

RADICAL FAITH
Daniel 3:8-18; 1 Peter 4:12-14

(Read 1 Peter 4:12-14)

Intro: I really appreciate the resources provided by the YouVersion Bible app. I use it for my Bible reading. As a matter of fact, I completed The Book of Common Prayer three year through-the-Bible-reading-plan this past March and presently I'm in a similar two year plan. I can read it or I can listen to it, which is helpful if I'm driving or mowing, or out for a walk. The app also has very good devotionals. It was there that I came across the devotional LEARNING FROM THE PERSECUTED CHURCH a month or so ago, and it caught my attention, since we have an annual emphasis on the persecuted church every November, AND, it was right about the time Afghanistan was falling to the Taliban.

The devotional is just five days long, with relatively brief scripture references and content, but is very thought provoking nevertheless. It was then I determined to take those brief devotionals and build them into a sermon series that would be fitting, not only for such a time as this, but appropriate for the last several weeks of ABC's October Mission's Month and the first couple weeks of November's emphasis on the persecuted church.

So, here we go. Let me begin with the devotional as an intro to my talk (I'll do this every week):

Many people love the Old Testament story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the three young Hebrew men in exile in Babylon who were thrown into a fiery furnace for their refusal to bow down and worship an idol. They violated King Nebuchadnezzar's order rather than violate their commitment to worship the one true God. Rather than acquiesce to the king's command, the young men replied with what had to be one of the greatest statements of radical faith ever uttered. They said:

"O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."
Daniel 3:16-18 (ESV)

It takes great faith to believe that God is able to deliver us from our difficulties. It is, radical faith, however, to say that even if God does not do that, it's okay. Believing God for miracles is a great thing, but believing God in tribulation or persecution, when no miracle comes, is faith at a profound level. To have a persevering faith like this may not bring deliverance from our trials, but it will make us "perfect and complete, lacking nothing." (James 1)

This type of radical faith is not formed through a life of ease, where everything goes as we want it to. It is formed in the crucible of persecution. There are many in the Persecuted Church who may not have an expansive theological knowledge, but they have lived through difficulties that have given their faith the opportunity to become deep and powerful. A faith that is not dependent on circumstances, enabling us to "walk by faith, not by sight." Persecution gives us the opportunities to develop radical faith.

Last Saturday, as you know, Kathy and I joined my brother Kent, his wife Darlene, another brother, Phil, and my oldest nephew and niece, Kurt and Lorie, for what we planned to be a marathon – 26.2 miles. Over the past year, Kathy and I had every intention to lose weight and get in shape to be able to walk the course for two 13.1 mile loops along a rugged trail (by the way, this pic does not at all represent the ruggedness of most of the trail, which follows the shore of the Green Lane Reservoir, which is not far from my home area northeast of Philadelphia, PA. Well, I'm not speaking for Kathy, but I didn't lose weight and our conditioning fell far short of what we needed. My brother Kent, nephew Kurt, and niece Lorie, on the other hand, are in the peak of conditioning and they were ready. We set out at 8 AM sharp, knowing we would only do 13.1 miles, but that was still daunting. We all did well. With the exception of Darlene, who works 12 hour overnight shifts as a nurse, and needed sleep, so she walked a mere 7 miles; we all survived one 13.1 mile loop. My older brother Phil's bad knee was acting up and his feet ached. My right leg was stiffening and a second loop was out of the question. Kathy could have gone further, but she chose to stay with her broken down husband. Lorie also chose to stop. But not Kent and Kurt. They left us in their dust and covered the second loop in less time than the first. They are conditioned by their careful and faithful preparation and when the time came, they were ready.

Similarly, it is often true that the persecuted church has well-formed faith muscles. Their radical faith takes careful and faithful preparation. To develop such faith, we need to know what it looks like and how it is

fostered. Building our faith through adversity is like Kent and Kurt's physical conditioning, it will help us be ready when the times of testing come.

We have examples of this in scripture. One is the account Sharon read about and I referenced from the devotional just a little bit ago. The other is Peter's encouragement to the increasingly persecuted church of the diaspora. I'll refer to both of them as I finish out this talk.

First of all . . .

Persecution of some kind will come for all of us

- Peter tells us we should not be surprised by fiery trial. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego dealt with crass jealousy, wicked maliciousness, and outright racism and they were ready to face it head-on. Being a Christ Follower is increasingly unpopular in our own society and downright dangerous in many other places around the world. But we are not in a popularity contest. We are called to be God's people.
- In Peter's words, let's not act as if it's something strange when we face adversity. We've been warned. Yes, religious freedom is guaranteed by our constitution, but what happens when those guarantees are ignored? Do we whine and complain or even acquiesce? No, we join in Christ's sufferings – with grace and strength. Peter even tells us to rejoice. Maybe we could even be like Paul and Silas, who, when locked up in the Philippian prison, were singing hymns. That's radical faith.
- Next, with Nebuchadnezzar's arrogant and furious words in mind, let's ask ourselves the question . . .

