

To fully appreciate the events of the account before us, we need to take just a few minutes and remind ourselves of the context; of the book of Daniel as a whole and of this account in particular. The book of Daniel was written by a man who spent the majority of his adult life as a stranger in a strange land. He was a young man, possibly even just a child, when the Babylonians swooped down on what was left of the nation of Judah and conquered it. The people who weren't put to death were carried off to Babylon to serve their conquerors there. Daniel, and many like him were forced into a life of exile. Now, this destruction from Babylon came not because God had forsaken his people, but rather because they had given up on him and worshipped false gods for too long, despite God's constant warning. The attack and exile to Babylon served as a wake up call to the people who did survive and many of them, in exile, returned to faithfully serving the true God.

The problem, or maybe better the difficulty in this is that they were no longer in a comfortable place to be doing so. In their homeland, in the nations founded on the Lord God, worshipping and honoring God above all things was commonplace. No one batted an eye at it. Even in the midst of the worst of Judah's idolatry the people still gave lipservice to the true God, so to worship him did not stand out. In Babylon, however, it was a problem. Worshipping the Lord God stood out, it made you different than the people around you. And, as it happened, it could get you in a lot of trouble. There was no such thing as freedom of religion in Babylon; if the king decreed you were to worship a certain something or in a certain way, you were expected to do it. And that's just what had happened here.

King Nebuchadnezzar had built a statue of gold and commanded that at a certain time, whenever instruments were blared out across the land that you couldn't miss, everyone had to bow down toward the statue and worship it. He also added the rider to this decree that whoever did not obey was to be thrown into a blazing furnace. Now, I'm pretty sure there wasn't a patrol going around inspecting every house at the time, making sure that absolutely everybody was obeying. But, by this time some of the Jews had risen to positions of authority because of their faithful service to the kingdom. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were in that position. A public position. A place where, if they did not bow down and worship as the king commanded, it was going to be noticed.

Now, we know what they chose to do, but I want you to take a minute and imagine the kind of mental battle that might rage inside you when faced with a conflict like this. The simple question was this: Bow down and live, or refuse and die? But it's not that simple, is it? Nobody *wants* to experience death, especially a gruesome kind of execution like being burned to death. And after all, these men were in positions of authority in a kingdom that wasn't terribly hospitable to their countrymen. They could potentially do their brothers and sisters a lot of good by staying in the positions they were in. After all, they could bow down and not mean it. God would know that they didn't mean it, that he still was number one in their hearts. God would understand that they were just trying to help other people by this little bit of subterfuge. I mean, it was a nation of heathens, it's not like they were owed any honesty. But then again, bowing down to idols was what got Judah in trouble in the first place, wasn't it? What to do, what to do? There were lots of seemingly good reasons that the trio could use to save their own skins, reasons and rationalizations that any one of us could've easily given into. But that is clearly not what they did.

<read text: Daniel 3:13-27>

And this is about where our reading picks up today. The three Jewish officials stood firm in their confession of the true God. They would not, under any circumstance, deny their God in any way. That meant more than avoiding saying "the Lord is not my god." It meant confessing the Lord as God at any and every opportunity. It meant never denying him even in a silent way. It meant never even giving the impression to anyone else that something else or someone else was more important than their God. And they were right; that is exactly the intent of the first commandment, to do any less than this is to not trust in God above all things. God commands that we have him as our God above everything else. To invent reasons to hide him or to pretend otherwise is to say that we do not trust his way is the best, or we don't trust him to care for us through the consequences of confessing him as God.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego trusted. Their trust is clearly demonstrated in their reply to the king. Nebuchadnezzar flaunts his arrogant ego in front of the three. "I am going to throw you into the furnace and what God will be able to save you from me then?" he asks. This; however was a matter between the Jews and their God and their reply indicates as much, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter." And the rest of their reply show the firmness of their conviction and their confidence in their God, "If we are thrown into the

blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”

