

“Even If”

Daniel 3:1-30

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I went to the beach for the first time the other day. It was pretty crowded, but I found a great spot to read and relax for about an hour. While I was lying on my towel, I couldn't help but hear the conversations taking place around me.

- One mother was explaining to her young son and daughter about accents. They had come to the beach from the store where the children heard someone speak with an accent and were now asking about it. The mom carefully explained about different cultures and speech and how if they learned to speak a second language they would speak it with a New England accent.
- A father was talking with his children about manners and how to be polite and express gratitude. So when the mother handed her son a sandwich, I heard the dad encourage a response and then the boy said, “thank you mommy.” After which he was praised for his politeness.
- On the other side of me was a large extended family with children, parents and grandparents. The dad was talking with the kids about team work and how the family is a team and every one pitches in and shares in responsibility. He asked one child to volunteer to keep an extra eye on the youngest, one to help get lunch out and one to help him set up a sun shelter. As they were setting up the shelter, he was very generous with his praise, thanking his son for his help, telling him what a big boy he was, etc.,

I left the beach thinking about how some people might think of the beach as just a place for sun and fun, and yet lots of parenting and learning happen there as well.

Life lessons can happen in unlikely places such as the beach

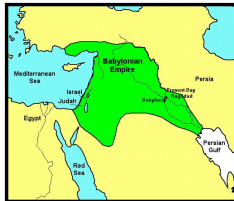
It would be nice if all of life's lessons could take place on a warm sunny beach, but today I'd like to share a story from (Dan 3), about some life lessons that take place in a fiery furnace.

On January 15, 588BC King Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah when he marched out with his army against Jerusalem and camped outside the city and held it siege. (2Kings 25:1)

By **July 18, 586BC** the famine in the city had become so severe there was no food to eat (v3)

On **August 14, 586BC** King Nebuchadnezzar entered the city of Jerusalem & set fire to the Temple that Solomon built. And all the houses and every important building in the city were burned to the ground. (v9)

The residents of Jerusalem were taken as captives into Babylon, (which is modern day Iraq) **(Show Map)** all except the very poor who were left in the city to rebuild and work the fields).



The young men in our story (Hananiah, Mishael & Azariah) (Dan 1:6) had been taken as captives and were given new Babylonian names, Shadrach, Meshach & Abednego.

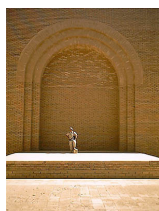
The word, “Babylon,” means *(gate of god)*. And was one of the most famous cities of the ancient world. It was located in the plain of shinar on the Euphrates River, about 50 miles south of Modern Baghdad, which was the capital of the Babylonian Empire. (If you’re interested, you can see items from Ancient Babylon at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts.)

Babylon was at the height of its glory and the most important city of the whole Mesopotamia region. Nebuchadnezzar built palaces, temples, mighty walls and beautiful gateways. The hanging gardens of Babylon were considered one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world.

Saddam Hussein rebuilt part of King Nebuchadnezzar’s Southern Palace which was south of Bagdad. **(Show Pics)**. Taken by Gunnery Sgt. Daniel O’Connell, USMC.



(Walls of King N. Palace; “Procession Street” Babylon, Iraq. -0100)
Ancient Procession Street ran outside the walls of King N. Palace.
Front brick work done by Saddam Hussein’s Labor Force.
(Front; ruins from King Hammurabi’s dynasty 3,750 BC;
Rear; Saddam’s Presidential Palace).



(King Nebuchadnezzar’s throne platform 0115)



(King N. Palace Courtyard, Babylon, Iraq- 0110)
Common folks gathered here.
Saddam Hussein rebuilt walls upon original brick.

Our story (from Daniel 3) begins when King Nebuchadnezzar made a gold statue, an image of himself that stood ninety feet tall and nine feet wide. He set it up on the plain of Dura (about 27km SW of Bagdad) in the province of Babylon. (v1)

Then he sent messages to the princes, prefects, governors, advisers, counselors, judges, magistrates, and all the provincial officials to come to the dedication of the statue he had set up. (v2)

When all these officials had arrived and were standing before the image King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, a herald shouted out, "People of all races and nations and languages, listen to the king's command! When you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes, and other instruments, bow to the ground to worship King Nebuchadnezzar's gold statue. (v3-4)

- When you hear the band playing, bow and worship the golden image. (v5)

"Anyone who refuses to obey will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace." This was a form of Capital Punishment in those days. (v6)

So, when the music started the people knew it was time to bow in worship of the king.

