Daniel 3 v13-18

Good morning. It is wonderful to be back in Stowe. Thank you for inviting me, I will talk you through the top ten.

10 is Afghanistan.. Iran is 9, Sudan, Pakistan, Nigeria is 6, Yemen, Eritrea, Libya, Somalia and North Korea. In NK things have got worse if anything. Kim Yong Un retains his iron grip on the country.. and makes examples of people who defy him, even just downloading South Korean music, 15 years and a life sentence for two youngsters recently. Pakistan has the anti blasphemy law which is used against Christians without evidence.. and mob rule means that they can be killed. Nigeria is the country where you are most likely to be killed for your Christian faith.

A young woman is locked in her house in the Middle East. Her crime? To have given her life to Jesus. She has not eaten for 10 days and worst of all her father has told her she is to marry her stepmother’s cousin that day. When Sara’s father locked her up, he said, see what your God will do to get you out. On the morning that Sara was going to be forcibly married to her Muslim relative, in her own words, “Someone came like a light, held my hand and dragged me out of the locked room,” she says. “I felt like I was in a trance; it was like a dream. He put me in a silver car. That morning, I woke up in a hotel room in a city in north Iraq, hours away from where I lived.” She later learned that security cameras at her home had stopped at exactly the time she was rescued. Sara woke in a hotel room hours away from her home. For those 10 days, she had been fearful, not knowing what awaited her, but God turned it around and brought good out of what was intended for harm. Sara said, “I am grateful for all the bad things and experiences I’ve been through. I got to know Jesus better, and I was transformed into His image. I have never regretted the decision I made. “Sara is now ministering to taxi drivers, giving out Bibles. Miracles still happen.. make no mistake, God is moving in incredible ways across the Middle East.. Jesus is appearing to people in dreams who would have no opportunity to meet Him at church or through other Christians..

There are 365 million persecuted Christians today, 1 in 7 Christians in fact.. they have discovered that He is worth the cost.

Let us consider the reading from Daniel 3. Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, friends of Daniel. Nebuchadnezzer, is ruling over the Jews, who are in exile in Babylon. You know the story, he never seems to learn, does he? Already, having had a dream interpreted by Daniel, and having promoted him. Nebuchadnezzer then decides to create a massive image of ( we are not told of what, but perhaps it is of himself?) for everyone to worship.. does that sound a little familiar? But Daniel’s 3 friends, are still standing up for their God.. literally still standing, everyone else has fallen down to worship the image. Thousands upon thousands are at the ceremony.. all the VIPs.. gathered from all the nations and tribes of the Babylonian Empire. Now according to the dimensions in verse 1 of this chapter, the statue is 90 feet tall, and 9 feet wide..trying to picture that..visible for miles around. It is made of gold, so when the sun hits it, it will shine out. When the band plays, you must bow down.

Imagine being a Christian in North Korea today and there are striking similarities, aren’t there? A totalitarian state, where the leaders demand worship. In nursery, the children are taught to give thanks to the Kim family before eating a meal. We have already mentioned the portraits to be hung on your wall. Children are taught to spy on their own family.. teachers to spy on their pupils.. neighbours to spy on their fellow countrymen.. North Korea is the most dangerous place in the world to be a Christian, dubbed a prison camp nation for its 26 million people.

In Pyongyang, the capital there are bronze statues 72 feet high, of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jon Il, former leaders. People queue up and bow in worship before the statues. Exactly what Nebuchadnezzer longer for. But there is only one God worthy of our worship.

Despite the dangers and huge cost of faith, more and more North Koreans are finding out about Jesus and deciding to follow Him.. Some like Ji Ho, through the radio programmes broadcast into NK from a neighbouring country.. which reach thousands of secret believers every day.

Back in Babylon, the three are still on their feet. Calm, unruffled, willing to defy the dictator. Nebuchadnezzer warns them that if they don’t bow down, they WILL be cast into the fiery furnace. Their response? We do not need to defend ourselves in this matter! What amazing faith in God they show. In verse 17, they state that their God is able and will deliver them from the furnace, but EVEN if He does NOT.. we will not serve your gods or worship the image… you have set up. In other words, their worship, their devotion to God is not dependent on being delivered from their circumstances.

Our faith cannot be conditional on God answering all that we want when we want it, like I will trust God as long as he answers all my terms, it’s not conditional on our physical safety, or our popularity, our health, I will trust you God if you deliver me from this, or I will trust you God if you answer this prayer. God calls us to trust. (Full stop) to count the cost.

Let’s go to Yemen.. after becoming a Christian, Saleh and a friend shared Jesus outside their local mosque on a regular basis. This was a risky thing to do.. it is illegal to convert from Islam to Christianity in Yemen, and Christians are often killed because of this. Saleh would share his faith wherever he went, and became known as the person ‘who knows Jesus ‘Many were converted. Today Saleh travels in and out of Yemen, serving 70 Christian families in the country with support which includes food, discipleship training. He says, ‘if we sit at home and do nothing, we would be safe. But what kind of Christians would we be if he were not risking our lives for others to know Life?’

