

I. Introduction

- A. For this summer, we have focused on a series called Underdog. What does God say during difficult times? What does God do for His people during difficult times? And how should we live and react and love and serve during difficult times?
- B. Today we're looking at one of the most famous underdog moments in all of Scripture—a place that most of us can easily relate to: the story of the Fiery Furnace and three young underdogs named Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.
- C. They were immersed in a world they didn't understand and couldn't control. They were torn from their support network, from their family, their friends, and their familiar places. They had no power. No control over their environment. No money. No respect. And now the king and his court did everything they could to strip their identities too.
- D. They were serious underdogs in a very difficult place, and they were about to face the biggest showdown of their lives.
- E. Maybe you can relate. Maybe there's a showdown coming in your life. A financial showdown—a foreclosure, or layoff, or a retirement account that has evaporated. Or a family showdown—you're heading toward a divorce and it's going to be ugly.
- F. Or maybe you just feel out of control. You're not where you were meant to be, not where you want to be, and you really can't control the world around you.
- G. I want to invite you to put yourself in the shoes of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Let God speak to a deep place inside you today through His Word.
- H. Let's get into the story.

II. *1 King Nebuchadnezzar made a gold statue ninety feet tall and nine feet wide and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. 2 Then he sent messages to the princes, prefects, governors, advisers, counselors, judges, magistrates, and all the provincial officials to come to the dedication of the statue he had set up. 3 When all these officials had arrived and were standing before the image King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, 4 a herald shouted out, "People of all races and nations and languages, listen to the king's command! 5 When you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes, and other instruments, bow to the ground to worship King Nebuchadnezzar's gold statue. 6 Anyone who refuses to obey will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace." 7 So at the sound of the musical instruments, all the people, whatever their race or nation or language, bowed to the ground and worshiped the statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up (Daniel 3:1-7, NLT).*

- A. One of my first real jobs in my 20's was working at some major grocery stores in Chicago. Actually, I worked for Jewel (Albertsons) first and then transferred over to Eagle (Lucky Foods).
- B. I was 19 years old and I worked produce—it was one of those mega huge stores and it was open 24 hours. It was really far from my house and in a lousy neighborhood. Most of the time I took a bus and a train and another bus to get to work and it took forever. I was always worried about getting mugged—though when you see this physique you'd undoubtedly back off.
- C. A new store opened really close to home in a really nice neighborhood, and I jumped at the chance to interview for the job.
- D. On my job application, I put in writing that I couldn't work on Tuesday nights. And in the interview, I told the store manager I couldn't work on Tuesday nights.
- E. That's because on Tuesday night, I ran the Awana clubs for my church, and forty or fifty boys would be counting on me to show up. That was my priority, I told them.
- F. Well, I got the job, and it was great. I stacked apples, and threw away moldy oranges, and trimmed green onions and cried the whole time. I became an expert at picking out ripe pineapples and cantaloupes, though I never figured out watermelons.
- G. They never scheduled me on Tuesday nights, until about a half a year into the job. The manager posted a schedule on the wall, and I was written down for Tuesday night.
- H. Right away I went to my boss and told him I couldn't work on Tuesday, and we agreed to that when I was hired. The kids in Awana at my church were my priority.
- I. My boss said, "Okay, I'll fix it." And that was that. I thought.
- J. Until Tuesday evening came. I was all dressed up in my Awana uniform, getting ready to go out the door, when the phone rang. It was my boss. He said, "Where are you Bill? You're late."
- K. I reminded him about our conversation, and that I couldn't work Tuesday nights. My heart was pounding. My palms were sweaty. This was a big deal. I had a union job, and I made a lot of money, and I didn't want to lose it.
- L. But I also pictured a bunch of kids getting ready for Awana clubs and my little church.
- M. My boss said, "If you don't come in tonight, then don't ever bother coming back."
- N. Now, I don't want to paint the picture that I am anywhere near as noble or as threatened as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. I'm not. I'm not a hero, and I'm not a martyr.

