

**Big BUTS of the Bible**  
***The BUT That No One Wants***  
**March 26, 2017**

**PRELUDE – Jesus**

**Jesus / Transition / Come Thou Fount**

**Announcements – Video**

**Drama – Where’s God When You Need Him?**

Good morning, everyone. Let’s pray together.

<PRAYER>

As Shannon said, today we’re continuing in our series *Big BUTS of the Bible*; looking at some of those places in the scripture (and there are many) where that one little word – “but” – makes a really big difference.

For example, last week we talked about “The BUT That Lasts Forever,” which was my way of summarizing a truth that Jesus often spoke of: how that, on the surface, it *seems like* there is only

one option when it comes to how we handle money and material possessions.

**I called it the “cycle of decline” where ...**

- We make money and we acquire stuff ...
- Only to see it wear out, break down or be taken from us ...
- Which then means we need to make more money and acquire more stuff
- Only to see *it* wear out, break down or be taken from us.

And on and on this cycle goes until, one day, *you die* ... at which point all of the money and stuff you’ve acquired gets passed on to someone else who:

- a. Didn’t do anything to earn it and likely won’t appreciate it like you did, and ...
- b. Might handle it foolishly ...

... which means that everything you spent your

whole life working to achieve and acquire will be wasted. It's a pretty bleak reality when you think it through.

However, as we learned last week, along comes Jesus who says “it *does seem* that this is your only option. “BUT,” He says, “It’s not true. There is another option.”

**“So don’t do it,” He says.**

*“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.”*

**BUT ...**

*Store up for yourselves treasures in Heaven where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.”*

*Matthew 6:19-20 (NIV)*

So, that little word “but” – taken seriously in faith;

believing that Jesus is telling us the truth – can make a huge positive difference in the life to come.

Jesus is saying that instead of spending all of our financial resources on *this* life we can use them in a way that, in a manner of speaking, makes a deposit into “the Bank of Heaven” where they will benefit us in the life to come – that Day when He returns and renews, restores and regenerates this entire world, including all who believe in Him and follow Him as Messiah.

And last week, we talked about what that looks like and how we actually go about doing that. And if you were not here, I strongly encourage you to go to our website or app and watch, listen to or read the message ... which reminds me ... I need to tell you about an exciting new addition to our media resources here at NHCC.

**<pic> We've just gone live in the past couple of days with a podcast of our weekly messages.**

So, every week, assuming you have a podcast app and you subscribe to our feed (just search for North Heartland Community Church) – every week, you can get the audio from Sunday’s message to automatically show up in your app which, obviously, would be really helpful for whenever you miss church.

In addition, if you *were* here for church, it also prompts you to listen to the message again. And over the years, I’ve heard repeatedly from some of you (and I’ve experienced it myself) that there is a lot of value in listening to a message more than once.

Anyway ... just want you to be aware that there is an additional resource beyond our app and our website.

So, last week’s “but” is the kind of “but” we all want.

- When it doesn't look like there is any reason to hope ...
- When seems like you're stuck in a cycle that's ultimately meaningless ...

*BUT* ... there's another option that's produces a result that is so much better if only we'll trust God and act on what He says.

That's the kind of "but" everyone wants. That's the kind that causes everyone to say, "Wow, thank you Lord. Sign me up for that. Show me how to get started on that."

## **All About Faith**

Today, however, we're going to take our "but" all the way to the other end of the spectrum where there typically aren't very many "wow" and "thank you" moments. Today, we're going to talk about "the BUT that *no one* wants."

Actually, it might be a bit of an overstatement to say “no one” because this particular “but” doesn’t apply to everyone, only to a very specific subset of people:

- People who believe in God.
- People who believe that God is all-powerful and good and loving and cares about them, personally.
- People who believe that God is listening to them and hears their prayers.
- People who believe that God will honor their faith and trust in Him.

Know anybody like that? I do.

- Most of the people in this room right now.
- The characters we saw in the drama.
- In fact, that describes pretty much every person who has ever received Jesus of Nazareth as their savior.

As Christians, we believe that God loves us, hears us and has the power to deliver us from whatever trouble or danger or crisis we face as we trust Him and walk in faith.

*And no wonder!* For the Gospels – the written record of Jesus’ words and deeds – are filled with stories like the one about a woman who suffered from some kind of a bleeding problem for 12 years. Matthew says that she had faith that if she could just touch Jesus’ robe, she would be healed.

So she fought her way through the crowd and reached out to Him ...

