

Daniel: The Fiery Furnace

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Prayer of Illumination

God, source of all light,
by your Word give light to our lives. Amen.

Background

- Vegetarianism. Fiery furnaces. Hungry lions.
- A mysterious handwriting a secret code on the palace wall.
- Kings turned into wild beasts.
- Strange dreams, visions, epic battles, and the end of days—

Daniel has it all. It's one of my favorite books of the Bible.

Daniel is a timely book—showing us what faith with backbone looks like. We're given unforgettable stories of costly and courageous discipleship in the face of intimidation by the State or other powers that be.

King Nebuchadnezzar is front and center our morning's story. He conquered Jerusalem and ransacked the temple in 586 BC.

Daniel and his friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are exiled Jews who serve as sages and servants in the Babylonian courts. They've received the best Olive League education—a full ride on Babylon's ticket.

At the end of the day, Daniel reminds us that God always keeps faith. God is sovereign over kings, history, and us. God gives wisdom, and often times protection, to those who honor him.

Scripture: Daniel 3:13-30 (NRSV)

Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought in; so they brought those men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods and you do not worship the golden statue that I have set up?

Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble to fall down and worship the statue that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire, and who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands?"

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up." Then Nebuchadnezzar was so filled with rage against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that his face was distorted.

He ordered the furnace heated up seven times more than was customary, and ordered some of the strongest guards in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and to throw them into the furnace of blazing fire. So the men were bound, still wearing their tunics, their trousers, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the furnace of blazing fire.

Because the king's command was urgent and the furnace was so overheated, the raging flames killed the men who lifted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

But the three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down, bound, into the furnace of blazing fire. Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up quickly. He said to his counselors, "Was it not three men that we threw bound into the fire?" They answered the king, "True, O king."

He replied, "But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the fourth has the appearance of a god."

Nebuchadnezzar then approached the door of the furnace of blazing fire and said, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!" So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire.

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 tunics were not harmed, and not even the smell of fire came from them. Nebuchadnezzar said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him. They disobeyed the king's command and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God.

Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that utters blasphemy 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 deliver in this way." Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – Daniel: The Fiery Furnace

Author Gordon Mackenzie tells a hilarious story about chickens.

When Gordon's father was a child, he would always get into trouble with his cousin when they visited each other. One Sunday morning, the two boys faked stomach cramps to avoid going to church. – Don't get any ideas! – As soon as the aunt and uncle rode off in the sunrise to church, the two 10-year-old boys got out of bed, in search of trouble.

The cousin asked, "Do you know how to mesmerize a chicken?"

"No, but I'm open to learning ..."

They went to the chicken coop and he selected a fine white hen and carried her under his arm to the front of the house. He then produced a piece of chalk and drew a short line on the porch. Next, he stood the creature over the chalk line and held her beak to it. After a moment or so, the boy slowly removed his hands. The chicken stood motionless—beak to the chalk line, hypnotized.

Let's do another one!!!!

They went back to the hen house for another chicken. And another. And another. Before long the hen house was empty—and the front porch was filled with seventy or so silent, motionless chickens with beaks glued to the porch.

Well, the aunt and uncle finally returned home—with the Scottish Presbyterian minister. He came along for a home visit to pray with the "sick" boys. The uncle, embarrassed by the two boys' deception, ran to the porch, bringing back the chickens to consciousness—with feathers, clucking, and four-letter words filling the air.

Here's the point:

The same thing that happened to those chickens can happen to you, if you're not careful. Societies, governments, or groups can take you by the scruff of the neck, push your beak to the chalk line and say—this is how we do things around here. No questions asked.

And if we're not paying attention—we can chicken out.

Thank God Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego didn't chicken out and balk at the chalk. Thank God, Jesus place-kicks us off the porch of mindless acceptance. The golden idol towered nearly 100 feet in the air. For polytheists—this new idol didn't pose any problems. Just one more god to add to the pantheon of gods.

But if you're a monotheist—like we are—this golden god poses a moral and spiritual quandary. Think 10 Commandments—you shall have no other gods before me. And you shall make no idols before me.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were not only in a tight spot, but they were in the spotlight. Nebuchadnezzar's bureaucratic retinue were all there—even the satraps and prefects.

Not only that, every instrument known to humankind was playing for the festivities:

Horns and flutes. And my favorite—a trigon--or what the King James translates a sackbut—which is a triangular harp. Also lyres, harps, and bagpipes. Who knows—maybe even a kazoo was thrown in the mix.

The king decided to play a game called “Nebuchadnezzar Says,” very similar to Simon Says—but the stakes were much higher. So they begin to play. Nebuchadnezzar says—fall down and worship the golden statue. Boom! Everyone goes down like a chicken in front of a chalk line.

But wait—waaaay in the back there are three teenagers standing. Maybe they weren’t there when “The Rules” were explained. OK—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—listen closely. When the band plays, and the king (cough-cough I, King Nebuchadnezzar) say Nebuchadnezzar Says, you bow down to the golden god. And if you don’t bow—I’m going to throw you into a fiery furnace. Capisce?

So, the king gave them a second chance. Music plays—Nebuchadnezzar says “Bow!” —and everyone bows—except those same three Jewish teenagers! They were standing, but in actuality they were really sitting ... in the hot seat.

So—What are our golden statues—our golden calves today? And more importantly—are you standing—or bowing before your golden statue?

