

# Cancel Culture

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, we have seen the rise of cancel culture in recent times. Cancel culture refers to the phenomenon of cancelling people or companies after they've said or done something that the culture considers to be offensive.

And it's increasingly popular to cancel public figures who voice opinions that seem to be objectionable to the current woke culture. And it's really a form of public shaming.

And it's fuelled mostly by social media, where the aim is to call someone out, to shame them, to silence them, or even just to get them sacked from their job.

Last year, over 150 prominent writers, academics and journalists signed an open letter denouncing this so-called cancel culture. And it was published on Harper Magazine's website.

And signatories included J.K. Rowling, Salman Rushdie and Margaret Atwood. And their letter really sought to highlight the consequences of cancel culture, saying that it weakened the tolerance of different opinions in favour of an ideological conformity in today's world.

[ 1 : 1 3 ] And so they say it is the restriction of debate, whether by repressive government or an intolerant society. And more recently, the actor and comedian Rowan Atkinson described cancel culture as the digital equivalent of the medieval mob roaming the streets looking for someone to burn.

Which takes us into Daniel chapter 3, where we see the ultimate in cancel culture. Bow down and worship or die. It's bold, it's blunt, and it's brutal.

If you don't conform, then you must be cancelled. And that's the situation Daniel's three friends find themselves in. They were under extreme pressure to conform to the culture and to compromise their faith in God.

And they refused. And so they were thrown into the fiery furnace in an attempt to cancel them. But God saved them from death. And in the end, they weren't cancelled. Instead, they were promoted.

And so there's a stark contrast between these three men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who resist the pressure to conform and those who give in and do conform.

[ 2 : 3 0 ] The great crowd of people who bow down and worship an idol because that's exactly what they're told to do. And there will be consequences if they don't. And so the message of Daniel 3 is a challenge to us all, whether we call ourselves a Christian or not.

Are we going to go against the flow or are we going to follow the crowd? Will we have confidence in God or will we simply conform to the culture?

Daniel 3 shows us that because God rules, then we must worship him and not the gods of our culture. And so let's look at three things from our Bible reading in Daniel today.

First of all, there's the expected conformity to the culture, verse 1 to 15. Secondly, there's the extreme confidence in God, verse 16 to 23.

And then thirdly, there is the essential company in the furnace, verse 24 to 30. In short, we're looking at conformity, confidence and company.

[ 3 : 34 ] So first of all, the expected conformity to the culture, verse 1 to verse 15. Verse 1 says, King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold six cubits high and six cubits wide and set it up on the plain of Jura in the province of Babylon.

Now this follows King Nebuchadnezzar's dream in chapter 2 where there was a large statue and the king himself was the head of gold. But the statue was smashed to smithereens.

And yet here we find Nebuchadnezzar, same king, in chapter 3, whilst he's doing, he is building an enormous statue of gold. And there's a connection because the same Aramaic word for statue in chapter 2 is used for the word image in Daniel chapter 3.

So it's clear that Nebuchadnezzar hasn't quite learned his lesson. He hasn't understood that God rules. He's still riding around in his chariot with this personalized registration plate that says one or king.

Because the construction of this gold statue was really all about him and his rule. And we're not told what the statue looked like so the image could have represented the king himself or a false god or the Babylonian empire or perhaps all three.

[ 5 : 00 ] You see, Babylon was a pluralistic society full of gods and people were free to choose which gods they wanted to worship. And so whatever the image represented, the king was demanding absolute loyalty to his totalitarian regime.

Everybody had to bow to state rule. And we see that in verse 2 to verse 6. Let me read. He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisors, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up.

So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisors, 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. Then the herald loudly proclaimed, nations and peoples of every language, this is what you're commanded to do. 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.

It's all recorded in such a way to ridicule the complete madness of it all. Where the repetition of the word image actually comes up 11 times in the whole chapter, it's meant to give comedic value.

[ 6 : 26 ] Alongside the mocking mention that the image was set up. Set up is there nine times in the chapter. And the point is, there is a man who constructs an image that is not real and he forces people to bow down to the image that he has set up and they do it.

It is a put-up job and the crowd literally fall for it. I guess the newspaper headline in the Babylonian Telegraph would have said, government must be obeyed.

Whereas the Babylonian son simply put, bow or burn. And that was the choice. Bow to the king's statue or burn in the furnace.

