

# Daniel Series Part 5

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[ 0 : 00 ]     What image comes to mind when I mention the names Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego?

Well, I think the answer to that is very clear. It's got to be the fiery furnace into which they were flung, only to emerge unscathed, as Jonathan was very vividly reminding us just a few moments ago.

The story of these three young men in the fiery furnace is a Bible classic, and it will occupy our attention at both services today.

So allow me to sketch out the plan of what we hope to do both this morning and this evening. We are going to divide the content and the message of this chapter, the third chapter of the book of Daniel, in the following way.

God challenged, God honored, and God vindicated. God is challenged by Nebuchadnezzar's construction of the statue of gold and the decree that all are to bow down before the idol.

[ 1 : 16 ]     God is honored by the three young men who refuse to bow down before the image. And God is vindicated, vindicated by himself in delivering his servants unscathed from the fiery furnace.

Now this morning, we will consider the first two elements, God challenged and God honored. While this evening, we will then proceed to deal with the third element, God vindicated by himself.

So this morning, the challenge and the honoring of a God. The challenge, as we've just noted, involved the issuing of a decree, or to use more contemporary language, the making of a law.

The making, very particularly, in this case, of an ungodly law. A law was made, and it was an ungodly law.

It went contrary to God's truth. The requirement that all would bow down before an idol. That is how God was challenged.

[ 2 : 33 ]     God was honored by the young men who disobeyed this ungodly law. As we think of these two elements, of God being challenged and God being honored, we actually noticed in the passage that there are three parties involved in this matter and that we are presented to in the first 18 verses of the chapter.

We have presented to us lawmakers. In this occasion, in the singular, a lawmaker. We have lawmakers. We have law keepers. We have those who kept the law that was decreed.

And we also have law breakers. The lawmakers, law keepers, and law breakers. And that's really the way we're going to order our thoughts this morning, as we consider God being challenged and God being honored.

We'll consider these things by looking at these three parties, as it were. The law makers, the law keepers, and the law breakers.

Before we do proceed, can I just deal in passing with a reasonable question that could be posed?

[ 3 : 45 ] The question is this. What practical application can be derived from this ancient account so alien to our modern ears? The story is familiar, of course, but the setting is so different to our own setting, or so it would seem.

And while the story is a stirring story, an exciting story, it is reasonable to say, but what has it to teach us today? And I hope that it becomes clear that it has a great deal to teach us.

For the making of ungodly laws, and the challenge to determine if you will be a law keeper, or a law breaker, is grippingly contemporary.

As you well know, the Scottish government is currently hell-bent, and I use my language advisedly, on driving through Parliament an ungodly law concerning marriage.

There are other laws that are in view that cause concern, but this morning I want to focus particularly as we would apply the lessons from this chapter of Daniel to this legislative project.

[ 4 : 57 ] The legislating of a law concerning marriage that is an ungodly law. What are we to make of this? And what are we to do in response?

Well, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego have plenty to teach us. So then, lawmakers, law keepers, and law breakers.

First of all, lawmakers. Well, in Babylon, it wasn't so much the case of lawmakers, but of a lawmaker. Nebuchadnezzar concentrated in his own person, legislative, executive, and judicial power.

Nebuchadnezzar made the laws. He made this law. He determined the manner in which they were to be kept, and he established and ordered the punishments to be meted out.

We find all of these aspects in the chapter. All of these three traditional powers of the state that we could describe them, concentrated in this one emperor, Nebuchadnezzar.

[ 6 : 02 ] And as we consider the law that he decreed, I want us to notice three aspects of this law. Three aspects of the lawmaker who decrees an ungodly law.

The first thing I want you to notice is that he rejects God's revealed will. In the case before us, he refers, of course, to Nebuchadnezzar.

Nebuchadnezzar rejects God's revealed will. That's the first truth I want you to notice in the making of this law. You see, we have just considered very recently chapter 2 last week, and the contrast between chapter 2 and chapter 3 is a dramatic one.

In chapter 2, we have described the manner in which God reveals to Nebuchadnezzar Nebuchadnezzar the future of his kingdom and indeed of subsequent kingdom. In his dream, Nebuchadnezzar is the head of gold, but his empire in time will be superseded by another.

Now, Nebuchadnezzar accepted and understood the interpretation of the dream. That is very clear in his response to it. He heard what Daniel had to say. He recognized that Daniel had spoken and that Daniel's God had proven himself as a revealer of mysteries.

[ 7 : 29 ] So, the dream was clear. The interpretation was clear. And Nebuchadnezzar, at that point, recognized the truth of the interpretation. Nebuchadnezzar is a great man, but a man for all that.

So, what does Nebuchadnezzar do in the light of this knowledge that he has given, in the light of God's revealed will being made very clear to him? What does he do? Does Nebuchadnezzar humbly reflect on God's revelation and wisely seek to exercise his God-given authority and humble dependence on the God of Daniel?

