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The National Presbyterian Church

# The Trials of Captivity

Daniel 3

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**D**uring these weeks this fall we've been considering the story before the grand story. We began in Genesis; we met Abraham the father, Moses the deliverer and the lawgiver, David the king, Solomon the man of wisdom, and then Jeremiah the prophet. Jeremiah lived in a very hard time because the date 586 B.C. was a very critical date in the Old Testament. It's the date when the south, Judah, was overrun and destroyed by the Neo Babylonian Empire. The Northern Kingdom was destroyed by the Assyrian Empire 710 B.C. The South hung on and then in 586 B.C. when a new empire emerged in the east and they destroyed Jerusalem, leveled it, and took most of the remaining people away to the Tigris and Euphrates River where they were for 70 years in captivity. That's called the exile. Jeremiah the prophet tells of that devastating fall. What a history.

In those 70 years the people wondered how they would hold on to who they were, remember who they were, sing their songs, keep their identity. In fact, one of the Psalms we have in the Old Testament Book of Psalms is Psalm 137 that was written actually in that captivity in that exile. Listen to it; it's a very famous Psalm.

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat down there and wept when we remembered Zion. [Zion is where David's tomb is.] In the willows there we hung up our harps for there our captives asked us for songs. Our tormentors asked us for mirth saying 'Sing to us one of the songs of Zion!' (Psalm 137:1-3)*

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The Jews were known for the songs they sang. And so even the captors wanted that. One of the books that tells of that 70 year exile is the Book of Daniel, which is a remarkable book. It narrates how the people made it through those years. It's filled with excitement; it tells of Daniel in the lion's den, and of the same Daniel who became an official in Nebuchadnezzar's court, and where and he actually interpreted dreams for Nebuchadnezzar. It is a very interesting book, and probably the most fascinating chapter in the book of Daniel is the third chapter. Listen to the text:

*King Nebuchadnezzar made a golden statue whose height was 60 cubits and whose width was six cubits. [That would be 90 feet high and 9 feet wide. That's quite a statue covered with gold.] He set it up on the Plane of Durra in the province of Babylon. Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent for the satraps, the prefect and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates and all of the officials of the provinces to assemble and come to the dedication of the statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. So the satraps, prefect, governors, counselors, [by the way, Daniel likes repetition], and the justices and the magistrates and all the officials of the province assembled for the dedication of the statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. And when they were standing before the statue Nebuchadnezzar had set up 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, drum and entire musical ensemble, you are to fall down and worship the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire.' Therefore as soon as all the people heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum and entire musical ensemble, all the people [this becomes rather humorous*

as we hear these instruments mentioned four times in this text], *and all the peoples, nations and languages fell down and worshipped the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.* (Daniel 3:1-7)

Those instruments are very interesting for all musicologists who are fascinated with that list of Babylonian instruments. This last week I had a funny experience. I was in Princeton presenting some talks on the book of Philipians to the alumni at Princeton Seminary, and while I was there I called one of our young men from this church who's a freshman at Princeton University. He's just a marvelous guy, Seth Gordon. So he got on his bicycle and rushed over for lunch and we just had the greatest time. It was neat and then he said "I've got to get back because I'm in the band." He's in the Princeton University marching band. And he said, "We're going to have a Halloween parade and I have to get back." And I said, "What do you play?" He said, "I play the quadratragon." That's four drums. That's even one better than the Babylonians had. They only had three drums, the trigon, three drums, all attached to one guy. Seth is playing four. Now picking back up in our story in Daniel 3:

