

“God is able”
Daniel 3:13-18
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Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had faith. The response Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego deliver to Nebuchadnezzar is a bold declaration of the faith they have in the God of Israel. “If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us...” Face to face with a furnace whose flames were dancing at their feet, flames licking their chops at the opportunity to consume these three Israelites who had refused to bow down to the massive golden image created by King Nebuchadnezzar, confronted with the very real possibility of being incinerated if they did not bow down to this false God, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego never wavered, never faltered, never quaked and never quivered. And they never bowed down because their faith was in the living God. They would worship no other. Completely confident in their God’s ability to rescue them, they brook no nonsense as they tell Nebuchadnezzar, “Our God is able to deliver us.”

Faith like that is faith that has been tried and testified before. The faith of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is forged in the fire brand of faith. The faith of these three is a faith that spans many generations and draws on countless examples where the God who is able has shown his ability by rescuing his people. It is almost as if Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego look fully into the fires of the furnace and say, “Is that all you have? Just a furnace and its blazing fire?” Come on Nebuchadnezzar! Are you for real? You light a little BBQ and you think we will bow down? Come on Nebuchadnezzar. I mean, really?

What a chance to witness to the wonders of God. Nebuchadnezzar is dancing and prancing in front of what he thinks are such impressive and intimidating flames, and these three, these faithful three, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, they invite Nebuchadnezzar over for a fireside chat. Let us tell you about our God, the God who is able.

- Maybe they began with the creation story. “In the beginning...” and day by day they let creation sing forth its praise to the Living

God who merely speaks, who just says a word, and everything, every single thing comes into being...at his word...at his voice...at his command. Come on Nebuchadnezzar, and all you have is a gas grill?

- Maybe they went back to that time in Egypt, when another ruler thought he had all the power. As Nebuchadnezzar basked in the glow of his campfire our trio regaled the mighty king with tales of gnats and flies, bloody rivers and boils, frogs, locusts and a plague on the livestock. You think threatening to toast us like marshmallows is going to make our faith melt? Come on Nebuchadnezzar. You think your fire is fancy? Our God speaks from the burning bush, a bush that burns and is not consumed, because our God is the eternal flame.
- Fiery furnace indeed! Our God parts the Red Sea. Our God rains bread from heaven for forty years. Our God brings down the walls of Jericho and slays slobbering sycophants like that giant of a man named Goliath. Stoke that little inferno of yours while we tell you about the fire of the Lord that consumed all the false prophets on Mount Carmel. Bow down to your idol? Come on Nebuchadnezzar. That is never going to happen.

With a faith that burned brighter than 10,000 fiery furnaces, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stared into the flames of that blazing inferno and without an ounce of fear they proclaimed, “Our God is able.”

But if you want to talk about faith, listen to what else they said to the king named Nebuchadnezzar. We need to listen to what else they said to the king. What that trio of men with strange names said to the king who threatened to burn them to a crisp is something that must be said if this encounter with evil is going to stand up against all those who threaten and try to frighten the faithful. We already know they spoke with great boldness as they told the king, “Our God is able.” Now hear what else they said. “But even if our God does not deliver us, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” Nebuchadnezzar, our God is able to rescue us from those flames. But even if he does not...it doesn't matter.

We have thrown our lot in with God, and we will worship our God no matter what. We will obey our God no matter what. We will trust our God no matter what.

It is that “no matter what” that makes the story of our trio of friends named Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego such a compelling statement of faith. We regale our children with stories of the fiery furnace and Daniel and the lion’s den, and rightly so. When God triumphs in the immediate, it is a sign and symbol that God will ultimately triumph in the eternal. When mighty rulers are brought down to size, when mighty rulers look ridiculous, it is a sign and symbol, often a sign and a symbol that is filled with humor and makes us laugh at how silly and self-important these rulers really are, when rulers are brought down to size, it is a sign and a symbol that their fame is fleeting, and their power will go poof! Oh yes, we need to celebrate every single story that celebrates the mighty power of God, for each and every one of these stories proclaim the great truth that God is able.

And yet it is that “no matter what” that makes the story of our trio of friends, those biblical heroes named Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, it is that “no matter what” that makes this story such a compelling statement of faith. We would not be honest with ourselves if we did not admit, even freely admit, that sometimes the flames do burn, and sometimes the lions do devour. We would not be honest with ourselves, and we would not be honest with our children if we did not admit, even freely admit that to be a person of faith means that we trust the God who is able, we trust the God who is able...no matter what.

