

Daniel 3:8–27 (CEB)

[Daniel has made many enemies in Nebuchadnezzar’s court by interpreting one of the king’s dreams when all his other advisers and soothsayers (the Chaldeans) had failed. Now, the king has ordered the construction of an enormous gold statue to which the entire kingdom must bow down and worship.]

⁸ At that moment some Chaldeans came forward, seizing a chance to attack the Jews.

⁹ They said to King Nebuchadnezzar:

“Long live the king! ¹⁰ Your Majesty, you gave a command that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, zither, lyre, harp, flute, and every kind of instrument should bow down and worship the gold statue. ¹¹ Anyone who wouldn’t bow and worship would be thrown into a furnace of flaming fire. ¹² Now there are some Jews, ones you appointed to administer the province of Babylon—specifically, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—who have ignored your command. They don’t serve your gods, and they don’t worship the gold statue you’ve set up.”

¹³ In a violent rage Nebuchadnezzar ordered them to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They were brought before the king.

¹⁴ Nebuchadnezzar said to them: “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: Is it true that you don’t serve my gods or worship the gold statue I’ve set up? ¹⁵ If you are now ready to do so, bow down and worship the gold statue I’ve made when you hear the sound of horn, pipe, zither, lyre, harp, flute, and every kind of instrument. But if you won’t worship it, you will be thrown straight into the furnace of flaming fire. Then what god will rescue you from my power?”

¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered King Nebuchadnezzar: “We don’t need to answer your question. ¹⁷ If our God—the one we serve—is able to rescue us from the furnace of flaming fire and from your power, Your Majesty, then let him rescue us. ¹⁸ But if he doesn’t, know this for certain, Your Majesty: we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you’ve set up.”

¹⁹ Nebuchadnezzar was filled with rage, and his face twisted beyond recognition because of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. In response he commanded that the furnace be heated to seven times its normal heat. ²⁰ He told some of the strongest men in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and throw them into the furnace of flaming fire. ²¹ So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were bound, still dressed in all their clothes, and thrown into the furnace of flaming fire. (²² Now the king’s command had been rash, and the furnace was heated to such an extreme that the fire’s flame killed the very men who carried Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to it.) ²³ So these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell, bound, into the furnace of flaming fire.

²⁴ Then King Nebuchadnezzar jumped up in shock and said to his associates, “Didn’t we throw three men, bound, into the fire?”

They answered the king, “Certainly, Your Majesty.”

²⁵ He replied, “Look! I see four men, unbound, walking around inside the fire, and they aren’t hurt! And the fourth one looks like one of the gods.” ²⁶ Nebuchadnezzar went near the opening of the furnace of flaming fire and said, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!” Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out of the fire. ²⁷ The chief administrators, ministers, governors, and the king’s associates crowded around to look at them. The fire hadn’t done anything to them: their hair wasn’t singed; their garments looked the same as before; they didn’t even smell like fire!

Staying faithful to God in tough times. Easier said than done?

Herod the Great was a mighty builder of mighty things. He built a massive port on the Mediterranean called Caesaria and a seemingly impregnable palace on the Dead Sea called Masada. He built a mountain on a plain south of Jerusalem and called it

Herodium. And he built the towering temple mount complex in Jerusalem. Wonders of the world every one. You can visit the meager ruins of them all.

In 1818, Percy Shelley wrote a poem about another mighty monument. A giant statue of a long-forgotten Egyptian king, Ozymandias.

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said:—Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
Half sunk, a shatter'd visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamp'd on these lifeless things,
The hand that mock'd them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains: round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Nebuchadnezzar, mighty king of Babylon, decided to erect a giant golden statue of himself. I'm sure he would have enscribed on the pedestal the same sentiment as Ozymandias – “look on my works, ye mighty, and despair.” Such a statue it was. Ninety feet high. Nine feet wide. Gleaming gold.

The Book of Daniel

The book of Daniel is set during the time of the Jewish exile in Babylon, more than 500 years before Jesus. Daniel is in two very distinct sections. The first section, chapters 1-6, tells the story of Daniel and his friends. Living in exile, they are pressured to assimilate into the Babylonian culture and religion. All of the short stories that make up this section tell how God delivered his people from harm because they stayed true. These stories came together in their final form about 200 years before Jesus, when the Jews faced similar pressure from a Syrian despot. The stories have a common moral: stay to true to Israel's God and you will be saved.

The second half of Daniel, chapters 7-12, tells a similar story about faithfulness and deliverance, but this time in apocalyptic language and imagery that is very similar to what we find in Revelation. The writing may seem very strange and bizarre to us, but it was quite popular during the period 200 years before and after Jesus.

So taken with it was the king, that he ordered the whole kingdom to sing songs, to dance dances, to praise and worship this statue of the mighty, mighty Nebuchadnezzar. What a glorious day it was!

But then a few clouds rolled into the celebration, three clouds to be precise, named Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They would not sing nor dance. They would not worship the magnificent statue. So the king sent for them, these three strange Jews from Jerusalem who failed to appreciate all that the king had done for them.

When questioned about their failure to join in the joyous worship of the gold statue, the three simply refused. Even when the king made it clear he'd toss them into a giant, fiery furnace that burned as hot as the sun, they still refused. Their response was infuriating to the king: “If our God—the one we serve—is able to rescue us from the furnace of flaming fire and from your power, Your Majesty, then let him rescue us. But if he doesn't, know this for certain, Your Majesty: we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you've set up.” Never, never, never. Under no circumstances would they abandon their God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Just *no*.

The king was so enraged that in a murderous fury he ordered them bound up and tossed

into the furnace. The fire was so hot it even consumed the soldiers who tossed the three friends into the fire.

