

Catford Lectures 2008-2009

Part 1

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[00:00:01] For this afternoon I have some Old Testament characters that I'd like us to consider and I have some lessons which really are very simple in principle and I suppose we could say that we know them well enough, but I believe the Lord wants us to draw out from the Scriptures account of these men some of these simple lessons, reminders that hopefully will be valuable to each of us. Now I think we're going to get the most benefit if we see these characters in their historical context. And to do that we need to go back just over 2,600 years. Go back to King Josiah. Now [00:01:05] it's not Josiah I want to talk about, but he'll be our starting point. Josiah came to the throne when he was very young and through his life he had a real desire to follow the Lord and to encourage his subjects to do so. And I'll quote from the Scriptures about Josiah. We read of him that, like unto him there was no king before him that turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might according to the law of Moses neither after him arose there any like him. That's what the Scriptures say about Josiah in 2 Kings 23. A very high commendation [00:02:02] indeed. And we also read in 2 Chronicles it says, Josiah took away all the abominations out of all the countries that pertained to the children of Israel and made all that were present in Israel to serve, even serve the Lord their God. And all his days they departed not from following the Lord the God of their fathers. Again, a wonderful testimony to a great man. But although he made the people, it says, serve the Lord, it's clear that there were very serious problems. Jeremiah had been preaching to the people of Judah and Jerusalem from the 13th year of the reign of King Josiah. And Josiah died after ruling 31 years. So Jeremiah had been preaching [00:03:06] for nearly 20 years during Josiah's reign. And it's clear that although the book of Jeremiah is not set out in chronological order, much of what is contained in that book was Jeremiah's message during the years of Josiah's rule. In fact, if we just now turn over to Jeremiah 25, we can get a feel for the situation. Jeremiah 25, and just picking up here at verse 3, Jeremiah says, from the 13th year of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, even unto this day, [00:04:12] that is the 3 and 20th year, the word of the Lord has come unto me and I've spoken unto you, rising early and speaking, that ye have not hearkened. So although Josiah was a godly man and tried to lead his people in a godly way, in fact there were extremely serious problems. And in verse 5 of this chapter, Jeremiah tells us what the message was. Turn ye again everyone from his evil way and from the evil of your doings. This had been his message for 23 years, including most of Josiah's reign, but they hadn't listened. And Josiah in the 31st year of his reign, [00:05:09] not yet 40 years old,

involves himself in the affairs of others and he pays for it. Now undoubtedly he felt provoked. The Egyptians came through his land to fight with the last remnants of the Assyrian Empire against the Babylonians. And Josiah may have felt that the Egyptians taking their massive army through his land was an insult to the Lord. And therefore the Lord would help him fight them. And he may have thought back several generations to Hezekiah and seen how the Lord had rescued the people then against what, humanly speaking, were overwhelming odds. But there's nothing to indicate he consulted the Lord. And Pharaoh warned him off, but Josiah [00:06:04] still goes to fight him. And Josiah gets killed, a tragedy, particularly as his sons were spiritually poor characters. An odd thing happens then. The people of the land, we're told, decide on the next king. And they don't choose Josiah's eldest son, Eliakim, they crown a younger son, Jehoahaz. I can't see any indication for the reasons for this, but that's what seems to have happened. But after three months the Egyptians came along and replaced Jehoahaz as king with his elder brother and they changed his elder brother's name to Jehoiakim. And Jehoiakim was 25 years old. And spiritually things don't improve. In fact they further decline. Whereas in Josiah's day Jeremiah was free to warn and admonish, now he feels the opposition of the authorities. [00:07:06] And in the fourth year of Jehoiakim's reign, we find Jeremiah restricted. He's restricted in what he can do. He doesn't have the freedom he had when Josiah was king. And we read that he was shut up. Not in prison, but living unobtrusively, perhaps in hiding. And we have the Lord speaking to him to tell him to write down all that he's told him to say. This is in Jeremiah 36.

There still seems a chance for Judah if they repented. And Jeremiah instructs his secretary Barak firstly to recall all he's said, then to read it openly. OK, now we come to a crunch point. [00:08:06] Let's go back to Jeremiah 25. Jeremiah 25, and I'm picking up at verse 8.

