

The Fourth Man in the Fire

Daniel 3:19-30

¹⁹ Then Nebuchadnezzar was full of fury, and the expression on his face changed toward Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. He spoke and commanded that they heat the furnace seven times more than it was usually heated. ²⁰ And he commanded certain mighty men of valor who were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, and cast them into the burning fiery furnace. ²¹ Then these men were bound in their coats, their trousers, their turbans, and their other garments, and were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. ²² Therefore, because the king's command was ^[c]urgent, and the furnace exceedingly hot, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. ²³ And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace.

²⁴ Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished; and he rose in haste and spoke, saying to his ^[d]counselors, "Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?"

They answered and said to the king, "True, O king."

²⁵ "Look!" he answered, "I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the^[e] Son of God."

²⁶ Then Nebuchadnezzar went near the ^[f]mouth of the burning fiery furnace and spoke, saying, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here." Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego came from the midst of the fire. ²⁷ And the satraps, administrators, governors, and the king's counselors gathered together, and they saw these men on whose bodies the fire had no power; the hair of their head was not singed nor were their garments affected, and the smell of fire was not on them.

²⁸ Nebuchadnezzar spoke, saying, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, who sent His Angel^[g] and delivered His servants who trusted in Him, and they have frustrated the king's word, and yielded their bodies, that they should not serve nor worship any god except their own God! ²⁹ Therefore I make a decree that any people, nation, or language which speaks anything amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego shall be cut in pieces,

and their houses shall be made an ash heap; because there is no other God who can deliver like this.”

³⁰ *Then the king ^[12]promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego in the province of Babylon.*

As we start today's message, I want us to notice a couple of things about the structure of Daniel up to this point. We are finishing chapter 3 and our persons of note up to this point in the Book up to this time have been Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and of course there has been Nebuchadnezzar. There are a few other people mentioned who for lack of a better expression played supporting roles, but notice a couple of things. Chapter 1 ends with Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego standing before the King and being recognized as 10 times more excellent than any of the other of the wise in Babylon.

Chapter 2 see's Nebuchadnezzar having his dream and demanding that his wisemen not only tell the meaning of the dream, they must also tell the King the dream. If this could not be done they would be executed. Well Daniel and his three friends go to the Lord and he reveals the secret of the dream to Daniel. He gives the dream and the interpretation to Nebuchadnezzar and at the end of Chapter 2 we see Daniel and his three friends are all promoted to positions of honor.

As chapter 3 closes, Nebuchadnezzar has once again played a large part. Yes he gives praise to God at the end of Chapter 2, but then in chapter 3 he has once again attempted to interpose himself into the mix. He has caused to be formed an image and he has demanded that all of the wise in Babylon, should bow down and worship the image. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refuse, and last week we saw them stand before the King and they let him know that it did not matter what he threatened them with, they would not bow to this image.

King Nebuchadnezzar in his rage and fury has them cast into the flaming furnace, and that is where we come to the text today. Spoiler alert, they are not burned but rather they are saved by a mysterious 4th man in the fire, After their release, they once again are brought before the king and they testify of the greatness of God, and we see Nebuchadnezzar give praise to God and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are promoted...again.

I want us to see that there is a steady stream of faithfulness by these men and also a continual progress of promotion in the eyes of both God and man, but the promotion always comes after a time of what I would call severer testing. And I also want us to see that Nebuchadnezzar continues to give lip service to God, and yet his time of true testing is still yet in the future.

Last week we saw Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego respond to the command by the King to bow before his image with these words:

“O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. ¹⁷ If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. ¹⁸ But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up.”

This stand against the unrighteous command of the King, this stand against what everyone else was doing, this stand against the prevailing wisdom of the day was a classic example of what true faith is. Today there are many, especially many in the church who speak of faith, and yet very often the faith they speak of is not defined in a Biblical way.