And the expectation of this state-sponsored ideology was that everyone must conform. And you notice that the majority did. So again, there's this satirical repetition of the people and all the pomp and ceremony.

Look who's expected to bow. It's the ruling class, the who's who of Babylonian society. The high-ranking, high-earning, highly intelligent elites.

[ 7 : 34 ] So we've got the CEOs and managing directors, the cabinet and the politicians, the specialist government advisors and the civil service, the professors and the scientists, the judges and the magistrates, the chiefs of police and the lord provosts.

And yet, despite all their sophistication, they are falling over one another. To do what? To worship an idol. Look at verse 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 worshipped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

This is the madness of crowds. They are like puppets on a string dancing to the king's merry tune, a tune which did include bagpipes, by the way. Everybody was quickly and easily ready to bow, giving unquestioning loyalty to this man-made image that had been set up.

Now, we might think, as people watching from a distance, I can't believe they were so gullible. How stupid and how pathetic. As modern, sophisticated people like us, we would never let our lives be controlled like this.

[ 8 : 57 ] We would never bow down to worship idols. But wait. The pluralism of ancient Babylon is really no different from what we find in Western Europe today.

And the reality is that people do conform to the culture around, no matter how ridiculous or how mad or crazy that culture is.

Because we do submit to the voices that shout the loudest in fear of being cancelled if we don't conform. Now, we like to think that we're free to think for ourselves, and we are free to live however we want to live.

And yet, we are, if not subtly, sometimes even explicitly, told how we should think, what we should believe, and how we should live.

Now, ironically, so many people see Christianity as being like a straitjacket. It's so restrictive about what to believe, so restrictive about what you can do and what you can't do, and so on.

[ 10 : 02 ] And Christianity is often seen as the enemy of personal freedom and liberation. And so we'll be far more liberated, free, if we forget about God.

And yet, what we see in Daniel chapter 3 is that it's not those who have faith in God who are being controlled by the state. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, they're not enslaved to the demands of a totalitarian state dictating what they should do.

No, it's the crowd who go with the flow. They're the ones being manipulated to think and behave in certain ways despite the madness of what they're doing.

It's the majority who comply to the culture. And so it's the culture that's the straitjacket. And here it's the minority who refuse and who think for themselves.

Look at verse 12. But there were 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.

[ 11 : 09 ] They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up. And so here are some virtue signaling, state worshipers, and they want Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to be cancelled.

But these three friends knew that to obey the king would be to disobey God. And so to obey God, they needed to disobey the king because their god was not one of the many gods in a pluralistic culture.

They worshipped the one true God, the God who rules the whole world, the God who commanded, you shall have no other gods before me, and you shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.

You shall not bow down to them or worship them. The first and second commandments in Exodus chapter 20. And so these men refused to conform to the king's totalitarian regime.

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

[ 12 : 19 ] 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? Now when you hear the sound of the horn, the flute, the 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? Can you just imagine for a moment what was going through the minds of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego?

Perhaps they could have justified bowing down to the image by saying to themselves, Well, we're not, we might be physically bowing down to the image, but we're not bowing down in our hearts.

We will still continue to worship God. Or maybe they heard their family or their friends saying to them, Just bow down. You know, this isn't worth dying for. We know that you worship God and you always will.

And you've got such strategic jobs in this pagan culture. And so what influence can you be for God when you're dead? There was a pressure there to conform.

[ 13 : 32 ] And it was extreme. And today, there continues to be this expectation that everybody will just conform to the culture.

And so the unwritten and the unspoken decree of our culture is that there are certain values that you must conform to and you dare not question or challenge them.

And it makes it increasingly difficult if you're a Christian and follower of Jesus Christ. And so, despite a society that preaches tolerance, it also says you must conform to the present-day ideologies in such a dogmatic fashion.

And if you don't go along with the agenda of the elites, then you will be cancelled. the virtue-signalling woke crowd will be after you.

They'll be watching your every tweet ready to report you to the authorities. Because like Nebuchadnezzar, they will be furious with rage because you refuse to bow down to the secular gods that everybody really should bow down to.

[ 14 : 42 ] And so the irony is that while tolerance is seen as a virtue in our culture, there will be zeal tolerance for those who worship and live for God. And so we're faced with a choice, aren't we?

Do we just go with the flow of the ever-changing culture and bow to the idols of the culture for an easy life? Or do we refuse to conform because we worship the one true and living God?