But when the king looked into the fire, he didn't see the burning bodies of three bound men, but four men – unbound and walking around! Muttering that the fourth man looked like a god of some kind, Nebuchadnezzar ordered the door of the furnace opened so the three friends could walk. Not only were they unharmed, they didn't even smell of fire.

Then came the biggest surprise of all – the king praised the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. From this time, no one was even to be disrespectful of the God of the strange Jews.

Even if . . .

This story, as entertaining as it is, has a lot to say to us – some of it pretty obvious, some not. It is pretty easy to see that the story is about staying true to God even in the most difficult of circumstances. He won't abandon you; don't you abandon him. But there is something deeper and more challenging going on. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are threatened with certain death, they admit that, though God is with them, they don't know whether they will live or die. But even if God doesn't rescue them, the answer is still no. Their faithfulness to God will not be swayed by circumstances, even by the prospect of death. John Goldingay writes:

The implicit question being asked of them is the Adversary's question about Job, does he only honor God because of the blessings God gives him? God may be trusted to protect us, but our honoring him is not conditional upon his preserving us from every blazing furnace, so that if he should not do so, we are free to abandon him and try some other god Death is preferable to apostasy. We regard no other god but God, no matter what happens. We obey God, not human beings (Acts 4:19–20; 5:29). Such a confession means that human potentates are defeated whether their victims escape the flames (as they will here) or whether they do not (as in 2 Maccabees 7). Their testing takes place in the flames themselves, if these are ever lit, though it has already taken place when the flames have been threatened.¹

When we are in tough times, it can be tempting to tie our faith in God to our getting the help that we desire. As long as we think our prayers are getting answered then we are ready to believe in God. But that isn't really what faithfulness is about. Being genuinely faithful transcends circumstances. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are simply going to stay true to God, even if they are tossed into the furnace and are not rescued from death.

The power of three

Whenever Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are mentioned in the book of Daniel, all three are mentioned together. There is not a single instance in which any one of these friends do or say anything apart from the other two. Today, we might refer to these friends as being “joined at the hip.”

Early in the last century, the sociologist Georg Simmel wrote extensively about the power of three. He noted that three close, mutually supporting friends or loved ones create a bond capable of withstanding troubles that might crush a pair. In the touching movie, *About a Boy*, young Marcus knows that he and his troubled mom can't make it on their own. As he puts it, “we need back-up . . . everybody needs back-up.”

The exiled Jews living in Babylonia had three choices. They could give up their Judaism entirely, fully embracing the religion of their Babylonian neighbors. They could accommodate themselves to the Babylonian culture and demands, perhaps not turning

¹ Goldingay, J. E. (1998). *Daniel* (Vol. 30, p. 74). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

their backs on God entirely, but making whatever changes were needed to get along with their new “masters.” Or . . . they could stay defiant. They could choose the path of most resistance and simply refuse to diminish, in any way, their commitment to the Lord God, to God’s covenant with them, and to each other.

We can be sure that some exiles gave in entirely and that others took the path of accommodation. But some, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego found in their bonds of friendship and faith, the strength to withstand the threats and the pressures. Their trust in God endured.

Just say no

Should Christians always obey the law? Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did not. They would not obey the king’s lawful decree (lawful because kings made law in the ancient world). The three friends would disobey the king’s law because obeying it would violate a higher law, God’s law. In his famous, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” Rev. Martin Luther King referred to today’s story.

One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law. . . . Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was evidenced sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar, on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire.

To bring this to the present day, the Roman Catholic charity, Little Sisters of the Poor, feel that they are being presented with such a choice. Where in our lives might we be presented with such a choice? Would we even have eyes to see the choice?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. I’ve raised three sons, so I know something about peer pressure. It is easy to recognize the pressures that teenagers can come under. What is cool? What’s not? Who’s in? Who’s out? All parents face a big challenge in helping their teenagers navigate through it all. But it would be mistake to think that it is only our teenagers who must deal with peer pressure. As we struggle to live genuinely Christian lives as disciples of Jesus, what pressures do we face to conform to a world that is increasingly hostile to the Christian worldview and values?
2. We’ve probably all struggled to stay faithful to God in tough times? It can be pretty tempting to lose faith that God is even there? How could I or someone I love be suffering so much if God is really there? Why won’t he help us? . . . What can we learn about faithfulness from today’s story? How can we become more faithful Christians? How can we help each other to stay faithful and strong? How do you think Shadrach, Meshach, or Abednego might have fared if they’d been alone? Would they have been so strong?
3. Have you ever felt a tension between what our civil and criminal laws demand of you and what God expects from you? Have you ever engaged in acts of civil disobedience? Would you? What would you say to a son or daughter who was preparing to disobey the law for what they believed was a Godly or moral cause?
4. “Keeping up with the Joneses” is a cliché for a reason. All of us want to be accepted, to fit in. In and of itself, this is not a bad thing. The question is with whom do we want to fit in? Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego made their choice. They were part of God’s covenant community. How do our friends in faith, those living with us as God’s covenant people, help us to resist the temptation to give ourselves over entirely to the ways of the world? You might relate some specific occasions when Christian friends have helped you avoid a big mistake. When have you helped others in this?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Hebrews 11, see esp. v. 39-40 The faithfulness hall of fame!</p>	<p>Tuesday, Genesis 6:5-22 Noah does everything God commands him to do.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Genesis 21 Abraham passes a test of faithfulness.</p>	<p>Thursday, Joshua 2 Rahab is faithful to a God she hardly knows.</p>
<p>Friday, 2 Corinthians 11:16-27 In a defense of himself and his ministry, Paul lists the many trials through which he has remained faithful to Christ and to his vocation.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