The faith that these men had was faith in God and in God’s perfect plan. There is a teaching today that teaches that faith is a force. If you can just muster enough faith, essentially faith in faith, then you can overcome any situation. Very often in Christian circles we link the effectiveness of our faith to how strongly we can convince ourselves that there will be a positive outcome to a particular situation. We decide to let no doubt enter our minds. Some of us go through intricate rituals to convince ourselves that we have pumped up our faith enough for God to honor our desires. We sing, pray, read Scripture, scold ourselves for wavering on second thoughts, and try to convince ourselves that we believe as much as is necessary to get God to do what we think is right. I want to be clear, this kind of faith which is not trust in God’s wisdom and power is trust in your own works.

The faith of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had absolutely nothing to do with trusting in their own work their trust and their obedience was trust in God and God alone.

Another thing we learn about faith in God is that faith in God is learning to trust in God's will and God's direction we do not write our own ticket as I have heard said. In fact true faith often takes us to places we do not want to go.

Many of us are led through the valley of the shadow of death, and I have heard Christians speak about this valley as though if you just had faith, you could be back in the green pastures. Faith is not trusting in what we want to happen, faith is trusting God even when he leads us in places where we do not want to be.

I want us to notice that in rage and fury Nebuchadnezzar, according to the text had his countenance changed toward these young men. He ordered that the furnace would be heated seven times its normal heat and then he ordered 'certain men of valor' to take Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and throw them into the furnace. The flames were so hot that the men who threw them in consumed by the heat. We know nothing of these men of valor other than they were those who the king called on to carry out the task of enforcement of his evil edict. Since they were the enforcers of the Kings law, I am sure they thought of all people they would be safe, but whenever you are outside of the will of God, you are anything but safe.

One of the questions I ask myself as I read this text was why was the King so angry? I mean there is the obvious answer. He is the king, who are these idiots that would stand against him? I mean we see this even today in the mandates that our government often issues. Our civil government, long ago felt like it should be involved in the day to day operations of life in this country. So when they issue a mandate that is overreaching and evil not only do officials get angry when someone would dare stand against them, most people, even many Christians, get angry when this happens. Remember Francis Schaeffer's warning to Dr. R.C. Sproul that the great danger facing American Christians in the coming years was Statism. The idea that to the state belonged authority over every aspect of our lives. R.J. Rushdoony recognized and wrote in 1973 in His Institutes of Biblical Law that the vehicle that the State would use to gain this control was the vehicle of public health. Listen to what he said in brief while speaking of the third commandment:

"The best statement of a positive concept of law was the Roman legal principle: the health of the people is the highest law. The principle has so thoroughly passed into the world's legal systems that to question it is to challenge a fundamental premise of the state. The Roman principle is basic to the American development, in that the courts have interpreted the 'general welfare' clause of the U.S. Constitution in terms radically alien to the original intent in 1787.

A negative concept of law confers a double benefit: first, it is practical, in that a negative concept of law deals realistically with a particular evil. It states, 'Thou shalt not steal,' or, 'Thou shalt not bear false witness.' A negative statement thus deals with a particular evil directly and plainly: it prohibits it, makes it illegal. The law thus has a modest function; the law is limited and therefore the state is limited. The state, as the enforcing agency, is limited to dealing with evil, not controlling all men.

Second, and directly related to this first point, a negative concept of law insures liberty: except for the prohibited areas, all of man's life is beyond the law, and the law is of necessity indifferent to it. If the commandment says, 'Thou shalt not steal,' it means that the law can only govern theft: it cannot govern or control honestly acquired property. When the law prohibits blasphemy and false witness, it guarantees that all other forms of speech have their liberty. The negativity of the law is the preservation of the positive life and freedom of man.

But, if the law is positive in its function, and if the health of the people is the highest law, then the state has total jurisdiction to compel the total health of the people. The immediate consequence is a double penalty on the people. First, an omniscient state is posited, and a totalitarian state results. Everything becomes a part of the state's jurisdiction, because everything can potentially contribute to the health or the destruction of the people. Because the law is unlimited, the state is unlimited. It becomes the business of the state, not to control evil, but to control all men. Basic to every totalitarian regime is a positive concept of the function of law.

