

Faith in the Furnace

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[0 : 00] Brothers and sisters, let's pray that God would open our eyes and hearts to his word. Lord, teach us now by your word to fear you, to love you, and to worship you, as we sit under it.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Have you heard of Paul Schneider? He was a German man who became a pastor in 1924. Now, Pastor Schneider served in the same church his father served at, and God blessed him with a wife and six children.

But during the Second World War, things took a rather dark turn. Schneider spoke boldly against the Nazi regime, even preaching against them from the pulpit.

And as a result, he was taken from his church, his wife, and his children in 1937 and placed in the Buchenwald concentration camp.

And there he was instructed simply to stop preaching. But Pastor Schneider refused. He preached the gospel to his fellow prisoners and Nazi soldiers alike, often resulting in torture.

[1 : 20] His co-prisoners told him that he could go home and see his family. All you need to do is stop preaching. But he just couldn't do that.

Things only got worse for Pastor Schneider. On Hitler's birthday, the guards hoisted up a Nazi swastika flag and instructed all the prisoners to take off their caps as it was raised.

Everyone did so except, well, you guessed it, Schneider. And what did that earn him? He was stripped naked and whipped severely.

Schneider was punished because he refused to worship that flag. And it's not just the swastika flag, is it?

Throughout history, many dictators have united the masses under symbols of their reign and power. And a whole two and a half millennia ago, King Nebuchadnezzar raised his own symbol of power in Babylon.

[2 : 28] But how did we get to this point? Wasn't King Nebuchadnezzar a changed man after the events of Daniel chapter 2? Just last week, we saw him acknowledging that Yahweh was the God of gods, the Lord of kings, and the revealer of mysteries.

And yet, in verse 1, here he is, making a 27-meter tall and 2.7-meter wide golden eyesore to be worshipped.

Well, you could put yourself in his shoes for a moment. You've been feeling rather anxious about this terrible dream that has been keeping you awake at night.

And then Daniel confirms your fears, interpreting your dream and telling you that your kingdom was part of a great big monstrous statue.

It's the golden part on top. But there are going to be other kingdoms coming after yours. And God is going to set up an everlasting kingdom that will break all the kingdoms before it, including yours.

[3 : 37] What do you do? Well, if you were so prideful that you thought of yourself as a god, and you wanted to stay in power for as long as you can, perhaps you do what King Nebuchadnezzar does here.

Build a fully gold monstrosity of your own. Gold from head to toe, implying my kingdom will never end. So this was a clear rejection of God's kingship.

It was Nebuchadnezzar's way of saying, thank you for that vision, God of Daniel. It was delightfully frightening and all. But bye-bye now. I have my own legacy to build.

So here is Nebuchadnezzar asserting himself as God. For this image is all about Babylon's glory and power, and therefore it's the king's glory and power.

But in verses 4 to 7, the facade falls and it all becomes clear. This is no mere monument, friends. This is a demand for worship from every nation and people.

[4 : 47] This is an idol. And notice then where this idol is set up in verse 1, on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon.

This huge towering structure to unite people of different nations and tongues. Doesn't that ring some alarm bells in your head? It's the Tower of Babel all over again.

In Genesis 11, mankind wanted to stand strong together and make a name for themselves, pushing God out of the picture. And that's why they built the Tower of Babel.

Now Babylon stands to do the same. And make no mistake, Babylon was no small fry kingdom. I mean, just look at how it's described in this chapter.

Full of royal officials, listed out over and over and over and over and over and over again. You've got the pompous musical instruments, the strongest soldiers, and of course, a blazing hot furnace.

[5 : 55] Now in contrast, Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, come from a different kingdom. They're miles from home.

Their temple has been destroyed. And it's all thanks to Babylon. Many of their own people had assimilated into the Babylonian way of life.

It seemed that Daniel and his three friends were part of a passing, or perhaps past, kingdom. Now put yourself in their shoes.

