

It Makes Sense to Trust in Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 23rd of January 2005. The preacher is Andy Pridot.

His sermon is entitled, It Makes Sense to Trust in Jesus, and is based on Daniel, chapter 3, verses 1 to 30.

It's great to be able to share with you from God's Word this morning, and I just want to thank you too for your ongoing prayers and support with us in our work with Christian Union, or AFES at Melbourne Uni.

It's great to be partners in the Gospel and to be part of this congregation too. You'll know that we've been having a series from Philipppians over the last few weeks or so. We're having a break from that this week to look at Daniel, chapter 3.

It's on page 719 of the Old Testament section of your Bibles, if you want to turn to that. And as we look at that, we're going to try to answer the question, why would anybody become a Christian in this day and age?

[1 : 1 0] Why would anyone bother? Does it make any sense to trust in Jesus, to become a Christian? There's lots of problems with Christians, you see. They're so backward in their thinking.

They actually still believe that sex is for men and women in the lifelong context of marriage. It's unbelievable. They think that personal freedom should sometimes be limited, so that even if you didn't want the baby, you shouldn't be allowed to abort it.

They actually believe that your own hard-earned money and possessions aren't really yours in the final analysis, but that they belong to God and that they should be at His disposal. And Christians are so intolerant of other religions as well.

They keep insisting that Jesus Christ is the only way to know God truly, to find eternal life, to be the person God made us to be. Some Christians still send missionaries into other countries and cultures, encouraging people to turn away from the gods of their ancestors and worship Jesus instead.

Why can't Christians just see the truth that there is no ultimate or objective truth? There's no one way. There's no one morality. Except, of course, the truth that says that there is no truth, of course.

[2 : 1 9] Now, every time I pick up the paper, I don't know about you, or turn on the TV set, I inevitably hear a version of one or other of these kinds of statements. Basically, God, the personal God, who's revealed Himself to us in the Lord Jesus Christ, who calls us to trust in Him, to live for Him.

Well, He's unreal, isn't He? You can't believe in a God like that. And Christians are naive pretenders, are they? They don't live in the real world. Christians should just keep in step.

They should get up to date. They should just conform to the moral and intellectual status quo, to what we know now is acceptable in modern society. This is the tolerant and enlightened society that we live in.

And so it's hard being a Christian in Australia, probably for a number of reasons. Here are two reasons. Firstly, the world is attractive, and the pressure to conform is great.

Materialism, selfish living, a religious tolerance seem to make sense to us. It's appealing. Life would be a lot simpler. It would involve a lot less conflict if we just conformed. We just sort of disappear.

[3 : 24] We'd all like to be popular, or at least accepted. We know that at Easter time, if Bishop Spong writes a two-page spread on why he doesn't believe in the resurrection anymore, of course it will be printed. The papers love to have stories like that to show how we need to get in step with the culture.

The second reason is because the world can also be a threatening place, is a threatening place for God's people. If you make it clear that you are a Christian, you do risk ostracism in your classes, in your job, maybe even in your home.

And we know, don't we, that increasingly in our country, the right to share the good news, to evangelise, is being controlled by law, certainly in schools. And we know, obviously, that in many countries around the world, it's actually illegal to share your faith.

In some places, even to own a Bible and practice your faith and meet together, as we are this morning, with other believers, under threat of imprisonment, torture, or even death.

So there's that question, is it worth the hassle? Does it make sense to trust in Jesus? Am I really living in the real world when I do that?

[4 : 34] Well, it was hard being one of God's people during the exile as well. We read about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel 3. Let's have another look at that. Verse 1.

Audio 2. When they were standing before the statue that Nebuchadnezzar had set up, the Herald proclaimed aloud, You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, you are to fall down and worship the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up.

Whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire. Therefore, as soon as all the people heard all of these instruments, all the peoples, nations and languages fell down and worshipped the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

It was hard being one of God's people in exile in the 6th century BC, especially if like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, I don't know how to pronounce that name, so I'll probably pronounce it four different times during the course of this talk, but if you're in positions of prominence like them, you're also stuck out.

You're more easily noticed, which made it hard as well. A little bit about Babylon at this time. Excavations in Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon have revealed it to be a very wealthy and cultured place.

