

In the Fire

OFFERING

You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. (2 Corinthians 9:11)

ANNOUNCEMENT

Just before we get into the message today, don't forget **Frivolity on the Go** – our Halloween alternative for children and families is happening very soon! It is your last chance to register! So make sure you do that so you don't miss out on your Frivolity pack and a fun time with your family 😊

INTRODUCTION

Right, so let's get into the message this morning. Currently we are in-between series. We have just finished our justice series – and next week we are going to be starting a new series on the book of Nehemiah – called "Rebuild" ...

In many ways, COVID has been like a gigantic reset on life, and a lot of things in church as well, and I believe it is time to rebuild! It's going to be a great.

But before we get there, I think it's important this morning to consolidate where we are, and what God is saying to us.

A couple of weeks ago, I tried to buy a big 2021 wall planner – and none of the shops across the road had any 2021 diaries and calendars! It seems that everyone is in at a bit of a loss of how to plan for next year! None of us are ready for it. But the reality is, we are near the end of October, and 2020 is almost over, and for many, it feels like we don't have much light at the end of the tunnel for next year yet – the scientists are saying we are at the start of a second wave of COVID which will peak in December/ January. So we are still living in very uncertain times.

So I want to talk about that...

How do we deal with this difficult time? How are you personally feeling right now? How do you plan for next year? I know so many in our church family have been impacted – health wise, financially, as well as mentally. Do we just throw up our hands and say we can't do this? Well, that is not really an option. Is it? So this morning I wanted to take you to God's word, and I believe I have a message for you from the Lord – I have called it;

In the fire

Let me remind you of a story, that most of you are probably very familiar with – you will remember Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego – they were young men, who along with Daniel, were captured and enlisted to work for the Babylonian government when Israel was defeated and taken into exile.

For them, they literally and figuratively, faced the heat – So how did they cope? They tried to maintain their faith and their worship to God throughout what seemed like very trying and strange times. And in many ways, we are also living in trying and strange times. So let's take a look at the story...

It's found in Daniel chapter 3 – where King Nebuchadnezzar who ruled Babylon, made a huge idol and set it up on the plain of Dura. The King then issued a command that everyone in his Babylonian kingdom had to fall down and worship this image of gold. Anyone who refused to do this, would be dealt with severely, and thrown into a blazing furnace. Everyone had to do it. No dissenting votes, or abstaining votes were allowed! And during this time, some of his influential leaders who were astrologers, saw that some of the Jews were not worshipping this idol, and they come and tell the King about it;

This is where I want to pick up in our story – in Daniel chapter 3:12; They come to the King and tattle tale... Oh King...

12 There are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up.”

Why did they do this? Because the King's advisors were jealous of the Israelite young men and the trust the King had put in them, so they were always looking for an opportunity to get them into trouble with the King – and it worked; vs 13;

13 Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, 14 and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up?

It's almost like he is fond of them and really wants to give them another chance... So he says to them...

15 Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?” 16 Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter.

Don't you love their courage? These are guys with backbone. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did not deny they had disobeyed the King's orders – they were not willing to compromise – and they were ready to face the punishment. Here is what they said to the King;

17 If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. 18 But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were prepared to face the consequences of disobeying the King's orders. They fully believed that God could rescue them from the furnace if he willed, but even if he did not... they would not change their stance on worshipping Him.

As I have thought about this year, and how to live as a Christ follower in this time, I really believe there is a message for us here...

Will your faith stand strong? Even if you get thrown into a fire? Will your faith endure? Even in the fiery trial? Will your faith survive? Even if ... Even if.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, were ready, and their faith in God was bigger and stronger than anything that the world could throw at them. They had already decided, even if... this happened... even if... that happened ... they knew that the Lord would be with them – and they would never stop worshipping and praising only Him.

I think there are many people who say they believe in God ... and follow Jesus... but they have never been pushed to consider ... would I still follow God if... would I still stand ... even if.

