

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego

Daniel 3

Introduction

Church history is filled with men and women who have given their lives in service of Jesus. You can find these stories online or in books like “Foxe Book of Martyrs”. One such story that stands out to me is the one of Polycarp, the last disciple of the Apostle John. Facing persecution much like the early church did, he was arrested in his 80s and led toward execution. He was threatened in Rome with being killed by wild beasts, burned alive, and other forms of death. Polycarp looked at the Proconsul Quadratus and said to the effect of, “You threaten with a fire that will burn for an hour, but the fires of judgement, reserved for the ungodly, cannot be quenched. Why do you delay? Come and do what you will.” The Soldiers grabbed him to nail him to a stake, but Polycarp stopped them and said, “Leave me as I am. For he who grants me to endure the fire will enable me also to remain on the pyre unmoved, without the security you desire from nails.¹” He prayed aloud, “O Father, I thank You that You have called me to this day and hour and have counted me worthy to receive my place among the number of the holy martyrs, Amen.” And the fire was lit. Some reports I read say that the fire actually didn’t kill him so he was then stabbed and died.

This story is very similar to that of the one we are in this morning where three other men are faced with death by fire or recanting their faith. In Daniel 3 we find the story of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, also known as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men exhibit to us an amazing attitude of “He not Me”. They also epitomize the idea of living an “its not about me”

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mindset. They will be faced with death and not relent or bow in worship to idols. If you are physically able, would you stand as we read Daniel 3:13-18?

Context

The story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and the fiery furnace is one that you may have heard many times over the course of your life. It is one that we tell children to show the power and protection of God. However, I never want to assume that everyone knows all the stories of scripture because maybe you're new to it. Because of that, I want to set a little context for what we will be reading this morning in Daniel 3. For this, we have to go back to Daniel 1.

Babylon, the big world superpower at the time, captured the Kingdom of Judah (Jerusalem) and took them into exile somewhere around the year 600-605BC. This did not catch God off guard, He had warned them it would happen and this was a result of their idolatry and disobedience. When you read chapter 1, you can find some of the detail of this and some of the items and people that Nebuchadnezzar took from Jerusalem to their temple. Among some of the treasures, four men are mentioned specifically as to having been taken to Babylon: Daniel, Hananiah (Shadrach), Mishael (Meshach), and Azariah (Abednego). They were taken and were taught the language and customs of Babylon.

Early on, these four men stood firm on their convictions to follow Yahweh and Him alone. They and the others were supposed to eat food that the king gave them, but they determined they "would not defile himself" with the food so they asked only for vegetables and water. After 10 days, they were healthier than the others, so they were allowed to continue with this diet. Because of God's favor, they became attendants to the King and he sought their counsel.

The Mandate (v.1-7)

Sometime after they were brought into Babylon, the three friends were placed as leaders in the area (Daniel 2:49). And at some point, Nebuchadnezzar erects a giant gold statue that was 90ft high and 9ft wide. It is possible that he built this giant statue as a result of the dream he had in chapter 2, and he may have overlaid it with gold to fight the notion that his kingdom wouldn't last forever. It was interpreted in his dream that the gold head of the statue was his kingdom and that another kingdom would rise up after his. One of my study bibles even had: "Babylonian records indicate that there was a revolt against Nebuchadnezzar during the tenth year of his reign, so this may have led to the king's desire for the loyalty test described here."²

After he builds the statue, he has a dedication service for it, and so he gathers all the leaders of the provinces together. It is there that he mandates the worship of this statue when the people hear the music being played. He tells them that they *must* fall and worship the statue or they will be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire. By building this giant statue and by forcing his people to worship it, he is instituting a government-based religion; not giving people a choice in who they want to worship.

(I'm glad we live in a place where we have the freedom to worship how we desire to. Government should not mandate worship. Obviously as followers of Christ we desire that all people worship Jesus as He is the One true God and only Savior and hope for mankind. However, I would not want it to be mandated because mandates can change.