[6 : 24] So as the exiles were marched in, they would have been, on either side of them were walls that were hundreds of metres long, decorated with mosaics in honour of their gods. Under their feet, as they looked down, as they walked along, they would read inscriptions such as these on the paving stones.

I, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, paved this road with mountain stone for the procession of Marduk, my lord, one of their gods. May Marduk, my lord, grant me eternal life.

The huge image of God we read about here, probably about 90 feet in our measurement, is actually shorter than a lot of statues that have since been excavated. So it's not unreal that a statue like this was commanded by this king.

Now if you know Daniel, by the end of chapter 2 of this book, you might hold out a bit of hope for King Nebuchadnezzar that he's been reformed. He had these dreams that Daniel was able to interpret for him.

He was told in those dreams that although he was a mighty king, that God had given him any authority that he has. And that the true kingdom, the eternal kingdom, that will outlast all kingdoms is of course the kingdom of God, the kingdom of the Lord, the kingdom, the king of Israel, the Lord God.

[7 : 35] But it seems that the only thing he's got out of this dream, in this chapter at least, is that yes, I'm great. God has made me great. And so he builds this statue, whether it's of himself or one of his gods, we're not quite sure.

But the point here is that like many dictators before and after him, he's tied religion and state together. Blasphemy and treason become the same thing.

And that's how the officials who do the three Hebrew men in understand it, in verses 8 to 12. They say in verse 12, they neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up.

It's the same thing. Maybe his goal was to unite his empire under one state religion, and ruler. Well, if that was the case, it seems to be working at the end of verse 7.

Everybody in unison bows down when they hear the musical instruments as they were commanded. Now, as I mentioned, this is not the first, certainly not the last time that kings and rulers have put themselves in the place of God in this way.

[8 : 38] In 1936, in Hitler's Germany, one of his officials made this statement, whoever serves Adolf Hitler, the Fuhrer, serves Germany, and whoever serves Germany, serves God.

Pretty clear statement being made. Similarly, the sort of statement Nebuchadnezzar is making, you shall have no other gods before me. But this evil pretension is not just the problem of a few megalomaniacs throughout history.

In a way, it's every person's problem since the fall of Adam. We know from Genesis, don't we, that God made human beings in his image glorious as kings and queens over creation, the stewards of his creation.

But instead of acknowledging God as our king and serving his goals for our world and his world rather in our lives, we've ignored him. We've made ourselves gods.

We've worked towards our own personal kingdoms, as it were. It's like I was saying earlier, it's considered to be a normal question to ask, well, what right has God to tell me how to live, how to treat other people, how to use my body, how to spend my money, how to raise my children, whatever it might be?

[9 : 50] The problem here for these guys is that everybody's doing it. Everybody's bowed down. Every kid has used that excuse for why they shouldn't have to do what their parents are telling them. Everybody's doing it.

We don't like to stick out. Swimming against the tide is hard work. And it's true here that Nebuchadnezzar was enforcing allegiance to him and his religion here by law, but there are also lots of benefits to living in Babylon at this time, as long as he didn't rock the boat too much, as long as he towed the line, bowed at the right time.

Daniel and his friends had already discovered that back in chapter 1. Their gifts had been recognised. They were trained in the royal court. They had a royal education.

They ate royal food. The exiles in Babylon, we know from Jeremiah, they were able to build their own homes, work and raise families. So the temptation to conform to the religion and I guess the ethics of the day would have been great.

Not only here because of the threat of a fiery death, but because, like in verse 7, everybody's doing it. Living as one of God's people, as the three friends discover in Daniel 3, makes you stick out, makes you stand out.

[11 : 02] And Christians stand out in this society, don't we? We spend our time in unusual ways. Why aren't we sleeping in at the moment? It's a very good question to ask. We meet together in these funny little groups to look at an ancient text, the Bible, Bible study groups.

That's an unusual thing to do, to say the least. We have a different attitude to morality, to human life, to the idea that pleasure is not an ultimate goal in life.

And this in turn can be threatening, as the beliefs and practices of the world are implicitly, I guess, exposed and judged. Again, what made it worse for these guys is that they were in positions of prominence.

