Grace Under Fire - Part 3

Our Companion in the Fire

(Daniel 3:1-28)

Welcome to week number three of our series Grace Under Fire. We’ve been talking about different ways God’s grace functions in our lives, and we have discovered that often his grace is found in our weakness or in the midst of a great difficulty or fiery trial of some kind. In other words, God often uses the fire in our lives to refine what he has already given us, and so it is his grace that continues to sustain us in the fire.

This morning, I want to share with you a message I have entitled “Our Companion in The Fire” and I want to launch off beginning in Exodus chapter three. My prayer is that the Word of God would speak to you in a profound way so that your life is changed, that you are strengthened, and that you grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. And so, as we come to Exodus chapter three, Moses has been on the backside of the desert for 40 years taking care of his father-in-law’s sheep, but suddenly things are about to change. Day after day, month after month, year after year, Moses had been leading the sheep, taking care of the sheep, and now he was about to discover that there was a purpose, a reason why God had taken him through this wilderness experience.

You see, the Bible reveals that nothing happens by accident, what you are going through, what you are experiencing, is preparation for what God is going to do in your life. In other words, there was sin, fallenness, and the consequences of sin, but then there was God working to deliver you through it all. And so, there is cause and effect, but nothing that you have been through will be wasted because God is working in all things. And as we come to our text in chapter three, while Moses was taking care of the sheep, the Bible says that,

“The Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So, he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn up" (Exodus 3:2-3 NKJV).

Now, it was not unusual for a bush to burn in the desert because it’s so hot, and the sun’s rays are so incredibly intense, but what was unusual about this sight, what caused Moses to turn aside to see, was that the bush didn’t stop burning, it wasn’t consumed by the flames.

I think Moses experience at the burning bush is much like the season we find ourselves in today, because it’s not unusual for people to get sick; people get sick all the time. They may catch a cold, even get the flu, and so that’s not unusual, but what is so unusual about the times that we’re living in right now is that so many people got sick with the coronavirus. Not only that, but it kept on burning through the summer, it kept burning through the winter, and it kept on burning into the next year, and then into this year. And so, it makes me wonder if in this season, in this time, if COVID-19 might not be our burning bush.

Now, I don’t want to come across as being insensitive or unsympathetic to those who have personally experienced great loss in this season, because we’ve all experienced loss, but my point is that this virus should have burned out, it should have been consumed, and yet it kept on burning. And so, it occurred to me that whenever God needed to get people’s attention in the Bible it was like a burning bush that was not consumed. Whatever he was using to get their attention, whether a plague, a famine, a fire or flood, it wouldn’t stop until he had gotten the appropriate response.

In fact, God said it this to the prophet Isaiah, he said,

“So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11).

And so, when something starts and doesn’t stop, it may be our burning bush, and it just may be that God is trying to tell us something, trying to get our attention. Whenever we are busy, distracted, or even purposefully refusing to listen to God, sometimes he may have to send a burning bush, a flood or a fire. And that’s why it is wise to turn aside, to consider the source, and say, “Yes, Lord, I hear you.”

I hope that as the people of God we can learn from this, not hardening our hearts, not refusing to listen to God, but paying attention because he said,

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you” (Isaiah 43:2, NKJV).

And so, we want to turn aside, spending time in his presence, just listening for his voice. Because if we don’t start listening to God, if we don’t stop calling wrong right and right wrong, if we don’t stop and turn aside, it is possible Jesus warned,

“Something worse may happen to you” (John 5:14).

And so, the angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in flames of fire from within the bush. The bush started burning and it kept on burning, because one way or another the Lord was going to get his attention. And so, Moses said,

“I will now turn aside and see this great sight” (Exodus 3:3, NKJV).

And honestly, that’s all God ever wanted us to do, was to turn aside and see, because that’s what repentance means. We have to change direction, that’s why the Lord said,

“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and what did he say? He said, “Turn from their wicked ways.” Because there has to be a change of direction, a turning aside, and that’s what repentance means, it means changing your behavior. And so, burning bushes always require a change of direction, a turning aside, and the Lord says, “…then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14).

And so, we can pray until we’re blue in the face, we can fast until we wither away, but it was never the prayers of God’s people that stopped the plagues, it was the repentance of God’s people. And so, if we don’t change our behavior, if we don’t get a renewed sense of justice, if we don’t stop calling wrong right and right wrong, the bush is going to continue burning, because prayer is not the point, it is the repentance of the people, it is the turning aside.

