

DANIEL – SECOND CHOICE EVEN IF HE DOES NOT

In this series in Daniel we have been thinking about living in what we might call second-choice worlds. Second-choice worlds are circumstances and situations that we would not choose – a place we do not wish to be. Sometimes second-choice worlds come about through circumstances completely beyond our control and they are thrust upon us. Sometimes second-choice worlds come about through the actions or choices of others and we find ourselves living in the consequences. Sometimes, second-choice worlds are the result of our own choices, decisions or actions.

However they come about, a second-choice world is a place we do not wish to be and would not choose. Mostly, we cannot change second-choice worlds – it's how the world is. But, and here's the challenge, it is possible to live well in a second-choice world.

Daniel and his friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are living in the second-choice world of Babylon. They never wanted to live there, they would never have chosen to live there, but Babylon is where they have to live. In Daniel chapter 2, king Nebuchadnezzar asked his wise men to tell him his dream and interpret his dream. The wise men told him no-one could do that. Daniel and his friends prayed and God gave Daniel the dream and its meaning. As a result, the king promoted Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. These four men were able to live well in Babylon.

How are you doing friends? How are you living in your second-choice worlds? It is possible to live well and flourish in a second-choice world.

But then, in Babylon, king Nebuchadnezzar decides to build a statue. I'm wondering if you've ever asked this question: "What's the worst that can happen?" as a way of rationalising our decisions, or helping us make a choice. But there may be times when we ask it in a more serious way. When facing an operation: "What's the worst that can happen?" When faced with a choice of treatment: "What's the worst that can happen?"

My best guess is that, in truth, we all live in fear of what we consider to be worst case scenarios, some of us might already have experienced that. For some of us, we are living it right now; lockdown because of a pandemic called

Covid-19. The consequences of “What’s the worst that can happen?” can plunge us deep into second-choice worlds. And, for some of us, we might be there right now.

Living well in Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are about to be plunged into their worst case scenario.

The Image of Gold and the Blazing Furnace

3 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. ² He then 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. ³ So 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.

⁴ Then the herald loudly proclaimed, “Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: ⁵ As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. ⁶ Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.”

⁷ Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the nations and peoples of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. (Daniel 3 v 1-7)

King Nebuchadnezzar is again trying to assert his authority. Everyone must bow down and worship the statue of the king; this is really about power and authority, and this kind of thing happens a lot in second-choice worlds – where someone other than me, has power and authority. The king sets the whole thing up to look really very impressive indeed.

The king gathers everyone together on the plain of Dura, a vast plain, so everyone can be seen. He gathers all the officials and important people, he gathers all the normal, ordinary people, he gathers all the people who make up Babylon. The Herald declares that at the sound of beautiful music all the people, all the people – will bow down and worship the statue of the king that he has set up.

The sight of the gathered people of Babylon on the plain of Dura before the statue of the king would have been a very impressive sight. With the added persuasion of musical accompaniment, it would have been a very persuasive moment. It would have been very hard to resist bowing down, and that was exactly the point.

The king wanted to make it very hard to resist bowing to the statue he had set up ... of himself! And just in case you missed the point, if you didn't bow down when the music played – you would be thrown into a fiery furnace. Quite a picture then, don't you think? When the beautiful music plays, the people all bow down and that's exactly what happens.

The music plays ... and the people bow down, except for three guys! On the vast plain of Dura, where the whole company of the people of Babylon are gathered – all the people bowed down, and just three men are standing! They are not just any men – they are now important officials in the kingdom of Babylon, and it does not go unnoticed.

⁸ At this time some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. ⁹ They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "May the king live forever! ¹⁰ Your Majesty has issued a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, ¹¹ and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. ¹² But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up. (Daniel 3 v 8-12)

Imagine for a moment the courage it would take to remain standing when everyone else bowed down, and here's the thing: they had a choice! They had a choice and they understood that there was a fiery furnace waiting for anyone who remained standing... yet they chose to stand. They had the choice to avoid the fiery furnace, yet they chose to stand.

No doubt there were other Jews present and they chose to bow down. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego literally take a stand, the other officials don't miss their opportunity, they immediately report Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to the king. The king reacts exactly as we would expect him to act.

