

First Baptist Church Merritt Island
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The Kingdom To End All Kingdoms
Daniel 3:19-30

Context from Daniel 3

600 years before the birth of Jesus, the most powerful empire in the world was the Babylonian Empire. Their king was named Nebuchadnezzar. The book of Daniel begins at the point when Nebuchadnezzar invaded the city of Jerusalem and took a group of Jews captive. Four young men were part of that group: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. They were taken from Jerusalem to Babylon and placed in a 3-year program that was designed to immerse them in Babylonian culture and fast-track them into positions of authority inside the Babylonian government. That was a part of the strategy that Nebuchadnezzar used to rule his empire. He knew that if he could influence the youth of a conquered nation into adopting the culture of Babylon, he could eventually rule that nation without force because that generation would basically consider themselves to be a part of Babylon.

One of the first ways Nebuchadnezzar tried to influence these young men was to change their names. Daniel was called Belteshazzar. Hananiah was called Shadrach. Mishael was called Meshach. And, Azariah was called Abednego. And, what we have seen so far is that, while they weren't rebellious or obnoxious to Babylonian leaders, they refused to abandon their identity as God's people.

And, last week, we saw one of the most poignant examples of that in the entire book. Nebuchadnezzar made a 90-foot-tall golden statue. He gathered the dignitaries and officials around it and demanded that they bow down in worship. And, everyone did it...except Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They refused to be unfaithful to God...even though the punishment was death.

And that's where we pick up their story today. They are standing in front of the most powerful man in the world, facing death because of their choice to remain faithful to the Lord.

But, before we read our text, I want to just acknowledge two questions that I've been getting from some of you that I'd like to quickly answer...

1. Why is Daniel always referred to by his Hebrew name and his friends seem to go by their Babylonian names?
2. Why isn't Daniel included in the group of people who refused to bow before Nebuchadnezzar's statue?

Let me answer those really quickly: I don't know. Here are a couple of possible answers.

In chapter 2, Daniel was elevated to a higher position than his friends. He's basically the second in command under the king. So, it's possible that Daniel had to run the government while all the other officials were gathered in the plain of Dura...kind of like the designated survivor stays at the White House while all the other leaders gather in the Capital Building for the State of the Union. So, we

shouldn't conclude that Daniel bowed before the statue because it's possible that he wasn't even there.

And one of the reasons Daniel isn't referred to by his Babylonian name is because in a couple chapters (5:31) the Medo-Persian Empire takes over Babylon. They wouldn't have used Daniel's Babylonian name. Even more, the entire second half of the book is about visions that God gave directly to Daniel...and God doesn't call him by his Babylonian name. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego really only show up in this scene where the Babylonians are talking directly about them. In order to keep us from being confused, it's likely that Daniel just uses their Babylonian names so that he isn't having to switch back and forth.

Daniel 3:19-27

19 Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury, and the expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. 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!" 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.

There's a reason this story is one of the all-time greats. It teaches us several really important truths. Last week, we saw that you can seemingly make all the right choices and life can seemingly still go wrong.

These young men are not only persecuted in spite of being faithful to God, but they are persecuted precisely because they are faithful to God. The Bible is clear that suffering is a part of life on earth, especially for followers of Jesus. We are living in a world that is headed the wrong way. There's a cultural current that is flowing away from God and His design for how life works best. So, we should never be surprised when pain and suffering are part of our lives...it's a direct result of living in a sinful, fallen world that is opposed to God's good design for our lives.

But our text isn't just reminding us that we will all experience suffering. This passage reminds us of what God is doing in our suffering. He isn't simply allowing it. He is using it. As a matter of fact, one of the most startling things about this passage is that God doesn't spare Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fire, He uses it to bless them. They are better because of the fire, not in spite of it.

And that's our big idea for this morning: God uses the fiery trials of life to bless those who trust Him.

Friend, I don't know all the trials of your life. I don't know the pain you are experiencing today, and I don't want to minimize the reality of your suffering. I know there are people in this place who are dying. I know there are people in this place who have loved ones who are dying, and it is hurting you so much that you wish it were you in their place. I know there are people facing the loss of their jobs, their reputations, their homes, their marriages...their children...and I pray you don't hear my words as trite or trivial...Pain is painful. Suffering is the result of a sinful world. And God loves sinners enough to send His Son, Jesus, to die as a sacrifice for our sins so that, one day, we could inherit eternal life in His sinless, joyful presence...

