

Sermon Transcript
July 31, 2011

Living for God in a Messy World

“Trust God”
Daniel 3

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on July 31, 2011, at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. It is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286. An audio/download version of this sermon may also be found on the church web-site at www.wethefc.com.

INTRODUCTION

Let me remind you where we are this morning. We are working our way through the first half of the book of Daniel. Here is what we have discovered to this point. We have something in common with Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Just like these four young men, we find ourselves living in exile. Did you know that? You are a “sojourner” an “exile” an “alien” a “stranger.” That is what Peter calls you in 1 Peter 2:11, if you are a follower of Jesus. He says it this way, *“Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.”*

Clearly, that is what Daniel and his three buddies are. They are exiles. They grew up in the city of Jerusalem but now find themselves living in the city of Babylon. Their country was overtaken by the Babylonians and they were uprooted from their homeland and deposited into the heart of Babylon. They were among the elite of Judah and now they find themselves among the elite of Babylon. By the time we come to our passage this morning, Daniel 3, they have already distinguished themselves and they each occupy a position of power and authority. But they are still aliens and exiles living in a foreign land. They are citizens of Jerusalem living in the city of Babylon.

We have already discovered that Jerusalem and Babylon are not just two different cities with different customs. Rather, they are two different ways of life and they worship different deities. In Jerusalem, they worship the one true God, Yahweh, Jehovah, the one we have come to know as the Triune God. Of this God, we have already confessed this morning, “The LORD is the true God; He is the living God, the eternal King.” But not so, to the citizens of Babylon. With a certain pride and arrogance, they worshiped other gods and, as we will see this morning, sought to force these gods upon their captives, including Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Here is the reality for citizens of Jerusalem living in the city of Babylon. It is not easy to live for God as a citizen of Jerusalem while living in the city of Babylon. But, of course, you already know that. That is your life as a follower of Jesus living in this culture. It is not easy.

It wasn't easy for Daniel and his three friends. Here we are in just the third chapter of Daniel and we are about to witness a third crisis of faith that has come upon these young men because they are followers of God. There is almost a certain repetition to these challenges that come to these young men of faith. Ligon Duncan says that there is almost a certain monotony to the crisis of faith that comes to citizens of Jerusalem living in the city of Babylon. It is a way of life for children of the kingdom of God.

Duncan says you can take two lessons from this monotony and repetition of crises. The first lesson is this. “Satan’s onslaughts are not occasional activities. Satan doesn’t just

simply try us once or twice and then leave us alone. Satan's onslaughts are continual. The temptations he voices upon us are continual. Satan operates by this sort of continual activity of temptation and so we must watch and pray and persevere in watching and praying if we are going to resist." In other words, don't be surprised if each chapter of your life includes a challenge to your faith.

But here is the other side of the coin. Here is what we learn from watching these four young men in the midst of the challenge and crisis of faith. In each chapter, in each occasion, in each crisis of faith, God honors His people when His people are faithful to Him. Duncan says, "When God's people choose to follow Him no matter the consequences, blessing always occurs. Blessing may occur in different ways and different circumstances, surprising ways even, but God is always faithful. God uses trials to produce even more significant fruit in the lives of His people."

It is with this in mind we come to Daniel 3, to learn more about how to live as a citizen of Jerusalem while living in Babylon. In this chapter, it is true, we encounter a third crisis of faith. But in this chapter we also gain another testimony of God's faithfulness to His people when they trust God in the midst of the crisis. Here is what I know. Because the crisis of faith is part of the repetitious monotony of living as a citizen of Jerusalem in the city of Babylon, your faith is being tested and challenged this morning. I may not know what that specific challenge may be in your life. But I have no doubt you are facing the challenge of living for God in this messy world. You know what your crisis of faith is. You know exactly where you are being tested in your faith. My prayer for you is that you would gain encouragement this morning from Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. My prayer for you is that you would learn to trust God in the context of your challenge and to watch God demonstrate His faithfulness to you. See, citizens of Jerusalem trust God as they live in the city of Babylon. You can trust God. That is the testimony of Daniel 3.

A CRISIS OF FAITH

Let me introduce you to the crisis of faith we encounter in Daniel 3. Starting in verse 1 we read, "*King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its breadth six cubits. He set it up on the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent to gather the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Then the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces gathered for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. And they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. And the herald proclaimed aloud, "You are*

commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace.” Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

This is a rather dramatic scene unfolding out “*on the plain of Dura.*” Nebuchadnezzar builds a large golden image that stands about 90 feet into the air. That is about eight stories high. It is quite an impressive image of gold. We are not sure what this image was. Was it an image of Nebuchadnezzar or was it an image of a Babylonian god? No one knows for sure. But here is one thing I think we can conclude from this golden image that Nebuchadnezzar made out in the middle of that plain. It was an image that made a statement.

