Lesson 7

Our Always Faithful God

Purpose

To help God’s people endure in faith despite the consequences.

Hearing the Word

The background Text for this lesson is Daniel 3:1-30.

Daniel 3:19-30 (NIV)
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.
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.”
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!” 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.
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.”
30 Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon

Daniel 3:19-30 (KJV)
19 Then was Nebuchadnezzar full of fury, and the form of his visage was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: therefore he spake, and commanded that they should heat the furnace one seven times more than it was wont to be heated.
20 And he commanded the most mighty men that were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace.
21 Then these men were bound in their coats, their hosen, and their hats, and their other garments, and were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace.
22 Therefore because the king’s commandment was urgent, and the furnace exceeding hot, the flames of the fire slew those men that took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.
23 And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace.
24 Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astonished, and rose up in haste, and spake, and said unto his counsellors, Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? They answered and said unto the king, True, O king.

25 He answered and said, Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.

26 Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the mouth of the burning fiery furnace, and spake, and said, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, ye servants of the most high God, come forth, and come hither. Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, came forth of the midst of the fire.

27 And the princes, governors, and captains, and the king's counsellors, being gathered together, saw these men, upon whose bodies the fire had no power, nor was an hair of their head singed, neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire had passed on them.

28 Then Nebuchadnezzar spake, and said, Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who hath sent his angel, and delivered his servants that trusted in him, and have changed the king's word, and yielded their bodies, that they might not serve nor worship any god, except their own God.

29 Therefore I make a decree, That every people, nation, and language, which speak anything amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made a dunghill: because there is no other God that can deliver after this sort.

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

DAILY BIBLE STUDY

| July 13  | Exodus 20:1-6 |
| July 14  | Psalm 34:1-10 |
| July 15  | Isaiah 43:1-7 |
| July 16  | Daniel 3:1-12 |
| July 17  | Daniel 3:13-18 |
| July 18  | Daniel 3:19-25 |
| July 19  | Daniel 3:26-30 |

Seeing the Need

In his book Profiles in Courage, then-Senator John F. Kennedy profiled the careers of eight United States Senators who through their sacrificial and unpopular positions brought change to the nation. Kennedy highlighted the careers of persons like John Quincy Adams, whose political views caused him to break away from the Federalist Party; Edmund G. Ross, who unpopularly voted to acquit a sitting president; and Robert A. Taft, who openly criticized the process of trying Nazi war criminals. The consequences of voting and living out their consciences often brought public ostracism, severe criticism, and even political ruin for some. Kennedy wanted his readers to know that courage that brings about constructive change for the good of all goes across social and party lines. His book went on to later win a Pulitzer Prize for short biographies.

In memory of her father, Caroline Kennedy and others later established the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award and Foundation. The purpose of this non-
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profit is to recognize public officials on all levels of government who demonstrate bravery and integrity in civic leadership. At one of the Foundation’s annual events, Congressman John Lewis was given this prestigious award. Addressing the conference, Lewis began with a brief overview of his life. He grew up in rural Alabama and recalled the days of overt racism and segregation. He personally experienced the humiliation of segregated bathrooms, restaurants, and substandard public schools. Frustrated with the hypocrisy of “with liberty and justice for all” as it played out in society, Lewis began participating in civil rights movements in an attempt to find a way to do the right thing. Lewis concluded his remarks by telling his audience that regardless of the consequences, he always felt free and liberated in heart when he did the right thing.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s fiery furnace experience showed them that while doing right can be trying, God is always with the righteous. God is also with us.

Worship Demanded

Our Scripture begins by noting that “Nebuchadnezzar was filled with rage, and his face twisted beyond recognition” in anger towards Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (Daniel 3:19). However, things did not start off this way. In Daniel 2, we read that after Daniel had revealed the mystery of Nebuchadnezzar’s agonizing dream, he found favor in the king’s eyes. Daniel was rewarded with lavish gifts and promoted as “ruler over all the province of Babylon and chief minister over all Babylon’s sages” (Daniel 2:48). Further, “At Daniel’s urging, the king appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to administer the province of Babylon” (verse 49). This was no doubt seen as a great and admirable achievement in the eyes of many of their fellow Jews. It was, in retrospect, the hand of God moving on behalf of the righteous to enable them to sing a new song in a strange land.