Therefore, thus saith the Lord of hosts, because ye have not heard my words, behold I will send and take all the families of the north, saith the Lord, and Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and will bring them against this land, and against the inhabitants thereof, and against all these nations round about, and will utterly destroy them, and will make them in astonishment, and in hissing, and perpetual desolations. Moreover, I will take from them the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones, and the [00:09:03] light of the candle, and this whole land shall be a desolation and an astonishment. Jeremiah tells them what is about to happen. The Babylonians are about to punish them for their rebellion against God. And we get in the first verse of this chapter when exactly he's speaking to them. It's in the fourth year of Jehoiakim. Now, let's turn to Daniel. So, move across to Daniel.

Daniel chapter 1 Daniel 1. In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, came Nebuchadnezzar, [00:10:10] king of Babylon, unto Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into his hand, with part of the vessels of the house of God, which he carried into the land of Shina, to the house of his God, and he brought the vessels into the treasure house of his God. OK, here we read that Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians came and besieged Jerusalem, and the Lord gave Jehoiakim into his hands. We read it's in the third year of the reign of king Jehoiakim. It seems that this is an example of different time frames. We should be familiar with that from the New Testament, where the times of events, particularly those [00:11:01] surrounding the crucifixion of the Lord, are given in Jewish time in the synoptic gospels, and in Roman time in the Gospel of John. Well, here it would seem that in Chaldean, in Babylonian recording of time, the first year of a king's reign was sort of considered introductory, and the following year was considered as the first year of his reign proper. So what Jeremiah was saying, he was telling them about events that were about to happen.

He was telling them about what was going to happen, as is described here in the book of Daniel.

Now I want particularly to talk this afternoon about Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. A lot of what we can say about them is true of their friend Daniel, but there are some differences [00:12:07] as well. Scripture records these three really as being involved in four events, and we look at each of them and draw lessons from them. And the first event is their captivity. So we'll pick it up at Daniel 1 and verse 3. And the king, that's Nebuchadnezzar, spake unto Ashpenaz, the master of his eunuchs, that he should bring certain of the children of Israel, and of the king's seed, and of the prince's, children in whom was no blemish, but well favoured, and skilful in all wisdom, and cunning in knowledge, and understanding science, and such as had ability in them to stand in the king's palace, and whom they might teach [00:13:02] the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans. And the king appointed them a daily provision of the king's meat, and of the wine which he drank, so nourishing them three years, that at the end thereof they might stand before the king. Now among these were the children of Judah, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, unto whom the prince of the eunuchs gave names. For he gave unto Daniel the name Belteshazzar, and to Hananiah of Shadrach, and of Mishael, of Meshach, and to Azariah of Abednego. Daniel and his three friends were young.

My guess is they were young to mid-teenagers. And we also see they were from the nobility of Judah. And until four years before this, four years before their exile, they'd been ruled in Jerusalem [00:14:05] by the godly king Josiah. And these four young men would have remembered Josiah and his godliness, almost certainly they'd been too young to have remembered that marvellous Passover that Josiah organised. Undoubtedly they'd have known of Jeremiah. It's possible they may have listened to his preachings. And although young, they would have sympathised with what he said and agreed with him. And I think therefore they would have had some insight into future events. How soon they'd come, they may not have realised, but that disaster loomed in spite of godly king Josiah would have been clear to those who are faithful to God. So these four young men, [00:15:05] along with others from the royalty and nobility, were dragged from their homes, their families, their country, with little hope of ever seeing their loved ones ever again. The fact that undoubtedly they had some understanding of the reasons doesn't distract much from their suffering. They had emotions and feelings like everybody else. It would have been a difficult journey, at least a thousand miles. They'd probably have had to have walked at least some of the way. And although there were special captives, and probably treated better than other captives, it would still have been a terrible experience. And then when we find that they get to Babylon, their names are changed.

Their Jewish names were no longer to be part of their life. I understand that Hananiah means [00:16:12] loved by the Lord, Mishael means who is like God, and Azariah means God is my help.

