

Image and Reality

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[0 : 00] Well, do turn with me, if you would, to Daniel, chapter 3. A chapter that's all about image and reality. In this chapter we have, perhaps, one of the best-known stories of the book.

One of the best-known stories in the Bible, perhaps. And it's a story that's brilliantly told. But, of course, it's not a story written for the Sunday school. At least not just for children, although it is just as important, of course, for them.

But it is a story for adults. And I suppose, if I had to be specific, it's especially a story for men. Indeed, you couldn't find anywhere a better model for real masculinity than what we see here. I don't mean macho and bravado and testosterone-fueled showing off that we often confuse for masculinity. But rather, real honour and courage and willingness to stand against the whole world, rather than to dishonour the name of God by capitulating to the relentless pressure in a godless society to conform to its ways and to its behaviour.

But there's a few things to remember by way of introduction before we dive into the story. First, remember that we are, in chapters 2 to 7, in the Aramaic section of this book.

[1 : 33] We saw that last time. These chapters are not in the same language as most of the Old Testament, Hebrew. They're written in Aramaic, the lingua franca of the ancient world at that time.

And whatever else the significance of that may be, surely at least it implies this. This is a message for the whole world. All people on earth need to read and to understand the message of these chapters.

It's a world story and it mustn't be hidden. Second, the first and the last chapters of this section, chapters 2 and chapter 7, act as bookends.

Each of these chapters speak of a dream that lays out God's revelation, his big picture of the unfolding human story.

And as we saw last week in chapter 2, that story is absolutely clear. Kingdoms rise and kingdoms fall, but all of this is totally under the control of the one true God, the God of heaven.

[2 : 39] As chapter 2, verse 21 says, He it is who changes times and seasons. He removes kings and sets up kings. He alone. And ultimately, it is his kingdom, the one that he sets up, which alone will last forever and never be destroyed.

And even in the days, during the days of all of these kingdoms that are mentioned in that dream, including Nebuchadnezzar's own kingdom, God is already doing this.

He is setting up a kingdom that cannot be destroyed. The stone that crushes all earthly kingdoms is rolling now. And it's already beginning its trajectory to fill the whole earth.

And finally, of course, it will smash all earthly kingdoms. And that kingdom alone will reign forever. That's the big story. That's what begins and ends this section in the book of Daniel.

And in between these two clear and definite outlines of the big story of world history, we have these chapters in the middle, chapters 3 to 6. Chapters that show that reality on the ground, in real life human experiences.

[3 : 55] Just what these great seismic movements of God's plan and purposes mean, up close and personal for the people of God. Real historical people living in the 6th century in Babylon.

In other words, what we're seeing here is the winds of this great war of the worlds, these great battles in the heavenly realms that are seen in the visions, blowing, if you like, into the real lives and personal experiences of God's people on earth.

And so, as we look at these individual stories, we mustn't forget that big story. And we mustn't forget that these stories are all part of that. Just as, by the way, as we look at the individual stories of our own lives and the significance of them as we lead them here today as Christians in the 21st century, we too must remember that we are part of a much, much bigger story.

God's story. God's story of establishing his everlasting kingdom, which will never, ever fail. And as we look at the real and the often terrifying powers in this world, in 6th century Babylon, or 21st century Britain or Europe or wherever, we must remember that big story.

And we must remember that the story of God's eternal kingdom is not just a future thing. That stone is growing already. It's rolling. It's gathering pace. The power of the world to come, the power of the kingdom of God, does influence all human history.

[5 : 36] It's unseen, maybe invisible, but it is very real. And the eyes of faith do see that and does understand that.

And at times, especially times of crisis, of critical moments in the history of God's unfolding plan, these powers can break into the story of earthly history in such a way that they become visible. In fact, sometimes so that they become utterly undeniable, so that all the world must see and must respond to what God is doing. And that is the relevance for us in these stories.

We mustn't fail to see these things. We mustn't fail to take heed to the unmistakable message that God reveals to us in these events and that he records in the language of the whole world so that the whole world can see them.

And for the people of faith, for the people who see the invisible, these chapters are ones of great encouragement. God is in control.

[6 : 47] No matter what seems to be going on in the little story of your life, God is in control. The power of the world to come breaks in to the story of human lives.

