

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Daniel 3:8-19
Sermon Title: "Surrender before God and Live"

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{SLIDE 1} There is a section we have in all our brains called the hypothalamus. One of the most important functions of the hypothalamus is to link the nervous system to the endocrine system via the pituitary gland.¹ You don't have to remember that – I'm just telling you what it does. Where the hypothalamus comes into play for us is when we think about the fight-or-flight response. You see, something happens to us – when we perceive some sort of threat or attack – the hypothalamus in our brains becomes active. It affects our nervous system and our adrenaline-cortical system. All these thoughts and emotions start shoots off in our minds at a million miles a second and we have a choice to make. Do we fight the threat or attack, or do we run from it? God forbid, someone breaks into our homes while we are there, and the fight-or-flight response tells us to confront the intruder. We are hiking up a snow-covered mountain and a huge snowball comes rolling down toward us at high speed. The fight-or-flight response may tell us to run for our lives. As you can tell from the pictures on

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hypothalamus> and <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hypothalamus>.

the screen, in the case of the soccer players they decide to fight over a bad play. In the case of Johnny Depp in the other picture, playing Captain Jack Sparrow from the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies, he decides to run for it with all those natives chasing him.

So we could fight or we could give flight. Or, a third option is that we could give up. {SLIDE 2} We could surrender to whatever is threatening us, believing that is the better move. We don't feel like fighting and we cannot run away from the situation, so we might as well give up and be honest. We are caught in a lie, and we can no way out of it, so we might as well tell the truth. We are caught speeding on the highway, and we cannot get into a high-speed chase with the police, and we cannot get out of the car and confront the officer, so we humbly submit to the officer's requests and pray he only gives us a warning.

Or, in the case of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego from our reading today in Daniel 3, they could just give up, surrender, to the king, and be honest, and choose to do whatever the king wants them to do.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego are caught doing they shouldn't be doing: they are caught not bowing down to a golden idol. King Nebuchadnezzar has built this tall statute out of gold, and he has decreed to all his subjects that when they hear the

horn, the flute, the harp, the lyre, the entire orchestra of instruments and people sounding off, at once they are to stop what they are doing and bow before this golden image. It isn't hard to miss. This statue that King Nebuchadnezzar built is not hard to miss. It is 90 feet tall. The Statue of Liberty itself is 111.5 feet tall from her feet to the top of her crown. All of the king's subjects can see this thing out in the open, so they know which way to bow when the instruments and choir start playing.

And it isn't as though nobody got the memo about bowing to this statue. At the beginning of Daniel 3, it says that King Nebuchadnezzar sent word to all the satraps, administrators, governors, counselors, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and all the officials of every province.² Every government official from the state to federal levels, every person serving in the courts from the judges to the police know what is going on. The word is out. Nobody is kept from hearing it. When the orchestra and singers begin to play and sing whatever music they are supposed to, every person, rich and poor, every leader, state and federal, must stop everything, turn to the statue, and give it the proper respect due to it. This is the king's solemn decree, and nobody is supposed to break it.

² Cf. Daniel 3:2-3.

Everybody knows this, including Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. And what do they do? They break the decree. They don't bow – they stand. They may not have turned to the statue – they may have placed their backs to it. The three men might have continued with their work, while the band played and everyone bowed. Or, maybe the men stopped what they were doing and offered worship to God, the only true God that could move their hearts.

{SLIDE 3} And now they are caught. They have been ratted out by certain Chaldeans who want to find favor with the king. “We know these guys, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego,” those certain Chaldeans say. “You know who they are, O king, because you appointed them to high offices within your own government.³ These three men will not bow down to your statue. When the music plays, everybody falls to the ground except these men. Everybody obeys your solemn decree except these men, your appointed government officials, your loyal servants from another country. What are you going to do about it?”

King Nebuchadnezzar knows what he is going to do. He is going to become enraged. He is going to let his fury burn like a scorching fire. “Is it true, O

³ Cf. Daniel 2:46-49.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, that you do not serve my gods and you do not worship the golden statue that I have set up?”

Now, the hypothalamuses in the brains of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego are on the alert. A threat has been presented to them. They could fight, but what good would that do? Fight the king and get killed by his soldiers. They could flee, but what good would that do? They might be able to reach the edge of the city before the soldiers captured them. They could give up, and maybe in such a situation we would give up. We would surrender our offense to the king, admit that we haven't bowed and worshipped the idol just as he decreed. We would beg for mercy, asking the king not to kill us and just give us a second chance. Maybe we would do that, raise the white flag and surrender.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego admit to King Nebuchadnezzar that they disobeyed his direct order. They surrender information about disobeying the decree – they do not lie about – but they do not surrender themselves. They do not give up themselves to the king and bow to his wishes.

“Now,” the king offers the three men, “now, if you are ready when you hear the sound... to fall down and worship the statue that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be

thrown into a furnace of blazing fire, and who is the god that will deliver you out of my hand?”⁴ The hypothalamuses in the brains of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego must be on overdrive. The king is offering them a choice: Bow and live or don’t bow and don’t live. Choose option one. Bow and live to see another day. Surrender, confess, change your attitude!