All the people, whatever their race or nation or language, bowed to the ground and worshiped the statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. (v7)

But some of the astrologers went to the king and told on the Shadrach, Meshach & Abednego.

- Have you ever had a job where everything was going along great and then your company came out with a "new policy" that basically made it impossible for you to do your job and set you up for failure?
- This new policy pitted their loyalty to their boss, (the king,) against their loyalty to God. And their loyalty to God was viewed as disloyalty to the king.
- *And* as it seems there so often is, there were people watching, who disagreed with their beliefs and were waiting to rat them out.

They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "Long live the king! You issued a decree requiring all the people to bow down and worship the gold statue when they hear the sound of the musical instruments. (v8-10)

That decree also states that those who refuse to obey must be thrown into a blazing furnace. But, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—whom you have put in charge of the province of

Babylon, have defied your Majesty by refusing to serve your gods or worship the gold stature you have set up. (v11-12)

Then Nebuchadnezzar flew into a rage and ordered Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to be brought before him. (v13)

- They had very visible positions as Government Officials.
- This new policy meant that anyone who was caught not worshipping faced Capital Punishment in the furnaces.

When they were brought in, before the King, he said to them, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that you refuse to serve my gods or to worship the gold statue I have set up? (v14)

I will give you one more chance. If you bow down and worship the statue I have made when you hear the music playing, all will be well. (v15)

But if you refuse, you will be thrown immediately into the blazing furnace. What god will be able to rescue you from my power then?” (v15)

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego took a stand and said, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty. (v16-17)

But even if he doesn’t, Your Majesty can be sure that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up.” (v18)

- These were young men, just teenagers, when they came to the province. But courage and conviction does not have an age limit. It would have been easy for them to comply, what’s a quick bow?
- I wonder if there were people who came to them and told them to compromise, *“just bow, who cares, God knows how you really feel, it’s what’s in your heart that counts anyway.”*
- They would be the talk of the town, for breaking the laws of the province. Yet they were willing to risk their jobs, their reputation, and their whole future, even their lives.
- I wonder what role their friendship played in their decision? (The Bible says a strand of 3 Chords is not easily broken Ecc. 4:12) We all need friends who will stand with us when the tough times come because it’s easier to endure hard times when someone else is with us.

The King was so furious with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that his face became distorted with rage. (v18)

He commanded that the furnace be heated seven times hotter than usual. Then he ordered some of the strongest men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. (v19-20)

So they tied them up and threw them into the furnace, fully clothed. And because the king, in his anger, had demanded such a hot fire in the furnace, the flames leaped out and killed the

soldiers as they threw the three men in! So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, securely tied, fell down into the roaring flames. (v21-22)

- Some of us have been through trying times when we felt like our hands were tied. It's amazing how powerless we can feel when we are subjected to the unjust anger of another.
- Even if we're not the intended target of someone else's anger, we can still get burned (close proximity) just as the soldiers did while following the irrational orders of the King to light the fire 7 times hotter.

Then suddenly, as he was watching, Nebuchadnezzar jumped up in amazement and exclaimed to his advisers, "Didn't we tie up three men and throw them into the furnace?" "Yes," they said, "we did indeed, Your Majesty." (v24)

"Look!" Nebuchadnezzar shouted. "I see four men, unbound, walking around in the fire. They aren't even hurt by the flames! And the fourth looks like a divine being!" (v25)

- God will not leave us – In the face of suffering, some people wonder where God is. He is where he was then...he was already in the furnace when they got there.

