

“The Fiery Furnace”
Daniel 3:1-30
Pastor Jacob Hanson
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Opening Prayer

The first message I ever preached officially as a pastor was the funeral for my paternal grandfather. Allan Hanson, who's name is my middle name, passed in early 2018 of a glioblastoma at the age of 76. At his funeral, my sister Katie requested that we read her favorite scripture from our youth. It was this account from Daniel 3, of the three young Jewish men who took a stand and were delivered from the fiery furnace. The connection for my grandfather's life was that he had been through a hellish fire of his own, when his wife Linda (our grandmother) had died of a brain tumor of her own at the age of fifty. How appropriate this scripture is for our family and my little sister in particular, as only a few years later we would walk through the fire of loss in several miscarriages. There are many of you who can relate what it is like to be cast into the furnace. You may understand what it is like to be brought before the king, to stand on the precipice staring into oblivion, and to plead with the Lord for salvation by His hand. For my grandfather, by the grace of God, he survived that harrowing and horrible loss... and the Lord graciously gave him another wife, grandma Pam, who loved him dearly until the day he died. For my sister the Lord graciously gave her two beautiful children who just turned one and two years old. Beloved, there are many connections that we can make from Daniel's account to our own experience. Here on the front end know that the Lord does not always give us exactly what we desire, but He does watch over His children in even the most evil and difficult of times. The same God that saved these three is the One we worship here and now, and His power and mercy and salvation have not changed. Hear the account of Meshach, Shadrach, and Abed-Nego, and know that salvation comes for those who place their hope in Christ... even if it is not as expected.

Daniel 3 opens where the last chapter closed. King Nebuchadnezzar had been given this glorious vision from God about what the future was to bring, about subsequent kingdoms and rulers, and Daniel had interpreted it for him. Yet, being a sinful and pagan king, Nebuchadnezzar decides to honor himself instead of God. He takes the part from his vision of being a golden head (that was to crumble) and makes for himself a golden image that is 90 feet high and 9 feet wide. The whole

empire is commanded to bow down and worship this false idol, a representation of King Nebuchadnezzar's supposed deity. At appointed times all of the officials of the empire would gather, there would be this cacophony of noise, and they would bow in worship. Anyone, by decree of the king, who would not worship the image was to suffer grave consequences. They were to be cast into a blazing fire, a fiery furnace. All but a few obey the king out of fear for their lives. Daniel is not present in the story, as he was in the king's court and not counted amongst the other officials, and he most certainly would not have worshipped the image. But his three friends, Hananiah, Azariah, and Mischael (who had been renamed Meshach, Shadrach, and Abed-Nego) are subject to this command. As faithful followers of the One true God, they cannot worship the image, and so the other officials observe their defiance and bring charges of them to the king.

“There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the administration of the province of Babylon, namely Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego. These men, O king, have disregarded you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up.” The king, who was enraged, immediately calls the three to his presence and demands that they worship his image. He gives them the choice, either worship the image or be cast into the furnace as he has commanded. The three give a response to the king that shows their faithfulness to God even in the face of death. “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

To follow God is perilous Beloved. We put our hope and our trust in a risen Lord, that there is One who is greater than the things of this world, and is worth worshipping even if it costs us everything. Jesus says it best “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” For these three, to worship the king's image meant a life of luxury... but a forfeiture of their souls. There is a cost to their faithfulness. The king, enraged even further, has the furnace heated up seven times hotter than it was. He commands that they urgently be tied up and tossed in. The fire is so hot it kills the strongmen that are carrying the three. The three though are plunged into the fire. They enter the furnace.

In our world we often have this misconception that karma is real. The idea that if you do everything good, then good will come back to you, is a very human one. In essence, we pay for good things to happen to us by being good to others. The reality, as we all know, is that you can do everything right and still have difficulty befall you. These three men who are plunged into the fiery furnace have done nothing wrong, by the Babylonians or by God. They have been faithful in their duties, appointed to high position because they were found to be ten times better than any other adviser in the kingdom. They are not cheats, or secret thieves, or gossips. More importantly, they have been faithful to the Father. They chose to eat vegetables instead of giving into idolatry in chapter one. They prayed earnestly for Daniel to understand the king's dream in chapter two so that he might be saved. They have done well, and yet they find themselves in this position. Why, you may ask, would the Lord allow difficulty to befall them? Why would the good Lord allow difficulty to befall any of us? Why should any, especially those who are good (by earthly terms for all have fallen short of God's glory) suffer? It is the age-old question, and there are two quick answers that encompass most of it.