This means, second, that no area of liberty can exist for man; there is then no area of things indifferent, of actions, concerns, and thoughts which the state cannot govern in the name of public health. To credit the state with the ability to minister to the general welfare, to govern for the general and total health of the people, is to assume an omniscient state, and to assume an all-competent state is to assume an incompetent people. The state then becomes a nursemaid to a citizenry whose basic character is childish and immature. The theory that law must have a positive function assumes thus that the people are essentially childish."

Now convinced that Nebuchadnezzar suffered the common malady of all people. We tend to think that whatever we do is right. After all Nebuchadnezzar had been told by the God of these three young men, that he was the head of gold and now they have the audacity to stand against him. But the reminder to him that his rule was not absolute, and that there was a God higher than himself was too much for him to bear. This is the common problem of all sinful men, we do not like to be reminded that we must answer to God.

In verses 16-18 last week we saw Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego placing themselves fully into the hand of God.

"O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. ¹⁷ If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. ¹⁸ But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up."

They fully knew the consequences for their action and they understood rightly that to trust in God even in the fire was more safe than to place their trust in the hand of the King who they had found great favor with up to this point. As he taunted and mocked them in verse 15, 'Who is this god who will deliver you out of my hands?' They made it abundantly clear who they trusted.

And so this is when the trial began. When they are cast into the fire, they were cast there as an example. They were cast there by the King that all would see what happens to those who come against him. They were cast there in vengeance and to satisfy the King's wrath, and they were

cast there in punishment for the audacity they had in claiming salvation by anyone other than Nebuchadnezzar. But then this is where the story takes a little twist.

I can imagine Nebuchadnezzar looking into the furnace from the outside. Perhaps he begins counting on his fingers. One...Two... Three... Four, wait a minute....Four? I am certain we only threw in three. As he struggles with his elementary math he begins to see a problem. Where he had only thrown in three men there was now an extra person in the fire. So why was the fourth man? An interesting twist here, the text does not say. But Nebuchadnezzar tells us what he looked like.

²⁵ “Look!” he answered, “I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.”

You know the commentaries and people through out history have been divided as to what this means. When Nebuchadnezzar said he looks like the Son of God there are those who say what he meant was he looked like a son of God. So this was an angel. Others say that Nebuchadnezzar saw a son of one of the Babylonian deities. But there is an other view, and this really troubles a lot of the unbelieving men. That is the view that this event was a Theophany.

A basic definition of a theophany is a physical appearance of a deity. There were three basic types of theophanies in the Old Testament. There were first Visible manifestations. These usually involved the Angel of the Lord appearing in human form, but could also include other visible encounters such as the fire and smoke on Mount Sinai.

Second there were auditory manifestations are indicated by the many “and the LORD said unto...” statements found throughout the Old Testament, but also include unique encounters like the “still small voice” that spoke to Elijah in the cave in 1 Kings 19.

And the third type of Theophany were those that took place in visions and dreams such as Jacob’s ladder dream, later in Daniel, he will see a man in linen, and Zechariah sees a man among the myrtle trees.

I personally believe that every visible theophany in the Scripture was also a Christophany. A Pre-Incarnate appearance of the second person of the Trinity. For example when Abraham was visited by the three men in Genesis 18 he addresses the man he is speaking to with the divine name. Later two angels appear to Lot and tell him to flee from the City of Sodom. I believe these were the two angels who were standing with the pre-incarnate Christ as he brought judgment on Sodom.

