

UPSIDE DOWN: REFUSING TO BOW

Sermon written by Martha-Jean Fitch
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TEXT: Daniel 3

Have you ever been in situation where you had to stand up for your faith? To stand up for what you believe in – or to go against the crowd? Or maybe have you ever felt called to stand up for the underdog – or step in where you felt there was an injustice? Let me ask you – how did you do?

I have been reflecting on those questions as I have been studying on our text for today from Daniel 3. One night, I went to bed after studying and I was awakened in the middle of the night – and my mind was just flooded with people I knew as I was growing up...people I hadn't thought of in years. But their names and faces were so real in my mind – I felt God was wanting me to share their stories.

The first ones to come to mind were Emily and Nita. Names from my childhood. I don't remember a lot of names from that early in life – but I do remember those two girls. In fact, I can see their faces today quite well – especially as they would fight back tears and look so sad. Nita was a friend from my church, and she had the unfortunate malady of having warts all over her hands. And kids at church didn't want to get near her because they thought she was contagious – and they would call her names. And then Emily – Emily was a very skinny, bow-kneed girl who stuttered and was clumsy and just a little worse in sports than I was. She was picked on horribly. She and I always stood together when teams were being formed in gym. One team would finally decide to choose me – and the other team would groan because they were stuck with Emily. I remember thinking, "Why are they doing this – what makes them do such cruel things?" That same year, there was a Jewish boy named Jonathan, but I remember his face, red hot with tears, as he sat at his desk, looking at his hands. He was the only one in the classroom who didn't get up and go out to get the pocket New Testament that the Gideons were giving to all 4th graders that year. As we returned to our classroom, he was condemned as a Jew for not getting a book about Jesus. And I distinctly remembering thinking, "Is that the way Jesus would want us to act?"

Now I must admit, while I remember these 3 young children very well, I look back and wonder - why didn't I speak up for them more. I guess, in a way I did stand up for them, just by being a friend to them – but I never did tell the "in crowd" that what they were doing was wrong. I think I was afraid of being condemned myself – of standing alone and facing the fire. So, I kept quiet.

In my junior high and high school years, desegregation happened, and I was able to become friends with several African American kids. And I had all sorts of other friends – one from India, and one from China and my best friend was from Japan. But I could never understand why the kids with a different skin color and nationality were the target of racism and hatred. I refused to conform to the way the "in-crowd" would treat those who were different – and I continued to be friends with students of all colors and nationalities. But as I look back, I wonder

if I could have stood up for them more...could I have been better at shining God's light in that dark situation.

I have reflected on these stories as I have watched and read about all the social injustice and division in our country today. We are living in such an upside-down world right now. We are becoming so polarized because of what we hear on social media and news broadcasts and from politicians. We are being tempted to conform and join what culture is saying – tearing down one another and dividing up into camps. And what is right and what is the truth is being confused and distorted...and God's words and ways are being lost.

Are we going to stand up for what is right and bring God's light into this dark world? Are we going to be courageous enough to go against the crowd – refusing to bow down to world's ways and stand up for God's ways? If we do, we may be persecuted – and have to walk through the fire! But the good news is that we will never walk alone!

That is the message we learn today from our story in Daniel 3. I encourage you to get your Bibles out and turn to Daniel 3 and let's look together at 3 courageous young men we know as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Three men who truly knew what it meant to stand up for their faith - and face the fire! This is such a great story that I think many of us may know. Time doesn't allow me to go through it all today, but I hope you will go home today and read this chapter in its entirety and reflect on how this passage applies to our lives today.

Verse one tells us that Nebuchadnezzar built a statue out in the plains of Dura in Babylon. It was a gold covered statue that was 90 feet high and 9 feet wide. Now that's about as tall as a 9-story building! I think Nebuchadnezzar built this statue in response to the statue in the king's dream that we talked about last week. But instead of the statue having just the head of gold – this statue had the whole body made of gold! Nebuchadnezzar had this statue built, I believe, to show off his power and to unify everyone together, from all nations and languages as they worshipped the image of himself.

Nebuchadnezzar planned an elaborate dedication service for the statue – and invited officials from all the provinces to come. At this service, he commanded that when the music from the orchestra began, everyone would bow down and worship the golden statue. Anyone refusing to do this, would be thrown into the fiery furnace.

Thousands of officials gathered for the dedication service and among them were Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego – those Jewish friends of Daniel. During the dedication service, when the orchestra started playing the music, all of those gathered obediently bowed down to worship the statue – that is everyone but Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Talk about standing up against the crowds. They stood strong and refused to compromise their faith...even though they knew it could mean their death.

