

The God we serve is able

Daniel 3:1-30 (key verse 17,18)

"17 If 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. 18 But 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."

As Christians, although we are in the world, we are not of the world, and part of Jesus' prayer for us, His church, was as follows: *"My prayer is not that You take them out of the world but that You protect them from the evil one"* (John 17:15). In a way, we are like the three men of faith we are going to learn from today—who were exiled in Babylon, which did not worship their God at all, and so were pressured to live a life contrary to their faith in God. How then can we live as Christians in an unbelieving world we live in? What does it mean and cost to have a spirit of resolve and not compromising in a world that has so much pressure to conform to its ways? What is the power of friendship in the Lord look like? Mainly, what is the role of personal faith in living a life of clear purpose—and in growing in such faith? Let's get to the word of the Lord in Daniel 3, that will begin to respond to these questions and may God grant us one word—to have resolve (personal faith) in our hearts and courage in the our God who is able! The God who is able and righteous. Amen!

Look at verse 1: *"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."* Why would King Nebuchadnezzar do this? We learn in the previous chapter of Daniel that King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that he really wanted to understand, since it troubled him to the point he could not sleep (Daniel 2:1). That is, he sought its interpretation, but in an extraordinary way—one that would really show that the interpretation of the dream was true. His Majesty Nebuchadnezzar had a dream where he looked, and there before him stood a large statue—an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. While he was watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were all broken to pieces and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth (Daniel 2:31–35). Upon having this dream, the king made it clear to his astrologers, magicians, enchanters, and sorcerers—who were capable of interpreting dreams: not being able to tell him what his dream was and interpret it meant death but being able meant that they would receive from him gifts and rewards and great honour. **No one could do it**, and this made him angry to the point that he issued a decree to put all the wise men, including Daniel and his three friends, to death. By God's favour, and having consulted God in prayer with his three friends (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego), Daniel interpreted the king's dream in the manner prescribed by the king—but with God's truth of what the dream meant. The first part of Daniel's interpretation of the dream was as follows, in his words to the king: *"37 Your Majesty, you are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; 38 in your hands he has placed all mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds in the sky. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold"* (Daniel 2:37–38).

To symbolise the meaning or interpretation of the dream, and being overwhelmed by the power and dominion aspect thereof, **the king made an image of gold** that would be clearly seen in the land of Babylon. **However**, God through Daniel did not say he was the statue but that he was the "head of gold"—**only the head of gold**. The interpretation of the other parts of the statue in the dream indicated that King Nebuchadnezzar's dominion would come to an end. These were the words to him: *"39 After you, another kingdom will arise, inferior to yours. Next, a third kingdom, one of bronze, will rule over the whole earth. 40 Finally, there will be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron..."* (Daniel 2:39–40). And so the image he made of himself was not a true symbol or representation of God's truth. This shows that the king was glorifying himself through the image he made, and he twisted God's word in

doing so. By so doing, he undermined God's goodness—may we be careful not to do the same, my dear brothers and sisters. God's truth is God's truth, and it remains true no matter how much we may want to take advantage of it—it is true and binding. As Shepherd Lesedi would put it, the Word of God has absolute authority! Unless God changes it, it remains. There are some presidents in the world who built statues of themselves, glorifying themselves, and this set the tone of how people live in those countries. However, other presidents or governments uphold anti-God or anti-Christ policies that set the tone of how people live in those countries, because it is reflected in the laws of the nation. That is why we see in verse 2 that the king summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. And since he was a feared dictator who did not issue empty threats—we see in verse 3 that the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, 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. **All this was at the government level, but what would it mean for the people under his kingdom?**

In verses 4–7, we learn that all peoples of every language, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe, and all kinds of music, were to fall down and worship the image of gold. Whoever did not fall down and worship was immediately thrown into the blazing furnace. **And indeed, as soon as they heard the sounds, they fell down and worshiped the image of gold.**

However, three men of faith—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—did not bow down, nor did they try to make a show of their refusal. Some astrologers, however, laid a complaint against the Jews in general and against these three men in particular. When this complaint reached the king, **he became furious with rage** and summoned the men to confirm the truth of the accusation. The king 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? 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 well. 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?"* [8-15]. This was a direct challenge to their faith, and the consequences were clear. **A nerve-wracking question, isn't it?** Have you ever been in a situation where you were asked about your faith in such direct terms, where it could cost you your life—or something precious, such as a job, reputation, failing a grade, or even a close relationship? Whatever your answer may be, let us learn from how these three men of faith responded, and how they found the courage to answer as they did.