Don't fear. There's also, of course, a message for those who would seek to oppose God's unstoppable kingdom.

It's a warning. Do not be a fool. It's utterly, utterly futile. God is building his kingdom.

Far better to climb down and to confess that this is what he's doing than try to oppose him. So with that, by way of introduction, let's turn to the story.

It's a great drama. It's rather like a play. And we're going to look at it as if in three acts, under three headings. First of all, verses 1 to 7, the evil tyranny of the king's image.

[7 : 49] Then verses 8 to 25, the extreme testing of God's men. And then from verse 26 to the end, the easy triumph of the men's God.

Or if you'd like something a bit more pity, pithy rather, Nebuchadnezzar sets up, the three friends stand up, and God shuts up. So first, verses 1 to 7, the evil tyranny of the king's image.

The image that the king sets up. The scene that's painted before us in these verses is a vivid and a realistic picture of the conformity and capitulation demanded by the image the world sets up.

They speak of the relentless and often ruthless determination of a society that has rejected God and opposed God to conform men and women into its own image.

and force them to bow down and worship at the altar that it has created. Its cherished gods. Gods erected by men and in the image of men.

[8 : 58] This is just a particular example, a real historical example, but one that repeats all through history. We've already seen it began right back at the beginning with the Tower of Babel.

The arrogant assertion of the city of man against the city of God and against all that the city of God stands for. You see, a world that rejects the one true God will not have no gods.

As the great poet and thinker Bob Dylan has put it, you've got to serve somebody. Well, I know it's a bit of a climb down.

Last week we had Shakespeare, but he's right, isn't he? You've got to serve somebody. We all serve somebody or something. And a world that is rejecting and ignoring the one true God, the God of heaven, will bow down.

It will bow down to its own images, to images made in its own likeness. And it will demand that everybody else, without exception, bows down to them too.

[10 : 08] And that's what Nebuchadnezzar is doing here on the plains of Jura. He set up the image, vast and impressive, 90 feet high by 9 feet wide. That's a lot of gold.

Even if it was just gold plated, that's a lot of gold. I'm not sure even a 50 million dollar bank heist would be able to pay for a statue quite that big. But he demands on pain of death that anybody who refuses to bow down will be massacred.

Straightforward enough, but the way that the storyteller tells it makes it clear that he wants to emphasize to us two distinct aspects of what's going on.

First of all, there is this fearsome and sinister power represented by this image. Maybe you listened as I read it, the way the scene is built up and up and up so that we're left with a picture that's utterly overwhelming.

First, we have the scale, the vast scale of this image and its location. It's set in the middle of a plain. The scholars tell us that it was a huge plain with mountains all around the outside of it, rather like a huge, vast amphitheater.

[11:24] And then we have again a repetition telling us that the whole might of the Babylonian Empire was coming to the dedication of this. The satraps, verse 3, prefects, governors, councillors, treasurers, justices, magistrates, all the officials of all the provinces.

Then there's the command to all the people, the nations, the languages to bow down in unison at the sound of the music on pain of death. And then there's a picture, just imagine the noise, verse 5, the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, bagpipes, for goodness sake, a great cacophony of all kinds of music blaring out together on this huge plain with this vast number of people.

And the huge spectacle of a sudden mass collapsing as all these people bow down together. Pictures for us, doesn't it?

The sinister and fearsome reality of absolute power. Doesn't it remind you of the newsreel footage of the Nuremberg rallies? Tens of thousands of people chanting Sieg Heil!

And Adolf Hitler strutting on the stage. Or the displays that we used to see of the Soviet military mic parading past the Kremlin. The huge crowds of people looking on as nuclear warheads went through the streets of Moscow.

[12:47] Fearsome! It's a fearsome and sinister spectacle and that's what we're meant to see. The entire mustard might of this vast world empire displaying its arrogance, displaying its very real power and authority.

Who could dare to resist that kind of decree? The very presence of the scene alone speaks of being utterly overwhelmed, utterly engulfed by the power, the sheer weight of the numbers.

Absolutely extraordinary pressure for everyone to conform, to capitulate. And if we've just read chapter 2 in the last few verses of it, we're beginning to wonder, surely, aren't we, what's going to happen to these three men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that have been appointed as officials of the provinces and must have been called to be part of that crowd.