After Daniel had given the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, it appears that this king’s heart swelled with pride and a sense of self-importance. Daniel 3 opens by telling us that Nebuchadnezzar “made a gold statue ... ninety feet high and nine feet wide” (verse 1). This golden statue would alert the nations of the world that Nebuchadnezzar’s greatness towered over all others. He then “ordered the chief administrators, ministers, governors, counselors, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and all the provincial officials to assemble and come for the dedication of the statue that he had set up” (verse 2). In addition, a full ensemble of “horn, pipe, zither, lyre, harp, flute, and every kind of instrument” called the people to “bow down and worship the statue” (verse 5). It would be a grand and unforgettable event to say the least. However, and unbeknown to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the stage had been set for the world to see that God is always with the faithful.
Nebuchadnezzar’s anger towards Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego grew out of their direct refusal to bow in homage and offer worship to this gold statue. Their refusal to bow was not arrogant and boisterous, but calm and unwavering. “We will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you’ve set up,” they told the king (verse 18), even though he told them they would “be thrown straight into the furnace of flaming fire” if they didn’t (verse 15). They did not know God’s plan for the moment, but they were confident that regardless of the outcome, God would have the final word on the matter. Nebuchadnezzar ordered the furnace to be “heated to seven times its normal heat” (verse 19). This act would in his mind answer the question he had asked these three men earlier: “Then what god will rescue you from my power?” (verse 15).

We do not always know how circumstances will turn out for us when we are obedient to God. But we do know that God loves us and is always on the side of the righteous. Our timing is not always God’s timing. Neither is our understanding and God’s understanding of deliverance the same. This is what God meant when he said through the prophet Isaiah to Israel, “My plans aren’t your plans, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD” (Isaiah 55:8). God’s infinite ways are beyond and higher than our finite and limited ways. Our best choice, then, is to humbly subject ourselves in faith to a loving God who sees beyond every negative situation and promises our victory in times of crisis. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego may not have known the outcome of their plight, but they did by faith know who held their future.

Nebuchadnezzar’s out-of-control pride caused his downfall. Pride and arrogance are serious temptations in the lives of every believer. This is especially true for leaders. This subtle and sometimes unassuming sin can wreak havoc in our lives. Proverbs 16:18 warns, “Pride comes before disaster, and arrogance before a fall.” Self-esteem and ego are not always the same. Healthy self-esteem might say, “I am an important person in the room,” while arrogant ego would say, “I am the only important person in the room.” One leads to respect for self and respect for others, while the other leads to a superior and demeaning attitude toward others. Nebuchadnezzar’s pride and sense of self-importance caused him to disrespect and overlook the gifts and graces of these three Hebrew men.

**How might we address the issue of spiritual pride?**

**Four, Not Three**

It seems that deep in his heart, King Nebuchadnezzar did have some sense of respect for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. After their three-year training was complete, “he found no one as good as Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah [their Hebrew names]. So they took their place in the king’s service” (Daniel 1:19). Saving face before the crowd, however, was on trial, so he asserted his pride and inflated ego. We
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can only try to get into the mindset of this ruthless king who would do almost anything for fame and power. However, the fiery furnace was the means through which Nebuchadnezzar would see true power—that is, God’s power!

“So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were bound, still dressed in all their clothes, and thrown into the furnace of flaming fire,” a fire so intense that it killed the men charged with sending the three Hebrew men into it (verses 21-22). But suddenly, the king “jumped up in shock” and asked those assisting him, “Didn’t we throw three men, bound, into the fire?” (verse 24). Had one of the strongmen ordered to deliver these three into the furnace accidentally fallen into the fire? We see Nebuchadnezzar’s insistence that something was out of order in his frantic call for these officials to “Look!” The king’s description of what he saw was vivid and detailed. He saw three go into the furnace, but now he saw four. They all were walking around, no one was hurt, and the fourth person looked “like one of the gods.” This descriptive phrase may have been drawn from the appearance of one of several pagan gods that likely was housed in the palace. What Nebuchadnezzar saw clearly got his attention and called him to investigate the matter.

