

IFES World Assembly 2015 – July 25

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## **Daniel 3 - But even if he does not... (Dan. 3:18)**

Good morning. My name is Munther Isaac, and I am a Palestinian Christian! I was born and live and serve in Bethlehem, the town where our Lord Jesus Christ was born. I am humbled to stand before you this morning, representing the small community of Palestinian Christians.

For many it is a surprise to know that there are Arab Christians, let alone Palestinian Christians. Do you know that Arab Christianity predates Islam! In fact, there were Arab bishops in the first ecumenical council in the fourth century! We are not a new phenomenon. (There are many Arab Christians with us in this World Assembly!)

I come from Palestine, where the total number of Christians in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem is about 45000. We are a tiny minority of almost 1.5%, and currently live under Israeli occupation – and as Palestinians we seek our independence.

Throughout my young life I witnessed so many wars and so much violence. The MENA region is not an easy place to live in. The Arab church has been living in the shadow of Islam for almost 1400 years. Our relationship with our Muslim neighbors has had its ups and downs. There were times when the relationship was very good. Today, however, things are different.

For us, we find in a book of Daniel comfort and guidance. The way I read the book, it is a book that speaks about religious minorities and how to respond in case of oppression. It guides us on how to be faithful as a community in difficult times.

In addition, it is a book that confirms to us: the kingdom of God will win the end! As we will see, this is an important source of comfort and encouragement.

### **(1) Daniel 3:1-7: The Empire on Display**

#### **- A global empire**

Let us turn to today's text from Daniel 3. This is a text that was written in Aramaic, one of very few chapters in the bible that were written in Aramaic. Probably the reason behind this is the universal message the book has. The setting of the book is a very global setting. Babylon was a global empire.

We begin today with a rival kingdom. What a glorious scene! A golden statue that is 30m height (100ft) and 3m (10ft) in width. It must have cost a fortune!

We stand in this text in front of a global empire. This is a global celebration (kind of similar to the one we are having this week). There is the statue. There is music. A orchestra it seems. The instruments that are mentioned come from different parts the world. Invitees are coming from all parts of the empire. Not only that, verse 7 says that "All the peoples, nations, and languages

fell down and worshiped the golden image”. One world. One capital. One religion.

### **- The logic of might and pride**

This is the logic of might and pride at display. What an extravagance! The king here cares for nothing but to show off his fortune and glory! He is showing off--- simply because he can! Here is the rule of the strong and mighty. Everyone bows to the strong. Everyone bows to the rich. It sounds familiar doesn't it.

### **- Babylon the center of the world**

The text is clearly provoking the faithful reader. Mainly the point that “all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden image”. Babylon is now the center of the universe. Babylon --- not Jerusalem. An empire that depends on might, a capital city and a king --- not the egalitarian kingdom of priests that God intended Israel to be. The worship is offered to a statue that represents might and richness --- and not to God.

A brief theological background is crucial here for us to understand what is happening in this text. The Old Testament is clear: God is not in favor of empires. In fact, one could read the story of Israel as the story of the people of God in the shadow of the two great empires of the ANE: Babylon to the east and Egypt to the West. It is important to note that the two most important events in the creation of Israel in the Bible – the calling of Abraham and the Exodus – involve leaving these two empires and wandering then dwelling in tiny Canaan. Israel in its socio-political structure and even in its ideology was meant to challenge and present an alternative to the concept of the empire.

Israel failed. She wanted a king who enslaves the people and possesses the land. She wanted a capital. She wanted an army. She wanted to depend on might – like the other nations. She wanted to corner God in a temple. In short, she wanted to become the empire.

Israel failed to provide an alternative. Babylon wins. The empire wins. Or so it seems...

By the way, we need to admit that there were times when Christianity sought the logic of might and pride – the logic of the empire. In fact, there are still expressions of Christianity today that run after power and money, but that's a different topic. (I will leave it to your imagination to figure out whom I am talking about).

## **(2) Daniel 3:8-15: Three Choices**

### **- No religious freedom**

We turn now to our three heroes: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. In chapter 1 they are described as “youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace” (1:4). Wow! Don't we all wish we could be described like this? We also know they were given the best Babylonian education. They originally had Jewish names: “Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah”. Their names were clearly changed for political reasons. With the name comes a new identity. A new faith. A new worldview. “You now serve the king – the one who gave you your names”.

Even though some archaeological digs reveal that there were signs of polytheism in Babylon, and the book of Daniel has signs of this as well, yet what is clear is that there was always the question: “Who is the god above all gods?” There were times when all must worship this god who is “above all gods”. What we have here is just that.