Can God's people possibly survive the kind of onslaught of this whole culture united in seeking conformity to this image?

It seems impossible, doesn't it? It seems impossible and of course, often throughout history, it has been impossible for God's people to stand.

[14:14] When the sheer tyranny of the images of kings or of empires or of ideologies has sought to bring all other loyalties into conformity, to capitulate to the power of a projected image.

We've seen these sinister examples so often, haven't we, in the power of totalitarian regimes that have systematically and ruthlessly gone about stamping out all faith of any kind.

Maybe just even political views or even ideas. We've seen that, haven't we, under communism and fascism, under some of the dictatorships that are still alive and kicking in the world today.

But even in our western democracies we are no strangers to the sheer power to conform and cause capitulation of a secular humanist culture, a culture in love with its own images.

Think of the power, the sheer power of public opinion and the pressure to conform, to bow down to the totems of our day.

[15:26] think of the aggressiveness of the assault of secular feminism, for example, with all its images demanding that women should conform to that image.

Think of the power of the pro-homosexual lobby demanding and getting all sorts of rights and cowering into submission all who might dare to voice a dissenting view.

think about the whole gamut of political correctness that pervades our society today that threatens any who will not toe the conformist line.

Our culture is full of sinister and fearful powers, of images set up by man and it's very, very hard not to capitulate, very, very hard not to be conformed.

Peer pressure is such a strong thing, isn't that right? Especially among the young. From trivial things, well I suppose not so trivial really, demands to conform to certain fashions and so on.

[16:39] There's sinister power there, isn't there, and the power of advertising. Just try and get your children past certain counters on the way out of the supermarket. It's power. It's very serious

too, isn't it?

The pressure to join in the wild sexual abandon, the experimentation, the promiscuity that's lauded in our culture. You know that, don't you?

I hope you do. Otherwise, we're naive. If you're a young girl at school or going to college, men are going to try very hard to get you into bed as quickly as they can.

You don't realize that, you're naive. If you're a bloke in your later years at school or going to college or anywhere else for that matter, all your mates are going to be trying to get you to get girls into bed as soon as you can.

You'll find that your hormones are not on your side, but they're on their side. The power to capitulate, to be conformed is very, very strong. And the question is, will people of faith be able to survive?

[17:49] And the truth is that many, perhaps even most, will not. It seems that it was only these three men, of all the Israelites, in captivity in Babylon, who stood and everybody else bowed.

And that is the history of the church, isn't it, for the most part? For the most part, it's been capitulation. Just this week, you will have read, as I did, that the Church of Scotland is to consider becoming the first major denomination in Britain to allow its ministers to bless so-called gay marriages with abandon.

That's going to be debated at this year's General Assembly, at which I'm a commissioner. Will we be able to resist? Or will we capitulate? Will any of us, will there be three of us, will be able to stand?

Let me quote to you from the newspaper article that was talking about it, and it's quoting the words of a dean of an Anglican college in Cambridge, who says this, he believed the church was going in the wrong direction over civil partnerships, quote, we insist that only heterosexual relationships are valid.

We insist that sex only happens between people who are married to each other, he said. In both these respects we are parting company from the morality of society around us. And that's a criticism.

[19:22] My answer is, what do you think the church is supposed to be doing? We, too, need to bow down to the image. The music is demanding it.

Get down on your knees. You see, the power of the world's image is real. It's fearsome. And the writer wants us to take that seriously.

But there's another side to it that he also wants us to see. And that is the farcical and the pathetic aspect of it all. As you read these verses, it's perfectly clear that at the same time he's mocking. You see it nine times, the repetition of the phrase, is the image that the king had set up. You see, it's a joke. All these satraps and high hedions and all the rest of it, falling down before an image that they know has just been made by a man and set up.

He's ridiculing them. And the repetition of the list of names just presses the irony. These are the people who rule over the languages and the nations and all the provinces of the world and they're falling over themselves to fall down at a pathetic image that the king has set up.

[20:38] Verse 7 literally says as soon as they were hearing they were falling down. They are literally falling over themselves to fall down. no doubt to curry favor with the king and to try and get on the advance.

