

# Daniel 3.1–30

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*But if not...*

Amington

Sunday 7 February 2021

Daniel: Faithful in exile (4)

## **Worship**

If I asked you to tell me what ‘worship’ is – what would you say? If we were in our church building I would ask you to shout out a few answers. *Pause* Maybe you are at your screen right now!

Maybe you’d say, ‘singing’, or ‘praying’. Maybe you’d use a word like ‘love’ or ‘adore’; maybe a word like ‘honour’. If you were feeling fancy you might use words like ‘exalt’ or ‘extol’. My answer? Worship means putting something – or someone – *first*.

Here are the words my dictionary uses: revere, adore, exalt, glorify, honour, praise, idolise, adulate, admire, love, be devoted to, extol, respect, pray to, venerate.

These are some powerful words – do they describe my attitude to God? Maybe, a little, on a good day! Do they describe my attitude to anything else? Hmmm...

Two statues, one female and the other male, had faced each other in the park for decades. One day an angel appeared and said, 'You've been such stunning statues for so long, that I have a special surprise for you. I am going to bring you to life for thirty minutes and you can do whatever you wish.'

With a clap of his hands the statues came alive. They climbed down from their pedestals and approached each other with shy smiles. They disappeared into the bushes and emerged fifteen minutes later after much giggling, laughter and rustling branches.

The angel smiled and with a knowing wink he said, 'You still have fifteen minutes left.'

With a look of excitement, the female statue turned to the male statue. 'Fantastic!' she said, 'But this time *you* hold the pigeon down and *I'll* poo on its head!'

There has been a lot of arguing about statues recently, particularly statues of people who made money from the slave trade, who then used that wealth for the public good, building schools, hospitals, and so on. Should such statues be pulled down, or not?

Should we *revere* – there's one of those worship words – such generous people? After all they didn't *have* to build schools.

Or should we *revile* them for making money out of what was and is an evil act – even if back then it was deemed acceptable?

Does leaving the statues up – and getting angry at those who want to pull them down – show that our country is still basically racist?

Statues are far more than blocks of wood, marble, and metal – they have meaning. So for me the issue isn't whether this or that person should have a statue of them or not: *no-one should*, because *no-one* is worthy. No-one is worthy of such veneration, except only God.

## **Pride (1)**

This week the pride and arrogance of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon reach new heights – literally. He made a golden statue **60 cubits high** (1) – that's 27 metres or 60 feet in old money. That's about the size of a nine-storey house. Or, about twice the height of our church building. Or, just over half the height of Nelson's Column. In other words, he made it to fit his ego.

If we back up a little, remember that last week Daniel explained Nebuchadnezzar's dream, which involved a statue with a golden *head*. That golden head represented Nebuchadnezzar's empire. The rest of the statue was made of silver, bronze, iron and clay – which represented the empires God said will come after Babylon.

Afterwards Nebuchadnezzar was full of praise for God, saying to Daniel, **‘Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries’** (2.47). Hearing that, we’d be forgiven for thinking that Nebuchadnezzar might change, become more humble, maybe even worship the God he said was his Lord!

And yet he completely ignored the dream and its meaning. He defied God by making the *entire* statue out of gold (1), as if saying to God, ‘No! My empire – the empire of gold – will last forever; there will be no-one after me.’

Worship, then, is more than words. Nebuchadnezzar had all the right words, praising the **God of gods and the Lord of kings**, but his proud heart was betrayed by his actions.

Speaking of pride... what did the leader of the pride of lions say to the others before walking into church? ‘Let us prey.’

## **Pressure (2-15)**

Nebuchadnezzar set up his massive golden statue on the **plain** (1) so it could be seen for miles, and he summoned all his civil servants. Remember: he picked the cream of all the nations he conquered to serve him. They all had different gods – so he was going to force them to acknowledge *he* was stronger than them *and* their gods.

So when the music played, they all had to **fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar [had] set up** (5). And being Nebuchadnezzar this wasn't a request – it was an order, under penalty of being burned alive in a **blazing furnace** (6).

Enter Daniel's friends Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah – called by the Babylonians Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They would not **worship the image of gold** that Nebuchadnezzar had **set up** (12). And so their enemies **denounced** them (8) to the king.

True to form, Nebuchadnezzar got angry – and once again (see 2.12), one anger word isn't enough: he was **furious with rage** (13). He summoned them and tore into them, repeating the accusation (14) and the threat if they stayed non-compliant:

'If you do not worship [the image I made], you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?'

*Daniel 3.15 (NIV)*

Not content with threatening them, Nebuchadnezzar's anger boiled over and he proclaimed himself greater than *any* god: **'what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?'** He had started to believe his myth that he was a god, and as a god he wanted *worship*.

