**Daniel 3 *Legendary: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: Another in the Fire***

***Meeting Jesus*Have you ever imagined meeting Jesus? As a preacher, that’s a thought experiment that I sometimes run. Sometimes when I’m preaching a story from the Bible, I’ll ask you to imagine that you are in the situation of one of the characters, and that you are meeting with Jesus under similar circumstances.**

**For example: If I’m talking about Mary and Martha and the dinner party they held for Jesus, I’ll ask you to imagine what you would do if Jesus came to your house. Would you be fussing around like Martha, or would you be really attentive to Jesus like Mary?**

**Or, if we are in Matthew 25, where Jesus says that whatever you do for one of the least of these, you did it for me, I might ask you to imagine meeting a beggar on the street corner and discovering that it is Jesus. We often imagine meeting Jesus as a person in need.**

**Or, we recently finished a sermon series here at Hope from Psalm 23. Psalm 23 famously talks about the Good Shepherd making us lie down in green pastures. So I often picture meeting with Jesus in a quiet park, alongside still waters.**

**And, of course, the band MercyMe has given us a picture in their song *I Can Only Imagine*. When they sing about us meeting Jesus for the first time in heaven, they wonder: “Will I dance for you Jesus? Or in awe of you be still?”**

**Those are all ways that I imagine meeting Jesus: maybe He’ll come to my house someday, maybe I’ll meet Him in the stranger who is hungry or thirsty, maybe I’ll sit with Him in the shade of a giant oak tree, maybe I’ll be falling to my knees in His heavenly presence.**

**But I wonder if you’ve ever imagined meeting Jesus in the middle of a fire? That’s what our story is about today. It’s a story about Jesus meeting us in the fiery furnace.**

***Team Building*We are in a series we are calling *Legendary*. We are looking at what I am calling the second-string heroes of the Old Testament. They are stories that may be familiar to you, but they are stories that we might not pay quite as much attention to as the stories of Abraham or King David or the like. And today’s story comes from the book of Daniel. Daniel chapter 3. Let’s start with verse 1:**

King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon.

**I need to set the context. We’ve zoomed ahead quite a bit from where we were last week in the book of Joshua.**

**The book of Daniel is about things that happened in the exile. After many centuries of having their own nation, the people of God have backslidden and God has fulfilled His threat to judge them by allowing the Babylonians to invade and destroy their country. Nebuchadnezzar is the king of the Babylonians.**

**And one of Nebuchadnezzar’s strategies is to enlist the most promising young men of each territory he conquers into government service, whatever their nationality. That means these young people are carried away from their homelands and put into Babylonian schools where they are trained to think and act like Babylonians. And among those taken into exile are 4 young Israelites: Daniel, who is the author of this book; and Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah—whom we know better by their Babylonian names: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.**

**The first two chapters of Daniel tell us how these four resisted things that would compromise their commitment to God while at the same time excelling in their Babylonian training. In chapter two, Daniel is able to interpret the meaning of the King’s dream, and he is appointed Prime Minister over the entire province of Babylon. In addition, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are appointed as administrators within the province.**

**In the first two chapters, things go pretty well for these four young men living in a foreign land. But now, in chapter 3, things are going to get difficult.**

**Verse 2-3:**

**2**He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. **3**So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it.

Here’s one of the things we are going to notice in this story: there are these lists that get repeated quite often. Verse 2 tells us about “the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials” and then, right away, in verse 3, the whole list gets repeated again. It seems kind of unnecessary, and it’s a real mouthful when you are reading it.

But I think it is there for a reason. I think Daniel, who is recording this story for us, is being funny. There’s a lot of self-importance in this story. A lot of pomp and circumstance and theater that is designed to show how King Neb is a big deal. And I think that’s what this listing of officials is supposed to be; a way of saying: “Look at how big and important and fancy I am, I have so many people working for me.” So, by repeating it in full, I think Daniel is mocking that self-importance.

