

Daniel 3:1-30 Standing out from the crowd

Introduction

In the last few weeks in Libya Islamist militiamen stormed the work compound where Egyptian migrant workers were housed and demanded to know which of those present were Christians and which were Muslim. Twenty-one of these men self-identified as Coptic Christians. To do so was to face torture and almost certain death –which duly happened in mid-to-late February 2015- when a sickening video was published online of the beheading of these faithful martyrs for Jesus Christ. What does it take for someone to be willing to stand out from the crowd? In the Middle East and North Africa, in an increasing number of locations, this question is being asked of our brothers and sisters in Christ who are risking their lives to remain faithful to their Lord. What would it take for you and I to be willing to stand out from the crowd? In 1937 two men shared a distinction of being ‘personal prisoners’ of Adolf Hitler. That is he personally signed the papers for their arrest and silencing. They were the two most vocal and prominent leaders of the Confessing Church in Germany, Martin Niemoller and Paul Schneider. Niemoller was already in prison when Schneider was taken to Buchenwald Concentration Camp on 25 November 1937. He was given the hardest routine and extremely limited rations, but it did not in any way reduce his open public witness. On 20 April 1938, Hitler’s forty-ninth birthday, the prisoners in that camp were ordered to stand to attention and remove their berets and venerate the Nazi flag. All but one man instantly did as he was requested. One solitary figure stood tall not moving for which he was viciously beaten with an ox-hide whip. The solitary confinement and torture that followed left him emaciated and skeletal in appearance and denied access to any books, especially his Bible. Four months later on 28 August at the 6:30am roll-call the men in the camp stood in silence when suddenly a voice broke that silence through the bars of his cell window. Paul Schneider for two whole minutes preached an evangelistic message urging his fellow prisoners to commit their lives to Jesus- the One who is the resurrection and the life. More beatings followed but every time he fearlessly proclaimed Jesus as Lord until in frustration at his defiance an order was given for his murder by a lethal injection of chemicals on 18 July 1939, a martyr for Jesus Christ aged forty-one. A survivor of that camp later commented: ‘In my estimation he was the only man in Germany who, overcoming all human fear, so consciously took on himself the cross of Christ even to death’ (Don Stephens, *War and Grace*, pp. 58-61). What does or would it take for you and me to be willing to stand out from the crowd? In our case we are not currently facing that level of risk, but it may be to face ridicule from unbelievers; it may put at risk a promotion or even an employment opportunity; it can cost friendships and other things that are important to us. What would it take for you and I to stand out from the crowd?

1. The demand of the King (Daniel 3:1-7)

(a) **The Context** (Daniel 3:1-3) *King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon.* ² *He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisors, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up.* ³ *So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisors, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it.* This passage of Scripture reads like an elocution test for an English-language reader but it was anything but a pleasant experience for the people stood out in the blisteringly hot Middle-Eastern sun waiting to hear the pompous speech of the ruthless Emperor himself proclaiming his

greatness and majesty. What an incredible waste of everyone's time. All these government officials and civil servants, very probably thousands of them present, but none would have dared consider offering the ancient equivalent of a 'sick-note'. They had no choice but to be there and seen to be there as their careers were on the line; what is more your career and your life were closely linked in that social context. The vast majority of those present just wanted to say or do whatever Nebuchadnezzar wanted so that they could then go home! Many of them –if not all of them had been brought to Babylon as captives. To say 'yes' to the Emperor ensured a comfortable life for themselves and their families- if they had one. To say 'no' to any request however unreasonable was to risk throwing everything away.