*Accordingly, at this time certain of the Chaldeans of the Babylonians came forward and denounced the Jews. They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, live forever! You have made a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon; harp, drum and entire musical ensemble shall fall down and worship the golden statue. And whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into the furnace of blazing fire. There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon. [Remember, Daniel had been promoted and evidently these three young men had been promoted because of their being outstanding young men.] You have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and they pay no heed to you, O King, and they will not serve your gods, and they will not worship the golden statue that you've set up. Then King Nebuchadnezzar was furious. He commanded that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be brought in and so they brought these men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar said to them, 'Is it true O Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego that you will not worship my gods? You will not worship the golden statue that I have set up. Now if you're ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum and*

entire musical ensemble, [even he is into this], if you do not fall down and worship the statue that I have made well and good, if you do, but if you do not worship, you'll be immediately thrown into the furnace and who will deliver you then?" Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego answered the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire out of your hand O king, let him deliver us. But if not O king, we still will not serve your gods. We will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.' Then Nebuchadnezzar was so filled with rage that his face was distorted. He ordered the furnace heated up seven times more than was customary. He ordered some of the strongest guards in the army to bind Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the furnace of blazing fire. So the men were bound still wearing their tunics, their trousers, their hats and their other garments and they were thrown into the furnace of blazing fire. Since the king's command was so urgent the furnace was so overheated, the raging flames killed the men who lifted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, but the three men Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego fell bound into the furnace of blazing fire. [But the next paragraph is the most interesting.] Then king Nebuchadnezzar was astonished [see this great furnace had an opening at the bottom where they would of course take the ashes out of the end, they threw them at the top and then there was this hole at the bottom, so he evidentially could look in to the furnace]. Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished, so he rose quickly and said to his counselors, 'Was it not three men that we threw bound into the fire?' And they answered the King, 'True, O King.' And then he replied, 'But I see four men unbound walking in the middle of the fire, and they're not hurt, and one of them, the fourth has the appearance of a son of god.' [Whatever he meant by that.] And so then he calls the three men Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to come out and they do. (Daniel 3:8-25)

The three come out. What an amazing text. Let me tell you something interesting. Did you know that in 1998 on the 100th year of birth of C.S. Lewis, Great Britain struck a stamp in honor of him? This is very unprecedented in England to strike a stamp in honor of someone and they did in honor of Lewis. And at Oxford University and at Cambridge the two schools where he taught, they celebrated his birth for two weeks. I was able to go to the Oxford celebration and it was really amazing. The theme for the entire celebration was called this: *Loose in the Fire*. And the text for the celebration was Daniel 3 and Hebrews 12. Remember Hebrews 12 is that

passage that follows Hebrews 11, which narrates the tribute to all of the great heroes of the faith. These heroes had suffered so grievously and yet at the end of the Hebrews text it says of these courageous men and women, "Yet the story of their lives is not complete without us" (Hebrews 11:40). That's how Hebrews 11 ends as it tells about these people who were stoned to death, were killed with the sword, they went about in the skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented. The world is not worthy of them. And yet the story of their lives is not complete without us. And then comes the great verse in chapter 12:

*Therefore since we're surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us run the race that's set before us looking to Jesus Christ the author, the finisher of our faith who suffered death in our behalf and is now at the right hand of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2)*

The single line from Daniel 3 was the main theme line, *Loose in the Fire*. Because the point of the celebration was that C.S. Lewis was, in effect, loose in the fire in the midst of a turbulent time in history, World War II when he wrote some of his greatest books. He lived out this amazing life and ministry of writing "loose in the fire." The opening worship service was held at St. Mary The Virgin Church, in Oxford which is the university church. It's where Lewis himself gave his "Weight of Glory" speech in 1942, and his "Learning in Wartime" speech in 1939. It's where Charles Wesley preached, where Cardinal John Henry Newman preached. It's a very famous church. And in that church they held a worship service, by the way this text that I just read to you was read by C.S. Lewis's stepson Douglas Gresham. He read it and it was hilarious, the people laughed when they heard all these instruments mentioned four times. And then the sermon was given on this text in Daniel and the Hebrews text and that's how the 100th birthday celebration began.