That's the first point, the expected conformity to the culture. And the second point is the extreme confidence in God. And we see this in verse 16 to 23.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were prepared to die rather than worship the gold statue. Look what they say. This is really the hinge on which the chapter turns, verse 16 to 18.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, 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.

[ 15 : 45 ] 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.

That is a defiant statement of faith in God. And the main application really for Daniel's readers both then but for us today too. Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego declare their absolute undying loyalty and confidence in God.

So the king is raging at them, challenging them, questioning them, threatening to throw them into the furnace asking, verse 15, then what God will be able to rescue you from my hand.

And yet despite the rage they are faced with, they respond with calmness and with respect. And they can do that because they know that God rules.

they were so confident in the God they serve that they were ready to die for him. How could they do this? Well, this wasn't the first time that these men had to take a stand.

[ 16 : 53 ] As teenagers in chapter 1 they resolved not to defile themselves with the king's food. They refused to compromise their faith in God way back then which surely prepared them to faithfully live for God in a pagan culture.

And so a kind of spiritual fireproofing had been going on in their hearts long before they reached the surface of the furnace. And that's why they were so ready to defy the king no matter what happened to them.

They knew that God had the power to save them. And so their confidence was in God himself not in what they thought God might do because they had no idea in reality how it would all turn out.

God could deliver them if he wanted to but even if he didn't they were willing to submit to his will trusting that God knew best. They would rather die than worship the image.

And it was extreme confidence because if God was going to deliver them from death if he wasn't rather going to deliver them from death then they were trusting that God could deliver them through death.

[ 18 : 05 ] death. And so for us it is only if you know this God that you can be fearless in the face of death. There is no need to be afraid.

He's either with you by stopping it or he's with you through it. And that's why the king was mad. Verse 19 and 20 So the king may have been able to throw them into the fire but in reality he couldn't touch them.

And this was intense persecution. But God's people have always needed to be ready to die. Jesus actually said it was part of following him.

In Mark chapter 8 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 and for the gospel will save it.

And so we have got to be ready to give up our lives if we're going to follow Jesus in this world. That's why we shouldn't be shocked when this world is hostile towards God's people.

[ 19 : 26 ] Suffering, persecution, even death are part and parcel of what it means to be a Christian. Now of course we may not face death in our Western society for our faith but we will feel the pressure to conform.

And so if you profess to be a Christian do you feel this pressure? Do you feel the pressure to adopt the culture's values, to conform to the current ideologies?

You see, if we don't ever feel any pressure could it be that we've simply given in? That we've settled for a comfortable kind of Christianity where the world has squeezed us into its mould?

Where we no longer stand out for being distinctive because we have just simply began to ape the values of the culture around us. So, if we are never being called out, if we are never cancelled in one form or another, if we're never tested or tried, if we've never felt opposition, whether verbal or otherwise, it's probably because we have capitulated to the culture.

We've lost confidence in God and either given in or we've sold out. But if we have confidence in God, then we're not threatened with death, but we're not threatened with death, how are we ever going to cope if we are?

[ 20 : 53 ] You see, in the New Testament, Peter uses the language of fiery trials to describe normal Christian experience. Perhaps he had the fiery furnace of Daniel in mind when he wrote in 1 Peter, now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire, may result in praise, glory, and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

And then in 1 Peter chapter 4, dear friends, do not be surprised that the fiery trial that has come on to test you as though something strange were happening to you.

And so the fiery trials, whatever the temperature, are a test to prove the genuineness of our faith in God. And the experience may be intense, but it should strengthen and purify our faith.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refuse to conform, and we're ready to die because of their confident faith in God. So how can we do this?

[ 22 : 04 ] Well, that takes us to our third and final point, which is the essential company in the furnace. So first, the expected conformity to the culture, second, the extreme confidence in God, and third, the essential company in the furnace, verse 24 to 13.

This next scene takes place in the furnace. So verse 24, then King Nebuchadnezzar leapt to his feet in amazement and asked his advisors, weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?

They replied, certainly, your majesty. He said, look, I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.

So the king sees four men in the furnace, and the fourth one looks like a son of the gods. So the question is, well, who is this figure? Nebuchadnezzar recognizes some kind of divine, supernatural being.

In fact, in verse 28, he says that God has sent his angel, and the text really says no more about the exact identity of the one who is accompanying them in the fire.

