



Faith In The Fire

Daniel 3:19-30

Speaker: Matt Gulley

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So, as I mentioned before, we have a special guest speaker today, Matt Gulley. I want to make sure I get this right. He's the Executive Director of the Diaspora Pathways, which provides leadership development, spiritual formation, and mentoring for Afghan missionaries and trauma care.

So I'm going to call him up, pray over him, so we can receive his word. Of course, he's taller than I am. It's okay. I'm from Mexico. I'm pretty tall from Mexico. Here we go.

Father in heaven, thank you for Matt, Lord. Thank you for just the blessings that you've poured upon him and his family and his missionaries' family as well, Lord, and here at Bellevue Pres, Lord. May your words be his words, Lord. May we learn from what you are doing in the world, Lord. Not only just in our lives here and on the East Side and in the US., but around the world, Lord. We thank you for this, your beautiful gospel that reaches all people. In your glorious name, together we all said, Amen.

Amen. Thank you. All right. Thank you.

Want to welcome those of you joining us online. And yeah, everyone here and really thank you for welcoming me as I'm a guest here and have really enjoyed being here this weekend with BelPres.

I have been in Greece for about 17 years, serving refugees with my family. God has put a special place on our heart for the Afghan people during that time. And we got to know BelPres from teams that have been sent over to work with refugees with us on the island of Lesbos and Samos, serving refugees that are coming across from Turkey. And I don't know if you've heard about that. I hope you have. But I've enjoyed to be here this weekend and get to see a little bit of what home is like for you. And so thank you for the warm welcome these days.

So the heart of our work is about strengthening the church among Afghans. I don't know what all you know about Afghans, but I know that the churches have been involved in helping Afghan refugees settle and get acclimated to life here, which can be quite a challenge and lengthy process. And so it's beautiful that you walk alongside these families. Thank you for doing that.

But a church among Afghans, is that such a thing? Afghanistan is a nation of roughly 50 million people, and maybe 6 to 10 million in the diaspora, Afghans living outside of Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, there are no recognized churches, not one. It's an entirely Muslim nation. There is an underground church, but it is illegal and punishable by imprisonment or death for Afghans to come to faith in Christ and to become Christians in Afghanistan.

And so, you can imagine it's a very rough, very difficult mission place that God has been working in for years, for decades. But outside, because of the refugee movement of people, we've seen, just in the last 10 years, for the first time ever, at least in nine centuries, a church that's growing up among Afghan people.

And so, in the last decade, Greece experienced quite a vibrant ministry with different churches and ministries that saw, in total, hundreds, maybe even thousands of Afghans come to faith in Christ. And so, we praise God for that, but we see that many of them have moved on into Europe, and they get scattered, and they get caught up in learning what it is to live in Germany and in Sweden and in Holland, and figuring out 40-hour and 50-hour work weeks, and now they have kids—well, they had kids—but their kids are in school, and everyone's learning language and learning to do life in a new place.

And many times, the faith starts to dissipate. And part of that is because the community is broken up, and they are having to do life alone. And you may have two Afghan believers in this town, and one over here, and three over here, and some cities have some concentrations, but those are some of the challenges.

But just in the last year, there has been a new drive and a new push from several Afghan Christian leaders who have only become Christians in the last 10 years, that are now going into different parts of Europe and starting to gather the scattered Afghan believers. And they're starting fellowships in different locations so that they can have a context of community and discipleship and growth and a sharing of life together.

And so just want to give you a little background of where our heart is and where we're coming from. So why don't we pray together?

Father, we thank you for your presence this morning. We ask that you open our hearts and our minds to what you want to teach us. Open our eyes to seeing you in every part of our lives and lead us through this time this morning. We pray in Christ's name, amen.

So you all have been starting through the Book of Daniel for the summertime. And we're in Daniel 3 today. So maybe a familiar story—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, the

fiery furnace. If you learned that as a cartoon, good, maybe we can make it a little more real today. Used to, that was flannel graphs. Is anyone in here familiar with flannel graphs? Okay, all right. Maybe you taught with those as well.