The Chaldeans play a dirty game here. Most commentators believe that the Chaldeans were probably a class of soothsayers and astrologers, and not an ethnic group. From the book of Daniel we see that they were close to the royal court, and the king usually sought them for wisdom.

Were the Chaldeans driven by jealousy? It looks like it. Yet notice how they convinced the king not to tolerate these three men. First, they highlighted their ethnic background. In verse 12 they say: “There are some Jews”! Friends: racism, bigotry and stereotyping are not new things. And they are not dead yet. We still have to fight and take a strong stand against racism in all its forms. This is a Christian, and indeed an evangelistic, battle!

Not only that. “Anti-Semitism” is not something new and is not something that ended. We still see it in the world today. I say this as a Palestinian, and as someone who regularly speaks against the policies of the modern state of Israel and the occupation of Palestinian lands. We must always be careful with our language and even our motives. There should be no place for anti-Semitism in our discourse. The Jewish people are loved by God like all people.

So first they highlighted the ethnic background of the three men. The second thing the Chaldeans highlighted is that “these men, O king, pay no attention to you”. They are touching on a very sensitive nerve: the king’s pride! It’s personal now! The king must take action.

### **- The three choices minorities face**

Minorities under oppression usually go two different ways: (1) option one is to separate; (2) and option two is to assimilate or compromise. Separation or isolation is a dangerous choice. We choose not to interact or witness to the majority. No encounters. It seems like the safe bet. We see this sometimes among evangelicals, who prefer not to engage much with the society. We live inside our own safe bubble and wait for the second coming to take us “from this evil world”. The church and our friends in the church become our comfort zone. Another face of this choice is emigration. Many Christians in the Middle East prefer to leave – emigrate to the West. For me this is a sad choice, as our region needs the Christian presence – a presence that is 2000 years old.

The second choice is to dissimilate and in the process compromise. Many choose this. They lose their identity and what makes them distinct. They want to fit. They too do not want an encounter. Many compromise to fit and belong with the strong. We sing the same tune. Play the same rhythm. The empire wins again. Again, this is a safe choice.

This choice becomes the obvious choice when we have a situation like the one we have in this text: bow or burn! It is this simple. You cannot even escape or separate. Bow to the king – or

burn in fire.

I believe that the book of Daniel was written to introduce us and challenge us into a third way – a third choice: the faithful testimony! The book of Daniel is about the testimony of the faithful community. When we read the book we see the opposite of both the “separation” choice and the “compromise” choice. As we saw in chapter 1, Daniel and his friends were distinguished members of their society. They were a blessing to the community. They spoke the language of Babylon, learned in the best schools, excelled in their professions --- all without compromising to the logic and might of Babylon. They were in the world. They understood the world. They also challenged the world – in wisdom and humility. They challenged it in courage.

### **- The testimony of the faithful**

Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah refused to bow to the statue. They refused to bow to the empire and the logic of the empire. For at the end: “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). They do not believe in compromise. Their faithfulness is startling especially when compared with Israel’s unfaithfulness which led to the exile. This faithfulness was already evident in chapter 1. What happened in chapter 1 is of extreme importance here. Because they did not compromise in the little things, they were ready for the big test. Our faithfulness in these little things matter.

Today you face many challenges in your universities and campuses. There is sometimes a pressure to yield. Will you compromise in the little things? Believe me: these little things you face today will prepare you for what lies ahead in your lives!

Notice the reaction of the king: He asks in mockery (v.15): let us see “who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?” The tension is boiling here. This is a climactic point. The king here sets himself against God. Will your God deliver from my hands! Is your God the real God? This is religious extremism 101: setting one’s god against the other’s god. In the struggle for power, we bring “God” and religion to our support.

### **(3) Daniel 3:16-18: The Stand**

#### **- The God who can deliver**

We reach here the climax of the story. The three men took a stand. There was no question for them: “our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king” (3:17). What a faith! Faith in the power of God almighty. He is able to deliver... and he will deliver.

Faith? Or by the logic of the world stupidity? Courage and wisdom? Or recklessness? We might want to say: “Just bow to the stupid statue, and worship your God on another day. Pick your battle”. Not these men. Not this battle. So much is at stake.

#### **- Even if... we will not!**

Not only that. The answer does not stop here. They continue: “But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up”. In

other words: even if we die, we will not bow down to the king and his gods. They were willing to go all the way to the end. If in the beginning they trusted in the power of God, here they trust in the sovereignty of God. If God wills not to deliver them, they will still not bow down. What a faith!

#### **- What is at stake?**

Here is the point here – and please take this seriously: For these three, delivery from the wrath of the king is not the goal! Their safety is not the goal. For them, to bow or to burn is the same choice!

