

The Fourth Man
Daniel 3:1-3,13-28
3rd in Series on Daniel
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Every country has or had a favorite way of execution of its criminals and opponents. Some are even known for the method they used. When we think of the Romans, we know they used a cross for the worst offenders, when they wanted to torture the person by suffocating them to death. The French are remembered for their guillotine, and the cry, off with their heads. The ancient Japanese used stakes set at low tide, where they would tie their victims and watch them drown when the tide came in. In England, William Wallace, the Scottish rebel, was drawn and quartered.

Today, we are going to look at ancient Assyria, and we will see they too had a favorite way to rid themselves of those who did wrong: They used fire in an enclosure that resembled a furnace and burned their victims alive. Their method caught on: the Romans burned Bishop Polycarp at the stake in 155 AD because he would not renounce Christ. And, the English roasted Joan of Arc in 1431 AD, claiming she was a religious heretic—she heard God talking to her. In America we used to hang most of those to be executed, that is, until we developed electricity and its practical application—the electric chair; somehow the argument was it was more humane.

In today's Scripture, we are going to hear of an execution by fire, at least an attempted one. It's a story we heard in our childhood, it's the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They were Daniel's friends who had been enslaved as captives from Judah. They had adapted and in time prospered as administrators for Nebuchadnezzar. The story we know is when they were thrown into a fiery furnace for refusing to worship King Nebuchadnezzar and his gods.

The background for the story goes like this: Nebuchadnezzar had beaten all the world in battle and had come to believe he was the greatest, blessed by his hand made gods, to the point where he thought he was immortal and deserve to be worshipped. To have something the people could worship, he had a 90 foot tall image of himself constructed out on the plain from his Capitol along with some images of his god—Marduke or Bel. Later called Ba'al. Nebuchadnezzar even had his statue overlaid with gold to project an aura of wealth and power. When he finished, he scheduled an unveiling and required all of the leaders and administrators of the kingdom to be there, and when the gold statue was unveiled and the music started, all were to fall down and worship him and his gods. It was a loyalty test.

The three from Israel refused and they were reported for their disobedience. Saying no to the king was a huge problem, because Nebuchadnezzar had said any who didn't worship the images he created would be thrown into a fiery furnace and executed.

Let's turn to God's word as Daniel has revealed it for us in Daniel 3 to hear more of this story:

- 1 King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, ninety feet tall and nine feet wide and set it upon the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon.
- 2 He then summoned ...all the provincial officials .. for the dedication of the image...
- 4 Then the herald loudly proclaimed, "Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do.
- 5 As soon as you hear the sound of the ..music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up.

- 6 Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into the fiery furnace.”
- 7 Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn and the music, all the nations and peoples of every language fell down and worshipped the image the King had set up.
- 12 (Some of the astrologers came forward to the king and said) There are some Jews you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon...who paid no attention to your decree....
- 13 Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego ... and asked, “Is it true?”
- 16 Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied ...”we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter.
- 17 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.
- 18 But even if he does not, we want you to know, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”
- 19 Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious and he ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual.
- 22 he hadthe three men firmly tied, and thrown into the blazing furnace.
- 24 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?”
- 25 “Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.”
- 28 (After calling the men from the fire) Nebuchadnezzar said “Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego,....They trusted in him and defied the king’s command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God.”

The Word of The Lord!

The three will always be remembered as men of deep faith, committed to serve only their God, willing to trust their God no matter what, and showing courage in the face of death because they would not say no to their God. The three will always be held up as examples of how we should be committed to God and the way God’s deliverance works. I hope we will never forget these lessons or the example they set of what it means to live committed to God, no matter what.

Unfortunately, many will hear this story and relegate it to the dust bin of history seeing it as just an anecdote in Babylon’s time. But, it is so much more. I remember when I was in the Army we had an Operations Manual for every system and every operation. The story of the three who said no to an inappropriate command is an operations manual in itself. It outlines a step by step process that we can follow when tests of our faith come, and they do come and they will come. Here is the manual approach:

Step One—never stop believing, never stop being committed to that belief, and never stop listening to and doing what God asks.

Step Two—evaluate what you are being asked to do--Does it ask you to compromise your relationship with God or your faith in God? Does it ask you to turn your back on God? Does it ask you change your beliefs as God has revealed them.

Step Three—stand up for your beliefs, let your beliefs control your life, let your God rule in all that you do.

Three steps,

(1) remembering there is only one God, one Lord of all; or as God said it at Mt Sinai —you shall have no other Gods before me —not those a master or a boss makes, not those made by ourselves such as success, power, money, things.

