

SUNDAY SCHOOL FOR GROWN UPS
Part Seven: Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego and the Blazing Furnace
Pastor Svea Merry **July 20-21, 2024**

Welcome! If we haven't met yet, I'm Svea Merry, our spiritual formation pastor. I hope you've been enjoying this summer series, Sunday School for Grown Ups. We've had a lot of fun teaching through some classic Old Testament Bible stories that many of us learned as kids but may not have thought about seriously with our adult eyes.

I was really excited when we divvied up the passages and I got the one that I did for today. It's been a favorite Old Testament story of mine since I was a Sunday School kid watching my teacher tell it to me, literally with a flannelgraph.

Here's kinda how I remember the story being taught to me as a kid. I remember my Sunday School teacher calling us all over to the corner of her classroom where we would sit on the carpet squares and she'd put on her reading glasses and begin reading to us from her teacher's guide, adding her own colorful commentary, of course.

About 600 years before Jesus was born, in the bustling land of Babylon, there was a powerful king named Nebuchadnezzar. Now, this king was a bit full of himself and decided to build a ginormous golden statue. How big, you ask? Ninety feet tall! That's like stacking nine giraffes on top of each other!

King Nebuchadnezzar thought his statue was the coolest thing ever and ordered everyone to bow down and worship it whenever they heard music. So, imagine this: you're walking down the street, and suddenly, a band starts playing, and everyone around you drops to the ground like it's a game of musical chairs.

Well, almost everyone. You see, there were these three guys – Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego – who thought the whole statue thing was a bit silly. They believed in God and were not about to bow down to some giant gold statue, no matter how shiny it was.

Of course, some tattletales ran to the king and said, "Hey, those three guys aren't bowing down!" The king was not happy. He called Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to his palace and said, "What's this I hear? You're not bowing to my statue? I'll give you one more chance. Bow down, or into the fiery furnace for you!"

But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego just shrugged and said, "Sorry, King. We're not bowing. Our God can save us from your furnace, and even if He doesn't, we still won't bow."

Nebuchadnezzar was furious! He ordered the furnace to be heated seven times hotter than usual. It was so hot that when his soldiers threw the three guys in, the poor soldiers got fried like bacon. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego? They were just chilling in the furnace, walking around like it was a sauna.

The king couldn't believe his eyes. He looked closer and saw, in the most epic photo bomb ever, not three, but four people in the fire! The fourth one was walking around like a superhero, looking like the Son of God. Nebuchadnezzar was way impressed and shouted, "Hey, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, come out of there!" And they did, without a single scorch mark or even the smell of smoke on them. Talk about a miracle!

Nebuchadnezzar was amazed. He declared, "Wow, your God is truly amazing! From now on, no one is allowed to say anything bad about the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. If they do, they'll be cut to smithereens and their houses smashed!" Seriously, this dude needs to try decaf.

So, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were not only not in trouble any more with King Nebuchadnezzar, he promoted them and everyone learned that God is way more powerful than they ever imagined.

Now, I'm not sure if my Sunday School teacher directly told me this or if it was just the assumption I made, but I always understood the point of this story is that we should be like SM&A. They were so rock solid in their faith that even the threat of being burned to death didn't cause them to waver.

Our approach to this series, our series thesis, has been: Let's wonder like children and read like adults. I think as a child, I wondered what gave SM&A the courage to stand up to king. I wondered if they were scared as they got thrown into the fire. I wondered how it worked for them to be in the flames and not getting burned. I wondered if they were frightened when they suddenly saw this fourth being in the furnace with them. I wondered what made them so brave and strong.

Now as an adult, I still wonder many of those same things, but I read this story somewhat differently. I still marvel at the strength of their conviction, but I wonder if after they stood up to Nebuchadnezzar, did they have any second thoughts? I wonder if, as they were being tied up and led to the flames and their death seemed imminent, did they feel like God had disregarded or abandoned them? But then, as they encountered the miraculous, saving power of God in the furnace, how did that change their lives?

