



Can Your Faith Take the Heat? Pilgrim Living in the 21st Century

Daniel 3

David Sunday

September 18, 2016

As you're turning to Daniel 3, I have a true-or-false statement I'd like you to think about. "There are worse things than dying." Is that true, or is that false? Think about that as I read the first 18 verses in Daniel 3. Let's worship as we read God's Word:

King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits [about nine stories tall] and its breadth six cubits. He set it up on the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. ² Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent to gather the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. ³ Then the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces gathered for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. And they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. ⁴ And the herald proclaimed aloud, "You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, ⁵ that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. ⁶ And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace." ⁷ Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

⁸ Therefore at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and maliciously accused the Jews. ⁹ They declared to King Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, live forever! ¹⁰ You, O king, have made a decree, that every man who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, shall fall down and worship the golden image. ¹¹ And whoever does not fall down and

worship shall be cast into a burning fiery furnace. ¹² There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men, O king, pay no attention to you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

¹³ Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought. So they brought these men before the king. ¹⁴ Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, "Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? ¹⁵ Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?"

¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. ¹⁷ If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. ¹⁸ But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

This is God's Word.

Have you found yourself wondering, "What if the worst possible thing I could imagine happens to me? What if I lose my job? What if the people whose favor I crave the most turn against me?" Maybe it's a little less significant, but "What if no one asks me to the homecoming dance? What if I don't pass that exam on Friday?" When we go through the "what ifs" in our mind, sometimes looming on the horizon of our thoughts is this ultimate dreadful question: What if I die? What's the worst that could happen me you? Well, I could die.

For many people, death is the worst possible thing they can imagine. But I'm asking you, "Are there worse things for you than dying?" As I thought about today's Scripture passage and the sorrow we're feeling as a church family, I was encouraged because I knew how Tom and Ross felt about the worst thing that could happen to them. I know they both felt there are worse things than dying. These were not men who were living in dread of death. They were men who wanted to live fully for Jesus and to love the people around them as long as they had breath. They knew there were worse things than dying.

That phrase comes from D.A. Carson, who had typhoid fever and whose wife has been at death's door with cancer. In his book How Long, O Lord? Carson writes this:

I do not know how many times I have sung the words, "O let me never, never / Outlive my love for Thee," but I mean them.

I would rather die than end up unfaithful to my wife; I would rather die than deny by a profligate life what I have taught in my books; I would rather die than deny or disown the gospel...

God knows there are many things in my past of which I'm deeply ashamed. I would not want such shame to multiply and bring dishonor to Christ in years to come.

There are worse things than dying.

We've got to be convinced of that. Until we know what we're willing to die for, we don't really know what we're living for. Until we're persuaded there are worse things than dying, we won't be living for what matters most. As we look at this passage, we see Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had no doubt about their priorities. Their conviction was unwavering.

We see this in verses 16-18, where they said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "We don't need to answer you in this matter, King. We're not debating this. We have no doubt in our minds about where we stand. If you're going to throw us into that fiery furnace...*our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.*"

We stopped reading there because a significant miracle has already taken place in this story. We sometimes think the miracle is in the burning fiery furnace—and there a great miracle will happen—but already something very significant, something only God could bring about, has happened. There were at least three men who—in the face of intense pressure to conform to the crowd around them—when they hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and whatever other kind of music the king was playing, decided to march to the beat of a different drummer. They say, "We will not bow down."

Their courage in the face of that kind of pressure is, I think, miraculous. It's super-human. They loved not their lives unto death. Notice, they don't know whether or not God will deliver them from the burning fiery furnace. They know He's able to, because they've heard the words from the prophet Isaiah: "*When you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior*"

(Isaiah 43:2-3). They know God is able—but they don't know what His plan is in their situation. They don't know what God is going to do.

But they show us true faith, because they cling to what God has revealed. They know what God has required of them. They've heard the Ten Commandments. *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."* What's the first commandment? *"You shall have no other gods before me."* Then God says, *"You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God"* (Exodus 20:2-5).