What do we do with this text? What do we do with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and the blazing furnace? Be careful not to write it off too quickly because of its impossibility. You may be wise to stand in front of a text like this and say, "One wonders." We know that most of the heroes in the Old Testament and New Testament are not rescued out of fire. That's what the whole of the 11th chapter of Hebrews is about. Most of the heroes are not rescued. Most of them face dangers and even death heroically. Most people are not rescued from persecutions. But these three were. It brings me to the main theme of the book of Daniel. The main theme of the book of Daniel is that in the midst of that exile, in the midst of that harrowing time, after the city of Jerusalem had been destroyed, after the people, if only a remnant, a few of them are taken, their king Zedachai was killed, Johoiachim, all the kings were killed, and the remaining people are taken off bereft of their leaders, taken off to this captivity ... nevertheless they survived! They survived. Frederick the Great was an atheist and he said to his physician Dr. Zimmerman of Brugg one day, "Von Zimmerman, give me a single proof of the existence of God" and Zimmerman said to Frederick the Great "Your majesty, the Jews!"<sup>1</sup> They survived. They shouldn't have. They're such a small remnant people, they shouldn't have survived but they did and with their poetry too, with their prophets, with the law, with their tradition, they survived like a fiddler balanced precariously on a roof. They survived. And that's the main theme of the Book of Daniel. But the big moment in this text is the mystery moment at the end, and it's very moving. It isn't Daniel who looks into the furnace, it's Nebuchadnezzar who looks into the furnace. It's this tyrant who looks in the furnace and sees something he cannot explain. He said, "I thought three men were thrown into the fire, I see them walking around inside, and there's a fourth one there with them."

We've been thinking together during these weeks about the story before

the grand story. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of this story. Jesus Christ is the one who will fulfill our yearning for a father like Abraham, for a king like David, for a lawgiver and deliverer like Moses. He will be the savior. He will be the one who fulfills joy and gives sense to life so that we'll call him the Son of David, the righteous branch. Remember Jeremiah said that. He is that one, and now we know that he will be the savior of us all in the fire with us. No one expected that. The disciples don't expect that. They expect that he will conquer, but that's not what seems to happen on Good Friday. He will join us in the fire and maybe the first glimpse of that reality comes in the book of Daniel. He is the fourth person in the fire. He will be the one who will conquer sin and death and the power of evil at the cross by taking it, absorbing it. He will stay in the fire, we'll get out. He will disarm the fire. He's the one. He will fulfill all the yearnings of the Old Testament. The story before the grand story prepares us for that.

We're now invited to celebrate the Lord's Supper together. It's interesting isn't it? The Lord's Supper is given to us by Jesus, he didn't create it, it's the Seder meal that celebrates the Exodus, that acts out how God protected his people in the midst of the tyranny of Egypt. And when the bread is broken that's when the smallest boy in the family says to the father, "Father tell us the story of the Exodus." And that's when the father tells the story of the Exodus in the Seder after the hidden bread is found and broken. Jesus takes the bread and breaks it but he doesn't tell the story of the Exodus. He says to his disciples and through them to us, "This is my body, which is broken for you," in the fire. Jesus takes the cup of Thanksgiving and speaks again, "This cup is a new covenant in my life given for you." And that's what we celebrate, this amazing celebration of Jesus Christ who has gone ahead of us and into the fire on our behalf. I had a friend in Seattle, a young friend who was battling cancer. I had tried to get close to him and encourage him.

Later, he wrote me a letter. I'll never forget what he said. He said, "Earl, I go every day to Gethsemane and Jesus is there too, and that's what keeps me going. When I go to Gethsemane, Jesus is there." That's the mystery of the Daniel 3 passage. He's there in the fire, it makes all the difference.

Heavenly Father thank you for this text. It's a mystery. We cannot fully understand it. And yet here is this amazing book that tells of the survival of a people who prepare us for the coming of the Messiah. Lord we know what fires are like and some of us know what persecution is like, and some people know what a very heavy strain danger is like. But Lord what a marvelous truth that when we go to Gethsemane, you're there, that that you went to the cross so that we don't have to go to Gethsemane alone because you are there. Lord, thank you. Thank you for that victory. Now bless us as we celebrate your love and faithfulness in these common elements of the Lord's Supper. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

1 Barth, Karl. *Dogmatics in Outline*. Harper Perennial. 1959.

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*Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.*  
*Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.*

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