These names have to go. They're a great testimony to the true God, but they now have their names changed to have names that are centred on the Babylonian gods Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

And although not mentioned in scripture, it's very likely that they'd have had to undergo the, I guess, crude, humiliating, painful operation of being made into eunuchs.

A lesson from this is obvious, but it's worth remembering that as Christians, [00:17:01] we're not exempt from God's dealings with the world around us. Judgment on the Jews for their disobedience to God and rebellion against Him caught up these godly Jews as well as the rebellious. But they didn't lose their faith because of this. Rather, their faith in God shines through their circumstances.

Now we find the second event I want to mention in the following verses. So we'll pick this up at chapter 8 of Daniel 1. I'm sorry, verse 8 of chapter 1. I apologise, verse 8 of chapter 1.

But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat [00:18:04] nor with the wine which he drank. Therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself. Now God had brought Daniel into favour and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs. And the prince of the eunuchs said unto Daniel, I fear my lord the king, who hath appointed your meat and your drink, for why should he see your faces worse liking than the children which are of your sort? Then shall ye make me endanger my head to the king. Then said Daniel to Melzar, whom the prince of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, prove thy servants I beseech thee ten days, and let them give us pulse to eat and water to drink. Then let our countenances be looked upon before thee, and the countenance of the children that eateth the portion of the king's meat, [00:19:04] and as thou seest, deal with thy servants. So he consented to them in this matter, and proved them ten days. And at the end of the ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat. Thus Melzar took away the portion of their meat and the wine that they should drink and gave them pulse. One thing that comes across here is a difference. A difference between Daniel and his three friends. Daniel was determined and acted. His friends sympathised and supported, but it was Daniel who acted. It was not an easy task for Daniel to deal with the authorities here.

The temptation to be the same as everyone else must have been enormous. Firstly as captives, [00:20:09] important captives, but still captives, they had no rights. This was not like being at home where they had choices. Why put themselves in danger over food? And then they could argue that they'd been abandoned by the Lord. He'd allowed them to be taken from their land and placed among heathen, in fact subservient to heathen. Circumstances were different. Why should God's law matter? And I'm sure there are many among the Jews, the Jewish captives, who were not willing to take a stand. They weren't told what the specific issue regarding the food was. Perhaps it was food that was forbidden under God's law. Perhaps it had been sacrificed to idols. But Daniel knew it would be [00:21:06] wrong to eat it. And the scriptures tell us that Daniel determined in his heart to do what was right. And it's clear that Daniel initiated and led the request to be given different food.

Now perhaps we shouldn't speculate, and it is of course impossible for us to know, but I wonder how these lads would have acted were Daniel not with them. They were young, they were showing a courage and maturity beyond their years, but they were still young. And if any of them had been on their own, I just wonder whether he'd have had the strength to stand up for what was right in an alien, unforgiving and vicious world. We can't tell. But the point is, [00:22:02] we don't need to. Because the Lord provided for them. He knew their personalities, He knew their desires, He knew their weaknesses. And He provided support and godly leadership for them. Of course we're all different. We have different strengths and weaknesses. We have different personalities. Some of us find some tasks, some duties, more difficult than others. Some are natural leaders, others aren't. But the important thing to remember is that God knows. The Lord knows, He understands us completely. He knows and understands what we find difficult. And He'd say to us, as He said to Paul with his thorn in the flesh, my strength is sufficient for you, but my power is made perfect in weakness. God knows us, He knows our personalities, [00:23:06] He knows our needs. I'm sure I can't easily do some of the things that you can do, and there are undoubtedly some things that you find difficult. The Lord knows and understands that we need the support of others, the leadership of others. We have our weaknesses, and we have things that we find difficult. But God provides practical ways to support us, as He did for these three young men. The Lord deals with us as we are, because He knows us

