

Daniel: Living by Faith in the Real World

The Furnace

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Last week we began a four part series of messages on the book of Daniel. This book describes a time when the Israelites had been conquered by the Babylonian Empire. Daniel was among an elite group of potential leaders captured and carried away from his home to live in Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylonia, had a strategy of indoctrinating young leaders of the nations he conquered. He sought to assimilate them into the Babylonian way of life. Some of the Israelites resisted this process and isolated themselves from the Babylonians. Others complied fully with the process and adopted all the Babylonian ways. Daniel and his friends found another way to respond. They sought to cooperate as far as possible with the Babylonians but without compromise of their faith. This presented them with the opportunity to express their faith to their captors including the king!

King Nebuchadnezzar built an image of gold—ninety feet tall and nine feet wide. He called all the leaders of the nations in the empire to come and worship the image. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego failed to show up. Some of their enemies told the King that they failed to show up. The king sent for them and ordered them to fall on their knees and worship the image. If they refused they would be thrown into a fiery furnace. They told the king that they worshipped only one God and would worship the gold image. Let's see how the king responds.

Daniel 3:19-30

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 ²⁰and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. ²¹So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. ²²The 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, ²³and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.

²⁴Then 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, O king."

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

²⁶Nebuchadnezzar 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, ²⁷and 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.

²⁸Then 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. ²⁹Therefore 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."

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

The Babylonian empire was a pluralistic society, much like our own. The Babylonians believed that there were many gods and all of them were valid. The Jewish people believed that there was only one Creator God. This difference created tension between both groups. In our society there is tension between Christians who believe there is one God. Jesus speaks rather exclusively when he says: "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." There are so many religions in the world today. How can one religion claim to have the truth about the only God? How can we be sure we are right? It sounds so intolerant to say there is only one God. Some people reject the Christian faith because of its exclusive claims.

Others reject the Christian faith because we believe that God is loving and just. They say: "How can God be loving and just and allow all the suffering in the world." These are two good questions. Is there only one God? If God is loving, how can he allow suffering. Chapter three in Daniel addresses both of these questions.

Is there only one God? Daniel and his friends sought to cooperate with their captors but without compromising their core beliefs. When Nebuchadnezzar built the image of gold and demanded that everyone worship it, he forced the Jewish people into taking a stand. What was this image? We don't know. The Bible only tells us that it was an image of gold. We can tell from the passage what it represented. King Nebuchadnezzar said to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego: "Is it true, that you do not serve my gods or worship

the image of gold I have set up?” He links worshipping his gods with the gold image. The image represents all the Babylonian gods. Nebuchadnezzar invites all the leaders of the conquered nations to come and worship the image of gold. Nebuchadnezzar appeared to be a tolerant king. He allowed his subjects to worship whatever gods they wanted to worship. However, in addition to whatever god they worship he expects them to worship the Babylonian gods as well. This is his way of forcing them to admit that all gods are real and valid. Why is this important? Nebuchadnezzar wants peace in his empire. He wants to assimilate people into the Babylonian way of life. The Babylonians are accepting of all gods—they expect their subjects to be accepting of their gods. This was a way to glue the empire together—forced religious tolerance. No one would be allowed to believe that their god was the only god. If groups were allowed to believe that they had the only true God, then they will judge other groups. They will seek to bring the other groups around to their way of thinking. They may oppress groups that disagree with them.

The message of Daniel is incredibly relevant to the real world we live in. We live in a pluralistic, multi-ethnic society. We are no longer viewed as a Christian nation. There are many religions and beliefs even right here in Lubbock. How do we get along? The majority of people believe that the way to get along is to affirm that all religious beliefs are valid. They view people who believe in only one God as the problem in our society. If you believe there is only one God—yours—you will seek to impose your views on everyone else. You are intolerant of others. There is tension between those who say there is only one God and those who say that all gods are valid.