But isn't it pathetic? But isn't it true? Isn't it deeply ironic? The world will not buy down to the truth of God.

The world rebels against his rule and yet willingly it falls over itself to become enslaved to images of its own making. Things that the world knows are fake.

And hollow. And yet we rush to bow down to them. Think of the fashions that so many people are enslaved to. The fashionable images of the day. The must have.

The clothes. The cars. The whatever it must be. I must conform. Twelve months later then the charity shops. Their passe.

[21:37] Their old hat. Their collapse. We know it's a hollow image. We know we're being conned. But we bow down just the same. The image of gold.

So soon after Nebuchadnezzar's dream in chapter 2 there's mockery. Has he forgotten that that great image that he saw in his dream with the head of gold ended up with feet of clay?

Has he forgotten? There are no feet of clay in this statue. Did you see that? He's got a selective memory hasn't he? For God's revelation he takes the bit that he likes and he forgets about the bit that he doesn't like.

He's just like most of the rest of us who take the bits from God's word that we like and neatly forget about the bits that we find a bit irritating. But you need to remember Nebuchadnezzar what happens to that whole image.

He gets smashed to chaff. He gets blown away. Yes, Nebuchadnezzar may set up all that he likes and see only the gold.

[22 : 39] But God knows the truth. He knows it's hollow. He knows it's transient power. He knows that all of these powers of the kingdoms of this world are just going to blow away like chaff.

And the message to the reader, don't take the world's power too seriously. Don't. Yes, it's real.

Yes, it's sinister. It's real power, but it's not the whole story. There is a far greater power behind the scenes, and that is the only power that really matters in the end.

And it's only if we see that, and seeing that, we learn to mock the power of the world's image, as well as fear it.

Only if we do that, will we be able to withstand it. Yes, it has teeth. Yes, the power of the world has power to harm us, even to kill us.

[23 : 39] But remember, these kingdoms, these images, every one of them, will end up like chaff. But the kingdom of God lasts forever.

Remember what Jesus said? Don't fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, fear him who can destroy both body and soul in hell.

people. And that's what these first verses remind us, and we must see that. But when men do see that, when we see behind the scenes to the real story, and when we therefore do not fear the world, but stand for God, we stand for Jerusalem in Babylon, well then there is an inevitable clash of loyalties.

Now, it brings us to act two of the drama, the extreme testing of God's men, the men who stand up and don't bow down. This is the crisis and the challenge that is inevitably provoked for those who will stand for God with real faith.

And the key verse that encapsulates the issue is verse 15, the verse we ended our first reading with, who is the God who will deliver you out of my hands? And there's a two-fold challenge, a two-fold question in that statement that corresponds to the two scenes in this act of the drama.

[25 : 09] The first is this, which men can withstand the power of this world? And secondly, which God can deliver them if they do? And so, first of all, in verses 8 to 18, we see the challenge to God's men and their answer to the king.

It's very significant that verse 8 says that at that time, opposition arose. Jews. These Chaldeans had all sorts of reasons to dislike these men.

There was professional jealousy after their humiliation in chapter 2 and these men's advancement. Perhaps racism was part of it. These Jews who you've set over Babylon, these foreigners.

Maybe there was opportunism, a chance for their own advancement. But whatever it was, they bided their time and when the issue arose that they knew was significant, they snatched it with a malicious accusation.

Again, it's so true to life, isn't it? It's exactly what people do when they want to get on. Bob File in his very helpful commentary points out that the term used there, malicious accusation, is the kind of language used of the devil himself in Revelation chapter 12.

[26 : 20] He's called the accuser of the brethren. And of course, we shouldn't be surprised, should we? The devil is a great strategist, he's got great timing, he knows exactly where and exactly when to attack God's people.

And be sure, the visions of Daniel have told us clearly that he and his host are behind all of this drama that's being played out on earth. And the New Testament, of course, is clear too in Ephesians 6.

Our battle is not just against flesh and blood, but against the power of the authorities in the heavenly realms. Oh yes, the devil is behind all of this. It's always the story from the beginning to the end of his seed against the seed of the woman, the seed of Satan and God's chosen people. And so here we see escalation, the pressure and the persuasion of the first seven verses are now magnified. And it's turned into very specific, very personal threats of punishment, the big burning

fiery furnace.

