray once more that you would give us ears this morning to hear what you would have to say to us.

[2:23] That you would be stirring our hearts by your Spirit and you would be helping us to see Jesus. God, would you be with us for your glory?

Amen. Let's dive in then with our first point this morning, which is the pressure to conform. It's there in verses 1 to 7.

And as we do that, I want you to think for a moment about Nazi Germany. I wonder if you can picture the scene of Nazi Germany. It's Berlin. In 1939, there are red, white and black flags everywhere, swastikas, eagles, and everyone is doing the Nazi salute.

It's really a thinly veiled worship, isn't it? And of course, behind that worship is the systematic murder of Jews, as well as all sorts of other unwanted people groups.

Can you take yourself there? And I wonder if you were an ordinary German living in Berlin in 1939, what would you do?

[3:27] Would you throw your lot in with the powers of the day? Maybe you'd keep your head down and go with the flow and salute the flag, even though you know deep down that you're unhappy with what's going on.

Or maybe you'd have drawn a line there, maybe even at the cost of your own life. Just be honest with yourself. What would you have done? Here in Scotland today, the cultural injustices obviously aren't as bold as that.

They aren't as in your face. But either way, there's no doubt, isn't there, that there are pressures to conform on all of us today. Last week, after Graham's sermon in chapter 2, we asked what cultural norms you felt most under pressure to conform to.

Almost half of you said something about cultural views on sexuality and gender. Some of you talked about gossip and a culture of badmouthing other people, especially at work.

Speaking of work, lots of you spoke about the relentless pursuit of wealth and success and approval. The truth is, it's different for all of us, but we all face, don't we, pressure to conform to culture in one way or another.

[4:40] And we're going to take a deeper dive into some of that this morning, but it's worth asking yourself that question as we go. And maybe particularly if you're a growth group this week, a good question to be asking, where am I under the most pressure to conform to culture in ways that would compromise my faith?

Let's dive in at verse 1. See in verse 1, check out what Nebuchadnezzar... Actually, can we just agree to call him Neb?

Would that be all right? Can we just call him Neb? It'd be much easier. Check out what Neb's doing. He's made this massive image of gold. It really is massive. I've got 60 cubits high in my Bible. Yours might have translated that into a modern measurement. It's about 90 feet, I think nearly 30 meters. And if you've ever seen the Angel of the North, if you've driven the M1, it's a bit bigger than that.

It's an imposing thing. And notice, Neb, he sets it up on the plain of Jura. I guess that's just an empty space, giving it maximum visibility.

[5:43] And then in verse 2, he invites... In fact, he doesn't invite them, does he? He summons them, the satraps and prefects, governors, advisors, treasurers, judges, magistrates.

In other words, all the important civil servants. And as if we hadn't got the picture, he continues, still in verse 2, and all the other provincial officials. Notice the power of Neb to summon everyone who's anyone to come and see this golden image.

And in verse 3, he summons them. Notice the repetition. They all come. And not just to see it, but to participate. See at the end of verse 2, again in verse 3, to participate in its dedication.

This image is specifically being set up to be worshipped. We get that even more strongly as we continue reading in verse 4. Therefore, the people are commanded, when they hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, pipe, and all kinds of music, they are commanded to fall down and worship this image.

If there was any doubt as to what is going on here, it's clear, isn't it, that Neb has set this thing up to be worshipped. And if you're there, you don't have a choice.

[6:57] You've been summoned, and now you're commanded to do that. And what Neb is up to here, I actually think it should be quite a big surprise to us. If you were here last week, at the end of chapter 2, in verse 47 of chapter 2, if you want to look back at that, Neb makes this remarkable statement.

It says, Daniel, surely your God is the God of gods, and the Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries. And so we get this at the end of chapter 2, and I guess we're thinking, brilliant, Neb's got it.

He believes in the one true God. But clearly now in chapter 3, we can look back and see that he's experienced there in chapter 2, conviction without conversion.

That is, he's recognized the truth, but he's not prepared to give himself to it exclusively. And I think that should be a big warning for us. And maybe especially if you're here and you're not a Christian, or you just, if you're honest, you just sort of dabble with it.

Maybe you come along occasionally, but you felt that conviction. Maybe you even know in your heart of hearts that it's true. If you felt yourself to be a sinner, and you know that the mercy of this God, that Jesus is your only hope, that's conviction.