[ 23 : 10 ] So was it an angel sent by God? Or was this God himself in human form? A physical appearance of Jesus before his incarnation?

The point is, God was present with them in the furnace. He physically accompanied Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, because he was fulfilling what he had already promised he would do, as he said in Isaiah.

Listen to what God says in Isaiah chapter 43. 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, for I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

So what is happening to these men is a concrete expression of God saving his people, not by removing them from the fire, but by passing through the flames of the fire with them.

And so when we see this as God coming to be with his people in order to save them, then we can't help but identify this son of the gods as the son of God himself, Jesus, Christ.

[ 24 : 36 ] What we've got here is a graphic preview of what God would do in Jesus. Because of course this story, the message of Daniel, is part of a greater story of the God who comes and dwells with his people in order to save them.

So in Jesus, God took on our weak humanity by entering into the furnace of this world. And so Jesus experienced every pressure and every temptation.

And like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, Jesus was also regarded as an enemy of the state. Jesus was unjustly tried and condemned to a painful death.

And then Jesus had to face the ultimate fiery furnace completely alone. Jesus was thrown into hell when he went to the cross.

That's why he cried out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Jesus felt the utter aloneness of total abandonment by God when he died.

[ 25 : 40 ] Why? Because he was dying for us. Jesus spoke about hell as the blazing furnace, the place where people will be thrown to be punished for sin, evil, and rebellion against God.

And it's what we all deserve because we have all failed to serve and worship God as we should. And yet Jesus went into the furnace to be punished in our place.

Jesus faced God's wrath on the cross so that we might be rescued from it. And yet Jesus came through the furnace because God raised him to life again.

And right now Jesus reigns as king, the resurrected, risen Lord. Lord. And one day Jesus will return as judge. And so everybody who believes in Jesus is delivered from hell for heaven.

And so do you know what that means? It means we can be sure that Jesus will be with us in the fiery trials of this life because he has already been through the ultimate furnace to save us.

[ 26 : 51 ] And that's the essential company we need, especially when faced with intense persecution or suffering. And so do you have that company today?

Do you know Jesus Christ? Is he with you? Nebuchadnezzar could see for himself how God came to save his people.

Remember his challenge to the men, verse 15, what God will be able to rescue you from my hand? Well he gets his answer and he's forced to confess, verse 29, no other God can save in this way.

And that really is the heart of the matter. No other God can save in this way. Can you see this? God saves his people not by standing aloof, standing back, or even by pulling out his people from danger.

No, God goes in. People often say that God doesn't understand our suffering. Well yes he does. That's why Christianity is so fundamentally different from every other religion.

[ 27 : 57 ] No other religion talks about a God who suffers for us. Every other religion, every other world view really expects you to save yourself. And yet when we fail, all other gods, whether they're religious gods or secular gods, ultimately fail us.

They offer as much forgiveness and comfort as our cancel culture does. None. God. Whereas the one true and living God always comes through.

Christianity gives us a God willing to suffer and pay for your sin and failure and mine. And so instead of being cancelled like we deserve, he was willing to be cancelled for us so that we can be delivered.

No other God saves in this way by personally taking the hell fire that I deserve so that I might go unscathed and walk free.

So if you don't have faith in this God, the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, the God who rules, the God who saves and the God who is with his people, then you'll never be able to cope with the furnaces of this world, whether they be persecution or suffering or even death.

[ 29 : 14 ] God didn't deliver Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from the fire, God delivered them in the fire. He was with them. And so God will not always shield us from difficulty or remove us from suffering, but the good news is that he walks with us through them.

And so we can live with confidence in God. If he has rescued us from the very worst we can possibly face, then we can be sure he'll be with us in every lesser thing.

And do you need to know that today, that God is with you whatever you are going through, no matter how intense the pressure or painful the suffering?

This whole episode shows us the madness of worshipping anything besides the one true and living God. Because the God who revealed himself in the fiery furnace of Babylon and then who revealed himself in the cruel cross of Calvary is the God who walks with us today, right now.

So don't conform to the culture, but have confidence in him. Remember that he is with you now and always. And so you can never be harmed.

[ 30 : 30 ] And only when you grasp that Jesus willingly went through the ultimate furnace for you, will you be able to go through the smaller furnaces for him. And when you do, it will only make you stronger.

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