

## **Heroes of the Faith: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego**

Good morning. We continue today our series reflecting on the stories of some of the great heroes of faith from the Bible, particularly those that trusted God, even in the most difficult of circumstances.

Our heroes this morning come as a famous triplet: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from the book of Daniel. These three men choose to make a great stand despite fearsome opposition, trusting that God will honour their choice and protect them from any harm that might come their way.

We are told in chapter three of Daniel that King Nebuchadnezzar has decreed that all people must worship a golden image. Our first introduction to these great men is to find out that, unlike all other peoples who live under Nebuchadnezzar's rule, there are some Jews who have refused to follow the rest and worship the King's golden idol. It would seem that even amongst the Jewish people Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego stand out as being particularly defiant. We are told that they 'pay no attention' and that they 'neither serve...nor worship' Nebuchadnezzar's idol. This, of course, was a hugely brave thing to do. These men would know the potential consequences of disobeying such a powerful ruler. They would know, too, that as foreigners in this land their behaviours would be well-noted. They choose, however, to trust in their God, and to stand on that First Commandment that they are to have no other God but Yahweh. They trust their understanding that there is only one God, and that He is the creator of the world, the Almighty, and that they are His chosen people. It is interesting to note that not all Jews were aligned in this regard - we are told in verse 12 that there are 'some Jews' who 'pay no attention' to the King's decrees. Even amongst a community of faith, these three men stand apart as being particularly trusting of their God, even in the face of such fierce opposition.

Later in the chapter, we have these three men speak about their trust in the Living God. What I find so refreshing about this moment is the lack of certainty contained in their words. They fully trust their God, and are even willing to stand up the mighty Nebuchadnezzar, risking death. What I so enjoy about this great moment is that they are fully open to the possibility that God may not choose to save them. They firstly state 'he will deliver us' and then follow by adding a caveat: 'But even if he does not...we will not serve your gods.' This, for me, is their

most heroic and faithful moment. This is no blind faith; they are fully aware that God might not directly intervene, and yet their trust of their God is not contingent in a miraculous intervention. They trust Him because of who He is, and because of who they are in relation to Him. They do not trust because of the great things he has done, or will do, but rather because He is God, and so they have no choice to trust Him. Sometimes we tend to believe that having faith or trusting God means that we shouldn't also have doubts: 'What if God doesn't save me?'; 'What if my friend doesn't become a Christian?'; 'What if I lose my job?'. The Psalms are full of question and doubts: being a person of faith isn't the same thing as being certain about every challenge you face. The one thing we can be certain of, is that we are children of God, that He loves us, that He gave his life for us, that He rose again, that he redeemed us and broke the yoke of slavery and the power of sin over our lives - these are the truths that we trust. But all of this does not mean that we will not have doubts, or that God will always save us in the way we expect. Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego were fully prepared to face death in this moment - I don't suppose for a moment they expected to survive the furnace - they trusted their knowledge of who their God was. They knew he was able to save them, should He choose to, and that was good enough for them.

Like Pharaoh in Exodus, the figure of Nebuchadnezzar here exemplified anti-trust; he is everything that our three heroes are not. Rather than trusting the God he cannot see, he, like many ancient rulers, sought to capture his gods in a physical form. More than that, his response to the incredibly faith of his three Jewish adversaries is to intensify the fires of the furnace - to stoke it seven times hotter than before. He orders and he commands - he is a man desperate to control, and yet is faced with a level of faith that he cannot comprehend. His actions are opposite to Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego - where they submit and trust, he seeks to command and control. It is interesting to note how his anti-trust response leads to self-destructive behaviours. He harms his own people. We are told in verse 22 that his command is so urgent and the flames so intense that some of his own soldiers end up being consumed. Like many tyrants portrayed in the Bible, in seeking to control events, Nebuchadnezzar only ends up damaging himself and his people. He serves as a perfect foil to the other men, and a reminder to us that seeking to control the events of our circumstances will often lead to a weakening of our position. There is power in trust.

It is, of course, ultimately this power that leads Nebuchadnezzar to see the truth about God. Because Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego trusted completely, surrendering to God's will, it is the Lord who is ultimately glorified.

Nebuchadnezzar is now under no illusion that their rescue is entirely God's doing, and his ultimate response to their complete trust in their God is to see a glimpse of the truth about His identity. It is their trust that ultimately glorifies the father.

This moment, of course, points forwards, too, to the work of Jesus on the cross. It is in the Garden of Gethsemane that Jesus prays, 'not my will but yours'. In that moment, Jesus chooses to trust the Father, knowing that the outcome would result in his horrific death. Jesus trusted in the garden, even though his immediate companions were clearly not yet ready to help launch His Kingdom here on Earth. And even on the cross itself, Jesus forgives his oppressors, and calls out with a loud voice: 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit' - a final act of trust in the good and perfect plans of the Father. And through this trusting, the Father, and the Son, are revealed and glorified.