

Less than a month before Sherry and I were married, my parents scheduled an opportunity for our entire family to go whitewater rafting on the New River in West Virginia. I had been around water before, and did not have a particular fear of water, but was unprepared for the exhilarating experience of running the rapids.

As we approached the first "hole," the water rushed and swirled furiously, and my first thought was, "I can't go through *that!* Let me out of here and put my feet on the solid shore."

We would never have made it without our guide. He spoke calmly, "We're going through. It'll be okay. You do what I tell you while you're in the raft, and you'll be fine."

He was right. The truth is I would have missed one of the most breath-taking, unforgettable experiences of my life had I followed my feelings and bailed out.

The truth is we face the same type of choices in the Christian life. And sadly, many are bailing out. I'm not talking about justification at this point--That is the work of God in which we have no part. I have in mind sanctification, specifically progressive sanctification. God has indeed provided us with everything we need for godly living (2 Pet 1:3). We can succeed in the Christian life, through the resources which are ours in Jesus Christ.

Yet successful Christian living involves choices. Daily choices. And here's the question we must answer every day, "Am I going to face today's challenges by responding God's way, or am I going to bail out and take the course of least resistance?"

When your supervisor calls you in and says, "I've got a promotion opportunity for you which could translate into big bucks, but it will involve being gone 2 weekends a month." You've got a choice to make. Would it be God-honoring to take a "promotion" that will force me to miss worship services, and give up my church ministry? Tough decision.

What happens when we refuse to bail out as we encounter the hard times in living for Christ? What happens when we choose to obey the Lord in a situation when the outcome seems unpredictable? We're going to find out this morning from Daniel 3.

Proposition: From the account of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel 3:19-30, we discover two potential results of refusing to bail out.

I. Result #1: We may experience greater problems (19-23).

- A. They felt the heat of the king (19).
- B. They felt the heat of the furnace (20-23).
 - 1. They were bound.
 - 2. They were fully clothed
 - 3. They were subjected to increased heat.

II. Result #2: We may experience greater privileges (24-30).

- A. The ungodly were pricked (24-27).
 - 1. Instead of seeing three men, they saw four.
 - 2. Instead of seeing pain, they saw God.

***Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

- They saw Him as weak (ch 1).
- They saw Him as great, but not personal (ch 2).
- They saw Him as deserving respect, but not allegiance (ch 3).

B. God was praised (28-29).

1. Honor Him for Who He is.
2. Honor Him for what He did.

C. The godly were promoted (30).

Implications: When you feel like bailing out...

1. Be faithful.
2. Remember, God is faithful.

I. Result #1: We may experience greater problems (19-23).

When we left off two weeks ago, we were marveling at the radical faith of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. King Nebuchadnezzar had built a golden image and commanded everyone to bow before it when the music played. Three of his cabinet members, three Jews, refused to bow. They made a choice to honor God when it would have been very easy to bail out.

What happens when we choose to stand up for God in difficult situations? God will send His angels and make the problem go away, right? Not exactly. That's not the way it worked for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They faced a problem, responded in a God-honoring way, and the result was that they faced even greater problems! Two problems, to be specific...

A. They felt the heat of the king (19).

Notice v 19, "Then was Nebuchadnezzar full of fury, and the form of his visage was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; therefore he spoke, and commanded that they should heat the furnace seven times more than it was usually heated."

There is some question as to what the furnace actually looked like. Gleason Archer suggests that Mesopotamian smelting furnaces tended to be like an old-fashioned glass milk-bottle in shape, with a large opening for the insertion of the ore to be smelted and a smaller aperture at ground level for the admission of wood and charcoal to furnish the heat (p. 56). There must have been two or more smaller holes at this same level to insert pipes which were connected to large bellows which were used to raise the temperature of the fire in the furnace.

The text says that after hearing the reply of the three Jews, the king was "full of fury." The LB's paraphrase is vivid, "Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury and his face became dark with anger."

Have you ever noticed how that when people get angry, they do irrational things? For example, consider Nebuchadnezzar. He was incensed at the audacity of the three Jews to defy his command, so what did he do? With his pride wounded, his face distorted, and his anger boiling, he gave the foolish order to turn up the furnace-heat sevenfold. As if that would increase the torment!

One commentator made this observation about Nebuchadnezzar (in Walvoord, 89-90), "And then he lost his temper! That is always the mark of a little man. His furnace was hot, but he himself got hotter! And when a man gets full of fury, he gets full of folly. There is no fool on earth like a man who has lost his temper."

Actually, a slow fire would have been far more torture. The king ought to have cooled the furnace seven times *less* if he wanted to hurt his subjects, but in anger he did the irrational opposite. At any rate, the three Jews felt the heat of the king, and...

B. They felt the heat of the furnace (20-23).

Watch how Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's problem became greater in verses 20-23. The heat of the furnace was compounded by three additional problems.