Babylon promises a prosperous future. One that would seem much stronger than Jerusalem. All you need to do is worship the idol.

Join the winning team. And guess what, friends? Idol tactics have not changed. Today, idols still promise you strength, success, comfort, power, you name it, in exchange for your ultimate devotion, your worship.

[7 : 05] Now, remember, friends, that idols are not exclusively statues with names. An idol is anything that you place above God.

It's something that you put in his rightful seat as the creator. So someone who idolizes wealth might end up devoting their family, their church fellowship, their devotional time to a taxing job in pursuit of it.

Or others might choose to just give up and give in to the idol of lust, believing that the satisfaction they feel will last and will fill some sort of deep desire for companionship that they have inside.

However, if you choose to resist your idols, well, you better be ready to face their wrath. Because idols don't just promise good things, they threaten terrible things.

For Pastor Schneider, it's the struggle of enduring prison and torture apart from his family. For other Christians, it may be the rejection that they face from their families at having left the family religion to pursue Christ.

[8 : 26] So these threats place immense pressure on Christians to just give up and give in to idols. So the big question we have today is this, my dear friends.

When the heat is cranked up to maximum, will you give in? Who will you end up bowing to when push comes to shove and when faith meets a furnace?

We can begin by observing the pressure that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were facing in Babylon. Firstly, there was the pressure of authority.

Now I wonder if you feel the same way as you see the title, King Nebuchadnezzar, repeated over and over again in the first half of this chapter. You know, I have a local area manager at the pharmacy I work at, and she's a rather nice lady.

We can just call her Miss Eve. But I can tell you nothing quite strikes fear in my heart as seeing her name pop up on my phone screen unexpected. Now, for those of you who can relate to that, imagine the pressure multiplied if it was our young Dipetuan Agong calling you instead.

[9 : 43] And if you are a big boss here today, you know, think about that the next time you call an employee casually on Saturday morning. But the sheer weight of the title, King Nebuchadnezzar, should already push you to submit.

And don't forget, friends, this is not just some king who is a self-proclaimed big shot. No. He is the man who destroyed your kingdom, Jerusalem. So he's not to be trifled with.

And secondly, there was the pressure of conformity. In verse 7, we find that all the nations and peoples of every language fell down in worship.

Each and every Babylonian civil servant, local or foreigner, gathered alike, was forced to fall once the music played. So imagine, then, that you and your two friends remain standing as every single person in the vicinity falls in worship of the idol.

Whew! Friends, I admit that even I cave under much less peer pressure. And you can imagine their colleagues whispering to them in the heat of the moment, Dude, just get down!

[11:01] I get that you have your own God to worship. I do too. This is a simple formality. You don't have to mean it. Just get down, get this over with, and we can all go home and enjoy Babylonian laksa later.

But have you been in such a situation? Perhaps at work, you were told to bend a few rules to make life easier for everyone? Perhaps alter a few documents, just like everyone else does, for that painless audit?

Or, you know, a cup of coffee can perhaps make an enforcement agent look the other way. Bend the truth a little with a client to close the sale.

It's that colleague or that boss who says to you, Come on, man. I know it doesn't sit right with you. It doesn't sit right with me either, but it's just a job. So do it.

What do you do in that situation? And thirdly, there's this immense pressure from persecution.

[12:08] Verse 8 tells us that there were some astrologers who came and denounced the Jews. To get a better picture, the ESV translates that phrase as maliciously accusing the Jews.

So they had malicious intent that was motivated by jealousy. Their envy becomes apparent in verse 12. Out of all the good local talent, King Nebuchadnezzar seriously put three Jews in charge of our local affairs?

So they had to scheme. They tell King Nebuchadnezzar that these three men are spitting in your face. They might have framed it something like this.

Oh king, you've done so much for these good-for-nothing Jews, and now here they are, thumbing their noses at you, proudly defying you. They don't care for your gods.

