

August 18, 2024

**Daniel**  
**III: The Fiery Furnace**  
**Daniel 3:1-30**

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Some of you might remember a sitcom from the 90's called *Ally McBeal*. I remember hearing about it, but my parents wisely told me at the time that I was too young to watch it. So, all my memories of the show come second-hand. But there was one episode of the show where Ally, the main character, goes to see her boyfriend, who is a doctor at the hospital. And while she's there, she meets her boyfriend's 8-year old patient, Eric. And Eric was having a pretty rough time. His father had recently died, and then Eric was diagnosed with Leukemia, and to top it all off, his insurance wasn't going to cover the experimental treatment that he needed. And so this little boy asks Ally, "If I wanted to sue somebody, could you help me?" And Ally responds, "Well, who'd you have in mind?" The little boy says, "God. I want to sue God."<sup>1</sup> In other words, God is to blame for this little boy's trouble.

Now, let's remind ourselves of the context of the book of Daniel. Daniel and his friends are in Babylon as exiles from their home in Judah. This event, this exile into Babylon, was the greatest calamity that the Bible records of the Jewish people. And it caused a sort of theological crisis. How could the God of the covenant allow this to happen? And the answer that emerged among some of the prophets was that the people had forsaken the law. The exile was the just consequence of their sin. If anyone needed to be held responsible for the events of the exile into Babylon, it was the people of God, not God himself. But what about Daniel and his friends? They had acted justly, had they not? In the story up to this point, they had lived out the righteousness to which God called them.

Let's now turn to our text for this morning. Remember that Daniel had prophesied that king Nebuchadnezzar's reign would one day come to an end, and that the God of heaven would take his place as the true and everlasting King of all the earth. So, what does Nebuchadnezzar do? Well, the king decides to correct that dream of his by setting up a *real* giant statue. And this time, it is not just the head that's gold. It's the entire statue. Meaning, of course, that Nebuchadnezzar sees himself as the king whose reign will last forever. That he is, himself, a great and powerful god. Never mind what he said to Daniel in the last chapter. The only god Nebuchadnezzar recognizes is himself.

And because he thinks of himself as a god, Nebuchadnezzar decrees that all the people should bow down and worship the image he has set up. And for the most part, the people of Babylon seem to fall in line. Because what's the alternative? To be thrown into the burning fiery furnace. That's not something most people need a lot of time to think about. It's pretty clear to me what I would do in that situation. Bow down! But that's not the decision of the three Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> [Glad, Sad, Bad, and Mad: Anger at God in Christian Life - Mockingbird \(mbird.com\)](https://www.mbird.com)

boys of our story. For Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, to worship a god other than the God of Israel is unthinkable.

You see, theirs is a faith which rests upon the faithfulness of the God of their ancestors. The God of their salvation. The God whose law says,

*“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image... You shall not bow down to them or serve them”*<sup>2</sup>

The faith of these three boys was different than the faith of those around them. You see, the gods of other ancient civilizations were just as, if not more, fickle and self-serving than human beings. We're familiar with stories about the Greek gods, for instance, who got jealous and angry and mixed-up into all sorts of mischief to satisfy their divine selfishness. It made sense to bargain with a god like that because a god like that was transactional. It made sense that a god like that would eventually bring calamity and hardship upon the world. It was just the way the world worked. If Nebuchadnezzar sees himself as a god, then this is precisely the kind of god he will be. He's fickle. He's selfish. He's wicked.

But the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego isn't like that, is He? He's not a transactional God. As the prophets testify, the God of Heaven is a God of mercy, justice, righteousness, and love. And so, when you're dealing with a God like that, when bad things happen, it doesn't make sense to assign blame to God. Does it? We've heard the first explanation. That bad things happen because bad people deserve it. Jesus himself encounters this theology when the disciples ask about a man born blind. They say, “who sinned that this man should be born blind? Was it him or was it his parents?” Jesus says, you've got the wrong idea, guys. So, if that's not it, then what's the only other option? It's that God must be to blame.

I know you've heard the story before, but I think it bears repeating. It comes from a play written by Elie Wiesel, inspired by events he witnessed as a teenager in Auschwitz. He tells of three rabbis in the camp putting God on trial for permitting the massacre of his people in the holocaust. And the verdict that came down from the trial was that God was guilty. That He should have intervened.

What are we to make of God when bad things happen? What are we to do in the face of calamity?