It’s worth noting, also, that the people involved in this story are the officials and government workers. Sometimes I’ve imagined this story involving every citizen of Babylon, wherever they were throughout the far-flung empire, being expected to bow towards the statue at the same time. But that’s not really what is happening. It’s just these officials, presumably called in from all over the map, assembled on the plain of Dura, in the presence of the statue.

What this is, really, is a team-building exercise. This is like what happens today when some big corporation—like Wal-Mart—calls in all the vice-presidents and corporate officers and the warehouse managers and the store managers and the assistant managers and they repeat some chant about how great Wal-Mart is and how they won’t be undersold and so on. The whole thing is meant to fire people up about the empire and keep them on the same page. **Verses 4-6**:

**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 horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of 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 a blazing furnace.”

Here’s the dubious plan. Here’s the loyalty test. These officials which represent nations and peoples of various languages and spread out all over the map are going to stand there, and then when the royal orchestra plays the fanfare—the horn and flute and zither and lyre and so on, I think this is another example of Daniel poking fun at all the pomp and circumstance—as soon as the instruments begin to play everyone is supposed to fall down in front of the statue and then… that’s it. That’s the big unity building rally cry.

Except, where it takes a dark turn, they have to “worship” this statue. And if they don’t, they’re going to die. This is like if the Wal-Mart officials had to bow down to a giant statue of Sam Walton; and if they don’t, they get thrown into the trash incinerator.

For the kids from Israel, this is a problem. All their lives, they have been repeating daily the Shema, the declaration that “The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” They follow the 10 commandments, which say you shall have no other gods. They’re not about to worship a statue of gold. **Verse 7:**

**7**Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the nations and peoples of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

The band plays, and all over the courtyard the faces of these officials hit the ground, and that’s it. Good meeting! Long live Babylon! Long live the King! Let’s get on with the business of running the empire.

Except…

When everyone else around you is on their knees with faces to the ground, and you are still standing upright, you tend to stick out. **Verses 8-12:**

**8**At this time some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews.**9**They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, “May the king live forever! **10**Your Majesty has issued a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, **11**and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. **12**But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up.”

Why did these astrologers care? Was it written in the stars? I’m guessing this is a case of ugly office politics. These are co-workers of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and they are probably enflamed with the green-eyed monster of jealousy. These Hebrew boys have risen quickly in the ranks and they were probably envied and hated by their peers and now they get ratted out.

Now, you might be asking, where’s Daniel? Surely Daniel would not have bowed down. Why isn’t he singled out?

And the answer is: we don’t know. I’m sure, given what happens later, that Daniel would not have bowed to this statue, but we don’t know why he isn’t included with the other three. Some speculate that as the prime minister, he may have been exempted from this little group exercise. Some speculate that he might have been out sick on this day (there are actually hints later in the book, 8:27, that he sometimes deals with illness). Maybe he was out of town. But we don’t know. The text is selective. And Daniel’s involvement is not the point of the story.

The point of the story is what Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego will or will not do. Will they break the first commandment or not?

***Confronted by the King*Verses 13-15:**

**13**Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, **14**and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? **15**Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?”

Old King Neb is furious with rage. He’s not a man of subtle emotions. Throughout the Bible’s description of him, he appears to be a man of extreme mood swings.

But he’s going to give the boys one more chance. He’ll cue the band one more time (horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music...so fancy!) and if they’ll fall down, all will be forgotten.

But if they don’t get in line…well, his last question really sets things up doesn’t it?

**Verses 16-18:**

**16**Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, 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, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”

This is one of my favorite speeches in the Bible. It always gives me goose bumps. This is an incredible statement of devotion. They believe in God. They believe in a God Who is strong enough to save them. But even if He does not, they are not going to disobey Him by worshipping an idol.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego willingly and knowingly choose death over disobeying God.

These are real people. I’m sure they are scared. I’m sure they are terrified. But they are resolved in their commitment to God. They are not going to bow down.

No. Matter. What.

**Verses 19-23:**

**19**Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual **20**and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. **21**So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. **22**The king’s command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, **23**and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.