If you remember the story of Jonah, he preached to the people of Nineveh, and the Bible says,

“God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened” (Jonah 3:10).

You see, it was the repentance of the people that stopped God from destroying Nineveh, they turned from their evil ways, and they were spared from judgment.

It is the turning aside, the change of direction, that will turn things around, and so from time to time in your life and in my life, there have been burning bushes. Something that started burning and would not stop, and God used it to get our attention. You see, a burning bush is something in your life that you can’t ignore, you can’t stop it, it doesn’t make sense, and you’ve got to deal with it. It will make you get down on your knees, doing what you’ve got to do to get a word from God, and it doesn’t have to be a pandemic. It could be a prodigal son, a broken marriage, or a doctor’s diagnosis, but whatever it is you’re going through a very difficult time and it’s got your attention.

Now, I know there are some people who find it difficult to believe that they would ever have to go through a difficult time because of some erroneous teaching that has proliferated the American church. But we’re not always going to be able to walk on water, the sun is not always going to be shining, sometimes there’s going to be wind, rain, thunder and lightning. In fact, Jesus said,

“In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33).

And so, I don’t know what that burning bush might be for you, it could be a financial bush, it could be a health-related bush, but whatever it is, it just keeps burning, it’s not consumed. And you can’t figure out why this is happening to you, why it doesn’t stop, why things don’t get better, but the Bible says,

“Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings” (1 Peter 4:12-13, NKJV).

Now, I know the context is persecution for the gospel, but the principle remains the same. And so, what do you do when you pass through the rivers, when you walk through the fire, when the bush is burning but it’s not consumed?

I think the Bible teaches very clearly that in whatever we are going through that we must trust and obey God, because as followers of Christ we live by faith and not by sight. And so, we are to remain faithful, trusting God in spite of our circumstances, in spite of the ruling, the verdict, the diagnosis, or situation that we find ourselves in, because the Bible says,

“These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Peter 1:7).

In other words, the Holy Spirit is telling us that a faith that is not tested, a faith that hasn’t been refined by fire, is a faith that cannot be trusted.

In the remainder of our time together, I want to show you a powerful example of faith being tested in the lives of three young men named Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. This illustration of grace under fire is found in Daniel chapter three and it really highlights how amazing the grace of God is as he walks with us through the fire of the difficulties, struggles, and challenges of life.

Now, if you remember the story, these three men were taken captive to Babylon and they were promoted to be administrators over the provinces. The problem was that it came about after a period of time that King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, a statue 90 feet tall, 30 yards straight up into the air, and his herald made this public proclamation,

“As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace" (Daniel 3:5-6).

Now, as soon the people heard the sound of this music, men of every nation and language bowed down, that is everybody except for three guys. You guessed it, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to go down.

Of course, King Nebuchadnezzar was livid, he was furious with rage, because he would never be satisfied with anything less than everybody bowing. Acting like the narcissistic egomaniac that he was, Nebuchadnezzar commanded that they be brought before him, and he gives them an ultimatum. He says,

“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” (Daniel 3:15).

It seems as if they are facing what could turn out to be a really bad day, but Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego remained faithful, they stood firm in their convictions, trusting God to rescue them, in spite of Nebuchadnezzar’s threat to throw them into the fire.

And so, these three young men stood before the king, facing imminent death, trusting that God was absolutely 100% in control over their situation. They didn’t have to post their circumstances in graphic detail on Facebook, asking for a consensus of what they should do, because genuine faith obeys God instead of following the crowd. And so, even though it would’ve been easy for them just to rationalize away their obedience and compromise their faith, they didn’t do that because they had a genuine faith that was determined to honor and obey God.

Instead of doing what everybody else was doing, they replied to the king,

“If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king" (Daniel 3:17).

And so, they determined to obey God and trust him regardless of what their circumstances looked like. And I promise you as a follower of Christ, if you’re truly trying to follow after his calling on your life, your spiritual enemy will give you plenty of opportunities to compromise what you believe.

However, a tested, proven, genuine faith will not be swayed, detoured, or distracted. And so, even if you left the doctor’s office with a diagnosis that was absolutely devastating, we’re going to pray and trust God because the Bible says,

“The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up” (James 5:15).

