

MESSAGE TRANSCRIPT //

AMONG LIONS | IN THE LINE OF FIRE

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Alright, what's up, everybody? Everybody doing good? Glad that you are here. And I want to say hello to everyone joining us across all of our other locations and anybody tuning in online.

Before we get going today, I just want to celebrate something that took place this last week. If you were here last Sunday, you might recall that we honored a very, very special group of people in our community, our school teachers, as they get ready to head back into their classrooms.

We had them stand and we prayed over them and then we just said, "If you need help clearing your list of school supplies for your classroom for the school year start, text this number in. We'll give you until midnight on Monday and we'll send you a \$75 electronic gift card on Tuesday.

It was really, really cool just to see what happened over the course of those couple of days—the snowball effect that began to transpire. A number of you saw what we were doing, and you took it upon yourself to go, "Well, I'm going to do this too." So many of you were reaching out to teachers and you were helping them. So the snowball effect of generosity was beginning to take place.

There are so many cool stories. Many of you who are serving in a school system said that teachers who don't go to our church were coming up to you saying, "Why would your church do this?" And it was creating an opportunity for really, really cool conversations.

Well, I want to share with you some numbers that came in. Monday evening at midnight we had 1,587 text messages that came in. Really cool. For a total a little over \$119,000 in gift cards that went out. Really cool numbers—570 schools were represented in all of that. Multiple states.

And I had so much fun. Normally I stay off the comment section on social media because I like to be encouraged. This was totally different. I was reading down through the comments. Most of the comments were tags. Many of you were tagging teachers, family, and friends that you know, "Hey, you should text in. You should get this."

And some people would comment, and they thought it was too good to be true. Somebody goes, "Well, I'm pretty sure this is just for members of Traders Point. And I was like, "I never said that." So I popped on and I said, "No, it's not."



And somebody was like, “Well, I live in Texas, and I think it’s just for residents of the state of Indiana.” And I was like, “I never said that.” So I was like, “No, it’s not.”

So it was just this cool snowball effect. I just want to thank you guys for your generosity. Your ongoing generosity throughout the year—you think \$119,000 is a big number, that because it is. That’s a big number. And yet, your ongoing generosity makes it possible for me to live out my dreams of being Oprah: You get a car! You get a car!

But in all seriousness, I love the fact.... There are pros and cons. I’ve served in really, really small churches and I’ve gotten to serve in bigger churches like ours. And I really don’t care about the size of our church. I love the impact we can make.

There are roughly 30,000 or so people who call Traders Point home. Not all of you show up on the same weekend. If you did, I’d probably have a heart attack. But about 30,000 of you call Traders Point home. You break that down, \$119,000, that breaks down to about four or five bucks per person. That’s doable.

So, our generosity, when we come together, enables us to make a big, big impact on our city and on our communities. So thank you, guys, for that. I really appreciate it.

Well, if you have a Bible, go ahead, and find Daniel, chapter 3. That’s where we are going to be today. And if you are just now joining us, we are three weeks in to an eight-week series called *Among Lions*. And what we are doing is we’re just going verse by verse studying the life of a guy by the name of Daniel, whose whole story is documented in the Old Testament book that covers his name.

And just by way of recap, what we saw in Daniel, chapter 1 is you’ve got this really corrupt king by the name of Jehoiakim who oversees the nation of Israel, God’s people. And then you’ve got this really corrupt king by the name of Nebuchadnezzar who oversees the empire of Babylon.

And God continued to warn Jehoiakim and the Israelites of their unfaithfulness. And finally He allowed Nebuchadnezzar, He permits him—that’s the word—to besiege Israel. It was all a part of God’s plan.

And besiege is different than obliterate. They didn’t go in and wipe them off the face of the earth. They went in and took the best of the best people, finances, culture and then absorbed it into the Babylonian Empire. That’s how they became stronger and more dominant.

So part of who got taken was this guy named Daniel and three of his friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego or depending on your church background, Rack, Shak, and Benny, alright?

So they bring them back to Babylon and they get a full ride scholarship to the University of Babylon where they get an undergrad degree in paganism and debauchery. They have

their names changed to reflect the names of false Babylonian gods, they are put under pressure to change their diet, and they are put under the chief eunuch, which likely meant having a surgery that was designed to remove anything distinctive about their gender.

And instead of Daniel and his friends sort of rising up and becoming very, very angry followers of God, and instead of them saying, “Well, I guess we can’t beat them so we might as well join them, just kind of assimilate,” they don’t do that. What we see over and over again throughout the book of Daniel up to this point and we’re going to continue to see it, is that they lived their lives—here’s the description—with wisdom and balanced judgment.

