

# STRENGTH IN NUMBERS + + +

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Hey, sometimes does it feel like the world's on fire? I mean, like, I saw this all over when I was watching social media on January 1st. It was like, 2025 was a dumpster fire. And in many ways it was. But you ever feel that way, that like, you're just holding on for dear life because the world is on fire and you're just trying to not get burned badly?

And I think that's kind of a feeling that a lot of us feel, particularly if we're a little bit more isolated, a little bit more separated, a little bit more alienated and a little bit more alone. And this feeling like the world's on fire all around us and it's trying to change us and singe us, it's nothing new. I mean, like, all you have to do is just study the history of war and you can see conflict and fire all over the place.

And to be honest, like, I'm a super nerd. So confession time, big time nerd, comic books, the whole thing, war history. In fact, Melinda and I, we led two different pilgrimages, one to the Holy Land and one to the second missionary journey of Paul, which is in like modern day Greece. And I actually asked our coordinators like, hey, we've got a little bit extra time. I'm a big like war history nerd. Can we like divert our way over to Thermopylae on the way? And he's like, oh, I know your type. Yes, we can go there.

And for those of you who don't know Thermopylae, that battle or the battle for the hot gates, that's what the whole movie 300 is based off of. So I'm going to give you a like true to form. This is a still picture from the movie from that time period while we were there. You're going to see a still of it right here. There it is. That's Melinda reenacting. I'm the ambassador from the Persians and I'm saying this is madness. And that's her saying, no, this is Sparta and kicking me down the well of souls. And that actually is in Thermopylae.

But for those of you who don't know that history, and we can take that silliness down for a second, there's actually a lot of study about that war because there was a lot of conflict, a lot of fire, a lot of flames, a lot of pressure from one group onto another group. But the defensive positioning that the Spartans took up is still studied to this day. It's called the phalanx position. You are actually going to see a copy of what that looks like in just a second.

What the phalanx did is it didn't have its strength in one soldier. The phalanx position strength was in all of the soldiers actually protecting each other side by side, shields linked shoulder to shoulder. So they'd have one brass greave on this leg. So their leg was protected. They would have a brass helmet. So their head was protected. But as long as they were in a position like this, they could protect one another.

But they needed to be defensively linked together, one by one by one. In so doing, this area where they were able to fight together was protected from its sides. There were rocky crags on each side. And so all the Persians had to be filtered into one area. And all that the Spartans had to do was line up in this

defensive position. And they could take on all of the fiery arrows that the Persians were shooting at them.

Every time another row would come at them with spears and swords, they could protect and have offense. They were able to then not only be a very good protective position, but also offensive. And those 300 soldiers, as long as they were side by side together, were able to fight off, depending upon the historian, either tens of thousands of the Persians or hundreds of thousands.

But this only works if they were together. You have one coward that drops his shield, the whole thing breaks down. You have one hero that runs forward in front of that defensive position. And the rest breaks down. No, the strength was in the numbers of the people as they were together. Or maybe what's important to our sermon series, as they were not alone.

That is the sermon series that we're in. The first week here, we learned about Elijah. He had to be good as one. That is, he needed to be filled up with God because he felt like he was all alone. But he wasn't. And last week, we learned that not only do we have to be filled up with God, but we also have to have somebody that's going to watch our back, like Jonathan and David, as they work together and the Spirit knit them together as an impenetrable wall.

This week, we're going to learn from the characters of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that you can have one, and that's okay. You can have two, and that is great. But if you have three in your community, you're a cord of three strands, which is not easily broken. And next week, we're going to say, well, what does that community look like? How can we avoid what a bad community could look like as we study Rehoboam, because he's a negative example.

The week after that, we're going to study a positive example, what the community looks like together around the Word of God through King Josiah. And then finally, we are going to look at how this is attractive and shows other people Jesus in the way that we live in our community.

But I hope you're picking up. You need a phalanx. You need a family. Because of all the pressures that are going to be pushed around you from the outside world, because of all the fiery darts and arrows that are going to be shot at you from everything that's surrounding you, you're going to need a community that's strong and has your back, but also covers you with their own shield, as well as somebody to your left and somebody to your right and somebody to cover behind you. You need a community to support you and lift you up.