The king is so furious with their insubordination that he orders the furnace heated several orders hotter than usual (did they really know it was seven times hotter? No, using the number seven that way was an idiom at the time for saying “a whole lot”). The point is made quite clear though when the guards who throw the three Jews in are killed from the heat of the furnace just getting close enough to put them in. There is clearly no natural way that anyone going inside that furnace is coming out alive. And this is the moment of truth. Again, imagine yourself in this position. We know how it turns out, but Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did not. Their confession to the king was clear; God was *able* to save them if he chose to, but they accounted for the possibility that he would not spare their lives in this case. There was a very real possibility that they would die. In fact, that was the probable outcome. They had received no special revelation from God that things would end differently. They were standing there on the edge of the fire, prepared to die.

So where was their confidence coming from? How were they able to unilaterally state that God would deliver them from the hand of Nebuchadnezzar? They had no promise that God would save them from the fire, how did they *know* they would be safe?

Because God had *already* saved them. By virtue of their trust in God they knew they were destined for eternal life. Holding to God was the only thing that truly mattered because God was the only one who had the power to save them. Nebuchadnezzar could bluster all he wanted but he didn’t have any power over life and death that God did not give to him. And the king had no power over eternal life and death. Only God can save anyone. We can’t save ourselves, we haven’t lived up to the standards that are required for heaven. Just looking at these Jews’ confession of God should shame us into remembering all the times we haven’t stood confident in our confession of God. And Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were sinners just the same. The only hope for anyone is at the hand of God. God who rescues those who trust in him by virtue of the sacrifice of Christ. Christ had not yet died when these three trusted in him, but their sins were paid for by Christ all the same. And their trust in God and no one else to save them is what brought salvation to them.

Nebuchadnezzar could not save or spare them in any way that truly mattered. They could not save themselves. Only God had any real power over them, and so they *had* to choose God over all others. And come what may, God would deliver them from the hand of Nebuchadnezzar; whether by sparing their lives in the furnace, or ending their earthly journey in those flames and taking them home to heaven. Do you see what’s going on here? By staking their confidence and trust in God alone, there was no way that this ended badly for these three men!

Of course as we do know, God chose at this time to extend Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego’s lives. And by doing so, brought many others to faith. After retrieving them from the furnace and seeing that they were not the slightest singed or even smelled like smoke, the king issued a decree that the God of these men was to be the only God worshipped in the entire land. But had these men been called to heaven then and there, that would have been just as good for them.

Now, we’ve spent most of our time this morning talking about what happened thousands of years ago during the time of Daniel, but hopefully I don’t have to draw you a line to see how this applies to us. Each of us face this same challenge constantly in our lives. Will I declare my God openly and possibly be harmed, or will I hide my trust in him from the world and try to go unnoticed? We are not living in the holy land any longer, Christians are rapidly becoming the minority in this country, faithful Christians who hold to all the truths of God’s word especially. We are strangers in a strange land. And we face constant pressure from the majority to fit in with their ideals. And there are all kinds of “reasons” and rationalizations we can come up with for ourselves as to why we should remain quiet and just go along silently, to not cause a fuss.

But, after seeing what these men went through, it is pretty embarrassing how quick we are to silently deny our God over some very trivial matters when these three were willing to be put to death for their confession. It’s tempting, when we’re faced with ridicule and confrontation, to just remain quiet, to go with the crowd and not say anything. But to do that is to deny our God and doing that forgets one very critical piece of information. Only God can rescue you, no one else. And God *has* rescued you, by the blood of his son on the cross. And whatever confrontation or crossroads you are at, when the road with God looks more difficult than the road without, remember this: Your God is able to save you. The path may *look* more difficult, but that is the path you don’t walk alone. That is the path you walk with God. And a path walked with God is just like the path that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego walked. There is only a happy ending down that road. The God we serve is able to save us. And only he can do it. Amen.