

Resisting a Real Authority ***Daniel 3:1-30***

The carrot or the stick – which works best? Which is more effective?

- Do you offer a child a bribe or threaten them with punishment?
- Will an employee respond with more diligence to the offer of a raise or the threat of dismissal?
- Is a teenage more likely to cooperate with overtures of positive outcomes or warnings of negative consequences?

And what happens on a national scale? How do governments extract cooperation from their citizens?

- Many flock to Australia because of the carrot – the great life on offer here. Our nation's gods create a popular vision.
 - Materialism offers wealth and prosperity.
 - Secularism offers tolerance and diversity.

The great Australian dream is enough to keep many in line – both those born here and those coming from other places. They willingly hop on the treadmill and rarely cause any waves.

- Yet, the carrot's not enough for everyone. Sometimes the stick's brought out. Laws are enacted to support the vision. Penalties are imposed on those who don't conform.

In Daniel 1, we saw Babylon's carrot. Nebuchadnezzar offered Daniel and his mates all the perks of anti-God, man-made, Babylonian grandeur. It's a seductive offer. He wants to mould them into true citizens of Babylon. What's the wise response of God's person to that offer?

Daniel and his mates worked out what it meant to live in Babylon and yet not be infected by Babylon or aligned with Babylon. Their first allegiance was to God. Where that was threatened, they took a stand.

The Challenge

In Daniel 3, we see Babylon's stick. Nebuchadnezzar sets up this gigantic statue.

- It may be of himself.
- It may be of a Babylonian god.
- It may be of an indefinite world spirit.
- It may be a pinnacle – given the proportions of the dimensions.

It doesn't matter too much.

What matters is the contrast with chapter 2.

- There, Nebuchadnezzar dreamed of a huge statue that represented the kingdoms of this world. That statue was destroyed. Now, he turns round and builds his own statue as a central focal point of his own empire.
- But even more importantly, in chapter 2 we're told it's the God of heaven who *sets up* kings (verse 21) and it's the God of heaven who *sets up* His eternal kingdom that destroys the empires of this world (verse 44). Now, Nebuchadnezzar *sets up* this statue. It's repeated again and again – verses 1 and 2 and 3 and 5 and 7 and 12 and 14 and 18.

What he does opposes the revelation he's been given. What he does opposes the God of heaven.

Why does he do it?

- Is he rebelling against his dream's interpretation – wanting to defiantly say his own kingdom won't be

replaced by the chest of silver?

- Is he trying to set up some new form of religion – perhaps even a religion centring on himself?
- Is it just an expression of his personal pride – an exhibition of his wealth; a monument to bring him honour in succeeding generations?

They're all possible – and maybe elements of each are involved.

Underlying it all, I think it's to do with the feet of clay. Big empires have their own seeds of destruction inbuilt. How do you keep them together? How do you balance all the diverse elements? How do you keep rebellious people subject to your will? You give them something to celebrate their unity. Now, they don't actually have much unity – other than you've conquered them all. So you must create something.

- Who's involved in this thing? Verse 2: *the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials*. In case you missed the list, it's repeated in verse 3. It's all the officials in Nebuchadnezzar's vast empire – the cabinet and back bench and public service. Anyone who's anybody is there.
- And what's going on? It's a great dedication ceremony. There's pomp and pageantry and showiness and music and maybe even the hint of something religious. It's a great spectacle – like the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games.
- And what's required of them? Allegiance. At the appropriate time, they're all to bow down to this statue. They're not told what it represents. They don't know the exact meaning of why they're all there. But they all do the same thing at the same

time. On threat of death, they're commanded to bow down and worship.

It's a relatively common practice of political systems. In the long run, they demand absolute allegiance. We spot it easily enough in other systems.

- The great parades in North Korea.
- The military processions in Tiananmen Square.
- The oppressions of the former Soviet Bloc. Those who refused to give the Soviets appropriate allegiance were sent to Siberia.

Do we recognise it in our own system?

- What happens to those who refuse to buy into the materialist's dream? At best, they're ignored – simply treated as being of no consequence; as being irrelevant. More likely, they're ostracised – treated as second-rate; looked down on by the middle class; considered a bit weird. Why wouldn't you get the latest ipod? Why wouldn't you rush out and see the latest movie? Why would you be satisfied with a small house?
- What happens to those who refuse to buy into the secularist's propaganda? This is where the demands for allegiance are becoming stronger.
 - We face pressure to accept sexual promiscuity as normal – as long as you use protection.
 - We face pressure to teach that same-sex relationships are a valid option.
 - We face pressure not to bring God or religion into the public arena – it's OK to have your quaint morals in private, but don't force them on government policy.
 - We face pressure to treat all religions as equally

valid – to accept the dogma that all religions are heading to the same place.

And so it goes on.

We aren't asked to bow before a gold statue – but we are asked to submit before these philosophical ideas that underpin and unite our secularist and multicultural society. And they come up with good reasons for it.