completely. Okay, let's just return to Daniel. Daniel, first of all, gets a bit of a brush off from [00:24:10] the prince of the eunuchs. The prince of the eunuchs is not willing to risk himself for Daniel. So Daniel doesn't give up at this point. He approaches the steward who's been put over them, and rather than insisting, he offers a test, and the official accepts the test, and because of Daniel's faithfulness to the Lord, the Lord honours him and achieves the objectives through the test. Without the Lord, there could be no guarantee that the result of the test would be so positive. It was only for ten days, but the Lord works for them. [00:25:01] Verse 17, chapter 1, verse 17. As for these four children, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. Now at the end of the days that the king had said he should bring them in, then the prince of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar, and the king communed with them, and among them all was found none like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore stood they before the king, and in all matters of wisdom and understanding that the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in his realm. Undoubtedly they worked hard during their three years' training, but it was God who gave them knowledge and skill, or knowledge and [00:26:03] understanding, in the literature and learning of the Chaldeans. God is actively helping them in this. He gave them the knowledge and skill, and when they're taken to Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar recognises their special gifts, and that they much surpassed the wise men of Babylon. The next incident involving our three comes in the next chapter. It's described in the first verse there as being in the second year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, which wouldn't seem to take account of the three years' training, but this could perhaps be explained by the way partial years are considered in their numbering system. Chapter 2, verse 1. And in the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar dreamed dreams, wherewith his spirit was troubled, [00:27:04] and his sleep break from him. Then the king commanded to call the magicians, and the astrologers, and the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans, for to show the king his dreams. So they came and stood before the king, and the king said unto them, I have dreamed a dream, and my spirit was troubled to know the dream. Then spake the Chaldeans to the king in Syriac, O king, live forever. Tell thy servants the dream, and we will show the interpretation. And the king answered and said to the Chaldeans, the thing is gone from me. If you will not make known unto me the dream with the interpretation thereof, you shall be cut in pieces, and your houses shall be made a dunghill. But if you show the dream and the interpretation thereof, you shall receive of me gifts and rewards and great honour. Therefore show me the dream and the interpretation thereof. They answered again [00:28:03] and said, let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will show the interpretation of it. The king answered and said, I know certainty that you would gain the time, because ye see the thing is gone from me. But if you will not make known unto me the dream, there is but one decree for you. For ye have prepared lying and corrupt words to speak before me, till the time be changed. Therefore tell me the dream, and I shall know that ye can show the interpretation thereof. The Chaldeans answered before the king and said, there is not a man upon the earth that can show the king's matter. Therefore there is no king, lord, nor ruler that asks such things at any magician or astrologer or Chaldean. And it is a rare thing that the king requireth. And there is none other that can show it before the king, except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh. For this cause the king was angry and very furious and commanded to destroy all the wise men of [00:29:09] Babylon. And the decree went forth that the wise men should be slain, and they sought Daniel and his fellows to be slain. The choice for the wise men of Babylon is stark, isn't it? Either tell the king his dream and receive gifts, rewards and great honour, or fail and be cut limb from limb and have your houses turned into rubbish piles. They fail. They can't go beyond their systems of interpretation and actually discover what the dream was. And the executioner goes out. Now being part of this system, being part of this advisory system to the king, presumably newly qualified, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego have to die with the others.

[00:30:06] Verse 14. Then Daniel answered with counsel and wisdom to Ariok, the captain of the king's guard, which was gone forth to slay the wise men of Babylon. He answered and said to Ariok, the king's captain, why is the decree so hasty from the king? Then Ariok made the thing known to Daniel. Then Daniel went in and desired of the king that he would give him time and that he would show the king the interpretation. Then Daniel went to his house and made the thing known to Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, his companions, that they would desire mercies of the God of heaven concerning this secret that Daniel and his fellows should not perish with the rest of the wise men of Babylon. Then was the secret revealed unto Daniel in a night vision and Daniel blessed [00:31:02] the God of heaven. Daniel and his friends had clearly not been aware of what was taking place and again, as we saw in our first chapter, it's Daniel who is active. He asks the king's executioner for details and Daniel has the courage to go into the king's presence and ask for time. The Lord had given Daniel ability to understand visions and dreams of all kinds but this was different. He needed to know from the Lord what Nebuchadnezzar's dream actually was before he could interpret it. Now we notice that Daniel doesn't take Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah with him. He discovers what's happening and acts alone. Times of the essence. He needs an answer quickly. The impulsive, the impatient king won't wait long. But Daniel returns home and explains it all to [00:32:05] them and he asks them to pray. Why does he ask them to pray? He asks them to pray because he has every confidence that the Lord will listen to them. And this tells us not just about Daniel's confidence in them but also their relationship with the Lord. Daniel knew them. He knew that the Lord would listen to them. He had confidence of that. He believed it was worth spending the time explaining what was happening to them and for them to plead with the Lord. This is proof, proof, if it was needed, that they were continuing in their godly walk. Their godly walk that had been so evident when they started their training. Now I want us to read a couple of verses from [00:33:08] Isaiah 59. We just need to remember what the Lord says to the Jews through Isaiah here.