All this being said, I believe that the one that looked like the Son of God in the fire with these three Hebrew children, was the Son of God. I want us to notice something. This fourth man never says anything. I will not go so far as to say He never does anything, because as the the satraps, administrators, governors, and the king's counselors gathered together, to see these men in the fire *they saw on their bodies the fire had no power; the hair of their head was not singed nor were their garments affected, and the smell of fire was not on them.*

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had placed their trust in God, and God had not kept them from the fire. But he had kept the fire from doing them any harm. God did not let them go through their time of trial alone, but he went through it with them.

Here these words from 1 Peter 1:6-9

⁶ In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, ⁸ whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, ⁹ receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls.

We have already seen that the fire didn't kill them, but they were walking around in the furnace.

²⁶ Then Nebuchadnezzar went near the [□]mouth of the burning fiery furnace *and* spoke, saying, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come *here*." Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego came from the midst of the fire.

At this point my mind automatically goes to the earlier facetious question that Nebuchadnezzar had earlier posed to these young men. "Who *is* the god who will deliver you from my hands?"

They did not even have to speak an answer to this question. God not only delivered them, but in verse 28 we see Nebuchadnezzar once again praising the greatness of the one true God. Again, this is not yet indicative of a changed heart. But he is still acknowledging the greatness of God. “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, who sent His Angel^[g] and delivered His servants who trusted in Him, and they have frustrated the king’s word, and yielded their bodies, that they should not serve nor worship any god except their own God!” And in the end he once again promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

This account is so relevant to our day. Just like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego we too live in exile in a strange and a foreign land. In 1 Peter 2:11-12 Peter calls all Christians “sojourners and exiles” in this world, ¹¹ Beloved, I beg *you* as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, ¹² having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by *your* good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation. The author of Hebrews when he goes through what my Father always called the faith Hall of Fame in verse 13 of Chapter 11 that ¹³ *These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off^[e] were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.*

In our time of exile we will go through trials of various kinds. The world tries to get us to live by its will instead of God’s will for us. And this often puts us in a bind where we have to choose. And as Peter reminded us earlier we are tested by fire. Romans 12 tells us to not be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

As we read this account and as we learn from the example provided for us let us always remember that Faith is trusting in God and His plan. Just as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego made the right choice and stuck with it despite the rage of many and the threat to their lives, so we need to make right choices. We can’t let difficult circumstances lead us to be unfaithful to God.

Galatians 6:9 says, “And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.” Often during times of testing and trial it is easy to grow weary in doing what is right, but we must remain steadfast. James 1:2 says, “count it all joy when you fall into various trials.” We must make right choices and stick with them, even when it is terribly difficult.

Let us also learn that where we place our trust matters. “Some trust in horses and some trust in chariots, but we will trust in the name of our God.” Just as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, in full faith, gave their lives into God’s hands in their trial, so should we because God is more than able to take care of us too.

Hebrews 13:5-6 is a strong confession of faith, ⁵ *Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have.* For He Himself has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” ⁶ So we may boldly say:

“The LORD *is* my helper;
I will not fear.
What can man do to me?”

Whether God delivers us from our trial or not, we know that God will take care of us and bless us.

In Isaiah 43 in verse 1-3 we read:

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called *you* by your name;
You *are* Mine.
² When you pass through the waters, I *will be* with you;
And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you.
When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned,
Nor shall the flame scorch you.
³ For I *am* the LORD your God,
The Holy One of Israel, your Savior;

Notice, he did not say you will never pass through the water. He did not say they would not have to go through the rivers, He did not say they would not have to go through the fire. But He did say He would be with them through it. He is our savior.

Just as he was with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fire so he will be with you. Just like them, we do not know how God saves his people. We just know that when our trust is in Him He will be there and He will deliver. It may not always be in the way we expect, but the fourth man in the fire will protect us better than we can ever protect ourselves. God is faithful and he will come through.

1 Corinthians 10:13 says, "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your ability, but with the testing he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."

When you go through difficulties, remember you are not the first to do so. There are many examples in the Scriptures that can help us. This morning, let's learn from the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and be strengthened to endure and overcome just as they did.