Paul writes in Romans 13:1-2, "Let everyone submit to the governing authorities, since there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are instituted by God. ²So

² Rydelnik, M. (2017). [Daniel](#). In E. A. Blum & T. Wax (Eds.), *CSB Study Bible: Notes* (p. 1329). Holman Bible Publishers.

then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God's command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves." Until those authorities impose something that goes against

what the bible says, we are to respect and submit ourselves to them. Now, if there is anything that is legalized that goes against the scripture, we must stand on scripture. What happened in

Babylon with this gold statue was clearly against what God had commanded in Exodus 20:3-6,

³Do not have other gods besides me. ⁴Do not make an idol for yourself, whether in the shape of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. ⁵Do not bow in worship to them, and do not serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, bringing the consequences of the fathers' iniquity on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me, ⁶but showing faithful love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commands."

Nebuchadnezzar is setting all of this up to make sure that people obey; almost daring them to disobey. Imagine seeing the smoke from the furnace pouring out as the threat looms. This would have been a horrifying way to die. Jeremiah 29:22 records two men, Zedekiah and Ahab, having been thrown in and killed by this fire by Nebuchadnezzar. This would have been a huge furnace, probably the same one used to melt the gold for the statue. One commentator records that this furnace might reach temperatures up to 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit! The sight of this furnace and the thought of being burned to death caused many people to bow in worship of this statue. But, as we see in the next few verses, at least three men dared to have boldness and exhibit an attitude of "it's not about me".

The Boldness (v.8-23)

Some jealousy starts to rise up in some of the locals there. There are some Chaldeans that come forward and “maliciously accuse” the Jews. In Hebrew, it is literally “ate the pieces of,” a phrase suggesting severe hatred and bitter language.³ Their language is also saturated in antisemitism. They don’t like the Jewish people, and certainly don’t like that they have been given leadership positions. **Chaldeans** is both a general ethnic term for the Babylonian people and, as used here, a specific term for priests who served as astrologers, soothsayers, and wise men in the king’s government. Their motive in denouncing the three faithful Jewish men was not devotion to the king’s demand but rather a hatred for the Jewish people.⁴ This may sound similar to what Haman was doing to the Israelite people in the book of Esther. It is also found all throughout the scriptures. If you read Psalm 83:1-5 you will see that this is not a one time occurrence. There were (and still are) people who:³devise clever schemes against your people; they conspire against your treasured ones. ⁴They say, “Come, lets wipe them out as a nation so that Israel’s name will no longer be remembered.”

The accusation that they bring to the King enrages him. These Chaldeans spoke directly to the king’s ego by saying that the three friends ignored him, don’t serve his gods, and don’t worship the gold statue (two of those three are true). So, he calls in Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and asks them if the accusations are correct.

While I could not find an exact age of these three friends, I do not take them to be old men. These are young men (late teens to early thirties maybe?) who are now being called before the King of Babylon to give an account for their refusal to worship his gold statue. Imagine that

³ Miller, S. R. (1994). *Daniel* (Vol. 18, p. 116). Broadman & Holman Publishers.

⁴ Rydelnik, M. (2017). *Daniel*. In E. A. Blum & T. Wax (Eds.), *CSB Study Bible: Notes* (p. 1330). Holman Bible Publishers.

feeling for a moment. Having to stand before the most powerful person you know of; the person who holds your life in their hands. And when they stand before him, they are asked, “Is it true that you refuse to serve my gods or worship my statue?”

He then gives them a second chance. He even issues a challenge and says, “who is the god who can rescue you from my power?” (Nebuchadnezzar is about to see who that God is!) These three young men, knowing what is at stake here, could have lied. They could have bowed in worship. They could have done several things. But their answer is so incredibly bold and brave! And it is really hard to not get fired up about how they respond to him.

They look at the king in his eyes and tell him, “we don’t need to answer your question.¹⁷ If the God we serve exists, then he can rescue us from the furnace of blazing fire, and he can rescue us from the power of you, the king. ¹⁸But even if he does not rescue us, we want you as king to know that we will not serve your gods or worship the gold statue you set up.” Their statement in verse 17 shows the “its not about me” attitude. If they lived their lives for themselves, they would have bowed in worship of this statue. But they were living for someone greater than themselves. When they said, “If the God we serve exists, then He can rescue us,” did not suggest any uncertainty on their part about the reality of God; it means only that they were leaving the matter of their deliverance to His sovereign will.⁵

Each and every person here is going to be challenged in this life to bow in worship to the gods of this world. Whether it is the pressure to conform to the images of this world as is often the case in our current culture. Or, under the threat of death like Shadrach, Meshach, and

⁵ Cabal, T., Brand, C. O., Clendenen, E. R., Copan, P., Moreland, J. P., & Powell, D. (2007). [*The Apologetics Study Bible: Real Questions, Straight Answers, Stronger Faith*](#) (p. 1274). Holman Bible Publishers.