They don't care for your laws. They don't care for you. So do something. And finally, of course, there is the intense pressure of death.

[13:12] In verse 13, we find King Nebuchadnezzar furious with rage. He summons the three men and gives them one final chance to submit.

Now, maybe, just maybe, these three men could have mustered up an inhuman amount of sheer willpower to reach this point.

They've withstood the pressure from authority and conformity and persecution. But now, three simple words stare them down. Blazing hot furnace.

Or, in other words, your very life. And you can really start to feel the heat now, can't you?

Imagine you're standing before the king, and he's got his strongest soldiers ready to tie you up and toss you in. And in rage mode, the king asks, at the end of verse 15, what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?

[14:18] Friends, how do you respond? Christians all over the world today face idols who demand our lives, too.

In places like North Korea and China, and even as we prayed for, India, Christians often have to meet in secret to avoid arrest. And while we may not live in a culture that forces us to worship our state, local Christians can sometimes feel some real life-changing pressure, too.

Some may get fired from their job for not doing those unethical things we talked about. Some may get fired simply for being called a Christian. And they may wonder, who will feed my children if that happens?

And for some, being a Christian might mean abuse from your family and your friends and your relatives, being cast from your home, not having a roof over your heads, not having food on your plate.

For some Christian converts, their life in Christ must remain hidden for fear of imprisonment here, too. For these Christians, choosing to worship God is truly a matter of life and death.

[15:35] For these Christians, and for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, how do they decide whom to worship when the heat is cranked up to maximum?

We now come to the true climax of the story. And I'm not talking about the furnace just yet, friends. I'm talking about the response of these three men.

Look with me at verses 16 to 18. King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. 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.

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 set up.

Wow! I mean, can you believe that? If Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were in hot water before, well, now they are well and truly cooked.

[16:44] But make no mistake, my friends, this response is nothing short of miraculous. This is pure faithfulness in the face of certain death.

Or is it? Is it really certain death? Because Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego don't seem to think so.

They know one simple truth, that they should worship the only true God, for only He can save. They know that they should worship the only true God, for only He can save.

And to understand that miraculous faith, we must first recognize what these three men already knew, that the Babylonian kingdom and its idol are a joke.

They are one big joke. You got your Bibles ready? I want you to look with me at the passage again, and as I read some of the following verses, tell me what phrase is repeated.

[17:58] Don't worry, it's not the list of royal officials. Verse 1, King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, and he set it up on the plain of Dura.

The end of verse 2, to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. End of verse 3, the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

The end of verse 5, worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. The end of verse 7, King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

I'm sure you've caught it by now. I could keep going. It's there in verse 12, it's in verse 14, it's in verse 15, it's in verse 18. That phrase, set up. And this repetition, friends, it's not accidental.

So, this thing was made by human hands, and it was set up by a king. So, all that royal pomp, all the music, the regal flair, the ceremony, all for what?

[19:04] For something that is literally manufactured. So, this isn't anything more divine than the decorations you would set up at your child's birthday party.

Here today, gone tomorrow. You wouldn't worship that now, would you? These three men knew that there is no true power behind the image.

No true blessing to be gained from bowing down to it. There's no real security to be found in submitting to some golden figurine that was just mint in box yesterday.

Isn't that also true of so many things we are tempted to trust today? Money is printed by human hands. Status and fame are shaped by human opinion.

Security depends on man-made strength. Conventional success is set up and defined by people. Our idols are, generally speaking, man-made things.

[20:08] Each and every one set up and sustained by men. Here today, gone tomorrow. And in the grand scheme of things, friends, they are nothing.

But beyond the nothingness of the idol, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego also know the sheer something of Yahweh, the reality and power of the God that they worship.

these three men, given their dedication to God, are most certainly familiar with the history of their people. When being forced to worship the idol, they likely remembered how long ago a man named Abraham was called by God in Genesis 12.

How God promised to make him a great nation and did so. They remembered how this God, Abraham's God, had given him descendants so numerous in the distant land of Egypt.