- O. But like most of us in this room, I do understand what it feels like to have the outside world pressure you to conform. To have forces you can't control try to define you, identify you, change your priorities, and own you. I get that, and I bet you get that too.
 - P. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego got it big time.
 - Q. Because when that music played, and when the fires roared, and when thousands of people—rulers and power brokers from the whole known world—when they bowed to their knees—you can bet that the pressure felt like a ton of bricks weighing them down.
 - R. What would you do? God tells me not to bow to idols, but I'm far from home. Nobody would know. Everybody's doing it. I gotta do what I gotta do to survive. I'm a victim. I'm an underdog. I've had a tough time. Just this once and it will be over. I can bow on the outside and not mean it on the inside.
 - S. What would you do?
 - T. What have you done, even this week?
 - U. Have you bowed to forces in your life? To the economy? To the headlines? Do these rule your spirit? To the health report from the doctor? To the family craziness? Who owns you and defines you? What outside forces rule your life? What idols make you bow?
 - V. Well, the masses bow, but three young men stand tall and proud in the sea of adoring fans.
 - W. The king loses it. He becomes distorted with rage, the Bible says. He commands his soldiers to drag the men before him.
 - X. In front of thousands of leaders from the known world, the king asks them is it true that they do not serve his gods and will not bow to his idols—and he warns them that if they answer wrong, they will be thrown alive into a blazing, fiery furnace.
 - Y. Here's the only time in the whole Bible these three men speak:
- III. *16 Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. 17 If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. 18 But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up" (Daniel 3:16-18, NKJV).*
- A. Now, who's the underdog?
 - B. Here's the magic: **BE TRUE TO GOD, BE TRUE TO YOURSELF, AND YOU'LL NEVER BE THE UNDERDOG.**
 - C. We have no need to answer you in this matter: translation, you already know our answer. We have already shown you by our manner of life what our answer is going to be. You know us. You know where you stand. Do what you have to do.
 - D. If that is the case: translation, we don't know the outcome. We don't have to know the outcome. Our job is faith. God's job is outcomes.
 - E. Our God, whom we serve, is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace: translation, God has all the power needed to get us out of this problem. There is no question in our minds about divine ability, divine love, and divine care. God is here. We're not worried.
 - F. He will deliver us from your hand, O king: translation, one way or another, we win. The person of faith always wins because in the spiritual realm—**VICTORY ISN'T THE VICTORY, FAITH IS THE VICTORY.** Not the answered prayer. Not the release from illness. Not the sudden discovery of cash. Not the miracle job that just opened up for you. These are good, and these we want, but these are not the victory. The victory is that you walked in faith, before the prayer God answered, or before the illness was healed, or before the cash comes in. Even if none of these things ever happened, you still walked in faith—and specifically the faith that your life was in God's hands, not the king's. Not the creditor's. Not the doctor's. Not the lawyer's hands. Not your ex's hands. He will deliver us from your hand, O nasty enemy.
 - G. But if not: translation, we may die here, and we know it. We may lose the house, job, or friendship. There is a price to pay for faith, there is a price to pay for integrity—and we are so convinced of the goodness and love and power of God we are willing to pay the price. But if not...
 - H. Let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up: this needs no translation. These guys are so inspiring.
 - I. When my boss told me, "If you don't come in tonight then don't ever bother coming in again," I gulped. I told him, "I'm sorry, but I have to go take care of my kids."
 - 1. Now, who's the underdog?
 - J. He said, "Okay."
 - K. I said, "Okay."
 - L. He said, "Goodbye."
 - M. I said, "Goodbye."
 - N. I went to Awana clubs that night with my heart in my throat and didn't tell a soul. But I'll tell you this: I felt God with me. And I didn't worry about getting fired. The Scripture that came to mind was:

1. *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:10, NKJV).*

- O. I know, in the great scheme of things, this was little. This was minor. But if I had to get fired, at least it would be for my integrity and faithfulness to Christ and not for any other reason.
- P. "But if not, let it be known to you, O Produce Manager, that we do not serve your bottom line, nor will we worship the golden schedule which you have set up."

IV. What was in their soul?

- A. I want to shift gears for a moment and ask a question: what made these guys different? What did they have inside their souls that made the strong in the face of a fiery death?
- B. Scripture:
 1. *[I pray] that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height— 19 to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:17-19, NKJV).*
 2. *And I pray that you, rooted and founded in love yourselves, 18 may be able to grasp (with all Christians) how wide and long and deep and high is the love of Christ— 19 and to know for yourselves that love so far above our understanding. So will you be filled through all your being with God himself (Ephesians 3:17-19, Phil).*
- C. That you may be able to grasp how wide and long and deep and high is the love of Christ—that you may be able to grasp the boundless dimensions of the love of Christ.
- D. We talk about God's love.
- E. But do we grasp God's love?
- F. Let me give you an illustration: Volunteers on stage. Basketball on stage. Hold the ball. Turn your hand over. Palm the ball.
- G. Can you palm a basketball? I can't. Why not? Two reasons:
 1. My hand is too small.
 2. My muscles are too weak.
- H. Can you grasp the love of God? Which is bigger to you: the love of God or the fiery furnace?
- I. I don't care how much you can talk about the love of God when times are good. I do care that you FEEL the love of God when times are bad.
- J. Because that's how underdogs become champions.
- K. Can you palm the love of God? Or are your hands too small and your muscles too weak?
- L. Paul prays that you may be able to grasp the love of God—how big it is, how unfailing it is, how perfect it is. Grasp it. Get it. Feel it.
- M. That is our prayer too at Neighborhood Church. That is our labor and focus. That you may grasp the love of God—that you may grow toward this mature view of life.
- N. Because until this spirit is inside you, every time you're an underdog, you'll feel like a victim. Or you'll feel bitter. Or you'll give up and live in discouragement and fear.
- O. Get this: there's the problem.
- P. And there's the problem behind the problem.
- Q. The problem is the problem—the danger, the loss, the illness, the bills, the tests, the adversity, the fiery furnace. The problem is the problem.
- R. But the problem BEHIND the problem is that we haven't grasped the love of God.
 1. The problem behind the problem is that we can't palm the ball.
 2. We can't declare: Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the fiery furnace.
 3. We can't declare it because we don't believe it
 4. We don't believe it because we are immature.
- S. There's the problem.
- T. There's the problem behind the problem that makes the problem a thousand times worse.
- U. Immaturity.
- V. Dear follower of Jesus, you have to palm the love of God. You have to grow big and grow strong in God. Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. Grow through life together in a group. Grow through Scripture. Grow through prayer. Grow through service. Grow through the Holy Spirit.
- W. Grow big and deep and wise enough to grasp how wide and long and deep and high is the love of Christ—even in your toughest adversity—that you will be filled through with the life of God Himself.

