

DANIEL: PROFILES IN COURAGE

III. "A Fourth for Fire"

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Daniel 3

INTRODUCTION

When Polly and I were in seminary, one of our first times together was bit unusual. Just four miles from the seminary was a place called High Bridge. This bridge over the Kentucky River was, at least at one time, the highest railroad bridge in the world, hence the name. It is 500 feet above the river. It was considered a cool thing among the seminary students to go out and walk on the bridge, which had a tiny catwalk along the edge. Walking on the trestle, you could clearly see the river way down below through the metal grating. It could be a bit unnerving when you were in the middle and a freight train came barreling past just three feet away. The wind, the noise, and the shaking bridge with nowhere to go but over the railing into the river 500 feet below was frightening. It was a warm fall day, and we'd gone down to High Bridge to study. There was an old Holiness camp ground there next to the bridge, high above the river where they occasionally had camp meetings, but deserted most to the time. It was a nice place to have a few hours to study on the grass under a tree. Of course there were a few brief conversations interwoven in through our serious study. Polly confessed to me she was afraid of heights, and wondered if I would walk with her out onto High Bridge to help her overcome her fear.

That sounded good to me! I could be macho and fearless, helping this lovely girl. Of course, on the narrow catwalk, it meant I had to hold on to her. We did make it to the middle of the bridge and back, which was her goal. I felt macho and important and thoroughly enjoyed having this beautiful girl clinging to me out of fear.

Fears can be crippling to us, restricting our lives. One way we try to overcome them is by facing them and pushing ourselves on through them. Fears avoided, when we make big detours to avoid them, end up multiplying and increasing their hold upon us. Polly's efforts at facing-down fear with my help is a time-honored way of handling fear. Our Scripture story this morning involves facing fear head on, but also directs us to the power of God enabling us to live above fear.

We live in a world that is pretty intimidating to serious faith. Some belief in God is considered OK, and even honored, but don't get carried away or too radical in your commitment. That puts you out of sync with the community and general culture. My greatest need as a pastor is to have the courage to be all that God has called me to be— to live out God's agenda with unflinching boldness and not let the voices of this world have undue influence.

Can you remember times when you've been able to talk to someone about your faith, trusting God, the church, and prayer, but then backed-off when it came to asking about where they were in their faith journey? I know I have. Not that we should be pushy,

unkind or insensitive, but at times I know I should ask that question and fail to do so out of fear of what they may think.

Fear is a great crippler in our living effectively for Jesus. Fear of rejection. Fear of loss, such as maybe our comfortable “status quo” lifestyle or being asked by God to give up something in our life we want to hang onto. And sometimes we’re afraid to go out-on-a-limb trusting God because you’re not quite sure He will come through for you. In fact you may remember some time when you felt like you really trusted Him and you were disappointed. Things didn’t work out like you’d hoped. It left you gun-shy in trying again. I’ve been there too.

This story from Daniel 3 is helpful in giving guidance to us in overcoming those fears. There is a wonderful sense of relinquishment here as they address the king.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. 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. 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." (Dan 3:16-18)

They clearly know whom they serve and the power of the one they serve. They know also that ultimately they belong to God and nothing can ever really destroy them. While they know all that, they also show an inspiring relinquishment regarding their present situation in those powerful six words, *but even if he does not...* Whether God’s rescue involves life or death, they do not know. Paul reflects the freedom they feel in his statement, *...whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord* (Rom 14:8).

Do you want that freedom and power in your life? Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are here in this event to lead us.

ALLEGIANCE

Nebuchadnezzar set up a huge gold statue, 90 feet high. Do you remember the last chapter and the image Nebuchadnezzar dreamed about? Daniel in God’s interpretation of the dream identified Nebuchadnezzar as the head of gold. Then, beneath him were subsequent kingdoms depicted by silver, bronze, iron, and iron mixed with clay. Daniel gives a clear, powerful witness to the true God, his involvement and control in history and his loving outreach to this pagan king to show him the truth— yes, even prove to Nebuchadnezzar that Jehovah, the God of Israel, alone is God. But as so often happens with our humanity, God’s good gifts get twisted by our pride and trying to control things. The chapter ends with Nebuchadnezzar acknowledging, *"Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries,* (Dan 2:47). But in between that and chapter 3, if you’ll excuse the pun, the nice things God said about him and the idea that he was the head of gold, went to his head. Now, he has an

imposing gold statue of himself made or perhaps it was of the Babylonian god Nebu whose name was the first element of Nebuchadnezzar's name, a name meaning, "Nabu, protect my boundary."