First two chapters of Isaiah 59. The Lord is speaking to the Jews through Isaiah.

Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save, neither his ear heavy that it cannot hear, but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you that he will not hear. Unconfessed sins damage our day-to-day relationship [00:34:02] with the Lord. And they were a real barrier to prayer. This wasn't a problem for the three. They were clearly continuing in their godly walk and God answers their prayer. Now it might be easy for us to look at this incident with Daniel and his friends and think that the key role was Daniel's. But the three only had a minor role and certainly Daniel was the most prominent in this. But they were as vital as he was and Daniel recognises their importance. We shouldn't need to have it emphasised to us because the importance of prayer is so clear in Scripture. But for some of us who lead busy lives, neglecting proper prayer may be a real danger. And for those of us who are older, [00:35:03] less able to be engaged in active pursuits, there's always the valuable activity of prayer.

The Lord answers his prayer. Daniel's given the dreamer's interpretation and so their lives are saved. They were in right relationship with the Lord and this allowed their prayers to be unhindered.

Now we're not going to talk about the dreamer's interpretation. Let's move on to the end of the chapter. Chapter 2. Verse 46. Then the king Nebuchadnezzar fell upon his face and worshipped [00:36:01] Daniel and commanded that he should offer an oblation and sweet odours unto him. The king answered unto Daniel and said, Of a truth it is that your God is the God of gods and a Lord of kings and a revealer of secrets, seeing thou couldst reveal this secret. Then the king made Daniel a great man and gave him many great gifts and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and

chief of the governors over all the wise men of Babylon. Then Daniel requested of the king and he set Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego over the affairs of the province of Babylon but Daniel sat in the gate of the king. So Nebuchadnezzar keeps his promise and he exalts Daniel. He's made ruler of the province of Babylon and as the empire was centred on Babylon, the province of Babylon was the most important of the provinces of the empire. And Daniel urges the king to give [00:37:06] appointments to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego as administrators in the same province. So they will be responsible to him, Daniel, and managed by him. Why was this? Well, there are two reasons I think that could be pertinent here. Undoubtedly Daniel wanted people working for him that he could trust. People who'd be honest in their dealings. Now how important that is, isn't it? I would have thought that in the affairs of Babylon there'd be plenty of opportunity for bribery and corruption, theft, dishonesty, as there is in many jobs today. Daniel wanted those he could trust, those who would work hard, those who'd be honest in their dealings, to work with him. [00:38:01] The way we work is so important, isn't it, in our Christian witness, as is emphasised in the New Testament in many places. Secondly, he may have been considering the three. Compulsorily being part, and a very junior part with no influence, of this heathen, Chaldean system of magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers, as one translation puts it, would have been extremely difficult for any godly Jew. So any opportunity to get away from this system would have been most welcome. They must have deplored, hated the ungodly, perhaps demonic system that they've been forced to join. But the Lord provides a way out for them. Again, we see how the Lord [00:39:03] understands them, understands their situation and provides for them. OK. Let's just quickly recap what we've observed so far. These three young men were captives, taken forcibly from their home, their family, their land, to perform a service to the Emperor of the great power of the day. They remained faithful to the Lord, and the Lord knowing them, provides the support and encouragement they need at critical points. They evidently remained faithful to the Lord during their years of training. So that when a crisis arises, which Daniel addresses, he entrusts the central, the essential task of prayer to them. And he knows [00:40:10] that the Lord will hear and ask them. And we noted too in this last incident that we considered, that God sees the working environment that's been forced upon them. And he provides a way out for them. The last time we read of them is in the next chapter, chapter 3. And this provides our fourth incident. Daniel's no longer with them. Now, this seems surprising, but it's likely that an important official like Daniel would travel for the king. He could be away in some other province of the king's vast domain, necessitating his absence for weeks, perhaps months on end. But clearly Daniel's not around. So we have a different situation for our three. [00:41:02] No longer do they have Daniel to lead them. I would suggest that this is what they've been trained for. Their previous difficult experiences where Daniel took the lead, they supported him, where the Lord honoured them, was training for this crucial event that we see in chapter 3. The Lord had a massive task for them. They had to stand up to the most powerful and autocratic man on earth and refuse his command. Knowing the consequences, knowing they faced his death sentence for doing so, and so witness to him in a powerful and practical way of the greatness and authority of God. It could be argued that this was one of the greatest tasks ever entrusted to man as far as witnessing to the world was concerned. Perhaps comparable to Paul witnessing [00:42:04] to the leader of the big power of his day, the Emperor Nero. If they'd failed to stand for God, they'd have missed out. Nebuchadnezzar would have missed out. In fact, the whole empire would have missed out. Chapter 3 verse 1. Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold whose height was three square cubits and the breadth of six cubits. He set it up in the plain of Jura in the province of Babylon. Then Nebuchadnezzar the king sent to gather together the princes, the governors, the captains, the judges, the treasurers, the counsellors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image which Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up. Then the princes, the governors, the captains, the judges, the treasurers, the counsellors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the provinces would gather together unto the dedication of the image

