

4th Sun. after Epiphany
January 30, 2011

Can't Take the Heat?
Furnace Facing Faith

Pastor Michael Ewart
Daniel 3:13-27

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Today we turn our attention to the familiar story of the three men in the fiery furnace. A perennial Sunday School favorite, I imagine most of you have heard it. Our God will be teaching us an important lesson today... but maybe not the one you expect. The story is centered around three Hebrew men, named Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. Sound familiar? Probably not... those were the three men's Hebrew names. The Babylonians gave them names that sounded good in their language and those are the names you're probably more familiar with: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Or, if you watch Veggie Tales, they're just called "Rack, Shack and Benny." We won't go that informal, we'll stick to their usual Babylonian names.

The background here is both interesting and important for understanding the truth God would have us learn today, so let me fill you in. The story picks up with those three Jewish men living far east of Israel in Babylon. How did they get there? Well, the people of Israel had been wicked. They worshiped false gods. God was very patient with them. For hundreds of years he sent them prophet after prophet who warned the people over and over, "Turn from your wicked ways. Stop worshiping gods that are no gods at all. Repent and turn back to me! If you persist in your rebellious ways, you will be captured by foreign armies. Many will be killed and the rest will be taken into captivity!" You might think they would pay attention to such warnings. But they didn't. They ignored God again and again.

Finally, God's patience ran out, and he did exactly as he threatened. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, invaded Palestine three different times. Each time more of the people were taken captive and deported to Babylon. The final invasion and deportation was in 587BC.

Nebuchadnezzar was actually a pretty wise ruler. The Assyrians were a cruel people. They usually preferred either to kill their captives or to put them into lowly servitude. But the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar knew that the people they conquered included some very bright and talented people. Kind of like in World War II, the United States didn't kill the German scientists. They shipped the brightest and best over to America so that we would benefit from their expertise. Nebuchadnezzar did the same.

Nebuchadnezzar ordered the chief of his court officials, Ashpenaz, to look among the ruling families and nobility of the Israelites and pick out the most handsome, the brightest, the most talented, quick learning, most promising young men he could find. Then he was to put them through rigorous schooling. They were to learn the language and literature of the Babylonians, as well as all kinds of learning. Ashpenaz found 4 men who fit the bill. They are the three we're going to talk about today, plus the one who wrote all about this, whose book we're reading today: Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar gave Ashpenaz three years to train them, and then Nebuchadnezzar would evaluate whether they would be a suitable addition to the King's cabinet of advisors and royal officials.

God blessed the studies of these four men. They excelled in all their courses. They became fluent in the Babylonian language. At the end of this training Nebuchadnezzar gave them their final exam. (I'm guessing this was an exam you wouldn't want to fail.) And Nebuchadnezzar was mightily impressed. He immediately recognized their ability and knew

there was no one equal to them. They were immediately given authority and power, and the king highly respected them.

Now, let's take a break here. This is an interesting story, but why are we even talking about this? Where is the "God" part of this story? What's God going to teach us? Take a step back and look at the bigger picture. The Babylonians had swept in and completely conquered the people of Israel. Now stop and think: how does this make the God of Israel look to the Babylonians? Wouldn't they conclude that their gods were stronger than the God of Israel? After all, they got the victory! Undoubtedly many thought this.

Truth was, God allowed Israel to be conquered as a judgment and punishment for their continued, obstinate sinning. He warned them for hundreds of years that he would do this. And guess what? He finally did! Were they conquered because God was weak? No! They were conquered because God ordained it as a discipline for his people.

But the Babylonians didn't know this. So God needs to do two things: 1) He needs to demonstrate to the Babylonians (especially the leadership) that **the God of Israel really is the true God** and he is mighty to save! And 2) **God still had a promise to keep**. God still had in mind to send the promised Savior to the people of Israel. Yes, this conquered, captive people who had lost the Promised Land God had given him, were still the nation through which the Savior would be born. So God needed to preserve his people within Babylon because eventually he was going to ensure that a remnant got back to Israel.

