

Introduction

What is the thing that you dread the most? If you are young it may be something like failing an exam or breaking up with your boyfriend, and if you are older it might be losing your job or your health, but the ultimate threat for all of us is the threat of death. I have a vivid imagination when it comes to persecution, probably because I grew up in England at a time when the threat of Communism was very real, and because of the stories I read of Christians being persecuted for their faith in Communist countries. This led me as a teenager to think about how I would react to persecution and threats of death if I were arrested, and of course I thought of all sorts of creative ways my opponents could kill me, but I will spare you these. The key question however was “Would I be found faithful, or would I deny Christ to save my life”?

By the grace of God I have not had to face that choice, but many thousands of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world do face it with a faithfulness and a courage that humbles me every time I think of them. We need to keep the persecuted church in our prayers. And these brothers and sisters are the spiritual descendants of three men that we will look at today in the third message in our series on “Faith Under Fire” from the book of Daniel, in which the fire is a real fire.

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Most of us know the story well; the story of three Jews in captivity in Babylon who refuse to bow down to an image set up by King Nebuchadnezzar, and who were thrown into a blazing furnace as a result. Let us read selected portions of the passage, which is Daniel 3.

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3:1 King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, ninety feet high and nine feet wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. 2 He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. 3 So all the ... officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it.

Slide**1. The first thing we note is the power and the pride of Nebuchadnezzar**

Nebuchadnezzar was the king of Babylon, which at that time was the capital of strongest and mightiest empire the world had seen. Egypt was a waning power, and Assyria, Greece, and Rome were yet to come, so Babylon pretty much dominated the world. So secure was Nebuchadnezzar that he built the Ishtar Gate in about 575 BC

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as a way of vaunting his power. The image is from a reconstruction of the small outer gate in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin; the larger inner gate was too big to fit in the museum. The gate was decorated with images of lions, bulls, dragons, and flowers, and approached by a long processional way designed to impress visitors

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So Nebuchadnezzar was extremely powerful. He was also an extremely proud man; so proud that he built this enormous image of gold on the plain of Dura, probably just outside Babylon. Why did he do this? There may have been several reasons, but one of them surely must have been Daniel’s interpretation of his dream in his previous chapter:

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Dan 2:37-38 You, O king, are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; 38 in your hands he has placed mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold.

We can imagine Nebuchadnezzar thinking to himself “I am the head of gold! How can I let everyone know this? I know, I will build an image of myself that people can worship. That will make sure everyone knows who is in charge, and will help to unify my kingdom.” We do not actually know if the image was of Nebuchadnezzar, by the way. It was 90’ high and 9’ wide, so it was tall and skinny, but part of the height may have been some sort of base. Many years ago the French Assyriologist Julius Oppert discovered a huge rectangular brick structure near Bablyon, forty-five feet square and twenty feet high, which he believed had been the base for some colossal statue. It is possible that it was the base for Nebuchadnezzar's great image which he had constructed on the plain of Dura.

Be that as it may, it is clear that Nebuchadnezzar was a proud and powerful ruler; one who would not tolerate any dissension from his various officials.

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2. The command to worship the image.

4 Then the herald loudly proclaimed, "This is what you are commanded to do, O peoples, nations and men of every language: 5 As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. 6 Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace."

7 Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of ... all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

And we need to note that almost certainly many Jews were among this who bowed down to the image. We know that Daniel and his friends were not the only leading Jewish young men taken to Babylon, and most probably some of them besides Daniel and his friends were appointed to positions of service in the Babylonian empire. And they probably reasoned that while they were bowing with their bodies, they were not bowing with their hearts, and that they could do more good alive than dead.

But for a faithful Jew, the command to bow down to the image was a violation of the first commandment, and God sent the nation of Judah into exile in Babylon primarily because of their idolatry.

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Ex 20:2-6

2 "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

3 "You shall have no other gods before me.

4 "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments.

So the Jews that bowed down were breaking the first commandment.

Why was this such a big deal? Because it was putting something else (an idol) in place of God, and only God should have the first place in the life of a Christian. John MacArthur puts it this way:

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“Now, idolatry, then, is the corruption of true worship. And from the very beginning, man has always set up his false gods, and the running conflict has gone on through all of human history, the conflict between the worship of the true God and the worship of false gods. In fact, let me say something that’s kind of a basic statement you ought to remember. Idolatry is the most basic issue about which God is concerned. Did you get that? Idolatry is the most basic issue in terms of the life of man in which God is concerned.”

