

“How to Pray for Persecuted Christians”
Daniel 3:1-4:3
November 1, 2020
Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service
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Well, we have heard of the need for prayer for the persecuted church ... later this evening we will pray for the persecuted church ... but right now we will take a few minutes to consider *how* we pray for the persecuted church. The sermon will be a little shorter – though our text is a little longer. Tonight we’ll be looking at Daniel chapter three, along with the first few verses of chapter four.

The people of God are in exile, in Babylon. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are three Jews serving in King Nebuchadnezzar’s administration.

In this text, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego serve as models for us within a story of miraculous deliverance from persecution. And so they also provide for us a helpful guide on how we should pray for Christians facing persecution.

With that in mind, we turn to Daniel chapter three.

Please listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this evening:

^{3:1} King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its breadth six cubits. He set it up on the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. ² Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent to gather the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. ³ Then the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces gathered for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. And they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. ⁴ And the herald proclaimed aloud, “You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, ⁵ that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. ⁶ And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace.” ⁷ Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

⁸ Therefore at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and maliciously accused the Jews. ⁹ They declared to King Nebuchadnezzar, “O king, live forever! ¹⁰ You, O king, have made a decree, that every man who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, shall fall down and worship the golden image. ¹¹ And whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into a burning fiery furnace. ¹² There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men, O king, pay no attention to you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

¹³ Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought. So they brought these men before the king. ¹⁴ Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to

them, “Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? ¹⁵ Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?”

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.

4 King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you! ² It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me.

³ How great are his signs,

how mighty his wonders!

His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,

and his dominion endures from generation to generation.

This is the Word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

Let's pray ...

Lord, your testimonies are wonderful;

therefore our souls cling to them.
The unfolding of your word gives light;
it imparts understanding to the simple.
Therefore we long for your word
and your commandments.
Turn to us now and be gracious to us,
as is your way with those who love your name.
Keep our steps steady according to your promise,
and let no iniquity have dominion over us.
Redeem us from the oppression of the world,
that we may keep your precepts.
Make your face to shine upon us, your servants,
and teach us your statutes.
Grant all of this, we ask, for Jesus's sake. Amen.

INTRODUCTION:

Today, as we've noted, is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. We have heard some thoughts on our struggle to pray for persecuted Christians, as well as a report on the challenges Christians in Nigeria are facing. The bulletin has several other countries we will pray about tonight.

But, as I said, before we pray together, we will take a few minutes and consider *how* we pray for persecuted Christians.

Of course there are a lot of aspects of the trials that persecuted Christians face that we can and should pray for. I don't intend to be exhaustive tonight. But looking at Daniel chapter three I want to point out five ways we see here that we can and should pray for Christians facing persecution.

I. TRUST IN GOD'S ULTIMATE GOODNESS & DELIVERENCE REGARDLESS OF CIRCUMSTANCES & PROVIDENCE:

The first is found in verses seventeen and eighteen of our text. Let's hear those again – this is the answer that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego give to King Nebuchadnezzar, when he tells them of the suffering they will face if they continue to be faithful to the Lord – to Yahweh, the God of Israel. They say: “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. 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.”

There are three statements about God to note here in their response, as we think about how to pray for Christians facing persecution.

The first is that God is *able* to deliver them out of the specific trials and persecutions they face. We see that in verse seventeen, when they say: “our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace.”

The second statement they make is that God *will* deliver them from their persecutors. We see that in the second half of verse seventeen – they say: “and he [that is, God,] will deliver us out of your hand, O king.”

The third statement comes in verse eighteen. They say: “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.”

That line in verse eight, “but if not,” is key. And it is in reference to the first statement. God is able to deliver them from the fiery furnace ... but he may not.

And yet, they remain committed to God because they know that ultimately God will deliver them from their persecutors. But how can that be if God may not deliver them from the furnace?

Well, as Bryan Chapell points out, heaven is a form of deliverance from persecutors. The peace and joy of heaven, and the eternal promise of the new heavens and the new earth is a deliverance in which no oppressor will ever have any dominion over them again.

And so, God will ultimately deliver them, but there are two ways – two providences by which God may deliver them. One is by delivering them right now from their current trials and persecutions. The other is with final deliverance at their death – whether now or later. [Chapell, 66-68]

Based on this knowledge, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego declare that they will remain loyal to God, and will trust in his ultimate goodness and deliverance, regardless of their circumstances, and regardless of what providence God may bring their way.

And that is the first thing we can pray for, for those facing persecution: that they will trust in God’s goodness, and so remain faithful to him regardless of their circumstances and regardless of whether God brings deliverance in this life or only in the next one.

That’s the first thing we see.