The earliest Greek translation of the Hebrew text of this event (called the Septuagint) says that when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were in the burning furnace, they were singing. This would have made this event even more dramatic and spectacular to these onlookers. It would also have testified to the power of God on behalf of the faithful. It may recall for us Paul and Silas, locked in the dungeon of a Macedonian jail, who prayed and sang hymns at midnight (Acts 16:16-40). This brought comfort to them as God heard their praises and delivered them in their crisis. Certainly this has a pertinent word for us today when we find ourselves in the dungeons and fiery furnaces of life. Many times God delivers us “out” of some situations and “through” others. Either way, God gets the glory and our faith renders us victors.

The amazement of this fiery trial was that after it was all over, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were unharmed. Verse 27 says that “the fire hadn’t done anything to them; their hair wasn’t singed; their garments looked the same as before; they didn’t even smell like fire!” Wow! God’s message of deliverance is clear for all to see. There was no doubt in the minds of these palace leaders that something miraculous and awe-inspiring had taken place. What God and God alone had done for these three Hebrew men left a lasting and life-changing mark on its onlookers.

Witnessing to our faith often goes beyond words. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were not preachy or attempting to change the heart of the king and those around him. They were not demeaning towards the gods of Babylon. On the other hand, they were neither apologetic nor compromising in their faith and loyalty to the God of their ances-
tors. Many times the most powerful witness to our faith is when people observe how God works in our lives. Little disappointments and how we react to them before others can speak a positive and persuasive word to others.

Nebuchadnezzar heard their testimony but saw the power of their witness played out before them.

How have you experienced times of God’s deliverance in your life?

Nebuchadnezzar Praises

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s fiery furnace ordeal left a lasting impression on King Nebuchadnezzar. It brought about a total change in his attitude and behavior toward them. He went from criticism and condemnation to praise and adoration for the God of these young men. He publicly called for all who were present to respect, honor, and praise the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Daniel 3:28). We do not know how this experience played out in reference to the king’s command to bow to the golden statue. However, no one could deny that something miraculous had happened that commanded the attention and respect of everyone present.

Nebuchadnezzar next began to interpret his understanding of this fiery furnace event. First, God “sent his messenger to rescue his servants who trusted him,” he said (verse 28). They had put their hope and trust in the God of their ancestors and God had delivered them for all to see. Next, Nebuchadnezzar honored the boldness these three men, who ignored the king’s order and decree at the expense of possible death. Nebuchadnezzar saw that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s actions were not a show of arrogant and misinformed stupidity, but confident faith and trust in God. Such faith at the very least had to be respected and honored. The miracle at the fiery furnace changed government policy and the social and spiritual course of an empire.

We may not always approve or agree with the actions of others. However, there are times when the tenacity and determination of watching someone reach his or her goal overrides what the person accomplishes. Specifically, I recall a politician running for an office who was not of my political party. Out of party loyalty I did not cast my vote for this person. However, I could not help but to appreciate and respect this person’s diligence and sacrifice in campaigning for office. This person’s uncompromising and untiring actions demanded the respect of others and even opponents.

Nebuchadnezzar may never actually have bowed and worshipped the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, but he definitely and unapologetically gave respect and honor to God. It is my sincere hope that we prayerfully hear and put into practice the message of this biblical event. God is still the God of deliverance from life’s most difficult and trying situations. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s story hails this truth for all to hear. Crisis will always be a part of life, yet God’s promise to the faithful remains.
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Take a few moments this week and reflect on a crisis in your life and how your faith in God helped you to overcome the situation. God brought you out of your fire! It will be meditation well worth it.

*What memories of past victories bring praise to your heart?*

Lord, we worship you as the God who meets us with comfort and peace in life’s most trying times. Help us to hold on to your promise so that we might see your grace; in Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.