Maybe it was professional jealousy that led the Babylonian officials to do them in, whatever it is. We read in verse 8 that, accordingly at this time, certain Chaldeans or Babylonians came forward and denounced the Jews.

They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, O King, live forever. You, O King, have made a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, an entire musical ensemble shall fall down and worship.

[12 : 05] The golden statue. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire. There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

These pay no heed to you, O King. They do not serve your gods, and they do not worship the golden statue that you have set up. It's costly serving the Lord alone as King, as our God.

There is black and white, and God's people fall on the wrong side of it. To assert Christian distinctives and expose false paths of other philosophies is to open yourself up for ridicule at least, perhaps social ostracism or worse.

A couple of years ago when I was working at Monash with the Christian Union there, our club was threatened with disaffiliation, which is very serious. It would mean that we would not be allowed, legally actually, to meet as a group of Christians on campus, and to do that publicly in that way.

And the reason was because we'd just been doing a series, as would happen here week after week, through the opening chapters of Genesis, and during the course of that we taught a biblical view of sexuality.

[13 : 17] Some people had come and heard that and concluded that that was offensive, and that was the conclusion. There were lots of meetings and things that we had to go through to make sure that that didn't happen, and we praise God that it didn't happen.

But within the next 20 years, it could become illegal in Christian churches, in gatherings such as this, to preach against certain practices, to tell it like it is from the Bible, as it were.

See, the new gods may not be being enforced by dictators in our culture, but our worship is often directed, even controlled by politically correct morality-turned-dogma, and increasingly enforced by law.

And for many in the world today, it does mean the loss of life. We need to remember that that's what it almost meant for the three men in this story.

Because I think it's easy to turn a story like this into a great adventure story to read to the kids before bed. It is a great story. It's a very exciting story. And we all know the happy ending. They don't die in the furnace.

[14 : 20] But we need to recapture the reality of their position. These men faced death for their refusal to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar and his gods. That came home to me recently when I read the story of Danza, a story more recent about Christians being persecuted in a communist country in Africa.

I just want to read a little bit about that for you. Around 1980, there was a time of severe persecution from the local officials of the communist government in my area of Walaita.

At the time, I was working in a government office, but I was also serving as a leader of the Christian Youth Association for all the churches in my area. The communist officials repeatedly came to me to ask for my help in teaching the doctrines of the revolution among the youth.

Many other Christians were giving in because the pressure was very great, but I could only say no. At first, their approach was positive. They offered me promotions and pay increases. But then the imprisonments began.

The first two were fairly short. The third time lasted an entire year. During this time, communist cadres would regularly come to brainwash the nine of us believers who were being held together. But when one of the cadres converted to Christ, we were beaten and forced to haul water from long distances and carry heavy stones to clear farmland.

[15 : 36] The worst time came during a two-week period in which the prison official would wake us early while it was still dark when no one could see and force us to walk on our bare knees over a distance of up to one and a half kilometres on the gravel road of the town.

It would take us about three hours. After the first day, the blood flowed from our wounds like a fountain, but we felt nothing. On another occasion, one particularly brutal prison official forced us to lie on our backs under the blazing sun for six straight hours.

There's that question being raised again. Is it worth it? Is Jesus worth being insulted for, persecuted for, even dying for?

It's a question that our brothers and sisters have to answer every day, that we have to answer every day. Is it irrational to hold on to faith in Christ in the face of all this? Are people like this, like the three men in this story, just not living in the real world?

Well, that's in effect what Nebuchadnezzar says to them, doesn't he? He effectively gives them a second chance there when he hears about their civil disobedience in verses 13 and following.

[16 : 43] And he says in verse 15, If you do not worship, you shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire. And who is the God that will deliver you out of my hands?

I'm actually going to do this, guys. This isn't a game. We're not having some little theological debate here. This is your life or your death. And there's no God who can rescue you from this situation.

Get real. Do something sensible. Save yourself. See, like our culture today, Nebuchadnezzar is challenging the idea that there is a God who exists, who can and who will rescue his people.

Friends don't agree with him, do they? Verse 16, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego answered the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, We have no need to present a defence to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us.

But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up. In other words, they say, we're not ultimately answerable to you, but to our God.