It's really the difference between fair weather Christians... and those who have faced the storms of life and endured. So I want to share a couple of points that I hope will be helpful for you as you navigate this time in your life. When for many – the heat is on. If you are taking notes, jot this down; First point today;

You've got to see it coming

I want to remind you today friends – that everyone goes through hard times. Everyone goes through times of testing. It's a natural part of life, and growth. Going through testing is rarely pleasant, but knowing God is always by your side in the midst of those challenges provides comfort and hope.

But you've got to see it coming. Not like you are paranoid and always expecting something to go wrong, but hard times are not meant to be something unusual. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego saw it coming, and they were ready for it. They were prepared for it when the people of Babylon tried to force them to worship their idols. They were prepared for opposition to their faith. They were prepared for the fire. They were prepared for the wrath of the King – and they respectfully, but firmly drew the line, and said "Even if..." we will still serve the Lord and worship only our God. They saw it coming and they were ready.

So church, we should not live in this little dream world where we don't see things like this coming. In the book of James chapter 1, this is what the New Testament Church is taught – I am going to read it to you from the Message translation so that you can perhaps see it in a fresh new light today;

2-4 Consider it a sheer gift, [my] friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides.

Perhaps like me, you're having a season like that. Where it's not just winter. It's like an ice-age! And you're getting him from all angles. Tests and challenges are coming at you from all sides. Who of you feel like you're in a time like this? Who of you feel like you enjoy times like this? Me neither! But God reminds us to not be surprised by tests and challenges, like some strange thing is happening. You've got to see it coming. This is why, James says; because...

You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colours. So don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way. (James 1:2-4. Message)

Instead of seeing this year and this time as a terrible time where we all sink into self-pity. Could it be that God is calling us to consider it a gift? A blessing? Something that will grow us?

James says; Consider it a sheer gift. Tests and challenges, things like COVID, things like lack of finances, things like health challenges, when we face the fire, our faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colours.

So how is your faith-life going? What true colours is God revealing? And are you just trying to get out of it? Or are you allowing God to do his work in you, so that you can become mature – and well-developed, not deficient in any way?

You've got to see it coming. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did.

Their faith in God did not change according to their circumstances. Their true colours were revealed – and they were beautiful to behold.

It is so easy to let our circumstances dictate our faith in God – if things go bad, then God is not near and He is not interested in us. That is not true. We need to take a lesson from these three friends – we need to worship God and no matter our circumstances. We need to understand that following God does not keep us from going through hard times. And - sometimes God will miraculously rescue us from difficult situations, but our faith and worship of Him should not waver even if... he does not choose to.

As you can imagine, King Neb is understandably mad at this point; vs 19

¹⁹ 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 ²⁰ and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace.

²¹ So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. ²² 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, ²³ and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.

Amazing story. Three friends. Their faith-life standing strong when the heat was on. How did they do it? Could I have done this? Could you? Here's the next point I want to make this morning...

You've got to **hold on to Jesus**

I don't know about you... but if it weren't for Jesus... I know I would not be here today.

For our three friends... they have just been thrown into a fire, a furnace so hot that it killed the guards who were throwing them in. At this point in the story it seems obvious that it's going to have a tragic end to the lives of three guys who refused to compromise.

But then everything takes a completely unexpected twist... vs 24;

24 Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?" They replied, "Certainly, Your Majesty." 25 He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods."

Don't you just love it!

There is so much going on at this point that we don't really know. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego have been thrown into this fire – and they are seen to be walking around in the fire – with a fourth figure – who the King says looks like a son of God – and angel sent from God perhaps? Or even possibly the pre-incarnate Jesus himself?

I wonder what they were experiencing in that fire? Was there a conversation going on? We don't know of course, but the message is clear. God is there with us in the fire.

In James chapter 1 – after he speaks about how to cope when the heat is on – he says this in vs 5;

5-8 If you don't know what you're doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. (James 1:5-8) The Message

And then a bit further on in vs 12;

12 Anyone who meets a testing challenge head-on and manages to stick it out is mighty fortunate. For such persons loyally in love with God, the reward is life and more life. (James 1:12) The Message

Friends, you've got to hold on to Jesus. And yes, maybe it's more a case of him holding on to us, but when you don't know what you're doing, and the heat is on. You've got to hold on to Jesus.

