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Do Not Fear—I Am With You!
Daniel 3:13-30

13 Then King Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought in; so they brought those men before the king. 14 Nebuchadnezzar said to them, “Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods and you do not worship the golden statue that I have set up? 15 Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble to fall down and worship the statue that I have made, well and good.^[a] But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire, and who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands?”

16 Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. 17 If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us.^[b] 18 But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.”

The Fiery Furnace

19 Then Nebuchadnezzar was so filled with rage against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that his face was distorted. He ordered the furnace heated up seven times more than was customary,²⁰ and ordered some of the strongest guards in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and to throw them into the furnace of blazing fire. 21 So the men were bound, still wearing their tunics,^[c] their trousers,^[d] their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the furnace of blazing fire. 22 Because the king’s command was urgent and the furnace was so overheated, the raging flames killed the men who lifted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. 23 But the three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down, bound, into the furnace of blazing fire.

24 Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up quickly. He said to his counselors, “Was it not three men that we threw bound into the fire?” They answered the king, “True, O king.” 25 He replied, “But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the fourth has the appearance of a god.”^[e] 26 Nebuchadnezzar then approached the door of the furnace of blazing fire and said, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!” So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. 27 And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the

king's counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men; the hair of their heads was not singed, their tunics^[4] were not harmed, and not even the smell of fire came from them.
²⁸ Nebuchadnezzar said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him. They disobeyed the king's command and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God.

It's probably good to know a little bit about **King Nebuchadnezzar**, who he was, what he did, and just how evil his empire was, in order to truly understand the story of **Daniel**, and his three friends--**Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego**.

These are the stories the kids learned this week in **VBS**, and they are the kind of stories in the Bible that **inspire** us. These are the kinds of stories that before books, families would sit together, and **pass down** to their kids. These are the stories about **God's provision in a time of exile**.

It was a story the Israelite people told about their experience in exile from Judah and Jerusalem to the **Babylonian kingdom in 597 B.C.** It was then that the vicious Babylonians came and captured the King of Judah, Jehoiakim, and his family, and his advisors, and their families, and made him watch while they killed them all, before plucking out his eyes (so that sight would be the last thing he saw). Then they set the Jerusalem temple on fire.

Can you even imagine the **horror** of such devastation? Those Babylonians plundered, murdered, destroyed. And then they **captured** young Daniel and three young friends, **Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah** as slaves from Judah. (their **names were changed** by Babylonians to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego)

Strangely, these four young men were taken into the palace in Babylon, and **treated almost like royalty**---with strings attached, of course.

Do you know where Babylon was?

It would have been **modern day Iraq**, 60 miles SW of Baghdad, with the Euphrates River flowing right through it.

It was a **formidable** city with miles of very thick walls, over 200 watch towers, 8 gates, 2 citadels, and a huge palace.

If you were to enter through the **Ishtar Gate**, you would enter the **Hanging Gardens** (quite a sight to behold in the middle of a desert!), built for Nebuchadnezzar's queen. It was known as one of the **seven wonders** of the ancient world.

In the center of the city was a **bridge**, and a giant building over it called the **Ziggurat**, with a Temple to the Babylonian god Marduk on top of it.
<https://www.ancient.eu/babylon/>

In the Akkadian language, Babylon meant '**Gateway to the Gods**', and that city really did look that way in many respects.

But in Hebrew, Babylon meant "place of babble". And it was a place of confusion and sorrow for the exiles.

The four captives were given the **food of the Babylonians**, and told to eat. Can you imagine that? Think of the strangest food, from a foreign land of your enemies, and now you understand it a bit.

Daniel, and his friends, young men of great **character and integrity**, refused to eat the non-kosher food. They ate **only vegetables and water**. But because they seemed to be even **healthier** than their Babylonian counterparts, they were allowed to live, and even be trained by the King for service. Daniel interpreted dreams, they all took on positions of power over the years.

These guys were **slaves** in a foreign land, but because of **God's provision**, they were given **favor** in the eyes of the Babylonians.

The problems came
when they were **required to worship the Babylonian god**.
Daniel, even though his temple was destroyed and he was a stranger in a
foreign land, prayed face down, facing towards Jerusalem, three times a day.

The three friends also **held fast to their faith** in the one God.
Faith led Daniel to a lion's den in Chapter 6,
and the three friends to a fiery furnace in our story today in Daniel 3.

When we get to this place in the book of Daniel,
King Nebuchadnezzar has **issued a decree** that anyone not worshipping his
god, the golden statue,
will be thrown into a **fiery furnace!**

Now just think about that!

What would you have done?

Imagine it was **your** life—your family—would you give in?
Plenty of people are in this predicament today,
people are **still persecuted** for their Christian faith all over the world.

What would you do?

Well, these three friends, not only refused, when taken to the palace,
¹⁶ *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king,*
*“O Nebuchadnezzar, we have **no need to present a defense** to you in this
matter. ¹⁷ If our God whom we serve is **able to deliver** us from the furnace of
blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us.^[b]*
¹⁸ **But if not**, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we
will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.”

These guys had what can only be called **integrity**.

Their **character was strong**.

Do you know what the word integrity means?

It means innocent, blameless, pure.

But it also means **whole, or complete**.

It comes from the Latin word **integer, which means whole**.

In other words, integrity is about having a **whole, complete character**.

Only **ONE** you.

Integrity is about **consistency** of actions, values and principles.

Which translates into an ***honest, truthful, consistent*** ethic for life.

Do you consider ***yourself*** a person of integrity?

Probably most of us do.

Who do you know that has the ***most integrity***?

How do they stay true?

How do ***you stay true*** to your values and principles?

And what causes you to stray?

Imagine their situation—the threat of death in a fiery furnace!

Would you stand firm, as they did, saying what they said?

Would you stay true to your convictions?

Would you ***go so far as to say*** that even if God ***does NOT rescue*** you from the furnace, you will still not bow down to the idol?

In the ancient world, a piece of ***pottery that had 'integrity'*** was one that was whole, complete.

Sometimes people would try to scam others with a cracked piece of pottery, by simply painting over any cracks,

But when water was put into it, it would leak.

A jug with integrity--did not leak.

Think about that for us—***we all try to cover our flaws***, don't we?

But if there are ***too many cracks*** in our integrity, when the pressure is on, we can't hold it all together, because we are not whole.

What we need is ***God to make us whole.***

We need those cracks to not just be painted over or concealed, we need ***God to repair them, and make us whole.***

Jesus came to do just that.

Our kids learn this in VBS.

Jesus spoke about this often in the Gospels.

In fact, Jesus' ***harshes***t words were for the ***hypocrites*** in the faith—the scribes and Pharisees—because they were the ***opposite*** of integrity.

These were people that ***looked good on the outside***, claimed to have true faith,

but their **hearts and actions** revealed something different.

They were all about the **law** on the outside,
but **didn't really care** about people.

They cared more about **whether Jesus was healing on the Sabbath** day
and breaking the law,
than the fact that he was healing someone and making them whole!

Had Jesus known Nebuchadnezzar, he would have had some words for him!
Jesus didn't think too well of hypocrites, we don't either, right?
It's one of the most common criticisms of the church today.

To Jesus, what really matters is the human heart.
And the people who needed him.
The sick, the outcast, the poor, the sinners—
He **welcomed them**, and **condemned the hypocritical** religious leaders.
What Jesus expected wasn't perfection---he wanted people to be **real**.
Honest.
True on the inside and out.

And Jesus realized that our **true integrity comes with the help of God**.
That's why he **welcomed all sinners**—they **KNEW they needed** God's help.
And when they came to Jesus—he made them **whole**.
Complete.
He **saved them, physically and spiritually**.
Just like He does for us, if we let Him!

Daniel and his friends—do you know **how they had integrity?**
Through their **faith** in God.
Their **utter dependence** upon him—to sustain them in exile, to save them
from a furnace.
Their **integrity gave them faith to withstand a horrific trial!**

They had **mature** faith.
Do we?
Which is different than the kind of faith we have early on.
An immature faith says, God—I'll **stand for you--if you protect me,**
if you show me a miracle.
So how about you make the idol fall down,

or the king not pay attention to my insubordination!

A **mature** faith is different.

It's like these three friends—

it says ***whatever happens God, I will stand firm for you.***

Mature faith has integrity.

It is a ***whole, complete loyalty*** to God.

The three friends say, ***even if he does not save*** us from this furnace,
we will never worship other gods.

So they were ***bound***, and thrown into a fiery furnace.

And you know ***what happens with integrity*** like that?

God responds to that.

When King Nebuchadnezzar looked into that fire—

he didn't see three men,

he saw four, and the fourth was an angel, sent to protect them.

The King also saw something else.

God had protected them, beyond their wildest imagination.

Because they were ***unbound, walking around, and completely unharmed.***

When they were taken out of the fire,

They were not burned, not even a hair on their head was singed,

and they ***didn't even smell*** of fire.

Ok, this part of the story cracks me up because I'm married to a ***firefighter.***

Let me just tell you that when Ed comes home from a fire,

the whole house smells like smoke.

When he puts those clothes in the washer—it requires two cycles.

When he takes a shower after the fire, I always laugh, because he still smells
like smoke.

To say that they didn't even smell like fire is ***almost unbelievable.***

They say ***no words in the Bible are wasted,***

and ***every detail*** is important.

Well, this is an ***incredible detail***—

because if they had been in a fire without the miraculous intervention of

God—they would be burned up, hair singed,

and even if they had escaped the flames, they would ***reek of smoke!***

You know what the ***only thing that was removed from them***, without harming them one bit?

The ***ropes that bound them***.

Now that's amazing because it was the King's strongest men who bound them up!

But they were walking around, unbound, in the fire!

Talk about a miracle.

And an ***inspiring*** story.

Think of the hope it brings to us in times of trouble!

Today as we walk through the fires of life, all our trials and temptations,

We are bound up, aren't we?

Yet God is with us, just like the 4th man in the flames.

And by the grace of God,

The chains that bind us are burned off, but we are miraculously spared.

Does this mean that ***every time*** we stand up for what is right, we will be ***fine***?

No. Everyone suffers---Paul, the Israelites, even Jesus.

Suffering is ***part of our fallen lives*** this side of heaven.

People still die for their Christian faith in the parts of the world today.

What this story means is that ***having integrity brings real life***.

Having a ***strong faith***, no matter the outcome,

sustains us, no matter what happens.

Having integrity means ***you could lose*** a lot in this life.

But you don't lose God.

We are ***always tempted*** to give up our faith.

The ***world bombards us*** with images of other gods,

and we are tempted to worship everything but God—money, fame, power.

Jesus was tempted in the same way by Satan in the desert.

We literally are in a culture like Babylon, today!

But there is ***a way to have integrity***.

To be whole, complete people of character.

To have real, abundant life.

By the grace of God,
We can ***Stand firm in our faith and convictions***, no matter the consequence.

The question is not whether we will be tempted, ***but when and how***.
Maybe you are being tempted right now.
So what will we do?
What will we say?

What if we say with the friends,
that we will follow God, no matter the consequences!
Because we have a ***God who is always with us!***

Friends, that is our ***Good News Today***—
straight from Daniel, his friends, our Savior, and VBS!

May we be whole—***people of integrity***—completely loyal to God.
No matter what comes.
And to that all God's people said, Amen.