And that's what we're going to learn today through the characters of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, having not just one healthy person, not just somebody to have your back with two, but to have a bigger community of three.

So let's start with Daniel chapter three, verses 13 through 15. This is the story that maybe you know, maybe you don't, of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace. They are actual Israelite boys who were taken out of their homes in Israel, and they were exiled into another country that had their own gods and goddesses in Babylon.

The king of the Babylonians, his name was Nebuchadnezzar. He was a little bit duped into creating a law that said that a certain point of the day when musical instruments would be played and all could

hear, everyone in the kingdom would have to bow down to his statue because in the Babylonian pantheon, and a pantheon is like a family of gods and goddesses, a king was not just a vessel through which the gods talked, that king actually inhabited the gods within himself and his position.

So Nebuchadnezzar, he learns that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are actually faithful to their god and they will not bow down to his idol. So in verse 13, he finds this out. He's furious with rage because they're questioning his deity. They're questioning his authority. So Nebuchadnezzar summons Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to him.

They were brought to the king and Nebuchadnezzar says to them, "Is it true Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that you don't serve my gods and you don't worship the image of gold I had set up?" He's saying, "I have a decree. I made it public for everybody. It's binding. When you hear the sound of the horn, the flute, the zither, the lyre, the harp, the pipe and all kinds of music."

Can we get that put into the budget for next year for the worship team? We are short at least one zither and I'm pretty sure in Fremont, we need to get a lyre and in Northwest, Kevin is going to need a harp or pipe. I'm pretty sure that will help this whole experience.

No, no, no. But this was actually like a trigger for all these people to try to move towards this idolatrous thing. Nebuchadnezzar is kind of giving them a bit of an out. He says, "If you're ready to fall down and worship the image I made, that's great. It's very good. But if you do not worship it, you'll be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then get this, what God," as in like, "which one will be able to rescue you from my hand?"

Notice he's setting himself up as a God against another God. Which God will be able to deliver you from my God-like hand? Nebuchadnezzar is engaging in a fight. He's engaging in a war. He's throwing arrows. He's pushing fire already from the outside on these young men who are standing up faithfully to him.

And you probably, maybe, didn't even pick up on how this full-on assault, how all these arrows even started, because it doesn't start with this idol worship. No, instead, it starts with their renaming.

Because did you know that their real names are not Shadrach, they're not Meshach, and they're not Abednego. They had names that they were given at birth. Names that honored their community. Names that honored their faithfulness to Yahweh. And it was Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians that changed their names so effectively that even we, we refer to them in their Babylonian names.

So listen to these arrows. Hananiah. Hananiah means "the Lord," that is, Yahweh, one specific God, is gracious. But the replacement name, the arrow that shot at him that he's supposed to just take on means "command of Aku." That's what that "Ak" at the end of Shadrach actually means.

Aku is their moon god. Aku is in charge of destiny and future. So by renaming Hananiah, which is saying "Yahweh is gracious," they're saying no, no, no, no. Arrow, arrow, fire. Aku is in charge of everything in your future. He's in charge of your destiny.

What about the one that you know as Meshach? Well, actually, his real name, as is given biblically earlier on in this narrative, is "who is what God is," as in like, "who is like our God?" It's this awesome, almost taunt, as in like, "oh, you think you're big? Come and see my daddy. Who is what God is."

But he's renamed to Meshach, which means "who is what Aku is," the Babylonian God, their moon God. Again, not just associated with the future, but also with the cycles of time in the present. So by renaming these two characters, they're saying, "oh, oh, oh, you think Yahweh is where you're supposed to be? You think you're protecting each other with Yahweh? Oh, no, no. We're going to rename you with this arrow and this dart and this fire, and your current and your future are going to be determined by this world, not by your God."

What about Abednego? Abednego actually means "servant of Nebo." That was their God of learning and wisdom. And so they're saying, "oh, you think you are blessed of the Lord?" Because these three men were known as wise, even in their youth, they were recognized as that. And that's why they have this position where they're actually known by the king, by name, because of their wisdom.