In the late 1930s... in the Soviet Union, Stalin's name was mentioned in a provincial meeting. This 'triggered' a standing ovation and a standing dilemma – for no one dared to be the first to sit down. Finally, an elderly man, unable to stand any longer, took his seat. They noted his name and arrested him the next day. He had failed to worship the idol long enough.<sup>1</sup>

## **Punishment (19-27)**

And so, Nebuchadnezzar ordered the furnace to be super-heated for their punishment (19). In fact he ordered it heated so much more than normal that his own soldiers died from the heat of the flames (22). Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown in, bound with rope so tightly it hurt (20, 23).

But then something strange happened – Nebuchadnezzar saw *four*, not *three* men in the fire, no longer bound but walking around – and what was more, they were unharmed (25)! He ordered them to come out (26), and everyone saw the:

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

*Daniel 3.27 (NIV)*

This is probably an event we learned at Sunday School; it's one of the most famous miracles in the Bible. Except, the bit we all know – the bit where the friends are thrown into the fire and walk around with the angel, unharmed – that bit isn't the point – *at all*. It's not the main miracle in this chapter!

No: the miracle of Daniel 3 happens in verse 18 – *not* in verse 27.

## **Obedience (16-18)**

One day a tennis umpire brought his son to a match to watch him work. But during the match the umpire was rude and insulting, even swearing and spitting at the players.

At the end of the match he beckoned to his son to climb up onto his umpire's chair and sit on his knee.

But the son refused, saying, 'The son never sits on the brutish umpire.'

What would you have done? What would you have done in their shoes? Would you have refused? Or would you have given in? Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were facing *huge* pressure.<sup>2</sup>

First, there was the pressure of the king's *authority*, their master commanding them to do something.

Then there was the pressure of *conformity*, because everyone else was doing the same thing and following the king's orders.

Third, there was the pressure of their enemies' *malice*, denouncing them to the king for doing the right thing.

Fourth, there was the pressure of *intimidation*, the threat of awful punishment if they didn't give in.

The pressure they faced was *huge*. What would you have done?

*Pause* Hear what *they* said (in a more accurate translation):

'If our God exists whom we are serving, he is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace – and from your hand, O king, he can deliver.<sup>3</sup> 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.'

*Daniel 3.17 (Davis) & 18 (NIV)*

That is the miracle, right there. The miracle happened *before* the three men were thrown into the fiery furnace – so if they had been killed, the miracle would still have happened, exactly the same: **'But even if he does not,'** they said, **'we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up'** (18). The real miracle is a miracle of obedience, *not* a miracle of deliverance.

This passage is not really about statues and furnaces and raging dictators, it's about *worship*: between them the words *worship* and *serve* appear sixteen times in these verses.<sup>4</sup> The question is this: whom will you serve, whom will you worship?

The miracle is that these three men stood up to the raging king, refused to give in to the pressure, and instead chose to worship only God. Exodus 20.3 – **'You shall have no other gods before me,'** the first of the Ten Commandments – *that* is what was at stake.

And friends *that* is what is at stake whenever *we* face the pressure of authority, of conforming to the mob, of other people's malice, of intimidation. Whenever anything tempts or encourages us to put God to one side, Exodus 20.3 is at stake. **'You shall have no other gods before me,'** God said: I suspect the commandment most broken by God's people. But it was not broken by these three men, on this day.

Notice, there was no promise of deliverance. They knew God *could* deliver them, but not that he *would*. Countless Christians down the ages have *not* been delivered – and yet this same miracle still happens, because the real miracle is not deliverance it is obedience.

In the Bible, faith doesn't mean trying to force God to do what we want, but respecting God's freedom.

In the Bible, faith doesn't mean predicting what God will or won't do, but holding to the truth of God's Word.

In the Bible, faith means obedience – and *that* is how we worship God: not by spouting fancy words, but by trusting and doing and following what he says – *that* is worship.

And for that, we need a miracle. We may not have the means to make a 27m-high statue out of gold, but our pride and our idols are every bit as real as Nebuchadnezzar's statue; we break the first commandment too *whenever* we put God to one side and worship things other than him. And we do that a *lot*.

I don't know if you pray for miracles, for healing, for the pandemic to end. If you do – fab, great, carry on – like God saved Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, our God can deliver us from harm. **But even if he does not...** what about then?

And so, do you pray for this miracle, too? Do you pray for the miracle of obedient faith? Do you pray for God to help you put him first and worship *only* him? For that is the greatest miracle in these verses: the miracle not of deliverance, but of obedience.

So friends, let us not be like Nebuchadnezzar, who said the right words but whose proud heart was betrayed by his actions.

Instead, let us be obedient and faithful to God, worshipping *only* him, and putting him *first*, whatever pressure we may face.

**‘Even if he does not [deliver us],’** they said, **‘we will not serve your gods’** (18). Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *The Message of Daniel* (Nottingham: IVP, 2013), 50.

<sup>2</sup> Davis, *Daniel*, 52-53.

<sup>3</sup> Davis, *Daniel*, 55.

<sup>4</sup> Davis, *Daniel*, 56.