**And Jesus said to her...**

*“Daughter, be encouraged! Your faith has made you well.”*  
*Matthew 9:22 (NLT)*

And she was healed.

Then there was the time when Jesus was

approached by a blind man who believed that Jesus could heal him. He began to shout out “Son of God, have mercy on me.”

The crowd tried to shut him up, but he persisted.

**And when Jesus heard him crying out, He said ...**

*“Go, your faith has healed you.”*

*Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.*

*Mark 10:52 (NIV)*

Later in the New Testament, we read that the Apostle Paul once met a man who had been crippled from birth; a man who had never walked in his life.

**The Bible says that ...**

*Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed and called out “stand up on your feet!”*

*At that, the man jumped up and began to walk. Acts14:9-10 (NIV)*

It's hard to miss the point of these passages and others like them. They teach us that *even a little faith can cause big things to happen.*

**For as Jesus, himself, once said:**

*“If you had faith as small as a mustard seed [at that time the mustard seed was the smallest seed known to humanity] you could say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it would move. Nothing would be impossible.”*

*Matthew 17:20 (NLT)*

And that's why, as Christians, we believe that God loves us, hears us and has the power to deliver us from whatever trouble or danger or crisis we face as we trust Him and walk in faith.

BUT – and, just to be clear, this isn't “the BUT that no one wants” but it's moving us in that direction

– there are those times when our faith doesn't seem to work.

- We pray.
- We fast.
- We verbally declare our belief and our trust in God's power to move on our behalf.
- We may even rebuke the demonic powers of darkness.

But nothing changes and, in fact, sometimes it gets even worse.

**And then we start questioning:**

- *Is it a problem with us?* Maybe we're not "doing faith" right. Maybe there's some sin in our lives which has caused God to turn His back on us.
- *Or is it a problem with God?* Maybe He isn't everything we've been told that He is. Maybe He really isn't there to begin with.

Maybe the Bible and Christianity is just a fairytale designed to make us feel good and give us hope.

Know anyone who has ever experienced that kind of thing? I do.

Me!

And I suspect most of you have experienced it as well. Actually, I think pretty much every person who has ever received Jesus of Nazareth as their savior has experienced it.

## **The Big BUT**

Of course, the big question is ... why? Why does it seem that, in spite of all the things Jesus said and did, faith sometimes doesn't "work" like we think it should?

More often than not, *it's because of that big BUT that no one wants.*

It's 597 B.C. and King Nebuchadnezzar has laid siege to Jerusalem – the first stage of an invasion in which he will eventually destroy the entire city, including Temple built hundreds of years earlier by Solomon. But at this point, he is content with installing a puppet king over the Jewish people and carting off some of the best and brightest of its citizens – including members of the royal family – to Babylon.

Among those forced into exile are four young men from the royal family; four young men who are totally and completely dedicated to God: Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.<sup>i</sup> Upon their arrival, they are assigned to the king's court where they soon meet their first challenge: it is required that they eat and drink the royal food and wine, which violates the dietary laws of their faith.

However, instead of compromising (you know, “when in Babylon do as the Babylonians do”) they

suggest an experiment to the manager of the king's household. "Feed us only vegetables and water for 10 days," they propose. "Then compare our condition to the rest of the king's court and, if everyone else is in better shape than we are, we'll eat the king's food."

The manager agrees. Daniel and his friends pray and honor God in what they eat.

And 10 days later, when the manager inspects them, he notices that they are actually healthier than the others. So, they are allowed to keep observing their dietary laws.

As time goes on, these young men rise to greater and greater prominence in the land.<sup>ii</sup> Eventually, Daniel is put in charge over the entire province and his three friends are appointed as administrators under him.<sup>iii</sup> And everything is *just peachy* for well over a decade until one day when Nebuchadnezzar decides to build a huge statue made of pure gold and demands that everyone in

his kingdom fall down in worship whenever they hear the sound of the awesome worship band he's put together.

Of course, as worshippers of Yahweh – the one true God – this is another law with which these Jewish men cannot comply. But this time, there is no experiment that can be proposed. And this time disobedience comes with a price: *the penalty of death*. Nebuchadnezzar has decreed that anyone who does not fall down in worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.<sup>iv</sup>

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Now, let me push pause on this for just a minute, especially for those here today who might think that the Bible is just a bunch of fables because, to our modern ears, this story *really does sound a lot like a fable*.

“I mean, what ruler would do something crazy like this – demand that his image be worshiped by

everyone? Surely, this is just a made-up story that is designed for one purpose: to make people of faith (in this case, the Jews) look good and heathens (like Nebuchadnezzar) look bad.”