Reading this story like an adult, I'm even more amazed by what SM&A did—but I wonder if the best take away from it is the idea that we should be like them. I'm not suggesting that we shouldn't, but I think there is an *even better* lesson for us here when we approach this story as an adult. An even better lesson that doesn't put all the weight on us to be the heroes. One that points us to Jesus regardless of how brave we are or how much we doubt if we could ever be as strong as Shadrach, Meshach or Abednego.

Before we get to that even better lesson, though, let's acknowledge that we may benefit from thinking through what it would be like respond to a challenge to our allegiance to God as they did.

Our culture is constantly pressuring us to metaphorically bow down, not to a statue, but to its values, and I know that many of you live under constant pressure to play the game in order to succeed. Now, I've never had anyone threaten me with death if I didn't fall to the ground and worship a statue. But I have felt the pressure to downplay my faith in conversations with people hostile to God. Or to avoid speaking about my values or convictions when I know that they would be rejected or ridiculed. And I know that several of you have been marginalized or suffered consequences that have held

you back at work because following Jesus was out of step with what you were expected to tolerate or endorse.

Throughout this series, we've often come back to one of the most important verses in the Old Testament: Genesis 3:15. This verse talks about the ongoing enmity or deep-rooted hatred between the line of Eve, the woman here, and the serpent who is the representation of the evil. And it gives the hope and the first mention in the Bible of one in her line, the King that we know to be Jesus, who would defeat the serpent and crush his head.

We've shown this slide several times and talked about how as followers of Jesus, our allegiance is to be to him in all things, but that the serpent is constantly fighting to pull us away from that, whether through external pressures or even the doubts within our own heads.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were given a pretty blatant choice between keeping their allegiance to the true King and the true King only, or to go along with the way of the serpent under the threat of death to denounce their faith and to worship Nebuchadnezzar's statue instead.

Now, you've probably never had a Babylonian king threaten to burn you alive if you didn't worship his gods, but what do you do when are tempted go along with the pressures the serpent puts on you? How do you respond to that voice that says, "It doesn't really matter. If you do this, you'll just be one among many. If you stand up like a Jesus-freak, you'll make it weird for everyone."

Let's look at this story with our grown-up eyes.

King Nebuchadnezzar was one of the great conquerors in human history. He was the most significant king of the Babylonian Empire, reigning from approximately 605 to 562 BC. Besides being an astute military commander, he left a lasting legacy through his extensive architectural projects in Babylon, including the legendary Hanging Gardens, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. His expansion of his empire was ruthless, though, and included the defeat and destruction of many great cities, including Jerusalem, and he took the Jewish people into captivity.

The Babylonians were no respecters of other cultures, and they expected the people they conquered to fully assimilate into theirs. They didn't necessarily mistreat their captives. In fact, those with skills and potential were given positions and opportunities

within industry and the government, and people were free to marry and own their own homes and enjoy life. However, they were expected to fully embrace a new identity as Babylonians, and not see themselves as Israelites anymore.

One of the ways that the Babylonians enforced this was by giving their captives new names.

Now, before I tell you something about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego's names, can we have a little fun first? They are crazy names, right? I remember as a kid hearing them as "sad-rat", "my-snack," and "to-bed-we-go." Someone else told me they were an adult before they realized it wasn't Shadrach, Meshach, and a Billy Goat.

And people continue to have fun with these names. You gotta love the creativity of this coffee plach. Shadrach, Meshach and A Bean To Go – Master Roasted, Never Burnt. And of course, some of you who know your Sunday School stories best through Veggie Tales know these guys as Rack, Shack, and Benny and if you're remembering that now, I'm sorry that you're gonna have the Bunny song stuck in your head for the rest of the day.

But as I was starting to tell you before I got on this fun tangent, these were not their real names. These three guys were originally named Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Their names had beautiful meanings too. They meant "The Lord is gracious", "Who is like God?", and "The Lord has helped".

But like I was saying, the Babylonian's strategy when conquering a people group was to force their assimilation into their culture and religious practices, and so Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were renamed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and stripped of the beautiful significance of their names.

