

Even if God doesn't or didn't...

Daniel 3

If you **grew up going to Sunday school** as a kid, you undoubtedly heard the story of Daniel and the lion's den as well as the fiery furnace. If you didn't, then today is going to be a treat for you. This is one of the **most compelling stories** in the Bible with one of the most powerful statements of faith in God. That phrase is "**Even if God doesn't.**"

But before we get into that, we need to give **a little context** to this story. If you are just joining us, this story comes to us as we have been reading through **the Bible chronologically**. The Bible is **not organized chronologically**, but rather topically. By reading through in the order that things happen when we **can see the bigger picture** of what God has been doing from **creation to Revelations**.

If you **don't have one of the Chronological Bibles**, they are still available for you **to jump in where we are in the story**, you see that it is organized into eras of time. The era that we are entering is **called captivity**. This is the time in the history of God's people Israel, where they have been conquered and taken off into captivity from the promised land that God had given them. **God had made a promise, a covenant with his people** to make them a great nation and give them a homeland, and even **to make them a blessing to all people**, to all nations. **Their side of the covenant was to follow the laws that God had given them through Moses**. Over and over throughout their history they disobeyed God's very **simple and clear commandments**, one of which is that they would **have no other God**. They were to be **completely loyal, full allegiance** to Yahweh, the God who had brought them out of slavery in Egypt.

If you have been reading along with us, you will have learned that this happened in **two steps**. Ten of the 12 original tribes had broken off and created their own nation, the northern Kingdom which was called Israel. They became wicked and depraved at a quicker rate than those in the southern Kingdom of Judah which contained 2 tribes of the original 12. **The northern Kingdom, Israel**, was conquered and taken off into captivity by **Assyria** then a while later the **southern Kingdom of Judah** was conquered by **Babylon** and many of their people were taken off into captivity, **particularly their brightest and best**.

That brings us to the story of Daniel which takes place in Babylonian captivity. The key characters in this part of the story are **Daniel, Shadrack, Mishak, and Abednego**. These were part of that group of **Israel's brightest and best leaders** who were taken to Babylon to be **incorporated into the Babylonian worldview**. That way they could be useful to their new masters in Babylon.

What would be the logical response to God allowing them to be taken away from their promised land, no longer being a nation, no longer being God's protected special people?

- Complaining.
- Giving up and assimilating into Babylonian culture.

God didn't rescue them. He let this happen! That's the **big picture**. Now we **zoom in to an event with three young Hebrew men** how they are confronted with making a choice and trusting God, even if he doesn't help them.

This event reveals the pressure of choosing to do what is right when there are dire consequences for doing so. **And what if God doesn't save you from those consequences.**

Today we find our story in chapter 3 of the Book of Daniel. Chapter 3 begins with **King Nebuchadnezzar** building a **gigantic golden statue** that is the God that they are to worship. **Whenever the worship band kicked in** with a certain song that represented this new God, everyone, regardless of nationality or belief, must bow and worship this God.

This is what brings us to our three Hebrew young men. Some astrologers it says went to the king and told him that Shadrack, Meshack, and the Abednego **were refusing his edict** that all must worship this new 90-foot golden God. This is **undoubtedly jealousy**. These three were **too good to eat the king's food** and were progressing above many Babylonian young men and so they needed to be **brought down a notch or two**. **"They pay no attention to you, your Majesty"** is the way they put it.

The punishment for disobeying this edict from Nebuchadnezzar was to be thrown into a blazing furnace. We begin reading at **verse 13**, where we get to see Nebuchadnezzar's reaction to this information. ¹³Then Nebuchadnezzar flew into a rage and ordered that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought before him. When they were brought in, ¹⁴Nebuchadnezzar 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? ¹⁵I 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?"** ¹⁶Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you. ¹⁷If 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." Daniel 3:13-18

So, the king makes the order to heat up the furnace. The furnace is so hot that when **the guards** get close enough to push them in, they are killed. **And that's how the story ends; the three young men are burned to a crisp, to the delight of the king.** Not so fast...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 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! ²⁸ Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise to the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego! He sent his angel to rescue his servants who trusted in him. **They defied the king's command and were willing to die** rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. ²⁹ Therefore, I make this decree: If any people, whatever their race or nation or

language, speak a word against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, they will be torn limb from limb, and their houses will be turned into heaps of rubble. There is no other god who can rescue like this!" He switched up the method of punishment this time after the embarrassing miss with the furnace. ³⁹Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to even higher positions in the province of Babylon. Daniel 3:24-30

We learned something about these young Hebrew men that we couldn't have learned without the threat of the furnace. The heat, the pressure, the consequences brought out **something that was central** to who there were as men. **It takes something like this to bring what is deep within a person to the point where it is visible to others.**

It's the same for us today. It doesn't have to be a literal furnace, **but that pressure and possible consequences where we are up against it** and we either trust God or give in. Only the furnace can reveal to us:

If we have simple belief or real faith...