1. They were bound.

V 20 says, "And he commanded the most mighty men that were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace." The king was taking no chances. He didn't want these men to escape from the inferno (as if that was even a possibility!). As if being cast in bonds into a fire weren't enough, they faced a second problem.

2. They were fully clothed

V 21 reveals, "Then these men were bound in their coats, their stockings, and their turbans, and their other garments." Why the clothing? Remember, this dedication ceremony was a black-coat-and-tie affair. All the dignitaries had on their Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes.

In preparation for the furnace, Nebuchadnezzar made sure these three Jews were dressed from head to toe. Why? It wasn't because he was worried about them catching a cold! His aim was simple--the more flammable material, the better.

3. They were subjected to increased heat.

How hot was it? V 22 tells us, "Therefore, because the king's commandment was urgent and the furnace exceedingly hot, the flame of the fire slew those men that took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego." I don't need to remind you that these "most mighty men" (20) were no wimps, yet the heat was so intense, that merely getting close to the furnace-opening killed them.

The situation was bleak, to say the least. When you read v 23, you realize that humanly speaking, all hope was gone. "And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace."

Perhaps you're wondering, "I don't get it. Weren't these three men living for God? Why then did God allow them to face these problems? Why didn't He do something?" He did. But before we consider what He did *for* them, don't miss what He was doing *in* them.

God was teaching the three Jews to trust Him. He brought them to the end of themselves so they had nowhere else to turn. But to Him.

In his recent book *A Gentle Thunder*, Max Lucado writes this about God (p. 5), "Please understand. His goal is not to make you happy. His goal is to make you his. His goal is not to get you what you want; it is to get you what you need. And if that means a jolt or two to get you in your seat, then be jolted. Earthly discomfort is a glad swap for heavenly peace."

May I speak frankly to you? If your aim in life is to be happy, you'll bail out in the crunch times. You'll stop reading your Bible and praying. You'll leave the church. You'll run from your relationships. You'll quit your ministry. That's what will happen if your aim in life is to be happy. Beloved, what we need to do is remember this. God's

goal for us is higher than happiness. It's holiness. That's why He sent His Son to die in our place, to make us holy. Our goal must be to cooperate with Him in the process.

II. Result #2: We may experience greater privileges (24-30).

Privileges? What kind of privileges? Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego saw three wonderful privileges because they stayed committed to the Lord, and refused to bail out

A. The ungodly were pricked (24-27).

God got the attention of the ungodly crowd that day, big time, all because our three heroes refused to bow down and bail out. The ungodly were surprised in two ways.

1. Instead of seeing three men, they saw four.

Watch Nebuchadnezzar's response in v 24, "Then Nebuchadnezzar, the king [an ironic reminder that the king is no longer in control!] was astounded, and rose up in haste, and spoke, and said unto his counselors, Did not we cast three men, bound, into the midst of the fire?"

You can almost sense the panic that is starting to spread through the ungodly crowd. "Weren't there *three* men?!" Yet in v 25, "He answered and said, Lo, I see *four* men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt." Four men, not jumping, not writhing in pain, four men walking in the fire! Instead of three men, the crowd saw four. But the second surprise was even bigger than the first...

2. Instead of seeing pain, they saw God.

V 25 concludes with this testimonial, "And the form of the fourth is like a son of the gods." While it's possible that the fourth person in the fire was indeed the Son of God (the Preincarnate Christ), it's doubtful that a pagan like Nebuchadnezzar would comprehend this, unless he had prophetic insight (Walvoord). The Aramaic term is plural, hence, "a son of the gods."

I'd like to read what happened next out of the LB (26-27), "Then Nebuchadnezzar came as close as he could to the open door of the flaming furnace and yelled: 'Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God! Come out! Come here!' So they stepped out of the fire. Then the princes, governors, captains, and counselors crowded around them and saw that the fire hadn't touched them--not a hair of their heads was singed; their coats were unscorched, and they didn't even smell of smoke!"

I want you to know something amazing happened that day, something that would not have happened had these three men of God bailed out. The ungodly were pricked in their hearts! Imagine what went through their minds when they saw that the same fire that killed their soldiers didn't even leave a trace of smoke on these Jews, and that the only thing burned up were the ropes! Since they didn't bail out, they saw the ungodly pricked.

Don't miss that God is doing something in the lives of the ungodly throughout the book of Daniel. Notice the progression in Nebuchadnezzar's understanding of the Lord God as we move through the book. How did this pagan king and his fellow Babylonians view the God of the Jews back in chapter one?

- They saw Him as weak (ch 1).

After destroying Jerusalem and plundering the temple, the Babylonians no doubt came to this conclusion, "This god of the Jews is inept. He's no match for our gods." Their view of God changed, however, in chapter two.

- They saw Him as great, but not personal (ch 2).

After God enabled Daniel to reveal the dream to the king, remember what Nebuchadnezzar said? 2:47 "Of a truth it is that your God is the God of gods, and the Lord of kings." Now he saw the Lord as great, but he's still not personal; He's still "your" god, not "mine." In chapter three, they move another step closer to the truth.