And the meanings of their new names went from Hananiah's "The Lord is gracious" to "I am made fearful." Mishael went from "Who is like God" to "I am of little worth", and Azariah's "The Lord has helped" became "who will serve Nebo," one of the Babylonian gods. I wonder if their stomachs turned every time they were addressed by these names. Maybe this is some of what made them so resolute in following God?

Reading this story as adults, can we grieve for these three that they were trafficked from their home in Jerusalem, taken to Babylon, conscripted into the service of King Nebuchadnezzar, who attempted to wipe away their identity and replace it with an orientation towards serving his gods? They endured a traumatic upheaval at a young

age and still they emerged from it with a strong commitment to God and continued to base their identity in Him. Sometime this week, read Daniel chapter 1 for the earlier part of their story and how they, along with Daniel, demonstrated their respectful unwillingness to be reprogrammed by the Babylonians.

If you haven't already, grab a Bible and turn to Daniel 3. Daniel is a short book in the second half of the Old Testament, a few books after Psalms and Proverbs.

The chapter opens with Nebuchadnezzar building this gigantic statue. Now, I assumed as I learned this story that ole' King Neb was kind of an egomaniac, and that the statue was an image of himself. But the text doesn't say that at all. In fact, with the dimensions given of 90 feet high and 9 feet wide, it was far more likely that it was a giant pillar like this with some kind of golden feature on top. It's not really important what the statue was. What was important, was that Neb was using this statue to demonstrate his power and control over people, and he summoned everyone who was anyone to his dedication ceremony.

Chapter 3 verse 2 says that he summoned the "satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up." Everyone with any kind of authority role in the empire has been gathered. And look who shows up in the next verse, the "satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and all the other provincial officials." King Neb ordered them all to jump on command, and they did.

Then, in what must have felt like a bully playing Simon Says, the King's herald spells out the rule of Neb's control game: whenever you hear music playing, you must immediately stop whatever you're doing, drop to the ground, and worship the statue. It's kind of a creepy mind-game to see if he can get all the leaders of the empire to drop on command whenever wants. And just in case anyone thinks this is ridiculous and doesn't want to play along, the ultimate threat is declared. "*Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.*" Neb's basically saying to all these officials, many of whom are people from other nations that he's conquered, "Prove to me that you'll act like my trained monkeys and if you don't, I'll burn you alive."

Who here likes to be treated like a pawn in someone's game? Me neither. And I don't think they saw any way around it. They made their peace with having to comply to avoid being killed.

So, when the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe, etc. play and it's time to face the music, and everyone except Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego comply, it makes sense that these other people would be upset and immediately rat them out to Nebuchadnezzar. I don't think they're all brainless suck-ups to the King. I think many of them feel trapped and resent having to play the game. So their indignance in seeing the three men choosing to stand in defiance to the King is understandable.

The text tells us that some came forward to rat them out. Watch them play their political game:

"May the king live forever! ¹⁰ Your Majesty has issued a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, ¹¹ and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. ¹² But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up."

Predictably, Nebuchadnezzar is furious. But interestingly, he gives Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego another chance. Can you imagine the pressure they were under *now*? It was one thing to choose to not go along with the crowd, but now they are face-to-face with the most powerful person in the land. Nebuchadnezzar amps up his death threat and adds an interesting line if they don't comply: "What god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"

Would your faith give you the strength to stand in this scenario? Do you believe God would rescue you from a tyrant such as this? Do you believe God is able today to rescue you now from whatever pressures you may face to follow the way of the serpent? Let me ask you one more question: If you do trust God, why do you trust Him? Hold that thought.

Here's what they said:

"King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷ If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. ¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

That response is like a master class for mature faith! "The God we serve is able to deliver us" "But even if he does not..."

