

Buzz King

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Daniel 3:16–30, ESV

¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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.”

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. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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. ²² 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. ²³ And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace.

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.” ²⁵ 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.”

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. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ Nebuchadnezzar answered and said, “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. 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.” ³⁰ Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

Trust.

There is a story that I have heard from at least three different adults, all of them a bit younger than me, but not much. I'll tell it only from the perspective of one of these people, a woman who asked specifically for a chaplain to come and talk to her. She wasn't a patient; her mother was in the hospital being treated for the ravages of severe alcoholism. This woman did not want to talk in front of her mother and so we sat down in a remote waiting area where there was no one else around. 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 in southern California, but 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 anger at having to take care of a mother who had caused her to have 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 in front of the school and right in front of all of Ellen's friends. Another time, she had possibly been in withdrawal, Ellen wasn't sure, but after Ellen had struck out three times during a softball game, her mother had screamed at her nonstop all the way home, telling her that she would never be able to do anything in life if she didn't try harder. What Ellen wanted to know was how was

she going to take care of her mother? She knew that she had to do it, but it was going to be terrible to have to provide loving care for Terry.

There's a story in the Book of Daniel; part of it is in our quote today. As a bit of background, 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 visions that Daniel had. Our passage is from the beginning of the book, Chapter 3. 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: 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, 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. Whatever God decides to do with them is fine. The point, of course, is that God, not Nebuchadnezzar, is in control of their ultimate faith.irate, the king orders them

bound and he orders 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 there is a fourth person there. God has not only protected them from the fire: he has sent an Angel to comfort 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. In effect, by showing their incredible trust in God to do whatever is best, God not only keeps them from being burned - which they could have done by themselves simply by worshipping the golden image of the king - God allows all the Israelites to be free to worship the true God. God has done something incredible with the trust that the three boys showed.

Getting back to Ellen and her mother, Ellen said that it was just very hard for her to express love for her mother. The problem was that 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 and going to the doctor with her, and with visiting her at the hospital. 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 truly and deeply cared for her mother. The problem, of course, was that every time Ellen went to offer emotional support to her mother, Ellen's mind was filled with memories, terrible ones, of her childhood. Ellen told me about something that had happened just that morning. A doctor had told Terry that her liver was badly and 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 fact that she was willing to help her mother, to invest her time and her money 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. God made us the way we are, and 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. If her mother had been negligent or abusive and had not had any apparent illness it would have been a lot easier for her. 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 told her to please just do what she felt she should do for her mother, but that it was perfectly fine to 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 very big 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.

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, which would have already been a phenomenal thing. God used these boys to serve the entire exiled nation of Israel. Instead of having to worship the gods of the Babylonians, instead of having to worship King Nebuchadnezzar, the people of Israel end up being protected by the king. They gain religious independence. This is far more significant than it might seem. As Americans, we are used to having this freedom to worship God as we wish. This was not how things were done in the ancient world in this part of the world. Now, Nebuchadnezzar did not himself become a follower of the true God. He continued with his worshipping of pagan gods and

with having his people worship him as a god. But he did decree this: *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.* This was truly astonishing for that time and place. This is what God did with the trust of those three boys.

I saw Ellen again. Her mother was in the hospital for quite some time. The day that her mother was being discharged, Ellen looked me up. We sat down again in a quiet place. She looked far more relaxed. 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 Terry and God, that it was simply important that Ellen distance herself a bit emotionally 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. She had to give Ellen some grace. It was then that Ellen felt her

heart fill with a forgiveness for her mother. There were still many deep scars; she would still 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 said that it would be a lot easier now for her to serve God by serving her mother.

Please pray with me.

God, we ask that you take the bad things in our lives and use them to make us stronger in our faith. We ask that you use them to do great things for us. Whenever we are confronted with something that seems unfair, when we are tempted to question your love for us, please use this as a vehicle for healing and for a deepening of our trust in you. May we walk through life not fearing what could happen in the future, but rather welcoming it – because we know that you absolutely always do what is best. May our trust in you lift us up and bring great joy into our lives. Amen.