This isn’t the first time we encounter a large image in the book of Daniel. Do you remember Daniel 2? Do you remember the dream Nebuchadnezzar had and Daniel interpreted for him? The king had a dream of a large statue. This image had a head of gold, a chest of silver, a waist of bronze and legs of iron with feet of iron and clay. A rock came and crushed the statue and the rock became a mountain that filled the earth. In interpreting the dream, it was revealed to the king that he and the kingdom of Babylon were the head of gold. But after him would come another kingdom that would succeed Babylon. After that kingdom, another kingdom would come and then after that kingdom, a fourth kingdom would come. And during the reign of this fourth kingdom, God will establish His kingdom, and His kingdom will be eternal. It says, in Daniel 2:44, “*And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end and it shall stand forever.*” A few weeks ago we saw how Jesus was the rock and His kingdom is eternal.

What was God revealing to King Nebuchadnezzar through this dream? God was revealing to this powerful king of this vast empire that God is the sovereign king of the universe. When Daniel was given the interpretation of the dream, Daniel worshiped God by saying, “*Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding.*” The implication of all this is that God is the ultimate authority of this world; and God is the one who is to be worshiped and feared. In fact, this very king, King Nebuchadnezzar, even confessed at the end of chapter 2 “*Truly your God is God of gods and Lord of kings, and a*

revealer of mysteries.” But apparently, this confession was nothing more than lip service, because some years later here is this golden image out “*on the plain of Dura*” and the command is for all the leaders in Babylon to bow before this image.

Do you notice what the image is made of? It is made of gold. So here is the statement Nebuchadnezzar is making through this golden image. He is not just the head of gold, he is the whole statue of gold. There is not another kingdom coming after him, his kingdom will endure for all time. But even more poignantly, Nebuchadnezzar is claiming through this statue that God is not the ultimate authority and object of worship, King Nebuchadnezzar is. By bowing to this image, you are denying God’s authority and God’s rightful place in this world. So the command was given for all to bow, and failure to bow to this image would result in death. I would call that a crisis of faith. It may even make your crisis seem rather small in comparison. But that was the crisis facing Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

In fact, we pick up the story in verse 8 where we read, “*Therefore at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and maliciously accused the Jews. They declared to King Nebuchadnezzar, “O king, live forever! You, O king, have made a decree, that every man who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, shall fall down and worship the golden image. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into a burning fiery furnace. There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men, O king, pay no attention to you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”*”

Can you imagine this scene? Everyone bows down to this image when the music plays, accept for these three young men. The people gathered “*on the plain of Dura*” were leaders. Nebuchadnezzar “battered their bread.” I am not convinced that many people bowing that day ascribed deity to that image. If anything, they were in awe of the glory of the image and the glory of this fabulous kingdom of Babylon. So if the king said “Bow!”, they said, “How low?” They were protecting themselves and selling out to the Babylonian Empire and all the opportunity it brought them.

But here were three young men who refused to bow. Here were three citizens of Jerusalem, worshipers of God, who would not and could not sell their souls to Babylon. They knew the commandments. The first commandment went like this; *I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.*” In other words, God alone is to be worshiped. But then the second commandment given was that God’s people were not to worship the LORD through the use of an image. “*You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or*

any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth.” Do you know why we cannot worship God through an image? Any image that man makes to represent the glory of God falls short in representing the glory of God. It cheapens God’s glory. As impressive as that 90 foot statue was, the actual glory of God is far greater. That is why David says, in Psalm 27, “One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.” Any image man can come up with to represent God cheapens the character and quality of who God is. These three young men knew that the glory of God was of greatest value. So, these young men had no choice. They could not bow down to this image and worship it. By refusing to do so, they put their lives in peril.

So we read, starting in verse 13, “Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought. So they brought these men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, “Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?”

Truly this is a crisis of faith, and these three young men are going to have to trust God. We have brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who face a similar crisis of faith. To worship Jesus, they put their lives in peril. I hope you pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world. Can you even imagine the faith and the trust it takes to stand for Jesus at the cost of your very life?

But we have to trust God too, don’t we? As citizens of Jerusalem living here in Babylon, we need to trust God. That is how citizens of Jerusalem live in Babylon. We trust God. That is why we don’t live together before we get married and we reserve sex for marriage, even though the rest of “Babylon” thinks that is just crazy. We trust God. That is why we set aside a portion of our income and give our “first fruits” to the work of God’s kingdom. Your accountant looks at you somewhat puzzled and wonders why 10% of your income is just given away. Do you know what you could do with that money? But we trust God. That is why, when we lose our job and our health teeters on the balance, we turn to prayer and confidently rest in God’s care for us. Our anxiety is quieted because we trust God. That is why, when we are called to step out in faith and go against what seems to be conventional wisdom, we step out and do what God calls us to do. It is because we are citizens of Jerusalem and we first of all trust God. That is exactly what these three young men did in their crisis of faith. I would like to share with you from their story four reasons why you can trust God this morning.

