

Daniel 3:13-27 #Blessed – in troubled times

You see hashtag *Blessed*. You hear someone say, “Ahh, I’m blessed.” What’s the kind of times people are most likely to post or say that - “blessed”?

Probably when they’ve received something really good: valuable, or wanted or liked. Or they get to do something they really enjoy: maybe new, or unique, or otherwise-too-costly but gifted to them, or treasured for some other reason.

How about when you have a lot less than others, hardly any material belongings maybe? How ‘bout when you face challenges more unique (more extreme!), and more costly to you than are ordinary? Blessed, then?

I think of the members of our churches in Indonesia. They have so little materially. Those in the village churches in West Timor, which we visited, have simple, thatched roof homes. They don’t have running water to them. They trek to get that. Some have two pairs of clothes only. But they had such joy. They seemed so content. One place we were visiting a church, which had been recently built with the help of some funds given from our church body here in the US. And with only the dirt beneath our feet for a floor, and with a simple corrugated metal roof above us, they were so appreciative.

I came home looking at the material stuff we have in a new way: appreciating it more, after seeing fellow Christians who had so much less and yet were so happy. But more than that: appreciating better *the reason* to be content and full of joy. It doesn’t have to do with how much we have in life. It has everything to do with *who* we have. If we have Jesus, with the forgiveness of sins and peace that are ours through faith in Him, then we are truly: #Blessed.

This is what Jesus talked about when he said: Blessed are those who are poor *in spirit* (recognizing our sin and confessing it), who hunger and thirst for righteousness (recognizing that Jesus gives what we on-our-own completely lack). Having Jesus, we are comforted, for we have peace with God. We are part of His family. We are given Jesus’ word: yours is the kingdom of heaven.

And then Jesus goes on to talk about: “blessed are you when people persecute you because of me.” And this is the topic we want to talk through more for the rest of our time today.

We stayed at a hotel in West Timor as we waited for our flight back to Jakarta the next morning. Sitting by the ocean, the topic of persecution came up. This wasn’t us talking about Bible times. It was Pastor Warsito, the President of our Lutheran Church there, telling of events in the recent history of Indonesia. He spoke about an outbreak of attacks on Christian churches and Christian individuals that occurred in a particular region of the country. So a special governmental force was dispatched for protection. The force stood guard during the days. But then at night, the attacks continued. In fact, men from the special force joined in the attacks. They’d guard during the day, and then turn around and attack the Christian churches and people at night.

Christians face persecution today in other places where we have sister church bodies or mission outposts: like Nigeria, Pakistan, and other East Asia countries. There is a lot of danger for Christians there, which simply comes with holding on to Jesus and their confession of faith in Him. In some instances that danger materializes in the loss of property, loss of position or social standing/credit, even physical harm, prison time or the loss of life.

So here's the question it brings up for us to answer, as we also look back at Daniel ch.3: what is the highest goal in life? If it is to stay alive, you understand how that is going to affect how one acts in any given situation where one's life is in jeopardy. But there's more application for us to think about.

Get further into this question, "What is the highest goal in life?" I say get further in, because this issue doesn't just come into play if you or I are facing a life-and-death situation. Think of things like *wanting to be successful in life* or *wanting to be liked*. Those aren't wrong. But the question is...

Where do such goals like that fit in your life? Because if one of those, or something else – say you're a people-pleaser by nature, and you want everyone around you to be happy -, if any of those is valued higher than holding onto and holding out Jesus, you see how that is going to affect and determine how one acts/responds in situations.

There is the "higher importance matter" in life than all the others – than being liked, than being successful, than making people happy, than hanging on to the stuff we have, than even staying alive.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego show us this truth, and so they also encourage us today in our faith and in our prioritizing of what is of the highest value.

Pretty much everybody who was anybody in Babylon was there. By "special invitation" of King Nebuchadnezzar, they were gathered. Everyone else, the average people of the land, would hear about the event. That's what King Nebuchadnezzar wanted. This was designed to send a message.

And it did end up sending a message. But a different one than what he had planned. Something ended up standing in the way of the king getting everyone on board with worshipping his false god. Actually, someones stood. They interrupted everything - everything that was s-o-o-o wrong in the scene.

That shows how important, and how far-reaching, the impact of the actions of just a few individuals – in this case 3 believers – can be. "To have A Savior, to know the One True God, and to have His blessings of forgiveness and life eternal, that is more important than staying alive."

Even if things we might lose don't rise to the same level as what Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were threatened with losing, there are potential loses we face. What do you have to lose when you hold onto & hold out Jesus?

Let's not go at this naïve to how things may turn out. There are going to be days when being identified with Jesus is easier, and others where it is going to be harder. Some of the harder times might include...

- You may work in an environment where you may get outright scoffed at, ridiculed, if your language and actions reflects your beliefs. Teens, you might "Lose respect" if you don't join in the disrespect of authority.
- We're going to save more detailed discussion on the topic of relationships for when we hear more of what Jesus teaches in Matthew ch.5 (in a couple weeks). But for today, just think how when it comes to human sexuality and relationships there is such a wide-divide between what culture holds and what God says in His Word. So you and I will face moments of great pressure to accept or join the world's views and ways. And you may suffer outright rejection if you simply stand for what is right.
- Or, if you take up the loving task to share answers to religious questions on topics like...
 - "When does life begin?" "At conception";
 - "Do you really believe everything the Bible says, like that stuff about hell?" "Yeah, hell is real. And God doesn't want you to end up there";
 - "Well, isn't it arrogant to say Christianity is the only way to heaven?" "Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life – no one comes to God in heaven except through Him."...if you answer, lovingly but also unwaveringly from God's Word, you may be labeled as narrow-minded, unenlightened and even hateful. But you aren't.

And don't throw in the towel. Don't think that your words or actions don't matter. Think through: who all is affected by your actions and the witness they give? How wide of a group(s) of people are potentially impacted?

- Obviously, you the individual – your spiritual wellbeing is in the picture.
- There's also your fellow believers standing beside you who are encouraged – and you by them – as we hold onto and hold out Jesus.
- Then there are those who aren't Christian, who are seeing and hearing what you and I do and say. They are pointed to the one, true God.

And how will things turn out?

Take a look back. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego expressed:

"... 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 save us from it. So, he may save us from your hand, Your Majesty. But even if he does not, you should know, O Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (Daniel 3:16-18).

They don't say too much. They don't demand that God rescue their lives. They only confess: God will decide the way best to defend them and his truth.

They teach us, in a real life situation, what it means and the peace it brings to trust God, and His promises and His will.

What in all the world would be enough to strengthen human knees to stay standing and staring straight into the threat of death, like this? They knew the One who stood with them through life. And they knew where they'd end up after life here on earth was through for them. I want you to think about that, and I want you to think about *the One who stands with you*.

Jesus' relationship with you and me was of such high value to him.... what did it cost him? He willingly stood and faced rejection, insult - and more than that, the suffering of hell itself, God's just anger for all sin in our place. Think of all the times where you've failed to stand up or stand out for your connection to Jesus. Think of your failures to keep your priorities correctly aligned.

Our Lord Jesus lives to meet our needs... He comes to you and says, "I've already stood in the fire for you - I suffered your hell. I've stood in your place and taken your guilt. The punishment is all paid." And then he says: "Here I am. I'll walk with you. I'll remain right by your side all your life through." This is yours - He is yours - through faith in Him.

When you've got a heart that trusts how he stood in your place and how he stands with you and me... *Even if God does not spare us from loss*, He remains our God. The most valuable things in life for you and me are not a job, or a friendship, or the social standing that we might lose. The most valuable and important thing in this world is the God who loves you, stands with you every moment in life, and will bring you home to Him in heaven in the end. What you and I have in him is most valuable. Ahh, we are blessed! Yes? Then say, "Amen." Amen.