- They saw Him as deserving respect, but not allegiance (ch 3).

In v 26, Nebuchadnezzar identifies the Lord as "the Most High God."

What's happening to the way Nebuchadnezzar views God? He's getting warmer! Is he there yet? No, and he won't be until God brings him to his knees in chapter 4.

There's an important lesson here for us. As Christians, we have a mission which is to evangelize the lost. But we can't do evangelism the way the church did it 30 years ago. Then, even non-churched people basically had a biblical foundation. If you told a non-Christian, "God loves you," he or she knew who you meant by "God." If you assume that today, you're making a serious mistake. Before we can do evangelism in the 90's, we need to do pre-evangelism. That is, we need to bring people along in their understanding of Who the God of the Bible is. Like God did with Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel.

What God may want you to do for your unsaved neighbor is not take Him down the "Romans Road" (he may not be ready for that), but help him gain a more correct God-concept. In fact, you may not even be the one who eventually reaps the fruit of conversion, but that's okay. Leave that up to God.

Recently, I met a man who is on medical retirement at the age of 37, and it didn't take long to realize he's hurting inside more than he's hurting physically. I began to share that God has a purpose for our lives, to which he responded, "Do you really think God had a purpose in what happened to me?" His unspoken words were, "What kind of God would allow this to happen?" What did that man need from me? A gospel presentation. Maybe. But likely he's not ready for that yet. He needs a clearer understanding of Who God is first. He needs to see the love of Christ in my life.

The problem many of us have as Christians is this. We want quick results. Since we want to be able to report in church, "I led 3 people to Christ this week," we move ahead of the Spirit and pick green fruit. We need to learn from how God dealt with the ungodly.

Because three men of God refused to bail out, the ungodly were pricked and...

B. God was praised (28-29).

It's amazing what came from the lips of the same king who less than 15 minutes earlier was shaking his fist at three Jews and their God. He's a different man as indicated by his words in vv 28-29. He gives us two reasons why people ought to praise and honor God.

1. Honor Him for Who He is.

Listen to v 28 in the NIV, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent His angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in Him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God."

God deserves honor because of Who He is. He's the Most High God (26). He's the God Who is involved personally in the lives of His people. So honor Him!

2. Honor Him for what He did.

What did He do? In v 28, a pagan king acknowledged He did this, "He sent His angel and rescued His servants!" In fact, because of what the Lord did, Nebuchadnezzar went so far as to issue a decree in v 29:

"Therefore, I make a decree that every people, nation, and language, who speak anything amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made a refuse heap, because there is no other God that can deliver after this sort."

Those are amazing words coming from the lips of a pagan, polytheistic king! The problem is, as chapter four will reveal, they are just words. Do you know people like this? They speak highly of God. They respect God, and even demand the same from their kids and others ("We don't swear in this house!"). They give lipservice to God, but what's missing? They refuse to let God be God in their lives. Like Nebuchadnezzar, they say that God is great, and that no other God can save like He does, but they refuse to give Him the absolute allegiance of their lives.

Realize this. God has ways of getting to the heart of the matter with people like Nebuchadnezzar as we'll see in chapter four. You see, Jesus Christ didn't die for you merely so you'd respect Him, but so you would accept Him as Savior and Lord.

C. The godly were promoted (30).

V 30 says, "Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon." Just think of the glory-to-God opportunity that would have been missed had not these three men stood firm! How many times have we "bailed out" just before God would have intervened in a great way?

Because these three men of God didn't bail out, the ungodly were pricked, God was praised, and they were promoted.

Implications: When you feel like bailing out...

Do two things.

1. *Be faithful.* I need to remind you that the point of the story in Daniel 3 is not to say that God always delivers us out of the fire. Sometimes He takes His own right through the fire to heaven. Polycarp was burned at the stake, as have been countless other saints. Jim Elliot was martyred by the Auca Indians. David Brainherd was only 29 years old when he died while serving as a missionary to the American Indians. Yet each of these made the same decision we must make. When they felt like bailing out, they chose to be faithful.

So must we. Jesus said, "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross DAILY, and follow me (Luke 9:23)." The challenge of the Christian life is that it is so "daily." Every day, by the grace of God, we must choose to be faithful.

Be faithful like Noah, who was committed to obeying God's will regardless of the mocking of his peers. Be faithful like Moses who chose to suffer affliction with God's people rather than enjoying the pleasures of sin for a season (Heb 11:25). Be faithful like David who likewise was committed to doing God's will, so much so that instead of taking matters into his own hands and killing Saul, he waited on the Lord. Be faithful like Stephen, a man who because of his commitment to his Savior, was stoned to death and subsequently escorted to heaven by angels.

And be faithful like our Lord Jesus Christ, Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb 12:2)." If you feel like bailing out, don't. Be faithful. Is it possible to be faithful to God these days? Yes. Why? The same reason the three Jews could.

2. *Remember, God is faithful.* Never forget the truth of 1 Cor 10:13 (NIV), "God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear."