

After Easter, we began a 50-day initiative called “We Have This Hope.” During these 50 days, we are hearing messages and testimonies, reading devotionals, and spending time in small groups dedicated to the theme of hope. A few weeks ago, we heard the story of Abraham and Sarah, and how they held onto the hope that God would fulfill his promises to them, even throughout the many years of waiting. Last week, we heard the story of Job and the hope he had in the goodness of God, even when he had no idea what God was up to. We are now at the half-way point in this 50-day journey, and this week we turn our attention to the story of Daniel and his three friends: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

If you went to Sunday school as a kid, you probably learned the story of Daniel in the Lion’s Den and the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the Fiery Furnace. And if you’re from my generation, you’re probably familiar with the VeggieTales versions of these stories. My apologies if “The Bunny Song” is now stuck in your head :)

Their stories are found in the Old Testament book of Daniel. This morning we’re just going to look at a few passages, but the whole book is only twelve chapters long if you want to read through it on your own. At the beginning of Daniel, we read that King Nebuchadnezzar has captured the city of Jerusalem, where the Temple of God was located. The king then ordered his chief of staff to bring young men from Judah’s royal family to Babylon as captives. Starting with verse 4 of chapter 1, we read:

**<sup>4</sup> “Select only strong, healthy, and good-looking young men,” he said. “Make sure they are well versed in every branch of learning, are gifted with knowledge and good judgment, and are suited to serve in the royal palace. Train these young men in the language and literature of Babylon.” <sup>5</sup> The king assigned them a daily ration of food and wine from his own kitchens. They were to be trained for three years, and then they would enter the royal service.**

**<sup>6</sup> Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were four of the young men chosen, all from the tribe of Judah. <sup>7</sup> The chief of staff renamed them with these Babylonian names: Daniel was called Beltshazzar. Hananiah was called Shadrach. Mishael was called Meshach. Azariah was called Abednego.**

Daniel and his friends were probably about 16 years old when they were taken as captives to Babylon, nearly 1,000 miles away from Jerusalem. That would be like the guys from McBIC’s youth group being captured and taken to live in Alabama or Florida. These young men were far from home, living in a foreign land with foreign gods and customs. **But God’s favor was with them.**

Daniel challenged the orders of the king, asking for permission not to eat and drink what was unacceptable according to his Jewish faith. He wasn't punished or reprimanded for his request. Instead God gave the king's chief of staff respect for Daniel. God nourished and strengthened Daniel and his friends, and the young men thrived on a diet of vegetables and water. God then gave Daniel and his friends knowledge, wisdom, and skill, and He gave Daniel a special ability to interpret dreams. The young men honored the Lord in how they lived, and with God's blessings, they became the most impressive and capable men in the king's service.

Skipping ahead to Chapter 3, we read the story of the fiery furnace. King Nebuchadnezzar had a 90-foot-tall golden statue built and ordered everyone in Babylon to bow down and worship it. Anyone who refused would be thrown into a fiery furnace. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused. The king was so angry when he found out, but instead of immediately throwing them into the furnace as the law said, he actually gave them a second chance. In verse 15, King Nebuchadnezzar tells them:

**<sup>15</sup> "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?"**

**<sup>16</sup> Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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."**

Their hope was not in the king's ability to change his mind. Their hope wasn't even in their own status among the king's servants. Their hope was in the God they served. **"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."** They trusted and put their hope in a God who had the power to save them—not just the power to keep them out of the furnace but the power to rescue them from its flames.

What is really significant in their response is what they said next: **"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."** *Even if he doesn't.* Their

hope in God and their worship of Him was not conditional. They knew what God was capable of but weren't demanding His rescue. Their loyalty to God wasn't dependent on His miracles or the favor they had received from Him.

Starting with verse 19, we read King Nebuchadnezzar's response:

**<sup>19</sup> Nebuchadnezzar was so furious with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that his face became distorted with rage. He commanded that the furnace be heated seven times hotter than usual. <sup>20</sup> Then he ordered some of the strongest men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. ... <sup>22</sup> And because the king, in his anger, had demanded such a hot fire in the furnace, the flames killed the soldiers as they threw the three men in. <sup>23</sup> So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, securely tied, fell into the roaring flames.**

**<sup>24</sup> 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.**

**<sup>25</sup> "Look!" Nebuchadnezzar shouted. "I see four men, unbound, walking around in the fire unharmed! And the fourth looks like a god!"**

**<sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> ... Not a hair on their heads was singed, and their clothing was not scorched. They didn't even smell of smoke!**

**<sup>28</sup> 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. <sup>29</sup> ... There is no other god who can rescue like this!"**

What King Nebuchadnezzar witnessed was an absolute miracle. In his anger, he demanded that the furnace be seven times hotter than usual, a decision that killed his own guards—and yet Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were untouched. At most, all the fire did to the three men was free them from the ropes that bound them. They stepped out of the fire unharmed as a living testimony to the power of God.

Though he previously commanded his people to worship his golden idol, King Nebuchadnezzar was now declaring praise to God, saying that there was no other god who could rescue like the Lord did. This display of God's power, along with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's willingness to die rather than serve anyone but God, led King Nebuchadnezzar to repent and even command his people to worship the Lord, too.