But hear the word of the Lord: while you are walking through the fiery trials of this life, God is at work. He is stronger than the fire and could certainly spare you from having to walk through it...but, He has allowed it for a reason. He wants to bless you. He wants to make you better because of the fire, not in spite of it.

So, let me show you three things God is doing in the fire that I pray will encourage your faith and bring you hope today.

1. God Uses the Fire for Freedom

There's something that is clearly being pointed out in our text. I hope you noticed it.

- In verse 20, it says that Nebuchadnezzar ordered ***"the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace."***
- Verse 21 says ***"Then these men were bound."***
- Verse 23 says, ***"And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace."***
- Verse 24, Nebuchadnezzar looks into the fire and asks, ***"Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?"***

You think God is drawing our attention to something? Maybe that these men were bound? Well, notice what happens next...

Verse 25, Nebuchadnezzar says, ***"I see four men unbound."***

Verse 27 says, ***"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."***

Do you see it? The only thing the fire touched was the thing that had them bound. They didn't even smell like smoke. Their hair wasn't singed. Their clothes were fine. The only thing the fire touched was the thing that had them bound.

The trials of life, even the ones designed by our enemy to destroy us, are used by God to liberate us from the strongholds of the enemy in our life...the things that have us bound to the things of this world and the patterns of our own sin.

Have you ever noticed how little the things of this world matter to you when you are walking through a fiery trial? There's not much of a difference between an old Ford and a new Ferrari when the doctor tells you that you have cancer...because the trial redefines what really matters in this life.

Have you ever noticed how hard it is to find time to pray when life is smooth sailing?

Ten years ago, this past Wednesday, my little brother and his family were visiting from Ohio. We were going to spend the day at the beach, and I noticed that my old cooler was a wreck. So, I went to the store and found an amazing deal on a red Igloo cooler. It was on sale for \$29. I was pumped. I got a new beach cooler for \$29. And it even included one of those big water jugs. It was awesome. I'll never forget the day I got a new cooler.

I came home and showed off my new cooler. I bragged about the amazing deal. We went to the beach and had the best surfing waves I can remember. Life was good. We all came out of the water for a bit to get some snacks and drinks from my new cooler...and that's when we got the call. My older brother had been found at a stop light in complete cardiac arrest. He was unresponsive and it didn't look like he was going to make it.

We all immediately started praying. We gathered all our stuff and within an hour or so, my family and my younger brother's family were on the road to Ohio. I spent the entire drive praying for my brother. As many of you know, he was miraculously revived and is doing well.

But I'll never forget that day and that cooler...my heart was so thrilled with something so trivial and then, immediately, it didn't matter at all.

Our hearts are naturally tied to the stuff of this world and the sin of our lives. And God uses the fiery trials to wake us up to what matters most. He is purifying our character to make us more and more like Jesus.

As a matter of fact, that's the context for the verse Christians most often quote when they talk about the trials of this life.

Romans 8:28–29 (ESV)

28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

If you are trusting in Jesus, God has destined you to become just like Jesus. And Jesus doesn't value coolers and cars and careers more than He values character. So, God is graciously using the trials of this life for the good of making you more and more like His own Son. And He will not stop until you are just like Jesus.

So, what are you walking through today? What challenge or trial are you facing? How differently would you feel about it if you believed that it was being used by God to make you just like Jesus? It is.

2. God Uses the Fire for Fellowship

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."

This is an Old Testament sighting of Jesus. Since Jesus is God, He has existed forever. When Jesus was born, it wasn't His beginning. It was merely the point in time when God became a man. But, Jesus has been alive forever. And there are times in the Old Testament when Jesus shows up. It's called a Christophany. That's what is going on here.

In the middle of the fire, Jesus showed up. He showed up in a way that was powerful and miraculous...not to quench the fire but to fellowship with His people in the middle of it.

And, there's something here that makes me smile. Look at verse 26:

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!" Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire.

