

Faithful Living in a Faithless World: *Faith When the Heat Is On*

Daniel 3

I want you to look back-to-back at two theological statements King Nebuchadnezzar, the powerful but pagan king of Babylon, made about gods in Daniel 3 to set the stage for today's message:

- “What god will be able to rescue you from my hand (3:15)?”
- “There is no other god who can save in the way Israel's God saves (3:29).”

I imagine that most of us at LAC will respond to these two statements in the same way. To the first, we'll say, “We are in a personal faith-relationship with the omnipotent God who can save from any kind of power in this world.” To the second, we'll say, “There truly is no God who can save like the one true God, the Father of our Lord Jesus.” Will anyone say “amen” to that?

Most of us have come to worship today because we have experienced a genuine relationship to the one living God through faith in Jesus. Indeed, we believe what Jesus said, i.e., that “*no one comes to the Father except through me* (Jn 14:6).” These are very exclusive claims, aren't they? We claim both 1) that there is no other God and 2) that there is no way to know him except through Jesus. Those kinds of claims put us at odds with the pluralistic world into which God has placed us. In fact, I believe that exclusive claims like the ones we make always create tension both for those who make them as well as for those we live alongside. Those whose lives intersect ours are often offended by our contention that we have discovered the truth of who God is - and that we deeply believe they need to know him too!

The same was true for three godly men who had been carted off as teenagers from their home in Judah and taken to Babylon, a very diverse and pluralistic city. I think they have a lot to teach us in Daniel 3 about how to live as those committed to the exclusive claims of the gospel while living in a pluralistic society.

Setting

The episode today happens after Nebuchadnezzar had a troubling dream (Dan 2). Only Daniel had proven able both to tell him what his dream was and

what it meant. The king had marveled at the mystery-revealing-God of the Jews (2:47). Nebuchadnezzar's dream had been of an image of a huge statue with a head of gold but with a body made of silver - and then bronze - and then lead - all resting on feet of clay. In his dream, he had seen that a stone struck those fragile feet and the whole statue tumbled down!

Our text today, Daniel 3, flows directly from that dream scene. It seems that, for Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel's revelation that his regime was the head of gold that would someday fall became a personal challenge to him. Nebuchadnezzar decided he would not simply wait for this to happen to his empire. No, he thought he could control things and undo the prophecy. Early on in chapter 3, we find the king wanted to unify his kingdom, i.e., he thought he needed a kingdom that is completely made of gold - without all those fragmented parts. And, he would not allow any clay in those feet. Nebuchadnezzar seemed to think that he could build a kingdom strong enough to resist the impact of the stone.

I believe the king erected this statue as a practical way to unite the people who were coming into his kingdom from all over the world. In ch. 1, we saw that he tried to make everyone think like a Babylonian. In ch. 3, he seems to have concluded that religion could be one way to bring his very diverse people together. I think his intuition was right. I do believe that our commitment to one God and his Gospel here at LAC is what will hold together a church like ours. But, Nebuchadnezzar chose to do this with a god who was not God.

So, he built a 9-story tall statue (see a similar sized building in Pasadena)



and located it out on a plain just outside the city. By order of the king, everyone in the kingdom regardless of ethnicity or national origin was to bow down before this statue. Of course, this brought up a crisis of decision for those who believed that there is only one God before whom they should bow - particularly for three young Jewish men who had risen high in the Babylonian government. They made the claim that "there is no god other than Jehovah God" even as they lived in a pluralistic society in which people believed in many gods.

As we look at Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego navigate this tension of living their faith in their society, we witness the two main problems we encounter anytime we seek to live for one God within a pluralistic society: 1) the problem of tolerance (3:1-18) and 2) the problem of pain (3:19-30).

The Problem of Intolerance: How do we live in a pluralistic world with our exclusive beliefs (3:1-18)? “*We will not, O king, serve your gods or worship the golden image you have set up.*”

Daniel and his Jewish friends were not the only ones who had been transported to Babylon. There were bright and gifted young men from all the nations Nebuchadnezzar had conquered who had been brought to Babylon for indoctrination. These young men brought their gods with them - and, those new gods from the many nations joined the list of many gods already worshipped in Babylon.