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendego are in a tough spot. They have high level government posts provided by Daniel, using the power he was given for interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's dream, to get for them. I can imagine tempting rationalizations for them. "Certainly we can do more good for God alive than dead." They had positions of power and influence that could protect and save many lives of their fellow Jews. "God placed us in these posts. If it means a bit of conformity to the whims of this king, then what's the big deal? After all, we know these Babylonian gods are not gods at all. We can kneel on the outside, but still be standing on the inside."

But they'll have none of that. Their allegiance is clear. On the back of your bulletin is a quote from Oswald Chambers,

*The remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God you fear nothing else,
whereas if you do not fear God you fear everything else.*

When the Bible speaks of "fearing God" it is used in the sense of awe and respect rather than being terrified of God, although proper awe and respect means that the idea of defying Him, rebelling against Him ought to strike fear in our hearts. Standing in awe of God means we place Him as Lord over our lives. We belong to Him. When you belong to the Creator of the universe and He loves you and has promised you protection, what is there left to fear? But, if we let anything less than the this all-powerful God dictate our lives, there is no end of things we will fear. Yes, indeed, in the words of Chambers, *when you fear God you fear nothing else,*

whereas if you do not fear God you fear everything else.

The more we worship God, the more certain we will be of His love and greatness. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendego knew what David witnessed to when he wrote in Ps. 27,

*The Lord is my light and my salvation— whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life— of whom shall I be afraid.*

Their allegiance is clear so nothing else could intimidate them.

Fear and caving into pressure to save our skins should alert us to a problem with letting God truly be Lord of our lives. Our divided loyalty, sharing allegiance with other idols is what makes us vulnerable to fear. Idols can take most any shape. Our possessions or things can command our allegiance. People who are important to us and those we feel a need to impress can cause us to bow down. Pleasure, popularity, and what we define as "the good life" can lead our hearts astray. And of course, most of us seriously want things "my way." We want control. We want to hoard our time, our resources, our "whatever" to our ends and purposes. It is all idolatry and leaves us bound by fear because we are trying to do what we were never designed to do; that is, be God.

Fear God, make Him Lord of your life, and you will fear nothing else. For when we do that, we're already dead as Paul affirms in Col 3:3,

For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

That surrender is a death to our old natures. But the other side of death is freedom, since nothing in this world can now destroy us. On the other hand, if we haven't made Him Lord of all, our horizons shrink and there are many fears that will bind us. We end up running around trying to preserve ourselves, trying to escape all the things we fear. That only binds us to those fears.

BETRAYAL

This story is also a powerful example of how we can be free of anger and resentment even when we are betrayed. Here these three Hebrews are victims of an insidious plot. You get the impression that these astrologers were just waiting to get the goods on Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendego. Remember, they had all been under a death sentence together in the last chapter. Daniel saved everyone's lives by his interpretation of the dream. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendego had been part of those prayers interceding not just for themselves but all these astrologers, magicians, enchanters and sorcerers. Now, how would you handle it to have these very people turn on you and report you to the king? I know I'd struggle with anger and resentment toward them. You expect it is all motivated by jealousy on their part.

Here, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendego's relinquishment is so complete, they are so sure God is in control of their lives, that they don't even have to worry about their enemies. They were able to leave it all up to God. Paul later admonishes us in Romans 12:19, *Do not take revenge my friends... "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.* If you've ever been betrayed, you know that such anger is one of the toughest things to let go of. But the greater we let God be, the less we feel we need to even the score. God is great enough to take care of us, no matter what. Look how He handled the betrayal of Jesus.