TRUST GOD: GOD IS ABLE

King Nebuchadnezzar asks a fascinating question at the end of verse 15. He asks, “*And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?*” As Christians we kind of smile at that foolish question. It is as if Nebuchadnezzar is putting himself above any “god” that might be out there. It is as if he is under the impression that there is no god able to withstand Nebuchadnezzar’s mighty hand. How foolish! He is asking the wrong people this question. He is asking the “wrong god” this question.

Don’t you just love the trust and the confidence and the faith expressed in verses 16-17? “*Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, “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.”* See, the reason we can trust God is because we serve a God who is able. We serve a God who is into “rescuing” His people. Our God is the God of the rescue.

These young Hebrew men did not forget the history of their people. Did not God rescue His people from the land of Egypt? Did not God, time and time again, rescue His people during the time of the Judges? Did not the Psalmist give testimony, in Psalm 34:7, “*The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.*” And did not God say, through the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 43:1-2, to the people of Judah going into exile, “*But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel; Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; and when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.*” We serve a God who is able. We serve the God of the rescue. We can trust God.

Is that not the theme and the story of the Bible? Through the coming of Jesus Christ into this world, through His death on the cross, His resurrection and His ascension, has not God rescued us? Has not God, through Jesus Christ, already rescued us from sin and Satan and death and hell? Are there any stronger chains in this world than those chains? And yet God is able to rescue us from these very things.

Satan is no match for our God. Our God is able to deliver us from Satan himself. I love the words of the hymn *A Mighty Fortress is our God*. “*And though this world with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, we will not fear for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us. The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him; his rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure;. . . (and I love this) . . . one little word shall fell him.*” We serve the God of the rescue. God is able. Trust God.

I love how Paul seemingly taunts death in 1 Corinthians 15:54-58. *“Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”* We serve the God of the rescue. God is able. So, based on this, Paul concludes, *“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”*

If God is able to rescue us from sin and Satan and death and hell, do you not think He is able to rescue and deliver you from your trouble? Our God is able to heal. Our God is able to provide. Our God is able to provide a way of escape. I was struck last week by the testimony of our friends who came from Maine to share with us their story of God’s leading in their ministry to the homeless. Do you know what struck me the most about their testimony? This has been such a venture of faith for them that they have had to actually lean on God through prayer; and time and time again they have seen God answer prayer. Pastor Berry said, with a smile on his face, “these guys actually believe God is going to answer their prayers!” They believe God is able. They trust God. See, God has this habit of delivering His people. So God asks us to trust Him. Citizens of Jerusalem learn to trust their God. That is exactly what Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego do in the face of the fiery furnace.

TRUST GOD: GOD IS WISE

Now there is a second reason that emerges from this story as to why you can trust God. Keep in mind what we just saw. These three young men put their trust in the God who rescues His people. They even said to the king that they believed God would indeed rescue them. But then they say something in verse 18 that is rather incredible. They said, *“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.”* While they fully believe that God is able to rescue them, they surrender themselves to the wisdom of God; and they fully comprehend that God, who is able, may not choose to rescue them. They fully realize that God may call them to the ultimate sacrifice. But, nonetheless, they will freely lay down their lives for God and will not bow down to the golden image.

I know you know this. God’s ways are not always our ways. God’s plans are not always our plans. Sometimes, if not often, we don’t understand God’s plans. But what we do know is this, God is wise and therefore God can be trusted. God’s plan for your deliverance may be different than your plan.

I like what Samuel Rutherford said. He said, “Duties are ours, events are the Lord’s.” In other words, it is our job to be faithful. It is God’s job to decide in His good providence how He is going to work out the consequences of our faithfulness. Did you notice that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego didn’t rationalize the situation and conclude, since their faithfulness could result in death, that God did not require them to be faithful? All they had to figure out is what it meant to be faithful and then to do it. To be faithful in this instance was to obey the first and second commandment. How God chooses to work that out according to His providence is up to God. All they had to do was do what was right and trust the good wisdom of God.