[8:16] But you need to know this morning that that's not the same as conversion. You must throw yourself on that mercy. Accept the grace that God offers you in Christ.

Essentially trust in him and live exclusively for him. Don't be like Neb, making claims about God one minute and then setting up his own man-made God the next.

You see, that's exactly what he's doing. Do you notice the repetition of that phrase, set up? It's there in verse 2, and then again in verse 3, and 5, and 7, 12, 14, 18.

I might have missed some. It's just there all the time in this passage, set up, as if to underline that this image of gold, it might look impressive, but really it's just a man-made thing. It's been set up by Neb.

And yet despite the fact that it's obviously man-made, he wants everyone to bow down to it, to worship it. And if they don't, verse 6, they'll be thrown into a blazing furnace.

[9:24] And suddenly the stakes are very high. It's life or death, bow or burn. And I guess we might be left with the question, what's the problem?

Then, right, if it's life or death, why not just bow down to the golden image? Why can't we just do the God-behind-closed-doors thing and then bow in public? What's the problem? Well, the thing is, the God of the Bible demands exclusive loyalty.

The first two of the Ten Commandments are, Why does God command that? It's not just arbitrary. It's because it's true, because he is the only God. And there is only one way to know the true God. We've seen this very recently in John's Gospel, where Jesus said, Everything else, just like the image in Daniel 3, it might seem easier to bow to other things in public, but they're just man-made, set-up things.

They are no God. And it strikes me that that connects with us today in all sorts of ways, doesn't it? Because we live in a culture that is very happy for us to do what we want privately.

[10:48] Certainly, in my experience, people aren't that bothered that I'm a Christian. They might think I'm a bit strange, but I'm unlikely to face any real opposition to my faith, so long as I keep myself to myself and practice it behind closed doors.

But of course, it's more than that, because yes, they're happy for me to worship God behind closed doors, but actually people are very upset when I don't bow to the gods of culture in public.

And we can think about culture more widely, but really I think this is going to be different for each of us, because it depends on the culture of your school or group of friends or club or family or whatever. And as I said, we've got a great opportunity this week in our growth groups to talk about where the rubber hits the road for us.

And maybe just a couple of scenarios, though, to prime those conversations, some hypotheticals. First, Johnny. Johnny became a Christian at university. Whenever he went home, he'd meet up with his friends from school.

They'd go to the pub together. And Johnny didn't really have a problem with alcohol. He was happy to have a couple of pints of beer or whatever. But when his old friends were starting to order shots of tequila, some of the conversations they were having about some of the girls that they'd been at school with, just a massive pressure to conform to something that he had left behind.

[12:03] Would Johnny bow to the gods of drinking culture? Would you? Or Jessie? Jessie is a primary school teacher. And she knew that she was going to have to have a conversation with the head teacher.

She was expected to teach later that year. She'd been given the curriculum that taught that a person could be born a boy and decide to become a girl. And she thought that was going to be unhelpful and confusing for the eight-year-olds in her class.

Would Jessie bow down to the cultural gods of trans ideology? Would you? Or take Joel, our last example. Joel has refused more than once to take a promotion at work.

It would be a significant pay rise. And to be honest, they could use the extra money. But he's got a big family at home. He's got commitments at church. And the promotion would mean far more responsibility, far more travel, far more time away from his family and a step back at church.

Would Joel bow down to the gods of the rat race and worldly success? Would you? And I wonder what it is for you. I wonder what the cultures that you exist in would have you bow to.

[13:14] And can I just say, before we move on, if you don't think that this is a problem for you, if you don't think that you're under pressure to conform, then the chances are you've already compromised. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, on the other hand, in Daniel chapter 3, they refuse to compromise.

And here's our second point. Their line in the sand. Verses 8 to 18. Have a look at verse 8 with me. At this time, some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews.

Presumably, they're jealous of the way, if you remember, that Daniel and his friends have been promoted in Neb's court. Let's keep reading. They said to King Neb, may the king live forever. Your majesty has issued a decree.

We know what the decree is. Bow or burn. And then down in verse 12. But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who pay no attention to you, your majesty.

It's worth pausing there just for a second, because that's not really true, is it? We know from chapters 1 and 2 that these three Jewish men, alongside Daniel, have paid much attention to Neb.