So got that? God has in mind (1) To show his power to the Babylonians, and (2) preserve and protect his people so he could ultimately restore them and send the Savior of the world through him. God HAD to do these things, because **his glory depended on it**. And **faithfulness to his word required it!**

Okay, back to our story. How did these three guys end up standing in a furnace? Rulers throughout history have sometimes used religion as a way to unite the people of the country. Nebuchadnezzar seems to have had just that idea. He made a huge image of gold that was ninety feet high and nine feet wide. It was an incredible and expensive work of art, and Nebuchadnezzar was very proud of it. For the dedication ceremony, he invited all of the rulers from his kingdom. Anyone who was someone was invited. But this was more than a dedication ceremony. The statue was declared a god and all were commanded to bow down before it. This was Nebuchadnezzar's way to unite his diverse country around this false religion. There was a dedication orchestra that he commissioned to play that day, and when the instruments would play, he commanded all to bow down before the statue in worship. And to encourage compliance, he threatened that whoever would not bow down and worship would be thrown into a blazing furnace to be burned alive.

Now, finally, we can talk about the three men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Remember, they were now people of status in Babylon. They were invited to this big shindig. They were expected to bow in worship before the statue just like everyone else. But they absolutely refused. They would not bow down before an image of gold. They believed in the one true God... the only real God... the God of power and might. They believed in the God who is powerful to save... the God who will not give his glory to another... the God who is always faithful to his Word and promises. They believed him to be worthy of their full devotion and obedience. They would not bow to another.

There were others in government who were jealous of the three Hebrew men who had been quickly promoted to important positions. They were also prejudice against foreigners. So when they noticed that these three men wouldn't bow, they ran to the king and tattled on them. **"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, O king. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up."**

The king was furious. No one dared to disobey an order from the king! He brought the three men before him, and gave them one last chance. He gave the direct order to bow down before the image of gold. He also "encouraged" them with this stern warning: **"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?"** Oops. Nebuchadnezzar way overstepped his bounds here. Not only did he challenge the power of the living God, but he challenged God's saving ability. Saving is what God is all about, and Nebuchadnezzar didn't believe God could do it.

Here's how the three men responded: **"O 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 save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."**

Let's wrap up the story quickly since I bet you remember the ending well, and then let's talk about what God is teaching us here. The king was furious. He ordered the furnace to be stoked 7 times hotter than usual. The men were tied up tight, still fully clothed... yes, in clothing that was highly combustible. He ordered them thrown into the blazing furnace. It was so hot that the executioners who had to throw them into the furnace, were killed from the heat. The three men fell into the furnace.

Then something interesting happens. The king takes a close look in the fire and sees something shocking. He sees movement in the furnace. People walking around! As completely impossible as this was, something else amazes him even more. He counts... 1, 2, 3... 4! There's an extra man in the furnace. He double checks that only three were thrown in. And he realizes the fourth had the appearance of a son of the gods. He shouts at the men, and listen to what he says: **"Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!"** They came out. All the rulers were watching. They were completely unburned. Not a hair was singed. Their clothes were not charred... and didn't even smell like smoke. The king was forced to praise God: **"Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God."**

Let's pause there. Some people will take this story and misapply it. They will say, "This story is about three believers whose lives were on the line. They believed in God with all their heart that he would save them from the furnace, and indeed he did. So trust God whatever you're facing and know that your God who is strong and mighty will save you too!" Is that what this all story is about?

I would suggest to you that such an application says both too much and too little. How does it say too much? Well, let's keep in mind that the three men, although they fully trusted God, they did *not* know that God would indeed save them. They entrusted their lives to God, the relied upon him fully in this time of crisis... but they did so *not knowing* whether God would

spare their lives or not. They did not have a specific promise from God that they would not die in that furnace. But they believed it was better to die trusting in the one true God than to live because they denied him. Clearly they believed in eternal life and knew that whatever happened to them on earth, it was their eternal destiny that mattered the most.