II. ENDURANCE UNDER PROLONGED TEMPTATION:

The second thing we see is something that comes up throughout the chapter.

I’ve mentioned before, I think, the Terrence Malick movie titled *A Hidden Life*, about the life and then the death of Franz Jägerstätter. Jägerstätter was an Austrian farmer, and a devoted Christian, who out of moral objections, refused to take the loyalty oath to Hitler when he was called up for military service in World War II, and was, in the end, executed for it. He is considered a martyr.

It’s one of the best movies I have ever seen. Rod Dreher wrote of it, saying: “The movie is overwhelming. It’s without question a masterpiece, one of the greatest films I’ve ever seen, and to my mind, the best evocation of the Gospel ever committed to film. Nothing else even comes close.”

Some have been amazed by it.

But others have not been.

A common complaint by some is that the film is about twice as long as it should have been.

But its length ... and its prolonged focus and repetitiveness on the same theme and the same issue, is, I think, one of its most important features.

I hope to do a sermon on Jägerstätter one day, and I'll say more about both his life and this film then, but for now, I want to focus on this one aspect: the prolonged nature of Jägerstätter's temptation.

After the setting and characters are established, Jägerstätter learns that he is being called up to service and will be required to pledge loyalty to Hitler. And he struggles with this prospect. And he has many discussions about it. And he decides he cannot do it. And then the big day comes. He reports for service. He and those with him are asked to raise their right hand and pledge their loyalty to Hitler ... and Jägerstätter stands there with his hands at his sides and his eyes down ... and the soldiers, with no fanfare, take him away ... and his difficulties are only just beginning. He'll talk to an officer who will at length explain why he should violate his conscience. And then there will be another. And then his lawyer will make the same case to him. And his own pastor will. And other officials will as well. And sometimes it will be in the context of physical abuse and other times it will be in calm and warm explanations about the need for him to take the oath so he can get on with things and be able to see and take care of his family again. And this continues *for months*.

And as the movie goes on and on with these encounters, you realize how wrong our mental pictures of faithfulness under persecution usually are.

We tend to imagine a big moment that takes a spike of courage, to stand for what is right, and then it's over, and the consequences come.

But in reality, more often than not, what's needed is endurance in faithfulness, under prolonged temptation to be unfaithful to the Lord.

And we see something of that in Daniel chapter three.

It's not just one moment of temptation to unfaithfulness, but several.

The first temptation comes in verses four through six, as the Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are called together and told that they will be asked to bow before an idol. With this comes the temptation to rationalize obedience to the command and disobedience to the Lord.

The second temptation comes in verse seven, the moment when the signal is given, and all others bow down, and the Jews need to either bow before the idol, or resist out of faithfulness to the Lord. That moment is when the tension spikes and a rush of courage is needed, and they stand while others bow down.

But that's in many ways only how it gets started.

Because a third temptation comes in verse eight.

Some of the Chaldeans who were against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego go to the king and report to him what the Jews had done. We don't know, but we may imagine that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego became aware of this before their enemies went to the king. And with that came another round of temptation. Would they continue this, or now that real attention was being drawn to it, would they turn away from the Lord?

A fourth temptation comes in verses fourteen and fifteen, when King Nebuchadnezzar confronts Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego directly, by telling them that once again the signal will be given, and they will be expected to bow to the idol. Nebuchadnezzar is recreating the initial temptation, now with all eyes on them, and the question is whether they will endure in their resistance.

A fifth temptation comes in verses sixteen through eighteen when they have to speak to the king, and explain their resistance. They could try to rationalize their decision to him. They could try to soften their stance. They could say something that will contradict the stand they seem to be taking.

The sixth temptation comes in verse nineteen, when they see the anger of the king they had served – the king who had raised them to their current status – they see his face taken over with anger, and hear the words he must have directed at them about how much they had disappointed him.

The seventh temptation comes in verse twenty when the consequences of their stand becomes real. As the furnace is heated and they are bound, you could imagine that a new round of internal doubts and questions came – a new round of temptations to recant and to save their own lives.

The eighth temptation comes in verse twenty-two as they are brought to the furnace and see the men around them, who weren't even going into the furnace, die of the extreme heat. As they saw the flames, as they felt the heat, as they witnessed others perishing from it, a new wave of temptation must have hit them.

There were multiple moments of temptation for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and for many Christians there are far more.

The second thing we need to pray for, for Christians facing persecution, is for endurance in faithfulness under prolonged temptation to be unfaithful to the Lord.

III. THE COMFORT OF GOD'S PRESENCE:

The third thing that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego received, and that Christians facing persecution often desperately need, is the comfort of experiencing the Lord's presence.