But I don't think so ... because this is exactly what the Romans did – and you can read about it in any secular history book.

Just like Nebuchadnezzar, they would invade other countries and then deport its leading citizens throughout the Roman Empire, which resulted in a huge melting pot of differing cultures and beliefs.

Now, the Romans didn't really care if those leading citizens and their subjugated countries continued to believe in their gods and practice in their religion ... as long as they recognized Caesar as Lord; as long as obedience to and, in some cases, actual worship of the emperor was supreme.

And the penalty for disobedience? Death, but not

by the fiery furnace. Instead, the Romans were masters of the cruelest form of capital punishment ever devised: *crucifixion*.

And, for every culture enveloped into the Roman Empire *except for one - the Jews* - obedience was no problem because the religions of all of those cultures were polytheistic (meaning they believed in and worshipped multiple gods). So, they simply added the emperor to their stable of divinities and paid homage as he required.

But as I said, the Jews did not which is why there was constant tension between them and the Romans and also why Jesus of Nazareth - and some of his followers - eventually ended up nailed to a cross.

Point being, even though the idea of a Babylonian ruler setting up a huge golden image to be worshipped, and a super-hot flesh-melting furnace for objectors might sound like a fable to us, it is not outside the pattern of what we know

of ancient history in that part of the world.

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So, with that said ... now back to our story.

King Nebuchadnezzar has set up his statue and demanded that everyone fall down in worship when the band plays. And, as the story goes, everyone does – all of the people, whatever their race or nation or language – except for three men: *Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego*. (Apparently, Daniel is away on business elsewhere in the kingdom and is unaware of what's going on.

And when word gets back to Nebuchadnezzar, he is hot, because these three men aren't just anybody. Remember, they are leaders over the province. And if he tolerates their rebellion in this issue, other people-groups who are captive throughout Babylon will start thinking about rebelling, too. And he'll have a full-scale insurrection on his hands ... which means he

really has no choice in the matter.

So, he calls the men into his throne room and he says, in essence, “guys, maybe you didn’t understand the rule so let me give it to you one more time just to be fair. Whenever you hear the band play – and you are hearing the band, right? I just want to make sure ... whenever you hear the music, *you need to bow down.*”

“And, honestly, just between us, I really don’t care if you’re all that sincere about it. You just have to hit your knees and everything will be good.”

**“Otherwise – and let me be very clear about this,” he continues ...**

*“You will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?”* Daniel 3:15 (NIV)

“I know you guys are super-spiritual and everything but, I’m telling you, it’s time to get

serious here.”

**The Bible tells us that the three men responded:**

*“King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter.”* Daniel 3:16  
(NIV)

In other words, “you need to understand, O King, what we’ve chosen to do and not do isn’t about you and your hand because you are not the ultimate authority in this world. In fact, we’re really not all that concerned about your hand. There’s *another* hand – a greater Hand – that we’re concerned with; the hand of God.”

“So, we’re going to do what *He* says. We’re going to honor His name and His laws first and foremost.”

**“And we know – we have that faith – that ...”**

*“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 3:17 (NIV)*

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Now, let's push pause once more because, at this point, there's another big problem with this story. (And it's not that it seems like a fable. Hopefully, we've put that idea to rest).

Instead, the problem is that *most of us already know how it ends*. We know that God *does* deliver them from the furnace unharmed. We know that God *does* deliver them from Nebuchadnezzar's hand and he repents.

So, it's very easy for us at this point to rush past the tension that these three men are facing in this moment. And it's very easy to conclude from the outcome that, “well, if your faith is strong enough, then this is how things work out. You just trust that God is able to deliver you without

doubting and then, bam, He will!”

“And if that’s *not* your experience then, again, *something must be wrong with you and your faith*. You clearly don’t have the same quality of faith as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. That’s your problem.”

So, before we rush to the ending ... and before we come to any conclusion about the power of “faith” ... let’s remember that these guys have not received any special “word from God” concerning what was going to happen. *They do not know*, as we do, how their story is going to turn out.

... which means that, in the moments leading up to their audience with the king, knowing that they could not bow down to his statue, they are wrestling with the likelihood that they are literally going to die for their commitment to their God.

In fact, it’s possible that as they are being rounded

up and brought before the king, their wives and children are present at their arrest, which puts them into the position of giving final instructions; trying to impart words of love and wisdom and encouragement to their families who they might never see again. Can you imagine the emotion of that?