And like, "oh, you think you're wise? You think you know where that wisdom comes from?" Arrow, dart, fire, pressure. No, you're a servant of Nebo, our God of learning. But his real first name, as given from the scripture, was Azariah. It means "God has helped." Not your God, not Aku, not Nebo, those aren't even real. They can't even give me good help. God has helped.

And brothers and sisters, I want you to know that in that name, I want you to find application from the scripture in teaching, that the Bible actually teaches, that we find help in the community that Yahweh gives us. We find help in the community that the Spirit knits together of those who are faithful to the one true God. That's where our help comes from.

Our help comes from the Lord and the Lord works through those who are having your back at your left and your right and holding up the shield of faith. We find this time after time and example after example in the Bible.

In the Old Testament, there's this brilliant leader, his name is Moses. Did you know that he has three that support him in his ministry? There's a story about Joshua, one of his three on the battlefield, making sure he's listening to the Lord and being victorious. All Moses has to do is hold up his arms, but his arms are going to get tired.

And every time he puts his arms down, the Israelites lose. So he puts up his arms back again and up and down and up and down. They win, they lose. Joshua was doing his best to support what God has said through Moses should be done. He's got one down there, but then two more show up and Aaron and Hur prop up his arms so that God's people can continue to do what God's people are supposed to do.

And that is have victory in his will and in his name. Amen.

There's another example of David. You may know that he had a group called his mighty men, but did you know he actually has a group within the mighty men, which were even more talented, more experienced. There were better warriors and he actually called them the three. He had Joshevim, Eleazar and Shammah.

They found out that David, they just overheard him say how he wishes that he could have a drink from a well that happened to be behind enemy lines and heavily protected by the Philistines. So they took it onto themselves to break through enemy lines, draw him a cup of water, defeat hundreds of enemies, and just so they could bring it back to serve their friend.

And you know, Jesus, Jesus had the one, right? He had his spotter. He had John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, but he also had the three. There are churches all throughout the world today that are remembering something called Transfiguration Sunday.

It's the story where Jesus goes onto this mountain and his form is transfigured and you see him in his glory. But there are three people who are able to see this. They had lived life with Jesus throughout the valleys and now they actually get to see him in his glory even before the resurrection on the Mount of Transfiguration.

And how many were there? There were three. Peter, James, and John, the disciple whom Jesus loved. All of these people had a great community that supported them. They all knew each other's names and they all were able to support each other because it was actually a community that was knit together in strength in Yahweh, strength in Jesus, and they could protect each other with the shield of faith that was given to them.

All because they knew each other's names and they were willing to serve each other so closely in the Lord.

And I think I'd be a little remiss if I didn't address, like, we just started this. You guys know why? Fremont had this when they started and it was a lot easier to be able to protect and look out for your people when you knew their name.

Northwest has had this at the Northwest campus. And as they're wearing the tags, their family got to know each other and they could protect each other and pray for each other. How? By name.

So here, you want to know what? This is why this is important. It's so easy in a church this large to come in by yourself and guess what? Go out by yourself and no one knows your name.

But that's not how life is lived in Jesus. Life is lived together and nobody's alone, especially when you know your name. Just think about that name. That's the name you've been baptized into. That's the name where Jesus claimed you as his own.

And in the waters, I baptize you, Ben, in the name of the Father, in the name of the Son, and the name of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, you are baptized into new life. Marianne, you are baptized into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and baptized into new life.

And you are baptized, not just you and Jesus, but you're now baptized into this amazing family of God. And Jesus knows your name. And if you know each other's names, it's a lot easier to pray for and protect one another.

Because you know what it feels like to be nameless. You know what it feels like for somebody else to call you a name that you are not, to call you a loner, to call you weird, to call you set apart, not in a good way, to call you less than, to call you broken.

You know what that feels like. And the hard thing is, sometimes it comes from the very people who are supposed to be holding their shield right next to you. And that's called church hurt. And that happens where sometimes you get stabbed in the back by the very person who's trying to protect you.