So there's a few things to see before we get to our text. The chapter opens with King Nebuchadnezzar making this 90-foot-tall, nine-foot-wide golden image and says, everyone needs to bow down to it. When the music plays, everyone falls and bows down. And that worked except for our three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who stayed standing.

There were some men that saw this, and they were the same men that were in chapter two that you talked about last week, the astrologers. The same ones that the king said, don't just interpret my dream, but tell me what I dreamed. And they said, that's impossible. And he said, okay, kill them all. And Daniel said, no, I got this. I'll tell you what's happening. And he saved their lives, but he humiliated them in the process.

And so maybe that was their reason for ratting these three Jews, these three exiles, these three maybe refugees out to the king and saying, they don't care about what you said. They don't care about your commands. They don't worship your gods.

And the king brings them in, and long story short says, bow down or burn. And so, they said, we're not going to bow down. The king said in verse 15, if you do not worship this image, you will be thrown into the blazing furnace. And then he said, then what God will be able to rescue you from my hand?

So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego answered that the God we serve is able to deliver us. But even if he doesn't, we want you to know that we will not serve your gods or worship the image you have set up.

And so that's where we start, that's where we pick up our text in verse 19. So let's read that through to verse 30.

Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual, and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in the army to tie them up and throw them in the blazing furnace.

So these men wearing the robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and these three men firmly tied fell into the blazing furnace.

Then King Nebuchadnezzar leapt to his feet in amazement and asked his advisors, weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire? They said, certainly, your majesty. He said, look, I see four men walking around the fire, unbound, unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.

Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted—just picture this, okay, to step away from the cartoon and the flannel graph—the king just watched some of the strongest soldiers in his army die by the flames that were coming out. Now he's looking in the fire.

There's four beings, four men walking. They're not—I don't know what else you would expect—they're not sitting, they're not dancing, they're walking in the fire. But there's four, there's not just three. And so he calls them out and he says, "Come out, come here." And so they come out and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisors crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was the hair of their heads singed. Their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.

So Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who sent his angel and rescued his servants. They trusted 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. Therefore, I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble." Don't mess with the king. "For no other god can save in this way." Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

What a powerful story of three men who demonstrate an unshakable faith that God is able and a resolute trust in him, whether he delivers them from the fire or not. And so we're going to see five lessons that we can learn from their faith in the fire.

Just thinking about what it is that God does over and over in scripture in demonstrating his power and his ability to rescue and to deliver his people in the most impossible circumstances. Think about the prophet Elijah when he confronted King Ahab and the prophets of Baal. Do you remember this story? And they go down to see, okay, who has the true God? Who's going to have God call down fire and consume their sacrifice?

And so the prophets of Baal make their sacrifice. They prepare it and they start praying and crying and cutting themselves all day long—and no fire. And Elijah goes and he prepares his sacrifice and God brings down fire and consumes the sacrifice, the altar and the water that he set up, proving that he is able.

Think about the bronze snake in Numbers 21. The people of Israel are with Moses and they start complaining against Moses and against God. And God sends venomous snakes to bite them, to kill them. And they repent. Don't try that with your kids, but you know—they repent and they say, "Moses, tell God to relent. Help us, save us, take the snakes away." And so God doesn't take the snakes away, and he doesn't give them a treatment plan, and he doesn't give them medicine, and he doesn't build them a hospital. He says, "Moses, go make a snake on a pole out of bronze and set it up and tell people to go look at the bronze snake and they will be healed." In doing so, he's demonstrating that he is able to save those who believe.

Think about the cross. It's the same message. The Son of God is arrested, is tortured, is crucified. And the same message is that God rescues Jesus, saves him, resurrects him from the dead, and seats him above all powers. And now, through his resurrection, he's showing that all we have to do is look to him and believe. And God is able to save us from sin and death and eternal hell.

And so, the same message was here to King Nebuchadnezzar from Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that the God we serve is able to save us. So we believe we are seeing this now in what God is doing among the Afghan people.

