

Fear or Courage? The Lion's Den Week 2

By Pastor Mandy Barkhaus

Yo! What up? Church. Family. One of the high schoolers dared me to start the service with yo, so I had to do it right. there's a lot of different ways to, tell the story of the Bible. Kind of the big themes from beginning to end. Now for N.T. Wright, anti Wright as a theologian, talk about him a lot.

One of my favorites he tells the Bible story is kind of he says it's a six act play and his acts are act one creation and then the fall and then Israel and then Jesus and then act five is the church. That's where we are. And then act six is the new creation that's yet to come. Now, Max Anders is an author and a pastor, and he has a book.

He has lots of books, but one of his books he has is called 30 Days to Understanding the Bible. It's a great book. It's kind of a workbook that you work through. His themes of the Bible and Max Anders themes are as follows. Creation. The Patriarch so that's Abraham and the others. Then you have the Exodus where Moses leads God's people out of Egypt.

Then you have the conquest. That's where Joshua leads God's people to the Promised Land, into the Promised Land. Then you have the period of judges Deborah and Samson and the others. Then you have the kingdom. The kingdom is established, and eventually King David rules, and then the kingdom splits into the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom. Then you have the exile where other countries come and conquer the kingdom.

Then you have the return where they go back to the Promised land. Then there's this period of silence and then the gospel message, right? The story of Jesus, then church, then missions. So the book of Daniel falls into the exile part of the story, and the exile is part of the story from the very beginning. Think about it.

our faith has always been about going home. Think about the very first story in the Bible humans living in this beautiful garden home right with God. And then they chose not to follow God. And God banished them from the garden. They were in exile and wanting to go back home. So all throughout our faith history, there's kind of been two questions that we've asked over and over again.

How did we get here, and is there any hope now? There is a great, video call from the Bible Project. If you just Google the Bible Project exile, you'll hear more about this idea of us going home. So check that out sometime. So the humans were banished from their garden, right? Banished from the Garden of Eden. And then God's people were given hope.

They were given hope of this promised land, and it took them a while to get there. But eventually they made it to the promised land. And then they chose not to follow the covenant that God had established with them. And then again they were put into exile. Now for Daniel and his friends, the two questions that I had posed already how did we get here?

And is there any hope? They had some answers for these questions. their answers were we got here because we strayed from God as a people. And the hope is, is if we stay faithful to God, that God will keep God's promises. But that requires courage, not fear. So eventually God's people will will be finally allowed to return home, right?

Daniel and his friends, they're in there in, Babylon and eventually they're going to go back home. But when they go back home, it's not quite the home that they were looking for because they were under. Oh, oppressive rule. But then Jesus shows up and Jesus is in exile with them, right? Jesus is in exile with us, wandering around.

But Jesus shows us a way to a forever home. Now, we just wrapped up the Christmas season, and in that time we recognize the incarnation, where God becomes flesh and lives among us. And we celebrate that by the birth of this baby Jesus. But today we celebrate baptism of the Lord Sunday in churches all across the world are thinking and talking about Jesus's baptism.

Because today is a day to not only recognize Jesus's baptism in the Jordan River, but it's the beginning of Jesus's ministry and that Jesus was not just flesh, but also divine. So on today and then the next following couple of Sundays, we are going to be examining our own baptismal vows and how they can help us understand the faith and story of Daniel and his friends.

Now, these baptismal vows, these are vows that you hear during baptism on new Member Sunday, on Confirmation Sunday. And these vows are historic questions that have asked, of us. All right. As we take a step forward toward understanding how God works in our lives and how we are supposed to work in the world. So today, we're going to be looking at this vow, the vow that asks, do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?

Now, I want you to keep that question in mind as we read on in the book of Daniel, and we're going to read some from chapter three. But before we get there, let's recap chapter one and two. Now in Daniel chapter one, we see Daniel and his friends taken right into Babylon. They're in exile and they are pressured to adapt to the Babylonian culture and lifestyle.

But they stand strong by their convictions and they chose not to defile themselves with the king's food, and instead they chose to honor God. Now their faithfulness, resolve in God, granting them wisdom and knowledge and a place in the king's court. Now in Daniel chapter two, King Nebuchadnezzar has this troubling dream, and none of his wise men can interpret this dream.

So Daniel steps forward and he relies on his faith of God and also God's sovereignty and he interprets the dream. And this sovereignty, this idea of God being sovereignty is displayed in the interpretation of the dream, saying, there is a prophecy of earthly kingdoms and God's eternal reign. Now, these couple chapters establish this idea of an unwavering faith and courage of Daniel and his friends, and it sets the stage for chapter three, this fiery trial that they will face.

Now, King Nebuchadnezzar, he creates this golden statue too, and he tells everyone, you have to bow down to this golden statue every time you hear the music. Well, Daniel's friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow down. So of course, King Nebuchadnezzar has a reaction to their refusal of bowing down. So Daniel chapter three, verses 19 through 21, Nebuchadnezzar was filled with rage and his face twisted beyond recognition because of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

In response, he commanded that the furnace be heated up to seven times its normal heat. He told some of the strongest men in his army to buy Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and throw them

into the furnace of flaming fire. So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were bound, still dressed in all their clothes and thrown into the furnace of flaming fire.

