

## Against the Tide: Lessons from Daniel 1-6

*Faithful in the Furnace* (Daniel 3)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on September 17, 2017

### Introduction

- ❖ We're currently in a sermon series going through Daniel chapters 1 to 6, but starting next week we'll take a brief hiatus to do a mini-series on the Reformation. **This year is the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, marked by the date when the German Reformer Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses on the church door of Wittenberg on October 31, 1517.** In commemoration, we've crafted a series called the *Five Solas*, which were the five principles (or mottos) of the Reformation. That'll start next week, and in each message, my hope is to introduce you to one of the Reformers.
  
- ❖ I'd like to get a head start today and introduce two English Reformers named **Nicholas Ridley** and **Hugh Latimer**. Both men were bishops in the Church of England and both were key figures in the English Reformation that established a clean break theologically and institutionally from the Roman Catholic Church. Both men were also victims to the terrible persecution that took place under the reign of the infamous **Bloody Mary**.
  - Mary was the eldest daughter of King Henry VIII from his first wife Catherine of Aragon. She was raised by her mother as a staunch Catholic. Mary wasn't a direct heir to the throne because, after his many wives, Henry VIII finally had a son who became King Edward VI. He was only nine when he ascended the throne, and he sided with the Reformers. Under his reign, the Protestant Church of England firmly rooted itself and strengthen in time to weather a coming storm of persecution.
  
- ❖ Edward's reign only lasted six years (1547-1553). He died of a terminal illness at the age of fifteen. And despite their best efforts, his counselors were unable to prevent Mary from securing the throne. She set out at once to undo her half-brother's efforts to reform the Church and began to march England back to Rome and under its papal authority.
  - She reinstated the Catholic mass. Required services to go back to being conducted in Latin only, prohibiting the use of English. She outlawed the English Bible and banned the books of Reformers. **And worst of all, she persecuted Protestants giving them two options: Renounce your reformational principles or roast at the stake.**
    - In the five years of her reign (1553-1558), no less than 288 Protestants were burnt at the stake. One was an archbishop, four were bishops, twenty-one were clergymen, fifty-five were women, and four were children. That's how she earned her infamous nickname Bloody Mary.
  
- ❖ On October 16, 1555 at Oxford University, two men were tied back-to-back on one stake. Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer were set to be burnt for their refusal to deny the gospel they so tirelessly fought to preserve and to proclaim.
  - Witnesses record Ridley as saying to Latimer, "*Be of good heart, brother; for God will either assuage the fury of the flames, or else strengthen us to abide it.*" Shortly after the fire was lit and God, in his sovereignty, did not assuage the flames. The two men were set ablaze. And Latimer's famous last words were, "*Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man; we shall this day, by God's grace, light such a candle in England as I trust shall never be put out.*"

- ❖ Those were prophetic words. After Mary's brief but bloody reign, her sister Elizabeth ascended the throne and unified a divided England under one crown and one church. And thereby securing the legacy of faithful martyrs like Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer.
  - **These two men stood in a long line of faithful men and women of whom the world was not worthy** (Heb. 11:38). There's a legacy of believers who have equally offended the authorities by their devotion to the truth. We're introduced to three in today's passage. **Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were early predecessors of Ridley and Latimer.** They too felt the flames of persecution – flames that I believe continue to burn our day. And you could argue that they've only grown hotter.
- ❖ It's true that in our context we're not being threatened with literal flames, but the intensity of opposition to the gospel is certainly there. **My question to you is whether you're going to stand in this line of faithful followers, whether you will share in this legacy.** I'm going to confront you with questions that you'll need to answer for yourself. If you desire to be a faithful follower of God, then you'll need to examine yourself with three questions.

