

Daniel 3 – No compromise, no harm, no comparison.

I know my wife pretty well, I'd say - **very** well in fact. But sometimes I have to say that I don't understand her – I probably never will. Not fully anyway. We can sometimes be like this with the Bible – we know what's in it, we know the stories, but we don't always fully understand what God wants to tell us **through** the stories. That's why it is important to keep reading the Bible – God wants us to understand it better and better. We can never come to the end of our understanding. There's always something new to learn – that's the wonder of God and His Word.

The events we're going to be looking at this morning happened about 2 and a half thousand years ago. If I said the names Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, how many of us would know who I'm talking about? It's one of the most related stories from the Old Testament, I 'd say, along with David and Goliath, Daniel in the lion's den, Noah and the ark. More about their names later, but let's read the account of Schadrach, Meshach and Abednego as it's written in the book of Daniel, chapter 3. (Page 886 in the blue church Bibles.)

There is some difference of opinion about exactly when this book was written, but Daniel was writing primarily for the encouragement of his fellow Israelites who were captives in a foreign land at the time. They needed to know that God was still with them, and overruling their situation.

Imagine yourself living in Israel in about 600 B.C. Your country is at present captive to the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar, a king feared throughout the world – if **he** invades, you know you'll be conquered.

We read in 2 Kings 24:14 that *“He [Nebuchadnezzar] carried into exile all Jerusalem: all the officers and fighting men, and all the craftsmen and artisans – a total of 10,000. Only the poorest people of the land were left.”*

What Nebuchadnezzar does is to take all the talented and useful people back to Babylon, and he leaves the rest, the poor to live peacefully in their own land. This means two things – the poor conquered remnant in Israel is loyal to him because they can live peacefully in their home land, but it also means that he, Nebuchadnezzar, has a steady supply of wise and talented people to ensure his empire flourishes.

In Chapter 1 of Daniel, and verses 3 & 4 we read why Nebuchadnezzar brought Daniel and his three friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah to his palace:

“ The king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and nobility – young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king’s palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians.”

So King Nebuchadnezzar wants these handsome clever young men to become Babylonian. He wants them to be part of his court and country by immersing them in Babylonian culture and traditions.

It’s a natural desire for us to be part of a group, isn’t it, to be accepted into the community where we live, to be “in” with the people around us. When I was at university I spent a year teaching at a school in Germany. For the first few months I was referred to as “der Englaender” (the Englishman). But they had a custom that when it was your birthday, you went to the local baker and ordered 50 or so bread rolls to be enjoyed by the staff at school. So when I did this on **my** birthday, they started referring to me as “unser Englaender” (**our** Englishman). I’d made it! I felt I was now accepted amongst them. And although I was a long way from home, I felt I was part of this group of people. We all want to be accepted, don’t we?

Nebuchadnezzar wants these men to be part of his people. He gives them important positions of responsibility, they were “*set over the affairs of the province of Babylon*” we read in chap 3 v 12. He even gives them new names, so that they will fit in – Schadrach, Meshach and Abednego. **I** think we should rather know them by their original names of Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, because they mean “The Lord shows grace, Who is like God? and The Lord helps” whereas the names given to them by the Babylonians Schadrach – “Under the command of Aku (a moon god)”, Meshach – “Who is like Aku?” and Abednego – “Servant of Nego, the god of learning and writing”, **these** names deny their origins and their faith in their God. Nebuchadnezzar tries to change their loyalty from Judah’s one God to the Babylonians’ many gods.

Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah survived in a foreign culture by learning about it and by achieving excellence in their work and by serving the people. **But** they adapted without abandoning their faith in their God.

I want us to think about **three ‘no’s’ – no compromise, no harm and no comparison.** (repeat)

Let's look closer at the passage before us this morning. Firstly, we see that the 3 men will not compromise their faith, they won't compromise their calling from God. **No compromise.**

Nebuchadnezzar wants these men to be part of his culture. He gives them access to all they need to be immersed in the Babylonian culture. They in turn are prepared to adapt their lives while they are in his land, to work for him and to serve the people around them.

But they are **not** prepared to compromise their faith in God. The king has had this gold statue built – 90 feet high – for everyone to bow to and worship. This is his attempt to unite all his people. There are numerous gods being worshipped at the time – each person had their favourites! Nebuchadnezzar thought that if there was one statue everyone bowed to, this would unite his people. An admirable attempt, we might say, but the wrong subject for their worship. Those who do not worship the image are to be thrown into a blazing furnace.