They trust, they know, that God is capable of rescuing them, but their faith is not dependent on Him doing what they hope He will do. They're not trusting God for their desired outcome. They trust God because they love Him. And they know that they'll either escape the furnace or escape Nebuchadnezzar's control through their death, but either way, they are standing firm in their allegiance to God. Their Lord who has been with them through the highs and lows of their lives. Their faith is unshakable because it isn't conditional on their circumstances.

Is yours?

Sit with me in this thought for a minute. I have observed that when people are most upset with God, or feel like their faith is crumbling, it's often because of hurt or adversity that they believe God should have prevented them from experiencing. Even moreso if they were genuinely seeking to please God, but then their world crumbled. And now they can't shake the thought that God should have rescued them from it and didn't.

What happens next to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego as God didn't prevent them from getting thrown into the furnace, but instead met them in it, is the grown-up level lesson from this story that can massively upgrade our faith. Mature faith doesn't trust in God *for* our circumstances. It trusts God *in* any circumstance.

This furnace they were thrown into was almost certainly a smelting furnace at the base of the statue. It was probably what had been used to melt the gold that plated the statue. That 90-foot tall object probably cast a shadow over them as they were led to the flames.

But what they were about to experience wasn't the fiery death that they maybe made peace with. They were about to experience the *presence* of God in a way that must have forever changed their lives for the better. The Son of God was about to reveal himself and unmistakably answer the question Nebuchadnezzar had let dangle, "what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"

I wonder if the apostle Peter, about 600 years later, was picturing this scene as he wrote to encourage another generation of people who loved and followed Jesus and yet despite that, were being persecuted horribly by their oppressors. He wrote in the New Testament letter we call 1 Peter:

“Though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” 1 Peter 1:6-7

And then later in the same letter:

“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.” 1 Peter 4:12-13

Nowhere in Scripture does God promise that as we follow Him that we'll be spared hard circumstances, even painful ones. Peter is even encouraging us not to even be surprised by them when they come. And the ordeals we endure aren't necessarily a punishment for wrongdoing; they may in fact happen *because* we are nobly following Jesus and his way. That was certainly the case for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They couldn't have been stronger in their faith here and in their courage to live for God without compromise. And yet, they were thrown into the fire.

Now, I want to tread carefully here, because I know that many of you have endured horrible suffering. And I don't want to come across at all callous to the trauma you may have survived. I don't know why it happened, and I'm not going to speculate on what purpose there could be in it.

But what I do want to say is that God is not callous to it either. He knows what it is like to suffer. He watched His own Son in our broken world experience the misery and trauma as we do. Jesus was the literal model of love and compassion and graciousness, and everything he did was aligned with God's will, and yet he was despised, beaten, rejected, and killed because of it.

The presence of fiery trials in our lives does not mean that God does not love us, or that He doesn't care about us, or that He is not able to fix it. And He certainly didn't do or cause anything that was evil to happen to us. God is incapable of evil. The brokenness that results from evil, the way of the serpent, is an awful part of reality in this present age. Fiery trials are just simply going to happen.

But that doesn't mean that God doesn't care about the suffering we face and He certainly doesn't abandon us to it. Let's go back to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego as they were tied and thrown into the flames. The flames were stoked 7 times hotter

than normal, so hot that the soldiers who were carrying them were burned and killed, and yet, they were still unharmed. Is that when the three men began to wonder if God was going to save them after all?

I find it fascinating that King Nebuchadnezzar was sitting nearby watching all this happen. Maybe he was getting some kind of perverse satisfaction in seeing the defiant ones tortured, but I'm not sure it was that. Remember, he had trusted these guys with significant leadership roles in his empire. And he gave them a second chance, seeming to want to spare their lives. Maybe he was regretting his outburst of rage and the death sentence he ordered. Whatever it was, verse 24 says,

"King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, 'Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?'"

They replied, "Certainly, Your Majesty."

²⁵ He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods."

Who is this fourth man in the fire? It may have been an angel, but many scholars believe this was not just someone who looked like a son of the gods but actually was the Son of God; a supernatural appearance of Jesus before his recorded life here on earth, coming to provide for and be with these people in the hardest moment of their lives.