But how were they able to do that? Where did they get that kind of courage? I think it came a long time before they ever got to this day. I think, just like Daniel, they had made a decision that they were going to stay faithful and committed to God, no matter what. They would not let the Babylonians change their convictions. Their conviction was to love only the

Lord their God and obey His commands. Thus, they refused to bow their heads and worship the statue was because they were already bowing their heads to God.

You know in this upside-down world, there is all sorts of music, if you will, calling us to bow down and follow it. And you and I have to make a decision what our principles that we will live by. Are we going to live for Christ or for the world? Will we commit to living faithfully – depending on the word of God to guide the way we think and act? Or will we just go with the flow and follow wherever culture is going? In our increasingly changing world, we need to make that decision now to live for Christ and depend on Him for strength and courage, for whatever tests and trials come our way.

It was certainly their faith in God that helped Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego when the heat was on. Let's continue reading the story at verse 13.

¹³ Then Nebuchadnezzar flew into a rage and ordered that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought before him. When they were brought in, ¹⁴ Nebuchadnezzar 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? ¹⁵ I will give you one more chance to bow down and worship the statue I have made when you hear the sound of the musical instruments. But if you refuse, you will be thrown immediately into the blazing furnace. And then what god will be able to rescue you from my power?" ¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ But even if he doesn't, we want to make it clear to you, Your Majesty, that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were able to stand courageously against the king because of their faith in God and trust in Him no matter what. They had made a commitment to God and believed that God would deliver them! God was strong and mighty to save! Notice verse 18 again. Circle the words "But even if". Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego said, "*but even if* God doesn't deliver us, we will still worship only God!" These three men didn't know what God was going to do – whether they would go to the furnace or not, or live or die – they didn't know for sure. But they did know they could trust God, whatever the circumstance. They surrendered themselves to the will of God and determining that no matter what happens, they would be obedient and worship God only. They knew God would be with them and they could trust Him with their lives, no matter what happened.

That's the kind of faith you and I are needing in these upside-down times. A kind of trust that is unwavering – an "even if" kind of faith that says: Even if I don't get what I want – even if the storm still rages on – I will still praise God; I will still worship and obey Him. As Alyson Keida says in her Upper Room Devotional: "God desires that we cling to Him—*even if* our loved one isn't healed, *even if* we lose our job, *even if* we are persecuted. Sometimes God rescues us from danger in this life, and sometimes He doesn't. But the truth we can hold firmly is this: "The God we serve is able," loves us, and is with us in every fiery trial, every *even if*."¹

With that kind of strong faith, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego found out that going through trials and challenges is an opportunity to see our Lord up close and that is very powerful.

Look at what happens next. Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego's declaration. And so, he ordered them to be thrown in the furnace. They were bound, fully clothed, and carried up to the fiery, hot furnace, stoked to be 7 times hotter. It was so hot, in fact, that the guards that were carrying the three men were killed, as they threw them into the flames. And here is where the story gets really good. Look at verse 24.

²⁴ But suddenly, Nebuchadnezzar jumped up in amazement and exclaimed to his advisers, "Didn't we tie up three men and throw them into the furnace?" "Yes, Your Majesty, we certainly did," they replied. ²⁵ "Look!" Nebuchadnezzar shouted. "I see four men, unbound, walking around in the fire unharmed! And the fourth looks like a son of God. ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ Then the high officers, officials, 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!

Nebuchadnezzar looked into the fire and saw not 3 but 4 people. And the 4th man "looked like a son of God". Well, we know who that is don't we? In the flames – they saw Jesus! Jesus had not delivered them *from* the flames – but he walked with them *in* the flames!

And that is the good news for us. In all the tears and trials and disappointments of life, we too can see Jesus. We are never alone in times of trouble – God will be there in the fires, whispering words of encouragement and giving us strength to endure.

For Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, they came out of the furnace – without anything burned. They didn't even smell of smoke! And Nebuchadnezzar was amazed and even declared that there was no other god who could do such an amazing rescue.

You know when we go through trials and fires, they can leave us better or bitter. The trials can either strengthen our faith or destroy it. It all depends on whether our focus is on Christ or the crisis. For Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, they kept their eyes focused on the Lord and not the fire! They were able to experience first-hand the promise given in the book of Isaiah – a promise we can hold on to we go through these upside-down days:

*Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name.
You are mine.*

*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they will not overflow you.*

*When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned,
nor shall the flame scorch you.*

*For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
(Isaiah 43:1-3)*

Where might your faith be calling you to stand up or even stand alone in these days? Wherever God calls you to stand, remember that God stands right there with you. You are never alone!

PRAYER

RESOURCES

¹Kieda, Alyson. “Trusting God Even If”. Upper Room. <https://odb.org/2018/05/19/even-if>