that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up. [00:43:03] And they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Then a herald cried out, To you it is commanded, O people, nations, and languages, that at the time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, sorterie, dulcimer, and all kinds of music, ye fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king has set up. And whoso falleth not down and worshipeth shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. Therefore at that time when all the people heard the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, sorterie, and all kinds of music, all the people, the nations, and the languages, fell down and worshipped the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up. He sets up this golden image, Nebuchadnezzar, nearly a hundred foot tall, [00:44:01] and he calls together the important officials from all over the empire to worship it. With each tribe having its own gods, he presumably wanted to assert the power and authority of himself and the Babylonian gods. And the three are there. Our three are there. They have a choice. Of course they could have done as everyone else did. It caused them no trouble. But their previous experiences were God's training for them. Joining with Daniel when he stood up to the authorities right at the beginning, then experiencing the Lord's deliverance after they were sentenced to be cut in pieces along with all the other wise men, God was training them for this occasion. Verse 8. Wherefore, at that time, certain Chaldeans came near and accused the Jews. They spake and said unto King Nebuchadnezzar, O king, live forever. Thou, O king, has made a decree that every man that shall hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, sorterie, and dulcimer, [00:45:07] and all kinds of music, shall fall down and worship the golden image. And whoso falleth not down and worshipeth, that he should be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. There are certain Jews whom thou hast set over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men, O king, have not regarded thee. They serve not thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up. Then Nebuchadnezzar, in his rage and fury, commanded to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Then they brought these men before the king. The three stand for God. Their refusal to bow to the idol is reported to Nebuchadnezzar who is filled with rage and has them brought to him. [00:46:01] Verse 14, Nebuchadnezzar spake and said to them, Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, do not ye serve my gods, nor worship the golden image which I have set up? Now if ye be ready, that at what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, sorterie, and dulcimer, and all kinds of music, ye fall down and worship the image which I have made, well. But if ye worship not, ye shall be cast the same hour into the midst of a burning fiery furnace, and who is that god that shall deliver you out of my hands? He offers them a second chance, and in doing so, he challenges the true god. And their reply is clear. Verse 16, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. [00:47:07] He offers them a second chance, and in doing so, he challenges the true god. And their reply is clear. Verse 16, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our god whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thy hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up. Their reply is clear. They don't want a second chance. They are determined not to bow, whatever the consequences. I love their reply. They don't know what's going to happen, and they acknowledge that. But they know with certainty [00:48:02] that god is able to save them from the flames, but they don't presume to know whether he will prevent their deaths in the furnace. But they do know that god will save them from Nebuchadnezzar. Their fate isn't in Nebuchadnezzar's hands. It's in god's hands. Verse 19, Then was Nebuchadnezzar full of fury, and the form of his visage was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Therefore he spake and commanded that they should heat the furnace one seven times more than it was wont to be heated. And he commanded the most mighty men that were in the army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the