### **A God Who Accepts No Rivals**

- ❖ The first is this: **Can you accept a God who accepts no rivals?** That's the kind of God that our culture finds offensive. And that's the God we meet in Daniel 3. Whether you're able to follow him into the furnace of persecution will largely depend on whether you can trust in the goodness of a God who seeks the exclusive worship of all peoples, in all places, in all times.
  - **The flames of persecution never touch those who claim everyone's view of God is equally valid.** Those who insist 'you have your truth; I have mine' and all religions lead to the same place – they never have to 'play the man'. They never get burned. Only those who insist there's only one true God, and they'll only worship him.
- ❖ That's what we see happening in Daniel 3. The chapter begins by describing a massive statue that King Nebuchadnezzar has installed on an open plain in Babylon. It's reminiscent of the Tower of Babel, which is also built on an open plain in Babylon back in Genesis 11. **These are monuments dedicated to human glory, to self-glory.** This one – this image of gold – is described as 90 feet tall and 9 feet wide. That's the height of 9-story building.
  - It's not clear what the image was. Most scholars think it was probably the image of a Babylonian god and not of Nebuchadnezzar himself. And yet even though he didn't build a statue of himself, it's still about him and his vainglory.
- ❖ He's probably reacting to his dream in chapter 2. If you recall, he saw in his dream a giant statue with a head of gold but with the rest of the body comprised of composite materials. Daniel interpreted the dream, and specifically identified Nebuchadnezzar as that head of gold (2:38). **But Daniel warned that the empire he built would eventually be replaced by four other kingdoms – the last being an eternal one established not by human hands.**
  - For Nebuchadnezzar to build a statue made of gold is no coincidence. It's a political/theological statement. **He's saying my kingdom won't be replaced.** It'll last forever. That's the symbolism of an entire image of gold versus just a head of gold.

- ❖ Now we're told that an elaborate worship service was designed for the dedication of this golden image with all kind of musical instruments involved. And officials from all the far-reaching provinces of Babylon were required to attend. In v4, we're told that all sorts of peoples, nations, and languages were gathered around this image, and at the sound of music everyone was to fall down and worship. Failure to do so would result in being immediately cast into "*a burning fiery furnace*" (v6).
- ❖ Besides just stoking his own ego, what was Nebuchadnezzar trying to accomplish? **I think it's safe to say that he wasn't trying to enforce the worship of his god alone, but he was trying to unify everyone under one civic religion.** All the various peoples of his kingdom could keep their own distinct religions and worship their own gods – as long as you're willing to bow down to one common cultural god that we can all agree on. He's not saying bow down to my god *instead* of yours but bow down to my god *in addition* to yours.
  - **He was trying to rule over a religiously diverse people by enforcing a policy of religious pluralism.** A policy that accepts all religions and religious people except those who won't go along. Who won't bow to the idea that no one way is the Way. The only ones who don't fit this society – who get cast into the furnace of persecution – are those who insist there is only one true God and they'll only worship him.
- ❖ There's a great irony here. **The typical objection to monotheistic faiths (like Judaism or Christianity) is that believing your god is the one true God will eventually lead to oppressive, totalitarian behavior.** Where you start imposing your beliefs on everyone else. Forcing them to convert to your faith or suffer the consequences.
  - Now historically we can't ignore that such behavior has occurred in predominately Christian nations. **There have been Christian majorities in various cultures that have behaved horribly toward religious minority groups.** But it's not just Christians, and it's not just monotheistic faiths that could be guilty of such things.
    - I'd argue that highly pluralistic cultures – that preach tolerance and acceptance as the highest virtues – can be oppressively intolerant and only accepting of those who bow down to the cultural idols of tolerance and acceptance.
- ❖ Here's the irony: **You have a culture like Babylon's – which says you're free to worship whoever you like, in any way you like – as long as you do it our way.** You're accepted as long as you bow down to this image, which embodies the ethos of our culture. The ethos of the age that says your way cannot be *the* only way and your god cannot be *the* only God. So don't try to convert people to your way and your God. **Accept their ways and their gods as equally valid – that's the giant 90-foot idol of our age!**
- ❖ Christians have a reputation for always trying to convert people to their faith. But I hope you realize that pluralists do the same. Just look at Nebuchadnezzar. **He was very tolerant of everyone's beliefs as long as they ultimately fit his.** You're free to worship any god you like as long as you add on my god. Which effectively equalize everyone's religious truth claims. Which essentially nullifies everyone's religious truth claims.