Centuries earlier after very possibly coming to some kind of faith in the God of Israel through his encounter with the prophet Elisha, Naaman the Syrian General made one request to Elisha that relates very well to this context. In II Kings 5: 17-19a the writer of this book records these words: *'If you will not,' said Naaman, 'please let me, your servant, be given as much earth as a pair of mules can carry, for your servant will never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god but the Lord.'*¹⁸ *But may the Lord forgive your servant for this one thing: when my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow down and he is leaning on my arm and I have to bow there also – when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the Lord forgive your servant for this.'*¹⁹ *'Go in peace,' Elisha said.* In the context Naaman had been healed by God of his leprosy, an amazing miracle at a time when no medical intervention was possible. The prophet allowed him to make this choice in the context in which he would find himself back home as the (or one of) senior armed forces commander(s) of that country. There is no editorial comment on that decision in the text, but certainly by the time of the exile in Babylon a much more decisive line against idolatry has been taken. For some reason Daniel was not present at this event but his three friends were required to attend. There was a pressure on them because their futures in Babylon had just been secured after Daniel's extraordinary intervention over Nebuchadnezzar's dream demand. Daniel 2:48-49 states: *Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men.'*⁴⁹ *Moreover, at Daniel's request the king appointed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego chief ministers over the province of Babylon, while Daniel himself remained at the royal court.* As slightly younger men with arguably nothing to lose they took a stand on dietary matters because of their faith. Now with a secure income and career in front of them they had an awful lot to lose if they refused to obey a command from the Emperor. The challenge comes to you and I at school in the play ground; possibly at university; certainly in the workplace and in social contexts; what pressures challenge your willingness to stand out from the crowd? What temptations lie in your pathway at the present time that make it hard to maintain your integrity and your profession of faith in Jesus Christ? Be in no doubt that for all of us tests usually small, but occasionally more demanding will cross our pathway. Jesus' calling to Christian discipleship reported in Mark 8:34-36 ⁴*Then He called the crowd to Him along with His disciples and said: 'Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me.'*³⁵ *For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me and for the gospel will save it.'*³⁶ *What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?* In the abstract world of theoretical ascent it is not difficult to say 'yes' to acknowledge Him. In the real world when the pressure is on we learn a lot about ourselves and the convictions we truly hold dear and non-negotiable.

(b) **Facing the Music** (Daniel 3:4-7). *Then the herald loudly proclaimed, 'Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do:'*⁵ *as soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up.'*⁶ *Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.'*⁷ *Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither,*

lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the nations and peoples of every language fell down and worshipped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. (i) **The timing** It is interesting that the Septuagint (LXX) Greek language edition of the Old Testament produced around 250-300 years after this event took place in its rendering of Daniel 3:1 places this event in the eighteenth year of his reign in 587BC around the time of the fall of Jerusalem. Did Nebuchadnezzar think he was more powerful than the God of Israel? Did he interpret the fall of its capital city as proof that the interpretation of his dream by Daniel was either wrong or that his influence and reign would last for a considerable time to come? He has planned an image as large as his ego an astonishing ninety feet high and nine feet wide. It was sited in a large flat plane approximately twelve miles from Babylon (G. King, *Daniel*, p. 81). Here nothing could block the view of the assembled officials and there was nothing else to look at in a place purposefully chosen. Is it possible that Nebuchadnezzar's mindset here could be captured by some words attributed to Friedrich Nietzsche: 'If there is a God, how can I bear not to be that God?' History records this ruler as a builder of a magnificent capital city as someone with a constant desire to make his surroundings ever more lavish, but it led to the focus being taken off the needs of the people and the maintenance of the empire. The seeds of its downfall may even have been planted in his extraordinary reign. The problem of pride can afflict each one of us; it can undermine the effectiveness in evangelism of even the soundest and most successful of churches. Humility before God and a recognition that each and every one of us is utterly dependent on the grace of God each day of our lives is so important. We can never take for granted any blessing we currently enjoy from God. We must always earnestly seek God's anointing on our work for Him week by week. 'Are we sitting comfortably then let us begin...' was the opening line spoken in a soothing voice at the Radio programme I used to listen to on Radio 4 with my mother as a preschool child. It is okay for an infant to be comfortable, but for the people of God in His service it is indefensible to rest on our laurels in a world where millions enter a lost eternity year after year. Our passion to worship and glorify God must be translated into a heart for drawing alongside people who need to come to faith in our Lord and Saviour for themselves. Have you been too comfortable in recent months or even years? May God give you afresh a holy passion for His glory and for reaching others with the good news of Jesus. (ii) **The setting** *Then the herald loudly proclaimed, 'Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: ⁵ as soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. (Daniel 3:4-5)* The aesthetics of the occasion were probably as close to perfection as was manageable at that time. The overwhelming experience of majestic music alongside the herald's proclamation must have moved even the hardest heart present that day. What was required? It appeared such a small thing merely a deep bow to the ground in unison with the thousands of others around you- something that could be completed in minutes. Who knows how many people took the ceremony seriously or affirmed its religious dimensions? A quick bow and back to work serving God in their place of real influence from which they could alleviate the suffering of fellow Jews in Babylon. Should they put all that at risk by declining to bow or should they do something that other people would have quickly forgotten about? How did they view this demand?