Now for the people who wrote the Bible, they wrote about their experiences with God and their understanding of God, and for them their understanding of God was this, if it rained, God was sending them a blessing. They were God was blessing them. If it didn't rain, God was punishing them. If God allowed for another kingdom to come in and capture them, God was punishing them and so forth.

Now this comes back to the idea of the sovereignty of God. And overall, that is the theme of Daniel. I said this last week that Daniel, chapter four, verse 17 and chapter five, verse 21 kind of lays out the theme that God is sovereign over all kingdoms on the earth. Now, if God is sovereign or all knowing, all powerful, absolutely free, if God is sovereign, if God is absolutely free, that God is free to do what God pleases, that there's no other higher being above God.

God doesn't have to ask permission to do anything right? Then the question becomes, why does evil and pain and suffering exist? The question and now other religions have created an answer for this. And other religions, say that they, they believe in dualism or they believe in two gods that, a good God and an evil god together created the world.

And and there's this kind of power, power fight. But this doesn't work for the Christian expression of God, because we believe that God alone created the heavens and the earth. So another God that is as powerful or more powerful is not possible. So then, if there is only one God, and if God is sovereign, all powerful and all knowing and free, then where does the free will of humans fit in?

Because if God is in control of everything, as we like to say, then that means I am not responsible for any of my actions and neither are you, right? I mean, if God is in control, then everything that happens is because of God. Like God is this puppet master, telling us and then making us do every single thing.

Now, within the Christian world, there are some disagreements on how we reconcile God's sovereignty and our free will. And it has kind of been divided into two major camps on this issue. And they're both named after theologians. one Jacob Arminius and the other, John Calvin. These are two theologians who had two different ideas about God's sovereignty and God's free will.

Now, for Jacob, Arminius, God's sovereignty is not absolute, in that God predetermined every human action, but rather Jacob. Arminius believed that God exercises God's power in a way that allows for free will. Now the other side John Calvin John Calvin views that God has absolute control over all of creation, and nothing happens outside of the will of God, including salvation.

That's where, some people believe in predestination, right? There's nothing you can do. If you're if God chose you to be saved, then you are saved. Now, denominations that follow these two different paths, for, for Arminius, or some sort of, offshoot of these two ideas, Methodist traditions follow the Arminius path, as do all their offshoots, the Salvation Army and such.

most Baptist and most Pentecostal churches follow Arminius way of thinking God's about God's sovereignty and free will. And then on the other side, you have the Calvinist churches, which are the

Presbyterian churches and the Reformed Baptists and and most of the other reformed denominations. Now, it's important for us to wrestle with what we believe about God's sovereignty.

is is everything that happens God's plan, even the bad things. Right. That's a question we need to ask. Ask. And what exactly is God in control of? And it's likely as we wrestle with this, we're probably not going to all agree. But it's really important that we think through what we believe and why we believe it. Because when life gets hard, not if like life gets hard, but when life gets hard and we are trying to stay faithful to God or trying to tell others about God, we have to have an understanding of who we are worshiping now.

Tozer, another theologian, says this about this idea of God's sovereignty and our free will. He says something like, God decided to let people have the freedom to choose between right and wrong from the very beginning. And people have used that freedom to make decisions and choices. Now, when someone decides to do something bad, it doesn't ruin God's plan.

It actually fits into it because God didn't choose for us. He chose to give us the ability to decide for ourselves. No one can stop God or question what God is doing. Our freedom to choose what we do every single day, in every single moment, is possible because God is in control. If God weren't in control, God wouldn't have the confidence to give us the freedom, right?

He if he didn't know that he could control it. In the end, he wouldn't give us those choices. So, Tozer has this illustration to kind of help combine these two views, the Arminius view and the Calvinist view. And he says, think about it this way. a ship that is going from one, one destination to another, from one port to another.

Now God in God's sovereignty, has determined the ship's destination. Right? God is like it's starting at this port and it's ending up at this port over here. Now, the passengers on the ship are have the freedom to make choices. They have the freedom to move around. They have a freedom to interact, act. They have, freedom to do good things or the freedom to do bad things.

But the ship will continue on to its final destination. And the ultimate end is a belief that God has this new creation on this other side for us. That's what God has in store for us, that that's the hope we have in Jesus. Now, the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Abednego highlights this incredible gift of free will, right?

God did not force these three to to make, to into obedience. God didn't force that, but instead God invited them to choose. And then when faced with this incredible decision, are we going to bow down to this golden statue, or are we going to face the fiery furnace? They, with courage rooted in their faith of God, an understanding of God's sovereignty, they trusted and said, we refuse to bow down.

