

THRIVING in BABYLON

A STUDY OF DANIEL

SERMON TITLE: Faith in the Fire
SCRIPTURE: Daniel 3

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Sometimes life feels like it's all about survival. Sometimes it feels like all we can do is keep our head above water. This is true for everyone, but especially for followers of Jesus. As Christians, we are exiles, and that means that survival is doubly difficult. But God has not merely called us to survive; he has called us to thrive. And the place that God called us to thrive is in Babylon - the place of our exile. With this in view, the book of Daniel is a perfect picture for us of what it looks like to be faithful in a foreign land that isn't our home. Daniel doesn't merely survive in Babylon. Rather, with God's help, he thrives there. What would it look like for us to do the same here in Greenville?

What is faith? How would you define it? How would you describe your faith to a neighbor? Many Christians struggle to find a way to articulate this. We know what faith *does*, but it's hard to talk about what faith *is*. We know that it unites us to Jesus; we might know that James says faith without works is dead; and we may remember that Paul says we are saved by grace through faith. But it's still elusive to define. Beyond this, though, true faith is tested. But is the testing part of the definition of faith? We also feel things like fear and doubt that try to cripple our faith.

But then if we're thinking in terms of exile, we will realize that the faith of exiles will meet hostility, social marginalization, or cultural pressure. And this is how we have to think about faith in the book of Daniel. We have to answer questions like, how does faith persevere under pressure? How does it endure under hostility? And answers to these questions also demand a healthy definition of faith. So, what is true faith, and what happens when faith meets fire?

In Daniel chapter 3, King Nebuchadnezzar builds a massive golden image, likely of himself, and commands everybody to bow down before it. For Nebuchadnezzar, this is a political move. He's trying to unify his empire. However, there are some Hebrew slaves in Babylon who refuse to bow the knee to Nebuchadnezzar and his huge statue. In his royal decree, Nebuchadnezzar said that anyone who didn't bow the knee would be thrown into a "burning fiery furnace." This is the point of testing and hostility for three young Hebrews - Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego.

What are they going to do? Certainly God would forgive them if they simply bowed the knee, and tried to survive another day in Babylon under the radar? But these young men were strong in their faith. When Nebuchadnezzar threatens them to their face, he declares, "Who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?" They respond, "O king, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us, and he will deliver us out of your hand. But even if not, we will still not bow before your gods and statues."

What they say here is telling. They claim that God is both willing *and* able. This is so important. Think: If God is willing, and *not* able, that means he wants to do something, but just doesn't quite have the strength to carry it out. And if God is able and *not* willing, that means that he does have power, but he doesn't really care enough. However, the God of Scripture is both willing AND able to rescue his people, and this is where the answer to our question starts to come into focus:

Faith is humble, confident trust that God can, does, and will deliver his people.

And this kind of proof knows that God will do it one day definitively, but doesn't presume on God's purposes in the meantime. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego say, "But if not," that's their way of saying, "We know he will finally rescue us one day, and if it's not today, that's ok." This kind of boldness is stronger than Nebuchadnezzar's threat. But still, into the fiery furnace, they're thrown.

However, when Nebuchadnezzar looked into the furnace, he sees four people and not three. Nebuchadnezzar says, "That fourth one looks like a son of god." And even though this is a unique phrase in the original language, it minimally means that, through this being, God is ministering and communicating his nearness to those in the fire. Or...

Faith in the fire not only believes that God has made promises about the future, but also believes that he is with us in the present.

Remember, God can, does, and will one day deliver his people. However, when we're not experiencing his deliverance right now, he's still with us! And his presence with us in the fire is the down-payment that the fire doesn't get the final say. His with-ness in the suffering is a reminder that it won't have the last word. God says through Isaiah, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."

Climactically, the ultimate proof that these things are true is Jesus himself. Even when he first shows up, his name is Immanuel, which means "God with us," – in the midst of our fractured and confused lives. He is like the fourth person in the fire, ministering God's presence among God's people. But more than this, Jesus went through the fires of death and judgment for us to assure us that they don't win. And now, he's with us in the fiery trials of life through his Holy Spirit. Jesus' death and resurrection are definitive evidence that God is not only willing, but he is also able to undo the power of sin and death, and bring his new world to bear on the present broken one. For this reason, we should trust him with unyielding allegiance. He is the only one worthy of that kind of faith.

For Discussion

Have someone read Daniel 3

1. What are good synonyms for faith?
2. When is faith the hardest for you?
3. Who is someone you know who faces things like fear and doubt like all of us, but always perseveres in faith?
4. How can the story in Daniel 3 encourage us to look to Jesus, and trust him more?
5. In what ways have you ever felt God with you "in the middle of the fire?"
6. Personally, what's your biggest takeaway from this message/passage?