Is that what Nebuchadnezzar does? Well, no. That is not what he does. Nebuchadnezzar rebels against the notion of just being the head of gold.

And he orders the construction of this image, of this statue, that is of gold from head to toe. And there is so clearly the intention of bringing us in to see the folly of it.

In the dream where he has revealed God's will, there is a head of gold, but the statue that he fashions is gold from head to toe. There's no room in his statue for feet mixed with iron and clay.

[ 8 : 53 ] No, Nebuchadnezzar has no time for such a statue, no time for a statue that would speak of the limited nature of his empire and of his power.

No, his statue, his image, is of gold from head to toe. And this statue of gold announces to all the unbridled power and majesty of Nebuchadnezzar.

Nebuchadnezzar in the making of the statue and in the issuing of the decree that he deliberately rejects God's revealed will. That is what he does.

This is the first aspect of the law that he decrees. And I ask you the question, is this so different to what is being hatched at Holyrood?

God has revealed clearly and unequivocally his will concerning marriage. In the very first pages of the Scriptures, For this reason, a man will leave his mother and father and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

[ 10 : 03 ] It is clear. It is unequivocal. A child could understand it. This knowledge is available to our legislators. It is revealed truth that has formed and molded Scotland for centuries.

And yet this revealed truth is being consciously and deliberately rejected by our lawmakers. They know better than God.

And what a grievous and chilling indictment on any government, on any parliament, on any legislature, that they would say of themselves or would declare by their actions, we know better than God.

But this is where we are in Scotland today. So this first truth concerning this law that is made, it is a law that in the making of it involves the rejection of God's revealed will.

But we also notice in Nebuchadnezzar's making of this law that he is challenging God's ultimate authority and power. Now there is, of course, a very clear sense in what we've already said and makes that clear.

[ 11 : 19 ] But I want to develop this slightly differently. He challenges God's ultimate authority and power. I wonder if Nebuchadnezzar would have accepted that that is what he was doing.

Had Nebuchadnezzar been asked on the occasion in which he is proposing this law or determining that this law be made, had one of his advisors ask perhaps and said, well, O king, do you appreciate, do you realize that in the molding of this statue you are defying the God of Daniel, the God who revealed the mystery of your dream to you?

Do you appreciate that this is what you are doing? I wonder if Nebuchadnezzar would have protested and said, no, I am doing no such thing. Perhaps he would have said, no, Daniel and his friends, they're quite at liberty to continue worshiping their God.

There is no prohibition for them if they wish to worship the God of Israel. They can do so. There is no reason nor a law to prevent them from continuing to worship their God in their manner and as they see fit.

My statue, Nebuchadnezzar may well have argued, my statue is not intended to replace the gods of the nations, but simply to provide a unifying focus for this multicultural and multi-faith empire that I rule over.

[ 12 : 45 ] Perhaps, we don't know. Perhaps Nebuchadnezzar would have protested if he had been accused of challenging God's ultimate authority and power. And yet, Nebuchadnezzar gives the game away when he is challenged by Shadrach, Meshach, and Ahmed-Nego and proudly declares there in verse 15 and at the end of the verse, as he threatens them very clearly as to the outcome of their disobedience, what does he then say?

What are his closing words, his closing salvo there at the end of verse 15? Then, what God will be able to rescue you from my hand?

See, there he gives the game away. Had it been the case that Nebuchadnezzar said, no, all and any God is welcome in my kingdom. I have so many nations under my control.

What a rich diversity of faith and religion and we welcome it. Had he put forward that discourse, the truth of the matter is to be found in these words.

What God, God of Daniel or any other God, what God will be able to rescue you from my hand? Because my hand is the hand. My hand is the hand of authority.

[ 14 : 11 ] My hand is the hand of power, not the hand of any other God. Who will rescue you, O insignificant Hebrews, from my hand? And so, it is very clear that in what Nebuchadnezzar is doing, he is challenging directly and foolishly God's ultimate authority and power.

The gauntlet that he is throwing is not to the powerless Hebrews. He is challenging God. Nebuchadnezzar must reign supreme and alone.

There is no room in his kingdom for a sovereign God who will rule over him. And again, I pose the question for you to consider and mull over, is this so different to what the Scottish government is proposing to do?

No doubt, our first minister and the deputy minister and those who are the intellectual authors of this legislative project, no doubt, they would be horrified or perhaps some even amused at the accusation that their intention to redefine marriage was a challenge to God's authority.

They are, they would assure us, very respectful of the diverse faith communities in Scotland, that the religious convictions of minorities cannot be imposed on the whole population, we would be told.