I think it's *hard* to imagine that because, as Christians who live in the highly-civilized Western world where freedom of religion is (for the most part) still valued, we don't realize that this is the same tension that so many of our brothers and sisters in Christ in other parts of the world face every day.

For example, Iraqi Christians in the city of Mosul *know* that if they are ever confronted by ISIS and refuse to confess that "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet" they could literally die for that. And they know that's because it's happened countless times.

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So, before we get to the happy ending that we all know is coming, let's remember that *Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego* don't know how it's going turn out. And there is *real* concern and *real* emotion in them, just like we see wherever ISIS enforces its creed on people ...

... because it's that concern and emotion that is about to lead them to put into words the "but" that no one wants. So here we go.

**"Your Majesty," they've said ...**

*"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 hand."*

*Daniel 3:17 (NIV)*

By the way, notice that, in their minds, there is a difference between being delivered from *the furnace* and being delivered from *Nebuchadnezzar's hand*.

And notice that the only claim they're making here is that God will rescue them from his hand. Either way, whether God saves them from the furnace or they walk through the flames into His eternal presence, they will be delivered from the hand of the king. He will no longer be able touch them; his control over their lives will be ended. v

Concerning the furnace what they say is “we know that God is able to deliver us from it ...”

**“BUT,” they continue ...**

*“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.”*

*Daniel 3:18 (NIV)*

And that's the big “but” that no one wants: the knowledge that God *could* deliver us from the furnace – from trouble or danger or crisis; the knowledge ...

- That God *could* heal our dog or our cancer or our spouses' MS.
- That God *could* lead us to a better job ... or any job.
- And God *could* protect our children from harm ...

BUT ... for reasons unknown to us, He *chooses* not to.

Let me say that again.

**The big “but” that no one wants is the knowledge that God *could* deliver BUT sometimes chooses *not* to – and we never really know why.**

For some reason, there are times when, in His sovereign wisdom, God knows that it *is better to not* save us from the furnace. And we don't know why that is, which is why this is the BUT that no one wants.

## Getting Personal

However, what we *do* know – and this is the reason I really wanted to do this message and talk about this great story, because some of us are confused and demoralized by this; what we *do* know is that ...

- Just because God chooses *not* to deliver us
- Just because God chooses *not* to answer our prayers in the way we asked
- Just because God chooses *not* to act in the way we hoped

That does not necessarily imply anything about the quality of our faith.

In fact (and this brings me to the first of a few personal applications I want to make related to this particular big BUT), the quality of your faith is not measured by whether God intervenes and delivers you.

**1. Instead, the quality of your faith is measured by whether you do what God wants knowing that He might not intervene on your behalf. <repeat>**

That's the point of this story we've been looking at. These three young men had great faith not because they were sure God would save them from the furnace, but because they *weren't* sure and they remained committed to Him anyway.

And it makes me sad and, quite frankly, a little bit angry that we've been told by some preachers that it's the other way around; that if you get your miracle, it's because "you had such great faith" when in truth, if you *don't* get your miracle and you continue to obey God anyway *you had even greater faith.*

"Even if He does not <fill in the blank – whatever it is>," you said, "this is what I will (or will not) do." That's a huge win in the faith department. That's maturity. That's the kind of faith that

pleases God.

**The great Christian author, Oswald Chambers, has written that ...**

“Faith for my *deliverance* is not the same thing as faith in *God*. Faith means, whether I am visibly delivered or not, I will stick to my belief that God is love.” (I will not stop believing that He loves me!)

... which leads to the second personal application I want to share, which is that ...

**2. God’s love for you is not accurately measured based on His circumstantial interventions (or lack thereof).**

And that’s really hard because the natural tendency is to think “if I’m praying and asking God to intervene in my life – in these specific circumstances in these specific ways – and He never does, why should I believe that He loves me?”

Great question. But I have a better one.

**Do you believe that God loves you more than Iraqi or Syrian Christians because you have an easier life than they do? (And you do!)**

Now, I'll admit that your circumstances might not be all that easy compared to others in this room, but you're not under the daily threat of persecution and death for your faith like they are. So, does that mean that God loves *you* more *than* them?

Of course not. That's why you cannot judge God's love for *you* based on His interventions in your circumstances any more than you can judge His love for *them* based on their circumstances – both of which are exceedingly temporary in the light of eternity!

That's why the apostles didn't go around preaching "now, whenever God does a miracle for

you; whenever God answers your prayers, that's how you know He loves you. That's how you know you can trust Him." That *wasn't* the good news they preached.

Instead, what they preached was ...