- ❖ **So on the surface, Nebuchadnezzar looks like a very tolerant person, but underneath we discover a heart of intolerance.** Where he tries to impose his beliefs on others. To convert them by use of force and threat. Even at the end of the chapter – after he at least recognizes the LORD God’s power – he still hasn’t changed. He still tries to impose, in v29, a general reverence of God by use of threat. I’ll tear you limb from limb if you speak against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. **My point is that religious pluralism looks tolerant on the surface, but under the veneer you’ll often find a spirit of intolerance.**
  
- ❖ But Christianity – I know it looks intolerant on the surface. Jesus is the only Way, the only Truth, the only Life. No one comes to the Father except through him (cf. Jn. 14:6). **It seems intolerant, but if you dig deeper, if you look underneath, you’ll find a heart of tolerance towards those who disagree – a heart of abounding love and exceeding patience.**
  - Because at the heart of Christianity is a Savior hanging there on a cross dying for those who oppose him, reject him, hate him. If Jesus on the cross is one thing you believe everyone needs – if a Crucified Savior dying for his enemies is the God we want everyone to bow to – then how could those convictions result in an oppressive attitude or approach that tries to coerce belief by virtue of force? Any “Christian” society that tries to coerce belief is not behaving in a Christ-like manner.
  
- ❖ Church, we have no mandate (or need) to coerce belief in anyone. In fact, you can’t convert someone even if you tried. Conversion is something only God can do. **Our task is not to convert others but to commend to others an open statement of the truth.** We need to know how to give a reasonable defense of the faith. But we don’t need to be defensive.
  - **Our God never feels threatened by the unbelief of others and neither should we.** Look at Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They felt no need to defend themselves. Look at what they say in v16, *“O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter.”* We don’t need to defend ourselves. They’re not defensive.
    - But look at Nebuchadnezzar. He’s about to blow his top. It says he was filled with fury (v19). Why so angry? **Because his god is threatened by the unbelief of others – by the refusal of others to bow down and agree.** That’s why he is so defensive.
  
- ❖ **But the Christian is the one who believes in a God who felt no need to defend himself when he stood before authorities.** When Jesus was attacked for his faith, he didn’t retaliate. He quietly entrusted himself to the Father.
  - If that’s the God you worship, if that’s the God you hope everyone else will worship, then your attitude and approach to people of others faiths (or no faith) should be anything but arrogant and antagonist. It should be marked by a quiet confidence and security – even in the face of unbelief and opposition.
    - Let’s face it, the flames of persecution will come for God’s people. Now you can avoid it if you simply bow to the spirit of pluralism – the god that accepts all gods. **But if you insist on worshipping a God who accepts no rivals, then don’t be surprised when the flames start licking.**

## A God Who Might Not Deliver

- ❖ Do you accept a God who accepts no rivals? That's the first question you need to wrestle with. The second is this: **Can you trust a God who might not deliver?** If you have a one-dimensional view of God where he's always there to rescue you from every trial, then you're bound to be disappointed. You won't understand how a furnace could actually be his will for you. **If read on you'll see a God who gives and takes away – who delivers his saints from the flames of persecution and yet at times does not.**
  
- ❖ Let's start back up in v8. We're told that certain court magicians grew jealous of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. So they inform the king that these Jews refuse to bow to the golden image. Such inaction would have been interpreted as a personal offense to the king and an act of blasphemy against the gods. But they couldn't betray the one true God.
  - Take note that, just like back in chapter 1, when they sought to swim against the tide, they didn't make a big stink about it. **They didn't start a big public protest and draw attention to themselves and their stand for the truth.** They just tried to faithfully obey their God. They quietly refused to go along with the current of culture.
  