(2) we are not to worship anything other than God and we are not to make images we worship-

(3) we must not misuse the name of God, and it is a misuse when we give things and others the name or place of God.

God's Operations Manual calls on us to evaluate every situation and to decide what we are being asked to do.

Following the crowd is not following God.

Following our passion is not being under control to and with God. During the Viet Nam War Lieutenant William Calley was tried for a massacre at My Lai village. Calley's defense was he was just following orders. Shadrach and his friends could have bowed and worshipped saying they were just following orders, but Scripture says we can't use this as an excuse. We must decide in every case if we are being asked to turn from God and deny God's clear call of us. We can't. Even if saying no means our lives, we can't

A second point the story is that bad times, evil times, difficult times come into every life. Belonging to God doesn't mean we get to live in a world without pain, without death, without sickness, without bullies, without war. All of these will come. A golf team in Texas, a killing at a school, a war in the Ukraine, the extermination of those different from us ---all of these things happen and good people, holy people suffer too. The story in Daniel talks of being held captive in a foreign land, under the thumb of a despot. Shadrach and his friends belonged to God, and they worshipped God, and they followed God, but it was raining in their lives, raining hard – they were captives. Belonging to God wasn't a shield from the things that come in life but belonging to God meant there was a way through it, that no matter what God would not abandon them.

Listen! Daniel doesn't say God will provide relief from everything that confronts us, but Daniel does say God will provide spiritual deliverance from everything that besets us, that God will deliver no matter what might happen to our bodies or our life. Jesus confirmed this in Matthew 10:28 when he said, "Don't be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both." God will provide relief and will deliver all who remain faithful.

But, what is clear from this passage is that even when we face death or loss or disaster, God will be there with us. In the story there was a 4th man. Nebuchadnezzar saw the man, he described the man as looking like a "son of God," and it was. The identity of the 4th man, who untied their bondage, who protected them from the fire, who never left their side, was God with them. Some argue it was an angel, others that it was Christ in a pre-incarnation appearance, one like the appearance of Melchizadek to

Abraham in Genesis. We know the 4th man, because Jesus promised it would come. Let's listen to Jesus' words in John 15:15-18

15 If you love me, keep my commands.

16 And I will ask the father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever.

17 The Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him because it neither sees him nor knows him. But, you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

18 I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.

The Word Of The Lord!

The Spirit of God wasn't new in Jesus' day. Daniel's friends walked with the spirit in the fiery furnace, and they were not harmed. A man named Bezalel was filled with the spirit in Exodus 31:3 so he could decorate the Temple properly; Moses, in Numbers 11:25, had some of the spirit of God that was on him taken by God and put on the 70 elders who were to help Moses lead the people of Israel; in Judges 8:34 the spirit of the lord came upon Gideon so he could lead Israel in its war with the Midianites. Over and over the spirit of God has come upon or dwelt within God's followers. But, as you have probably noted, the presence of God's spirit is selective. Some, but not all; sometimes, but not all times—it was the way God worked to strengthen and lead and empower. But that was before Jesus; Jesus promised things were going to change: if you believe, if you are committed, if you are willing to walk in God's way, you will have the spirit with you--forever.

The story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is a story of the Holy Spirit at work, the Holy Spirit indwelling, the Holy Spirit protecting and empowering. The 4th man in the furnace lives today, the 4th man is with us today. The 4th man, the Holy Spirit, will never leave us and will walk us through whatever tests come.

And it is the Spirit who enables us to reveal God to the world by helping us to remain faithful, no matter what might come our way. And, as Jesus said in John 14, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will ask the father to send the spirit to you, to be with you at all times." And, the Spirit is here, right now, in this room, ready to lift us or lead us or stand with us.

There is an old poem by Carol Joyce Carty I want to close with:

Footprints In The Sand

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the Lord.
Across the sky flashed scenes from his life; for each scene he noticed two sets of footprints

In the sand, one belonging to him and the other to the Lord.

When the last scene of his life flashed before him. He looked back at the footprints in the sand.

He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints.

He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in his life.

This really bothered him and he questioned the Lord about it.

"Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way.

But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints.

I don't understand why when I needed you most you would leave me.

The Lord replied:

My son, my precious child. I love you and I would never leave you.

During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints,
It was then that I carried you."

The 4th man lives and walks with us and lives within us and carries us when we cannot go a step farther. There is no fiery furnace hot enough to keep him away. Hallelujah!

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