It's the whole world now, arrayed against the people of God. And the people of God is just these three men. Real men with real names, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

[27 : 38] It's one thing to be despised in principle, isn't it? It's quite another thing to be despised and persecuted in person. Isn't that right? To have your name on the secret police's list.

To have your name on the fatwa. Because you have converted from Islam to serve the Lord Jesus Christ and you will stand for him. And now your name is on the death list.

And we know, don't we, that many of our brethren in the world today have their names, real names, on lists like that, just as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had.

But even here in our own society, there are many so-called enlightened liberals who show just such totalitarianism.

Isn't that right? There's many a fiery furnace of mockery, of ostracism, of sneering, and sometimes worse, for those who will not bow down to the image of our culture's demands.

[28 : 45] You know that. You'll never get on in this firm if you won't join in with the rest of us in doing this or that or the other thing. You'll never make friends in this school if you don't join us in doing this or come where we are to do that.

Isn't that right? And verse 13 says the king was furious. He was furious at the thought that these men would not bow down.

And again, that's so true to life. The rage of the so-called tolerant liberal intelligentsia. It's often staggering, isn't it? Witness the outrage recently when a Christian woman dared to say on a Radio 5 Live audio program that she believed homosexuality was wrong.

And she had the police round making investigations. indeed the world finds it almost unbelievable that anyone can possibly not capitulate to its superiority.

Verse 14 says Nebuchadnezzar, is it really true that you don't serve my gods and worship my image? Well, I can hardly believe that anybody would not capitulate.

[30 : 03] Think about Richard Dawkins. He cannot believe that any intelligent person could possibly believe that the world was created by God. He just can't comprehend it.

He tries to pretend that such kind of thinking is almost an illness. So contemptuous is he of it. He won't even debate anywhere with a Christian scientist.

Because I suppose he just believes it's unbelievable. But what enrages the world even more is when it has to face the answer of real faith.

Verses 17 and 18 are the climax of this chapter. It's this that is the great moment of victory. Do you see? Because Nebuchadnezzar and his image are defeated by this confession of faith.

Do you see verse 17? If this be so our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace and will deliver us out of your hand, O King. But if not, be it known to you, O King, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you've set up.

[31 : 17] You see? The king is utterly defeated. Because they know what he does not know. They see the real truth behind history.

They know that the only kingdom that really matters is God's kingdom and that Nebuchadnezzar has no say in God's kingdom. As Bob Fyre puts it, they appeal to a realm where Nebuchadnezzar's writ doesn't run.

And they've defeated him. In the words of Revelation 12, they've conquered him by the blood of the lamb who is the stone that establishes the kingdom and by the word of their testimony for they love not their lives even unto death.

And Nebuchadnezzar's power over them is defeated just because they belong to a realm where he has no power. And they know that.

And he knows that. And that's what enrages him. But even if the story ends there, the world has not triumphed.

[32 : 26] They have overcome the world as John says in 1 John 5 and 4. This is the victory that overcomes the world. Your faith. They've defeated him.

They will not bow down. Because they love not their lives even to death. But you see, the story doesn't end there because Nebuchadnezzar had made two challenges.

Not just to the men, but directly to God himself. Which God can deliver them. And so in verses 19 to 25 we have the challenge to God himself and God's answer directly to the king.

Verse 19 describes Nebuchadnezzar's fury at the men. So furious it seems that he burst a blood vessel. He's red with rage. He knows he's beaten you see and that makes him furious. They've conquered him. But now at least, at least he's determined to show that their God will be no match for him. He wants the satisfaction of revenge against them, but he wants the public satisfaction of saying, well, they died in vain because their God did nothing for them.

[33 : 42] You see, if the world has to give grudging respect to the Christian martyr, if it can't impugn the bravery of a Christian who stands, it at least wants to be able to show a superior kind of pity with such a waste, such misguided heroism.

You have to admire the stand, but it's so unnecessary and foolish. And you see, Nebuchadnezzar is determined that he will defeat these men's gods. Just in case there's any contest, he puts the flames up seven times hotter, just to stack things in his favor.