- We have so many diverse cultural backgrounds, and all cultures have their strengths and weaknesses.
- We have different cultural ways to achieve the same ends – and who's to say my way's better than yours?
- We live in a world that's learnt to celebrate variety.

We must be tolerant and inclusive and accepting. And that's true. The problem comes when they extend that reasoning into areas of right and wrong; truth and falsehood. It's when they impose their secularist worldview on everyone – a religious perspective that leaves God out of the equation.

And so we live in a world where:

- Jesus is banned from Christmas in schools.
- Nurses can't initiate talks about Jesus with patients.
- An employee was sacked for wearing a gold cross.
- Ministers are pressured not to tell people that God says homosexuality is wrong.

Martin Buber observed that every nation is inclined to make an idol of its own inner spirit – and that, when they set that up as an absolute, they desire to get rid of God's people.¹

¹ John Goldingay, *Word Biblical Commentary: Daniel* (Dallas: Word Books) electronic edition.

The Stand

Daniel's three mates are put on the spot. Some Chaldeans notice they're quietly in the background still standing up when everyone else is on the ground looking at the dirt. They feel compelled to draw the matter to Nebuchadnezzar's attention. They tell him they just can't bear to see the great king dishonoured like this. More likely, they see an opportunity to dispose of three people higher up the political ladder.

Nebuchadnezzar is furious. He summons these three guys and gives them opportunity to repent. The key to his approach is verse 15:

Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes 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?

I rule this vast world empire. I've conquered nation after nation. None of their gods rescued their peoples from my hand. I'm the authority here. I've got all the power. If you do as I say, I'll overlook your earlier indiscretion. But if you don't, then I'll throw the book at you. No one can stand against me. No god can rescue you from me. Which is more impressive?

- This great ceremony I've organised – bringing all the world leaders to this one united event; or
- The flattened temple of your God back in Jerusalem – the one I burned to the ground?

Where does it look like the action is? Has your God done anything impressive like this? I want your allegiance.

It's a blasphemous challenge: the best of human might setting itself up against the God of heaven. Who really rules in God's world? Nebuchadnezzar thinks he does. He thinks he has the power to determine what his subjects should think and worship. It's so typical of godless kingdoms.

- The Soviets aimed to eliminate religion. Their ideology said: Religion is the opiate of the people. They confiscated church property, ridiculed religion, harassed and tortured religious people and taught atheism through the education system.
- The Chinese under Mao Zedong likewise tried to suppress religion.

It's no different in modern Australia. Sure, the coercion's not as strong – we're not threatened with exile to Siberia or executed – but we do face intimidation. We do face pressure to conform to secularist ideology. Human power sets up itself as being impressive. We're the ones doing things in the world. We're the ones making progress. We make things happen. We shape the world the way we want it. Where's this so-called God of yours? What's He up to? Can He match it with us?

What's the wise thing to do in such situations? Many think the wise thing to do is submit to those in power. These guys have the authority. They can make life rather uncomfortable if you defy their authority. It's best not to rock the boat. Simply keep the peace and continue enjoying the comfort of Babylon.

Daniel's three mates decline the opportunity to repent. The key to their approach is verses 17 and 18:

If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and He will rescue us

from your hand, O king. But even if He does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.

They know who really rules. They know who has the real authority. They choose to submit to him rather than some puny little king.

God made his will on the matter quite clear.

- Commandment #1: You shall have no other gods before Me.
- Commandment #2: You shall not make for yourselves an idol. You shall not bow down to idols or worship them.

Not much doubt about that.

Will God rescue them from the king? That He hasn't made known. They have no clear word from God one way or the other.

- They know God is quite capable of rescuing them. He's done things like that in Israel's past – miraculously intervened when things looked hopeless. He got them out of slavery in Egypt. He got them into the promised land. He fought for them in battles, rescuing them from overwhelming odds. Recently, He'd saved them from Nebuchadnezzar's edict of death. Nebuchadnezzar wasn't the first pagan king to issue this sort of challenge to God.
- But they didn't know if God would choose to rescue them. They didn't control God. They didn't dictate terms to Him. God's the One who rules, not them.

Either way, they submit to God. He's the greater authority. They refuse to bow to Nebuchadnezzar's statue. They refuse to give Nebuchadnezzar ultimate allegiance.

That's the wise thing to do. Suppose two people give you conflicting instructions.

- A policeman in the car behind you has his siren going and is indicating he wants you to pull over.
- Your six year old son in the back seat wants to see if you can outrun the police car.

What's the wise thing to do? It's the same sort of contrast in Daniel 3.

- The God who made this world and everything in it and who continues to rule His world tells you not to worship anything else.
- The pompous human king tells you to bow down and worship a bit of metal he's made.

What's the wise thing to do? When you see the reality of the situation, it's obvious. But too many people don't see the reality. For some strange reason they think the pompous king has the greater authority. They think the wise thing to do is to submit to him – to avoid being thrown in the furnace.