Verse 12 says: *“There are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon – Schadrach, Meshach and Abednego – who pay no attention to you, O king. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up.”*

They are willing to adapt to survive in the foreign land, but they are not willing to compromise their faith. They will live there for a while, but they will not lose their identity. They will remember their origins, that they are the people of God. They will not bow down to this idol, because they remember that the commandments given to Moses say *“You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them...”* (Exodus 20:3,4)

Like Moses, they remember their origins. He refused to be part of the culture where he was raised, because he remembered where he was from. In Hebrews 11:24 we read

“By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be ill-treated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time.”

These three could so easily have said “Oh well, it won’t be so bad if we just bow to this statue once in a while – our God will be merciful, he’ll forgive us, he knows we don’t really mean it – he can see our hearts.”

But no, there is no room for compromise in their faith. It **is** OK to adapt to survive, but it is **not** OK to bend over backwards to fit in. As someone once said “People who bend over backwards to please everybody soon weaken their spine”! At the men’s conference at the Albert Hall last year, one of the speakers was talking about how we adapt to the world around us – he said some believers are like chameleons, they adapt so well to their surroundings that no-one can tell the difference. **These** 3 men stand out.

God calls us to a life of total uncompromising faith. Like these three men, like Moses, we are to regard ourselves as strangers in a foreign land. The Christian knows this is not our real home. We are just passing through.

In Hebrews 11 we read of men of faith recorded in the Bible – Abraham, Enoch, Noah, Isaac, Jacob. In verse 13 it says “*They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted they were aliens and strangers on earth.*” They admitted they were aliens on earth – their real home was what lay beyond. They listened to the call of God, and lived lives of uncompromising faith.

How do we live? Are we too comfortable in our existence? Do we compromise our faith? “I’ll just watch that programme rather than read my Bible; I’ll just go out for a meal rather than go to the prayer meeting; I’ll just talk to my friends rather than witness to that man who’s just walked in off the street; I’ll just **listen** to that unhelpful conversation, rather than put God’s point of view – make my life easier.” So many ways we can compromise our faith. There should be **no** compromise, even if it could mean discomfort, even pain for us. We’re only strangers here, Peter urges Christians to “*live your lives as strangers here*” in 1 Peter 1:17.

The 17th century Puritan Thomas Watson said “*The world is but a great inn where we are to stay but a night or two and be gone. What madness it is to set our heart upon our inn as to forget our home.*”

Let’s not forget where our real home is as Christians – eternity in heaven with our Saviour and Lord Jesus. Let’s live our lives accordingly.

God calls us to love and serve Him with all our heart and soul (Deut 10 and 10); He doesn't want us to be lukewarm, we read in Revelation. No compromise.

Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah did not bow down to the statue, they did not compromise, they remembered their origins, they stood firm in their faith. How about us?

2. In verses 13 to 15 we see Nebuchadnezzar very angry with the 3 men, but he offers them one last chance to bow down to the statue. Let's read verses 16 to 18 again. What wonderful faith. They know their God. They trust their God. They believe that He is God, He is King, He reigns, He is sovereign.

Secondly, we see that these men come to **no harm**. No harm. They refuse to bow down to the statue and so must be thrown into the fire - a furnace you could obviously walk into, probably used normally to bake bricks. That's the decree, Nebuchadnezzar can't go back on it. We read that the King is so furious that he orders that the furnace be heated to 7 times its normal heat. So hot it kills the men who take Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah to the furnace. The extra heat in the furnace increases the effect of the miracle. Like the time Elijah soaked his sacrifice in water before calling God's fire down upon it – the effect of God's power is increased.

The furnace was 7 times hotter than usual, it killed the soldiers. Surely no-one could survive being thrown in there. The three men fell into the fire, firmly tied, verse 23. The king expects them to be consumed immediately.

But no. He is totally amazed. He looks and sees a fourth person in there with them. They are not harmed – in fact quite the opposite, they walk around unbound and unharmed. They come to no harm. We read in verse 27 as they came out of the fire, the crowds *“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.”* No harm.

They were not preserved because they were anybody special; they were not preserved because they had **done** anything special. They were preserved because **God is sovereign** – He alone decides what happens. The three men knew this – that is why they said *“the God we serve is able to save us... But even if he does not ... we will not serve your gods.”* (verses 17 and 18)

They knew that the decision was God's whether they lived or died. He **was** able to save them from the fire, but he may not. They would either be rescued by God **from** the fire, or be rescued by God **in** the fire, that they would be with him in eternity. Either way they would be rescued.

