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INTRO

This talk is taken from Daniel chapter 3 which is the 'Blazing Furnace' chapter in the words of the Youth Bible. Let's ask the Spirit to reveal God's Word to us and open our hearts and get started..

Many servants of God have a hard time as God allows circumstances to shape and mould their characters. I can say from personal experience that God has often thrown me into difficult times – often because he wants to shape me and help me grow spiritually. It's hard, often we don't like it, but we have to learn from God's work in us.

This chapter (chapter 3) describes what the UCB Bible Study Notes calls, a 'furnace faith' – faith in God that is unshaken by 'furnace' experiences..

IDOLATRY, SELF AND OUR CHOICE

We live in a world that may not idolize and bow down to Nebuchadnezzar, Baal or other such Old Testament idols – but our society has idols of money, fame, self, sex, power.. all the kinds of things that Old Testament Kings and idols stood for, let's not forget that times have changed but the human heart hasn't..

Where there is idolatry, there will be potential problems for God's people. As we live out our Christian lives with integrity, and have the God-given privilege of discipling young people, let's set our hearts in all things at all times to worship only God. Maybe challenge young people to seek God right at the start..

In Daniel 3.6 we find that an order is made for all people to bow down and worship the king or be thrown into a furnace. Immediately we find that there were men intent on causing trouble.. verses 9-13 shows a group of Babylonians heaping sickly flattery on the king, before naming 3 men of God who were refusing to bow down to the king.

Whenever you stand as a Christian, there will be evil people, intent on causing harm and undermining you as a Christian, and Jesus as the way, the truth and the life. When a friend of mine started working for a company recently, he was subjected to immediate abuse for an entire day because he said he was a Christian. This may not happen to you. But there is a cost to following Jesus. For some, like me, part of the cost has been little money, having to stay in a situation that really isn't ideal in many ways..

But why were Shadrach, Meshach and Adednego refusing to bow to the king? Let's turn to Exodus 20.3 where God said, 'You must not have any other gods except me'. We are to worship God alone. When Shadrach, Meshach and Adednego (or Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah to give them their Jewish names!) refused to bow to Nebuchadnezzar, they were honouring God and saying 'no way, we worship only the Lord God'.

So what does this mean for us today? What do we need to stand up to? Where do we need to make a stand for God and refuse to bow down? Think about that as we go on..

In verse 15, Shadrach, Meshach and Adednego were offered another choice to bow down to the king. Imagine you're in this situation.. knowing that if you refuse to bow down to something, you will be thrown into a fire. You know, for many church leaders in the world, this kind of thing is a reality. For those in countries where Christians are persecuted, you know that you may be abused, attacked, tortured or killed because of your faith.

The story is told of a church meeting in an Eastern European country where a soldier burst in with a machine gun and shouted, 'everyone who's not a Christian, get out of here.' Some people ran out. The soldier then sat down and confessed he was a Christian but just needed to make sure he was among true believers, not possible government spies who may inform on him.

So, what would you do? This kind of thing would certainly separate true believers and 'hangers-on' huh?!?

STANDING DESPITE THE HEAT

In Ephesians 6.13 says, '..and then when you have finished the whole fight you will still be standing.' This has to be our attitude as Christians. Many of God's people have started strong but finished weak in God – for example Saul. We need to stand strong in our faith and carry on strong.

The king, in his anger, then threw down a challenge which was effectively a challenge to God.. 'What god will be able to save you from my power then..' (We see how power had gone to the head of the by now arrogant king).

I love the reaction from Shadrach, Meshach and Adednego. They speak humbly but with strength. They are secure in the knowledge of God and his power and calling in their lives. Their words are a good lesson to us when people criticise our Christian ministries or our lives.. 'Nebuchadnezzar, we do not have to defend ourselves to you..'

But Shadrach, Meshach and Adednego carried on.. they made several key points for us today:

1. They did not try to get out of being thrown into the furnace – maybe this is an unpopular statement but as Christians we do need 'furnace' experiences sometimes for God to get our attention, or as in this case, to be able to display his power so that no-one except God can gain the credit (and rightly so!)
2. They affirmed (by words) the fact that God was able to save them. There is great power in words. As proved by the attitude of Caleb in Numbers 13.30-31 when he declared that they were well able to take with Promised Land, with the help of God.. in Numbers 14.20-24 we see the fulfillment of Caleb's spoken declaration when God promised that Caleb would enter the promised land (and his children would possess it), unlike those who doubted. These men were not allowed into the Promised Land by God, also fulfilling their own words (that they wouldn't be able to take the land).

So your words are important. Secondly, Shadrach, Meshach and Adednego declared their faith in God publicly. This was a bold, courageous move and they knew its consequences.

3. They were still respectful to the King (calling him 'our King'). Even in our messed up and fallen world, our words and lives are to demonstrate by their integrity, that we are God's people. Someone once advised young women considering meeting their perfect bloke.. 'Get in the car with them and see how they act in the car. Are they abusive and aggressive or is their attitude calm and steady.' It's a good point – and one equally valid vice versa! This must be our attitude. Also one of respect to authority, as much as possible, we've all had run-ins with the police and authorities that make this pretty hard!!

