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Daniel 3:28-29, edited, ESV.

²⁸ Nebuchadnezzar said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve any god except their own God. ²⁹ Therefore I 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."

An Angel to Shut the Mouths of Lions.

I once spoke with a woman whose mother was in the hospital being treated for liver failure due to alcoholism. This woman did not want to talk in front of her mother and so we sat down in a waiting area. We'll call her Ellen. Ellen said that she realized that her mother was very sick and that her mother was going to need a lot of care. Ellen's mother had been living out of state, and late one night several months before, Ellen got a call from the police in her mother's city, saying that her mother had been driving drunk and had passed out at the wheel and crashed her car. She wasn't badly hurt, but the officer was calling because he was genuinely concerned for the safety of this older woman. We'll call Ellen's mother Terry. Terry had given the officer her daughter's phone number. Ellen had two other siblings that lived in other parts of the country, but neither of them wanted

to have anything to do with Terry. They had all grown up with a mother who was frequently passed out on the living room floor when they got up in the morning to go to school. Terry had been a loving mother when she was sober, and much of the time, she was very caring, making school lunches, creating Halloween costumes, taking them to softball and baseball games, and teaching them to ride bicycles. But there were simply too many bad memories for Ellen's two siblings. So, when that officer called, Ellen had no one else to turn to. Her father was dead. It was just Ellen. Ellen was a Christian. She felt a responsibility for her mother. So, she had moved her mother out to Colorado and placed her in an assisted living facility and in an intense program for alcoholics. The program, at least so far, had been successful. Terry was no longer drinking. But she had a lot of health problems. What Ellen wanted to talk about was her resentment at having to take care of a mother who had given her so many horrible childhood memories. She told me about incidents, such as the time her mother drove drunk to school to pick her up and got pulled over by the police in front of the school and right in front of Ellen's friends. What Ellen wanted to know was how was she going to give her mother loving care?

There's a story in the Book of Daniel. As a bit of background, the prophet Daniel was one of the Israelites who was sent into exile in Babylon after the

mighty nation of Babylon conquered Israel, a much smaller and militarily weaker country. In the beginning of Daniel, Chapters 1 to 6, Daniel describes events that occurred during this period. In the rest of Daniel, we read about prophetic visions of Daniel. Our passage is from the beginning of the book, Chapter 3. Here are verses 16–30, heavily edited for brevity, from the ESV.

¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

¹⁹ Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury. He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than usual. ²⁰ He ordered some of the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the fiery furnace.

²⁴ Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished. He declared to his counselors, “Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?” They answered and said, “True, O king.”

²⁵ The king 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.”

²⁶ Then Nebuchadnezzar declared, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out!” Then the three came out from the fire. ²⁷ And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king’s counselors gathered and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men.

²⁸ Nebuchadnezzar said, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve any god except their own God. ²⁹ 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.”

Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon has an image of himself made from gold. It is about ninety feet tall and at the dedication of the image, people are ordered to worship it as a sign of loyalty. Three youths, named Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, refuse. They dismiss Nebuchadnezzar’s threats - but to

refuse to worship the image means death. They proclaim that they will not worship that image or the gods of the Babylonians. They say that they have faith in the true God. They say that God's power is greater than the King's gods, and they say that God might choose to save them, or God might not do so. Even if God doesn't rescue them, they will still have unconditional trust in God. The point, of course, is that God, not Nebuchadnezzar, is in control of their ultimate fate. In fact, the king orders them bound and the fire to be cranked up to such a heat that it kills the men who have bound the three youths. They are tossed into the fire. But then the Babylonians see that the three boys are walking around in the fire unharmed. And here is the intriguing part: there is a fourth person there. God has not simply protected them from the fire. He has also sent an Angel to comfort them, to guide them. The king is so impressed that he advocates for the three young men throughout the empire of Babylon. They are to be protected always. And anyone who speaks against their God – the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego – is to be gruesomely punished. By showing their incredible trust in God to do what is best, God not only keeps them from being burned God allows all Israelites to be free to worship the true God. God has done something incredible with the trust that the three boys showed. For us, God affirms their faith in a stunning, memorable fashion way by sending an angel.

The ancient Israelites had a strong belief in angels, and they are highlighted in Genesis, Judges, Ezekiel, and Zechariah. Given the fact that Genesis and Judges represent earlier times in Israelite history, the Israelite belief in angels is quite ancient. The Bible presents angels as being heavenly beings - but they can appear on Earth as indistinguishable from humans. They do not fly. They surpass humans in wisdom and power. But they are not to be worshiped. In Heaven, they are quite numerous. Angels often serve as messengers, bringing messages from God to people, and sometimes vice versa. They can guide people, protect people, inspire people, and guard the nation of Israel. They can punish evil people. Angels also appear in the New Testament.

Here is something intriguing: After Ellen told me that she would have trouble caring for her mother, she said that she needed God to send an angel from Heaven to care for her mother, that she couldn't bear to do it herself.

Ellen went on to say that it was simply very hard for her to express love for her mother. And Terry wasn't satisfied with just being taken care of, with Ellen helping her find a place to live near Ellen, with Ellen helping her financially, with Ellen making doctor's appointments for her, going to the doctor with her, and visiting her at the hospital. Here is why Ellen needed an angel: Her mother Terry also needed – and in fact, demanded – emotional support. Terry needed Ellen to

show empathy for her, to say that she loved her, to act like a daughter who deeply cared for her mother. But every time Ellen tried to offer emotional support to her mother, Ellen's mind was filled with terrible memories from her childhood. That morning, a doctor had told Terry that her liver was permanently damaged, and this frightened Terry. She reached out for Ellen, and when Ellen went to hug her, all Ellen could think of was the time she had been sick with the flu in her room, and when she asked her mommy to please stay with her, her mother just walked away and went back to the kitchen to get another drink.