[17 : 54] There is a God who is real, who can save us if you throw us into the fire. He's more real than the statue that people are falling down before. And unlike your gods, he's not at the beck and call of people.

Do you notice that in verse 18? He may choose not to save us for his purposes. The Lord, Yahweh, is free. He is the living God. He can't be used to prop up human politics, as Nebuchadnezzar was doing.

And even if he does not save us, they say, we will not worship your worthless idols. Why are the friends prepared to die here?

Because they know what's really at stake. See, the whole reason God's people had gone into exile in the first place was because they'd gone after the gods of the other nations and their way of life.

They'd become like them. And so they were taken by them. That was God's judgment. These guys weren't going to make the same mistake. They were going to trust in the Lord, even in the face of death.

[18 : 56] And if we look at this passage closely, it does make sense, doesn't it? We have this sort of repeated description of how all the different instruments and when they're played, you have to fall down. It's sort of like a religious game of musical chairs, isn't it?

It's comical how these sophisticated people bow and scrape before an inanimate object made by a human being. Remember, the Babylonians were highly cultured.

Rome learned their culture from the Greeks. The Greeks learned it, though, from the Babylonians. If we stand back and look at the futile worship of money, of cars, of houses, of fame, of intellect, the piddly statues we built ourselves in our culture, though, it's perhaps no less embarrassing.

Jesus said as much in Mark 8, didn't he? Of any who would follow him, who would gain the whole world, yet forfeit their life?

What a foolish thing to do. The psalmist says that it is the fool who says, there is no God. Psalm 14. So these guys know enough of the Lord to know that he, and not Nebuchadnezzar, ultimately holds the power of life and death.

[20 : 04] The Lord is the true king. That the Lord, and not wealth or human power, secured their future. The God whom they worshipped made the whole world by the power of his word.

He gave Nebuchadnezzar any power he has, as he'd already discovered, in the dream which Daniel had interpreted for him in chapter 2, and God would take it away again in his own time.

God had made these three men and put them into positions of prominence in Babylon for his own purposes. They understood they served a greater king, the only true king.

And even if the purpose of their king might be that they die for the sake of his kingdom, they are not about to renounce him. And how much more reason have we got now with the fulfilment of God's kingdom in Jesus Christ?

Jesus has conquered death in his death. He has brought new life that is eternal in his resurrection. It makes sense to trust in Jesus, yes, even in the face of death.

[21 : 10] Well, verse 19 of our passage, Nebuchadnezzar is true to his word. Indeed, in his anger, he orders what was probably one of the huge brick kilns that have since been excavated in that area to be made even hotter.

The guards who take his prisoners to their fiery grave themselves fall victims to this king. They're burnt to death. But then something strange happens, and it's appropriate that Nebuchadnezzar is the first to notice.

We'll read from verse 22. Because the king's command was urgent and the furnace was so overheated, the raging flames killed the men who lifted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. But the three men fell down, bound into the furnace of blazing fire.

Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up quickly. He said to his counsellors, Was it not three men that we threw bound into the fire? They answered the king, True, O king. He replied, But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt.

And the fourth has the appearance of a god. So instead of three men bound, he now sees four men loose. The fourth appears to be some sort of supernatural figure.

[22 : 17] He later calls him an angel. In verse 28. The important thing to notice here is that while God did not spare them through going into the fire, he was with them through it and in it.

God was with them, protecting them, keeping them safe. Let me read to you from another prophetic book speaking to people in exile. From Isaiah 43.

Now thus says the Lord, He who created you, O Jacob, He who formed you, O Israel, do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.

And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned. And the flame shall not consume you. Spoken perhaps figuratively of God's protection, of his people.

Here those words prove to be true literally, don't they? These words spoken for God's people in exile. There's no God like this. Like the Lord, the God of Israel, the living God, who acts to save and deliver his people, even in exile.

[23 : 23] The God who stands with his people in their darkest moments. There were four figures in the fire. Earlier on, the officials had bowed and scraped before some mute idol.

Now in verses 26 and 7, they crowd around, not to see the handiwork of some goldsmith now, but the handiwork of God himself. But again, it's important to remember, as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego understood, in verse 18 there, that God's loving commitment to his people won't always mean physical rescue in this life.