It is striking that God not only delivers Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, but he is by their side in the furnace.

In verse twenty-five Nebuchadnezzar looks in the furnace and says: "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."

Jesus Christ, before his incarnation, made his presence with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego visibly known to them.

Now, Jesus assures us in Matthew 28 that he is always with his people – to the very end of the age. That is always true. But we do not always experience his comforting presence. We don't always feel it.

Christ gave Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego the extraordinary blessing of actually seeing his presence with them. But even without that miraculous vision, he makes his presence known to us as well. By his Spirit, we can become especially aware of his presence with us. And it can bring extraordinary comfort in the face of trials, temptations, and persecutions.

And so, the third thing we can pray for, for Christians facing persecution, is that they would receive the comfort of experiencing the Lord's presence.

IV. DELIVERANCE FROM PERSECUTION:

The fourth thing we can pray for, for Christians experiencing persecution, is deliverance from the persecution itself.

Now, as we said earlier, ultimate deliverance can come in this life or it may only come in the next one. But it is right and fitting that we should pray for their deliverance in this life, even as we are assured that it will certainly come in the next one.

And, in fact, deliverance in this life is what God does for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in verses twenty-five through twenty-seven.

They are completely delivered and not a single hair on their heads is singed.

There are many ways that God can deliver his people, but regardless of the circumstances, as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego confessed, he is always able to do that.

And so the fourth thing we can and should pray for is deliverance for Christians from the persecution itself.

So – where does that leave us?

When it comes to Christians facing persecution, first, we should pray that they will trust in God's goodness, and so remain faithful to him regardless of their circumstances and the outcome of their suffering in this life.

Second, we should pray for endurance in faithfulness under prolonged temptation to be unfaithful to the Lord.

Third, we should pray that they would receive the comfort of experiencing the Lord's presence.

Fourth, we should pray that even in this life they would be delivered from the persecution itself.

V. THE CONQUERING OF GOD'S AND THEIR ENEMIES:

Fifth and finally, we should pray that God will conquer his and their enemies.

We know that this will happen ultimately, at Christ's return, but we should pray for it in this life as well.

And in Daniel chapters three and four we see that God's conquering can come in one of two ways.

First, God can conquer the enemies of his people through judgment.

We see that in verse twenty-nine. There the king says: "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."

Here we see that God may bring worldly powers or worldly circumstances in judgment against those who would persecute his people. We would imagine that these words stood as a strong warning to the advisers of the king who had initially reported to him about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Judgment is one form in which God may conquer the enemies of his people who are set on persecuting them. But it's not the only way ... and it's not necessarily the most glorious way.

The greatest way God conquers his enemies is seen in Nebuchadnezzar himself. In verse twenty-six Nebuchadnezzar goes from being one who was enraged by Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's loyalty to their God, to one who declares that their God is "the Most High God."

In verse twenty-nine he declares that their God can do what no other god can. And in the beginning of chapter four we hear from Nebuchadnezzar himself. He writes:

"King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you! ² It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me.

³ How great are his signs,
how mighty his wonders!
His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and his dominion endures from generation to generation.

In all this we see that Nebuchadnezzar has been conquered by seeing and confessing the greatness of God.

And this is another way we can pray that God would conquer the persecutors of his people: not only through judgment, but through conversion.

Our prayer can be that they would not only see God for who he is for a moment, but that they would confess who he is with true faith, leading to eternal salvation – that God would conquer their hearts for all eternity.

And so, taken all together, when it comes to Christians facing persecution, first, we should pray that they will trust in God’s goodness regardless of their circumstances.

Second, we should pray for endurance under temptation.

Third, we should pray that they would receive the comfort of experiencing the Lord’s presence.

Fourth, we should pray for deliverance, right now, from the persecution itself.

And fifth, we should pray that God would conquer their persecutors, either through judgment, or, even more gloriously, through their conversion.

CONCLUSION:

Our brothers and sisters around the world face many trials and temptations for their faithfulness to Christ our king.

And while it is difficult, and the suffering is real for them, none of it is new to God. It has been a reality for God’s people since the fall.

And yet, while many Christians suffer, we live in relative ease.

Let us then use our ease and use our freedom for their benefit. Let us pray earnestly for them in the midst of their trials: For their faithfulness, for their endurance, for their comfort, for their deliverance, and for God’s response to their enemies.

We do not know what God will do for them in this life. But we know that he is good. And we know that he is able. And so, let us pray for our brothers and sisters.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Chapell, Bryan. *The Gospel According to Daniel: A Christ-Centered Approach*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014.
Keller, Timothy. *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*. New York, NY: Penguin, 2013.