

Thresholds
Furnace Doors
Daniel 3 (*selected verses*)

Today we begin a series called ***Thresholds***. **One definition for a Threshold is “the place or point of entering or beginning.” Like a doorway. A threshold is associated with an entry point.**

But there is another meaning for threshold: “a point at which a physiological or psychological effect is produced.” This has more of an understanding of capacity, like we might say a threshold of pain or potential.

Doors we go through in life, whether literal or metaphorical, often lead to experiences that expand us. They increase our ability or potential. For this month of June we are going to consider some powerful biblical stories that all involve some door or passageway that a person crosses, a threshold, that also leads to expanded abilities, thresholds. Our thresholds of endurance or influence or potential are increased because of thresholds or doors we walk through. And we begin today by considering one of my all time favorite stories in the Bible and the impact of furnace doors. Let us pray...

In roughly twelve years Alexander the Great had conquered the world. He traveled further east than any other European ruler, but he died at the age of 32. Following his death his ten generals divided up the empire. This was significant for Israel and the geopolitical conditions leading up to the birth of Jesus. **Israel was between (still image of map)** two ruling empires started by the General Seleucus to the north, and Ptolemy to the south. **(start live graphic of map)** They warred against each other going back and forth for control. By the second century BC the Seleucids maintained the upper hand.

The rule of the Seleucid Empire at this time was a ruthless dictator named Antiochus Epiphanes the IV. We recognize in this last name the word Epiphany. It means “revelation of God,” but what does it say about a person who gives himself the last name “the revelation of God?” Have any of you ever dated someone with the name Epiphanes?

Because Antiochus thought he was God, he didn't tolerate anyone worshipping another God, which for Jews was a problem, so Antiochus despised the Jewish people. He ordered executions of entire families one at a time to get them to recant their faith in God.

So imagine living in a time like this, trying to hold onto your faith, wondering where God is during so much trial. Maybe some of us wonder that now? You might not be facing execution but what you are going through feels that way. It feels like you are dying, and you wonder where God is in the midst of it all?

It was during this time that someone wrote down the story of a Jewish national hero named Daniel who was a prisoner of war in Babylon some 300 years before. The book contains stories of courage and faithfulness meant to encourage people struggling to hold onto their faith. One of those stories, which is one of the better known in the Bible, involves Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

It begins with the King of Babylon creating a statue of himself for the people to worship. When certain music played every person, no matter what they were doing, was to bow down in the direction of this statue, because you were acknowledging that the king is Epiphanes!

Well, some tattletale reported to the king that Daniel's friends refused to do this, that they worshipped a God bigger than the king. So the king had them brought before him where there is a giant furnace. And the king sort of sounds like the Godfather. He says, "I'll make you an offer you can't refuse. When you hear the music, if you bow down to my statue, you'll eat supper tonight. But if you don't, I'm throwing you through that door and then what God can save you from my hand?" At least that's how I hear it!

But look at the response of Daniel's friends: ***"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."*** (Daniel 3:16-18)

This is a rare and exceptional display of faith. They are supremely confident in God's ability to deliver them. They even expect it! There's no "I hope God can" or "I want to believe God can." They are counting on God's deliverance. Yet it's the next line that stops you in your tracks, "But even if he does not..."

Now that's a picture of faith. **Faith= Believing in what God can do, without depending on God to do, in order to decide what you will do.**

Sometimes we need to see God respond in order to confirm we made a right decision. We aren't sure. And the bigger the risk the more dependent we are on a sign or some heavenly vindication. But then there are other times, times when we know what is right, and we know it with such certainty that you can't be talked out of it, and even if God doesn't respond like you hope, that's okay. Because you know in your gut what is right. And you know that whatever cost you pay is not nearly as great a cost as a loss of integrity, or trust, or honor.

Beth Moore became an internationally known Christian speaker and author in the Southern Baptist Church. Her resources were widely used across the denomination and not just for women. Men and youth studied her resources.

But she risked it all several years ago when disparaging remarks against women were made by prominent figures suggesting that it's okay for men to make unwanted advances on women. This struck a nerve in Beth Moore. She had been sexually abused as a

teenage girl. She wanted to know why the male leaders of her church were not speaking out about this. She began calling them out. She started questioning other actions of denominational leaders like condemning LGBTQ people.

She became blacklisted. Leaders discouraged conferences from inviting her to speak. Her church owned publishing company was forced to cancel future book deals. They stopped promoting her materials. She didn't feel welcome in her church anymore.

In her recent memoir, *All My Knotted Up Life*, she closes saying that life hasn't turned out like she thought it would, but she's finding peace. She describes it like a balled up mess of string. Everything gets knotted together and makes no sense, but you find it's a tight knot and it holds. And that is how she has found God in her life. She finishes with these words:

“Every inch of this harrowing journey, all of the bruising and bleeding and sobbing and pleading, my hand has been tightly knotted, safe and warm, with the hand of Jesus. In all the letting go, he has held me fast. He will hold me still. And he will lead me home. Blest be the tie that binds.”