Here's the thought that just blew my mind. God saw the threat that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were under and the situation playing out for them. And behind the scenes, totally unbeknownst to them, the Son of God decided that He was not going to let them be alone in those flames. He left the comfort of paradise, and willingly placed himself in the middle of the furnace to be with them. He certainly did protect them. The text says:

"the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them."

Isn't that crazy? Have you ever been around a campfire and not left smelling like smoke? I often have to wash my hair twice to get the smell out. They were indeed rescued in a miraculous way.

But did you notice who actually took them out of the flames? It was Nebuchadnezzar who:

"then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, 'Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!'"

The fourth man in the fire patiently stayed with them in the flames until what was revealed through him compelled the people witnessing this incredible glory to respond.

Have you ever wondered about what Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were like after they were freed from the furnace? Maybe like this? Maybe not.

But do you think they ever had any second thoughts, any doubts that they made the right decision to stand firm in their faith? Though the march to the furnace must have been terrifying, do you think they would have ever traded the experience of having God meet them in it? Don't you imagine that to have turned out to be the most precious and significant moment in their faith journey?

I don't know what fiery trial you have experienced or are experiencing. But I do know that you don't have to go through it alone. God did not abandon these three studs, and He won't abandon you either. And there isn't any set of circumstances that he wouldn't enter into with you. He is compassionate enough, brave enough, loving enough, and strong enough to willingly help you through any furnace.

Think about this: The joy of knowing Jesus as our Lord and Savior isn't only knowing we'll be with him when we die, it's also knowing he'll be with us as we live.

Last week we saw the mighty act of God to lead Moses and the people literally through the Red Sea, today we saw him walk with dear ones in the fire. God wants us to be prepared in knowing that hard times will come, but that He will be with us. These verses could not be a more delightful reminder of that given what we've studied last week and this:

*"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and 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."*

The waters and the fires will come, but just like God was with Moses, like he was with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, He will be with us too. Our deliverance might be out of our suffering, or it might be that His grace will be sufficient for us to endure it, or it might be that we'll be delivered from this life and into the next where we'll never

suffer again. The faith that rests on that is the kind of faith that can stand up to any pressures that the Nebuchadnezzars in our lives threaten us with.

For those of you who are at least 25 or older, do you remember the encouragement that beloved children's television host, Mr. Rogers, gave to children when they heard about tragedies? He famously said, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers."

Maybe the grown-up version of that, even the bottom line of this story for followers of Jesus, is that when we face fiery trials, we can "Look for the Helper." For every one of us who has asked Jesus to be our Savior, he promises that will always have his Spirit with us as our Helper.

One of my favorite verses of all time is Isaiah 41:10:

"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." Isaiah 41:10

As followers of Jesus, we don't need to fear anything that come our way, because our trust in God is solid in knowing that we are His and He is with us no matter what circumstances we may face.

I'm so thankful that we don't ever have to face anything alone. Friends, if you know Jesus as your Savior, and you are seeking to follow his way, he is with you. When the waters rise or the flames burn hot, look for him as he meets you there. It might end up being the most precious and significant experience of your faith journey.

And if you don't know him in this way, I don't want you to ever again face any fiery trial without him. Don't face this life alone. Ask Jesus today to be your Lord, your strength, to be the one who will gladly come to you in the hardest days of your life and give you what you need. And if you do that, tell someone so that they can encourage you in your new faith. Tell me, or another pastor, or a friend who loves Jesus, but tell someone so that you will truly never be alone in the flames again.

If you want that, please pray with me.

Jesus, thank you for not leaving us alone in this broken world. Thank you for entering into it to save us and lead us. We admit that we, too, have contributed to the brokenness and have done things we regret. Please forgive us for the ways that we

have sinned. We need the forgiveness made possible through your death and resurrection. We accept you as our Lord and want to follow your better way. What joy for all of us who call you Lord, whether today for the first time or for the millionth time, to know that you will always be with us, helping us, guiding us, sustaining us, now and forever. Amen