

Text: Daniel 3:13-30. Reformation 500. **October 29, 2017.**

Grace and peace are yours through our Savior Jesus. Amen.

Imagine you are summoned to a meeting with the president of the United States. Wow! Cool! Maybe not everyone would think so. You arrive. He plays a video of you singing in church. He asks, "Is that you?" He shows you a copy of the Meditation devotion book you've been reading. He asks, "Have you been reading this? Do you believe this?" He plays the Time of Grace video you've been faithfully sharing every day on Facebook. He asks, "Do you really believe this, all of this? Because if you do, we've got a big problem. This stuff is causing trouble in our country. This is dividing people. We can't have that. People are taking sides. People are refusing to obey laws. I need you stop going to church. I need you to throw away your Meditations. I need you to go back on Facebook and tell all your friends, 'I don't believe any of that stuff in those videos.' If you don't, I'm throwing you in prison. Then what good will your god be?" What do you do? What God can rescue you?

Almost 500 years ago another man was confronted with that same choice. The secular and religious powers of the day threatened Martin Luther with the ban, excommunication from the church for false teaching and also the death sentence, that anyone who found him could kill him, and by killing Luther, that person would be performing a service for the king. What God could rescue him?

Over two thousand, five hundred years ago, three men were faced with an even more serious, instant life and death situation. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were forced to bow down to another god, or be thrown immediately into a fiery furnace. What God could rescue them? Their answer? Our God. The God we serve is able to rescue us! The God we serve is able to rescue us! The God we serve is able to rescue us.

Let's give a little bit of background. God's people had been taken captive to a land called Babylon. The king of Babylon was easily the most powerful man on earth at the time. The king's name was Nebuchadnezzar. He had conquered a lot of people, from many different lands. He figured, like a lot of rulers, that religion would be a way to unite people. He also wanted all his subjects to show their loyalty to him. So he constructed a gold statue, 90 feet high and 9 feet wide. He gathered subjects from all over on to a big, open plain, where they could all see the statue. He commanded everyone in his kingdom to bow down and worship this statue when they heard the sound of music. And everyone did, literally, everyone did. Except three guys, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Imagine, everyone, everyone, thousands of people, except three. They didn't stick out like sore thumbs. They stuck out like people willing to die!

Well, the king was a nice guy. He wanted to give them a second chance. These three men were government workers. Maybe they misunderstood. So Nebuchadnezzar called them in. Gave them one more chance. Explained to them, very clearly. "If you don't bow down, you will go into the fiery furnace! Then what god will be able to rescue you from *my* hand?" Then what god indeed? What god could possibly rescue you from the fiery furnace?

Think of all the excuses they could have made. We can bow down without actually worshipping. We know what's in our hearts. We can just do it this one time and then ask forgiveness later. God is loving. He will understand that we have to obey the king. If we lose our positions in the government, how can we help people? How can we help our own people?

But they didn't give in to any of these excuses. They stood solid and firm and replied to the most powerful man in the world, "We don't need to defend ourselves before you." Wow! Talk about guts! "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!" Oh snap! It is on! Can you imagine hearing that? Can you picture listening to that conversation? No one dared talk to the king like that. What god? Our god! What god? Our god. What god can rescue? Our God can rescue! What god can save? Our God can save! The God we serve is able to rescue us! And from my perspective, that's not even the coolest part of their confession. It's their next words. "Even if he does not, we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." Even if he does not. Even if we burn up in the blazing furnace, we will go to heaven. Thanks for doing us a favor, o king. Even if you take away our jobs, we will keep serving our God. Even if no one stands with us. Even if all we get for serving our God is loneliness and pain and unpopularity, we will still serve our God, because he is the only one who can save us, eternally. Even if our God doesn't save us from this fiery furnace, he has already saved us from the fiery furnace of hell. O king, we're good. Wow! I don't have a word to describe that kind of spiritual courage.