*God shows His great love in this, that while we were yet sinners, Christ, died for us.*

What they preached was ...

*He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?  
Romans 8:31-32 (NIV)*

What they preached was ...

*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than*

conquerors through *him* who loved us. Romans 8:35, 38 (NIV)

What they preached was ...

*I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ... neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in [not “in our feelings”; not “in our good and pleasant circumstances” but] in Christ Jesus our Lord.  
Romans 8:38-39 (NIV)*

If God never answers a prayer in your life again ...  
if God never answers a prayer in my life again in the way that I hope or expect, or in the timing I think it ought to be, or you think it ought to be – that is no reason to think we are unloved because God’s love is ultimately not about our personal life experience – it’s about Christ and the cross. It’s about the fact that Jesus gave his life for our sin. And on the third day, God raised him up.

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Ok, one more thing - one more personal application from this big BUT ... and this might be the most important of all.<sup>vi</sup>

In spite of their faith, in spite of their commitment to worship only Yahweh, God doesn't keep Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego out of the furnace. There's no miracle that stops the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. He doesn't fall over dead. There is no coup that overthrows him just in time.

Instead, the Bible tells us that as they walk towards it, they begin to feel the heat. Further along, they watch the men who are leading them to their deaths, collapse and die themselves from its intensity.

And then they're in the fire, waiting for the searing pain, for the numbness, for the smoke

inhalation that will suffocate their lungs but, oddly, nothing happens. They don't feel any different, and it begins to dawn on them they're not even warm--no burns, no smoke, and their restraints have disappeared.

Obviously, there's a miracle taking place. But that's not the best part. The best part is what happens to turn this from a miracle to a divine encounter.

### **The Bible says that ...**

*Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "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.” Daniel 3:24-25 (NIV)*

In the words of Pastor John Ortberg, there is a “fourth member of the furnace club.” And he is unharmed and apparently is the one who is protecting the other three.

Who was this fourth man who appeared from nowhere and cheated death and, “looks in appearance like a son of the gods”? The text doesn’t say, but I think it was Jesus.

From the way the story reads, apparently the four of them spent a little time together in the furnace. I wonder what Jesus said to them.

- I wonder if He told them how proud the Father was of their loyalty, devotion, and love.
- I wonder if he told them that because of this one act of faithfulness their names would be

remembered for thousands of years through the history of the earth.

- I wonder if he told them that for centuries all over the world men and women who face suffering, or persecution, or trial or even death, would be strengthened by hearing their story.

The furnace, which looked like the end of their lives, actually turns out to be the greatest thing they had ever experienced. It's the "can't miss" event of their whole lives because it turns out to be the place where they meet God.

God decided to deliver Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego *in* the furnace, not *from* it. That's the point of the story. And sometimes God does the same with you and me.

**3. Sometimes He delivers us *in* the furnace instead of *from* the furnace.**

... because, as Ortberg puts it, “Jesus is a furnace kind of guy.”

When Nebuchadnezzar realizes what’s happened, he orders the men to come back out of the furnace. And when they do everyone sees that the fire has not harmed their bodies, nor is a hair on their heads singed, nor is there a smell of smoke on them.

Then the king promotes Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon. He doesn’t just restore them, he lifts them up to new positions, and gives them more opportunities to influence, to contribute.

Going into the furnace, which looked like the last thing they wanted to do, turned out to be the greatest event of their lives. Ironically, the furnace that looked like death turned out to be the safest place of all. Why? Because God was there.

Sometimes, God delivers us *from* the furnace, and sometimes God delivers us *in* the furnace.

And that's the big BUT no one wants but everyone needs.

*“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 hand.”*

*But ... even if he does not...”*  
*Daniel 3:17-18 (NIV)*

Let's pray.

<prayer>

1. The quality of your faith is measured by whether you do what God wants knowing that He might not intervene on your behalf.
2. Do not judge God's love for you based on His circumstantial interventions.
3. Sometimes He delivers us *in* the furnace

instead of *from* the furnace.

## **Feature – We Won’t Be Shaken**

### **CLOSING COMMENTS**

1. Offering at Door

**2. Experience Project update**

3. Next week – “The BUT You Need to Lose”

### Endnotes

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i Daniel 1:6-7

ii Daniel 1:18-20

iii Daniel 2:48-49

iv Daniel 3:1-6

v Jan Thomas, BIG BUTS of the Bible, pg 35

vi This section is from John Ortberg’s wonderful message, *The Fourth Man in the Furnace* found here: <https://soundfaith.com/sermons/13957-fourth-man-in-the-furnace>