

## “In the Fiery Furnace”

Daniel 3

Do you know what the most common command in the Bible is? Some of you might guess that it's a command to love, since Jesus spends a lot of time telling people to love God, love their neighbors, and love their enemies. Others of you might guess it's a command to be humble, since pride is the source of many of the greatest sins.

The most common command in the Bible is the command to not be afraid. “Fear not” are the first words of almost every angelic messenger, from when God made his covenant with Abraham, to the angels that appeared to the shepherds the first Christmas. From David to Elijah, from Isaiah to Jeremiah, God continuously reminded his people not to fear. When Jesus charged the twelve disciples with their responsibility to teach and preach, He told them not to be afraid of those who would seek to harm them for proclaiming the truth. To the women gathering at the empty tomb and to the disciples seeing the resurrected Jesus, the message was the same: do not be afraid.

In every instance, people faced legitimate fears. Things out of the ordinary were happening, big changes were coming. But each time God's message remained consistent. Depending on which translation you use, there are 366 “fear not” verses in the Bible – one for every day of the year, including one for a leap year!

Unfortunately, the reason that the command to fear not is the most common command in the Bible is that people continually find themselves in scary situations. And that's what happened to the three young men who are thrown into the fiery furnace.

But that's not the only time they needed to not be afraid. These three young men were born in

the land of Judea. Their birth names were Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, but they were taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar's army and brought to Babylon to serve him. Going to a strange land far from home, far from family and friends can be frightening in the best of circumstances, and these were far from the best circumstances. They were captives in a foreign, hostile land, that didn't respect their culture or beliefs. In fact, the Babylonians wanted to make them good Babylonians, instead of good Israelites. And so they faced some frightening situations as they had to navigate what they could go along with, and what they had to refuse to do, even at the potential cost of their lives.

Even before this episode with the fiery furnace, these three young men, along with Daniel, were forced to make choices about what would be acceptable for them in this strange, hostile land they'd been brought to. And their choices don't make sense to us. In fact, they seem a little strange. They're brought in captivity to Babylon to be trained to be Babylonian officials. They don't object to their course of study. They don't object to their accommodations. They don't even object to having to take on new names, names which honored Babylonian gods, instead of the one true God who their Hebrew names honored. Their birth names had been given to honor the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but they were given Babylonian names to honor the Babylonian gods, to show that they belonged to Babylon. So Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah became Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Instead, they object to meals. Why? Why would they object to being given an all you can eat

buffet and an open bar every night? What kind of students are they to object to free food and drink? The problem is especially the meat. They know for sure that any meat served at these meals was not killed in the manner prescribed in their laws. The meat might not have always been labeled, and they could have been worried about eating unclean animals. The meat also probably came from sacrifices to false gods. And too much booze would lead to other problems, just as it does today. So they got permission to eat just vegetables and water, and were healthier than everyone else who was feasting on fatty foods every day. Facing their fears of standing up to the officials over them, and the wrath of their fellow students when they lost their free meals, was worth it to remain faithful to God's commands about food.

But now we come to another challenge. They'd graduated and been appointed officials. But their success brought jealousy and envy from those around them. So when King Nebuchadnezzar made a golden statue, and commanded everyone to worship it, and these three did not, their coworkers saw an opportunity and took it. They had them brought before the king, who commanded they bow before the statues. But they refused. They knew that was a line they could not cross.

They also knew that God could save them. God could rescue them from the fire of the furnace and the power of the king. But even if God did not rescue them, they would remain faithful. They would not serve the false gods and would not bow down to the statue.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown into the fire, and something amazing happened. The fires were not quenched, yet neither did the men die. Instead, those brave men stood their ground. They were surrounded by flames, engulfed in the one thing they were probably praying would have gone away. But

even while the fires roared around them, they were not alone. A fourth was seen in the fire. King Nebuchadnezzar and all those with him could see the fourth man, who looked like a son of the gods. The fires raged around the friends and God used a fiery furnace to show that they were not alone. The flames engulfed them but Christ himself was there.

That's the source of our hope and joy. Almost every time God commands people to not be afraid, it comes with a promise. Do not be afraid, I am with you. Fears are calmed by the promise of God's presence. Christ was with the three young men in the fiery furnace, and their fears were relieved. They weren't burned, they weren't injured, and they didn't even smell like smoke after being inside a bonfire.

That sermon hymn we just sang is attributed to the three young men. It's not in the version of Daniel we have in our Bibles: it's in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, the Septuagint. And since it's in the Greek and not the Hebrew, it's left out of most Bibles but included in a section called the Apocrypha, which contains books that were written in the time between the Testaments. Even if it's not original, though, the fact that we can think about the three young men singing praises to God in the fiery furnace is worth remembering. If they could sing these praises to God in the fiery furnace, we can sing praises to God in our trials as well.

Their faith was amazing. They knew that God was mighty and powerful and could do absolutely anything, including dousing a fiery furnace with water or otherwise putting it out. On the other hand, they also knew that God was all-knowing, the greatest plan designer, and the ultimate decision-maker. They knew God could, but they did not know if He would. They had decided to go into this situation trusting their Father in Heaven. If God performed a

miracle, they would praise Him. If God did not, they would praise Him. And that is the most amazing faith that we could pray for.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were faithful. They worshiped God. Their confession did not waver. Even when stood at the mouth of the fiery furnace, they did not worship false gods. They did not give in to fear. Their confession was, “Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us.”

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