4. Shadrach, Meshach and Adednego clearly stated that not only was the Lord their God, but also that they were unwilling to bow down to any other gods. What is our attitude? Are we prepared to put to death any idols in our lives? Are we willing to make ourselves 'totally, unreservedly available to God? It's a hard question. Shadrach, Meshach and Adednego made themselves totally available to God, despite the fear they must have felt.

INTO THE FIRE

The king was mad with Shadrach, Meshach and Adednego. 'How dare you refuse to obey and bow down to me – soldiers, light that furnace real hot, pump it up 7 times hotter than normal' said the infuriated king, 'tie up these dogs and hurl them into the flames while still wearing their clothes, they must die!' But the first ones to die were the soldiers who died (verse 22). God will deal with those who oppose him and persecute his people, don't forget that. In this instance, the consequences were instant.

Suddenly, the King spotted 4 men in the furnace, not 3 men. The shackles had fallen off the hands of Shadrach, Meshach and Adednego, plus the king recognised there was someone else in the fire, 'who looked like one of the sons of the gods.' God does not always protect his people but God is well able to protect his people. Why doesn't God always help his people? God's glory and kingdom must always come first, that's why God saves some people and not others. Other times, we just don't know why.

In this instance, God spared Shadrach, Meshach and Adednego for a purpose. The king must have been amazed. These men he had just thrown into the fire were just walking around. I wonder what was going through the heads of Shadrach, Meshach and Adednego! What were they saying? 'Bit hot in here isn't it mate?' Or 'whose that bloke in here with us?' I suppose we'll only find out one day in heaven but it must have been pretty amazing!

In addition, it's interesting that the king realised there was something different about the fourth person in the fire. Was this an angel? Was it Jesus? I'm not sure. The king then went to the opening of the fire and commanded Shadrach, Meshach and Adednego to come out of the furnace.

When the 3 men came out of the fire, only the ropes that had bound them had been affected (and burned off) by the fire. When you are walking in the purposes and plan of God, no weapon that is fashioned against you will be able to stand (Isaiah 54.17). God will break the bonds, the barriers, the ropes in your life and world that seek to hold back the purposes of God. It may not always be so dramatic or obvious.

But God's plan will stand, and the enemy is ultimately useless to hold him back. (Remember Jesus on the Cross, he had complete and total victory.

Paul says in Colossians 2.13-15:

“When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. **And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.**” (emphasis added)

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

Shadrach, Meshach and Adednego walked out of the fire. Immediately all the advisors and soldiers surrounded them in amazement. Not even a hair on their heads were burnt (and it's not cos they'd had their heads shaved..) But notice. A subtle change had occurred in the king. How did he address the 3 men in the fire.. 'Servants of the Most High God.' The king knew he was on holy ground. He must have been pretty shaken. He knew this was God that had done this. The one and only God. What's more the king even offered up words of praise to God!

You see, when people see God in you, many will recognise it is God and they will be changed by God's Spirit, maybe slowly, maybe immediately. Let's look at the promise of Jesus in Matthew 5.16: 'In the same way, you should be a light for other people. Live so that they will see the good things you do and will praise your Father in heaven.' What can we learn from this? That it's OK to stand as a British Christian and let your light shine, as long as it is for God's glory.

An example of this. With God's help, I have tried (often failed) to do this. I want to follow God's calling on my life through music, media, youth work, training and more. I want to do these things because God has gifted me in these areas. That's OK. But I want to do them first and foremost for God and his call, for God and his glory. I'm not saying I've succeeded but that is my aim, through God's Spirit. What about you?

The king then recognised that the 3 men had been willing to die rather than obey his command, trusting God instead. He then went on to proclaim that anyone who spoke against the Lord God would have his house destroyed. A very dramatic change and evidence of how all things work together for good when God is in control. The king also said something very important. 'No other god can save his people like this.' He also promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Adednego!

Let's learn from this. There is no other god who can save his people other than the Lord God. There is only one way to God. Through Jesus who said, 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No one gets to the Father except through me.' It is the blood of Jesus on the cross that has made a way between man/woman and God. There is no truth in any other religion, sect or cult. Let's not forget this and let's live this out.

For Nebuchadnezzar, this experience didn't transform him immediately – he didn't accept God as the one true God – but it did take him further down the line that way. If we read on in Daniel 4.34 and following, we see that God dealt with Nebuchadnezzar and then the King did accept God, humbling himself and confessing sin. Through the first 4 chapters of Daniel, we see that the King was on a journey with God himself. Be encouraged that those you're praying for are on a journey of faith – as are those people who have accepted Jesus in their life. They and you may not be where you want to be, where God wants you to be – but you're not where you were. So stay up, stay encouraged. God hasn't finished with you yet.