

## PLAY WITH THE BETTER FIRE

Pastor Colin Rieke ~ October 30, 2016



<sup>16</sup> Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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.” <sup>19</sup> 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 <sup>20</sup> and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. <sup>21</sup> So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. <sup>22</sup> 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, <sup>23</sup> and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace. <sup>24</sup> 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.” <sup>25</sup> 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.” <sup>26</sup> 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, <sup>27</sup> and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. 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. <sup>28</sup> 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. (Daniel 3:16-28)

*Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.*

One of the common occurrences in Africa was power outages, especially during the rainy season. It was almost expected when there was a heavy downpour that the power would go out - maybe it would be for only 5-minutes, sometimes it would be down for several hours. This happened so frequently that the power company knew my dad by name, because he would always call to inform them the power was out and to ask when the power would come back on. With such frequent outages, we had a drawer that had flashlights, candles and matches that we could go to in order to have some light in the house.

But the general rule was, you don’t go into that drawer if the power was not out. You don’t play with matches and light candles. Having little kids of my own now, I know precisely why that was a rule. I don’t want my kids to get burned, whether it’s playing with matches, lighting a candle, or having a candle

potentially light something else on fire. I'm sure it's a general rule in your household to, "Don't play with fire...because you might get burned." Parents don't want kids to learn the hard way.

Now, I'm no pyromaniac, but this morning, I am encouraging you to play with fire. Not the fire that is lit from a match, not the metaphorical fire of dangerous activities, but the fire of the gospel found in the Word of God. It is this fire that has been burning brightly throughout our service and our lessons for this morning. It is a better and more powerful fire than anything this world has to offer. It is a fire that has burned since the dawn of time and will continue to burn until the end of time. And so I encourage you to **PLAY WITH THE BETTER FIRE:**

1. It burns hotter than a furnace
2. It burns longer than a lifetime

(1)

This morning and for the next three Sundays, the focus in our worship services shifts to the end of the world. The end of the world is something the Bible talks about. The end of the world is something we are interested in. And the end of the world is coming. Jesus talked about the end of the world in our gospel for this morning, and amidst all of the terrible and destructive things that will happen at the end, there is one bright spot. There is one fire that will shine bright, even at the end. Jesus said, **"the gospel must first be preached to all nations."** It is this gospel fire that we focus on today.

And as our eyes are fixed on the end, we can remember and learn about what it means to have this better fire, this gospel fire burning within us right now. To do that, let us take a look at an account that is familiar to many - the three men in a fiery furnace.

The time frame we're looking at is about 600BC, in Babylon or modern day Iraq. God's people - the Israelites - had disobeyed him, and he had punished them by sending first the Assyrians, and then the Babylonians to conquer them and take a number of them back to Babylon. This is the time frame that the Bible calls the exile. It is during this time that Daniel lived in Babylon. In addition to Daniel, he had three other Israelite friends named Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. This account is about them.

The reading we had for this morning actually stepped into the middle of the story. King Nebuchadnezzar, ruler of Babylon had erected a statue which he commanded everyone in his kingdom was to bow down to. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, rightly refused to bow down to it. Now the king is threatening to cast them into a fiery furnace if they do not bow down. This is where our lesson begins, this is where the defense to the king begins. Notice how brightly the gospel fire is burning within Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

**"King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. 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. 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."** The gospel fire burning brightly in the hearts of these three men, burned hotter than a furnace - even recognizing that God may not deliver them from the flames. They knew the gospel fire would burn longer than their lifetime.

Even this well thought out and respectful response to the king was not enough to dissuade him from their fate. In fact, he ordered the furnace even hotter and then threw the three men - Shadrach, Meshach

and Abednego into the flames bound hand and foot. Nebuchadnezzar thought that he was rid of these troublemakers. You can imagine his surprise when he looked down into the furnace and could see men walking around in the flames - but not just the three he threw in there, but an angel of God himself, protecting Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

The king called the men out of the furnace and along with his advisors was astonished that they showed no signs of having been cast into the fire, not even the smell of smoke was on their clothes. **“Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who has sent his angel and rescued his servants!”** While this was not a confession of faith by the King, it was an acknowledgement of God’s clear power to protect his own.