You've got to remember that as his child – you are never alone – and the ultimate reward in life, is not living a life free of challenges and problems – but it's getting through it with Jesus. He is the one who said to us;

“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

So don't give up! We were born for such a time as this. God is with you. The fourth person in the furnace showed that God had not abandoned them – He was with them despite the flames. The same is true for you and I – even though we do not always see Him, He will never abandon or forsake us.

God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”⁶ So we say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?” (Hebrews 13:5)

Here's our next point;

You've got to see it through

You've got to see it coming

You've got to hold on to Jesus, and...

You've got to see it though

I'm glad to say that the three friends had a happy ending to their story – God had protected them in the flames and had seen them through this incredibly difficult trial. We know that not every faith story has a happy ending, but we also know that every faith story has Jesus in it, to see you through...

Here is how the story ends...

²⁶ Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, “Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!” So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, ²⁷ and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them.

These three Godly men – were in the fire – and they saw it through. They went in – and they eventually came out of the fire... They saw it through.

We don't know what furnace we will have to face next, but I want you to check on yourself today, and don't give in to the negativity of the season. We don't know what is coming next, and the truth is, we never actually do – only God knows what lies ahead. But what can we cling to in these uncertain times when we are getting tired and ready to give up? We can cling to Jesus.

Remember and be encouraged by the words of Jesus;

I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. (Rev 3:11)

Hold on friends. Hold on. You've got to see it through.

You've got to see it coming

You've got to hold on to Jesus

You've got to see it through

I want to end with this;

You've got to shake it off

You've got to shake off the dust – or the smoke in this case - And push on! I like how the story of the three friends ends; vs 27;

They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them. ²⁸ Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants!

They trusted in 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 God. ²⁹

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, for no other god can save in this way." ³⁰ Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego – trusted the Lord, and they were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except the true God. And they shook it off – and were promoted. I am not sure how you continue to work with a boss who literally tried to burn you alive. But that's another matter. They remained faithful to their God... and he honoured them for that.

What are the lessons here for us.

During tough times – there are some things we need to shake off – fear, anxiety, worry, negativity, doubt, self-pity, greed, anger, unforgiveness, resentment.

You've got to shake that stuff off.

Don't allow a tough season to rob you of joy and peace. Shake it off and continue to serve the Lord faithfully. In the book of Nehemiah, which we will be looking at soon, we are taught...

"For the joy of the Lord is your strength." (Nehemiah 8:10)

Don't lose your joy. Don't lose your peace. There may be a lot that is changing and uncertain, but remember that God has not changed. You can count on him when there is not much else you can count on in this life.

So much has changed in this last year, but God is the same. He is still Mighty, Loving, Just, Righteous, Holy, Awesome, Saviour, Redeemer, Lord, King of Kings.

He is still in control – 2020 and COVID-19 has not taken Him by surprise. He is unchanging. He is the same God who walked in that fiery furnace. He is able to rescue us! Amen?! But even if he does not... will you still worship Him?!! Even if...

This has been a year when we have had to adapt and change – individually and as a church family. The Executive meet recently to look at the budget planning for next year – is so hard when we don't know what next year will bring. We have a member's meeting coming up soon where we look at the budget and appoint leaders also – yet we don't know what lies ahead.

There are some things that I can tell you will remain the same. We will continue to love God, to love people, and to make disciples. That will never change. Let me remind you of our vision & values... If you have come in the church building recently you will have seen them on the walls at the entrance so that we don't forget them –

We will continue to trust God to have a greater influence.

We want to influence our community,

Build families, and...

Reach the next generation.

Then here are our values; to...

- 01 Love Jesus above everything**
- 02 Esteem the Word of God**
- 03 Freedom Through Spirit Life**
- 04 Prayer Is Seriously Important**
- 05 Influencing our community**
- 06 Grow and serve in our gifting**
- 07 Family is our heart**
- 08 Generosity is our norm**
- 09 Excellence honours God & inspires**
- 10 Faith-filled big-thinking risk-takers**

Amen.

Let me pray for us;