Fortunately, in America we usually don’t face the literal extremes of fiery furnaces like many Christians around the world do today. Yet forces within and forces without continue to try to get us on our knees.

Theologian Paul Tillich once said that “a person’s god is the thing or person that one is most concerned about, thinks about most, or affects one’s life the most.”

John Calvin put it this way, “Our minds are a factory of idols.”

An idol can be a good, bad, or a neutral thing. The real issue is of an idol is an improper or misplaced relationship to it. Some of our subtle or not-so-subtle golden gods are:

1. Unquestioned allegiance to political parties or governments
2. It could be your race or your heritage or your country
3. It could be the past
4. The Big 3—Money, Sex, and Power. Instant gratification—no matter the cost
5. Fear of conflict or of getting in trouble
6. A relationship—maybe a boyfriend/girlfriend, or a child, or spouse
7. Maybe your golden trophy is winning at any cost—cheating in school, cutting corners in business, or walking over others to rise to the top.
8. Being a victim
9. Your appearance
10. Or the most insidious of all golden gods—The Self

This is just the short list.

Surprisingly, the philosopher Nietzsche can help us here. He wrote a cleverly titled work “Twilight of the Idols or, How to Philosophize with the Hammer.” He wasn’t talking about using a sledgehammer in your dealings with others. The hammer he was referring to was a tuning fork. Authentic living always has a tuning hammer in hand to determine what is and isn’t an idol.

We take that figurative tuning hammer and tap that person, that place, that thing, that idea:

- a. Does it ring “hollow” Is it off key? It’s an idol.
- b. Does it resonate and ring true? It isn’t an idol.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had their spiritual tuning hammers in hand, and they tapped that 100-foot golden idol. And that enormous statue was more like one of those chocolate Easter bunnies that are hollow on the inside.

In reality, it was a lot less substantial than it appeared. Kind of empty. And wobbly.

King Nebuchadnezzar went from happy to angry in a split second. His face was first a shade of pink, then red, then a purplish hue.

After that, he began to shake and steam came out of his ears.

“Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—do you know who I am?

Who’s the god that will deliver you out of my hands?”

“O King, we will not bow. Whether our God protects us from the fire or not, we will not serve your gods and we will not worship your golden statue. End of story.”

But the story is still going on for us today. We’re constantly being cajoled to bow—sometimes subtly other times blatantly. It’s inevitable. If we’re being faithful to God, sooner or later we’ll get into trouble because we won’t fall down and worship false gods, like everyone else flat on their face.

Our reading also says that some of the magicians and astrologers denounced Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego for their godly resistance. The word denounced in Hebrew means literally “ate pieces of” or “back-bited” the three young Jews. Going against the grain can get you in trouble with not only authorities, but your peers.

The king would have none of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s treasonous shenanigans. He ordered the fiery furnace to be heated seven times hotter and the three Jews were to be thrown in the oven—an eerie foreshadowing of the Holocaust. The story says Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were dressed in layers. They had on their:

- long johns and undershirts
- shirts and suspenders
- cummerbunds and bow ties
- sweaters, hats, and gloves
- snow suits and ski masks

Maybe the king was thinking the extra clothing would heighten the “fireworks,” but in reality, these threads would show God’s miraculous provision.

After being thrown in the fiery furnace, the three were miraculously untouched by the flames.

- a. Not a hair was singed or out of place
- b. They didn't even smell like a campfire
- c. But did you notice in the story the only things burned in the fiery furnace?
 - i. The guards
 - ii. The ropes that bound their hands

In other words, they were most free in the fire. The fiery furnace had no power over them.

Sometimes God saves us from the fire, other times God saves us in the fire. And then there are times where our body isn't saved from the fire—but our soul is.

Contrary to bumper sticker/church reader board theology—the safest place in the world is NOT God's will. King Nebuchadnezzar slouched in his throne watching the pyrotechnics display. But then he sat up. Started counting. Recounting. And Re-re-counting.

I only remember three names—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. What was the fourth guy's name? God's presence in bodily form was with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The Fourth Man was there—who had the appearance of a divine being or angel. The good news is that Christ—The Fourth Man—is with us in the bad news and the bad times. He's Immanuel, God with us.

When others see our courage under fire, we get their attention. They see we believe in something that we're willing to die for. They suddenly become interested in our stories and want to hear more about us, more about that Fourth Man who stood with us in our fiery furnaces.

The very pagan king that once mocked the three young Jews' God, now clearly proclaims the truth about God, better than most believers can! Just as they were promoted in Chapter 1, these three were promoted even higher in Chapter 3 for their faith and integrity.

And that's the last we hear of the three young Jews in Daniel.

- a. They didn't go on any speaking tours
- b. They didn't have any book deals or movies
- c. They weren't on Oprah or Meet the Press
- d. They just faithfully did their work and stayed true to God—that's called character.

The story of the fiery furnace challenges us today—

- What kind of Church, what kind of followers of Christ will we be?
- How will history look upon us?
- Will we stand and be God's church—or the State church?
- Will we stand for human rights—the dignity of every person made in God's image? Or let the downtrodden get stepped on more?

God's calling us to stand up for what is good and true. And not fall down and cower in fear to ungodly powers.

Immanuel, let's worship our Higher Power, who is the Highest Power, a Holy Power, that's above all earthly powers.

Amen.

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