I believe Beth Moore has total faith to believe that God could intervene and prevent her from losing any income and speaking invitations and book deals, but that is not why she did what she did. She didn't do it for the provisions, she did it for the peace that comes from doing what she believes is right. She has a “But even if God does not...” faith.

That is a powerful faith. That's what Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego displayed, but there is more to their story. You see God did show up for the three friends. God did intervene, but not to keep them out of the furnace. God showed up in the furnace!

The king ordered the furnace to be heated seven times hotter than normal, then had the three friends tied up and thrown in. The furnace was so hot the guards who threw them in the furnace died! But then the king was astonished and said, ***“Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?...Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.”*** (3:24-25)

Now who could that fourth person be who appeared like a son of God? Someone willing to meet people in death, and yet have power over death. That sounds like Jesus doesn't it? At this, the king tells Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to come out of the furnace. So they do and were indeed unharmed. They didn't even smell like smoke! The king became a believer in their God and promoted them.

What a story. It turns out happily ever after. But notice carefully the point the writer is making. This outcome did not happen because God kept the three friends out of the furnace. It happened because God met them in the furnace. They crossed a threshold that took them into a furnace. And because they did their spiritual thresholds were enlarged. They discovered God's presence and power in a whole new way.

Sometimes God delivers people *from* furnaces,

but sometimes God also delivers people *in* furnaces!

That's the legacy of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, they faced the furnace and found that the place they wanted to avoid was the safest place to be, because God met them there. They became folk heroes and were forever remembered, and their story was important enough for a writer three hundred years later to record so that people facing their own fires in the second century BC would take courage from it.

And I wonder how needed is this story today all these many years later? Is there a danger in our world today, particularly here in America that provides so many comforts, to make the goal of life to be furnace avoidance? Is there a risk for people of faith to believe that when the heat gets turned up that it must be a sign that God isn't present? That our faith isn't working? That if pain or risk or potential loss is involved, God has turned away from us?

Sometimes I wonder if we pray so much for God to turn down the heat and keep us out of the fire, when God is actually waiting to meet us in the fire!

Are you facing a fire of some kind today? Maybe at work. Something is going on, and your temptation is to put your head down and avoid it, because you know if you address it, it could mean repercussions for you. You may even lose your job? But what is the price of not addressing?

Perhaps you face a relationship fire. You feel the need to be honest about something, but if you do, you fear the other person may cut you off. Yet how strong a relationship is it, if you can't be honest?

Maybe you feel the need to take a stand on some issue, maybe an issue of justice or respect or fair treatment of others. But if you take that stand, it may mean that you become the target of attack. But what you can get away from is knowing in your gut what is the right thing to do. You want God to change things and remove this furnace, but what if God is waiting for you in the furnace?

Our thresholds of trusting in God's power and discovering God's faithfulness are in direct proportion to our willingness to cross furnace thresholds.

John Ortberg has a wonderful thought about this passage. He says, "I imagine God having a **calendar page**, and whatever the date was when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had their ordeal with Nebuchadnezzar, at that time when it happened, say 10:00, God has it written down on his calendar that day at 10:00: "Meet Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace."

And then he asks, **"What if they hadn't shown up? What if they had decided to bend their knees and avoid the furnace? What would they have missed?"**

And then you wonder, where on God's calendar does God have it written down to meet you in some furnace? Where is God anticipating a date with you in a place you would rather avoid?

We spend so much time avoiding furnaces. We work really hard to make life comfortable and satisfying—and there's nothing wrong with that. But when we face a furnace, what might be the difference if stop avoiding it? What would be the difference if we stopped asking God for less heat and quit dodging the flames and just said, "God, I'm trusting you to bring me through the flames." What better thing might be awaiting you on the other side if you would just trust him to meet you there?

Somewhere along the way a virus crept into the Christian faith, a virus that can be paralyzing spiritually. It convinces us that our faith should shield us from problems, protect us from pain, and make our lives easier. But, said the writer of Hebrews, let's remember all the heroes of the faith. Let's remember what the faith meant for them. And the writer starts with Abel and Noah and Moses and Abraham, moving right through the Old Testament. He finally says this doesn't even mention the scores of others ***"who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength..."*** (Hebrews 11:33-34)

And eventually came Jesus, God's own Son, who faced the fire of crucifixion, but through that fire brought the hope of resurrection, confirming that God meets us in the flames. And those who followed him discovered this same truth. Paul did. All the apostles did. An early church leader named Polycarp did. A Christian leader named Telemachus gave his life to end gladiator games discovered this truth. So did Joan of Arc and William Tyndale and Martin Luther and Martin Luther King Jr and Mother Teresa.

Do you think that God has quit now? Do you think your furnaces are hotter than what these faced? I don't. I believe that sometimes God does deliver us from furnaces. It's okay to ask God to keep us out of the fire. But even if God does not, we can know, that our God is able to deliver in furnaces.

Amen.