And so, our faith will rise above those situations where we are threatened with a fiery furnace, or when we have come face-to-face with a burning bush, because we believe with everything in us that God is not only able to heal, but God is willing to heal and able to restore all things.

And so, believing with everything in us, we won’t allow our faith to be confined by the things that we see. And we pray that God would increase our faith knowing that he is…

“Able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (Ephesians 3:20).

And so, it’s his power at work within us, and we’re not abandoned, we’re not left filled with doubt, despairing of life, because we know that our God is the same yesterday, and today, and forever.

Our faith says that God is with us and our faith believes no matter what we see. But what do we do if God doesn’t do what we are believing that he wants to do? You know, what if you are praying and believing that God is going to heal someone and they die? What if you’re believing for God to bring your kid back to faith in Christ, but they seem even more determined in their rebellion? What do you do?

Well, we need to follow Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s example, because our responsibility is to be obedient, to be faithful to God, living the life that he has called us to live. And so, anything beyond trusting God is outside of our job description, because what God does and how he does it is entirely up to him. And so, watch with these three men do, they look at Nebuchadnezzar, believing that their God is able, their God is willing, and they said in verse 18, “Even if he doesn’t rescue us,

“We want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (Daniel 3:18).

Now, most of us know how this turns out, but right now these three men are facing the possibility of a horrible death, this is a crisis of faith, because they don’t know what God is going to do, but their faith is unwavering. And so, they determine to trust God to rescue them, because they know the goodness and the power of their God.

They trust him with the outcome and their perseverance and tenacious refusal to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar’s idol deflated his arrogant sense of self, causing him to become even more enraged. He was so furious that he ordered the furnace to be heated seven times hotter than usual and commanded the three men to be thrown into the blazing furnace.

“The furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace” (Daniel 3:22-23).

Now, King Nebuchadnezzar is watching this as his soldiers died on the outside and the three Hebrews fell inside. And the Bible says that he leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisors,

“Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?" They replied, "Certainly, O king." 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" (Daniel 3:24-25).

Now, most reputable Bible scholars believe this fourth man to be a pre-incarnate revelation of the Son of God himself and this is just as important for us today as it was for Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego in that day. We’ve got to remember that this is not the New Testament, this is not the book of Acts, but many centuries earlier they had a companion in the fire. Some of you here today needed to hear that because God will show you his power in all kinds of different ways over the course of your life, but you will know the reality of the presence of Christ best when you are in the fire.

Nebuchadnezzar, approached the opening and shouted into the blazing flames of the furnace,

“Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!" So, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out of the fire, 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” (Daniel 3:26-27).

Now, obviously there was something that was burned, something that was consumed by the flames, because they were walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed. In other words, they were thrown into the blazing furnace bound, firmly tied, and the fire burned that which bound them. They were loosed and set free.

This is such a word of encouragement today, because some of you are facing a fire right now, maybe it’s a blazing furnace, maybe a burning bush, and you’ve been begging God to deliver you from this trial. Praying that God would end this season of suffering, but I wonder if maybe the very thing you are asking God to remove is that which he is going to use to set you free? You see, it may be that the flames are for your deliverance, and there is a promise, a fourth man, a companion in the fire who said,

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, Nor shall the flame scorch you” (Isaiah 43:2, NKJV).

That are some of you today who have been restrained by the economy, bound by addiction and self-gratification, facing the burning pressure of excruciating trials, even hurting the people you love the most. And I wonder if the very thing that you have been praying for God to remove is the very thing that God is using to set you free and to draw you into a deeper, closer, more intimate relationship with him.

You see, this is so important, because we can’t minimize what the presence of God in our circumstances will accomplish. We have a companion in the fire, and we know that God will use all things, right?

“We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

And so, when God shows up in a burning bush, in your pain, in your trial, as the world looks on in amazement. People will see you walking free from addiction, delivered from your trial, faithful in your relationships, honoring God with your health, and they will praise God. 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 3:28).

You see, when your faith is tested, that is a faith that can be trusted, and God is glorified.

As we close today, would you take some time this coming week to turn aside and to thank God for the flames, the burning bush in your life. Identify it, write it down, and try to recognize where God has been with you in the flames. Praise him for those areas where his grace has been sufficient and take some time to simply be with Jesus. That’s all he really wanted after all, that’s why he got into the flames with you, because his grace is with you, it is for you, and it sustains you.

Let’s pray together.

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