® **It's a "give up" or go deeper moment.**

Remember that the faithful were **dragged into exile** just like the wicked. **They must decide, will they remain faithful?**

Simple belief never asks this much. You can **always add to it according to what the culture says.** This will allow you **to get along and even ahead.**

What is at stake here? They were **risking their lives and potentially the lives of other Jews** who weren't going to bow.

They would be **breaking two of the ten commandments**, idols and having no other god.

If you remember Job, his situation was similar. He lost everything and was suffering terribly. His friends encouraged him to **curse God and die.** He didn't.

Let's add another phrase to help us understand what simple belief and real faith are. **Only the furnace can reveal to us: If we have simple belief or real faith...**the kind that can push through fear and disappointment.

They had faith that allowed them to fearlessly tell the most powerful man in the world that they weren't going to compromise. It was God working in their faith that allowed them to **push through the fear of the consequences** that would come.

That's fear, but **what about disappointment?** When following God **doesn't give you the return on investment you expected.** When we **don't get what we think we deserve**, that is when disappointment comes.

This is where we talk about "when he didn't" in your life. Is there a point in your life where **you prayed for something** to happen or just believed it would because you were **"blessed and highly favored,"** but God didn't come through. **You went to church, read the Bible, prayed, tithed, even joined a small group but still...**

- Your marriage didn't survive.
- Your addiction didn't go away.
- Your kid continued to get into trouble.
- Your family member didn't beat cancer.
- You still didn't get the job, you got fired.
- That temptation didn't go away, it increased.
- Life didn't get easier.
- Your depression didn't go away.

Your spouse will disappoint you. That is when love becomes real and powerful. Love pushes through disappointment.

Look at those **people who were following Jesus** around Palestine **thinking he was the Messiah**, meaning he was going to take the throne of David and bring back the **good ole days**. Not only was that not happening, but he was saying things like, **“you need to eat my flesh and drink my blood”** if you want to be my disciples. ⁶⁶At this point many of his disciples turned away and deserted him. ⁶⁷Then Jesus turned to the Twelve and asked, “Are you also going to leave?” ⁶⁸Simon Peter replied, **“Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life. ⁶⁹We believe, and we know you are the Holy One of God.”** John 6:66-69

That is an example of simple belief that couldn't help them push through disappointment. Jesus wasn't going to **rescue them in the way they thought they needed** to be rescued. **They didn't want to face any furnace or even a little bit of discomfort.** Jesus was supposed to be a messiah who came and made everything alright. He did that, but everything doesn't get put right until the end.

Eat my flesh and drink my blood and other stuff like **“die to yourself”** didn't sound like the king that would lead the uprising to **kick the Roman overlords out and bring us to the very top of power with him.** That's disappointing.

Peter and the others who stayed did so because they pushed through the confusion and disappointment that comes from hearing Jesus say such things.

Have you ever been disappointed by the church, this one or another one? A lot of people have, and **they gave up.** I've been disappointed by the church before, **but I can't leave because I'm the pastor** and God called me to do it.

One of my favorite writers **S.K.** used the word **“offended.”** He said **unless you are offended by Jesus and push through** that you will never have real faith. **Has Jesus offended you?**

If you are new here, let me make you a promise? If you stick around long enough, I'm going to disappoint you. **This church is going to disappoint you**, but if this is your faith community and you have real faith, **you can push through** that.

“Dietrich Bonhoeffer once observed that idealism about church can actually hurt real churches. When we value our ideal of Christian community more than Christian community itself, we can miss the gift God wants to give to us. The New Testament reveals many times how hard it can be to get along with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Yet, God intends for us to live the Christian life in a genuine, committed relationship with others. Often this takes work!” **Mark D. Roberts, Fuller De Pree Center, Life for Leaders Devotions**, March 7, 2023

“Every human idealized image that is brought into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be broken up so that genuine community can survive.” **Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together**

“Well that shouldn't happen in church.” Why not? We are broken people who are being made new. **That's messy and some people just aren't up for messy.**

Have you been disappointed by God? Be honest about it. Call it what it is. You wanted to be saved from something or avoid some sort of furnace and he didn't do it.

John Calvin in his writing on Daniel says that **God could have extinguished the fire before** they were thrown in. **But God helped “in the fire, not from the fire.”** God **didn't prevent faithful people from being taken to Babylon nor did he keep faithful people from being pitched into furnaces.**

How about **falsely imprisoned instead of a furnace.** ¹⁸So they called the apostles back in and commanded them never again to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹But Peter and John replied, “Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than him?” ²⁰We cannot stop telling about everything we have seen and heard.” ²¹The council then threatened them further... Acts 4:18-21a

Only the furnace can reveal to us: If we have simple belief or real faith...he is the kind that can push through fear and disappointment. And...How simple belief turns into blame and bitterness.