Each week, we've not only been looking to God's word but also to the testimonies of hope from people in our congregation. This week, we have a video testimony from Kat Figura about the hope she has in God.

### Kat Figura testimony video

I am so thankful for Kat and her willingness to share her story with us this morning. When I hear her story, I see a few parallels to the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The first is the source of her hope. Kat's hope is in God and who she knows God to be. As she spent time in God's word and got to learn more about who God was, she was able to have hope in the midst of an incredibly difficult and hopeless situation. For the Israelites exiled in Babylon, it was a struggle to maintain hope while living in the land of their conquerors, yet Daniel and his friends showed it was possible to hold onto hope because they believed the God they served had the power to save them.

Kat also talked about how things with her family have not gotten better. Even though she became a Christian, even though she's been able to experience God's healing for herself, her family situation has gotten worse. The furnace has gotten hotter! And yet she hopes in God. She doesn't know what God's rescue will look like, but she continues to hope, knowing that God loves her family.

The last parallel I want to point out is what Kat said at the very end of her testimony: "The situation didn't change, but God was with me so it was OK. And I know he's not going to waste any of it." For Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, their situation didn't change. The king didn't change his mind. He didn't pardon them. He held to his word and had them thrown into the fire. But God was with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—standing with them in the furnace, walking around in the flames—so it was OK. And God didn't waste any of it. King Nebuchadnezzar's heart was changed, and the three young men were promoted to even higher positions in the kingdom.

There's one more story I want us to look at, this time from the New Testament in the book of Acts. Stephen was a leader in the early church. Acts 6:8 says he was a man full of grace and power, who performed amazing miracles. The Jewish elders and teachers

accused him of blasphemy and brought him to testify before the high priest. You can read his full response in Acts 7, but he ends his testimony accusing the high council of resisting the Holy Spirit and betraying and murdering Jesus, the Messiah.

Starting with verse 54, we read their response:

**<sup>54</sup> The Jewish leaders were infuriated by Stephen's accusation, and they shook their fists at him in rage. <sup>55</sup> But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God's right hand. <sup>56</sup> And he told them, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God's right hand!"**

**<sup>57</sup> Then they put their hands over their ears and began shouting. They rushed at him <sup>58</sup> and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. ... <sup>59</sup> As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup> He fell to his knees, shouting, "Lord, don't charge them with this sin!" And with that, he died.**

Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, Stephen faced the death penalty for what he believed. But Stephen's story had a different ending. He wasn't miraculously rescued. He didn't emerge from the pile of rocks unharmed. He died. But God was with him, so it was OK. **"Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God's right hand!" ... As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."** God was with him, so it was OK. And his death wasn't wasted either. Stephen became the first martyr of the Christian faith, and following his death, the church scattered in fear of persecution. Yet the church continued to preach as they scattered, allowing the Gospel to spread throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth—eventually making its way to you and to me.

As I think about these three testimonies of hope, I notice that God's response and actions were different. For Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, God provided supernatural protection. For Stephen, God received his spirit into heaven. For Kat, we continue to wait and see how God will move in the lives of her family members. But what was constant through each of these stories was the presence of God.

This should be a familiar idea for our high school youth. Last weekend I got to be with them on their retreat, and the theme for our time together was "steadfast." We learned that God is "firmly fixed in place." Even when he feels distant or when the world around us is crumbling, even when we have doubts and fears—He remains. His presence continues to be with us.

I'm also reminded of what Phil Byers said in his testimony last week about having two kinds of hope—a “want” hope and a “trust” hope. When we find ourselves before a fiery furnace—whatever that might look like in your life—what does it look like to put our hope in God? Do we have a “want” hope or a “trust” hope? Do we put our hope in what we want God to do for us—the outcome we want to see—or do we put our hope in who He is? Or to put it another way, do we hope for God’s intervention or for God’s presence?

In all our hoping, I think we can sometimes put God in a box. We have expectations for what He will do or how He can move in our lives based on the outcome we want to see. Sometimes God provides exactly what we ask for, and sometimes He doesn't. But who He is—His character and His presence—remains the same. We put our hope in a God who provides, trusting that He knows exactly what we need. We put our hope in a God who heals, surrendering our expectations for what that healing looks like. And we put our hope in a God who is powerful, knowing that even though we will have trouble, He has overcome the world.

So as the worship team comes up to lead us, I want to invite you into a time of reflection and response. **What is your fiery furnace?** Maybe there's an area in your life where you feel like you're the only one standing up for your faith. Or maybe there's a situation that feels hopeless, where things have been getting worse. As you stand before this furnace, **how do you put your hope in the Lord**—with a “want” hope or a “trust” hope? Are there expectations that God wants you to surrender? Or is God asking you to be satisfied with just His presence—to know that God is with you, so it's OK.

As you reflect and respond, we have prayer partners stationed around the room ready to pray for you. If you are worshipping with us online, you can send a private message to our Facebook page, and Pastor Jen is available to pray for you.