

Through Fiery Trials

In the name of him who delivers us from death, dear friends in Christ: In last week's Lenten meditation, we heard how the Lord God sent a mysterious dream to Nebuchadnezzar, the pagan king of the Babylonian Empire. The dream frightened and confused him. He knew it was full of deep meaning; but when he turned to his wise men, enchanters, and astrologers, none of them could interpret it for him. This so enraged the king, who was now thoroughly convinced of what he had long suspected – that these men who claimed to have all kinds of supernatural insights and magical powers were in fact a bunch of frauds – that he ordered the death of all the wise men in his kingdom.

This meant that the sentence of death fell also upon Daniel and his three companions Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who, as we've learned in earlier chapters, had been captured as hostages, trained in the Babylonian language, arts, and sciences, and forced to serve the king in the ranks of his advisors and wise men. Daniel, however, thinking quickly, went to the king and told him that he could do what none of his closest and most trusted advisors were able to do if only given a little more time. Because the king desperately wanted the dream explained, he granted the request. And then Daniel gathered his three friends and together they prayed to the Lord for the wisdom to know the king's dream and its interpretation. That night as Daniel slept the Lord gave him the answers he was seeking.

The next day Daniel explained everything to Nebuchadnezzar. It turns out that the Lord had given the king an overview of future world history. He revealed that there would be a succession of four kingdoms of men, of which Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon was the first. Three others would follow, which we now know to be the empires of Persia, Greece, and finally Rome. In the days of that last kingdom the Lord himself would establish a kingdom of a different kind, one far more stable than the transient kingdoms of men – indeed, this would be a kingdom that would last forever. We know this kingdom as the Church of Jesus Christ, for those who enter it by God's grace live forever under the eternal reign of his only begotten Son.

The king of Babylon was so impressed and pleased that he praised the Lord of heaven who had given Daniel his insight. And in gratitude he promoted Daniel to prime minister and set him above all his other wise men. Daniel in turn used his new influence to have Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego appointed as government officials in the provinces of Babylon. Thus these four young Jewish men found themselves serving a pagan king in a foreign land in positions of high rank and authority – proving that the Lord has a plan and purpose not just for the grand sweep of world history, but also for the individual lives of each one of his faithful children.

It's likely some years later when the events of this evening's text take place. King Nebuchadnezzar decides to erect a golden image – presumably representing one of his gods – and commands all his subordinate leaders and government functionaries to fall down and worship it when the signal is given. The biblical text doesn't tell us why he issued this decree, but with the help of other historical sources it's possible to make an educated guess. You see, what happened was that shortly after his taking the throne, a number of subjected territories rose up in rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar's rule. It took several years of bitter fighting and bloodshed for the king to crush this revolt and consolidate his control over the empire. Bible scholars believe that it was shortly after having accomplished this that the king found himself

wanting to prevent another uprising by extracting an oath of loyalty from everyone who served him in high offices. He had all kinds of people subordinate to him. They came from dozens of countries and they worshipped a wide range of gods. By ordering them to recognize and worship the official gods of Babylon, he meant to have them show that they were willing to recognize and submit to his own authority.

It's important that we understand this: Nebuchadnezzar, like most of the ancients, was a polytheist. He believed that there were many gods. And he had no problem believing that each nation and people group had their own set of gods, all of whom were perfectly legitimate. Again, that's why when he conquered a nation, he would take the idols of their gods from their temples and place them in the temple of his own god, Bel. The thought was that we beat you in war because our god is stronger than yours, so we'll take your god's idol and put it in our god's trophy case. It's a way to say, "See, your god is now a servant of our god – just like you are our servants." So, to Nebuchadnezzar, the acknowledgement of his god was a way for you to say, "Okay, I agree. Babylon rules the world. And I submit to it." In the king's mind, he wasn't trying to change anyone's religion. You could go on worshipping your own gods however you wanted. All you had to do was recognize his gods too. It wasn't really so much a matter of religion to him; it was a matter of recognizing the authority of the state. To him it was more like when we pledge allegiance to the flag. Only a rebellious traitor would refuse to do so. And rebellious traitors deserve the death penalty.

But that's not how Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego saw it. As faithful Jews, to them it was basic first commandment stuff. The Lord said, "You shall have no gods before me. You shall not make graven images of things in heaven, on earth, or in the sea; and you shall not bow down and worship them." It was that simple. They were more than willing to submit to the king in other matters. They served him loyally. But when the king issued a decree that was in conflict with the higher authority of God, they had no choice but to say, "No. We will not comply." And I think it's worth noting that they don't make a big fuss about it or go out of their way to register their unwillingness to obey the king's ungodly decree. They don't start a riot or grab protest signs and start marching. They don't chant catchy slogans about the injustice of the king's command or say things disrespectful of the king. Instead they very quietly and respectfully fail to comply with the order.

It's left to others to bring the matter of their dissent to the king's attention. In this case, it's certain other government officials who seem to be more than a little envious of the three and the way they were promoted to their positions – probably over most of them. It galls them: "They're foreigners. They aren't like us. They don't follow our ways. And they only got their jobs because they've got connections with that smarty-pants prime minister, Daniel." They aren't so much interested in defending the honor and authority of the king; no, to them it's a personal vendetta. They want Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego taken out of their way.

So pulling together all the sycophantic charm they can muster, they take the matter to the king: "Say, your majesty, didn't you issue this decree? Well, we feel it's our civic duty to tell you that there are some foreigners among us whom you've appointed as governors, and they think they're above having to follow your orders. What do you think of that?"

As we heard, the king was not pleased. But I have to give him some credit: as angry as he is, he is willing to offer them a second chance. It's probably because he knows them to be honest and capable leaders who have been doing a good job for him. So he summons them and says, "Maybe you didn't understand. This is what you are required to do. When the signal is given, you will fall down and worship the image I've made. Do that and everything will be fine.

But if you refuse, I will have you cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you from my hand?"

And I don't know ... maybe it's because we're familiar with this story and know so well its happy conclusion, but I think it's easy to gloss over the impact of the king's words and the very real fear they would have induced in the hearts of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Bear in mind, they didn't know the end of the story. All they knew for sure was that they were facing death by fire because of their faith in the Lord. And they knew it would be a horrible way to go. How easy it would have been for them to give in to the king's command. One little motion ... just lie down in the direction of that statue ... it really didn't mean anything. It's not like they imagined for a moment that the idol the king had set up was really a god. Surely the Lord would understand and forgive a little human weakness. I wonder ... what would you have done? Peter thought he would never deny his Lord. He swore he wouldn't do it even if facing death. And in his life he had seen far more evidence of the Lord's miraculous power to save than these three men ever did. But when he faced his trial of faith, he caved in not once but three times.

This makes the answer of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego all the more remarkable. "We don't need a second chance. And we aren't going to offer any defense. Our God is able to save us if he so wills; but whether he does or not, we are not going to recognize your gods or serve them."

It was noted earlier in this series that King Nebuchadnezzar was not a man used to hearing the word "no". From his reaction to hearing it now, it's easy to see why. Practically insane with fury, the king orders the furnace heat to be increased seven times, and for the three men to be bound and cast in. The furnace itself was most likely a large kiln for firing brick or a smelter for iron. Either way, by adding fuel and vigorously pumping the bellows, the king's servants soon transform it into a raging inferno throwing off so much heat that it kills the unfortunate guards charged with casting the men in. But into the fire they go.