Let us all read the key verse, *"¹⁶Shadrach, 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^[c] 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."*

How could they respond like this? Firstly, **personal faith**. What they said reveals a "model" of pure faith that we personally need to follow. In what respect is their faith exemplary? We can say that their faith is exemplary in that it rested purely on who God is, not on what God would or would not do in a biased way. Some people rely on God because of the miracles He can perform for them. But they are no different from a boy who loves his father's wallet more than his father's person. To such people, God is like a vending machine. They cannot go far; they generally become restless after making decisions because they struggle to rely on who God is. When the going gets tough, they soon show their true colours. But Daniel's three friends were different. They said that even if God would not save them, they would still serve Him. Matthew 9:29 says, *"According to your faith it will be done to you."*

In addition, their faith is truly glorious in that, while they were far from home—where they had no temple, no rabbis, no shepherds, no elders, and no parents ready to offer assistance—they still, purely

based on their own personal faith, refused to bow down to the golden statue. By faith, they decided to serve and worship the God of Israel alone. Their influential friend Daniel was not with them—perhaps the astrologers knew they might not win against Daniel, since he had more favor from the king, having interpreted his dream in a miraculous way, or perhaps he was away on a business trip. They were also summoned immediately and therefore did not get the chance to seek prayer support or report the matter to him. Yet, because they had their own personal faith—rather than relying on the faith of someone else, such as their mothers' faith or their shepherds' faith—they were able to take a stand. Brothers and sisters, have personal faith in God, and may this faith be pure—not biased.

Secondly, **spiritual training**: they could respond like this because, right from the beginning of their three-year course or training to serve in the king's court, they had purposed—or resolved in their hearts—not to defile themselves with the king's food, which was offered to idols and, generally, did not conform to the diet of the Jews according to the customs of the Law of Moses (Daniel 1).

Thirdly, **spiritual friendship**—the company you keep. The resolve these men had, which did not begin in that moment but more than three years earlier, was influenced by their friend Daniel. Daniel 1:8 says, *"But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way."* In Daniel 2, when faced with the impossibility of knowing the king's dream and interpreting it without it being revealed to him, Daniel consulted his three friends so they could pray together. Daniel 2:17 says, *"Then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah [whose Hebrew names were changed to Babylonian names Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego]."* We can, therefore, appreciate the power of friendship in the Lord to influence and encourage us in matters of faith, even when other Christians compromise their faith. Do you have such friends—friends who will not allow you to live however you want, but who hold you accountable for your ways and actions?

In April, I found a consulting job that brought me much closer to presidents. Through this job I attended high-class events pertaining to the country's future, particularly as it pertained to gender equality or Gender-Based Violence and Femicide. Close to two months in the job, I was overwhelmed by the idea that my vision to one day bear the name of Jesus before kings and presidents of the African continent was finally becoming tangible or getting close to being fulfilled. However, in one of these high-class events I was nearly interviewed by a journalist or reporter regarding the event, but I managed to avoid her and my colleague took the interview. Little did I know that the job would make me public because, although I didn't take the interview, pictures of me came out on the news of some country where they had an online interview with the Chairperson of that event and society. I avoided the interview because I was scared to share views that might contradict the organisation and, most importantly, my faith and identity as a man of God.