The Bible, the pages of history, are full of accounts that make that clear, that sometimes, as Jesus called us to, losing our lives for Christ and the gospel, taking up our cross, in other words, does actually mean losing our life for Christ and the gospel.

But it is also true that ultimately, God does save, he does deliver his people. So, Paul is in agreement with that passage from Isaiah 43 that I just read, when he says in Romans 8, and verse 35, Who will separate us from the love of Christ?

Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, for your sake, we are being killed all day long. We are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.

[24 : 42] No, in all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

And what is that love in Christ Jesus, our Lord? Well, we celebrate it, we remember it again this morning with the Lord's Sabbath, don't we? Jesus, as it were, went through the fire of God's judgment in our place, taking the punishment we deserve, and arose a mighty conqueror over sin and death.

He guarantees, through that, forgiveness and eternal life to all who put their trust in him. The experience of the three friends in this story is in one sense a picture of Jesus' resurrection resurrection, and the final resurrection, the final deliverance of all who belong to him.

This story, the whole book of Daniel actually, shows us that the Lord himself will be shown to be the one true king, the one true judge, and the one true saviour, whatever earthly rulers may say.

And that all those who put their trust in him will never be put to shame. See, God's purposes in this case meant that they were spared their lives. The result was that God and his people were once again honoured, and the worship of Yahweh was made legal in Babylon, actually, more than that.

[26 : 13] We might read from the end of the passage, verse 28, Nebuchadnezzar said, Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him. They disobeyed the king's command and yielded up their bodies, rather than serve and worship any god except their own god.

Therefore I make a decree, any people, nation, or language that utters blasphemy against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way.

And the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon. Let me read to you about what happened in Duncie's case. His life was also spared.

And he goes on, When the communist government fell, several years later, the head official invited us back to preach in the jail. At that time, 12 prisoners being held for murder received Christ.

We have continued to minister in the prison and there are now 170 believers. Most of the prison officials, those who'd formerly persecuted them, have also believed.

[27 : 18] received. We worship a sovereign Lord. But whether God's people live or die, what this chapter of Daniel teaches us about the Lord is that he is the real king and he can be trusted, that he can and that he will ultimately deliver his people.

We know that because Jesus died and rose from the dead. So who really is living then in the real world? Nebuchadnezzar thought that he could separate these Israelites from their puny God by threatening death.

He was wrong. God's people may look silly, old fashioned, dangerous or irrelevant now. But we know, don't we, that what the world holds out is life and freedom compared to all we have in Christ is in the end nothing.

This is because we know Jesus Christ whose death and resurrection achieves for us an eternal quality and quantity of life. And we know too that there will be a day when Jesus returns when every person who has ever lived will be called away from the golden idols they've set up to bow before the throne of the Lord Jesus either willingly or unwillingly.

And in the meantime we have a choice to make to entrust our life our death to our creator, our judge, our saviour or keep serving gods that we make in our own image that suit us, that don't challenge us, that flatter us, that make us good in the eyes of others, that leave us alone to live for ourselves, whatever it might be.

[28 : 53] And of course every time we share the gospel, the message of Jesus' death and resurrection we hold out that choice to people around us. We recommend the living God, the true and loving King and this is a message we shouldn't be ashamed of.

Who else makes an offer of love like this? Who else achieves it at so great a cost? The death of his son. It makes sense to trust in Jesus.

Let's pray. Let's pray. I'm going to suggest some things we might like to thank God and ask God for in the quietness of our own hearts.

So let's pray together and let's thank God that he's shown himself to be the true king in the person of his son, the Lord Jesus Christ. let's pray for those in the voice of Jesus Christ.

Let's pray for those and enable us to persevere in trusting in him even in the face of opposition to our life's end. let's pray for those in the world today even at this moment who live their lives under the constant threat of imprisonment, persecution or worse simply because they follow the Lord Jesus let's pray for those people let's pray for those who don't yet know the true king or worship him who are still enslaved by the worship of idols that they would be freed by the gospel and brought into the kingdom of the Lord Jesus in whom we have forgiveness of sins let's pray for our non-Christian friends and family Father we pray to you in Jesus name and for his name's sake

[31 : 15] Amen