The pluralist thinkers say that those who believe in one God should not try to convert people to their way of thinking—to impose their views on others. This is essentially the message of Nebuchadnezzar. “You are free to worship as long as you include the

gods of Babylon in your worship—admit that they are real and valid by bowing to the gold image.” He did not want anyone claiming to have an exclusive god and attempting to convert others to their beliefs about this god. When someone tells us that we should not try to convert others to our way of thinking, are they not trying to convert us to their way of thinking? They want us to accept that the only valid belief is to accept all other beliefs as valid. They are telling us there is only one right way to look at god—and that is to declare all gods and all beliefs as equally valid.

If you are truly tolerant, then you have no problem with persons who believe in only one god and seek to convince others of the need to believe in their god. On the surface Nebuchadnezzar appeared to be tolerant. He gave people freedom to worship whatever god they wanted, yet he expected everyone to accept all gods as valid. If you did not, then he would throw you into a fiery furnace. Pluralists today will not throw you into a fiery furnace, but they will label you a bigot and ostracize you if you believe in only one God. That is not very tolerant behavior. Even after Nebuchadnezzar sees the miracle of the three men surviving the furnace, he remains intolerant. He says:

Daniel 3:28-29

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. ²⁹Therefore 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."

Notice he says that it is the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—not his God. Anyone who speaks against their god will cut into pieces. He continues his intolerance—just 180 degrees in the opposite direction. On the outside, Nebuchadnezzar looked like an advocate of tolerance, but he was extremely intolerant of anyone who

disagreed with him. On the outside the Christian faith looks intolerant because it claims to worship the one true God. But at the core of the Christian faith is true tolerance. At the core of the Christian faith is the cross. On the cross Jesus died for everyone—even those who opposed him. He taught us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. We respond to intolerance with love and forgiveness. Jesus demonstrated that it is possible to have an exclusive faith in One God that is truly tolerant. The claim that the Christian faith is intolerant does not hold up.

Let's look at the other reason persons give for rejecting faith in the Christian God. If God is loving, just how could he allow suffering in the world? The fiery furnace gives a response to that question. Three men are thrown unjustly into the furnace. When Nebuchadnezzar looks in the furnace he sees a fourth man. He describes his appearance "like a son of the gods." Even in the raging flames, he could evidence that this person was a supernatural being. Who was it? Nebuchadnezzar got as close as he could: "a son of the gods." Most commentators believe that the fourth man was not just a son of the gods—but the Son of God. This is Jesus entering the furnace before he would be born as a baby in Bethlehem. This incident with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego foreshadowed what Jesus would do 600 years later. He would enter into the fiery furnace of this world to suffer with us and die for us so that we could be set free. Jesus is the ultimate answer to the question of suffering. Nebuchadnezzar said after seeing the fourth person in the furnace: "no other god can save in this way." This is a God who enters into the furnace of suffering with his people. He did not reach down from heaven and pull the three men out of the furnace. He entered the furnace with them and walked with them in the furnace. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego said to Nebuchadnezzar before they went into the furnace:

Daniel 3:16-18

"O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. ¹⁸But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

They knew God was able to rescue them, and they hoped he would. But even if he did not rescue them, they trusted him to be with them in the fire. And he was! Whatever suffering they would experience, God would go through it with them.

Furnace experiences are going to come—experiences of suffering. The question is: who will we go into the furnace with? Jesus came into this world of suffering. And he experienced suffering with us and for us. He was rejected, tortured and killed. He knows what suffering is. And he went to the cross to suffer death in our place. We are the ones who separated ourselves from God, who cut ourselves off from the source of life. We were the ones who were supposed to die. But he suffered and died in our place. "No other god can save in this way." Only Jesus enters into our suffering, goes through it with us and dies for us. The God revealed in Jesus is unique. He is a God suffers with us because he loves us. The way you know you really love someone is if you are willing to suffer with them. It is so sad when I see marriages where one person becomes disabled and the spouse decides they cannot live with them. It is so inspiring when I see a spouse take care of their husband or wife and go through the suffering with them. That is true love—love that is willing to suffer with and for another person. Jesus suffers with and for us, because he loves us. How can a loving God allow suffering in the world? Look at the cross and see that this is a God who saves in a unique way. He does not exempt us from suffering or reach down and pull us out of the suffering. He goes through the furnace with us. Suffering is going to come. Jesus is the only God who will walk with you through it. There is no other god like Jesus.