I told Ellen that she shouldn't put too much on her shoulders, that the mere fact that she was willing to invest her time in taking care of Terry, showed that she was a good person. She, unlike her two siblings, was willing to honor their mother despite the bad memories they had of their childhoods. God doesn't ask us to pretend. God knows that we are human. It was a sign of Ellen's true depth of faith as a Christian that she felt responsible to take care of her mother. I asked her if she knew that Terry had a disease, that alcoholism isn't something people have by choice. Ellen said yes, she knew this, and that was the reason she felt so guilty, so stressed by all of this. It was the sense that she should be loving her mother fully and unconditionally, that is what was causing so much conflict for Ellen. I suggested that if she decided to help her mother, she might want to also

distance herself emotionally. Terry would just have to come to understand that her alcoholism had impacted more than just Terry. It had impacted her children in a huge way. I said that Ellen should feel good about herself. She was struggling with her feelings and was doing her absolute best to honor her mother and God – despite the absence of an angel to take over the job of caring for Terry.

The story of the three youths is perhaps the best story about trust in God in the entire Bible. God doesn't just rescue the boys. God used these boys to serve the entire exiled nation of Israel. Instead of having to worship Nebuchadnezzar and the gods of the Babylonians, the king protects the people of Israel and their faith. This was astonishing for that time and place. As Americans, we are used to having freedom to worship God as we wish. Whenever one nation conquered another in the ancient world, they almost always forced their faith on the people they now controlled. Nebuchadnezzar continued worshipping pagan gods and having his people worship him as a god. But we see what God did with the faith of those three boys, when Nebuchadnezzar decrees:

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.

Consider something, also from Daniel, a few chapters later, Chapter 6. It is the famous story of Daniel being rescued from the den of lions. Because of

Daniel's deep wisdom, he outshines officials of the king. They hatch a plot against him, accusing him of disobeying a decree from the king. But Daniel maintains his faith in God and his trust that God will protect him. Here is our passage:

¹⁹ Then, at break of day, the king arose and went in haste to the den of lions. ²⁰ As he came near to the den where Daniel was, he cried out in a tone of anguish. The king declared to Daniel, "O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?" ²¹ Then Daniel said to the king, "O king, live forever! ²² My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths, and they have not harmed me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no harm." ²³ Then the king was exceedingly glad, and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God. ²⁴ And the king commanded, and those men who had maliciously accused Daniel were brought and cast into the den of lions—they, their children, and their wives. And before they reached the bottom of the den, the lions overpowered them and broke all their bones in pieces.

God sends an angel to rescue a believer, this time to shut the mouths of lions.

There are many elements of the Bible that are there to assure us of God's faithfulness to us. Repeatedly, we see God first punish the Israelites for straying morally, and then protect them, to ensure that they will thrive. God sends the Babylonians to attack the Holy Land, but then the Persians destroy the Babylonian Empire, and the Israelites are returned from exile. The Mosaic Covenant promises that they will have land, progeny, and God's blessing – and we see God providing all three. And numerous times in the New Testament we are reminded of God's faithfulness. There are many passages similar to this one, from 2nd

Thessalonians: ³ *But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.* Angels are presented in the Bible as actual beings, living not on this world, but capable of coming to Earth to fulfill the promise of protecting us. Angels are a living manifestation of God's faithfulness to us. They give us something concrete to hold on to when we are in dark times, when God seems distant. This has led to the belief that each of us has a personal so-called "Guardian Angel", although there is no specific Bible passage that speaks of each of us individually being assigned a permanent, single angel.

Because her mother was in the hospital for quite a while I saw Ellen one more time. The day that her mother was being discharged, Ellen and I sat down again in a quiet place. The tension was gone from her face. She was smiling for the first time that I had witnessed. She told me that she repeated to her mother something that I had said to her, that she was doing her best to honor both Terry and God, that it was simply important that Ellen emotionally distance herself a bit from her mother. This caused the two of them to have the frankest talk they had ever had. Terry apologized for letting her disease get in the way of providing a safe and secure home for her children. She said that she loved Ellen very much and that she understood why Ellen couldn't treat her the way that most children treat their mothers. We're all imperfect, Terry said, and she knew that Ellen

would have dismissed and forgotten the normal, daily mistakes that all parents make. Terry understood that in Ellen's case, things were very different, that her childhood was filled with horrible things. It was then that Ellen felt her heart fill with forgiveness for her mother. There were still many deep scars, and she would have trouble showing true empathy for Terry. But the two of them were finally talking about the wall that stood between them. Ellen said that being confronted with the responsibility of taking care of her mother, something that had caused great distress for her, ended up being the path to finally beginning the healing process so she could recover from the injuries of her childhood. Ellen laughed and said that apparently, she got the help she needed, even without God sending an angel to take over the care of her mother. I told her that perhaps God sent an angel not to care for her mother, but to care for her, for Ellen, and that God sends angels to protect and to guide the faithful. And I told her, in the Bible angels are described as usually being invisible to us, so don't be so sure there isn't an angel beside you, Ellen, right now.