If we get to the furnace and compromise, we have demonstrated that we have nothing more than **simple belief**. Once that belief in what we expect from God is seen to be untrue, the **next step is blame. It's God's fault.** Then we become **bitter**.

I am sure that there were **many from Judah making the long trip to Babylon** who were **grumbling every step blaming God** for not saving them in the way they believed they deserved. **They wanted to avoid the furnace that was humiliating defeat, loss of their national identity and homeland as well as their spiritual identity in the temple.** And since God didn't rescue them, they blamed him and became bitter. **The return to God from bitterness is long and few make it back.** These people will most likely lack the energy to remain God's people in captivity. **They will probably blend into** the culture.

It's the same today. If "God didn't" in your past and you blamed him or even decided that he didn't exist, then bitterness toward God and his people is usually what comes next. And then it's almost impossible to not blend into some part of the host culture. That is what the Bible calls "the world" those patterns and systems to track us away from God's goodness and provision found in following him loyally.

That's the poison. Here's the remedy. What God is doing.

It's easy and somewhat lazy to only look for God working when things are going well. The hard work comes in seeing or trusting him to be at work for our good and his kingdom when we are standing in front of a furnace. If we come to the furnace only believing that God is working for our good when things are good means we will miss the bigger purpose.

One of the ways God wanted to use this story and these three men's amazing faith is what is happening today. You are hearing how a real person stood in front of the fire and did not waver from their commitment to God. Their story was either going to be a martyr's story or a story of God's miraculous power to save. Either one he could use. God is using this story to prepare you to trust Him when it appears that He is not there. Particularly if you don't get saved.

We don't face this kind of life-or-death situation very often in our time in our part of the world. But others do. Those people who live in places like India, Iran, China, Indonesia, and Afghanistan do find themselves in these types of situations often. Some of them coming to Christ know that by doing so they are putting their lives, and their families lives in jeopardy.

We can keep these people in front of our minds and in our prayers. I try to do this through an app on my phone called **Global Christian Relief. They post real life furnace stories from these countries where their contacts see them happening. Then they put the story on the App with a different name. God can use this story in our lives when we connect with our brothers and sisters who are facing the furnace.**

Simply put, we can see God's purposes and what he is up to when confronted by the furnace because this is what He does. How often are people who are following God faithfully get caught up in the punishment that God allows to happen to their wicked neighbors. By reading through the Bible, you can see how this keeps happening. It's all about God having people who are bringing his kingdom to others around them. God always uses what the enemy means for evil to allow that evil to bring about some other good in his long-term plan. Again, if we are lazy, we will miss this. We will get to the furnace and give up or get bitter. God is always up to something when things look the bleakest.

Only the furnace can reveal to us...How we can ask better next time? The furnace lets me know I may need to return to this point.

The better ask is more than, "get me out of this situation." Maybe it's the best thing for you in the long run that God does not pluck you out of the mess you are in. The better ask next time can go something like this: "Lord if it be your will and for your glory to get me out of the trouble,

then please do. If not, **then help me to be faithful to you in this time of extreme heat.** Help me **to be able to praise you.** Help me to say, **“but even if you don’t”** I will remain completely yours and **I will look for signs that you are turning what the enemy intended for evil into good.”**

We ask for the strength we need, and that God will be glorified through this, not simply get me out of this mess.

A Christ follower in a country where there is persecution. He **said to us in the west, “Don’t pray that the persecution will go away because God is using it to spread the Gospel. Pray that we will remain faithful.”**

We are going to do something about what God is telling us right now. It can be a take home that you repeat, particularly if this is hard for you. **I’m going to work through these steps first then we will go back and pray through them together.** During this prayer time I want you to allow God to work, **not just on your mind, but on your emotions.** Ask him to help you **see and feel where he wants you to go with this.**

Steps of Obedience

1. Take your disappointment to God.

Another word for this is to **lament.** Take **your accusations and disappointment** of how God didn’t rescue you in the way you wanted him to.

When we pray these steps together use this verse as our pattern hitting the key response.⁶ **Humble yourselves,** therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.⁷ **Cast all your anxiety** on him because he cares for you.⁸ **Be alert and of sober mind.** Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. 1 Peter 5:6-8 NIV

1. Reaffirm your trust in Him.

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and don’t lean on your own understanding but in all you do is acknowledge him as God and he will direct your path.”

1. Praise God for how He has rescued you in the past!

Leave space for the Holy Spirit to help you remember the times when God did rescue.

I want to close this time of prayer and response by reading these words from the **Apostle Paul who knows a thing or two about living a life that says, “God even if he doesn’t...**

For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia, for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired for life itself. Why, we felt that we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. 2 Corinthians 1:8-9 ESV