[ 15 : 39 ] But the reality, be this recognized or ignored, is that the one being challenged is God himself. Of the King of Kings, our parliament would declare, as with foolish men of old, we will not have this man to reign over us.

So this lawmaker, in his lawmaking, in the making of an ungodly law, he rejects God's revealed will, he challenges God's ultimate authority and power, and thirdly, he demands the obedience of all.

Of course, that is the nature of laws. Nebuchadnezzar was not proposing some Babylonian street party to celebrate his many achievements that the good citizens of Babylon could attend or not as they saw fit.

But like when we celebrate the Queen's Golden Jubilee, we can have a big street party. If you want to go, you go. If you choose to stay at home and watch the telly, well, that's up to you. This is not what we have.

This is a law. And laws are there to be obeyed. This was a decree. This was a law of the kingdom. And of necessity, as a law, it was to be obeyed by all.

[ 16 : 51 ] No conscientious objectors could be tolerated. And again, as we fast forward to our own day, what about same-sex marriage? Are we not being told that no religious body or celebrant will be obliged to conduct a same-sex marriage against their religious convictions?

Well, this is what we are told. But regardless of what assurances are promised, the reality is that if successful, if this legislative project is successful, we will be obliged to accept as the law of the land the new definition and all that will assuredly follow in the wake of such legislation.

Time doesn't allow us to explore that, but in the whole realm of education and our schools and what our children are taught, necessarily, a new law in this area will necessarily require that curriculums be revised and be adjusted to the new law of the land.

And of course, it is also reasonable to presume, though we are not prophets in these things, it is reasonable to presume that it is simply a matter of time before those who object to this law will fall victim of anti-discrimination or equality laws of one kind or another that either currently exist or will in due course be placed on the statute book.

Lawmakers. But the passage also presents us, and we will deal with this more briefly, with law keepers. In verse 7, we have them presented to us. Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, and all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations, and men of every language fell down and worshipped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar set up.

[ 18 : 44 ] My interest is to explore the motivation that drives the law keepers to keep an ungodly law. I would suggest three elements.

First of all, you have, no doubt for some, a lack of knowledge. No doubt many who bowed down before Nebuchadnezzar's statue, unlike Nebuchadnezzar himself, were ignorant of God's revealed will.

They, as victims of their own ignorance, mindly do as they are told. Maybe their thinking would have been along these lines. Well, the King knows best.

Nebuchadnezzar, he's so powerful, he's so wise. He has conquered all before him. If Nebuchadnezzar says that this is what we must do, then this is what we must do. The King knows best.

Who are we to question his wisdom? He's such a clever man. He knows so much. He has so many wise advisors. Perhaps some, some who participated, even relished the spectacle and the opportunity to bow down before the image of gold as citizens of the great Babylon.

[ 19 : 53 ] It was a privilege to be part of this great empire. And so perhaps some willingly bowed before the statue, victims of their lack of understanding, of their lack of knowledge.

marriage. Does that not also ring true today? How many in Scotland today mindlessly, and I use that word very deliberately, mindlessly imbibe and even parrot the received wisdom?

If the movers and shakers of society assure us that same-sex marriage is the way to go, then who are we to question their wisdom? They know best. They know best.

And we will just go with the flow. And of course there are those who have been persuaded and warmly welcome the prospect of such progressive legislation.

So lack of knowledge is one of the motivators or one of the aspects that explains the actions of the law keepers.

[ 20 : 55 ] But there is also surely there in Babylon of old and indeed today the matter of absence of principle. Not just lack of knowledge but absence of principle because I have no doubt that many of those who fell prostrate before the image of gold were clear in their own mind that such homage was an act of folly.

So why did they? Why did they at the sound of the music sheepishly grovel in the Babylonian mud? Why did they do so if many of them I am sure thought that this was an act of folly?

Well because they were driven not by principle but by convenience. They knew what way the wind was blowing and were prepared to remain silent and so court favor with the powers that be.

And so they are motivated by an absence of principle. again that sounds very familiar. I am sure that there are many MSPs and journalists and civil servants and counsellors and we could go on who think that the very notion of same-sex marriage is to put it colloquially but very accurately a piece of nonsense.

But will they express that opinion in the public square? Well listen carefully to the sound of silence. And why? Why the silence?

[ 22 : 26 ] Silence. Because they are driven not by principle but by convenience. So what motivates these law keepers that they would keep an ungodly law lack of knowledge absence of principle but also fear of man.

For many the bottom line was fear. Of course it was very understandable fear in the case of Babylon in the time of Nebuchadnezzar. I bow down or I fry. So I'll bow down.

It's a small price to pay to keep my life. So I'll bow down. Not such a big deal. I'll bow down. Because if I don't I know the consequences of not doing so.

Lawmakers, law keepers but then finally let us consider the law breakers. Because thank God in the day of Nebuchadnezzar there were law breakers.