Then Nebuchadnezzar came as close as he could to the door of the flaming furnace and shouted: "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!" So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stepped out of the fire. (v26)

Then the princes, prefects, governors, and advisers crowded around them and saw that the fire had not touched them. Not a hair on their heads was singed, and their clothing was not scorched. They didn't even smell of smoke! (v27)

Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise to the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego! He sent his angel to rescue his servants who trusted in him. They defied the king's command and were willing to die rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. (v28)

Therefore, I make this decree: If any people, whatever their race or nation or language, speak a word against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, they will be torn limb from limb, and their houses will be crushed into heaps of rubble. There is no other god who can rescue like this!" Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to even higher positions in the province of Babylon. (v29-30)

- Compromise sometimes looks like an easy way out. But lives, jobs, families, reputations & more are ruined when we compromise.
- You know what they say, talk is Cheap, it was time to "put up or shut up." Their actions were based on their commitment and resulted in the most effective testimony. Through their actions God was glorified. They could have "talked" about God all day long, but their actions spoke louder than anything they could have said.

We learn from Shadrach, Meshach & Abednego how to face the furnaces of life. We learn;

- That our destiny is determined by God, not our circumstances.

- That our unshakable belief in God's ability to save us affects *how* we face the furnace. They had no way of knowing that God *would* save them, only that He was *able* to save them and that was enough!
- We learn that there will always be people watching, and our actions speak louder than words.
- That doing the right thing takes courage and sacrifice & commitment. We all may know someone who has turned away from God or the church because God didn't answer a prayer the way they hoped or they felt disappointed by God. Some one might say that their faith failed them. But many times it's not faith that fails but commitment.
- That life is not fair & even when we are innocent, even when we try to do the right thing, we may find ourselves in a difficult trial.
- That sometimes God will deliver us "FROM" the furnace and other times he may choose to deliver us "IN" the furnace.
- We learn that we will not have to face the furnace alone, God will be there with us.
- That true freedom never comes through compromise. Sometimes it's in the middle of life's most traumatic trials that we experience the clearest sense of God's presence.
- We learn to be ready. They knew the situation they were in. They knew who their Nebuchadnezzar was and the ways he was challenging their beliefs. But it's not always so easy for us. The things that call us may be very subtle and the consequences not so obvious. But we need to be aware.

Is there a Nebuchadnezzar in your life today? Is there someone or something that tempts you to compromise? Or someone who represents the voice of ego & arrogance, short tempered vanity, irrational thinking or unjust motives).

What are the idols or images that may distract us or make us feel pressured?

What do we do when others disapprove or disagree with our beliefs?

Some of us have been in the furnace. Some of you may be there this morning.

Sometimes the furnace is one we've made ourselves and sometimes it's one of another persons making. Yet regardless of how we got there God is able to see us through.

One thing is for sure. We are all in one stage or another...either we are in the furnace...coming out of the furnace...or about to enter the furnace.

Yet trying times are when some of life's most significant lessons are learned.

The most important thing we have when we face the furnace is our faith and conviction. It's knowing when to draw the line and say this is my line that I will not cross and from which I will not retreat.

When we face trials may we like Shadrach, Meshach & Abednego be able to say,

- I will not fear, I know that God is able to save me, but even if he doesn't, (I will remain loyal.)
- Even if I'm tempted, (I will be faithful).

- Even if I'm afraid, (I will not turn away)
- Even if it could cost me everything...even then...I will not bow!"

LET'S PRAY: Dear God, Thank you for your constant care and for your ready help in times of trouble. I pray for everyone here who might be facing a furnace this morning. May your strong and steady presence provide safety and protection when the heat gets too hot. May we walk in your ways, blessed with wisdom from you so that we avoid as many trials as possible. Remove the Nebuchadnezzar's who call for attention and worship that belongs to you. Please remove the idols and images that may tempt or distract us from what we know is right. Forgive us and help us through the mistakes that have contributed to our trials and provide a way of escape for us, give us safe deliverance. Either way God, help us to be people of faith, courage and conviction. In Jesus Name...Amen.

BLESSING: Isaiah 43:1-3

"But now, this is what the Lord says;

Fear not

- I know who you are; I know you your name
- I have redeemed you; you are mine.
- When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.
- When you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.
- When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze, Says the Holy One of Israel, your Savior!