

# FAITH - 9: PROPHETS - FAITH UNDER PRESSURE

Hebrews 11:32-34

32 And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel **and the prophets**— 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, **stopped the mouths of lions**, 34 **quenched the power of fire**, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

Muzzling lions and quenching flames.

Today we are going to revisit some old Sunday School stories. We are going to talk about Daniel and his friends.

I think that's who are in mind at the end of verse 33 and the beginning of verse 34 when the writer talks about people whose faith enabled them to stop the mouths of lions and quench the power of fire. It was Daniel who survived a night with the lions (chapter 6) and it was his three friends who survived being thrown into a fiercely burning furnace (chapter 3).

In terms of the timeline that Hebrews 11 is following, these stories take us to what the end of verse 32 refers to as "the prophets." Daniel was a prophet. His three friends are not normally regarded as prophets, but they are very closely associated with the era of Daniel.

Remember the overview. The first readers of this letter need to be encouraged to hold firmly to their faith: keep on believing. Part of the way the writer encourages them is by looking back at the importance and significance of faith all the way through the OT. So whether you are talking about Abel, or Noah, the Patriarchs, or Moses, Joshua, the Judges, David or Samuel, the great things that happened in their lives happened through faith. The prophets were men of faith too.

That's where Daniel's story comes in.

Let's just refresh our memories about these two stories.

The flames story actually comes first (it's interesting that the writer of Hebrews chooses to reverse the order of several pairs): it's in Daniel 3.

The background is that King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon has overseen the construction of a large gold statue. We don't know if it was meant to represent one of his gods or whether it was meant to represent him. The arrangement was that when the music played - and there was quite a sophisticated worship band ready to play - everyone, representing different nations from all over the Babylonian Empire, was to bow and worship the statue.

It was almost like a parody of what heaven will be like!

At the right moment, everyone obeyed. Except for three young Jewish men: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They refused.

These three young men had been exiled from Jerusalem along with Daniel. They had received a good Babylonian education and had risen through the ranks of government. But even though they had got heavily involved in the public service of a pagan empire, their hearts still remained true to the Lord, their God. They could have no other object of worship.

As the story unfolds, several rivals of these three young men report them to the king for refusing to worship the statue. They are well aware of the set penalty: being thrown in a blazing furnace. When the king hears what's going on, he challenges Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who refuse to change their mind and they are thrown to the flames.

Miraculously they survive. And not only that, but while they are in the flames, a fourth person is seen walking around the fire with them.

Nebuchadnezzar is blown away by it and makes a new law: anyone who speaks against the Lord will be torn to pieces.

In Daniel 6, the spotlight is on Daniel.

It's a different ruler - Darius - because time has passed, and rulers come and go; but it's a very similar challenge. He had done well politically but he had rivals who did not like him. They used an aspect of his faith, specifically his commitment to prayer, to attack him. As with the story in chapter 3, Daniel's opponents get the king and the law to work against him. In Daniel's case they encourage a law that for thirty days prayer can only be prayed to the king.

As with the story in chapter 3 there is a severe penalty for breaking the law: this time it's a den of lions. As with the story of his friends in chapter 3, Daniel makes no adjustments to his expression of faith. So he is thrown to the lions, but God shuts their mouths.

King Darius is greatly relieved that Daniel survives and he too makes a new law that people are to worship Daniel's God.

Those are the stories: what do we learn about faith?

## 1. Faith can get you into trouble.

The exciting thing about the faith of these stories is that faith made it possible for people to muzzle lions and extinguish flames. It enabled them to be extracted safely from some very difficult and frightening circumstances. We would all like faith to do that for us.

We'll get to that part in a moment, but please notice that faith can get you into trouble.

In the NT Peter wrote to some scattered believers who were facing trouble. He made a distinction between two kinds of suffering. There is suffering which is a consequence of doing something wrong - which results in shame - and there is suffering which happens because the person is a Christian which brings no shame but is actually a reason to praise God.

Being a Christian is never meant to be a guarantee of a trouble-free existence. Faith can get you into trouble that you would not experience if you were not a believer.

So when you look back at these stories of Daniel and his friends, you need to notice that it was Daniel's faith that got him in trouble. It was Daniel's habit of regular prayer to God that gave his opponents an opportunity to attack him. And it was the faith of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego that got them in trouble. If they had not believed in God in the first place, and be so determined to worship God in such an exclusive way, they might never have ended up where they did.

Did you ever imagine that worship could get you into trouble? Did you ever think that prayer could get you into trouble? They did for Daniel and his friends. It was the expression of their faith through worship and prayer that brought them into conflict with the laws of the empire and brought them to face the flames of a furnace and the mouths of lions.

Look a little more closely at the way their faith was challenged. The two stories are quite similar but there is an important difference.

In the case of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, no one told them they couldn't worship the Lord: they had to extend their worship to the golden statue. In Daniel's case it was different: the law tried to prevent him from practicing his faith. He was not allowed to pray to the Lord because he was only allowed to pray to the king.

So in one story the attack was to say 'your faith is too narrow' and in the other the message was 'your faith is now illegal.' At least for 30 days.

What would you do if it happened to you? What will you do when someone accuses you of having a faith that is too narrow? What would you do if it became illegal to say that someone else's system of belief was wrong? No one is saying that it is illegal to be a Christian, just that you have to be prepared to worship at other altars too.

Go to the second step: your faith is illegal. What would you do then?

What would you have done this morning if it had been illegal to meet here? Would you have risked it? Don't forget, as you consider your answer, that there will be some of your brothers and sisters around the world today who have put their well-being and their livelihood on the line by gathering to worship Jesus.

That's an extreme example and in the mercy of God we haven't had to deal with it here. Your challenge may not be on that scale. It may be limited to social rejection, or someone having a laugh behind your back. Whatever way it works out in your life, remember that sometimes your faith will get you into trouble. Are you ready for that?

## 2. Faith cannot be negotiated.

All four of these men were stubborn. They knew what was at stake and they refused to compromise. They were crystal clear about what they were doing. They were clear about the consequences of disobeying the law.

There were plenty of Jews in the Old Testament who bowed before other objects of worship. But not Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. If the Lord had said, "You shall have no other gods before me," that was how they would live. They would not share the worship that belonged to him with anyone or anything else. They would not bow before any other object of worship.

This was non-negotiable.

You could imagine a 21<sup>st</sup> century person coming along and pleading with them to see reason.

"This city and this empire have been good to you. This king has been good to you. He has given you places of great privilege in government. Don't be so confrontational. Be grateful for what you have; don't throw it away. And think of the opportunity you have to influence the provinces of the empire. If you throw your life away in a burning furnace, who is going to get your job? It won't be someone who follows the Lord. Why don't you just go along with this? Keep yourselves out of trouble. This will eventually pass."

Or Daniel.

"Come on Daniel, you can see what's going on here. These people are jealous of you and they want rid of you. Don't give them that pleasure. You have a good relationship with the king, and you wouldn't want to put him in an awkward position. It's just a month after all. God will understand."

Let me ask you a question. Do you have any non-negotiables in your life and the reason they are non-negotiable is because they are part of your commitment to God? God is God and there is no way you would dream of doing anything that would be disloyal to him. You know that he has your 100% allegiance. You know that your life revolves around him - that is what he created you for - and you would never do anything that would compromise that.

Or, honestly, is your faith a convenience that is more about helping you to avoid trouble and keep comfortable? Because if that's the case, you will be quite prepared to set your faith aside if setting it aside is what will help you avoid trouble and keep comfortable.

Are there aspects of your faith that are not open for negotiation? Are there things that you won't budge on because God is God in your life? You won't budge on them, no matter what it costs you.

### 3. Faith invites God to work.

Why are these incidents referred to in Hebrews 11? Because these men were men of faith and it was through the exercise of their faith that God worked to rescue them.

What do these stories teach us? They teach us that God is a powerful, living God who rules over the lives of his children. He is able to send an angel into a den of lions so that the lions will not touch one of his children who is trusting him.

Think about the confrontation between Nebuchadnezzar and the three young men. The king threw down a challenge. If you don't bow down, you will be thrown into the furnace. What god is going to rescue from that? You are ready to lay down your life out of loyalty to your God: but what God is more powerful than me.

Here is their answer:

We have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us... and he will deliver us out of your hand.