Well, bad things were happening in the lives of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. At this point in the story, they're standing at the edge of a furnace, about to be thrown inside. So, what is their response? Remarkably, it's not to blame God, but to put their trust in him even more. Nebuchadnezzar asks them one last time, “Bow down or else you're going into the furnace. And once you're in there, who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?”

And the remarkable reply of the boys, is this:

*“O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. <sup>17</sup> If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will*

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 20:2-4a

*deliver us out of your hand, O king. <sup>18</sup> But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.*"<sup>3</sup>

"But if not..." Up to this point, we've talked about two responses to calamity. On the one hand, we've heard that when bad things happen to us, it's our own fault. On the other, we've heard that it's God's fault. But there's a third way. And it's the one we see here. The boys say, "we believe God will save us, but if not... But if not..." That's the kind of faith that trusts in God, come what may. The kind of faith that says,

"I don't know what is ahead, but even still, I will trust."

Remember the rabbis in Elie Wiesel's story from Auschwitz? After having found God guilty, one of the rabbis looked around and noticed that it was getting dark. Which meant that it was time for evening prayer. So, the three rabbis went off to pray.<sup>4</sup> Despite all that had happened, the rabbis continued to trust.

We know how the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego ends, of course. God indeed does deliver these three boys from the furnace. But there are plenty of times in the Bible where, for whatever reason, things don't happen as we might expect... Just one example: Think of the book of Acts, which we just finished studying. When Peter is imprisoned, an angel comes that very night to set him free<sup>5</sup>. But by the end of the book, another one of the apostles, Paul, is languishing in prison and no angel comes to save him<sup>6</sup>. Why not?

"We know our God has the power to save us," say the boys... "But even if he doesn't, we will not worship the image you have set up." So, the wicked king has the boys bound, and he orders the burning fiery furnace to be heated up seven times hotter. And once the furnace is sufficiently hot, Nebuchadnezzar has them thrown inside to be burned.

And if the story were to end here, then it would be a fantastic story of human courage. We would marvel, as indeed we do, at the strength of their faith. The kind of faith we all wish that we had.

But that kind of faith is hard to conjure, isn't it? In the face of suffering and hardship, that kind of faith is difficult to muster. Because unlike Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, we are the ones of little faith, aren't we? The ones who, like the disciples, cry out in the midst of the storm, "Lord, do you not care that we are perishing?" And so for us, thankfully, the story does not end at the door to the furnace. But there, deep within the flame, we see who the real hero of the story is. We see what kind of God this is. We see why it is that we can trust in God, come what may. Because there, in the white-hot center of the flame, is the angel of the Lord. Nebuchadnezzar himself jumps up to proclaim the miracle. He says, "But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods."

Right before his eyes, he sees the prophecy of Isaiah fulfilled:

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel 3:16-18

<sup>4</sup> Daniel & The Twelve Prophets for Everyone - Goldingay

<sup>5</sup> Acts 12:5-17

<sup>6</sup> Acts 25:27

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.

<sup>3</sup> For I am the Lord your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.<sup>7</sup>

Back when I was in seminary, there was only one class where we had a substitute teacher. It was in my introduction to theology class. And on that particular day, we were going to talk about the so-called “Problem of Evil.” That is to say, why does a good God allow bad things happen? I think my professor intentionally skipped that class, because it’s such a difficult question. But I’ll never forget what the substitute gave as his answer. He said, “I don’t know why bad things happen, but I do know that God is always with us through them.”

That’s the God we meet in Scripture. The God of mercy, justice, righteousness, and love is the God who comes down to be with us in our trouble. He does not come to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego because of the strength of their faith. No, He comes to them because of His own perfect faithfulness. And the same is true for us. Whenever and wherever we face trouble and difficulty, God is with us. God is with us in the fire because he loves us.

You remember the apostle Paul, how he suffered hardship from which, in his lifetime, he was not delivered? In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul tells us that three times, he prayed to be delivered. But what was the Lord’s response? 2 Corinthians 12:9, “But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’” Then Paul Goes on to say, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”<sup>8</sup>

But if not... said the boys. We will never know this side of heaven why bad things happen. But what we can know for certain is that when troubles do come, God is with us. For, in his Son, God takes upon himself all our deepest troubles, and he nails them to the cross. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 43:2-3a

<sup>8</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:9-10