And again, we see the sinister fury, the irrational fury of the god-hater, don't we? Very dangerous man. Yet at the same time, we see the irony of it, the laughable folly of it, as if the god of heaven who sets the times and seasons, who destroys and sets up kings, as if he's going to be defeated by some kind of special turbo oven.

For goodness sake, it's laughable. Even though the king's poor soldiers are burnt to a crisp, but in go the men, throw them down the huge chimney of the great brick oven.

And the king sits on his throne and he looks through the door where the men are stoking on more and more coal and wood to heat it up. It's hard not to think of Psalm number two, isn't it?

[35 : 13] The kings of the earth set themselves. The rulers plot against the Lord and his anointed, but the Lord sits in heaven and laughs.

He has them in derision. And yet, we're meant to look at this and see what a laughable sight it is. Poor old Nebuchadnezzar. He's sitting there looking at the flames and all of a sudden he jumps up. What on earth is going on? I thought I torched three corpses. What's going on in there? There's four men and they're walking around. They're unharmed in the fourth.

He's like a son of the gods. He's some kind of divine being. What's going on? Well, what's going on is God's answer to the king. And it's a second defeat in one day.

And not just for him, for all his Chaldean henchmen. Because you see, there is a God who can deliver his people and who does deliver. And against the Chaldean theology of chapter 2, verse 11, remember when they said, the gods do not dwell with flesh.

[36 : 20] Well, apparently this God does come down and dwell with flesh and blood. This God stands by his men. He stands by those who stood up for him. Should we be surprised at that?

Well, God had given his people particular promises, hadn't he, for the exile through the prophets. In Isaiah 43, he said, Fear not, for I have redeemed you. When you pass through the fire, you will not be burned.

The flame will not consume you, for I am the Lord, your Savior. Fear not, for I am with you. And here he is with his people in the crucible of suffering, a Savior, a deliverer.

Nebuchadnezzar can only describe what he sees in his own polytheistic pagan language, but he knows that what he sees is a divine being. And of course, we know the big story, don't we?

We know that that story is about a God who promises to establish a kingdom that will last forever, and who does it because he's a God who is Emmanuel, with us to save, as God the Son.

[37 : 30] We know that it's a story about a God who would one day be with us in the flesh forever, to plumb the depths of affliction for his people, and in the place of his people, to deliver his people, to deliver them from the bonds of sin and guilt, and set them free forever in the kingdom of his light.

And that's how this God overcame the world once for all, when the powers of the world to come, when the power of his eternal kingdom broke into human history once and for all, to destroy all his enemies, to deliver his people.

And it's exactly that power that breaks in here, in history, to make his presence felt, in the person of the pre-incarnate Son of God.

Don't forget that this is an episode of critical importance for God's whole plan and purpose of salvation. We must see that, or else we might apply it very wrongly and get all kinds of strange ideas and wrong ideas as to what we must expect ourselves in times of trouble.

These men represent God's remnant, God's people, Israel, the seed of the woman, upon whom the whole of God's unfolding plan of salvation depends. Destroy them and God's whole plan of salvation is wiped out.

[38 : 54] And therefore the issue is not just one of blasphemy against God's name by the king, although of course it is that. It's the survival of God's promise. Who is the God who will deliver you out of my hands?

That's not just Nebuchadnezzar's words. It's the word of all the powers of evil arrayed against the God of heaven saying, how can your promise, how can your salvation, how can your covenant survive this?

And God's answer is this, though I myself must come down and enter the fiery furnace of affliction and suffer with my people in order to deliver my people, my promise and my salvation shall stand. That's God's answer. It's all about one like a son of the gods, one who comes down to deliver, who is Emmanuel. We'll see in chapter 7 is the son of man who rises up to receive glory and dominion forever and to take his people with him.

that's God's answer to the blasphemous questioning of the powers of this world. And that's why the story ends with total reversal, with the easy triumph of the three men's gods, of the God who shuts up the mouths of the rulers of this world.

[40 : 27] The last few verses there from 26 are all about the climb down and the confession elicited from the pagan king by the God who does deliver. Isn't the irony delicious?

Here's this pagan king himself with all the leaders of the known world standing around in bemused silence. He himself is utterly silenced except that he himself becomes the great confessor. He becomes God's mouthpiece of revelation. He speaks in the language of the whole known world. God's life. It's like a live broadcast taken on CNN or something.

