

Jan. 14, 2018

## Lesson 7: A Bold Faith

Scripture: Daniel 3: 19-23, 26-28

### **Context:**

Last week we read of the rise of several young men in the court of Nebuchadnezzar. At the request of Daniel, three young Jewish men, Shadrack, Meshach, and Adednego become officials in the province of Babylon. They are like other conquered people in that they are forced to assimilate while exiled to this foreign land. Sources date the story to the court of Babylon during the period of exile (597-538 B.C.) although evidence in the form of Persian and Greek words suggest that the story came a little later, perhaps even later when there was a rise of Hellenistic (Greek influence) in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> This story was probably embellished as time went on especially with the mysterious fourth figure that appears in the furnace with the three men.

We see in the chapter the Romantic embellishment of this period as the men are portrayed as heroes of the Jewish faith who like Esther must demonstrate great courage that may cost them their life. In the story Nebuchadnezzar sets up of a great golden image and commands all officials of the kingdom to attend its dedication and worship it. For the young men of Israel this poses a great conflict as they have been taught to keep the commandments and bow before no God but Yahweh. Those, they choose not to do so. Their decision to not bow ignites the Chaldeans and they complain to Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar in an angry rage orders young men to come before him.

In a dramatic moment the young men declare that they would rather be thrown into a furnace fire than bow down before the golden idol. The king is outraged and orders that the furnace level be increased and that the men be burned. In the haste of preparing it, the guards who place them there are killed. But as they are thrown in the pit, they do not burn. The gates of the furnace are opened and King Nebuchadnezzar is amazed that not even their hair is singed. A declaration is made that no one is to mock or disregard the God of the Jews. This God can and does deliver the ones God claims.

The story focuses not as much on the faithfulness of the three young men, but on the faithfulness of God. God delivers these three young men from a fiery furnace in a situation that looks hopeless. This story would have been passed from generation to generation as a way to give hope to those who were in exile and to remind them that any form of exile never had the final say. God is resolute in intervening and God is faithful.

### **Application:**

I think this story is a favorite for Vacation Bible School. Or at least that's where I hear it repeated the most. Who doesn't like to imagine all the senses that come with this story? There are fancy nobles in long robes with turbans and big palaces. There is a big golden idol that everyone bows to except these three young men. You can see the whispering of the other Chaldeans and the red face of the king in rage.

But perhaps the most fun part is to imagine the furnace. There is ton of coal and

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<sup>1</sup> W. Sibley Towner, "Daniel," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1984), 46.

you can almost see the flames rising higher and higher. And yet, the men do not burn. They do not gag or suffocate. They stand there untouched by the flames. When released by the guards they are as they went in with not even an eyebrow singed.

These men are those who have gone to their potential deaths all because they would not cave in to the pressure around them. While most commentators would focus on their bold faith and some would like to claim that it is because of their faithfulness, I think this misses the point of this story.

In the passage the focus is on God and God's faithfulness through ordinary people like these three young men who model faithfulness for us. They lead their provinces as they should and participate in the life of the court. Yet when it comes to abandoning their faith, they refuse to do so. They would rather die than become something they are not and lose their identity as children of Yahweh.

Often I think that Shadrack, Meshach, and Abednego represent so many of the saints that I know and love. They are the ordinary people who go to church weekly, say their daily prayers, give sacrificially of their time and money, and at times may even give up things others in their church never see to do all those things. Day in and day out, people go through different furnaces of life simply believing that no matter what happens, God will be with them and deliver them. They aren't looking for a reward and really don't focus on being martyrs of the faith. They simply want to be faithful to the God and the faith that formed them.

Recently, Netflix released season two of *The Crown*, which focuses on the early reign of Queen Elizabeth II. Even though she is by title the Head of the Church of England, most Christians focus on the words and ideas of preachers, evangelists, bishops, etc. Yet, this season of the series reveals the deep abiding faith that sustained Elizabeth as she came to power. One episode in this season includes her inviting Billy Graham to the palace and having a religious conversation with him about wisdom and direction.

This seems to be not a work of Hollywood, but a reality as evidenced by the Queen's Christmas speech this year in which she gives thanks to Jesus whose generous love has helped her through the good and bad times. This royal figure sees herself just like everyone else who is looking for God and understands that she too is to be but a humble servant. She may be a Queen of a major world power, but she does not bow down to the idols of power, violence, arrogance, or wealth.

To me, people like Queen Elizabeth highlight the story of these three young men in the fiery furnace. She, as many of us, has gone through things where it is our faith that sustains us. Even when we sin or mess up, we hope and pray that God will see us through. Our faith is to be a bold one in which we see that God will deliver us no matter what we must face. Our God is one who delivers even in the midst of exile or corrupt leaders who have no regard for humanity or the servant leadership of Jesus Christ. Our God will always be with us.

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