¹³ Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, ¹⁴ and

Nebuchadnezzar 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? ¹⁵ 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 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? (Daniel 3 v 13-15)

King Nebuchadnezzar is furious, but he is also clever. He tries to entice Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to do what he wants by effectively giving them a second chance, “I can’t quite believe you didn’t bow down, but guys, here’s what we’ll do... if, when you hear the beautiful music on all those different instruments played by such talented musicians... if you bow down... then we’ll just forget what happened here today – what do you say?”

Second-choice worlds do that all the time, they are full of beautiful music ready to entice us and have power over us. Mostly it’s very subtle:

Nobody will know: it’s between you and me!
This will set you up financially for life
This will give you the security you’re looking for
It’s all you deserve, after all
You’re not hurting anyone
It’s not your fault, just take it!
Everybody else does it, don’t worry about it.

Lots of subtle ways of exercising authority over us. I’m wondering friends, is it possible that you have been offered many other sweeteners that require you to worship other gods? Second-choice worlds are full of enticing music that only serves to dull our sense of priority.

King Nebuchadnezzar resorts to making threats: “What gods will be able to rescue you from my hand?” (v15) This threat is a rhetorical question – the king is neither wanting nor expecting Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to answer! He is basically telling them who has the power and authority in this situation. But, incredibly, that’s exactly what they do – they answer the king!

And just look at what they say.

¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. 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. (Daniel 3 v 16 & 17)

Our God is able to rescue us, this is an extraordinary response. Our God is able! This response flies in the face of the authority of the king – “Actually O King, our God is more powerful than you are!” Friends, here is a deep and profound truth; the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is our God – and He is able:

To change lives – to change your life
He is able to bind up the broken hearted
He is able to restore broken relationships
He is able to turn darkness to light
He is able to soften even the hardest of hearts
He is able to restore what is broken
He is able to transform even the most difficult of situations
He is able to meet you in the midst of a Covid-19 lockdown
O yes friends, our God is able!

I'm wondering friends, into what area of your life, into what situation you currently face, into what relationship, into what part of your life where you live in fear, could you invite the God who is able?

Friends, you, this morning, right now in these moments, are evidence that God is able. God is able to change and transform lives; to restore what is broken; to soften hearts. Our God is able to draw those he loves to himself – you are watching this service this morning. Our God is able!

Our God is present in our second-choice worlds, and he can act in his power and wisdom, and he is able, now, today! Friends, how big is your vision of God, for he is able. What happens next is extraordinary. John Ortberg describes the next words spoken by Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego as the most incredible words spoken by any human being. “But even if he does not.....”

What has led to this moment? These three young men have served God even though they are in Babylon as captives: Second-choice! They have served the king well, and my guess is that they prayed that this moment would never come. Maybe they prayed that the king would change his mind on account of their good service. Maybe they prayed that when they remained standing on the plain of Dura, no-one would notice. If they prayed these prayers, they weren't answered, and now they are faced with their worst-case scenario.

Ever been there? Perhaps that's what you face now, and yet, and yet, their response is "But even if he does not, we will not bow down!" They had already decided their response: they, together, would not bow down, and for that they faced the fiery furnace.

I'm wondering friends, what does discipleship mean for you? Mostly, I try to bargain with God. Here's a question that really challenges me: What if nothing changes, how much will I follow God? Our God is able.... But even if he does not.

I wonder how many people have walked away from God, faith, church, friends, community... because he did not! How about you friends, even if he does not? Maybe right now, you feel like you are standing on the edge of the furnace: worst-case scenario. How will you pray?

How much, I wonder, could you pray this kind of prayer: "Father, take me out of this situation; change that person; restore what is broken; heal these deep wounds; find me that money, but even if you don't I will follow you with all my heart and serve you with all my strength. I will not bow down and worship any other god, however hard that might become."

Friends, our God is able: to grant me success; a job; more money; a close friend; a reliable partner.... He is able to heal broken relationships; to restore my failing health; to give me security for the future; give me fame; influence – all the things I find myself dreaming for. But even if he does not....

What if God asks you to go to the furnace? Jesus chose the furnace of the cross, even Jesus prayed: "Father, if there is any other way... but even if there is not...!" Jesus stands with us. Our God is able, but even if he does not.....

So, friends what do you need to do in response to this?

Prepared by Rev. Ian Phillips to be Live streamed on Sunday 31st May 2020.....