For these three men, there was much more at stake here than their own delivery and comfort. Their compromise could lead to assimilation of the whole Jewish community – and possibly other religious minorities – into the worship of other gods. They stood together. They represented their communities. It's about taking a stand for what is right. It is about taking a stand for what is right. It is about taking a stand for the community. It is about taking a stand against the empire and the logic of might and pride. It is about taking a stand for their faith. It is about taking a stand for their God.

Delivery and safety are not the goal. To bow and to burn is the same choice.

#### **(4) Daniel 3:19-30: In the Fire**

##### **- “They surrendered their bodies”**

Now, when a king in the ANE gets angry, and his pride is provoked, then we must be careful. Something bad is going to happen. The three men were thrown into the fire. In fact, the king ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated. The fire was so strong that it killed the “mighty men of the king’s army” who threw them into the furnace.

But let us ask here: were these men thrown into the furnace --- as if it was against their will? Notice how verse 28 puts it: “they yielded up (or surrendered) their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God”. Yes: they surrendered their bodies. It was their choice.

The words of Paul in Philippians 1:20-21 come to mind: “as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain”.

“That Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death”.

##### **- Emmanuel**

They surrendered their bodies, only to discover that they were not alone. The king shouts: “But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods” (3:25). A fourth person shows up and simply walks with them! They take a walk! Who is this fourth person? The one who is like the “son of the gods”? We have the right to believe that this was Jesus pre-incarnate. And if that is true, then what an honor these men received – to see Jesus in his glory before his incarnation.

Here is what I love about this story. God did not simply deliver. He was present with them. He was with them in the fire! This is what God says in Isaiah 43:2: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you... when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you”. And in Psalm 23:4: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me”.

You get this? The promise is not simply that of deliverance. But that he will be with us in the valley. In the fire. In the water. He will be with us. That is the promise.

We all suffer in different ways. We all have our own valleys of deaths – as individuals and as communities. Every country represented here has its challenges. Every students group has its challenges. Every individual here is going or will go in difficult times one day. This is what we can all be sure of today. That in the most difficult of times – God is with us. He walks with us. And this is better than deliverance.

### **- God glorified**

The three men were rescued. Nothing happened to them. The king declares: “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego... , for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way” (3:28). God receives the glory – as is only fitting.

Remember the Empire in its might? Remember the celebration in the beginning? Remember the music and big show? That very same Empire falls down now in front of the feet of three brave young men! The Empire bows down to the three men who trusted their God and were faithful to the end. The Empire falls before these men who in the words of Hebrews 11 “through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises... quenched the power of fire... were made strong out of weakness” (Hebrews 11:33-34).

Friends. I speak specially to young folks like you and me. Never - ever - underestimate the power of faith. Empires fall down at the feet of faith! Amen? This is, by the way, how the kingdom of God wins and prevails. Not through might. But through weakness. Through the sacrifice of faithful communities.

## **(5) Daniel 3 today: The Witness of the Community**

### **- They still burn people**

Thousands of years later, and the same region is again suffering from intolerance and extremism. Few months ago we were horrified by a video of the so-called ISIS burning a Jordanian pilot alive... in the same region! Religious minorities are suffering today in places like Syria and Iraq. There is so much death, pain and violence and thousands of innocent people are dying. We need to mourn the state of our world today. It's good to celebrate as we are doing in this conference. But I believe that we evangelical have to learn how to mourn sometimes. We need to lament.

By the way: as Christians we must mourn the death of all people – not only that of Christians. We pray for all people, not only Christians. I am surprised by the response – or lack of – of many Christians for the death of thousands of Muslims in Syria and Iraq over the last few years. The media is silent and the church is silent. But when Christians are killed we cry against it. Friends: let us be careful as we have no credibility when we do so! We have no credibility when we only protest the persecution of Christians, while ignoring the injustice against people of other faiths!

Not only that. We must also acknowledge that many Muslims are spearheading the fight against religious extremism in the Middle East. As Christians, we cannot stereotype and stigmatize Muslims or any people group. The un-Christian reaction of many evangelicals to the religious extremism continues to shock me. I fear we are becoming extremists ourselves!

### **- The faithful do not always survive**

Today we remember that the faithful do not always survive. It is not always a fairy tale ending like the one we have in Daniel 3. Recently thousands of Christians from the Iraqi city of Mosul were forced to leave their city for they rejected to bow to the new kings of the so-called IS. It is heartbreaking to see this happening to one of the oldest Christian communities in the world. It really breaks my heart.

Whereas these Christians escaped and became refugees – some in miserable situations; others did not even have the choice to escape. One of the most shocking incidents for Christians in the Middle East this year was the beheading of 21 Coptic Christians by the so-called IS in Libya. There was no fairytale ending to this episode – and many other episodes lately. The faithful did not survive. God did not deliver. God was silent it seems.