Now the velvet gloves come off. The literal translation of verse 19 says that Nebuchadnezzar’s face changed. He orders the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual (seven being a Biblical number for “a lot”) and then he has Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego tied up like so much kindling and he even leaves their robes and hats on so there is more to burn and then he watches his own soldiers die in their efforts to drop them into the fire.

I’ve always wondered what this furnace might have looked like. I read this week that it was probably an iron smelting furnace. It would have been made of heavy clay and looked like an oversized milk bottle. There would have been a wide opening in the neck of the bottle, where the crucible could be slid in and out. And there would have been some sort of ramp, or viewing platform, that would allow someone to look down into this opening. And then, underneath there would have been a smaller opening for throwing in fuel for the fire, as well as some small ports with bellows attached for really adding oxygen and cranking up the heat.

So when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are dropped like logs into this furnace, that’s not good for them. They took a noble stand for God, but now they are dead. Except…

***The Fourth Man in the Furnace*Verses 24 and 25:**

**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?”

They replied, “Certainly, Your Majesty.”

**25**He said, “Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.”

There’s a fourth member of the furnace club, and he is unharmed and apparently he is keeping the other three unburned and unharmed as well.

Who is this fourth man, who appears out of nowhere and cheats death and “looks like a son of the gods”? The Bible doesn’t say for sure.

But I’d like to suggest that this is Jesus. I believe this is a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus in the Old Testament. Theologians talk about something called “theophanies.” A theophany is an appearance of God. Really, it’s anytime God is described as appearing in physical form—whether in the burning bush or in the thunderheads of Mt. Sinai or even when He is described as the “Angel of the LORD.” And there are a few, mysterious appearances, like this one, where some sort of human form will appear in the Old Testament, where theologians wonder if it might not just be the second member of the Trinity showing up on earth.

Regardless of whether this is Jesus or an angel, this fourth figure is clearly sent by God, represents God, and is in the process of protecting Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego.

Makes me wonder what they might have talked about down there. I wonder if He told them how proud the Father was of their devotion, loyalty and love. I wonder if He told them that because of this one act of devotion men and women facing suffering or trial or persecution would look to their story for strength.

I wonder what they said to him. I bet they poured out their hearts in worship. I bet they poured out adoration, gratitude, and worship. I bet they came to realize that this furnace, which looked like the end of their lives, was the greatest thing they had ever experienced. **Verses 26-27:**

**26**Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, “Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!”

I just noticed this this morning: Nebuchadnezzar is able to approach the opening of the furnace. When his servants threw the boys in, they died. But now the King is able to approach, which means the boys were in there for a while. Long enough for the furnace to cool down enough for the King to get close…

So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, **27**and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.

Do you think they saved those robes? I can imagine, years later, when their wives are having a yard sale and they want to put those old, out-of-style robes and turbans out on the table... I can imagine Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego grabbing them back and saying: “Oh no you don’t!” **Verses 28-29:**

**28**Then Nebuchadnezzar said, “Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! 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. **29**Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way.”

Here's another extreme mood swing for Nebuchadnezzar. Suddenly he’s all in on the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. He’s got a great line, one of the truest lines in scripture, “No other god can save in this way.” It’s too bad, judging by what happens later, that he doesn’t fully surrender his heart to God. But he does reward the boys. **Verse 30:**

**30**Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

And that’s it. That’s the las time they are ever mentioned in Scripture. We don’t know what the rest of their lives looked like.

But I wonder if they ever though about how easily they might have missed this adventure. If they had given in to fear, one word, one bent knee, they would have missed the greatest moment of their lives: the moment they met Jesus in the furnace.

***The Lessons***I’ve got two points to make today, and they come from what I think are the two big moments in this story.

First, **faith means trusting God can deliver, even if He doesn’t.** Back to the speech in **verses 17 and 18**, the one that always gives me tingles:

**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, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”

This is an example of something I call being faithfully realistic. The guys believe that God can save them. They believe that God is the creator of the universe, the God who parts seas and produces manna in the wilderness and knocks down walls and overcomes giants. They believe that God is almighty, and they are faithfully committed to Him. They don’t know how, but they believe God can save them from the fire.