It was very rare then, and it’s very rare nowadays to see that. And it was so countercultural that the Babylonian authorities couldn’t help but notice. And they respected Daniel and his friends, even though they didn’t believe what they believed. And that earned them a seat at the table where they could have tremendous impact upon the culture in which they lived.

Daniel and his friends knew that they were in Babylon, but they weren’t of it. They knew what 1 John 4:4 says, “Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.” They had the Spirit of the living God living within them, so they were able to make a difference by being different.

Now what I love about our study in Daniel is that it’s not about God inviting some young man into full-time vocational ministry. There are some He invites to do that, but He’s using somebody in the marketplace, which the vast majority of us, that’s how we are going to be used by God, and that’s how we will make a big difference.

So what God did then, He still desires to do today. The Bible is not an old book that tells us what happened, it is a timeless book that tells us what always happens. So God is saying, “Hey, listen. I am looking for men and women who will be My modern-day Daniels today. They understand who they are, and they understand their identity in Christ, and they know what they believe and why they believe it. So they don’t need to rise up and become defiant and they also don’t need to blend in. But they can stand with courageous conviction and live out those convictions in a winsome, real, and authentic way.

And I said a moment ago that we have roughly 30,000 people who call Traders Point home. What if we had 30,000 Daniels living out our faith today? Imagine the kind of impact.

Now, because of the size of our church, we are often known around the city. We might be known for all kinds of things. As I said earlier, I don’t want to be known for our size, I want to be known for our impact.

So if we have 30,000 Daniels really living this out in real and authentic ways, imagine what the community might say about us. They may go, “Well, I would never go to that church, I am not a Christian, I don’t believe in God—everything they stand for I stand for the exact opposite.

“However, isn’t that the church that cares for vulnerable children and struggling moms? Isn’t that the church that speaks up for the marginalized and the oppressed? Isn’t that the church that gave away nearly \$120,000 so teachers could start the school year with fully supplied classrooms?

“Is that the church that prays over and honors men and women in law enforcement? Is that the church that every year at Christmas helps families in need to buy great Christmases for their kids and to do so with dignity and respect.

“Is that the church that really challenges men to step up and be the men that God created them to be? Not to shame them or to beat them up, but to encourage them to step into their purpose and identity as men of God?”

And by the way, guys, mark October 28, a Friday night, on your calendar. Don’t book anything else. That’s our men’s night. And you don’t want to miss it. Ladies, mark that calendar for the man in your life. Get him here. And just in case you thought we forgot about you, ladies, women’s night is going to be in February. It’s going to be amazing as well.

How about this. For those of you who invite your unchurched family and friends to come with you, I just want to promise you this. I want you to know that this is my aim every single week. When I am teaching, and somebody is here.... Maybe you’re here right now and you’re like, “I’ve had a really bad church experience. I’m sort of inching my way back into this thing. I don’t trust you. You’re going to have to earn it. I don’t know what I believe about God.” All that kind of thing.

If somebody leaves right after the service today, my aim is that they would go, “Wow. I don’t know that I believe what they believe, but I believe that they believe it. And I believe it is real. And I don’t know that I agree. There was all of this clapping and people raising their hands. It felt kind of weird.

“And there is this guy up front, and I don’t know that everything he was saying I agree with, but, man, that was really hopeful because right now I’m desperately looking for hope in this hopeless world. And that was helpful. That made sense. I understood it. It was logical. Don’t know if I agree with it all just yet. But that was really helpful, and I think I could apply that to my life tomorrow.”

Now here’s what I’ve learned after about 25 years of ministry. If somebody just keeps coming back because it was hopeful and helpful, eventually they run into Jesus.

Eventually they have that experience and that's what we're trying and hoping might happen.

And I've just got to tell you, man. I honestly, I can say this with integrity. I've never been more excited about the future and the direction of our church than I am right now. And that's saying a lot because we've been on a pretty wild ride over the last 15 years, for those of you who have been here that long.

The last two years have been really difficult. I couldn't see five feet in front of us. And now that the fog is beginning to lift.... Obviously the world is still really, really jacked up and there is still so much pain and yet, at the same time, this is what we were made for. This is what God designed the church to do.

And right now as we begin to venture into the future, I'm so excited about what we can accomplish in and through.... Because right now, more than ever the world is looking for answers and everywhere else has come up short.

So I just want to say to you as we come into chapter 3, just a little insight from my study, if I could go... if I could just allow the theological nerd to come out in me because he's in there, he's in there, just this theological nerd, here's what I would say.

Chapter 1 was written in Hebrew, because it starts in the land of Israel. Chapters 2 through 7, the original language—it is written in Aramaic, the language of Babylon, because all of the events took place there. But then in chapters 8 through 12, it reverts back to Hebrew because they are all of the prophecies about the end times.