Abednego. There are people all over the world who deal with religious persecution and threats on their lives to recant Jesus.

I want to say this as lovingly as I can: We cannot live with this kind of boldness and bravery if we are a “Sunday Christian”. This has to be engrained in our DNA. If the only time we think of Christ or rely on Him is on Sunday mornings when we gather together for worship and then not again for the rest of the week, I don’t know that we can stand with the same boldness that these three friends did in Babylon.

I read this and I am amazed at this statement. The guys know that God *can* rescue them, they just don’t know if he *will*. And that is a scary position that we might find ourselves in one day. To look the king in the face and say, “God can rescue us, but even if he doesn’t, we will not worship you” is one of the toughest things said in scripture! They show no fear in this moment. I can only pray that if I am ever confronted with that same reality, that I will have the same response. That I love Jesus so much that I have no other option than to give my life in service to Him. To me, this is the epitome of “He must increase, and I must decrease”. Thinking so little of our own lives that we are willing to lay them down because we cannot bow our hearts in worship to anyone or anything else. They were defiant, but not in a sinful way. They were just unwilling to worship this other god.

I think in this moment, Paul’s words in Philippians 1:21 come to mind: “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” These guys knew that if they lived, they would continue living for Yahweh. And they knew that if they were to die, that they would be with Him. They rested in His sovereign care of them. Their faith in Yahweh was not rooted in the guarantee of their deliverance. Their faith in Him was rooted in His steadfast love and grace. Like them, we cannot

let our faith be rooted in only the good things that God does for us. Understand those things for what they are: blessings. But do not let them be the cornerstone of your faith. The cornerstone of your faith should not be in what God gives you or does for you, but in Him.

The friends would have loved what Jesus said in Matthew 10:28, “²⁸ Don’t fear those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul; rather, fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” Their attitude is essentially, “What’s the worst you can do? Kill me?” Well, this makes Nebuchadnezzar even more mad. He orders that the furnace be heated seven times more than normal; this simply means as hot as it could get. He gets some of his soldiers to tie the guys up and throw them in. The furnace is so hot that it even kills the men who took them over and threw them in. And verse 23, theoretically, should be the end of the story, right? I mean, they are inside an inferno so hot it killed some men outside of it. But, the story isn’t finished.

The Rescue (v.24-30)

The way the text reads, this all happens almost instantly. In reading about this furnace, I read it might have looked like one of those old glass milk bottles. The opening at the top where the smoke would come out, and an opening on one side of it to see in or place bricks in or get them out. If this were the construction of it, there may have been some type of platform at the top where they were pushed in and Nebuchadnezzar would have been able to see them burn up, which is what he was expecting. But, rather than seeing them burn up, he sees something else!

He questions the men around him, “Didn’t we only throw 3 bound men into this fire?” Not wanting to be thrown in themselves, they reply, “Yes! Of course!” What they saw when they looked in was not the death of these three men, but the fires had presumably burned off their ropes and now they were walking around inside this fire. And they weren’t alone.

Inside this raging fire stood a fourth man, and Nebuchadnezzar says, “He looks like a son of the gods.” Nebuchadnezzar, a polytheist, would have no concept of the Trinity, or of Jesus, but he also understood that the person inside that fire was more than a person. This phrase that he used was meant to show that someone was divine. So, while he may not have meant Jesus in that furnace with them, I fully believe that’s exactly who was in that fire with them. As Danny Akin said, “The God who did not deliver them *from* the fire was the God who met them *in* the fire and delivered them *out of* the fire!”⁶

Here is the great and undeniable truth: Jesus never leaves our side. He is with us every step of the way and through every hardship that we go through in our lives. In reference to Proverbs 18:24 says, He is that friend who sticks closer than a brother. As it also says in Hebrews 13:5, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” Nebuchadnezzar had built this statue and threatened many people with death in that furnace because he thought it was all about him. He thought there was no one greater than him. But he was badly mistaken! Because the One who was walking around in that fire with those three men was greater than that fire. He was greater than the threat of death. He was greater than anything else that this life could offer. The glory that Jesus showed in that furnace with the three men is exactly why we have to live our lives understanding it isn’t about us.