- ❖ Now in v13, Nebuchadnezzar gets quiet upset and defensive. And he gives them one more chance or it's off to the furnace. And at the end of v15 he poses this threatening question, *“And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?”*
  - The three friends answer that their God is the God who is able to deliver them from the burning fiery furnace. But – look at v18 – *“But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”*
  
- ❖ **There are some today who would see those words “but if not” as a sign of weak faith.** As if they didn't trust God enough. They doubted. If a Christian today were to say something similar – “I believe God will deliver me from this trial *but if not...*” – there are those who will say the reason you're not delivered is because you said (or just thought) *but if not*.
  - I want to emphatically say they're wrong. That doesn't sound like weak faith. That's actually what true faith in God says. If you insist that God *must* deliver you from your trials – if you refuse the possibility that he might not – **then it would seem to me that you have great faith, not in God, but in your plans/agenda for God.**
    - True faith says in the face of suffering, “O God let this trial pass over me, nevertheless not my will but yours be done.” That's what faith in God looks like. Where you approach him without a predetermined outcome in mind.
  
- ❖ Now as the story goes, God's will was for them to be delivered from the flames. They're rescued just as they believe God is able. **But let's be careful not to treat this story of divine deliverance as normative for all God's people.** Otherwise what would you conclude about Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer and the nearly three hundred believers who weren't delivered from the fire? Were Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego more faithful to God than Ridley and Latimer? And God more faithful to them?

- ❖ You might be tempted to conclude that, but that's when I would turn to Hebrews 11 – to what is popularly known as the **biblical Hall of Faith**. After chronicling the stories of famous figures in the OT, in v33, the author goes on to list other faithful saints, “<sup>33</sup>*who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, <sup>34</sup>quenched the power of fire*” (11:33-34a). Those last two are clear references to the book of Daniel – to the events here in chapter 3 and later in chapter 6.
  - Let's keep reading in v34, “*escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. <sup>35</sup>Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. <sup>36</sup>Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. <sup>37</sup>They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword.*”
- ❖ Did you notice how there was no pause whatsoever between ‘some quenched the power of fire, some became mighty in war and put armies to flight’ and ‘some were tortured, others suffered, others were sawn in two and killed with the sword’?
  - The smoothness of the transition tells me that we're still talking about the same kind of people – people deserving to be in the same Hall of Faith. **The point is you can't judge faithfulness – either God's or ours – based on the outcome alone.** In both outcomes God is faithful and so were the individuals – whether you're delivered from the flames of persecution or you die in them. Whether you escape them or succumb to them. **The outcome is not what determines God's faithfulness or yours.**

### **A God Who Is With You In The Furnace**

- ❖ Now if that's the case, then what does? **I think this story is saying faithfulness is not determined by whether you escape the furnace – but by whether God is actually with you in the furnace and whether you have eyes of faith to see him there.** That leads to our third question and final question: **Can you see God with you in the furnace of suffering?**
- ❖ If we keep reading in v19, Nebuchadnezzar is enraged and orders the furnace heated seven times hotter and has them cast into the burning fiery flames. But then look at v24, “<sup>24</sup>*Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, "Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?" They answered and said to the king, "True, O king." <sup>25</sup>He answered and said, "But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods."*”
  - A lot of ink has been spilt trying to identify this fourth man in the furnace. **Nebuchadnezzar thinks there's something supernatural, something divine about this mysterious figure. He says he looks like a son of God.** Later on in v28, he says the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego has sent “*his angel*” to deliver his servants. It's not just one of his angels but likely the angel of the LORD.