So the question the book of Daniel presents to those of us reading it is, "Hey, man. If you follow God in the Hebrew, do you know how to do it in Aramaic?"

Let me say it a little bit better, "If you know how to follow God on your home field, that's great. Can you do it when you are on the away field?" And those of you who are athletes know there is infinitely more challenge to go as a visitor onto somebody else's home field and play. Every advantage is thrown against you. They turn the locker room temperature way, way down, They stop up the toilets, all that kind of stuff just so you don't play very well. They are booing you, all of that.

And I just want you to know if you're a Christ follower, we have the away jerseys on. You can be faithful to God. You know what it looks like, sounds like, talks like to be a Christian at church on Sunday (if this room isn't easy for you to be a Christian, I don't know what is going on).... You know how to do it in this room, but can you do it out in your community Monday through Saturday? That's the question that the book of Daniel is seeking for you to answer.

Now, in chapter 1 you recall Daniel is 14 or 15 years old. Chapter 2, a few years go by, he is 17 or 18 years old. And between chapters 2 and 3, 17 years go by. So Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are in their mid-to-late 30s at this point.

And where we left off last week was that King Nebuchadnezzar was having these crazy, psychedelic dreams. He has this dream about this giant statue made of different metals. So the head of gold which represented Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom, Babylon, and then you had the chest and the torso and the legs made of different metals.

The feet, if you recall, were made of clay symbolizing that this impressive statue was impressive to look at, but it was built on a very unstable foundation. And the rock, which represents Jesus, strikes the feet and the whole thing comes down, shatters to pieces and the rock becomes a mountain, saying that Jesus would come to usher in the new heaven and the new earth, right?

And then Nebuchadnezzar thanks Daniel for interpreting the dream. He gives him this big, giant promotion. All of that happens.

Now, what is the very next thing Nebuchadnezzar does? Check it out in verse 1 of chapter 3:

"King Nebuchadnezzar made a gold statue ninety feet tall and nine feet wide," so he is not the brightest bowl on the shelf, okay? "... and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon."

So you've got to step back and scratch your head on that one, "Really, bro? This is the first thing that you're going to do? You had a dream about a giant statue and Daniel said this represents your kingdom and it's all coming down. So you say, 'I know what I'll do, I'll build a giant statue. That's what I'll do.'"

Now, I want you to notice a couple of things. Notice the location. It says he built it in the plains of Dura, which is the exact location that the tower of Babel was built in Genesis, chapter 11. I don't think that is a coincidence.

The second thing that I want you to see is that in Nebuchadnezzar's dream the head was gold, that was it. But he built an entire gold statue. And I think that his line of reasoning is something along the lines of, "Well, I'm going to defy the dream. I think that really what the problem was wasn't the statue, the problem was that the whole statue wasn't mine. So I'm going to make the whole statue gold representing all of my kingdom. That will be much more stable."

And if you notice, the statue was not given an identity. And I think that there is a reason there. Possibly so that people could interpret it however they wanted. There is a term for that. It's alive and well today. It's called religious pluralism. Religious pluralism says it doesn't really matter what you believe as long as you sincerely believe it and you don't hurt others. No matter what you worship, you sincerely worship it.

And I think that Nebuchadnezzar is saying, "The statue, hey, privately worship whoever and whatever you want. That's totally fine. I don't care. But in public you must keep

those personal beliefs private and acknowledge the power of the empire.” Sound familiar?

There is a reason. There is no coincidence. Because as we’ve said, the city of Babylon was a real place, but it got destroyed about 3,000 years ago. But the spirit of Babylon lives on. The spirit of Babylon has been alive and well behind every nation of men throughout history.

So verse 2, it says Nebuchadnezzar:

“... sent messages to the high officers, officials, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and all the provincial officials to come to the dedication of the statue he had set up.”

So he invites everybody on his payroll, and this is a ribbon cutting. This is like a dedication service to his statue. And since Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were given promotions, they were on the payroll, they get invited.

Now, if you notice, or did you notice who isn’t there? Daniel doesn’t appear to be there. Now, at the end of chapter 2 he gets a promotion, and he is taken to the king’s court. So that is quite possibly where he is.

My theory is that Nebuchadnezzar didn’t want him there. Think about it. This was the voice of accountability in his life. Daniel was the one who interpreted the dream about this statue and now Nebuchadnezzar is building his statue. He doesn’t want the guy who just interpreted and prophesized saying the entire kingdom is coming down at the ribbon cutting. So he’s not there. And then in verse 4 it says:

“Then a herald shouted out, ‘People of all races and nations and languages, listen to the king’s command! When you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes, and other musical instruments, bow to the ground to worship King Nebuchadnezzar’s gold statue.’” Get this last sentence, *“Anyone who refuses to obey will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.”* Daniel 3:4-6 (NLT)

So this is not like a matter of preference. This isn’t like, “Hey, if you don’t feel like it.” This is like, “We don’t care what you think, you need to bow down and worship.” And it went from zero to 60 in 2.5 seconds. And he said, “Man, if you don’t do this you’re going to be immediately thrown into a blazing furnace.”