V. Back to the story

- A. Well, the king was so mad he ordered the furnace to be superheated—so hot that the guys who stoked the fire were incinerated. The king ordered the three men to be tied up, and thrown into the fire.
- B. And here's what happened:
 1. *23 So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, securely tied, fell down into the roaring flames. 24 But suddenly, as he was watching, Nebuchadnezzar jumped up in amazement and exclaimed to his advisers,*

“Didn’t we tie up three men and throw them into the furnace?” “Yes,” they said, “we did indeed, Your Majesty.” 25 “Look!” Nebuchadnezzar shouted. “I see four men, unbound, walking around in the fire. They aren’t even hurt by the flames! And the fourth looks like a divine being!” 26 Then Nebuchadnezzar came as close as he could to the door of the flaming furnace and shouted: “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!” So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stepped out of the fire (Daniel 3:23-26, NLT).

- C. Did the grace of God rescue Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace? No. It rescued them in, but not from the furnace. They were thrown in. And no matter how much faith they had, that moment on the edge of the fire had to be horrible. Remember, these men had no promise from God that they would live. But they were absolutely convinced that, one way or another the power and victory of God will prevail in the end.
- D. Now, think of the last time you had a tough time. Your last heartbreak. Your last trial. Your last test. Which would you prefer?
1. Would you prefer God to walk with you IN that adversity? Or...
 2. Would you prefer that you NOT SUFFER the adversity in the first place?
- E. It’s a tough question. In which of those situations does God display His grace? Does He display His grace when He keeps you from adversity; when He leads you beside still waters? YES.
- F. Does He display His grace when He brings you into adversity, and throws you into the fire, and goes with you through the valley of the shadow of death? YES.
- G. In BOTH cases God puts His grace on display. In BOTH cases, whatever need is there, God’s grace is there.
- H. And here’s the big deal:
1. God has not given us the right to DEMAND what form His grace shall take in our lives. It’s His choice. It’s God’s prerogative. God’s job is outcomes.
 - a) *“O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter?” says the LORD. “Look, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel” (Jeremiah 18:6, NKJV).*
- I. God is the potter and you are the clay. The potter has power over the clay. You cannot command Him. All you can do is hang on, and trust that He has not only His glory, but also your best, in mind.
- J. Can you grasp that?
1. On that Tuesday night long ago, I went to Awana. And even though my boss told me not to bother coming back, I went back to work. On the next day I was scheduled, I got dressed and went to work.
 2. I saw my boss and went to apologize.
 3. He interrupted me.
 4. He said, “Bill, as far as I’m concerned, nothing happened on Tuesday.” He turned around and stacked some corn, and that was it. Problem solved.
- K. And if God permits you to be kidnapped, and thrown into the furnace, as hard as that is, there is something greater and grander going on. Our outward circumstances rise and fall, but His grace never fails. And if you have learned how to tap into that grace, then you can say:
1. *“Therefore we do not lose heart [we are not a wreck on the inside]. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16, NKJV).*
- L. The real miracle in Daniel 3 is not just that the three men came out of the fire in v. 26. It is not that they didn’t even smell like fire in v. 27. It is not that the fire was selective, burning only the ropes that tied their hands and feet together in v. 25. No. That’s the easy stuff.
- M. The real miracle is that in v. 18 Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow before they knew the outcome.
- N. The real miracle is that you keep the faith before you know the outcome.
- O. The real miracle is that you so grasp the love of God for you that you are nobody’s victim.
- P. The real miracle is that you so grasp the love of God, that the only underdog in the room is anybody foolish enough to stand against you as you stand with God.
- Q. What’s in your soul?
- R. Can you palm the love of God?
- S. Let’s go there, church.
- T. Let’s grow there.