Note that Daniel's three mates didn't rationalise. They didn't think to themselves:

Well, God's put us in this position of great influence. We have opportunity to significantly influence Babylon for the kingdom. Why risk throwing all that away? Why not just perform this outward action to this meaningless statue? Our hearts won't be in it.

Has a ring of wisdom about it, doesn't it? But it's not God's wisdom. How can you hope to influence the world for God by disobeying God? It just doesn't work. You're already compromised. Obedience to God comes first. The God who put them in that position is quite capable of looking after His interests.

- His interests may best be served by miraculously

rescuing them – like here.

- His interests may best be served by their deaths – the history of God's people is littered with many examples of God being glorified and His kingdom advancing when Christians are martyred.

But His interests won't be served by disobedience. That dishonours Him. That treats Him with contempt. That fails to trust Him.

Unfortunately, it doesn't stop us doing it. We're very good at rationalising and not so good at obeying.

- Christians who take short-cuts in business because it means they can give more to missions.
- Christians who engage in wrong behaviour to get the opportunity to speak with non-Christians.
- Christians who follow the world's tactics in the corporate ladder games because they think their success at the top will bring God honour.
- Christians who marry non-Christians because they think they can convert them.

Secularism attacks at many different levels. Its focus is on human achievement – on the name we make for ourselves – on setting up our own kingdoms. That focus creates its own agenda and its own rules. When living in Babylon, it's very easy for that agenda and those rules to seep into the way we think – especially at the level of thinking it's all about what we do and what we achieve – even what we achieve for God. We must keep coming back to the desire to truly honour God. And that means obeying His word – even if it means death.

The issue of ultimate allegiance comes up in all sorts of ways. Don't get me wrong here. We still owe a certain level of allegiance to other authorities.

- God expects us to honour our parents.
- God tells us to submit to our employers.
- God instructs us to obey the government.

But our ultimate allegiance remains to God. And if those other authorities tell us to do something against God's will, we obey God. And if those other authorities claim a place above God, we don't give it to them. It comes up in so many ways.

- Parents grooming you to be a surgeon but you believe God wants you on the mission field.
- Employers instructing you to lie for them or to fudge the figures on government forms.
- Governments telling you to teach same-sex relationships as a valid alternative.

It may cost. You may face ridicule. You may ignore a lucrative career. You may lose your job. But is it wise to ignore God? Is it wise to think you know better than Him? Is it wise to give someone else – or something else – greater allegiance?

The Outcome

Typically, Nebuchadnezzar's enraged by their defiance of his command. That's often the response of Babylon when God's people truly follow God's ways. The king flies into action.

- He has the furnace heated seven times hotter.
- He has them tied up securely.
- He throws them into the furnace, clothes and all – not personally; his strongest soldiers do it for him.

In other words, Nebuchadnezzar does all in his power to execute them.

And it doesn't work. A higher authority steps in. He learns first-hand that there is a God who can save them.

It's driven home.

- His strongest soldiers die because they get too close when throwing them in – but Daniel's mates survive the furnace itself.
- And the furnace has no impact on them – not even a hair singed; not even the smell of fire touches them.

So the king acknowledges a higher authority. Verse 28:

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.

Those who are really wise are those who trust God who really rules – even to the point of defying the greatest human authority.

Will it always end like this? There are other remarkable stories of this sort of thing – both in the Bible and in the history of the church. But there are also many stories of martyrs – people refusing to give ultimate allegiance to human authorities and being executed as a result. Jesus is one example. He could have escaped crucifixion.

- Told the authorities what they wanted to hear.
- Been a bit less confrontational.
- Called a legion of angels to rescue Him.

But He chose the Father's will. The Father didn't rescue Him from suffering and death – but He did vindicate Him and He did raise Him from the dead.

How is it wise to trust God if you'll get hurt for it – if you'll miss out in this world? It's wise because this world isn't the end. God's the One who really rules. Just as He raised Jesus from the dead, so He'll raise us. Indeed, all will stand before God's judgment. At that point, we'll see

who's really impressive. The great kingdoms and rulers of this world will pale into insignificance. Their power will be seen for the puny thing it is. They can't stand before the real God. It's what the real God says that's important. And so it's always wise to obey Him – even if we get hurt for it on this earth.

So, where are you struggling at the moment?

- The carrot? The seductive offer of great career or great wealth or great pleasure if only you'll be less of a fanatic about God and learn to keep Him under control?
- The stick? The intimidation to compromise on your commitment to God or else to pay the price – to lose friends, to lose prospects for advancement, to lose your job?

Why do you struggle with that? Do you know who rules really? Or are you more impressed by human kingdoms and man-made philosophies? The gospel holds out to us something far greater and far more secure and far more permanent than what's on offer from the secularist gurus. Will you trust God? Do you believe that what He offers is better? Do you believe that He's for us? Do you trust that His ways – even though they involve hurt – are best?