First is that we live in a fallen world that is full of sin. The wages of sin is death according to Romans, and we know full well how sinfulness corrupts and destroys. It was a sinful and idolatrous decree from Nebuchadnezzar that brought these men to the furnace, not an act of the Lord. Nebuchadnezzar was the one responsible, along with all those who accused Meshach, Shadrach, and Abed-Nego. Secondly, notice how the Lord can use even the most difficult of situations for the glory of the kingdom. This is not to say that being put through the furnace is glorious, for it is not. But the Lord has a way to turn evil that results from sinfulness and an evil world into something useful for the future. In the case of these three, their faithfulness resulted in the empire having to acknowledge God's glory. Meshach, Shadrach, and Abed-Nego's story still carries weight with us today, inspiring us and reminding us that the Lord is good and that He is in control. None of that would have been the case if the Lord had interceded earlier. The Lord had a plan, and it results in glory and salvation.

I want to take a moment near the end of the message here, and speak to those who carry an immense burden or who feel that they are going through the fiery furnace themselves right now. For us, because we only see eternity from the pinprick that is our earthly life most of the time, we forget that God will make everything right on the final day. The evil that exists will be cast into hell, the pain that we

experience will be cast into hell, and everything will be made as it should be. We cannot comprehend all of that here, no matter how hard we try, for we are not omniscient (all-knowing) as our Lord is. We cannot even imagine all of the implications for continuing in the faith here, and we cannot fully grasp what the Lord will do in eternity. The reality is that there will be times of fire here, but we can take courage. For the Lord has a habit of saving His children out of the fire... but even if He does not, those that persevere have the eternal hope of eternal life without blemish. Those gone far too soon are not gone, but are in heaven where we aspire to join them in time. Those evils that tarnish our hearts and souls get wiped clean on the last day, completely made right by the only person who can make them right... the Lord Himself. He has promised you and I as much, and has backed that promise up with His own life, death, and resurrection that are factual and real. He has promised to walk with you even in your times of great stress, to use you in a way that is wonderful and glorious and hope-filled in a world that is anything but. Meshach, Shadrach, and Abed-Nego were no fools to go before the king and state the truth... they served a God not made with human hands, who could protect them if He desired, but even if He did not it was worth following Him even if it meant perishing in the fiery furnace... for everlasting life and hope and peace were theirs.

Going back to the story, the wonderful climax is that God delivers His faithful servants in their time of greatest peril. They fall into the furnace, and the king himself is dumbfounded to see four men walking around, completely loosed from all bonds in the fire. He calls the three out, and to everyone's surprise as they gather around, there is not a trace of fire upon the men. They have no burns, no singed hair, their clothes are wholly unchanged, and there isn't even the smell of fire upon them. God has fully protected them beyond what anyone could have imagined. The response is immediate, and all present are forced to acknowledge that there is a God in heaven. The king even goes so far as to say "There is no other god who is able to deliver in this way." The three prosper in the kingdom, and they are immortalized in history for their great faith. There is one final point for us to look at, perhaps the most important, and it is who that fourth person was in the fire with Meshach, Shadrach, and Abed-Nego. While the fourth person may have been an angel sent by God, many believe (including myself) that it was none other than Jesus Himself who came loosed His faithful followers. Jesus Himself walked in the blaze with His servants.

Your God, Beloved, is not hands-off with you and me. He is present, fully and wholly, and He walks with us. You may be going through much in your life, you may find yourself accosted by the kings of this world or walking in the blazes that accompany our sinful earth. You may right now be in your own fiery furnace. Know that Christ walks with you in it. He does not stand away, He is not frightened, and He does not leave you alone. Be encouraged that every step of the way in your life, your Creator is with you. No matter how the situations you find yourself in are ended in this life, know that He looses all bonds for eternity. In His time when He returns, He will make all things right. He often does deliver us here and now, but even if He does not deliver us from the difficulties we face, He still walks with us and looses us from sin and death and evil and pain in eternity. King Nebuchadnezzar was right to say that no god delivers like the one we serve. Indeed, our Lord can (and often does) deliver us from the furnaces of this life, but He always delivers His servants from the fiery furnace of hell. Jesus Himself walked in the blaze with the three... and He still walks with you and I today. That is a Lord worth serving, a God who saves. Let us Pray.

Closing Prayer