FACING FIRE

It is hard for me to imagine a worse death than being burned alive. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendego certainly had to be frightened at the prospect. And they had no illusions of a guarantee that they would be spared the furnace. Their statement to Nebuchadnezzar is a remarkable affirmation of confidence in the power of God to deliver and yet coupled with total relinquishment, not dictating how God might want to use them.

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. 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.

Six incredible words of relinquishment, but even if he does not.... Here is total trust.

They know God is able to deliver them from the fire. They also are ready to die if God should choose that as a means of rescue. And, indeed, when we know we have eternal life, death is a rescue. There is no bargaining with God. It is Job's, "even though he slay me, I will trust Him"(Job 13:5). And it is Luther's affirmation in his great hymn,

"Let goods and kindred go, this mortal live also,
the body they may kill; God's truth abideth still.
His kingdom is forever."

So often we try to tell God how to do things. When we cling to our idea of how things need to happen, we will be anxious and fearful. We're still in control. We try to manipulate other people to our ends, and even try to get God to do it our way. Giving all that up is freeing. When we don't have to know the end results but just desire God's will for what He knows is best, we have God's supernatural peace that passes understanding. Sometimes God supernaturally heals, delivers, spares us suffering or adversity. Other times He chooses to use our sickness, problems, disasters and even death to a higher end. It may include our development, the formation of our characters, or doing a special work of grace in those around us. Those are things that have eternal value. It is gloriously liberating to know that, whether we are spared, delivered, or have to go through the furnace, God will bring out what is best.

Confronted with their open, fearless defiance of his power, the king in a rage insists on seeing them sizzle in the flames. These furnaces were 12-15 feet high with a domed top, shaped like a beehive. There was an opening in the top through which material to be fired was dumped in. There was also an opening in the bottom where the fired materials could be removed. The heat of the fire was controlled by bellows. So, being heated seven times normal probably meant more bellows pumping oxygen to the fire. They had it cranked up so hot, when the soldiers opened the top to throw them in, they were killed by the blast of heat. The king is seated down below where he can see in the furnace opening to watch these unrepentant Hebrews burn. The Scripture affirms,

These three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace!

Then, the miracle.

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."

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."

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, 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.

The fourth man in the fire is spectacular assurance that when we are called to go into the fire, God goes with us. This was at least an angel, but it is commonly thought (and it makes sense to me) that this is a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus. We have God's promise, *I will never leave you nor forsake you* (Heb. 13:5). It especially true in the furnaces of life. In the midst of pain and confusion, we find the Son of God walking with us. As a pastor, I sometimes get to peek in the door of the furnace of tribulation. I see this miracle repeated again and again. Believers standing there unharmed in the fire, witnessing to the presence and peace of God.

And, when we come out, we have a new freedom. Only the ropes that bound us have been burned. I thrill at hearing testimonies from Christians saying, the thing I feared most has happened to me:

- My teen is on drugs
- I have cancer
- I lost my job
- My marriage has disintegrated
- I lost my family.

Then, I hear these powerful words: "But you know, I'm all right. I'm not afraid anymore. The worst I could imagine has happened, and Jesus is here. I have this incredible peace, even a deep joy. I now know He will never leave me nor forsake me! And that's more important than anything."

You can recognize those who have been through the furnace with God. They have a wonderful freedom and courageous witness about them. They reflect that nonchalance of Pauls,

...whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord (Rom 14:8).

Nothing in this world will ever intimidate them again.

CONCLUSION

Two of England's great protestant reformers in the 1500's were Bishops Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley. They were contemporaries of Thomas Cranmer, imprisoned with him in the Tower of London. Ridley probably worked with Cranmer in putting together The Book of Common Prayer. Queen Mary, referred to as "bloody Mary" for her reign of terror trying to stamp out the protestant reform movement in which 288 were burned at the stake, had the Bishops Latimer and Ridley burned together. It is reported that in Latimer's last words he turned to Ridley and said,

Be of good cheer, Master Ridley. We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England as, I trust, shall never be put out.

Do you long for that kind of freedom, that kind of witness? Let's take a moment and offer up to the Lord all the fears that bind us. Invite Him in to be truly Lord of all.