This trust led them right to the fiery furnace. It says in verse 19, *“Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury, and the expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated. And he ordered some of the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. Then these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the burning fiery furnace. Because the king's order was urgent and the furnace overheated, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace.”*

We are not told what went through their minds as they were being escorted into the fiery furnace. All we know is that they trusted God and went willingly. That is all God asks of us. Be faithful. Trust God. Last week we heard the story of a man who trusted God even when the church dwindled to 18 people and even members of his own family turned away from him. But he did what he thought God was calling him to do. And now look what God has done in Skowhegan, Maine. But can I say this, even if God had chosen not to do what He is doing in and through that church, all He wants of us is to be faithful. You can trust God while living in Babylon, because God is wise; and God is using your faithfulness to God in ways you can’t even see. You may not even see the fruit of your faithfulness in your lifetime. I think that is more the norm than not. But God, in His wisdom, is at work. So trust God. God is wise. *“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.”*

TRUST GOD: GOD IS WITH US

So here are these three young men thrown into the fiery furnace. The fire was so hot that their escorts were consumed by the heat of the fire. Then something amazing happens. If you grew up in church, of course you know what happens. This is one of

the familiar stories from the Old Testament. It says, in verse 24, *“Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, “Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?” They answered and said to the king, “True, O king.” He answered and said, “But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.”*

No doubt, this is a tremendous miracle. These three men were not harmed by the fire. It says, in verse 26, *“Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning fiery furnace; he declared, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here!” Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king's counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men. The hair of their heads was not singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them.”*

Do you realize the message that is being communicated here? Do you see why God is saying to you that you can trust God to be faithful? The message is not that God will always deliver you from the fire. But the reason you can trust God is found in the fourth person standing in the fire. Some think that the fourth person in the fire was the pre-incarnate Christ, others think it was an angel. We don't know for sure. I personally would not be surprised if it were Christ Himself. But the message you need to see in this fourth person is simply this. You can trust God because God will never leave you. God is with you, even in the fire. How many times do we read in Scripture to not be afraid for God is with us? We will not fear, even in the face of death, because God is with us. Because this is true, we can trust God.

After receiving the news that they had been diagnosed with prostate cancer, John Piper and Dave Powlison wrote a thought provoking article called *“Don't Waste Your Cancer.”* In this article, they suggested 10 ways you might be tempted to waste the opportunities that come your way as a result of cancer. For example, they suggest that you will waste your cancer if you seek comfort from your odds rather than from God, or if you think beating cancer is defined by staying alive rather than cherishing Christ.

I was particularly intrigued by the last suggestion they make to those suffering cancer. They said, *“You will waste your cancer if you fail to use it as a means of witness to the truth and glory of Christ.”* Let me just read what they said. *“Jesus is your life. He is the man before whom every knee will bow. He has defeated death once and for all. He will finish what He has begun. Let your light so shine as you live in Him, by Him, through Him, for Him.* Then Powlison quotes an ancient hymn of the church,

Christ be with me
Christ within me
Christ behind me
Christ before me
Christ beside me
Christ to win me
Christ to comfort and restore me
Christ beneath me
Christ above me
Christ in quiet
Christ in danger
Christ in heart of all that love me
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger

Remember, you are not left alone. You will have the help you need. *“My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”* So trust God! God is with us. God never leaves us. God is at work even in the fire.

TRUST GOD: GOD IS EXALTED

The final reason you should trust God and be faithful is because, every time you do, you express the glory of God and others praise God. We said at the beginning of this message that the monotony of the crisis of faith gives opportunity for the testimony that God blesses those who are faithful. In other words, when God’s people are faithful, it always results in praise and glory to God when people see the hand of God at work.

It happened every time these Hebrew boys were faithful and trusted God. In fact, each time praise to God came from unlikely sources, namely King Nebuchadnezzar. Now he is not there yet. In fact, he is a work in progress. But with each demonstration of God’s provision, Nebuchadnezzar is becoming more and more aware of God.

At the end of Daniel 1, Daniel and his friends stood out and they were recognized by the king. At the end of Daniel 2, the king said of God *“Truly your God is God of gods and Lord of kings.”* Now, at the end of Daniel 3, Nebuchadnezzar confesses, *“Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way.”* Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon.”

So trust God! When you trust God in the midst of the crisis of faith, people take notice and they see God at work. God uses this to draw people to Himself.

CONCLUSION

The crisis of faith is the way of life for the citizen of Jerusalem living in Babylon. I am not sure where you are being called to trust God this morning, but I have no doubt that you know the tension and the reality of your situation. May I simply urge you to trust God, and may I assure you that there is good reason to do so.

- You can trust God because God is able to deliver you. He already has in Christ.
- You can trust God because God is wise and knows what is best.
- You can trust God because God is with you and will never leave you.
- You can trust God because your trust in God will result in others seeing and worshiping God.

So, citizens of Jerusalem, until we arrive to that heavenly Zion, trust God!

©By Dr. Scott W. Solberg - All rights reserved