Afghan people that are following Jesus face some of the most impossible situations. The fires they are thrown into—Afghan Christians—these are brothers and sisters of ours, they're being cut off from family and community. They're losing property. I just heard a story last week—a man who became public with his faith in the US—his family called him from Afghanistan and said, "You lost everything when you abandoned your religion." And he lost all his inheritance, all his property in Afghanistan.

Physical abuse, forced divorces, children that are taken away, torture, imprisonment—the list is a terrible and a long list. How important is it to have these stories and be inspired by their faith to confidently believe that God is able, that he is above all powers and above any evil that can come against us?

So yes, God is able to deliver us. But even if he doesn't, we will remain faithful. Even if we burn in the fire—that was the message of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—"Even if we burn in the fire, we will still trust him." Our circumstances do not determine our faith.

And so there are times when God does not deliver us from the fire. There are times when we feel the pain, we feel the burn. In fact, there is a consistent message in scripture that suffering is part of our calling. In Philippians, Paul says, "It is granted on behalf of you not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for him." Jesus said, "Take up your cross and follow me." The cross—a torturous instrument of death—is what we've been called to pick up as we follow in the path of Jesus to the cross, to our death.

So the question becomes: do I trust him even if he doesn't rescue me from this fire? Do I trust him even if he doesn't rescue me from this terrible situation that I'm in?

And so while we know that Afghans face a lot of risk in the country for their faith, they also face a lot of risk outside the country and in refugee populations for their faith. We had some of our team went to visit a family. They went from Athens up to the Thessaloniki area in northern Greece and visited a young Afghan family living in a housing container who had just come to faith.

And so they were excited about what was happening in their lives, what they were learning about Jesus, what they were experiencing in their own lives, in their marriage, in their family—and they couldn't stop talking about it. They couldn't be quiet about it. And

so they started sharing, and they were not received very well. So the Afghans in the camps said that they had rejected their people. They were no longer one of them. They started cursing them. They were physically abusing and beating them. They were preventing them from getting food from the food line to feed themselves and their children.

And so they were rejected for their faith in the camp. And then they go to the Greek government to get their asylum process going. And they do their interview and tell them about their journey to Greece, why they came, why they're seeking asylum. They tell them about their situation in the camp. And the officials say, we don't believe you, we don't believe you're Christians.

And so this young Afghan family, and young in the faith, are facing the fire of being rejected by their people, being rejected by this government they're seeking safety from. And they're in the midst of this difficult, difficult situation. And so the question is, can I turn my page? The question is, without having these answers in the moment of would God deliver them and how would he do it and when would he do it, the question is what would happen with their faith?

Would it be shaken? Would they keep their faith in Jesus even in the midst of these trials and this rejection? Or would they keep their faith in the one who walks through the fire with his people?

So, God is able to deliver, we trust him even if the fire burns, and know that God is in the fire with his people. That's our third point.

So, the King had a lot to look at, to figure out, right? Four people walking around, fourth person looks like a son of the gods, whatever that means. So, Nebuchadnezzar in verse 28 says that it was an angel in the fire with them. Many people will look at this and say, maybe it was a Christophany—an appearance of Christ before he came in the flesh centuries later. But either way, what we see is a powerful demonstration that God did not abandon his people to the fire. He was there with them. He was present. And it was a promise fulfilled that he made to Isaiah in Isaiah 43, when he says, "When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned. The flames will not set you ablaze." This was made to Isaiah for a people who were exiles, like refugees.

So God is in the fire with his people. I wonder what that means for you. I wonder what fires you have gone through or you go through in life. These are things you probably don't need to take a lot of time to think about. Maybe it was something in your marriage or in your family, in your home. Maybe it was a bankruptcy or a betrayal of some kind. Maybe it was an unbelievably difficult health diagnosis. You know what your fires are.

The power of the story is saying that you're not alone in those places. God is in those places with you. And what is interesting to also see is our fourth point—that it's not just God with me in the fire, it's God with us in the fire. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego

were together. We were not meant to face the fires of life alone. God designed us to be together. He designed us to be the family of God.