Saleh has received death threats but, you won’t be surprised to hear, that has not stopped him. This is the same kind of faith that we see in Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego.. the faith that says I will trust my God no matter what happens to me.

In the fire, a fourth man appears.. who we believe.. to be Jesus., he looks like a son of the gods, in verse 25. And Nebuchadnezzer reacts.

What can we learn from this? That Jesus is with us in the fire.. in the distress of persecution.. in whatever we are walking through. When you go through the waters I will be with you..in Isaiah 43 ..and when you walk through the fire you will not be burned..

It is often the case, that followers of Jesus, who are under pressure, being persecuted, with so little, still manage to go the extra mile.. to share their food in north Korea, it’s called holy rice..a trust that god will provide for them...I read that Christians under persecution are praying for hours each day.. And Christians who are at the coalface.. as it were.. A brother from the Gulf shared last year, that his sharing of his faith may get him killed one day.. but he is ready for that possibility.. Imagine having that kind of faith and trust in God. There were more arrests in Iran last year, because there are more people turning to Christ!

Although we may not be bowing down to idols in Babylon, nevertheless we all have things that get in the way of our walk with God. Things that are more important at times, maybe it is bowing to pressure of others, accepting what the world says and not questioning it. Jesus said small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.. in Matthew 7 v14..

I had the privilege of travelling with Open Doors to the Middle East last year. In this particular area, there is a relentless wave upon wave of persecution through subtle and not so subtle means,, having to watch your back all the time and a partner shared that they could leave.. at times it would be tempting.. constantly being watched.. the threat that they could be arrested..the slow drip drip drip of being the second class person not welcome in their own town because of their faith.. what their children have to go through, but he said, We are the light. If we leave, we make more space for the darkness.

And that was so powerful.

Jesus is the light of the world.. in John 1 - the light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it.. or overcome it in some versions.. Shadrach and friends were the light in the darkness of Babylon. One of the partners described life for us in the West as living in Babylon.. with all the temptations and sights that dazzle.. . But what they are enduring is less subtle and more full-on spiritual warfare..

Faith is trusting God even and especially when we cannot see ahead.. stepping out of the boat and walking on the water towards Jesus.. God can turn things around and does.. is that your testimony? I have seen God bring blessing out of dark times. God can turn things that are meant for harm, to good. He is the one who calms the waves, commands the winds.. and the storms which we encounter. He stands in the fire with us and with our family who are suffering. Look at how He turned things around for Joseph, sold into slavery by his brothers, falsely accused by Potiphar’s wife and thrown into jail.. but years later in a prominent role.. deputy to Pharoah..

Let us be inspired to trust Him more as we follow Jesus by getting into the furnace (in prayer and support) with the persecuted church, because that is where He is.

I invite you to stand with brothers and sisters like Sara and Saleh, who are experiencing the heat. They need your prayers, to know that they are not abandoned.

We can learn from them too.. it is always a case of praying with our family.. did you know they pray for us too? We can learn from their example of standing firm in suffering while supporting them. We would love you to be connected with us at Open Doors, and there are cards on your chairs (HOLD UP CARD) on which you can fill out your details to receive the latest prayer requests will help you to pray.. the information is very good.. and it is so important to stay informed. If you feel moved to support Open Doors financially come and see me or use the link on the card. I have a couple of copies of God’s smuggler with me for anyone who signs up.. do chat to me, and if you feel moved to give, there are forms at the back.. or you can donate at opendoorsuk.org

Please stand if you are able and would like to. Let us take a moment to respond.

Let’s be silent for a moment, remembering those who are in the fire for Jesus as we gather here in freedom.

Perhaps you would like to pray for a country that has been mentioned, pray for people we have thought about..all the other believers standing behind them.. picture them, a great army of believers, but they are in need, they are displaced, some of them have nothing.. some of them are incarcerated unjustly.. some of them are discouraged.. some have lost their family..

Pray for ourselves to have the courage to stand, to follow Jesus, even if it means that we are the last ones standing. Prayer to finish:

Father I want to acknowledge the presence of this group of believers here in Blisworth Baptist church. I want to thank you for each one here today and for the difference they are making for you. May they continue to shine a light for you in this community and among their colleagues, family and friends.

Lord we thank you for the persecuted church, and all we can learn from them. You told us to pray for all the saints and we lift them before your throne, and ask you to heal, to comfort, to strengthen, to anoint them to keep standing for you.

Dear Jesus, please help us to remember them to pray for them, to stand in the gap for them.. and we thank you that you stand with them and us in whatever fire we find ourselves in when we follow you.

We pray all this in the mighty Name of Jesus, Amen