How when they were enslaved there, God saved his people from one fearsome king's hand and brought them into the land that he promised. They drew confidence at the thought of the God who provided his people, judges, to deliver them from surrounding nations again and again and again.

[21:24] They drew strength from the God who raised up kings, not to mention King David and how he conquered the Philistines and the Moabites and so many other nations.

So they could look back and see the one true God, Yahweh, and how he has always kept his promises and showed a mighty, saving hand.

So when King Nebuchadnezzar asked them in verse 15, then what God will be able to rescue you from my hand? You can understand how these three men smiled back and responded, we don't need to give you a proper defense.

Yahweh has been in the business of saving our people for years. He saved us from kings before and you, your majesty, are no different.

But perhaps what's even more amazing about their answer is how they follow that up because in verse 18, they affirm that even if, even if God doesn't rescue them out of the fire, they will not serve Nebuchadnezzar, they will not serve his gods, they will not worship the image of gold.

[22 : 44] In other words, brothers and sisters, these three men are saying, we know that God can save us, we know he is able, but we don't know if he will save us today from the blazing furnace.

And that's okay. We will not forsake Yahweh. Would you be able to say the same? Would you be able to say to God, God, I know that you are able to save me from the hand of those who want to hurt me.

I know that you are able to soften the heart of my parents who are so strongly against you. I know that you are able to support my family if I quit my job because my boss wants me to do terrible things.

I know you are able to heal me from this terminal illness, but I don't know if you will. And that's okay. I will still faithfully worship you because you are the one true God.

That is true genuine faith. Christians nowadays struggle with that kind of faith.

[24 : 04] A faith that can coexist with the uncertainty of what God is going to do. I mean, it's quite the contrary. You might hear people today say things like, I declare that God will heal you.

Or maybe, I declare that God will bind the evil that you are facing. Now, I'm not saying that God can't do those things. But brothers and sisters, what if he doesn't?

Because true faith is not about trying to strong arm your God into moving a mountain for you. true faith is trusting that God's revealed ways are best and sticking to them even when you end up in a furnace.

These three men ended up in a furnace, not because they were 100% certain that God would rescue them from it, but they were 100% certain that when God spoke to their forefathers in the desert, he commanded them, you shall have no other gods before me.

And that was enough. They stood firm for their faith and they defied Nebuchadnezzar. True faith is worshipping God no matter what he allows to happen.

[25 : 21] And that can be frightening, can't it? Which is why that is the true miracle we witness in this passage, the faith of these three men.

As Pastor Walter Luthie put it, that there are three men who do not worship in Nebuchadnezzar's totalitarian state, is a miracle of God.

It's the miracle of the confessing church. That there are three men who are not devoured by the fire is no greater miracle.

Suppose the fiery furnace had consumed them, the real miracle would have happened just the same. brothers and sisters, oh that we would be like these three men.

So that when you are pushed to the brink of suffering for your faithfulness to God, that you recognise that these idols, whatever they are, money, fame, sex, or even good things like family, a stable career, your health, your potential spouse, your comfort, your security, these things have no real lasting power.

[26 : 32] They promise much and they deliver little. Resisting them can make you hurt, yes, but ultimately they are not God and they can never take his place.

A friend of mine reflects this kind of faith. When he started his dream job, he quickly realised it was a Christian nightmare.

He was in a HR role and he was forced to fire people unjustly for some big mega corporation and often lost time for his church and home fellowship groups.

He didn't wait. He quit his job while he was in probation in the midst of COVID without the security of a second job waiting for him. It was a tough few months, I'm sure, but he did it all the same because he trusted that doing right by God was better than giving into the idols of money and comfort.

So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego give themselves up to the fire and then the saving God reveals himself. In verse 19, Nebuchadnezzar is so, so, so angry that he gets the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual and then he gets the beefiest guys to tie them up with the beefiest rope and then he tosses them into the fire.