Now we are not likely to be commanded to bow down to an idol, as the Babylonians were, but we can be and will be tempted to put other things in the place of God. And when we do, when we put our money or our job or

our family or the Hokies before God (although the last one is less likely after yesterday's debacle), we are committing idolatry. Dr. Andrew Blackwood, professor emeritus of Princeton, he said, "America has these following gods: Self, money, pleasure, sex, romance, amusements, sports, education." And he added, "We need a return to the first commandment in the light of the cross."

So the challenge to all of us – myself as well as you – is to ask the question "what are my idols?" What am I not willing to give up to follow the Lord?

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3. The courage and faithfulness of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego

8 At this time some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. 9 They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, live forever! 10 You have issued a decree, O king, that everyone who hears the sound of ... all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, 11 and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. 12 But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon-Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego — who pay no attention to you, O king. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up."

13 Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, 14 and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? 15 Now when you hear the sound of ... all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"

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16 Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. 17 If 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. 18 But 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."

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.

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We come now to the heart of this passage; the fact that these three men were willing to lose their lives because of their faith in God. Daniel is not mentioned in this chapter, by the way, probably because he was out of town on some important business for the king. Note that the three men were turned in to the king by "some astrologers", who clearly were jealous of the rapid promotion that Daniel and his three friends had received. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were then brought before the king, who was furious at this assault on his pride and his power. However, he must have had some respect for them, because he gives them another chance to obey his edict "if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"

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The three men then give this courageous reply "If 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. 18 But 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."

Let us note a few things from this reply

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- a. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego counted the honor of God as of greater importance than their own lives. They could have argued something like this “I am an important official in this empire, and I can do a lot of good for God and my fellow Jews if I am alive, but I will not be able to do anything after I am incinerated in the furnace. So I will just go along this time, and live to work another day.” But they did not; they counted the honor of God as more important than their own lives. Would I have been as brave as they were? Would you?

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- b. They fully believed that God was able to save them. “the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king.”

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- c. But they also recognized that He might choose not to do so “But 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.”

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- d. Their love for God outweighed their desire to save themselves.

Now we know the end of the story, but they did not. For all they knew, they were about to be burned alive in the furnace. And we also need to recognize that God’s deliverance of them was unusual. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews has this to say:

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Heb 11:35-37

35 Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. 36 Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. 37 They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— 38 the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

So we note that while some were raised from the dead, others were persecuted and killed. God does not guarantee us an easy life, but He does promise us that He will be with us in and through our trials.

A modern day example of faith under fire is the Nigerian teenager Leah Sharibu.

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Leah was abducted this year on February 13, along with more than 100 other girls, when Boko Haram fighters stormed a secondary school in the town of Dapchi. A month later, she was the only girl who wasn’t freed, because she refused to denounce her Savior and convert to Islam. A spokesman for Boko Haram threatened recently to kill kidnapped Leah if she did not become a Moslem. Please join me in praying for Leah’s release.

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4. The power and faithfulness of God

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, O king."

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.

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Wow! Nebuchadnezzar had just said "Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" and now he has found out. The Lord God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, He is the God who can rescue his people, including us, from the hand of Nebuchadnezzars both past and present.

And God rescued the three men by sending His angel (or possibly His Son, we do not know for sure) to protect his servants.

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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.

So the faithfulness and courage of these three men resulted in two blessings. The king recognized the God of Israel as a God who must not be spoken against, and they themselves were promoted to higher positions.

Conclusion

In closing, here are six take-home lessons from this passage:

1. Let us beware of the sin of pride, whether pride of possessions or of race or of position or of anything else.
2. We should expect persecution. The early church experienced it, and in many ways our culture is returning to the anti-Christian culture of the early years of the church. As Peter wrote in 1 Peter 4:12-16 (**Slide**)
12 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. 15 If you suffer...as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.
3. Let us remember that our future is in God's hands, whether we are being wheeled in for surgery or are in good health, whether we are 21 years old or 81 years old, whether we are blessed with wealth or living in poverty.
4. When we do go through trials, the Lord Himself has promised to be with us, just as He was with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. (**Slide**)
Isa 43:1-2
But now, this is what the LORD says — he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:
"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.
5. Most people will bow before the power of the state and its laws, or at least fail to witness for Christ in all things. How about when we eat in public places? Do we bow our heads in prayer, or do we pretend we are arranging our napkin?
6. We need to pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ who are facing their own fiery furnaces of persecution.