Remember Daniel is here writing for his fellow people for their encouragement – what greater encouragement than to know that their God is with them – even while they are in exile – and that He is still in control of every situation. That must have lifted their hearts. That must have come as such a great blessing. To know that their God reigned. It will have reminded them of the verse in Isaiah 43: *“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.”*

What wonderful consolation for the people who Daniel is writing to – even now, even here, God – their God - is in control. God is with His people. What a wonderful thought for **us** – God's people today - God can be trusted even when **we** can't see the outcome. He knows the beginning to the end. He is sovereign. He is King. He has a plan which can't be thwarted.

Let's be clear - believing in God doesn't mean that we will be saved from all harm and suffering – if it was like that there would be a massive queue outside every church in the world full of people wanting to join. No, instead it means that for the Christian there is the assurance that God is with us in every situation. Nothing can harm our relationship with God ultimately. Every situation is preparing us for eternal life with him in heaven. Let me say that again ...There are **eternal** reasons for our temporary trials. What a wonderful thought, isn't it?

In the sovereign plans of God, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah came to no harm. They knew his presence with them in the fiery furnace, they feared no evil, because He was with them. We read in Psalm 23, remember *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.”*

Thirdly I want us to look at verses 28 & 29.

“Praise be to the God of Schadrach, Meshach and Abednego ... no other god can save in this way.”

We see Nebuchadnezzar giving glory to God, praising God, but he's still not quite there. It's a bit drastic that anyone who says anything against God should be cut into pieces, and their houses reduced to rubble! He still doesn't get it fully!

He doesn't recognise God as the one and only God – he doesn't **replace** the Babylonian gods with the God of Schadrach, Meshach and Abednego – he just **adds** Him to their number. He is not saying here “Do away with all the other gods, **this** is the one true God.” He's not quite there yet. In fact we see in chapter 4 it takes 7 years of insanity before Nebuchadnezzar can say *“Now I praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything He does is right and all His ways are just.”* We read this in chapter 4, v. 37.

But he does acknowledge the **power of God**: *“for no other god can save in this way.”* He recognises God's power. Nebuchadnezzar's gods couldn't save his soldiers when they merely approached the heat of the furnace, but the God of Israel delivered his people from its full heat. *“.. the God we serve is able to save us from it ..”* v.17. The 3 men knew their God had the power to deliver them from the fiery furnace.

Nothing is impossible for God. He has power beyond compare – He is God. There is **no comparison** – nothing and no-one, no other god can compare with the God of Israel.

We read in Psalm 89 verses 6 and 8: *“For who in the skies above can compare with the Lord? Who is like the Lord among the heavenly beings? O Lord God almighty, who is like you? You are mighty, O Lord, and your faithfulness surrounds you.”*

God speaks in Isaiah 40:25: *“ ‘To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?’ says the Holy One.”*

After God had powerfully and miraculously parted the Sea so that his people could walk safely across, Moses sings to Him *“Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you – majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?”* Exodus 15, verse 11.

Nothing compares to the power of God – the One who parted the sea, the One who saved Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah from the fire, the One who saved Daniel from the mouths of the lions, the One who raised Jesus from the dead – *“no other god can save in this way.”* This is the Christian God. This is **our** God.

Nothing can compare with the beauty of our God – look around at creation – not at how man has altered it, but at God’s creation. Go out into the countryside – creation untouched by human hand. Watch those brilliant sunsets we often see down here. Wonderful, Beautiful. This is our God.

Nothing can compare with the love of God – He **is** love. Such love that sent His only Son, Jesus to the Cross, that our sins may be paid for, so that we may walk free, free to enjoy eternal life with our God. Sacrificial, saving, powerful love. This is our God.

Our God is unique. There is no comparison to the power of God, nothing compares to the beauty of God, the love of God has no rival. Do we know this God? Do we really know this God? Is He our God? Is He my God?

Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah knew this God personally – they knew His love, they knew His power to save, they knew His presence; so they trusted Him. They knew that He is sovereign – nothing happens but by His design; God is in control. Because they knew their God, they were not prepared to make any compromises, they trusted their God that no ultimate harm would come to them.

There is no comparison to our God, we can afford to say we will not compromise our faith, because we know that nothing can harm us.

Our God is unique – **no comparison**, He is sovereign – **no harm**, and He calls us to a life of total commitment to Him – **no compromise**.