2. **The disobedience of the Jews** (Daniel 3:8-18)

(a) **The accusing voices** (Daniel 3:8-12) *At this time some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. ⁹ They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, 'May the king live for ever! ¹⁰ Your Majesty has issued a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, ¹¹ and that whoever does not fall*

down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace.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. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up.’ What was the basis of their accusation? Were they merely offering factual information or was there a particular motivation behind their actions? It is highly likely that they were nationals of that country angry that these prominent positions had been given to foreigners – in effect a racial issue was behind their denunciation. What is more anti-semitism the most probable motivation here was and has continued to be a major problem throughout the centuries. If you choose to put God first in your life be assured that there will be some people who don’t like it. Maybe in the workplace you are watched as they wait to pounce on the first apparent infraction of Christian standards. ‘I thought you were a Christian...;’ If there is no human voice seeking to undermine you as a believer there is certainly a spiritual one. In I Peter 5:8-11 the apostle makes this point: *Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.*⁹ *Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.*¹⁰ *And the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.*¹¹ *To Him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.* It is not if you are tested, but when! It is not whether you will face opposition and possibly even persecution for your faith but what form it will take. However, be encouraged because God’s grace is sufficient to enable you to be an overcomer for Him.

(b) **The angry enquiry** (Daniel 3:13-15)¹³ *Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king,¹⁴ and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, ‘Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up?’¹⁵ Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?’* The first issue at stake as Nebuchadnezzar sees it is a religious one. The statue represents his gods, the power behind his throne. This edifice does not merely represent him as the ruler but the full package of him and his gods together! Who is the god who is in charge here? This was a foolish option to take as even the most powerful earthly ruler has his limits! For such a stance to be challenge it could only produce an outpouring of rage and indignation. In this pluralistic society where many gods were acknowledged intolerance of the people who only worshipped one God has risen to the surface. It will become an increasing issue in our own land when we raise the convictions and values on which we build our lives in the public square. Others will see our boldness as arrogance and narrow-mindedness. The second issue was the cost of such a stance. *But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace* (Daniel 3:15b). Your life will be forfeited gentlemen if you defy me. However, the folly was demonstrated by Nebuchadnezzar’s next words: *Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?* (Daniel 3:15c). Challenging God to rescue His servants – did he really expect ‘nothing to happen?! People around you at school or university or your workplace or a social event or even for some Christians in their own family circles may mock us for following Jesus, but one day God will call them to account to Him for their actions. Paul wrote these words in his letter to some churches in Southern Turkey: *Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows* (Galatians 6:7). Evil people never have the last word. This was why Paul could be so confident in writing these words in Romans 12:17-21: *Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.*¹⁸ *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*¹⁹ *Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.*²⁰ *On the*

contrary: *'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.'*²¹ *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.* Do you share Paul's confidence in God? May it help us not to succumb to pressures to do or speak evil because 'everyone else' is doing it.