Verse 26 finds Nebuchadnezzar astonished and calls them out of the fire. Just moments before, this same man had condemned them to death, and now, he sees that something greater than he is at work here. When they came out, it was determined that none of them had any effects from the fire. No hair was singed, their robes weren’t burnt, even their clothes didn’t smell

⁶ Akin, D. L. (2017). [*Exalting Jesus in Daniel*](#) (p. 38). Holman Reference.

like smoke. Anytime I fire up my grill with charcoal, I end up smelling like it for hours (not that it's a bad thing!), but these guys didn't even smell like smoke. Only the One True God could make that happen.

He makes a new decree that anyone who says anything offensive against this God would be torn limb from limb and their home destroyed. He didn't *quite* get it. But, he does say one thing that is undeniably true: "there is no other god who is able to deliver like this." That was true then, and it is true now. Nothing we conjure up and nothing we seek out will deliver us like the God of the bible. Drugs, alcohol addiction, pornography addiction, over eating, not eating, sex, greed, and so many other things will try and promise the deliverance that we seek, but all of them will fall far short of the true deliverance that Yahweh offers to us.

If their faith was strong inside that fire, I'm sure it was only strengthened when they got out. Can you imagine that conversation when they left? "Guys, can you believe what we just went through? God truly is incredible!" And I think their mindset of not living for themselves and living for the Most High makes a wide impact. Their conviction obviously started something in Nebuchadnezzar. Their witness and conviction to stand firm in their faith, may have been the first step in Nebuchadnezzar's repentance. If you read into chapter 4, Nebuchadnezzar comes to a place where it certainly reads that he has a repentant heart. It stands to reason, in my mind, that seeing God do this great miracle with these men may have played a direct role in him coming to faith later.

I think that as people see others stand (and die) for their faith, it helps them to see the reality of the life changing power of Christ. I believe that if we increase Jesus every day of our lives that, when and if the time comes, we too could stand with the same boldness that Shadrach,

Meshach, and Abednego did. We, too, can stand with the same confidence to say, “God will save me. And even if He doesn’t, that’s ok, too.” We are going to have to make a decision to avoid the idols of this world and only be about Jesus. Period. We cannot make our lives about us.

Conclusion

As we begin to close this morning, let me offer you some encouragement. God is a God who rescues. Sometimes God rescues us in the fire. Sometimes, our rescue comes in heaven. But either way, God will rescue us. I do not want to mislead you, not all rescuing happens on this side of eternity. Maybe someone has some real health issues or they’ve been in some type of accident or something else entirely. You’ve been praying for healing and you’ve been praying that God would rescue/deliver them. Don’t lose heart if that deliverance doesn’t come in this life. God can and will deliver us, in His timing and in His way. And when we live with the “He Not Me” mindset, it helps us to keep this in perspective. It helps us to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God’s got it. He is in control and He will see us through whatever comes our way.

But it is hard to have that assurance when you are increasing yourself, rather than increasing Jesus. It is hard to have that assurance when you are a “Sunday only Christian”. I said this earlier, but if Jesus isn’t part of your everyday life, when the fire comes where do we turn? Or when faced with threat of losing our lives, will we give in and worship whatever it is that will save us? Please know that I am not saying any of this to beat you up, that’s not my job. I love you, too much, not to tell you these things. There are always things we can be working on in our lives and making sure we increase Jesus will help us when and if we are staring death in the face.

Something interesting about this story is that we know them better by their Babylonian names: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, than we do their Hebrew names, Hananiah, Mishaël,

and Azariah. When they went into Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar had their names changed, probably to something honoring the Babylonian gods. Even with new names, they didn't forget their old ones. And I think that knowing their Hebrew names helped them when they came to this point in their lives. You see, Hananiah means "Yahweh is gracious", Michael means, "Who is like Elohim?" and Azariah means "Yahweh helps". The God that they served, and the God that we serve is still incomparable, gracious, and helping.

If you are here this morning and have never experienced this life changing power, I will be down front and would love to talk with you and lead you to Jesus. Just as these three men were called out of the fires of death, so too, can you be called out of the fires of death by the One who defeated death, Jesus Christ.

Or maybe you're at a place in your life where you realize that you have not been increasing Jesus as you should be. Guys, there is hope available to you. Repent this morning and increase Him in your life. Flee the idols, no matter the expense it brings. Whatever the Holy Spirit is leading you to do, be obedient to Him this morning. Would you stand as we pray?