What would you do if you were thrown in a huge furnace and realized that you had been freed? I think I might immediately turn around and run out. But, that's not what Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego do. They stay in and walk around for a while. As a matter of fact, they had to be thrown into the furnace, but they had to be ordered out! They would rather walk in the fire with Jesus than rest at the throne of a king.

There's a certain kind of fellowship that we have with Jesus in the midst of suffering. Philippians 3:10 calls it the "fellowship of His suffering." (the *koinonia*/sharing of his suffering)

There is a peculiar presence of Jesus when we go through the trials of life. It's a fellowship that we don't quite get during the smooth sailing. We never know just how much peace Jesus is able to bring until we are surrounded by a stormy sea.

Many of you have known this kind of fellowship. I've talked with you about it. Some of you have gone through illness or grief and, as hard as it has been, you've said something like "I've never felt Jesus more close to me." Or, "I don't know how it's going to turn out, but God has given me such peace."

The fire is a place of fellowship. And let me just encourage some of you in a specific way. Some of you have been hesitant to do hard things...you've been hesitant to be obedient to God about something...maybe a relationship or your job or your finances. You've not wanted to face the hardness of obedience.

Let me encourage you...don't avoid the fire...don't run from the difficulty...you aren't actually running from the possibility of pain, you are running from the fellowship of Jesus. Some of us are missing out on the power of Christ's presence precisely because we are afraid of the fire.

What might change about the choices you have to make today if you truly believed that Jesus was going to meet you in the mess or fellowship with you in the fire?

3. God Uses the Fire for His Fame

Daniel 3:28-29

28 Nebuchadnezzar answered and said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, 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."

And we can debate about whether or not Nebuchadnezzar's confession was a true conversion. I don't have the answer to that. But I do know that God used this to spread His glory and fame among the Babylonian Empire. God took the trial of His people and used it for His glory. And God aims to do the same thing in your pain and mine. There is no better testimony to the power of God than when this world sees that He is satisfying and good in the lives of people who are suffering.

When God gives us peace and sustains us in the midst of our suffering, He proves that He alone is able to do something that nothing else in this world can possibly do. He alone is satisfying to our souls. He alone is stronger than suffering. He alone is a source of unshakeable hope. And our lives become a front-row seat for this world to watch God work...our fiery trials spread God's fame in our world.

Steve Saint was a child when his missionary father, Nate Saint, was killed along with 4 other missionaries in the jungles of South America in 1956. Life magazine ran their story, and it became known around the world. Years later, Steve was visiting a predominantly Muslim part of Africa. At one point, he was traveling through a particularly dangerous place. It caused him to think about his father's death and for some time, he was tempted to think his father's death was just a random act of violence and not necessarily a part of God's greater plan.

- As he was thinking through those thoughts, he came upon a man who had converted to Christianity from Islam. In the course of their conversation, Steve found out that this man had endured tremendous suffering. His family had even tried to kill him.

- So, Steve asked what it was that helped him continue following Jesus when it had brought him so much suffering...where did his courage come from? The man told Steve that the missionary who had led him to Christ had given him books about other Christians who had suffered for their faith...
- He said his favorite book was about 5 young men who risked their lives to take the good news of Jesus to the Indians of South America...they were so satisfied in Jesus that they were willing to die for the sake of Jesus.
- Steve was stunned..."one of those men was my father." The Muslim convert made sure Steve knew that it was the story of God's work in his father that God had used to help him hold on to his faith in Jesus.

What if you truly believed that your suffering wasn't primarily about you? What if God was going to use His work in your pain to bring your friends or your neighbors or your co-workers or your children to Jesus?

Would you be willing to walk through the fires of this life if it would result in someone you loved being spared from the fires of hell?

Your pain isn't pointless. Your suffering isn't random. The fiery trials of this life are being used by our glorious God...He brings freedom and fellowship and His fame through the fire.

And the greatest example of that isn't Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego...or you and me...it's Jesus.

No one has endured the painful suffering of Christ. The only perfect man who has ever lived was despised and rejected suffered the wrath of God for our sin at the cross...His pain wasn't pointless. His suffering wasn't random. His death wasn't final...His pain was used by God the Father to free us...to fellowship with us...to bring fame to His name.

So, in the midst of the fire, look to Jesus...turn to Jesus...trust in Jesus today.