Now for these three they were living out the baptismal vow that we just talked about. They were accepting the freedom and the power that God gave them to resist, to resist evil and injustice and oppression. That's what they were doing. They were living out this vow. And and when or if we say yes to this vow, we also acknowledge the freedom that God grants us to choose God's way over the world's way.

Now, the courage of these three friends is amazing. Think about it. They chose not to bow down to this idol, even know they were going to be thrown into a fiery furnace. But did they know the outcome of this? Now here's how the King responded to them. They, When refusing to bow down, King Nebuchadnezzar said then.

Then what? God? King Nebuchadnezzar asked, what? God will rescue you from my power? And so this is how they answered. They said, King, if our God, the one we serve, is able to rescue us from the furnace of flaming fire, and from your power, Your Majesty, then let him rescue us. But if he doesn't know this for certain, your Majesty, we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue that you've set up.

See, they've recognized God's authority over their lives and circumstances without expecting a guaranteed outcome. Think about that. That is hard to do because we want to believe that our prayers, if we pray hard enough, if we have enough faith, if we do the right things, then God will bless us. God will answer our prayers in the way that we hope.

But faith means having the courage to do the right thing while also trusting, that we do not. And we cannot know the big picture. But we trust. We trust that in the end that God will bring us back to the garden, that God will carry us home, that the kingdom will come here on earth as it is in heaven.

Teresa of Avila had this. She wrote this. And it's kind of simple, but kind of powerful, but kind of hard. she said, let nothing disturb you. Let nothing frighten you. God alone is enough. Isn't that a great way to live if we actually put this into action? Okay. We we we don't have anything to fear because God alone is enough.

And we just keep moving on in our life. And now, last week, we handed out a sheet. I think you got one. Maybe this week, two of some steps that you can take to help learn some lessons from Daniel. And one of those steps on there is to name your fears. And I did that personally this this week.

I said I'm going to name my fears. And so I did. I sat down and I thought about what what are my fears in life? You know, the fears of that. I'm not I'm not enough or fear of failure or, fear of of losing trust in the ones I love or a fear of safety and health and wellness for my kids is a huge fear that I have.

And then I have this journal, and I wrote down my fears one one after another, and then I cross them off. And then I wrote, God is bigger than this. And then I wrote my next fear, and I crossed it out and I said, God is bigger than this. And by doing that, I gave the power back to God.

And, and and it took the power away from my fears. If I can say God is bigger than this fear, he takes the power away from your fears. So these three friends, they stood together, right? They didn't do it alone. They supported one another in their refusal to bow down. I'm sure they were fearful, but they had each other.

And similarly, like we need to find those we can trust, people in our life group or, or close friends that we can share things with others, church, community, people and places that will hold us accountable and encourage us to stand strong in our faith. So choosing courage often comes with a cost for for these friends, it meant risking their lives.

For us, it might mean standing against injustice or, confronting personal fears or trusting God when the circumstances seem bleak. So the question is, do you choose fear or do you choose courage? Because our faith is about going home. But we have a we have to travel on the road to to get there. And when we travel on the road, there's decisions that we have to make.

God in God's sovereignty gave us the power to do something about the evil we see in the world. But too often we don't do the things that we know we should do because we'll just say something like this well, God has a plan, or we don't do the things that we know we should because we say, well, that's the will of God.

And then that way I am not responsible for any evil or anything I see because, well, that's the will of God. But we have to take ownership of our actions and the consequences that we might face. So I'm going to ask you this question. I'm going to ask you this baptismal vow. And if you want to, answer, then you answer with, I do.

But here's the question. Do you accept the freedom and the power that God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves? They do. This week, I invite you to reflect on areas in your life where you're, tempted to bow down, where you're tempted to freeze and not do anything. And I invite you to also share your reflections with your life group or, a trusted friend and ask for prayer in accountability.

Say, I know that there is something that's tugging on my heart that's evil in this world. Help me do something about it. And maybe that just simply starts starts with prayer. Because God delivered Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from that fiery trial, from that fiery furnace. And God will also deliver us. But we have to choose courage on the path.

We have to choose to trust God's sovereignty, that God will lead us home. Would you pray with me? God, we too often don't take action because we are afraid of the consequences. It's too often God that we don't take action because we are afraid we might not make enough of a difference. You know, we're just one person. What can we do?

But God help us to to realize that you have given us power and you have given us the freedom to stand up for things. When we say this is not right and God, we don't know the outcome. Sometimes when we make decisions, and sometimes it's scary to to make a decision to stand up for something you believe in saying, you know what?

I don't know what the outcome is. Help us to be courageous. Help us to to understand that God, you are walking with us. You are walking with those three friends in the fiery furnace, and you're gonna be walking with us in every single trial that we face. And when we realize that you are walking with us, God, that will help us to have that courage to make those decisions difficult.

Decisions. But God, you've entrusted that with us. And in the end, we know that your kingdom will come here on earth, that all will be well. So give us the courage to trust in that. And I say all of this in the name of Jesus, Amen.