[14:22] They've really genuinely sought the prosperity of his kingdom. They stayed up all night together to try and help him solve his dream problem. But here they draw the line.

End of verse 12. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up. These three men, they refuse to bow down. Despite the life or death, bow or burn situation, they draw a line in the sand here.

And can I just say that as they do that, they are nevertheless excellent citizens of Babylon. We were reminded two weeks ago of what God had said through the prophet Jeremiah. Advice for exiles says this, Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile.

Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper. And that is exactly what they've done, right? They've attended the Babylonian University.

They've helped King Neb, like I said, with his dream in chapter 2. But here in chapter 3, we see this is a vitally important point. Seeking the peace and prosperity of that city, being good exiles, does not rely on their bowing to the statue.

[15:34] We desperately need to know this today. For Johnny, as he draws the line in the sand, refuses the extra shot of tequila, refuses to talk about girls like that, he can nevertheless be an excellent friend.

For Jesse, as she draws her line in the sand, has that difficult conversation with her head teacher, she is nevertheless an excellent teacher. For Joel, as he makes his family and his church family a priority, he is nevertheless an excellent employee.

Refusing to bow down to the cultural gods around us is not the same thing as refusing to seek the peace and prosperity of our city. In fact, I take it we're to be excellent at doing that, even as we draw our lines in the sand.

See what happens next. Neb, he summons them. Verse 13, he's furious with rage. And he asks them at the end of verse 15, what God will be able to rescue you from my hand?

Keep that question in your back pocket for later. But see how these men answer the king. I think this is one of the most remarkable statements of faith in all of scripture. Verses 16 to 18.

[16:46] King Neb, 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. Isn't that a remarkable statement of faith?

See first their confidence in God's ability. They know that their God is the one true God. They know that he's able to deliver them from the hands of King Neb. I wonder, do we have the same confidence in God's ability as we face the golden images of our day, as we face the pressures to conform and to bow?

Are we confident that if we decide to draw the line in the sand, then our God is powerful to deal with whatever we face because of that? But not only are they confident in God's ability, they are also accepting of God's decision.

See those remarkable words at the start of verse 18. But even if he does not, they know that there's a very real chance that they might not survive the furnace.

[17:59] In fact, it would be a miracle, wouldn't it, if they did survive it? And yet, even if they don't survive, they will trust God. Do you see their trust? It goes beyond their current situation.

Indeed, it goes beyond the grave. If they trust that even if God's decision is that they will die through this, his purposes will ultimately be good and that there is life beyond that for them.

There's a lesson here for us, isn't there? In that confidence in God's ability to save, but also in an acceptance of his decision. I think that means that we can pray. We can pray like this.

Lord, heal this sickness. But if not. Lord, help me to succeed at school or college or work or uni. But if not.

Lord, bring peace to that situation. But if not. Bring salvation to this person. But if not.

[18:59] Still, I will trust you. As we determine to draw the line, wherever we will draw it, we can say, God, you are able to save. But if not.

Still, I will trust you. And as we pray that prayer, where will you draw your line in the sand? And finally, our third point.

The God who came to save. Neb is furious in verse 19. And so he orders the furnace to be heated seven times hotter than usual.

That's probably just a way of saying as hot as possible. It's so hot, in fact, that the soldiers that Neb orders to tie them up and to throw them in, it's so hot, see in verse 22, that they themselves die in the process.

This is being written to make one thing very clear. There is no way, no way that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are going to survive this. But then comes the famous moment.

[20:02] As Neb notices, see in verse 24, he's amazed. He asks, weren't there three men in there? They all reply, certainly, your majesty. Well, look, I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed.

And the fourth looks like the son of the gods. And so Neb, he has them taken out of the fire. And all those officials, the civil servants that we've already seen bowing like robots to this golden image, they're all there.

They all see that the fire hasn't touched Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. How is that possible? A lot of ink has been spilled over who that fourth person was.

Maybe it was an angel of the Lord. Maybe it was Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, a preview of what was to come. Whatever we think about that, one thing is clear. And in some ways, I think Neb himself gets it.

You remember that question he asked in verse 15? What God will be able to rescue you from my hands? Well, he answers that question himself in verses 28 and 29. Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants.