[28 : 01] And we get some immediate irony here in verse 22. The first to die in this passage are those same macho soldiers who obeyed King Nebuchadnezzar's command.

So submitting to the idol got them killed. And then, and then, silence fills the room. As Nebuchadnezzar putting on his prescription glasses peels, appears into the furnace and he sees not three, but four men walking around.

And the fourth identified as a son of the gods. Now that phrase, a son of the gods, means he is a divine being, no mere human.

Now, whether or not the fourth person in the fire is an appearance of Christ in the Old Testament or just an angel, the fact remains clear. God has rescued Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and God did it in a personal way.

When we see the fellowship in the furnace, it is a living picture of Isaiah 43 verse 2 up on the screen, where God says, when you pass through the waters, I will be with you.

[29 : 19] And when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned. The flames will not set you ablaze.

And friends, their salvation is so complete that once they're out of the fire, nothing is burned. Not their clothes, not their hair, there's not even a smell of smoke on them.

And if you don't find that detail amazing, then you have never been to a barbecue. But once Nebuchadnezzar sees this, he has no choice but to face the clear answer to his question, acknowledging in verse 29, no other God can save in this way.

Brothers and sisters, God allowed these three men to face the fires of Babylon, but stood among them in the flames. Being a Christian doesn't exempt you from the trials in this life, especially not the trials that will come about when you resist your idols.

Because Isaiah 43 verse 2 is not a promise that your life will be devoid of struggle, it's quite the opposite, isn't it? It is a promise that you will encounter waters and fires, but it's also a promise that the same God who brings you there will be with you as you see them through.

[30 : 49] As his children stare down the trials of this world and choose to remain faithful to him, God is glorified. It is through these trials that our faith is displayed the greatest for all to see, even kings of nations.

So, brothers and sisters, we have to also remember then that not everyone is guaranteed a rescue from the furnace, like these three men in the passage. I never told you how Pastor Schneider's story ended, did I?

He never saw his family again. In 1939, Schneider was killed in Buchenwald camp. As far as we know, he was the first pastor to die at the hands of the Nazis.

A little later, another famous pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was killed by the Nazis too. And they are joined by countless other martyrs, many of whom were the apostles.

And their long-standing suffering stands as a testament to the God that they trusted in. Their faith inspires many Christians around the world who suffer today for their faith.

[32 : 03] And God, whom they alone worship, still receives all the glory. So how do we respond to this story, my friends?

Well, first off, worship God. Worship God. Isn't the God who is able to save so effortlessly worthy of all the praise and glory and honor?

Isn't he worthy of our unconditional affection and devotion and love? He holds true power. Idols do not.

So don't trade the real deal for a dollar store figurine. And while Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are good models for us to follow, we must recognize first, brothers and sisters, that the true hero of this story is of course the only true God who saved.

saved. And that's the key to faith in the furnace. Like these three men, you need to know God and know his power to save. You need to know God and know his power to save.

[33 : 15] But this story also presents the wrong way to respond to seeing God in action. And that's the way Nebuchadnezzar responds. You might imagine that seeing something so amazing would turn even the most hardened atheist Christian.

But look at Nebuchadnezzar's response in verse 28 onwards. He acknowledges what he can't deny, that the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego has done something no other God can do.

He even issues a decree to protect God's reputation, and he promoted these three men. Seems impressive, right? And yet, notice what's missing.

He never bows, he never actually gives his worship to God. For all his grand words and gesturing, Nebuchadnezzar still treats Yahweh as just one of many gods.

And does his threat to cut up the detractors of Yahweh carry any weight? I mean, he means well, but we know that Nebuchadnezzar can't keep his promises.

[34 : 25] He couldn't even keep his own soldiers safe, let alone cook three other men. But friends, there is a king who can keep such threats.

That's God himself. As Jesus warns in Matthew 10 verse 28, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul.

Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell. So we must ask ourselves, are we in danger of responding the way King Nebuchadnezzar does here, treating God as one of many?

When you look at God and you see his mighty salvation, do you merely accept it but keep God as one amongst the many idols of your heart?

No. Brothers and sisters, accepting God's salvation means accepting God's kingship and worshipping him alone. And that is when Nebuchadnezzar fails.

[35 : 30] And let's be honest, brothers and sisters, even when we know that God deserves our worship, we are nothing like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Unlike them, we crack under the slightest pressure when facing down our idols. We cave in when they take away our comfort and our joy and our pride. We are quick to worship them when they promise things they cannot provide.

We are two-faced with our God and King. We spit in his face and we thumb our noses at him. In trading our God for these nothing idols, we turn against God in our hearts.

And that grave sin means we are headed for an eternal hellfire, much, much hotter than anything Nebuchadnezzar could muster. But there is, of course, one hero who outshines even Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, Christ Jesus.

You see, Jesus stood his ground against Satan when Satan offered him all the kingdoms of the world in the wilderness. Satan offered him a shortcut to glory, a way to escape the pain and suffering of the cross.

[36 : 42] But he responded, it is written, you shall worship the Lord your God and him alone shall you serve. Doesn't that sound familiar?

He didn't crack under the immense pressure when the people who tried to force him to become a king in their own image tried to do so. He didn't crack under the immense pressure in the Garden of Gethsemane where his sweat drops fell like blood for you and I.

He didn't crack under the pressure of the Roman Empire and the malicious crowds who lied to crucify him in a sham trial. And when Jesus gave up his body and shed his blood on the cross for our sin and shame, he did so alone.

Alone, he felt the full weight of the Father's burning fury fall upon our sin which he took upon himself. Alone, he cries out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why did he do all that? To rescue you from eternal hellfire. He did that so you wouldn't be alone in your earthly trials.

[37 : 54] Your greatest ordeal has been dealt with. If you know the risen Christ as your King and Saviour, then you can be certain that you have escaped the fiery judgment to come.

In exchange, you have a secure hope. in a future heavenly home with all the saints and all the martyrs who have come before us.

And you know the God who personally sticks with you in the midst of your trials and tribulations today. Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us.

You are united in Christ. You are in him. He is in you. He even gives you the promised Holy Spirit. He empowers you to withstand your trials and temptations.

He empowers you to endure. My brothers and sisters, that is the God that you know. That is the God who has saved you.

[38 : 57] That is the God that you look upon when your idols are threatening you today. God will look back at the God who let their forefathers out of Egypt.

But when you are pressured by the world around you to forsake God, you look to that same God. You look to Christ, your Savior, and you know that whatever happens to you, one day you will see eternity with God.

And in light of that, even if it costs you your livelihood, all your life, you can stand firm and choose to worship God rather than these false idols.

We don't know what the future will bring. In the decades to come, who knows, maybe it will become criminal to utter the name of Jesus in public. But even if they threaten to starve you, to shoot you, to burn you, may we together with the saints, look to Christ, who achieved what a false idol in Babylon could not.

Christ has saved a multitude of nations and tongues, and united them in one true eternal kingdom to come. So let's boldly declare in the face of these nothing idols and their servants, we will not serve you, nor your gods.

[40 : 22] We will serve Yahweh, because he is the only one true God. And no other God can save like he can. Let's pray.

Our dear Heavenly Father, we thank you for sending your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ, who rescues us from our idolatrous sin.

We confess to you that we so often keep idols in our hearts. Every day, we give in to them, and we are not deserving of your mercy or grace.

But we thank you that through Christ, we now have a secure hope for an everlasting future with you. So please help the many Christians around the world today, and maybe even in this very hall, who are facing trials and tribulations on account of your Son's name.

Strengthen them, Lord, help them to look to Christ and to stand firm. Help them to continue worshipping you. Help us all to do the same when troubles rise.

[41 : 34] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.