Do you see what he does? He gives them a three-point sermon all about faith. First of all, in verse 28, he talks about the God of faith. It's the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

He is Emmanuel. He's the God who stands with his people. And he's a God who comes down. And he does dwell with men and he comes down to deliver his people.

[41 : 27] He's always been that kind of God right from the beginning of the Bible story. He came down to Abraham. He came down to Moses in the flames of the burning bush. And he came down ultimately in the body of the Lord Jesus Christ.

He came down to be with us forever so that now he says, I'm with you even to the end of the world. That's the God of faith. And Nebuchadnezzar says he's the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, no other.

Second, he gives us a sermon on the nature of true faith. If the first question was who is the true God of heaven? The second question is what is true biblical faith?

And Nebuchadnezzar tells us in verse 28 it's trusting in him alone. It's refusing to bow down to the images of this world, whatever the pressure might be.

It's yielding up your body rather than worship any other God than the one true God. That's real faith. It's standing for Jerusalem and Babylon because like all the heroes of faith that we read of in Hebrews 11, they saw him who is invisible, a God of heaven who rules over all, a God who comes down to deliver his people in the person of his son.

[42 : 47] That's faith. That's the victory that overcomes the world. That's the victory that overcomes all the Nebuchadnezzars of this world. And finally, Nebuchadnezzar points us to the fruit of true faith.

Verse 25, he shows us that the world sees the Savior. Nebuchadnezzar sees what is always true but is often not seen.

He sees the presence of the Son of God with power in the midst of his people to save them. And real faith, faith that stands despite threats and sufferings because it sees the invisible, because it sees the truth of the presence of the living God, real faith reveals God to the unbelieving world. And it reveals God in the only way that he can be seen and encountered in the person of the Son of God, the Savior, who comes down.

The world sees the Savior and so, verse 29, the name of God is glorified. There is no other God who can rescue in this way, says Nebuchadnezzar. And his people, too, are blessed in him.

[44 : 02] And the world and society is impacted by their stand. We may not approve of Nebuchadnezzar's methods. They're rather enthusiastic, tearing people limb from limb and wrecking their houses.

I guess that's just the Babylonian way. But even if there are not mass conversions all around, do you see two things have happened. There is the promotion of men of righteousness and stature in

the public life of that nation.

There's the threat of punishment for wickedness and for those who are the sworn enemies of God in society at large. So, Nebuchadnezzar gives a pretty good sermon, doesn't he?

A pretty good lesson for a pagan king. And friends, this is our God. This is the reality that we must keep hold of in the midst of the world and all its images.

We do live in the tyranny of a world full of the king's images. That's why Paul says, anyone who desires to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

[45 : 09] And no, not every one of us will be rescued from the flames. Because we're not like those three men. The physical line of the coming Messiah does not depend on us as it depended on them then.

And like many others in the Old Testament and in the New Testament and ever since, we too, as Hebrews 11 35 says, might have to refuse release so as to rise to a better life.

But still, always, everywhere, real faith does overcome the world. We conquer all enemies by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of our testimony if we love not our lives even to death.

That faith reveals, that faith preaches, that faith proclaims to the world that there is no other god than the god of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the god made known in the Lord Jesus Christ.

That kind of faith says to the world, there are no other gods who can rescue in this way. It bears fruit. The invisible god is seen and heard and he is worshipped and he's loved and he's obeyed where real faith bears fruit.

[46 : 35] So friends, our prayer must be that God would help us to see the true reality behind this world of image and by our faith to reveal that reality in this world with its spent and worthless images that men and women and boys and girls may see the one who comes down in the person of the son of God to deliver his people and to show the way and the truth and the life.

Let's pray. Gracious God, we thank you that you are the God of heaven in whose hand are all the issues of time and eternity.

We thank you that you are a God who has come down, come into the suffering of your people to deliver, God. And we pray that you would open our eyes and thrill our hearts with the truth of the message of the glorious gospel that is in Jesus.

That we, by our faith, by our stand for you in a world of crushing and often perverse and sinister images, might show the way to that truth, that our Savior may be seen and loved and glorified.

For we ask it in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen.