

## “The Daniel Project – Part 3”

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We're going to talk about what do you do in life when like the rug gets pulled out from underneath you (which it will)...when your world gets rocked (which at some point will happen)? What do you do then? Because if you wait until that moment, you could be vulnerable. I ran into this a while ago. It's instructions...supposedly a page out of the manual for Peace Corp volunteers headed for South America called *What to Do if Attacked by an Anaconda*. Useful information. These are the instructions:

1. If you're attacked by an anaconda, do not run; the snake is faster than you are.
2. Lie flat on the ground.
3. Put your arms tight at your sides and your legs tight against one another.
4. The snake will come and begin to nudge and climb over your body.
5. Do not panic.
6. After the snake has examined you, it will begin to swallow you from the feet end. Always from the feet end.
7. The snake will now begin to suck your legs into its body. You must lie perfectly still. This will take a long time.
8. When the snake has reached your knees, slowly and with as little movement as possible, reach down, take your knife, and very gently slide it into the side of the snake's mouth between the edge of its mouth and your leg. Then suddenly rip upwards severing the snake's head.
9. Be sure your knife is sharp.
10. Be sure you have your knife.

That's my favorite one of the 10 right there. Because there is actually a book, actually a series of books, and I have some of them, called *Worst Case Scenarios*. In the preface, the authors write, "The principle behind this book is a simple one...you just never know." You never really know what curves life will throw at you, what's lurking around the corner. You never know when you might be called to choose life or death with your own actions. But when you are called, and you will be called, you need to know what to do. If you wait until a crisis hits, because it will hit, you have waited too long. You need to be prepared first.

We're going to read a remarkable story out of the book of Daniel and kind of walk through the text. If you have a Bible with you or you want to pull one out of the pew racks, you can do that. There will be words up on the screen. But we're going to be in the text quite a lot today and walk through a story sometimes thought of as a children's story, but it is not. It involves historical characters. We're going to look at three great truths. One of them is *a truth of great strength*. One of them is *a truth of great nobility*. The third one is *a truth that will change your life if you'll let it*.

So here we go. Daniel, chapter 3. *"King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, ninety feet high and*

*nine feet wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it.*

*Then the herald loudly proclaimed, 'This is what you are commanded to do, O peoples, nations and men of every language: As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.' Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up."*

Except for three...Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego...three young men. They have already lost their homeland. They have been exiled from Israel. They've lost their families. Even their names were changed, were stripped to cause them to lose their sense of identity, their allegiance to this God. They're living in exile.

One day Nebuchadnezzar makes a statue. Not a little bit of kind of behind-the-scenes context. What the statue stands for is left quite vague in this story. There is no name given to the god the idol represents. Babylon has taken over many cultures, many countries, many peoples, and Nebuchadnezzar wants to make sure he has unity, that everybody understands he is the man. These cultures are quite polytheistic, so he figures he'll throw one more god into the pantheon. Forcing everybody to worship together will reinforce his own prestige and power in their midst.

In other words, this isn't nearly so much a religious deal. It's primarily a political deal. It's really about power. He invests a lot of effort into positively motivating people to go along with him. Beauty and art... this is a statue ninety feet high, it would be immense. Probably gold plated, but still of immense value. Music from every instrument he can think of.

You'll notice in the story there is a number of lists that get repeated. It's very artful story telling. It's communicating this sense of peer pressure that would be on everybody to bow down before this idol. There is a very impressive gathering of leaders from the nations. That's all on the positive motivation side. If all that is not enough to compel you to bow down, he decreed that failure to comply would mean you would be thrown into a furnace to be burned alive.

So now picture this moment. A vast assembly of countless peoples, especially all leaders, and this very moving music begins. The people are highly motivated by Nebuchadnezzar as he intended. Literally in verse 7, the text says, "As soon as they were hearing, they were falling." It was like a race to see who could hit the ground first to show Nebuchadnezzar how devoted they are. Then in the crowd there is a ripple of noise, quiet at first, but it grows louder until it is heard above this music. Suddenly nobody is looking at the statue anymore. In an act that looks like either monumental courage or suicidal folly, three young men are still standing. They will not bow their heads. They will not bend their knee.

Now these men have very powerful enemies. They have risen very quickly in the ranks of the Babylonian hierarchy. So when this happens, there are people who have an agenda. *"At this time some astrologers (these would be high-ranking people) came forward and denounced the Jews. They said to King*

*Nebuchadnezzar, 'O king, live forever! You have issued a decree...and these three will not obey.'*" The word *denounced* literally means *to eat pieces of them*. It's intended by the writer to convey intense hostility to these three young men. One scholar notes that this story may be the first historical account of religious persecution, certainly of anti-Semitism. Because these guys had been placed, see, under Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They are consumed with jealousy. This is their chance to bring these guys down.

They all knew how Nebuchadnezzar would respond. It was quite predictable. *"Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, 'Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good.'" He is giving them another shot. "But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"*" Now, I want to consider that statement, *"What god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"*

This falls in the category of a rhetorical question. When a speaker asks a rhetorical question, he is not looking for information...just making a point. When I grew up, a parents' favorite rhetorical question was, "Do you want a spanking?" No kid would ever say, "Well, I was thinking about going out to play. But you know, now that you mention it, yeah, I think that would benefit my character. Let's go ahead with your idea." So Nebuchadnezzar asked, "What god will deliver you?" He is not looking for information here. He is just reminding them they have no choice.

But much to his surprise, there are three men who do not treat it as a rhetorical question at all because when you have faith that there is a big God who oversees the affairs of humankind, all of a sudden...all of a sudden, you have options. *"Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied to the king, 'O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter.'" These are unbelievable words. "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..."*

"The God we serve is able. He is not a myth, king. He is not an abstraction. He is not a lovely idea. He is not like this statue you yourself have just built out in the desert. He is real. He made everything that is. He stands above time, space, and history. He is making Himself known among the peoples of the earth. He is able to save us from the furnace. He is able to deliver us from your hand. The God we serve is able." Now this is the first truth. This is the truth of great power: *our God is able*. Our God is able. Therefore, you have options. Therefore, we do not have to live in fear. Therefore, we do not have to live in defeat. Therefore, we do not have to cower. Because every human power will find its limit. Every human power will reach the end of its tether.

When I was a boy, I used to play a game called *Daddy Home*. When my father would come home at night and I would hear that door open up at the end of a workday, I would go racing down the stairs to jump into his arms. He was and is a big guy...about 6 feet 2 inches tall, about 200 pounds. I would take off five or six stairs away from the landing...wouldn't even bother to look...just jump into the air because I knew he would catch me.

Then one day, my mom pulled me aside. My dad couldn't bring himself to do it; my mom did. She said, "You cannot play *Daddy Home* anymore." I was crushed. "Why not?" She said, "Well, it's not that he doesn't love you because he does. It's not that he won't always be there for you because he will. It's just

you're 48 years old. He is 71 now, and those arms are just, you know, not as powerful as they once were."

Every pair of arms is going to wear out one day. Every human being is going to find their limit. Real smart, real powerful, real clever. Nebuchadnezzar is going to find he has a limit one day. There will be an enemy. There will be a problem. There will be a diagnosis. There will be a disease. There will be a loss. There will be age. There will be death. But our God's arms have lost none of their strength. We live in faith...not in fear...every day no matter what we face, no matter what the problem is, no matter how deep the discouragement, no matter what internal emotions we wrestle with because the God we serve is able. This is good news.

The God we serve is able to reconcile broken marriage, and I've seen it happen. The God we serve is able to liberate people from horrible addictions, and I've seen Him do it. The God we serve is able to heal damaged bodies. The God we serve is able to forgive the darkest of sins and make somebody into a new creature, and I've seen it happen. The God we serve is able to provide for the greatest need. The God we serve is able to guide with supernatural wisdom. The God we serve is able to inspire spiritual gifting beyond human ability. The God we serve is able to soften the hardest human heart in the world. Everybody in this room, by your mere physical existence, by your spiritual hunger, and by your presence here is testimony to this single truth...*our God is able*.

If we were another kind of church, right about at this point, people would be getting happy. But we're not. We're a Presbyterian church. So just look pleased for a moment, would you? If you take nothing else away, let's just take this phrase...*our God is able*. Let's say that out loud, "Our God is able." You live with that this week now. When you run into a problem, when somebody does not like you, when something is not going your way, when a worry comes into your mind...our God is able.

The reason these three men lived in faith, not in fear, is they live in the universe with this great big God. So their focus is not particularly on the size of the furnace or the power of Nebuchadnezzar. It's on their God. Our God is able. ***"We want you to know, O king..."*** But they don't stop there. They go on to a statement of devotion that takes your breath away. One thing you need to know about these three young men...they are not people with a superficial faith that has emerged because their lives have always been easy. You know, we see that sometimes with people. They just give glib, easily voiced, kind of superficial spiritual language that does not get rooted too deeply. Their lives have been exceptionally difficult.

They would have prayed a long time ago when Babylon was arising as a world power and their little country of Israel was threatened that Nebuchadnezzar would not defeat them, but he did. They would have prayed when Babylon took over and some of the brightest and the best were being exiled that they would not be among those who were exiled, but they were. When they heard one day about this decree where everybody was going to have to fall down in front of an idol, they must have prayed Nebuchadnezzar would repent, that he would come to his senses, but he did not.

They must have prayed that the decree would not end up being enforced, but it was. They must have prayed that because of Daniel's influence with Nebuchadnezzar the Jews would be excused, but they weren't. Maybe they prayed that when that day came, nobody would notice that they failed to bow, or if people noticed, they would not tell, but people noticed. People told.

Not one of their prayers got answered. At every point, these three men were bitterly disappointed. At every point, the nightmare grew closer to reality. Now they faced their worst-case scenario. They stare their worst enemy in the eye. Now every door of escape has been closed tight. So they testify once more

to their faith in the One they serve. "If we are thrown into the furnace, O king, we want you to know the God we serve is able to save us from it."

Then in verse 18, one of the great statements of faith ever uttered by any human being. ***"But even if He does not..."*** "Our God can rescue us still, Nebuchadnezzar. The God who drowned Pharaoh's army and fell Jericho's walls and dropped Goliath with a stone, who brought manna in the morning, who gave a pillar of fire to lead His people by night, who spoke worlds into existence...His arms have lost none of their strength. Our God can rescue us still." ***"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."*** Who are these men? How does a human heart get shaped like this? "We want you to know, O king, we will march to our death singing hymns of praise to the only God we will ever serve or love."

Now this is the noble truth. "Our God is able"...that's a strong truth. Able to answer your deepest prayers, able to fulfill your fondest desires, able to realize your greatest dream. But what about even when He does not? I think of Job who went through intense suffering without relief or explanation and said, "Though He slay me, yet I will trust Him." I think about Esther who decided she would confront a king bent on genocide even though it could mean her death and said, "I will go to the king even though it is against the law. If I perish, I perish."

A lot of us are tempted to pray, "God, if You'll grant this one request, if You give me what I really want, I'll spend the rest of my life serving You. I'll tell everybody about You." Will you decide to have "even if He does not" faith?

Maybe you're in a relationship and the truth is you really like this person...you're highly attracted...but he is pressuring you to cross sexual boundaries you know you should not or is involved in behavior that's opposed to your deepest values. You can rationalize staying together if you want to. Underneath it you're afraid. "I may never find anybody I'm so attracted to. I may end up alone." God is able. God is able to bring somebody even better into your life. The question now is...*What will you do even if He does not?* "Even if God does not bring someone else into my life ever, even if it means facing fear and aloneness, I will not dishonor my God. I will not bend the knee to a relationship I know does not please my Heavenly Father."

Maybe it involves finances that are going really badly, and you are in debt. Our God is able to provide. Even if He does not... Maybe there is a job that's not turning out the way you want to. Maybe you're looking for a job. Our God is able to make a way. Even if He does not... Maybe your health is in a real precarious situation. Our God is able to heal. Even if He does not... Maybe you wrestle with a depression that is so bad some mornings you do not even know if it is worthwhile getting out of bed. Our God is able to bring joy. Our God is able to lift depression. Even if He does not... Even if I have to wrestle with this the rest of my life... Maybe you have a child who is a long, long ways away from home. Our Father specializes in bringing prodigal sons and prodigal daughters back to Him, in putting families back together. Even if He does not...

Often the truth is, you know, "When my day goes well, when I get good news, when circumstances go right...I'll live with joy. I want to serve. I'm motivated to tell other people about God. I'm more generous with my time and my money. But if not, if I get a little close to the furnace, I begin to bend the knee to God. It's called self-absorption or self-preoccupation or self-serving or self-pity because in the end of the day, that great big idol always is named *me*." That's what that idol is always named. These three men, they know what they're saying. "Our God is able, and He can rescue us still. But we want you to know, O king,

even if He does not, we will not bend our knees to your god. We will not worship before this idol."

They say this to Nebuchadnezzar, and he is deeply moved by their devotion and sets them free and proclaims religious liberty throughout the land. Is that the way the story goes? No. Nebuchadnezzar wasn't so much that kind of a guy. "You're not a big religious liberty kind of a guy." They did not live in the same world in which we live. His response was quite predictable. ***"Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed."*** Literally it says, "And his face toward them changed." You know when somebody's face is just exploding with anger. ***"He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual."***

Now you see that phrase every once in awhile in ancient literature. It appears in Proverbs a lot. "Though the righteous fall seven times, they will rise back up." It was a kind of formulaic way of saying something is getting maximized to the fullest extent possible. "Heat that furnace up as high as it will go." To deliberately burn someone to death is historically one of the most inhumane forms of execution. It involves treating a human being like an object, like a stick of wood to dispose of. Human beings have been treated that way by authorities who make themselves absolute and still do to our day.

When I was in Honduras, there was a group of people, a ministry, trying to find a way to help a young girl. She had been covered with kerosene by her parents and then set on fire and then abandoned. She survived it. She was now deaf, possibly autistic, skin hanging like bracelets from her body, but still alive. That's her world.

These three men wait to be thrown into the flames. This is the fate they faced voluntarily knowing at any moment a single word could spare their lives, and they will not say it. Again, you know, I'm a million miles away from a furnace like that one, but we live in a world where in China, while you and I meet here, there are people who are facing pretty serious moments. They just say, "Our God is able to deliver us, but we want you to know, O king, even if He does not, we will not bend the knee to any other god. We will not bow our heads before any other idol."

They're carried to the furnace, filled with courage, fear, defiance, faith...I don't know. They see the men who bore them collapse and die. They are in the flames. Then this remarkable thing. ***"King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feat 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.'"***

Who do you think that fourth Man was who can appear from nowhere, who can cheat death, who looks in appearance like a son of the gods? The furnace, which looked certainly like the end of their lives, turns out to be the greatest thing they ever experienced because they met God there. They were hoping to get delivered from the furnace, but God decided to deliver them *in* the furnace.

This is the truth that will change your life. God said to them what He sometimes says to people still all around our world, "I will meet you in the furnace...in the place where full devotion can sometimes lead a follower, in a place that looks frightening, dangerous, painful because it is frightening, dangerous, and painful." It turns out to be where Jesus is. It turns out to be maybe not in this world but in the ultimate eternal scope of things the safest place of all. It turns out to be the adventure of a lifetime.

I wonder with those three men what the rest of their lives were like. We don't know. This is our last view of them. They are never mentioned again in the Bible. I wonder as they went through life if they ever

thought about how easily they might have missed this adventure. I wonder if they lived to be old men if they would get together and talk about those moments that only they knew, thought about how one word spoken in fear, one knee bent to the wrong god, and they would have missed the adventures of their lives. They would have missed the fourth Man in the furnace.

Because I'll tell you what I think... I think the fourth Man in the furnace was Jesus because He knows about the furnace. This is what is amazing about our God. Jesus prayed in the Garden that His Father would spare Him the suffering of a Cross, of being executed by authorities who wanted to make sure He did not disrupt their empire... Roman Empire, the Babylon of that day. He prayed He would be spared the pain of carrying our sin on Himself. I cannot even conceive that pain. Then Jesus prayed, "Father, I want to be spared this, but even if I am not... Let this cup pass from Me, but even if it does not... Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours be done." Sometimes God delivers people *from* the furnace. Sometimes God delivers people *in* the furnace. I wonder where you are, what your furnace would look like.

We're going to close our service today with a time of prayer. We'll often let people know if you want to have prayer after the service is done, there are some folks over here who would love to pray for you. We're going to do that today. But sometimes that's an afterthought or it will feel like kind of an afterthought. We didn't want that to be the case today. So I'm going to stick around here and be praying, and other folks will.

I want to say a word real quickly just to two different groups of people. Because maybe you're facing a furnace, and maybe you need prayer. For some of you, there is a problem, there is a situation, there is a challenge. You've been worrying about it. You've been trying to handle it on your own. It's been kind of a nagging fear. God is just saying today, "Let somebody else pray for you, would you?"

I was thinking this week about how you know with a car if you're not wearing a seatbelt, the car will beep now to get to you put the seatbelt on. I used to have a car, and it would beep if you're not wearing a seatbelt. But I learned that I could buckle myself in. Then if I unbuckled the seatbelt, I could keep driving, and it wouldn't beep anymore. I was so proud I had outsmarted the engineer. Then it occurred to me, if I get in an accident, the engineer is not going to die. That would be me. So why would I drive unguarded, unprotected? Why would you live un-prayed? Maybe you've been trying to face a furnace, and you sense a need for God. Then just come on down. Let somebody... Something happens in prayer.

Then I had this thought earlier, and this would be some people in this room... of a human being crying out to God like a little child, "This is too hard for me. This is too heavy. I don't know if I can handle this." The Father holding out His arms saying, "I know, I know. You come to Me. You run to Me. I cannot promise every outcome the way you want, but I will walk with you even through the furnace. I will be Your Father, and you will find more in Me than you ever need. You come." So would you pray with me for just a moment, and then we'll just kind of close with a time where prayer will be going on in this room.

Heavenly Father, only You know the situation, the difficulty, the fear, the challenge every person in this room is facing right now. You are able. How we need for Your power, for Your deliverance, to be released in our lives. I think in this moment about my own life and the circumstances I face and then people who are my brothers and sisters on the other side of the world who are threatened with arrests or imprisonment or worse for just doing what we're doing right here. I pray for me and for our church that "even if He does not" kind of faith. So Father in these moments, would You move and heal and guide and forgive and strengthen? We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

So there is not going to be any more formal close to the service than this. I'm just going to come down here, and there will be some other folks. If you want to have prayer, if you have a need, if you are convicted or sad or discouraged or afraid...just come on down. We'd love to pray for you. If there is a little line, just kind of wait in that line and we'll just focus on prayer. Then for everybody else, you're dismissed, and you can go out knowing God will go with you.