THE BETTER FIRE not only burned hotter than a furnace, but it even delivered them from the hot furnace. Those are the stories we like to hear, right? The stories about God delivering his people through miraculous occurrences. And this is the power of our God. We confess this power every Sunday in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. I believe in God the Father Almighty - that is all powerful. He has the power to perform great miracles through his people, and he even has the power to deliver his people from death. This is the very essence of the gospel message. The simple gospel is that Jesus died for our sins and rose again, because of that, those who believe, will live with him in heaven. It is this gospel message that is powerful, it burns hotter than a furnace.

But how quick are we to PLAY WITH THE BETTER FIRE? Instead, it almost seems like we set THE BETTER FIRE aside to play with the more dangerous fire. Sure, there may not be many people telling us to go and worship Buddha or Allah, but how easily does the world influence us to avoid worshiping God, or to avoid opening the Bible? How easy it is to convince ourselves that it doesn’t matter what you believe, as long as you believe in Jesus? How easy it is to rationalize our own wicked behaviors by saying Jesus loves me anyway. When we do this, we neglect the better fire, and play with dangerous fire. And the longer you play with that dangerous fire, the more likely it is that you will be burned.

This better fire of the gospel is powerful enough to work outward miracles. But this better fire of the gospel is also powerful enough to work inward miracles. The better fire of the gospel heals up the burns of the dangerous fire. The better fire of the gospel purifies you before God. Allow the better fire of the gospel to work in your heart and life.

(2)

It is this BETTER FIRE OF THE GOSPEL that burns hotter than a furnace, but it also burns longer than a lifetime. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego knew that full well. “Whether God saves us or not, we will not bow down and worship your gods.” They recognized the better fire of the gospel was not just a part of their life, but they were a part of the gospel’s fire. God had given this gospel promise long before they were born, and they believed that gospel promise would burn brightly after they were gone, whether that time would come at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, or at a later time. By their actions, they were willing not only to die for this gospel fire, they had and were still willing to live for it.

That’s another important thing that we need to understand to. So often we focus on the dying for Christ. We would say that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were willing to die for Christ. When we invite people up to be confirmed and join the congregation (both youth and adult), we ask if they would be willing to die rather than let go of any of the teaching of the Bible. Fortunately, by the grace of God, we are not

yet to a point in our history that a majority of us will die for our faith. But that doesn't mean that we won't be asked to live for our faith, to live for the gospel fire that is dwelling within us.

I recently heard it put like this. Imagine your faith, your life as a Christian being a \$100 bill. Many Christians would love nothing more than to slap that \$100 bill down on the table before God and say, "Here God, I give you my all, I lay down my life for you and for your gospel," and be done. But what happens more often than not, is God says, "Take that \$100 to the bank and exchange it for nickels." And so instead of our Christian life being this one great act of love for God, it is in small chunks, as small as nickels. One nickel as you patiently waited behind a car going 5 miles under the speed limit, two nickels as you teach your children how to pray, another nickel for inviting your neighbor to join you for church, and so on. It's a lot harder to spend \$100 in nickels than to spend it all at once. But living for Christ is just like that.

And we are able to live for Christ because we know that this gospel faith that is in our hearts, is not just something that is a part of us, but that we are a part of it. Because we have been made a part of God's family, we have been connected to Christ and this will last longer than our earthly lifetime. (We'll talk more about what awaits us on another Sunday) Knowing this, and also the power of the gospel, gives us the strength to be able to stand up for THE BETTER FIRE OF THE GOSPEL against kings like Nebuchadnezzar, against friends, and even against family if necessary.

I have confidence that THE BETTER FIRE OF THE GOSPEL is burning bright right now. Not because you are such awesome and wonderful people, but because God is such an awesome and powerful God. He is the one who started the gospel fire burning, and he is the one who placed it into your hearts, and he is the one who will see that it continues to burn even until the end of the world. Praise God for this BETTER GOSPEL FIRE that burns hotter than a furnace, and burns longer than a lifetime. Amen.