I suspect that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were just as astonished as the king that they didn't immediately die in the fire. No doubt they assumed that they would be freed from the king's control by passing through death to life with the Lord. But the Lord had other plans. He wanted to communicate some important messages to his people. And so the three men find themselves walking around in the flames completely unharmed. It's a nice touch that the Lord sees to it that the only things that burn up are the ropes used to bind them. And that conveys one of the messages the Lord would have us know: that those who place their trust in the Lord are always free regardless of their external circumstances. Whom the Son sets free is free indeed. Nothing, not even death can hold or harm them. The other message is conveyed by the presence of a fourth person who is seen with them in the fire. Nebuchadnezzar describes him as "a son of the gods"; but that's his pagan ignorance speaking. We know better. The Lord speaking through the prophet Isaiah had told his people 150 years before this: "*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you; when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.*" This can be no mere angel in the fire. No, this is the Lord himself in the person of God the Son. And that's the message. The Lord is showing that he is with us in our afflictions. More than that, the Lord is foreshadowing the truth that in Christ Jesus, he will face all of our trials and bear all of our afflictions for us.

But it was vital for God's people that he communicate these messages to them at this particular point in history. You see, there were other things going on. It was at about this same time that the nation of Judah rebelled once again against Babylonian rule. You may recall that's

how Daniel and his three companions had come to be in Babylon in the first place. The Lord had given the king of Babylon dominion over his people as a punishment for their sin and faithlessness. And as part of that punishment, the Babylonians carried off into exile a group of what was at most a few hundred hostages, among whom were Daniel and his three friends. Unfortunately the people of Judah didn't learn the lesson. They continued in their sinful ways and thought they could throw off the yoke of Babylonian oppression even while offending the Lord. They were wrong. The Babylonians returned and easily subjugated them again; but this time they made the penalty more severe. There were executions for their leaders. There were heavy fines and taxes laid on them. And this time they took some 15,000 captives into exile and put them in settlements in Babylon that were partly refugee camps and partly prisons.

Life was pure misery for these exiled Jews, and it would have been very tempting for them to think that maybe the Babylonian way of thinking was right after all. It did seem that the gods of Babylon were stronger than the Lord God of Israel. Why else did we keep losing to them? The Lord knew this temptation would be great, and so he set forth Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as examples to these new captives of his mighty power to save and of the rewards for faithfulness. And something else the Lord did: by using this episode to have these three men promoted even higher, he put them in positions from which they could better assist and help ease the suffering of the new captives. In that sense we can see these three men Christologically. Their going first into exile, suffering, and then rising to positions of authority foreshadows how Christ goes for us first into death. It's through his suffering, dying, and rising again that the passage through death is made safe for us.

The other big lesson we want to take from this story concerns the issue of civil disobedience. As Christians we are citizens of two kingdoms. There is the earthly kingdom to which we owe our allegiance, in our case the United States of America; and there is God's kingdom, the Church of Jesus Christ. We recognize that both kingdoms serve the Lord God: one to maintain law, order, and national security in this world; and the other to proclaim God's Word and administer the gifts of his grace by which he forgives sin and grants eternal life. Most of the time there's no conflict between the two; but when there is, that is when the state tries to supersede the Law of God, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego we are called to obey God rather than men. That's what the Apostles did when they were commanded by the Jewish authorities to stop preaching about Jesus. That's what the early Christians did when they were persecuted in the time of Rome for refusing to worship the emperor as a god. It's what Luther did when he was commanded to renounce his faith in the Gospel before the Holy Roman Emperor at the Diet of Worms. It's what newly converted Christians in Muslim nations are doing today because under by Islamic law to renounce Islam and become a Christian is punishable by death.

All these people and more faced fiery trials on account of their faith. Many suffered terribly. Many died. But the Lord was with them in their fiery trials, sustaining their faith. And in the end not one of their hairs has been harmed. They are alive even now with the Lord. And this is a great comfort for us. We have no idea what kinds of trials we may have to face. It's doubtful that any of us will be confronted by death any time soon on account of our faith; but mockery and ridicule are already rampant, and the way things are going fines and perhaps even prison may not be far away. We'll just have to wait and see. But we need not despair, for we know that the Lord will be with us also no matter what happens and he will deliver us one way or another, through Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!