Now, what I want you to see... I need to do just a little bit of review for those of you who have been in our church for a while, you have heard me say this. And I actually covered all of this last fall when we went through the book of Romans together. So if this sounds familiar it’s because I’m re-circling on this because it is so important to understand, not only to understand the text, but to understand the times in which we live.

What we just read here is the demonic equivalent of a worship service. There was an image for them to worship—a gold statue. We worship an image too. What we just did a few moments ago was us worshipping an image. We worship Jesus who is the image of the invisible God and the exact representation of His nature.

And so they said, “Hey, you need to bow to the counterfeit king and if you don’t you will be thrown into a counterfeit hell, a fiery furnace.”

Now what I want you to understand is that God is a Creator, Satan is a counterfeiter. Satan does not have an original bone in his body. He doesn’t have an original idea. He drafts off of God’s ideas.

So what happens is that anything that we would consider sinful or destructive, really at its root is a good gift that God gave to us for our joy and our fulfillment that we turn into an ultimate thing. The book of Romans says we choose to worship creation over Creator God. We worship the gift as ultimate. The top three: money, sex, and power are not bad in and of themselves unless we make them ultimate. They become a counterfeit desire.

So Satan takes all of the good gifts that God has given us and counterfeits them, which is why this is so confusing. For some of us we’re like, “Well, I just feel like I’m following my natural impulses.” And it’s originally a good gift God gave, Satan has counterfeited it, twisted it just enough to be somewhat confusing.

So understand.... Here’s another way to look at it. If God gave us Fruit Loops, and we all know that He did, Satan gave us Fruit Spins. It’s the counterfeit. It’s not good. If God gave us Pringles, Satan gave us Prongles. If God gave us Mountain Dew and Dr. Pepper, Satan gave us Dr. Bob and Mountain Shout. That’s what that is. It’s the counterfeit, It’s never good, it’s whatever God creates Satan counterfeits. And he’s still doing it today.

Our culture, here in the modern world, likely you will never be called to bow down to a literal golden idol. But you will be called to bow to an ideology.

Ideologies are the idols of our day

So there are idols within our culture, and you can probably rattle them off. You’ve seen them in school. You’ve seen them in the marketplace. You’ve seen them around our communities where you will not bow down. Like if you will not affirm everything about this ideology then, “Hey, we’re not going to throw you into a literal furnace. But we will fire you, cancel you, boycott you, and remove your books from Amazon.”

Bow to the counterfeit or else. That has always been Satan’s strategy because it is what is behind the spirit of Babylon. And Nebuchadnezzar had just heard the interpretation of the dream. Oh, he knows. He knows that Jesus is the rock that is coming to strike the foundation and so he says, “You know what? I think I can outrun the process. I think I can keep this from happening.”

So in the following verses he says, “You need to bow.” So everyone there that day just eats pavement. They just completely bow down. Every race, nation, and language—it sounds really tolerant and inclusive, but it’s not. Because the text says very clearly that their motivation for worshiping was not out of a complete heart, or authenticity, or even love. It was out of fear. They bowed down that day because they were fearful for their lives. And in verse 8 it says:

“But some of the astrologers went to the king and informed on the Jews.”

Now remember the astrologers, these were the guys who could not interpret Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in chapter 2. So I would imagine that they are still a little bit offended by that.

And they are standing there—get this image in your mind. Everybody is bowing down except the three dudes in the back. And they are standing there, and they are not bowing down. They’ve got their arms crossed and they were standing off to the side kind of looking around and the astrologers see it and so they snitch on them.

And they pull out the fine print. They pull out the by-laws. And they read them to Nebuchadnezzar in verse 11:

“That decree also states that those who refuse to obey must be,” this is not a possibility Nebuchadnezzar, they must be, “thrown into a blazing furnace. But there are some Jews—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—whom you have put in charge of the province of Babylon. They pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They refuse to serve your gods and do not worship the gold statue you have set up.” Daniel 3:11-12 (NLT)

And Nebuchadnezzar, as we see both this week and next week in chapter 4, there is this tug of war going on in this guy’s heart. He’s got one or two gears, man. He’s either off or he is full on. And Nebuchadnezzar just freaks out and loses it once again. And he says in verse 14:

“Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you refuse to serve my gods or to worship the gold statue I have set up? 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 this next sentence is key:

“And then what god will be able to rescue you,” then what god will be able to save you, “from my power?” Daniel 3:15 (NLT)

And can I just say this to you? That is the question that is in front of every single one of us today. And it’s simply this: Is God able to rescue me? Whether you realize it or not, that question is on your lips and on your heart and in the back of your mind with whatever circumstance you are facing right now.