That's clear. God has revealed that requirement. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego say, "For us, breaking the first and second commandments would be worse than death. We'd rather die than bow down and worship a golden image representing the gods of Nebuchadnezzar. We won't do it." That's faith.

Last year Ross wrote a book review for The Gospel Coalition. He talked about reflecting on God's wonderful promises—even when we can't fully understand all that's happening to us. Here's what he said:

God does not owe us an explanation for why He allows severe trials. There is mystery here, yet we can rely on the truth that only He fully understands our suffering. We waste precious energy when we seek answers that only reside in the secret places of the Most High (Deuteronomy 29:29).

I can just imagine Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego listening to Nebuchadnezzar's rage, thinking to themselves, looking at one another, and saying, "Should we waste any precious energy here? Should we deliberate, to see if there's a way we can satisfy this king and not disobey our God." They just shake their heads. "No. We're not going to waste any energy. We don't know what God's plan for us is. We know what He's able to do, and we also know with certainty what God has revealed. We will have no other gods before Him."

Thou, and Thou only, first in my heart
High King of heaven, my treasure Thou art.

(From "Be Thou My Vision," attributed to St. Dallan Forgaill)

That's where they're going to take their stand, and they will not waver. That's true faith. True faith doesn't require God to tell you what He's going to do in your situation, because it relies on what God has revealed about His character and His ways. True faith says, "What God has

revealed is all I need to know, and what God hasn't revealed I don't need to know." True faith looks at the end of the story of Scripture and sees that we are more than conquerors through Jesus Who loves us. So true faith says, "It will all be okay in the end. If it's not okay, it's not the end." True faith then trusts in what God has revealed.

I love how Dale Ralph Davis, author and former seminary professor of Old Testament, summarizes the faith of these three young men:

Faith does not predict God's ways; it simply holds to God's Word; faith obeys God's truth, it does not manipulate God's hand; faith is not required to plot God's course but only to obey God's command. Faith's finest hour may be when it can oppose Nebuchadnezzar's three words (burning fiery furnace) with three of its own: But if not. God, we will trust you.

That brings me to the crux of the matter today. Can your faith take the heat? We really have to be careful not to answer that question too glibly. We shouldn't think, "Yeah, I'm ready for whatever God brings my way. I could do the fiery furnace. Yeah, I'm like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego."

Even someone as great as Thomas Cranmer—the great English reformer who wrote The Book of Common Prayer—even he buckled when the heat was turned up. Bloody Queen Mary threw him into prison, and he sat there for three years. When at the end of three years she asked him to recant his faith in Christ and the gospel—the Protestant faith for which he was standing—he said, "I can't take it anymore." Then with his own hand, he wrote out a recantation of his faith in the gospel.

But that wasn't the end of the story. Bloody Mary said, "I still want that guy dead. I can't stand him. I want to burn him at the stake." She set a date, March 21, 1556, to have him publicly repudiate his Protestant faith—or be burned at the stake. But instead of saying what the Queen wanted him to say, he repented of his greatest sin of all: his denial of the gospel. They led him off to be burned. When he reached the fire, he put his right hand into those flames first, saying, "As my hand offended, writing contrary to my heart, my hand shall first be punished."

Facing a fiery furnace, you might wonder, "Can my faith take the heat? Would I stand?" The truth is we actually answer that question in a thousand lesser ways every week of our lives when we make daily decisions. "How will I spend my money? What will capture my imagination? What kind of images will I put in front of my eyes? How will I handle my disappointments?"

In all these different circumstances of our lives, we are daily making decisions whether or not we will bow down before the gods of anger, self-pity, greed, gluttony, lust, resentment, revenge, jealousy and pride. It doesn't always take something as fearful as a burning fiery furnace to get us to bow down and worship lesser gods, does it? We've crumbled before far less of a threat than Nebuchadnezzar's furnace. We've all failed when the bar was set lower.

So as we see the faith of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, we're convicted—and we should be. But we need to also remember that these men were not perfect either. We don't know what their sins were, but we know they were sinful. We know they didn't stand before that king and go into that furnace on their own. What does the writer of Hebrews tell us in Hebrews 11:33-34? He says it was "*through faith.*" It was through faith that they "*obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness.*"

It wasn't in them. It was through faith that they did these things. So as believers, we're convicted when we see their courage and faith, but we're also encouraged that the same God Who sustained them and gave them strength is the God Who will sustain us and give us strength.

Also, as believers, we're experiencing something in our lives that God is doing—it's called repentance. That's not just a once-in-a-while thing. It's not just something the world out there needs. It's something we need every day of our lives as we turn away from lesser gods that promise us security, comfort, provision, peace and pleasure. We say, "I will not bow down or worship those lesser gods. I will worship You alone." That's what's going on in our lives by the grace of God through daily repentance. Through daily turning away from these lesser things, God is strengthening our faith.

We don't need to wait until we get put before a fiery furnace to grow strong. The strength comes in day-to-day decisions in our ordinary lives. It grows as we come to the Lord's Table and receive the body and blood as medicine for our sin-sick souls. It comes when we gather before God's Word, when we read the Bible together, when we pray together. What is God doing? He's strengthening our faith, so that when it is tested by fiery ordeals—which it will be—our faith, which is more precious than gold, will prove real and genuine, and will result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Let's look at the rest of the story which is really amazing. I don't know if you've read this since you were a kid in Sunday School. But this isn't just a kid's story. This is really for big people. This is for adults. This is for people who need courage to see Who our God is. Let's read, beginning at verse 19 of Daniel 3. "*Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury, and the*

expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.” I wonder what he looked like. I’ll bet it was scary to see his red face.

He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated. ²⁰ And he ordered some of the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. ²¹ Then these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the burning fiery furnace. ²² Because the king’s order was urgent and the furnace overheated, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. ²³ And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace.

²⁴ Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, “Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?” They answered and said to the king, “True, O king.” ²⁵ He answered and said, “But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.”

²⁶ Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning fiery furnace; he declared, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here!”

Wow! What authority this king has, bossing them around.

Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. ²⁷ And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king’s counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men. The hair of their heads was not singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them. ²⁸ Nebuchadnezzar answered and said, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego....”

He doesn’t say, “Blessed be my God,”—yet—but he does say, “Blessed be the God of those guys.”

“...who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king’s command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. ²⁹ Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way.” ³⁰

Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

Wow! What a story! It's an amazing story—and it's history. It really happened. God really did this.

This week I was reading a sermon by Charles Spurgeon. It was really a wonderful meditation on this text, and it ignited what I hope is a little holy imagination in me. It was called, "Consolation in a Furnace." Spurgeon talked about how, as God's people, we often find ourselves in furnaces. Sometimes they're furnaces men have made—furnaces of oppression or persecution. Sometimes they're furnaces Satan has lit up to try to destroy us. But sometimes they're furnaces that God brings us into in order to purify us. Then Spurgeon, thinking about those furnaces, focused on four things: what we lose in the furnace, what we do in the furnace, what we do not lose in the furnace, and Who is with us in the furnace.

When you get to heaven, aren't these three guys some of the first ones you'd love to meet? As I was meditating on Spurgeon's wonderful words, I got to thinking, "What if we could have Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego up here with us today to interview them?" I would love to talk to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego about their experience.

I'd start with, "How hot was it really?" And they'd tell us, "It was so hot that the men who threw us into that furnace were instantly incinerated when they opened doors near those flames." The flames of adversity destroy those who do not have faith in God. But for those who trust in the God of Daniel, those flames only serve to purify our faith.

Then I'd ask Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, "What did you lose there in that furnace? Because surely you lost something in that fire." And they'd say, "Well, we didn't lose our turbans or our coats or our shoes. Not even a hair from our heads perished in that fire. Not even a hair!" Didn't Jesus say something like that? "*But not a hair of your head will perish*" (Luke 21:18).