Who is the god who will deliver us?

- The answer is simple and it's dangerous and it requires radical faith – OUR GOD! Our God is the one who will deliver us. Do you believe that?
- Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego could feel the heat of the furnace that was stoked up and ready to make them into crispy critters. To avoid it, all they had to do was bow down to an idol that was set up expressly for the purpose of feeding the arrogance and ego of a megalomaniac with a very short memory. In Daniel 2 we have the account where Nebuchadnezzar had seen the power of God displayed through Daniel's God given ability to interpret his dream. Daniel was the only one who could. It was some 19 or 20 years before – but it was powerful enough to never forget. But somehow, with his memory cloud by self-importance, Nebuchadnezzar raged on. You see, the problem with people who cannot see past themselves is they become their own god and that was Nebuchadnezzar's problem for sure. And so he asks, *Who is the god who can rescue you from my power?*” Daniel 3:15c (The Message)
- Let me take a little, yet, timely aside here and just say, this kind of arrogance is still a danger for us. Commentator David Gusick writes, referring this fiery furnace text, *“In this, Nebuchadnezzar was just like many politicians who often seem willing to use religion to strengthen their grip on political power. Politicians are happy to blend together spiritual allegiance and national allegiance. An example of this was displayed in 1936 when Herr Baldur von Schirach, head of the youth program for Nazi Germany, said: “If we act as true Germans we act according to the laws of God. Whoever serves Adolf Hitler, the führer, serves Germany, and whoever serves Germany serves God.”* (End Quote) Let's not get played by politicians who will use us to get elected or get their way. Hitler is a safe example here this morning, but we have had much more recent examples of it.
- Now, back to our God who has a capital G! He is the God who will deliver us. And radical faith knows this.
- Moving on, I like how Peterson puts it in those final verses of our Daniel text. *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered King Nebuchadnezzar, “Your threat means nothing to us. If you throw us in the fire, the God we serve can rescue us from your roaring furnace and anything else you might cook up, O king. But even if he doesn't, it wouldn't make a bit of difference, O king. We still wouldn't serve your gods or worship the gold statue you set up.”* Daniel 3:16-18 (The Message) And this begs a question . . .

What's a threat anyway?

- I'm not minimizing persecution and danger. I know we have no concept of what suffering is when you compare a Christian baker being forced to make a cake for a same sex wedding to being a Christian burned alive in a car by an angry Hindu crowd; or being a Christian beheaded by Isis terrorists; or a Chinese pastor sentenced to hard labor the crime of carrying out the Great Commission. We have no idea. But the freedoms

we have to worship as we please ARE being eroded – and what will we do if that erosion grows into a full blow threat? What will we do if we are told to cease and desist?

- Radical faith says we do what Peter and John said in when they were told to stop teaching about Jesus, *“Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”* Acts 4:19-20 and the next day again, *“We must obey God rather than men. Acts 5:29. Or Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, . . . our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”* Daniel 3:17-18. Radical faith stands up to a threat and chooses . . .

To serve our God and him alone

- We can learn from the persecuted church to stand up for Jesus the way Peter encourages his readers, or like the three Hebrew who refused to bow to anyone or anything other than their God.
- Spurgeon, commenting on the radical faith of Shadrach, Meshach and Abdnego preached this to his congregation, *“If, standing before the heart-searching God at this time, you cannot say, ‘It is true,’ how should you act? If you cannot say that you take Christ’s cross, and are willing to follow him at all hazards, then hearken to me and learn the truth. Do not make a profession at all. Do not talk about baptism or the Lord’s Supper, nor of joining a church, nor of being a Christian; for if you do, you will lie against your own soul. If it be not true that you renounce the world’s idols, do not profess that it is so. It is unnecessary that a man should profess to be what he is not; it is a sin of supererogation, a superfluity of naughtiness. If you cannot be true to Christ, if your coward heart is recreant to your Lord, do not profess to be his disciple, I beseech you. He that is married to the world, or flinthearted, had better return to his house, for he is of no service in this war.”* Whew! I think he felt pretty strongly about it – don’t you?
- We should feel so strongly Church! Let’s stand with the persecuted church around the world – let’s be ready for service. Radical faith calls for it. Like them let’s live for Jesus and spread the message of his love to a hostile world. The God we serve will take care of the rest. Amen.