Jesus himself did not go it alone. Think about his relationship structures. So think about the 12 disciples he had that he did life with for three years. And of that 12, he had three. And of the three, think about what happened when he was in his moment of greatest need. Who did he take into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray with him, to sit and watch and be with him? Peter, James, and John. Who are your three? Who are you doing life with? Who are you journeying with? Who's there to hear you, to listen to you, to love you, to pray with you, to not judge you, to accept you? Who are you there for in that way?

We were not meant to face the fires of life alone. And it takes intentionality, it takes sacrifice, it takes a lot of effort. But I believe it's what God calls us to; it's what he gifts us with in the church and in the body. And so this is one of the greatest challenges we see in the Afghan church—isolation. I've already talked about how they're scattered. And so being isolated and not having the community, not having as much access of being together.

And so that's why there's a new drive that I want you to pray for, of more fellowships that are providing opportunities for brothers and sisters in Christ that are Afghan to be together, to do life together with one another. They're integrating in local churches, but they need that community and their first, their heart language. And so I invite you to pray into that.

Several years ago, there was a brother in Athens that came to faith and he was married and had two kids. And they started getting involved in the church and the ministry. And all of a sudden, the wife disappeared. She took the kids and left. She was gone for months. And no word, no communication. And it was in that moment that the church was there with this brother. We'll call him Najib.

And months later, he found out they were in Thessaloniki, which is in northern Greece. So he goes to northern Greece to find them, and then finds out they're back in Athens. So he comes back to Athens to find them. And they reunite and she's around for a little while. And then she comes and says, I can't take it anymore. She couldn't handle the pressure of the community for their choice to live as followers of Christ. And so she left, and she left him alone with two kids to raise as a refugee in Greece. And the church came around him and became his family.

And this man is now starting fellowships in a European country. They've started three fellowships in the last year in different provinces. And they have gathered an Afghan leadership team that are going for this purpose of gathering believers. I'd love you to be in prayer about that as well.

Last point: don't be surprised. Expect the fires. First Peter 4:12 tells us, "Don't be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, but rejoice inasmuch as you

participate in the sufferings of Christ so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed." Persecutions come, sufferings come. This is life. Jesus said, "If they hated me, they'll hate you." Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart, I have overcome the world."

And so my encouragement is that we honor God in the midst of our sufferings, in the midst of the fire we hold firm to our faith for the hope of seeing his glory revealed, for the hope of seeing his name praised through our sufferings.

And so wrapping up, the question is not just, will I face the fire—because we all will. The real question is, when the fire comes, will I walk through it with him? Will I trust him even if he doesn't deliver me as I expect or as I hope?

Whatever trials you're facing today, God is with you in them. Whatever trials our Afghan brothers and sisters face, God is with them too. And one day, God will wipe away every tear, and there will be no more death, no more mourning or crying or pain. Until then, may our faith in the fire result in praise and glory to God.

So there's three action steps in wrapping up.

Number one, pray for the Afghan church like you pray for your children. If you don't have children, just pretend. So Masood is a dear brother that many of you maybe have met or known or have heard stories about. And this was his plea—that we would pray for the Afghan church like we pray for our children when they're in need, when they're hurt, to pray for them passionately.

The second action step, remember their fire and let it fuel our faith. Afghan believers are facing rejection, persecution, even death for following Jesus. Let their faith and their fire inspire ours.

And so the third thing is to equip ourselves—to be ready, to be in the Word, to be in prayer, to be following Jesus with our lives, to not be surprised but to be ready when the fires come so that we can stand strong in faith. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for your goodness, Lord. We thank you for your presence. We thank you for your power to save—you are mighty to save. We thank you for what you are doing and raising up the family of God among Afghan people, enlarging our family, Lord. Thank you for the gift it is to call you Father and to call these dear brothers and sisters, brothers and sisters.

Awaken our hearts, awaken our faith to see you in every part of our lives—whether it's the mountains or the valleys, the fire or times of peace. May your name be praised. In Jesus' name, amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- What helped Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stay faithful, even when they didn't know if God would rescue them? How does their faith challenge or inspire you?
- What is a "fire" you have faced, or are facing now, and how have you seen God's presence in it? If you are still in it, what helps you keep trusting Him?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.