The three men surrender information – they do not lie – but they do not surrender themselves. At least, they do not surrender themselves to King Nebuchadnezzar. They surrender themselves to the God and Lord of their lives. It takes a lot of guts to stand up to the king, but they do. “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us.”⁵

{SLIDE 4} Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego are making a choice. They choose not to fight, but they choose to take flight. They flee to their God whom they believe will rescue them. They go to the God whom they trust will show that they have done nothing wrong. They have chosen the right path. They follow God in all situations, no matter what trials come their

⁴ Daniel 3:15.

⁵ Daniel 3:16-17.

way. They will always flee to their God and do as God wishes.

{SLIDE 5} We are not under the threat of a king or politician telling us to bow and worship a golden idol. But we sense threats or attacks to our personal being from time to time that cause our hypothalamuses to kick into gear. Any bad news that comes out way about our health, our finances, even our family's health and finances, may make us feel hopeless and weak. Any bad word that strikes our ears, such as "You're ugly" or "You're stupid" or "Nobody cares about you," may make us want to lash out and cause damage. We know we should not surrender to such news and such words, and we know we cannot react with equal negativity. The word of God tells us to trust the One we serve. Believe in the One who saves us from sin and death.

We sense a threat, a situation that arises that causes us to panic and fear. We wish this situation didn't crop up – we wish things would work out as we plan for them to work out. We might even wake up in the middle of the night with panic seizing our minds. We cannot go back to sleep. We cannot get the threat out of our heads. We are tired and scared and freaking out. We know we shouldn't think or feel this way, but we cannot help it. God can help it, though. God is awake to hear our pleas. God is close by to

solve our problems. We flee to our God and grab hold of him. We put our full trust in God and lay our troubles before God for him to solve. We ask God to remedy the situation in ways we cannot – God is able to do things behind the scenes, which we cannot do. We ask God to give us the time and effort to solve the problems in the ways we are able. There is once a prayer that goes, “God, grant me the courage to change the things I can change”⁶ We gain a deeper sense of peace. We receive a new game plan on how to execute a certain task. We are energized to do what we can, and give the rest to God to solve. And God will solve it in God’s own unique way. We already believe that.

{SLIDE 6} Yet, here is where Shadrach’s, Meshach’s, and Abed-Nego’s true faith lies. This is where our true faith lies in the next words they share with King Nebuchadnezzar. They just said that they will disobey the king by not bowing down to the golden idol, and that they will place their trust in God to deliver them. Then, the three men say this, “But if [God doesn’t deliver us from the fire], be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serenity_Prayer.

up.”⁷ We need to understand something here: we know how the story ends. They are thrown into the furnace but they live. God rescues them. However, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego didn’t know the end of their own story. They trusted that it *could* end well for them, but they were not completely sure. God would deliver them, but they still could burn up in the furnace. Nothing was guaranteed for them, other than their full trust in God no matter what happened.

This is where true faith lies. When we cannot see the end of it all, when we don’t know how things will turn out, good or bad, and yet we still place our trust in God no matter what. Maybe we do know that things will not end well with us. Maybe the situation is what it is, and we cannot change it. So what? We do not fight or flee from it. We surrender to the God who holds us in his hand, and will take care of us in this life and in the next.

{SLIDE 7} One of the passage I love turning to on this subject is Habakkuk 3:16-19. Here is a person who knows that disaster is coming, and it is not going to be pretty. People are going to die – Habakkuk himself may die. And yet, the prophet says, “Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the

⁷ Daniel 3:19.

vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights.” God is his focus. God is the One the prophet flees to, surrendering all he has and all he is, knowing that God will be his salvation always.

We may think of Joseph in the Book of Genesis, who was sold by his brothers, sent to a foreign land, and got caught up in a fake scandal with the captain of the guard’s wife.⁸ As he languishes in jail, serving sentence for a crime he didn’t commit, never knowing when he might be let out, Joseph never stopped being the dreamer. He never stopped being a servant of God who worked with fellow prisoners, offering them wisdom that comes only from God. He never gave up his gift of interpreting dreams, which was always God’s call on his life.

There are a number of times I would tell my son to pray about something. And he would say that the prayers don’t work. He would still be worried and scared about something he had to do. He would wake up in the middle of the night at times and not be able

⁸ Cf. Genesis 39.

to fall back asleep. I told him that seeking God is constant. It doesn't happen once or twice or even ten times. It is constant, never ending, never failing. The words of God must always be in our minds as we face whatever situation, good or bad. Fleeing to God and surrendering our lives to God is relentless, ceaseless.

When it comes to our friends in Daniel 3, after they spoke to the king, who knows how many hundreds of times Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego repeated to themselves that God will deliver them. God will deliver them. They may survive the fire or be burned up. No matter, God will deliver them. Even within that fiery furnace, they had to be repeating those same words, keeping God right in front of them.

{SLIDE 8} When we encounter a threat or an attack, our brains are going to trigger. They are going to take us places we may or may not want to go. Fear and terror, hopelessness and weakness may become our partners for a time. Yet, we know there is a God who watches over us. There is our God who knows what the threat or attack is, and knows what to do about it. We flee to our God. We bow before God as our only rescue. God will take care of us, no matter what. God will always be our salvation.

Assurance of Pardon:

In Christ, we are offered a new design for living: open hearts, abundant forgiveness, yearning to serve others, desire to be one with God. The old is gone, and a new life has begun. Accept Christ's sacrifice, and be healed of your sin. Through him you and I are forgiven - thanks be to God. Amen.