Now let me be very clear that the default position for Christians is to be law keepers. We are those who respect the authority over us. We are those who are to be careful to be keepers of the law and to be meticulous in our law keeping.

[ 23 : 35 ] That is our default position. But having made that clear we ask the question why did Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego become law breakers?

As with the law keepers the answer lies in the matter of knowledge, principle and fear. Remember we noticed that concerning the law keepers.

Why did they keep the law? Because of a lack of knowledge an absence of principle and fear of man. Well these three elements also explain what lies behind these men who broke the law.

Knowledge, principle and fear. First of all knowledge. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were privy to knowledge that provides the rationale for their law breaking.

What knowledge? Well first and foremost knowledge concerning the law of God. These men were familiar with the Ten Commandments with God's moral law.

[ 24 : 34 ] They knew that to bow before an idol of gold would be to break. Not only the first but the second commandment. And their knowledge of God's law serves as the foundation for their law breaking.

But they had knowledge also not only of God's law but they had knowledge of God's character and of His promises of protection for His people. If we just give one example of that and there are multiple but the prophet Isaiah had lived less than a hundred years before these events and had prophesied very particularly concerning the exile.

And God spoke through the prophet Isaiah and He spoke in these terms. Listen to what is said in Isaiah chapter 43 and verses 1 to 3.

But now this is what the Lord says. And this is God's word through Isaiah for the exiles. But now this is what the Lord says. He who created you O Jacob He who formed you O Israel fear not for I have redeemed you I have summoned you by name you are mine.

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 but I am the Lord your God the Holy One of Israel your Savior.

[ 26 : 01 ] So these men had knowledge not only of the law of God and that it would be an act of disobedience to bow down before the image of gold they had knowledge of the character of God and the promises of God and they rested in the character and promises of God in their disobedience in their law breaking in their disobedience of ungodly laws.

What about us? Well we too must know the word of God we must have a clear grasp of his truth that we too would know when we must become lawbreakers we have no desire to be lawbreakers no desire at all it goes against the grain or it certainly should go against the grain we take no delight in breaking laws we trust that in God's providence and his mercy we will not be required to break laws but our knowledge of God's word and of his law will or ought to be what ultimately determines the action that we will take we must also with these men cling tenaciously to the promises of God promises that would grant us resolve and confidence in the face of the consequences of law breaking these law breakers were motivated by or informed by the knowledge that they had but also by the principles that they held to you see knowledge is important but an unprincipled man simply ignores that knowledge you know it's perfectly feasible to have the knowledge but to act contrary to the knowledge that you have but not Shadrach

Meshach and Abednego there are few more stunning words than those voiced by these men in the very face of Nebuchadnezzar we have read them and we read them again there from verse 16 Shadrach Meshach and Abednego replied to the king O 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 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 the words are so powerful and so stirring that they almost require no comment these men had a deep faith in God's power and in his ability to save but their faith was also such that they would recognize that if in his sovereign will he chose not to deliver them their principles would not bend equally they would not go against the principles that they held they would not bow before this idol regardless of what the consequences might be regardless of the furnace that awaited them they would not bow down and they would not do so not only because of the knowledge that they had but because of the principles that they held to and notice in the passing as a challenge and an encouragement to us notice the power of three principled men the multitude bow down the multitudes hundreds and thousands from every nation and tribe and tongue bowing before the statue but three principled men turn the whole thing around they turn it around knowledge and principle what about us do we have the courage of our convictions to raise our voice of protest in the face of ungodly laws do we have the courage if push comes to shove to break such laws will we timorously go with the flow or will we courageously be the men and women God calls us to be let us take heart in the power of good that can be achieved by three men of principle in the hands of God they were driven by knowledge and principle and finally they were driven or motivated or informed in their law breaking by fear also but not fear of man the fear of

God most groveled in the dust for fear of Nebuchadnezzar you can just picture them all the music play it's almost robotic the music plays and they're down postrate in the dust the very sobering picture of men who choose to reject God most groveled in the dust but Shadrach Meshach and Abednego remained upright for they were gripped by a deeper and a more noble fear the fear of God when we speak of the fear of God that gripped them we're not talking principally of the fear that they had of some act of divine punishment if they would have bowed before the statue but rather by the fear of God that was reflected in their drawing to please God to respect God to do his bidding as the only one worthy of their loyalty and obedience these men did not bow down because they feared

God and they feared God so much more than they feared Nebuchadnezzar what about us who do you fear who do you fear do you fear the opinions of men do you tremble at the prospect of being branded a bigot or marginalized for expressing views that run against the grain or do you fear God if you would honor God as these men did then you must first fear God like these men lawmakers law keepers and law breakers lessons for us as we would live as citizens in the land where God has placed us today may God help us to be the citizens that he would have us be let us pray for you do you