This shows how weak I am, lacking substance and courage to stand before kings and presidents. And so, upon reflection during the time I was waiting for my contract renewal at the organisation, and after I was informed that my contract would not be renewed, it dawned upon me to read Daniel 1. As I was reading Daniel 1, it dawned upon me to check what passage I would be messenger on since it was not the initial plan that I should be one of the messengers for the conference. To my surprise it was Daniel 3, and so I began to read and study from chapter 1 to 3 and came to a clear realisation that I need to have resolve and grow in that resolve to have the substance or courage to stand and respond as the three men of faith did when faced with a similar situation—when the going gets really tough.

Moreover, I realise that since being newly appointed as a shepherd, I have often found myself busy with many streams of income in order to provide for myself and prepare for marriage. As a result, my role as a shepherd in God's ministry became equal in weight to my jobs. This passage has encouraged me to make a resolve, by personal faith, to put my ministerial role at the forefront of my life and trust God for provision. This means trusting God for a simple, well-paying job that does not require weekend work, and remaining in it until I am admitted into a fully funded PhD program; marrying a suitable

helper by faith who will not have to suffer because of my busyness with multiple jobs and ministry at the beginning of our marriage; and ultimately pursuing a fully funded, full-time PhD program without mixing it with a job.

It is my prayer to undergo God's faith training through being faithful in small things before bigger things just as the three men were faithful during their three-year period together with their influential friend Daniel. I perceive that I am now in a season where I must be firmly established as a resolved man of God before stepping fully into my strategic secular profession.

Still in line with God's faith training journey, I noticed that Tsibela and I became shepherds less than a year apart, are in similar fields of study, and made similar decisions of faith to let go of or quit jobs that could have diverted us from our calling as campus shepherds. We also both desire to marry by faith (to establish our house churches). With this in mind, I decided by faith to reach out to him. Together, we created written vision documents—one for him and one for me. We are resolving in our hearts not to defile ourselves with job opportunities, our marriage decision and life direction that contradict the contents of our vision documents and, ultimately, our common calling in Him, based on the word of the Lord that inspired us both. It is our prayer to grow in personal faith so we too may be able to respond when push comes to shove: *"King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If 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. But 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."*

The three men of faith fully committed themselves to the righteousness of God and believed that He was able to rescue them from the fire. Shepherd Khomo, sharing a message on this same passage, put it this way: *"The Lord God is able to deliver us, not that He removes us from the fire, but that He is with us in the fire. The Lord is able to deliver us, not that He removes all sorts of sufferings from our lives, but that He is with us even in those sufferings."* The point is that they did not place their faith only in God's ability to save them, but also in God's righteousness – and love for them. In addition, their faith affirmed the value that is above human life—that is, serving and worshiping the God of Israel alone, even if it involved death. Daniel and his three friends refused to worship foreign gods; by faith they risked their lives and chose to serve the God of Israel. By faith, they kept their identity as God's children.

In conclusion: Like these men of faith, most of you are in academic training that is secular in nature and intended to benefit the world. Many of you are still studying, while others are pursuing postgraduate studies. Some of us are working in various jobs, and some are still searching for suitable work. In all of this, do you have personal faith in God? Are you willing to undergo God's spiritual training—to commit to weekly Bible study and testimony writing, and to obey God's Word? Have you resolved in your heart to remain faithful in these practices to willingly and wholeheartedly obey God's revealed word? Have you decided to follow Jesus and not be defiled by depending on your studies, career, or relationships for your identity, recognition, and meaning in life?

Do not sell your soul for your dream job or for a person, because the Scripture is true. The Lord Jesus was not joking when He said: *"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done"* (Matthew 16:24–27).

Having personal faith and a firm resolve in our hearts is our strength to honour God even in the most difficult situations—situations that may cost us our lives, jobs, status, reputations, potential ungodly marriages, partners, socio-economic futures, or careers. To have courage in God is to accept His

spiritual training, to develop personal faith, and to resolve to deny ourselves and follow Jesus Christ. May we also value our friendships in the Lord—friendships that spur us on to honour Him in every critical situation. **One word: The God we serve! Amen.**