It could be a work thing, a marriage thing, a relationship thing, a health thing, a financial thing—we're all saying, "Is God able? I would be fully devoted to Him if I knew He was able to rescue me from this fiery trial that I'm experiencing."

Nebuchadnezzar throws out that question and right now you've got a showdown. They're going to play chicken. These guys are in the back. Everybody is bowing down in between. And Nebuchadnezzar points his finger in their chests and says, "You better bow right now." And what these three guys do next is a pivotal moment, not only in their lives and in their relationships with God, but in what was going to happen throughout the rest of the Babylonian Empire.

If we stop for a minute before we see their response just imagine how they could have responded. There are really only three ways. And there's often three ways that we, as Christ followers, can respond whenever our backs are against the wall as well. One of them is:

They could have become confrontational.

That is an option. And we see a lot of that nowadays. We sort of bulk up, "You threatening me, bro?"

"Hey, Nebuchadnezzar you don't tell us what to do, you think the fires of the furnace are hot wait 'til you feel the fires of hell, because that's where you're going, man."

They could have just risen up, "You're not going to tell us what to do. You are not our king. Forget you."

Here's another way they could have responded. We see a lot of this nowadays:

They could have become compliant.

"Hey, we're not going to isolate and get all confrontational, we're just going to assimilate. We're just going to kind of water things down, 'Oh, we misunderstood. Oh, you mean that statue? We didn't even see it.' And, 'Oh, we're so sorry. You said bow down? We thought you said stand up. My bad, my bad.'"

They could have just gone over.... And really, this is a reminder that there are three groups of people in this text. There are the people of God. It's very clear who they are. Then you've got the people of Babylon. It's very clear who they are. The next group is really confusing. The people of God who live as Babylonians. And that's really confusing.

And we see a lot of that nowadays as well. These are men and women who maybe grew up in church, were raised in church, "Love God. I'm a Christian. I gave my life to Him. But I really don't like what God says about money, sex, and power. Let me kind of change it up a little bit."

Or, “Man, I love God, but I really am not down with that whole generosity thing. I don’t trust that God can provide for me. So, God, this is mine, that’s Yours. I’m going to compartmentalize.”

“Man, I love Jesus. Don’t question my love for Jesus. But I am going to live with my girlfriend and sleep with her because that’s what I want to do.”

It’s the people of God who live Babylonian.

Or there is a third way. And this is the way of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego:

They were courageous in their convictions.

They were courageous—because that’s what it is going to require—courageous in their convictions. They didn’t become confrontational. And they didn’t comply. They demonstrated courage. And what they say next is quite possibly my favorite section in the book of Daniel. They said:

“O Nebuchadnezzar,” translation, bless your little heart. You know if somebody says bless your heart, that is not a compliment. They did not compliment you.

They go, “Oh, bless your little heart, Nebuchadnezzar,”

“we do not need to defend ourselves before you. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve,” say it with me out loud, *“is able to save us.”*

Is able to save. We need way more of that nowadays. In fact, you need to say that until you believe it. You say it until you feel it and believe it. Your back is against the wall, facing an impossible circumstance, “My God is able to save. My God is able to save.”

“He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty.” But check this out. Verse 18. This is a game changer.

“But even if he doesn’t,” what? Even if He doesn’t. Why wouldn’t He? Even if He doesn’t,

“we want to make it clear to you,” now this is where you need to imagine that it is Harrison Ford or Denzel Washington saying this because this would be just that moment, right? Where it’s, “Wow. That takes some serious courage.” Even if He doesn’t, we want to make it so clear to you, Mr. President. We don’t dance, alright? That’s a throwback to the 90s.

“... Your Majesty, that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up.”

I love how pastor Chris Hodges says this. He says, “Convictions are all about the choices that we make before we’re challenged.”

You determine your convictions ahead of time, before you’re in the furnace, before you’re backed against the wall. It’s like, “These are my convictions and so this is what I

know before I'm challenged." Faith is our ability to act on those convictions when tested.

And right now this is a showdown. And as soon as they said that back to Nebuchadnezzar I would imagine silence fell over the crowd. Now, keep in mind these are relatively young men. You've got to ask yourself, "Where did they learn this? Where did they learn this courageous conviction?" I'm going to get to that here in just a minute.

But right in this moment, they could have easily responded another way. I've certainly responded this way when I've been faced with my own challenge, when my character is challenged, my beliefs are challenged, when I'm pressured into something, I've responded this way.