Hebrews, one of the books in the New Testament, has a chapter that fits really well with the story of our trio of faithful friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Chapter eleven in Hebrews is called the chapter on faith. The chapter begins with a definition of faith. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Faith is that assurance and that conviction that God is able. In Hebrews eleven the author wraps us in the wonders of God’s creation, of faithful followers like Abel and Enoch, Noah and his ark, Abraham and his journey into the unknown, that desperate trip up Mount Moriah when he entered his own furnace of fire and found that God is able, that God

provides. We are reminded of Isaac and Jacob, of Joseph and his journey into Egypt, of Moses and the crashing walls of the waters of the Red Sea, of Joshua and the battle of Jericho. Oh, in chapter eleven of Hebrews, God is able. God is more than able. And yet Hebrews eleven also tells us of ones who were tortured, ones who faced jeers and flogging, chains and imprisonment, they were put to death by stoning, they were sawed in two, they wandered this world destitute, persecuted, and mistreated. Not every person of faith steps out of the fiery furnace unharmed. Nevertheless, knowing that God is able, knowing that God is God, knowing that God will ultimately triumph and redeem every bit of this world in which we live, these ones of faith held fast to their faith even when God did not rescue them from the flames and the fire.

Now in all honesty, that is asking a lot of us, isn't it. It's one thing to say, "Step into that fiery furnace. Don't worry. The flames shall not harm you." It's another thing to say, "Step into that fiery furnace. We don't know the outcome. But we trust God." It is asking a lot. So let us take one more look at that fiery furnace that we will all face at one time or another, in one way or another.

After our trio of faithful friends tell Nebuchadnezzar "our God is able", and even if he does not deliver us we will worship him alone, we will obey him alone, we will trust him alone, after our trio proclaims their faith in the living God, they are thrust into the fiery furnace. Oh, before the king throws them in, he turns up the heat, seven times hotter than usual, so hot that the fires consumed the ones throwing our faithful friends into the flames. The king is watching and waiting for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to be incinerated. Instead, he sees something that stuns and startles him.

"Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, 'Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?' They replied, 'Certainly, Your Majesty.' He said, 'Look! I see four men walking around the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.'" (Daniel 3:24, 25)

If you know the story of the fiery furnace, you know that our trio of faithful friends step out of the flames, and they are unharmed. We are

told not a hair of their heads was singed. Their robes were not scorched. There was no smell of fire on them. God is able.

Richard Hays preached a sermon about the fiery furnace. Of course, he celebrates as we all celebrate when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego emerge unharmed. That is such a relief and such a testament to the power of the God who is able. Of course, Richard Hays celebrates when our heroes emerge unharmed. But Hays is also intrigued by what happens inside that fiery inferno. He pays particular attention to the words of King Nebuchadnezzar, who says, “But I see four...” We know only three went into the fire, just three, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. But the king sees a fourth. Hays writes, “Ah, the plot thickens. Daniel gives no explanation, but those who know the story of Israel need no explanation: this is the presence of God—with us in our suffering, sustaining and saving us.”¹

As we ponder that beautiful revelation, the incredible good news that God is with us, even in our suffering, that God is with us in the fiery furnace of life, sustaining and saving us, Hays offers one more insight. He asks, “Did you notice, though, a strange thing? When Nebuchadnezzar opens the door of the furnace, only Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego come out. The one whose appearance is like a son of God does not come out of the furnace of suffering. He is not miraculously preserved from the fire: he remains within it.”²

To which we might also say with Hays, “Ah, the plot thickens.” We also know one “like the Son of Man” who has entered the furnaces of fire, one who became a human being just like us, one who wrapped himself in human flesh just like us, one who suffered as we suffer, one who wept as we weep, one who cried as we cry, one who was wounded as we are wounded, one who was rejected, abandoned, arrested, convicted, and crucified on a cross. Jesus did not come out of the flames unharmed. Jesus suffered and died. Jesus suffered and died with us. And Jesus suffered and died for us. Jesus endured the flames and the fire so that we could be rescued, so that we could be redeemed, so that we

¹ Richard B. Hays. The sermon by Hays is titled, “Who is the God who deliver you”, and begins on page 306 of the book, *The Art of Preaching*, edited by Hays and Ellen F. Davis.

² Hays, p. 308.

could be bought back, so that we could be set free, and so that we could be born again through the power of his blood.

Before they entered those flames, and before they were rescued from those flames, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, testified to their faith. Faith like those three had is faith that has been forged in the fire. Faith like that inspires us to face our own infernos by putting our trust completely in God. Faith like that inspires us to face our own infernos by putting our trust completely in Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

In closing, let us hear the words of the writer of Hebrews, the words that come after he has regaled us with all the stories of the faithful saints that have encouraged and inspired us in the 11th chapter of that letter. Still basking in the glow of the fiery furnace, still ravishing with delight Daniel's descent into the lion's den, let us hear how we might respond to such stories of faith.

- **“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”**
(Hebrews 12:1-3)