But they are also realistic. Because they know that God is sovereign and they are not. They know that God is writing the script for their lives, not them. S

o while they firmly believe that God CAN save them, they do not know whether or not in this particular instance He WILL, and that’s O.K.

Because even if He doesn’t, that’s not reason for them to doubt Him. Even if He doesn’t, that’s not reason for them to disobey Him. Even if He doesn’t, that’s not reason for them to bow down.

Their faith in God is not conditional on God doing what they want Him to do. They have put aside the desire to tell God what to do.

And we are called to have the same kind of faith. Too often, we think we can negotiate with God. God, if you do this…if you make this thing happen in my life…if you answer this prayer in this specific way…then I’ll do this…I’ll be obedient to you in this way…I’ll change my life to honor you. If God does something…then I’ll do something.

But that’s not faith. God calls us to be obedient even if. God calls us to honor Him no matter what. Our faith in God should not be conditional on God doing what we want Him to do.

And then, second, **sometimes God doesn’t help us avoid the furnace, but He meets us in it**. Sometimes, instead of fixing things so that we can avoid trial, it is in the midst of the trial that God wants to meet us. **Verse 25 again**, this picture of the boys meeting with Jesus:

**25**He said, “Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.”

John Ortberg says this:

Going into the furnace, which looked like the last thing they wanted to do, turned out to be the greatest event of their lives. Ironically, the furnace that looked like death turned out to be the safest place of all. Why? Because God was there. Sometimes, friends, God delivers people from the furnace, but sometimes God delivers in the furnace, and those are the greatest times in your life. (*The Fourth Man in the Furnace*, found on the internet)

The great danger here is that as followers of Christ, we will opt for the comfortable life. There is a danger that the primary goal of our lives will become furnace-avoidance. We will choose the path of least resistance for our lives. We will compromise with the idols and patterns of this world so that our lives will be free of discomfort or suffering or inconvenience. Our prayers become: “God, make my life smooth, make my life easy, make it pleasant.” We try to avoid even the low-level flames.

And what we miss out on is that God wants to meet us in the furnace. Sometimes, it is in the midst of the trials that Jesus wants to show up in the biggest way.

Imagine a calendar. God’s calendar. I’m pretty sure God doesn’t need a calendar. He knows everything and He’s everywhere. But let’s say that God has a calendar, and on the date that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had this showdown with Nebuchadnezzar, God has written on his calendar: “Meet Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the furnace.”

What if they didn’t show up? What if they had bailed, and bent the knee? Then what? They would have missed this whole adventure, the greatest moment in their lives. That whole meeting with Jesus was dependent on their willingness to face the furnace.

So what about you? Where on His calendar might God have your name written down: “Meet you in the furnace”? If He does, are you going to make it? Or are you going to bow to the wrong god?

Maybe God’s been whispering for you to get involved in some form of service, with the church or with the poor, or going overseas. Maybe it involves using some spiritual gift, and you’re afraid to do it. You have been avoiding what feels like the furnace. God is in the furnace. Tell him you’ll meet him there.

Maybe the furnace involves a relationship or financial hardship or giving or sacrifice. I don’t know. I just know that the golden statues in our world tend to involve gods with names like comfort, ease, security, and success. Somewhere along the line, too many people in too many churches have gotten the idea that following God guarantees an easier life.

Or maybe your furnace is some circumstance in your life. Maybe it’s an illness, or the illness of your spouse. Maybe it’s a chronic condition in your child that you pray every day will get better, but maybe it won’t. Even if that circumstance won’t change, can you still praise Him? Can you believe that God, if He doesn’t help you avoid the fire, is going to meet you in it?

John Ortberg again, I’ll finish with this:

This is your day, friends. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had their day...This is your day... I don’t know what furnace you’re facing; I don’t know what this means for you. I just know who will meet you there. He says, “Fear not, though you pass through the flames they will not burn you, they will not destroy you.”  He says, “I’ll meet you in the furnace.”