They could have thrown their hands up and been like, "God, are You serious? Are You kidding us right now? This is the way You're going to pay back our faithfulness to You? We were ripped away from our home as kids and we had to go to this training program, and we got out names changed, and all of these things have happened to us.

"And God we have been faithful to You throughout the years. And now this is how it's going to end? We're going to get thrown into a furnace. God, are You messing with me? I wish You would have just had me killed back in Israel all of those years ago if You were going to string me along."

And I'm just wondering if there is somebody listening to this today and that's right where you are right now. In your relationship with God you are like, "Things have fallen apart. I can't find that hope and that help that you are talking about."

And maybe somewhere along the line you either heard or you assumed that the deal that God was offering you was like, "Hey, if you believe in Me, if you love Me, if you worship Me, if you come to church, if you do some good stuff, then here's what I'll do for you."

It's kind of like you are sitting across the table from God and you're in negotiations. And you write something down on a napkin and you turn it over and you slide it to God and He's going to write something down and slide it back over to you. And so you always assumed that, "God, I'll give this to You if You come through for me."

And what God wants from us is.... Have you ever done bargaining prayers? You ever bargained with God? Does it ever work? It's finals week. You didn't study. You wake up that morning and you're like, "Please, Lord Jesus, would You just help me to pass this test? Miraculously give me the answers and God if You do, I will serve every single weekend in a nursing home for the rest of my life." You don't do anything like that. Once you got through that you forgot those bargaining prayers.

And here are Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and they are saying, “Hey, Nebuchadnezzar. We believe that God is able to save, but even if He doesn’t we’ll still serve Him.” And that is a game changer.

Some of you might be pushing back and arguing with me in your mind. It’s totally fine to do so. You might be saying, “Well, why would God ask that of me? Why would God ask me to stay faithful to Him if He’s not going to get me out of the furnace? Why does He just want me to want Him for Him?”

And I would just simply say: great question. Why do you want that in every relationship you have?

You ever had somebody text you or call you and you see his caller ID on your phone, and you don’t want to answer it? Come on, you can be honest. You’re like seeing it and going, “Oh gosh.” Chances are it’s because the only time he ever contacts you is when he wants something. And you know it. And it’s not that you don’t want to give it to him, but that’s what your relationship has boiled down to—the only time you hear from him is when he wants something from you? “Hey, how’s it going?” The relationship is eventually going to fall apart.

And it is not different between you and God. God doesn’t want robots. God doesn’t want religious people. God wants a relationship with real people. He’s happy to save. He’s happy to rescue. But He wants a relationship over that.

Now, here’s the thing. I don’t know if any of you are like me. I have a tendency to struggle. And I’m not talking about like one of those preacher illustrations, “I’ve struggled a long time ago, but I have overcome. So, do as I do.” I’m talking yesterday, okay?

I don’t know if any of you are like me where it’s like... I have a tendency to mix up my personal agenda with God’s promises. So when God doesn’t come through on my agenda, which sounds pretty good to me, it’s my agenda, then I’m like, “Well, God. Why did you break your promise?” And God is like, “Well, I never promised that.”

So Nebuchadnezzar sees all of this with these three guys, and he just goes ballistic. We are talking Jack Nicholson in *The Shining* kind of crazy. Like coming through the door with a knife saying, “Here’s Johnny.” He’s like crazy. He sets the furnace seven times hotter, it says. Look at this in verse 22:

“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.” Any of you gotten close to that campfire and you’re like, “Ow, man, that’s hot.” This was so hot it actually killed them.

“So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, securely tied, fell into the roaring flames.” Daniel 3:23 (NLT)

Of which we could assume lights out. Game over. They are gone. But look at what it says next:

"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. 'Look! ... I see four men, unbound, walking around in the fire unharmed! And the fourth looks like a god!'" Daniel 3:24-25 (NLT)

Now the text never tells us who this fourth guy is. It could be Jesus. There are some scholars who assume or think that this is the first appearance of Jesus in the Bible. We don't really know that. It could be an angel of God that He sent to meet with them in the furnace. Regardless, what it is is a physical demonstration of God's presence with them in the furnace. And then it says, going on:

"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,'" boy, you've changed your tune now, okay? "'come out! Come here!' So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stepped out of the fire." Daniel 3:26 (NLT)

I love that, man. Just imagine that. Their trench coats going out behind them, "Here we are." That would be so cool. Verse 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!"

And here we go again. Verse 28:

"Then Nebuchadnezzar said, 'Praise to the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego!'" Two gears. Two gears. All or nothing. *"He sent his angel to rescue his servants who trusted in him. They defied the king's command,"* which was him, *"and were willing to die rather than serve or worship any god except their own God."*

"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," it's like, "Okay, I think you are missing the point of it, Neb. Can we just work the crazy out of you?"

"... their houses will be turned into heaps of rubble. There is no other god who can rescue like this!" Well that's true. Verse 30:

"Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to even higher positions in the province of Babylon."

So we could say this guy is the epitome of unstable. And there is just this wrestling match for his heart. And we're going to see that next week in chapter 4.

In the remainder of our time let me just give you a few takeaways and then I'll dismiss you. Here's the first one:

The "furnace" is inevitable

The furnace—I'm speaking figuratively, not literally—the furnace is inevitable. You cannot live your life without having a furnace experience. Speaking as a self-professed furnace dodger, can I tell you this? It's futile. There are going to be plenty of experiences in our lives where we are going to feel that our backs are against the wall, and we feel the heat, and we will be in the line of fire.

And maybe the furnace experience for you is your ongoing battle with depression or anxiety. Maybe the furnace for you is a marriage that you really, really are doing everything you can to make it work, but it is still falling apart. Maybe the furnace for you is that you've just lost somebody you really, really loved and you are just drowning in grief.

Maybe the furnace for you is this ongoing health problem, this chronic pain. And no matter how many times you go to the chiropractor, no matter how many things you throw at it, it just continues to be there. You've laid awake at night asking God to take it away from you. And it doesn't seem that He is listening.

The furnace is when you are falsely accused or criticized when you have every intention of doing the right thing.

Whatever your furnace is, it never says, "Are you a good person? Are you trying to live for God? Are you a Christ follower? Oh, you are. Okay, you get a pass." The furnace doesn't care. The furnace doesn't care. And the furnace is coming for everyone regardless of who you are, what you worship, and what you believe.

Now, let me just make a couple of caveats about the furnace. First of all, and I want to be really clear about this. God never uses the furnace to punish you for your sins. Let me say that again, because you heard something different in a different church or growing up or you misheard something. God never uses the furnace to punish you for your sins. Your sins were punished once and for all through Jesus on a cross.

Now, that doesn't mean that there aren't consequences that you are now dealing with that may feel like a furnace. But God is not punishing you like, "Well, I'm going to throw you into the furnace so you can pay for your sins." That's not what that is.

The second thing is that there is a difference between the everyday, normal circumstances of life living in a broken world that is dominated by the spirit of Babylon and our own foolish decisions and disobedience.

So I can't leave today and go 75 miles an hour in a 35 mile an hour zone, get pulled over, thrown into jail and say, "Well, I guess it's just a furnace." No that's plain disobedience, alright? So there is a difference.

And I just want you to know that the furnace is inevitable. Here's the second thing:

The "furnace" reveals who I am, and refines who I'm becoming

The furnace is a revealer. The furnace reveals who you really are and it refines who you are becoming. The furnace is what will tell you what you really believe. The furnace will tell you what you're really made of, what your character really is.

You know, I've shared this with our church family before. But the first six weeks of the pandemic, I was operating on adrenaline, and I honestly thought, "We're going to do this." And I am naturally a very optimistic person, so I was like, "We're going to come through this." And, "Here are the opportunities." And, "We're going to go and it's going to be great," and rallying people.

And at the beginning of the sixth week I ran out of gas and just collapsed: physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. I just didn't want to do it anymore. And God spoke through my wife, which He often does. And I remember very clearly one day, her saying, "Hey, Aaron. You need to slow down; you need to stop. God's forcing you to sit in this and it's not going to be over tomorrow. And He's trying to show you some things about you."

And He did. God brought some things out to the surface of my heart. It's easy to follow Him, do all of the right things, when things are going great. When things aren't going great, what is in there? And He brought all of those impurities to the surface. I didn't like what I saw. It was like, "God, would You deal with that? Would You refine me?" And He will.

So if we get out of the furnace too quickly, we're actually missing out on a real gift where God is saying, "Hey, what you usually say you put your trust in—this is actually showing you what you really put your trust in." And it's an opportunity to be refined.

You know, fire can be really, really damaging. But steel workers know that fire can actually be refining. And actually, when the fire cools, you come out of it looking stronger.

Can I share this with you today? I believe that somebody needs to hear this today. I want you to understand this principle: If you always interpret the furnace that you are going through as God's punishment or His passivity, you will miss out on God's presence because God is asking you to invite Him in.

What if we change our prayers from, "God, get me out," to, "God would You please join me in"?

When you're in the "furnace", you're never alone

When you are in the furnace, you are never alone. You are never alone. It may feel like you are. But you are not.

I was thinking this last week of all of the ways that God could have saved.... Think about this. This is such a great story. I mean, it's amazing. Just think of all of the creative ways God could have saved Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

He could have blinded the Babylonians with a really bright white strobe light, you know: flash, bang, boom. And Nebuchadnezzar stumbling around like he's doesn't see anything. Meanwhile, Jesus, dressed in camo comes in through the back of the furnace, "Hey, guys. This way." He could have done that.

Gabriel and all of his Navy SEAL angels could have ziplined in and got them out in Black Hawk helicopters. They could have done that. Or here's... to me it's like a no-brainer. God could have just extinguished the flames of the furnace. You know they are trying to get it lit, and they can't get it lit. The matches are wet. But He didn't do that. Instead what did God choose to do? God chose to save by being with them.

It reminds me of one of the very first names that we get for Jesus in the New Testament, God is Immanuel. He is with us. This is what sets apart Christianity from every other world religion or belief. And I know that it's popular to say, "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you sincerely believe it."

And according to the analogy, if truth is a big elephant and we're all blinded, all the world religions have a piece of the elephant. Somebody is grabbing ahold of the trunk. Somebody is grabbing onto the tail. And they are just grabbing different things—same elephant. We just sincerely follow our path, that's all leading to the same place.

And I just want to very lovingly disagree with that and say, "There is no other belief, there is not other religion that teaches that their god or entity suffers. That their god or entity steps into the furnace with us." Jesus took that on our behalf so that we could be reconciled to God. He is able to save. There is no other god that saves like this.

So let me bring you back to this question. Where did Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego learn to be this courageous in their convictions? And I want to say it's because they had had years and years and years of training. Now, I'm not talking about the Babylonian training school. I'm talking about discipleship to their God. It is so clear. Because in the moments when you're faced with the furnace, whether you rise up or whether you comply shows how you've been training.

The book of James says, "You want to grow in spiritual maturity, which is what is required to be courageous in your convictions, then you have to read God's word and then obey it. Read God's Word and then do something with it. Apply it." So this is, "Okay,

I'm going to read God's Word every day." And then, "God, what is it that You want me to apply from what I've just read?" And then look for an opportunity to apply it that day.

Now, you do that over and over and over and over again—that's like practice for your soul. And so when you find yourself in a situation where your back is up against the furnace, you just revert back to your training. And you know how to be courageous in your convictions.

So let me illustrate it like this. I've got a golf club up here with me. And this is a six iron. I'm not a golfer. I played when I was younger, but I haven't played in quite a while. So all of you golfers out there, please do not judge my swing, alright? And I won't judge your soul. How about that?

A little pastor humor.

So, from what I've been told there are two parts to the swing, alright? So you've got the back swing and the back swing is where the power comes from. But then you get it right down here and then you've got the follow through.

And so, from what I've been told, when you step up to the tee box you can't just be all back swing otherwise the ball is not going to go anywhere. But if you step up and you're just all follow through then there is no power behind that. The ball is not going to go down the fairway.

The same thing is true when we are following God. The same thing is true in our Christian lives. Some of us are all back swing Christians," meaning we read books, we watch podcasts, we're worship service junkies. Man if Mad City comes to Indy you are front and center, alright?

A lot of theology, back swing Christians, but there is no follow through. You're not applying any of it to your life. You are not any more loving. You are not any more gracious. You're not serving anywhere. You're not trusting God with your finances. There is no follow through.

Some of you, though, you are all follow through Christians. Not all that into back swing. You're not spending much time in God's Word because you are all about action. And you are all about, "Well, I know what you believe, but we need to love people. And I'm really involved in politics and social issues and all of that stuff really, really matters. You're all head and I'm heart and hands. I'm a follow through Christian." But there is no power behind it. The ball is not going anywhere.

What we need is we need Christians who have a back swing, "I love God and I love His Word, and I'm going to follow through and I'm going to apply what I know."

And here's the definition of spiritual maturity:

Spiritual maturity is directly connected to the amount of time between hearing the Word of God and doing it.

And when you get up and you begin to do that over and over again, you begin to practice, practice, practice, what ends up happening is you grow in spiritual maturity, which is what makes it possible for you to be courageous in your convictions when you are in the line of fire.

Father, we come to You today and just in the quietness of these few moments before we go on throughout our day and as we get ready for another week, I pray that Your Holy Spirit would meet us right where we are sitting.

Maybe there are some here today who realize, "You know what? I have been a back swing Christian for years, and years, and years. But there is not enough follow through."

Or maybe you're like, "Man, I'm more of a follow through Christian. I'm all about the action. I'm all about outside the walls of the church." There is not a lot of power in that because there is not a lot of back swing, not a lot of time with You, God.

And, God, I pray that You would help us to bring those two things together, to read Your Word and to do Your Word and to practice that over and over and over again so that we come to know and believe that You are a God who saves.

Father, I pray that You would help us to apply the courage of our convictions to make a difference in this really, really hurting world that is looking for hope and looking for help that only You can provide. We ask this in Jesus' name. And everybody says: Amen.