### **- Why didn't he deliver?**

Many were left in confusion and shock. I can still remember the tears and anger of a woman in a Bible study I was leading in our church days after the beheading of the 21 Copts: "Where was God? Why didn't he deliver? Didn't he promise to rescue? Where was God?"

Where was God? It is in moments like these that our faith is tested. It is in moments like these that we have nothing to say – no explanations – but to surrender to the sovereignty of God. As hard as it is to believe: even in the midst of this, Jesus is still Lord. We have to believe that God is in control --- though we cannot see it and understand it. We do not have to like it by the way. The Middle East is on fire these days. It is crazy. Instability. But we must - must - remember and keep the faith that God is in control. Jesus is Lord.

However, I believe that God is not completely absent. I believe he was with these 21 martyrs. His promises are not always to deliver. But he always promises to be present. Actually – some of these Christian heroes were seen calling the name of Jesus – Yasu' in Arabic – just before their beheading. They were true martyrs - in the literal sense of the word! Their testimony and awareness of Jesus' presence spoke to millions around the Arab world who saw their barbaric killing. When I think of these martyrs and many others in the Arab world and indeed around the world – I think of the words of Hebrews: "Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that

they might rise again to a better life...of whom the world was not worthy” (Hebrews 11:35, 38).

Refusing to accept release... Indeed, of whom the world was not worthy.

Where is God when we suffer? Why doesn't he deliver? I believe he suffers with us. I believe he is present with us.

Kayla Mueller was a young brave American girl who spend many years in the Middle East defending the oppressed and advocating for justice. As a human rights activist, among the many things she has done is work for justice for Palestinians, African refugees, and also Syrian refugees. She witnessed so much suffering and pain in her young life. In a letter from the ME to her father in 2011 she wrote:

*“I will always seek God. Some people find God in church. Some people find God in nature. Some people find God in love; I find God in suffering. I've known for some time what my life's work is, using my hands as tools to relieve suffering.”*

Kayla discovered God revealed within those who suffer. Two years after she wrote these words she was kidnapped by the so called ISIS while working for Syrian refugees and she was eventually killed. “Of whom the world was not worthy”.

### **- Same Choices Today**

Today we all face different challenges. We all suffer in different ways. Some are suffering for their faith. Some still face the same choices: bow or burn.

As people of faith we have the same options Daniel's friends faced: we can separate or seek to escape. We can disengage and seek our comfort and avoid engaging with people. We can hide our faith. We can simply leave these areas of tension.

Or we can assimilate and compromise and bow to the strong.

The book of Daniel urges us to persevere and be a testimony. There is a third choice: Take a stand for what is right and just. Be a witness. Be men and women of principles. Be radical in offering an alternative to the way of the Empire. Challenge the Empire and its ways. Do it in wisdom and courage. Above all – do it on love, maybe even sacrificial love. Lift the name of Jesus above all names. Put comfort and even safety aside, and do what's right.

### **- The crucified Jesus is our strength**

We all have a cross to carry. For courage and comfort – let us in the end focus our eyes on Jesus. Let us remember that Jesus himself died as a victim of religious violence and intolerance. We often forget that. The crime Jesus was convicted of was blasphemy.

Where is God when we suffer? Jesus on the cross answers this question. For he too cried out from the cross: “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). Jesus chose this. He could have escaped it. He could have called for angels



to come and rescue him. But he did not.

The cross shows us that Jesus suffers with us. Just like he walked with the three men, today he walks with us in our hardships. He suffers with us and gives us strength.

Lebanese writer and poet Gibran Khalil Gibran in his famous book “Jesus the Son of Man” envisions Simon the Cyrene, the one who carried the cross of Jesus. Gibran has Simon saying:

*And I carried His cross.*

*It was heavy...*

*And Jesus looked at me. And the sweat of His forehead was running down upon His beard.*

*Again He looked at me and He said, “Do you too drink this cup? You shall indeed sip its rim with me to the end of time.”*

*So saying He placed His hand upon my free shoulder. And we walked together towards the Hill of the Skull.*

*But now I felt not the weight of the cross. I felt only His hand. And it was like the wing of a bird upon my shoulder.*

After Jesus dies, Simon says:

*Now, the man whose cross I carried has become my cross.*

*Should they say to me again, “Carry the cross of this man,” I would carry it till my road ended at the grave.*

*But I would beg Him to place His hand upon my shoulder.*

As we walk in the valley of shadow of death till the end of our road – we pray today, we beg, to experience Jesus placing His hand upon our shoulders. Amen.