When Nebuchadnezzar told everyone to bow down to this statue, he wasn't telling them they could not worship their other gods. The statue was meant to be an all-embracing representation of all the gods that the many different people groups living in Babylon represented. Given the king's worldview, he was being religiously tolerant. All his subjects could worship their god as long as they also submitted to the spirit of Babylon that this statue represented. But, soon this kind of tolerance of all religions became violently intolerant.

Here's how this played out in the story: The king called for a huge celebration, as spectacular as anything you might see today in military demonstrations that dictators put on (like Kim Jong-Un in N.



Korea).

Daniel emphasizes the spectacle of it by telling us twice all the names of the dignitaries in attendance -- and three times all the instrument playing in the orchestra! You have to envision people marching, music playing, crowds shouting and dancing as they go from the city to the plain to celebrate being

Babylonians! The king intended this to be the kind of celebration that declared, “We’ re all Babylonians, the greatest nation in the world!”

Since this statue was to represent all gods of this very diverse and pluralistic nation, not to bow down would be tantamount to refusing to pledge of allegiance to the state. How Did Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego resist this? What would you do? They could easily have justified compromising. I can imagine them thinking, “We’ ve got to keep our government jobs to help all the Jewish people now under the rule of Babylon.” Or, “we can bow down with our knees but not in our hearts. After all, the king isn’ t asking us to deny our own God.?”

But, of course, God’ s Word was unmistakable in what it said about that kind of compromise. God’ s command was embedded in their core document, i. e., in the 10 Commandments: *You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I am the Lord your God*… (Exo 20:4–5a).

And, they could not hide. The young men had been promoted to positions of prominence by the king. A group of astrologers in Babylon had become jealous of the favor that they had with the king. Those men hated the Jews (3:8), those people who felt they alone knew the truth about God. So, they concocted a successful plot that led to Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego being sentenced to execution in a fiery furnace.

What did they do? 1) They obeyed God, and 2) they dealt respectfully with the people in their world.

#1: They Obeyed God - The king called them in and gave them a chance to change their minds about bowing to the statue. He made it clear that they had no option in this decision. He was the one in control (he thought). So, his words were unequivocal: *“If you do not worship the image, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand (3:15)?”*

What would you have done? Let me tell you that you will have times in your life when you will have to make a similar decision - either to confess Jesus as your Lord or to deny him. It might be among your friends or in your school or at work. The words of these young men were as clear as were the king’ s: *“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. But 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 (3:17-18)."

#2: They Dealt Respectfully with the People in Their World -- It's pretty clear that Nebuchadnezzar's view of these young men was quite positive up to this point. But, with their declaration that their God was the only God they would worship, he became furious -- so much so that he had his executioners heat up the furnace sevenfold. But, other than making it known that the king was not God, notice that they did not speak against the king or engage in violent protest. They simply gave witness to God - and obeyed him rather than the king.

And, as you know, God rescued them. After they were rescued from the furnace and given big promotions (3:30), they continued to work with the other "wise men" who had accused them and to serve the king who had thrown them into a furnace. They were productive and loyal citizens where they were planted.

How do we do this? How do we identify as followers of Jesus, the only name by which people can be saved, while dealing with those who might mock us or treat us unjustly for doing so? I think the key is to develop a blend of the courage necessary to be faithful to God in this world and the profound humility necessary to deal kindly and graciously with those opposing us.

Their challenge was - and ours is - how to be able to live fully in keeping with our convictions while still respecting others. As I seek personally to learn how to do this, I find Jesus shows us the way. When we see Jesus on the cross, we see one who knew and proclaimed that no one is able to come to God except through him while, at the same time, bleeding, serving, dying and offering forgiveness, even to those who reject him.