This has now become a clash of kingdoms. There is Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom with Nebuchadnezzar's power. Worship me, he says. And there is God, the Lord with his kingdom which will eventually crush all the kingdoms of men. Worship me, he says. And that is what these three men do.

They refuse to budge on the issue and they are thrown to the flames. A fourth man appears in the flames with them, someone who looks like a son of the gods. God hasn't left them stranded. He is right there with them, and they emerge without suffering the slightest harm.

What if they had given in? What if they hadn't been sure that God was powerful enough and could be trusted? They would never have experienced this deliverance. It would never have happened.

I wonder how many things we don't see because we don't trust God enough to let him work. It says in the gospels that Jesus did not do many miracles in his home town because of their unbelief.

I wonder how often we are like that. We don't see God do as much as we might because we are not really ready to trust him. We are not sure he is powerful enough. Many of us live a life where we hedge our bets. We go along making sure we have enough of our own resources to lean on just in case God doesn't come through. We have our own plans and our own cleverness. We have our own ideas. We have our own money. We'll trust God a little bit, but make sure there is a plan B!

Is it too simplistic to say that the more room we leave for God, the more we will see him work? The more we acknowledge our dependence on him, the more freedom we give him

demonstrate his power? I realise that that sounds odd: who are we to give God freedom? But the problem is that we can easily get in the way.

That is why there are times when God brings us to an end of ourselves. It is almost as though he says, If you have finished, let me show you what I can do.

We worship a living, powerful God whose kingdom is stronger than all the kingdoms of this world.

But perhaps there is a lurking question. You trusted God, you believed that he would work something out, and it didn't happen the way you wanted. What about the people who have been martyred? Did they die because their faith was lacking? Some teachers would almost make you think that! There will be more to say about this next time, but listen to what else the three friends said to the king.

He will deliver us... but if not, we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.

“But if not...” Was it a cop-out? No. They just realised that God was free to do whatever he wanted. Their trust in him was not dependent on getting the outcome they wanted. They knew he could deliver them, they thought he would deliver them, but if he didn't, he was still their God.

That is the total surrender of faith. That is the faith that leaves the outcome to God.

#### 4. Faith points other people to God.

Both of the rulers, Nebuchadnezzar and Darius, had their worldview turned upside down by what they saw.

In chapter 3, Nebuchadnezzar made a new law. It wasn't a law that forced people to worship him: it was a law that warned people not to speak a word against the God of Shadrach. Why? Because he recognised that there was no other god like this one.

In chapter 6, Darius makes a new decree. Everyone has to worship the God of Daniel. Why? Because he is the living God who rescues people and who does powerful works.

True faith that allows God to work ends up pointing other people to him.

Isn't that what people need to see? They need to see God working in our lives. They don't need us to be hyper-religious or self-righteous: they need us to demonstrate a living faith in a living God.

That's how God wants you and me to live.

Conclusion: with our eyes on Jesus.

These men were not just great examples to the kings they served, pointing them to the reality of the living God; they were put in this chapter to encourage the first readers of this letter.

It was important for the Hebrew Christians who were reading this letter to see the example of people who literally went through the fire and who literally faced lions, but whom God brought out on the other side. They needed to see real life examples of what happens when people trust in God. They remind us that God is able to act powerfully on behalf of his people.

And Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are examples for us. They remind us that there is sometimes a significant cost to trusting God. But their example invites us to trust

him. Keep on trusting God, even when trouble comes and even when that trouble comes as a result of your faith.

But they are not the ultimate example. His name is Jesus. We've been thinking today about men whose loyalty to God brought them into frightening places, but God rescued them. There were no scorch marks on Shadrach. There was no smell of smoke from Abednego. There were no scratches on Daniel.

But there are scars on Jesus. There was no last minute escape for him. He endured the cross because of the joy that was set before him. That joy was tied up with all that he was making possible for you and me as he carried out his Father's rescue plan. By enduring the cross, he brings many sons and daughters to glory. There will be people from every nation enjoying God in a perfect city forever because Jesus endured the cross.

By the way, will you be one of them?

As we come to the communion part of our service, it's an opportunity for us to remember what he has done for us. We take bread and wine in humble gratitude. And as we do this, in the light of Hebrews 11, we say, Lord you kept going and you endured the cross; help me to keep trusting you, even when my faith takes me to hard places.