Applying this to our lives... understand that in the vast majority of the things we pray for, God has not revealed his will to us one way or the other. So our attitude will be that of the three men: "I trust with all my heart that my God is *able* to do such and such. But even if he doesn't, I will entrust myself and my future to him."

But I would suggest to you that this story from Scriptures has a bigger picture than just the life or death of three men at the hands of a capricious tyrant. At stake here are two things much, much bigger. 1) God's honor and glory. And 2) God's promise to send a Savior to the Jews who would deliver all mankind from sin. God's **glory** and God's **faithfulness** are on the line here!

How is his glory on the line? (1) Remember this little detail from the story: the king directly challenged God and claimed he was unable to save the three men. If, now, God did not rescue them, the king would have that idea confirmed; namely, the God of the Israelites is no God at all. Would God allow his Name to be dishonored such? He allowed it once because the higher priority was to discipline his people. But there was no discipline involved here. The glorification and honor of God necessitated that these three men be miraculously saved! When God's glory is on the line, he will defend it and proclaim loud and clear that he is the one true God!

2) How as God's faithfulness being challenged in this story? If God allowed the three men to die, this would likely have been the beginning of an Israelite persecution. These three would not bow down to the false god. They would not be a melting pot in Babylon and integrate with the people and culture. That makes them at a target. It could have stirred up a national persecution of all the Israelites. If this had happened, God's big plan of salvation would have been in danger. All of God's promises hinged on the children of Abraham remaining a distinct nation. The Savior of the world was promised to them. If they no longer existed, and if they melted into the Babylonian population, then God's promise would be lost to the world, and left unfulfilled. This would mean that God made a promise but didn't keep it. And there is *no way* God would ever allow that!

The story emphasizes that God's faithfulness to his promises is what's really at stake here. Notice that God didn't just keep them alive. But he actually sent a fourth person among them: one who was like a son of the gods! Friends, God sent the Angel of the Lord to rescue these men. I don't think we're speculating much if we would say this is the pre-incarnate Christ... the true Son of God... testifying by his presence with the three men in the furnace that God is God and his promises will not be broken! God *will* save mankind when in the fullness of time, he would send his own Son into our world, born in Palestine of Jewish parents... just as God promised. God **WOULD** keep his word! That fourth person in the furnace was the reminder and the guarantee.

So what is happening here is this: God spares the lives of these three men in a miraculous way because if he didn't, he would have violated his very nature. His name would not have been glorified and his promises would not have been kept. These three men were on pretty solid theological ground in expecting that God would save them. And he did!

So... what is this story about? Is it about the faith of the three men? Not really. It's not about them. It's about our God. He is powerful to save. He will not be stopped from fulfilling his big plan of salvation. God will not be mocked.

Go home with this comfort: the same God who would not let his salvation plan for the world be sidetracked is just as interested in your eternal salvation. You may be facing some unexpected challenges in your life right now... and you will face many more in the years to come. But God is guiding and directing your life so that his name may be glorified. And his name is glorified when he frees you from Satan's grasp and eternal furnace he would like to throw you in. He send among us that fourth person in the furnace: his own Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. He took the heat for you when he went to the cross. He guaranteed your freedom through his resurrection. And on Judgment Day, you have God's promise and guarantee that not even hint of smoke from the flames of hell will be on you. God will protect and keep you all the way to your eternal home.

Like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, our God gives you a furnace facing faith. Not a faith that's concerned about self. A faith that's concerned about God's glory and his faithfulness. Entrust your life now and forever to the one true God is who mighty and powerful to save. Don't doubt for a minute that he's got everything in your life under control and that in the end, you along with all the saints, will glorify his holy name for his faithfulness and salvation. Whatever you face, and whatever persecution you must endure, stand firm and let nothing move you. Give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord. You've got God's faithful, never-failing promise that all *will* work out for good and for the glory of God.

Amen.