- ❖ Whenever the angel of the LORD appears in the OT, human beings fall down and prostrate themselves in worship, and the angel of the LORD willingly receives the worship. Which is why most people think the angel of the LORD is none other than the pre-incarnate Son of God. **Which is why many think this angel in Daniel 3, this fourth person in the furnace, is also the Son. This is Jesus with them in the furnace!**
- ❖ At the very end in v29, Nebuchadnezzar acknowledges that there is “*no other god who is able to rescue in this way*”. Little did he know how profoundly true that statement is. **No other God rescues like our God. Only Jesus rescues by going into the furnace with us.** He easily could've caught them as they were falling in or snatched them out.
  - But Jesus goes into the furnace. He's a God who's not immune to suffering but well acquainted with it. And he suffers – not so we would never have to (there's no promise of that) – **but rather he suffers so that when we suffer we can be confident that he is with us.** Jesus was cast into the ultimate furnace of suffering, so that he can walk with us through the much smaller furnaces in our lives.
- ❖ I want you to picture with me Jesus kneeling in the Garden of Gethsemane. We're told in the Gospels that he was in such distress and agony that “*his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground*” (Lk. 22:44) **But prior to Gethsemane, Jesus had been depicted as resolute to die.** He had set his face like a flint towards Jerusalem. He knew exactly what was waiting for him.
  - So you wouldn't expect him to crack. Just like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego before a fiery furnace or Ridley and Latimer tied to a stake – they all faced death without blinking. With no bloody sweat. With no pleas to God for another way. **So it makes you wonder what happened to Jesus.** To his resoluteness. Why is he sweating? Why is he praying for the cup to pass?
- ❖ You have to understand that, for all these courageous men and women in church history, their deaths were different than Jesus's. **They faced martyrdom while Jesus faced penal sacrifice.** Martyrs went to their death trusting God was with them in the furnace or on the stake. But Jesus faced death completely alone. **He was to be offered up as the sin-atonement, wrath-averting sacrifice that bears the judgment of God against all human sin.**
  - Stretching back into eternity past, God the Son shared perfect, unbroken fellowship with God the Father. But now as Golgotha loomed larger, Jesus was faced with the prospect of the Father turning his face away, forsaking the Son, treating him as a wretched sinner.
- ❖ **No one has ever faced the furnace that Jesus faced.** In one of his sermons on Gethsemane, **Jonathan Edwards** explains why Jesus was sweating so much. He writes, “*The sorrow and distress which his soul then suffered, arose from that lively, and full, and immediate view which he had then been given of that cup of wrath. . . . The thing that Christ's mind was so full of at that time . . . was the dread his feeble human nature had of that dreadful cup, which was vastly more terrible than Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace. He had then a near view of*

*that furnace of wrath, in which he was to be cast; he was brought to the mouth of the furnace that he might look into it, and stand and view its raging flames and see the glowing of its heat, that he might know where he was going and what he was going to suffer.”<sup>1</sup>*

- ❖ Do you see what was happening to Jesus? **He was sweating so much in that garden because he was being given a preview of the burning fiery furnace of God's wrath.** He was led to the edge of the furnace to peer inside, to contemplate what he would soon suffer.
  - If we were in his shoes, I'm certain all of us would've recoiled. All of us would've refused to follow through with God's plan. None of us would've ‘played the man’. No other man, no other god, is even willing to rescue in this way. **Only Jesus is willing to save by going into the ultimate furnace of God's wrath for you.** In your place.
  
- ❖ So now if you (when you) get thrown into the cultural furnace of persecution – when you get mocked and ridiculed for your Christian faith, when you lose opportunities, lose your job, lose a relationship – **you can be sure that the furnace you're in is not a punishment for sins.** The flames are hot, but at least they're not the flames of God's wrath.
  - You can tell yourself, “**Because Jesus was thrown into the ultimate furnace for me, the flames around me now are not punishing me but serving me.** This furnace was meant by the culture to punish me for not conforming, but it's been transformed by Christ to refine me, to burn off the dross, and make me more like him.”
  
- ❖ And you can be sure that he is in there with you. He is Emmanuel. God with us in a very real sense. Let me say this plainly: **If you don't have a God who walks with you through the furnace of suffering, then you don't have a God who's worthy to bow to.** Turn to Jesus instead. No other god is able to save you in his way.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “*Sermon VI: Christ's Agony*” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 2 (Hendrickson), 867.