burning fiery furnace. Then these men were banded in their coats, and hosen, and hats, and their other garments, and were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. Therefore, because the king's [00:49:01] commandment was urgent, and the furnace exceeding hot, the flame of the fire slew those men that took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down, bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. Nebuchadnezzar's furious anger isn't really shown in a very practical way. Hotting the fire seven times was not going to make the experience worse for his victims. In fact, humanly speaking, they might be expected to die before even reaching the fire, as the soldiers did. Verse 24, Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astonished, and rose up in haste, and spake, and said to his counsellors, Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? They answered and said, I was the king. True, O king. He answered and said, Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire. They have no hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God. And of course, [00:50:07] the Lord did save them from the flames. Men of enormous courage, ready to suffer the pain of being burnt up, rather than bow to idols. What a privilege it must have been, mustn't it? To have walked in the fire with the Lord. There are many events described in scripture where we like to listen to conversations. The Lord instructing Cleopas and his companion on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, explaining in detail how the Old Testament taught of him, is a great example. But I'd love to know what was said here too. As the fourth figure, as Nebuchadnezzar acknowledges, like the Son of God, walks in the flames with them. [00:51:02] And then Nebuchadnezzar tells them to come forth in verses 26. They come out. They must have been very reluctant to do Nebuchadnezzar's bidding, I'd have thought, and come out of the fire. What a contrast between walking with the Lord in person and being with Nebuchadnezzar. But their job isn't finished. They have a further interview with the king. And then we see that the king issues a decree. He comments on verse 28. Let's just read that verse. Then Nebuchadnezzar spake and said, Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants that trusted in him, and have changed the king's word, and yielded their bodies, that they might not serve nor worship any God except their own God. Therefore I make a decree that every people, nation, and language which speak anything amiss against the God of Shadrach, [00:52:04] Meshach, and Abednego, shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made of dunghill, because there is no other God that can deliver after this sort. For a faithful God-fearing Jew in Palestine or anywhere else in the empire to read this extraordinary decree must have been amazing. Their emperor witnessing to the power of their God. Now I just want to look at one more aspect of their lives.

Five times we read in this book of Hananiah. And every time we read of Hananiah we also read of Mishael, and every time we read of Mishael we also read of Azariah. 15 times we read of Shadrach, [00:53:07] and every time we read of Shadrach we also read of Meshach, and every time we read of Meshach we also read of Abednego. That all was recorded as being together. They were united. I can't think of I can't think of a couple in scripture, let alone a triple, who were always together and mentioned as many times as these three are. I appreciate their circumstances were exceptional, but it would be extremely unlikely that there was nothing about them that irritated or annoyed each other. But rather than quibbling about each other's ways and habits, they operate together. They're together. In fact there's such unity between them, such harmony, that when they replied to King Nebuchadnezzar back in verse 16 of chapter 3, [00:54:07] the scriptures say, then Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego answered and said to the king. Now they didn't chant in unison, but there is so much of one mind that it doesn't actually matter who actually did the speaking. They are together in this. So let's learn from them. We're in a heathen world that's hostile to those who hold and practice the truth, as they were.

Showing unity is part of our witness to the world. It's very noticeable as we look at the lives of these three, that the Lord is there. They're living in extremely difficult circumstances, [00:55:02] in an alien and hostile culture, but the Lord is there. They're put in positions where they have to stand up for the Lord and take the consequences or give up. They stand for the Lord and he honours them. He is there supporting and encouraging. Knowing them, he provides Daniel for them, but when Daniel isn't there, he himself shows himself with them. Now perhaps we may not feel we easily identify with the three. Their circumstances were very difficult to ours. Generally we don't suffer the open and active persecution they did, but the world is hostile to God and the principles that govern their behaviour and the Lord's dealing with them remain the same. [00:56:05] I want to close at this point. OK, let's just have one verse, because time's gone, of 289. 289. Be still my soul, the Lord is on my side. Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain. Leave to thy God to order and provide. In every change he faithful will remain. 289.