(c) **The courageous response** (Daniel 3:16-18) ¹⁶*Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, 'King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷If 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. ¹⁸But 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.'* 'Guilty as charged your honour'! There was no attempt to offer any mitigation of cultural misunderstanding or religious sensibilities or any other explanation. Sometimes it is right simply to say 'yes' that is what I believe; this is the conviction that is central to my life as a Christian. The most significant words they spoke were in verse eighteen. *But even if He does not...* They were not into 'the power of positive thinking' or proclaiming a prosperity gospel for the godly; instead like many believers in every generation Jesus comes first no matter what the cost. For the Christian today frustrated at the lack of employment opportunities or the career for which you have longed - *But even if He does not* allow me to see that fulfilled; for the Christian today who never finds the spouse for which they have longed and have to face the future single when they had hoped for fulfilment in marriage - *But even if He does not* grant my request; likewise for married couples unable to conceive children - *But even if He does not...* Place here your own issue whatever it may be - *But even if He does not* grant this heartfelt desire I will still honour Him as Lord and Saviour. Can you say that? Where does He come in your life and priorities? Are you facing any decisions just now where you might be seriously under pressure to submit? God is looking for men and women who will stand out from the crowd. Can He count on you and me?

3. **The deliverance of God** (Daniel 3:19-27)

(a) **When the prospects of deliverance are bleak** (Daniel 3:19-23) *Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude towards them changed. He ordered the furnace to be heated seven times hotter than usual ²⁰ and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. ²¹So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. ²²The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, ²³ and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.* At the human level it appeared there was no way out and the three believers were prepared to enter eternity. It was this willingness to lay down their lives by Christians that overcame the might of the Roman Empire. A people with no fear of death cannot be blackmailed into ungodly choices. In effect Nebuchadnezzar was saying to the God of Israel I will burn Your subjects to a cinder –what will You do about that? Ultimately of course in the person of Jesus God showed us that after death comes resurrection! Because he lives so one day shall each one of His people with Him for eternity. However, that was still future and unknown to the participants in this drama. What is abundantly clear is that God will always have the last word. Only a fool thinks they can defy God and get away with it. As faithful servants of Jesus we have to be willing to pay the price of the cost of obedience as Paul Schneider did at the hands of brutal Nazis. In the short term, even possibly in the medium term some of God's people loose out in this world's affairs, but in the longer term of eternity God will honour and vindicate all who honour Him.

(b) **When the intervention of God is least expected** (Daniel 3:24-27) *Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisors, 'Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?' They replied, 'Certainly, Your Majesty.'*²⁵ *He said, 'Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.'*²⁶ *Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, 'Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!'* So *Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire,*²⁷ *and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisors crowded around them. They saw that 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. As these men knew when they entered the flames miracles are rare and never assumed. The people of God who triumph in Jesus' name are those who will firmly declare: **But even if He does not... I will stand for Him.** During the Communist era in Russia many Christians suffered severely for their faith. On one occasion the KGB raided a church on a Sunday morning at just the time when an elderly lady was kissing the feet of a statue of the crucified Jesus. The official in his native language asked: 'Babushka (Grandma) are you also prepared to kiss the feet of the beloved general secretary of our great Communist Party?' 'Who of course', she replied, 'But only if you crucify him first.' (Os Guinness & John Seel, *No God but God*, p. 112) The Lord Jesus Himself was the One who joined them in the flames and ensured they walked out unharmed when those who put them there were destroyed by the intensity of the heat. To the exiles in Babylon Isaiah wrote two centuries before this event: *But now, O Jacob, listen to the Lord who created you. O Israel, the one who formed you says, "Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are Mine. ²When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. **When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you.**³ For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour (Isaiah 43:1-3a). God will be with you who are His wherever you are and in whatever situation. Do you need to hear these words of encouragement today?**

4. **The declaration of the King** (Daniel 3:28-30)

*Then Nebuchadnezzar said, 'Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent His angel and rescued His servants! They trusted in Him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. ²⁹Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way.'*³⁰ *Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon. The reward of God was a bonus. These believers put God first because it was the right thing to do –even if it cost them everything. Each one of us will be tested often in circumstances particular to ourselves. Daniel did not face the fire. His friends would not experience the hospitality of a lion's den. What you will go through may be very different from the people sat around you in church or wherever you may be at a particular moment in time. The one question God places before you and me just now is simply this: can He count on us to stand out from the crowd in twenty-first century Scotland? I hope each one of us can firmly say 'yes', for Jesus' sake, Amen.*