"But we did lose something," they would say. "We lost our bonds. We lost the cords with which that wicked king tied us up. They fell off in those flames." When believers are tested by the fires of adversity, God uses those fires to free us from whatever remaining bondage that sin, the flesh, the devil and this world hold on our lives. We find that through those sufferings we learn to walk more and more in the freedom for which Jesus has set us free.

Then I'd ask them, "What did you do in the furnace?" No one else has ever done what these guys did in a burning fiery furnace. They would say, "We walked around. We took a walk in the burning fiery furnace. We walked on those hot coals, and we weren't hurt by them. We walked with ease, as free men. We walked calmly." And this is the normal experience of a

believer. Though we grow tired and weary and are hard-pressed by many trials, we who wait on the Lord walk and do not faint (Isaiah 40:30-31). We keep walking with our God.

Then I'd ask them, "What did you not lose in the furnace?" They'd say, "Well, the fire had no power over our bodies. Our cloaks were not harmed. We didn't even smell like smoke when we got out of there." Likewise, friends, we who are in Christ have a robe of righteousness that cannot be taken away from us, and the fires of affliction cannot destroy that robe in which we are clothed. We have an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and will not fade away, kept in heaven for us (1 Peter 1:4). And we have the promise that we will rise in the resurrection with immortal bodies that will not see decay. Therefore, as Psalm 16 says, our hearts are glad, and our whole being rejoices. Our flesh also dwells secure, for God will not abandon our soul to Hades, or let His holy ones see corruption (Psalm 16:10).

There's one last question I want to ask these guys. "Who was with you in that furnace? Who was that?" And they'd say, "Ah, what a wonder He was! So full of splendor that even that wicked king Nebuchadnezzar said he'd never seen anyone like this before—one like the son of the gods. This we know: the most high God gave His angels command concerning us, to guard us in all our ways, and He never left us or forsook us. When we walked through that fire, we were not burned, and the flames did not kindle upon us."

This past year I read a book by Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*, in which she talks about being on the prairies in Nebraska in the late 1800s and early 1900s. She told how sometimes ferocious wildfires would come across those prairies, threatening to destroy everything in sight. Sometimes the settlers had no other recourse but to light a ring of fire around their property, so that when the blazing fire came up to their property, it would meet that ring of fire and go around them. Within the ring of fire, there was safety.

I don't know if that fourth person in the furnace was a pre-incarnate appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ. I kind of think he was. But we don't have to prove that. What I do know is Immanuel was there. God was with those men. And I know something even better. Immanuel came into this world and He hung on a cross. He Who knew no sin became sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21). And Jesus endured the furnace of God's wrath. Jesus went into the burning fiery furnace for you and for me, and He went there alone.

Around the shadow of Jesus' cross, wherever that shadow can reach—and it reaches to every tribe, tongue, nation and people group around the world—whoever comes within the shadow of that cross comes into a ring of safety. The fire of the holiness of Jesus, the fire of His

atonement for our sins, the fire of His purity—He Who never bowed down to any idol—protects and preserves us from the wrath our sins deserve.

I don't know if I can always face the heat of adversity, but I know Jesus took the heat for me. Jesus took the heat of God's wrath on the cross. So I can say, and I can sing, with all of us today...

When through fiery trials thy pathways shall lie,
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.

(How Firm a Foundation by Jon Rippon)

What wonderful, wonderful news! Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Lord, as we come here to this communion table, we pray that it would be medicine for our sin-sick souls, that it would be food to satisfy our hunger for You and nourishment to give us strength to live for You. We pray that the dearest idol we have known—whatever that idol may be—would be torn from us so that we would worship only You. Help us, Lord, to put away everything that we tend to bow down to for comfort, security, pleasure, protection and provision. May we forsake those idols and cling to You.

Lord Jesus, we thank You for taking God's wrath—the Father's holy wrath that our sins deserve—for us on the cross. As we see the fourth man walking in that furnace, we thank You that You went alone to the cross for us and bore something far worse. You've already dealt with our worst enemy—the guilt of our sin which is worse than death—so that we could go free. We thank You and say alleluia, what a Savior! Amen.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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