What would your answer be? We need to answer the king's question. What god will be able to rescue you? Maybe we aren't standing in front of a fiery furnace, but we're standing at the office. People are talking about their weekend partying. They ask what you did? Tell them you went to church? Or make the excuse, "If I tell them, they won't talk to me anymore, then what chance will I ever have?" What about the fires of passion burning on the next date, jump into those fires, or confess your antiquated idea from an antiquated god who says, "wait until marriage"? Maybe we need to ask another question, "Which fiery furnace are you most afraid of?" The fire of unpopularity on earth, or the eternal fires of hell?

Let's get back to our three friends and their king. When they confessed, "Our God is able to rescue us," now the king's attitude changed. He got more than a little angry. Notice he was ok with them, until he got God involved. Once God was involved, there was no fence to ride anymore. He ordered the furnace heated to the maximum temperature. He wanted to watch them burn! And it's like he grabbed his popcorn and took a front row seat.

But then, it got crazy. These guys didn't burn! The strong soldiers who took them to the furnace were killed by the blazing heat, just being close to it. But the guys in the fire did not burn. What? They were not harmed. Not one hair was singed. Their robes were not scorched. They didn't even smell like smoke. You can't do that when you are grilling in the backyard. But God can do that! God rescued them. God did a great miracle, down to the details. This is no fairy tale. God rescued them. And God even sent someone to keep them company. Even the unbelieving Nebuchadnezzar and his advisers had to admit it. Even they saw it. A fourth man walking around in the fire. Having a nice casual conversation it seems. Was this an angel? Was this even Jesus himself?

You see, Jesus has done more for us than rescue us from a fiery furnace on earth. Jesus saved us from the eternal fire of hell. Jesus walked through that fire. In your place. Jesus went to hell. So you don't have to. Jesus rescued you from someone more powerful than the president or Nebuchadnezzar. Jesus rescued you from the clutches of the devil and wrapped you up in the fire-proof clothing of baptism, keeps you close to him in his fire-safe arms. The cross is at the center of our rescue. The cross is the focal point of our salvation. The cross gives us strength to keep on serving God, even when we are unpopular, even when political correctness is not on our side. The God we serve is on our side. The God

we serve is able to rescue us. The God we serve has rescued us from the worst fiery furnace of all. It's amazing what happened. Nebuchadnezzar stopped being angry and his attitude changed once again. He had sudden respect for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and even more respect for their God. Nebuchadnezzar wasn't brought to true faith. He didn't start worshipping their God. We wouldn't say he became a believer. And yet, in his tolerant society, that just kept throwing gods onto the pile and constructed a new god if you had some extra gold lying around, even Nebuchadnezzar had to admit, "No other god can save in this way." You can't speak against this god, unless you want to be torn limb from limb. Ok, maybe he wasn't really tolerant. You can't say anything bad about this God, unless you want your house torn into a pile of rubble. Because no other god can save in this way. No other god can save like our God, by sending his Son, by having him die on a cross, by having Jesus go through the fires of hell instead of you. Yeah, no other god can save in this way and so we will not serve any other god. Now the story has a happy ending for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. And I'm not so much talking about the last verse of the text, that they were promoted in the kingdom. The happy ending is that they turned opposition from a government into an opportunity to witness. Opposition became opportunity. That's the happy ending. Their courage and conviction testified to the truth. That's a happy ending even if the God they served chose to let that fiery furnace be their ticket to heaven. Martin Luther did the same. Opposition became opportunity. It was almost 500 years ago that he stood before a powerful emperor and a more powerful church and spoke some unforgettable words. "I can not and will not recant. Here I stand." There wasn't an immediate happy ending for Martin Luther. He was declared a false teacher and an outlaw and had to go into hiding. But the Word of God brought a happy ending. The good news, "We are saved only by God's grace and not by our good works," spread like a good fire across the world. And still warms our hearts today. There Luther stood. On the Word of God. And here we stand. On the Word of God, 500 years after Luther, 2500 years after Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Still today, we can turn opposition into opportunity. Maybe you won't speak before the president, or an emperor or the most powerful king in the world. But you can speak to family, friends, even turn the opposition of the government into an opportunity. Maybe there won't be a happy ending here on earth. But there will always be a happy ending in heaven. Why? Because the God we serve is able to rescue us. The God we serve has already saved us. Amen.