The Problem of Pain: How do we deal with the unjust suffering that accompanies our faith (3:19-30)? *"The king ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual..."*

In Daniel 3, the young men experience what we see as unjust suffering. This should not surprise us. We know that our calling is to be faithful to our God. And, we know that faithfulness has always led to

opposition as the kingdom of God clashes with the kingdoms of this world.

Here is the question: Why would a God who is all-loving and all-powerful allow godly people like Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego to face a fiery furnace? You might say, "But they were rescued from it - and, as **3:27** says, "*The fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.*" But, notice please that they knew quite well that this is not always what God does. That's what led them to say in **3:18**, "*Even if God does not rescue us, we want you to know we will not serve other gods.*" They had seen their nation plundered by the Babylonian armies and, I'm sure, had witnessed friends being killed as Jerusalem was besieged.

So, what does this passage say about faith in a fiery furnace? Let me tell you that Daniel 3 is one of the most beloved Bible-passages among those in the persecuted church around our world. And, it's not because Daniel 3 answers all the intellectual issues we have about unjust suffering. But, it does address the issues of our hearts.

What do we believe that sustains us when the heat is on? 1) perspective, 2) providence and 3) presence.

- **Perspective: We believe that death is not the end.**

Never be surprised when you go through fiery trials. But, please remember that, as a follower of the resurrected Jesus, even the final trial of death can do you no lasting harm. You know this in ways that these three Jewish men, who lived before Jesus' s death and resurrection, could not have known. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "*Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.*"

Are you in Christ? When you are, this truth provides a hope-filled perspective for every kind of loss or pain or death in our world. As the Apostle Peter wrote, "*Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice...* (1 Pet 4:12)."

- **Providence: We believe that God is at work in this world.**

One way that I've seen a more secular worldview creeping into church communities like ours is through the mindset that assumes that everything happens - and has to happen -- according to fixed natural causes. And, of course, they usually do. But, when we believe in the kind of God you and I believe in, we live our lives aware of the fact that this is our Father's world and that all that happens in our nation, our church and our individual lives are in his hands. We use this word "providence" to speak of the reality that God, with wisdom and love, cares for and directs all things in the universe. Do you believe that?

Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego were aware of the fact that they had no might to save themselves from this powerful king. But, they accepted the king's fiery sentence without despair because they also believed that the battle was not theirs but the Lord's (2 Chron 20:15). They were resolute that, if God was calling them to die giving witness to him, then they would trust that plan. There are no coincidences in the kingdom of God.

- **Presence: We believe that God is with us wherever we go.**

The king's guards threw three men into the furnace - but, what a shock -- the king saw four! One of them looked like, he said, "a son of the gods." Who was this fourth guest in the fiery furnace? It was clearly the very presence of God, perhaps even a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ.

As your pastor, I never want to deceive you by telling you that you will not have to endure times and situations when you too feel the heat in this world. Following Jesus is not always easy. Furnaces come and go in this imperfect world. The question is, "Who goes into the furnace with you?"

The God of the Bible is the one you need. And, what he does is that he enters into our lives in good times - and even more definitively in hard times. God entered this world through his Son, who experienced all the trials and temptations that we do - yet without sin. That is to say: God participates in this world with his people. Never forget this: God didn't rescue the men in Daniel 3 by pulling them out of the fire but by going in with them! They stayed there in the fire - but not alone.

And the same God is with you! So, you will sometimes be accused of being intolerant because you have learned that "*there is no god who can save like our God*" (1:29), as even Nebuchadnezzar had to confess. As you give witness to that exclusive truth, please be as gracious as these men were.

And, I am quite sure you will sometimes have to go through unjust suffering in this world. I ask again: When you do, who goes with you? I'll tell you this: God has a way of showing up when the heat is on: in fiery furnaces, ER wards, neo-natal units, university dorms, prison cells and funeral parlors.

There are no God-forsaken places in God's universe. So, I leave you with these words God gave the prophet Isaiah, words written 200 years before the events in Daniel 3:

This is what the Lord says...

"When you pass through the waters,

I will be with you...

When you walk through the fire,

you will not be burned;

the flames will not set you ablaze (Isaiah 43:1-2).