[21:12] Verse 29. No other God could save in this way. Maybe it was an angel. That's what Neb seems to think. He probably isn't the most reliable source.

Remember, he was the guy who went from praising God to commanding idol worship, furious punishment in the fire. I'm not sure we should trust Neb. But he does get one thing right. Whoever it is walking in the fire there with him, it's clear who's behind their rescue, isn't it?

It was their God. The true God, true to his promise. This promise. Hear what God said to his people as he prepared them for exile through the prophet Isaiah.

It's a wonderful promise. It says this. Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have summoned you by name. You are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.

And when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned. The flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

[22:18] Whoever it is walking in the fire with them, whether a representative of God or God himself or Jesus pre-incarnate, whatever it is, it is God who promised, I will be with you and you will not be burned.

And how much clearer that is for us with the New Testament in our hands. You know, I wonder if the furnace in this passage was also the fire that was used to refine the gold that Neb used for his statue.

Because the apostle Peter writes that God can use our fiery trials, that they won't burn us up, but that instead through them, our faith will be refined by them.

Just like gold in a furnace. Peter goes on to say, dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you as though something strange were happening to you.

I think it's true that one of the things that causes us to struggle under the pressure to bow is the surprise of it. Maybe we've been surprised before when we've drawn a line in the sand and been met with opposition.

[23:25] And so we're reluctant to go again. But Peter says, don't be surprised. Opposition to those lines in the sand, it isn't a strange thing. We saw this again in John's gospel just a couple of months ago, didn't we?

Specifically, it's not strange because Jesus faced it too. Jesus said, if the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. Living in the world as we do as exiles, with heaven as our true home, it means that we will face that fire.

And of course, we will all face that final fiery trial that is death. But we can know that our God came down, entered the world that he had created and walked with his people in the person of Jesus.

He died in our place facing that final fiery trial on our behalf so that we can face the furnace of death. And like him, the promise is that we will walk out the other side without being so much as singed by it.

But more than that, and wonderfully, if you remember again in John's gospel, just after Jesus has warned them about the hatred of the world, he says this.

[24:38] That is because Jesus died and rose again, because he's made a way for us to do the same, he's also made a way to be present with his people in the meantime.

Those who trust in him by faith, he is present with them by his Holy Spirit, wherever you are, whatever fire that you face. You know, I spent most of the last 10 days actually wrestling with how to apply the golden image stuff, working out what the cultural gods of our culture are today, asking that question, where are we as individuals and as a congregation?

Where are we under pressure to bow? Well, last week I was actually chatting to Joe Carstairs about this. We were just batting it about together. And then a couple of days later, we were driving back from the prayer meeting on Sunday night last week, and Joe just came out with the most helpful line.

He said this, You know, Daniel chapter 3, I don't think it's really about the golden image, so much as it is about the God who came to save. And I think that's just so helpful.

We can all wrestle all we like with where we're going to draw the line. I think it's important that we resolve to draw it somewhere. But the key takeaway of this passage is this, we have a God who came to save as we do that.

[26:11] You know, throughout history, wherever Christians have been, even in Nazi Germany, there has been the pressure to bow to some cultural narrative that contradicts God's word.

Some are more obviously horrific than others, but there's always something. And in every place where that has been true, there have been those Christians who have buckled under the pressure of it.

But there have also been those who resolved to draw a line in the sand and who suffered for it. And, you know, as they did that, God was with them.

And for those of us who draw a line in the sand today, God is with us too. Here in Daniel chapter 3 in the fire, God was with his people.

At the parting of the sea, God was with his people. In Acts, where Stephen is stoned and where Paul is put on trial, God was with his people. During the Reformation, when faithful men and women were burned at the stake for their faith, God was with his people.

[27:14] Today, as 200,000 Christians in North Korea are held in prison camps, refusing to renounce their faith, God is with his people. And that means wherever you are tomorrow, at work or at uni or at school, whatever

it is that you face, whatever trials you're going through, whatever the lines in the sand you're going to draw, God is with his people.

God is with you. And so we can encourage one another this morning as we face the fires together. Not so much may the force be with you, but may God be with you and trust that indeed he is.

Christ is a reason for love. Because the winds through this, and lost trust to the path is a thing that we can do in the potential and the winds through the river your journey to the other people in have it all that women, women, and the concludes through the river times,...