And here's what I've seen from church hurt. Most people, when they're hurt by somebody that's supposed to get their back, supposed to help them, supposed to be in their community, supposed to know their name, they just start shying away. And they back further and further away from the front line.

And so they're not worshiping anymore. And they're not serving anymore. They're not helping anymore. They're probably not reading anymore because there's not a whole lot of accountability for them to be in the Word.

And so you want to know what? The further and further you get away from the front lines, the further and further you get away from protection, the more and more vulnerable you become when you isolate yourself, even if it's because of a real pain or a real hurt.

And it's okay to get help with that. And it's all right to call on the name of the Lord so you can get healed from that. And it's okay to call on the name of people that you actually trust not to betray you in that way.

But do not start going to the back of the line. That is where you're the most vulnerable.

And so, I want to encourage you to do that. I want to encourage you to do that.

That is where you're the most vulnerable. When the Spartans would hold their phalanx position, they actually could do so in a way where the front line could hold their shields like this. And if arrows were coming, the line that was behind them could hold their shields at this level.

So the closer you were to the front line, guess what? The safer you actually were because you were a lot closer to the protection that was intended to cover you.

If you've been hurt by the church, you can still get help and be at the front lines. You can still heal and be protected because there's a huge danger from retreating.

Think about Peter, who was a part of Jesus' three. Think about how he retreated that night when Jesus was betrayed in the garden.

Earlier in the garden, he was so willing to protect when everybody else was around him that he drew his sword and he was so like zealous, he cut off a dude's ear, which is gross. Poor Malchus. Like he had to get the ear slapped back on him. I don't know how it worked after that. It was like a bell tone. I don't know. But Jesus healed it, so it must have been great.

But that was Peter when he had the three with him, when he had other people to support him.

Notice what happens when Peter retreats and Jesus is away from him and his friends are away from him. And he's around a fire when a little girl asks, "Hey, don't you know Jesus?"

"I don't know him. I don't know him."

It was easier for the evil one to take out Peter when he had retreated to the back.

And we already learned the same lesson from Elijah. He had done all the faithful things against the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. But when he retreated away from his servant, when he retreated away from everyone else that supported him on Mount Carmel, when he was all by himself,

hit with the arrows. God, just kill me now. Just let me die. I can't do this anymore. God, just kill me now. Just let me die. I can't do this anymore.

We see time and time and time again that when we step away from Jesus's community, that's when we're the most vulnerable and the most likely to be taken out.

Because I tell you what, brothers and sisters, the fire usually doesn't come in a furnace. The fire usually is much more pinpointed and targeted at you.

The Apostle Paul actually observed this, and he wanted to equip his community with the right view of the attack. And so he gives them Ephesians 6.16.

He says, "In addition to all of this, take up the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one."

And I want to take a minute in here because it's very important that we actually study this for your sake and the sake of those with your shield to your left and the shield to your right.

If you read this in the translations that you have, the majority of translations make it sound like this is your call for you to do by yourself independently.

But when you actually go and study the original language, when you study the Greek manuscripts, this is what it says.

"In addition to all this, you all take up the shield of faith. All take up the shield of faith with which you all can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one."

Do you want to be protected? Do you actually want to walk in a way where it feels like Jesus's kingdom is taking new ground and moving forward?

This is how. It's this gift of the shield of faith. Faith is a gift. You don't work for it. You don't work for part of it. It is 100% a gift given to you and given to me.

And this shield of faith is to be picked up, not just by me and not just by those who are up on this stage and not just those who are always volunteering.

No, this shield of faith is to be picked up by every single redeemed son and daughter of Jesus.

Did you notice the power that's given to you then? It says in that scripture that with the power of the shield of faith, you can extinguish not a couple, not some, not most of the fiery darts of the evil one.

No, the word says you can extinguish all the darts of the evil one.

But I tell you what, it only happens when we all pick up the shield of faith and move forward together.

You see this as we continue to study through Daniel 3, 16 to 18.

So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego go back into this story.

They say to King Nebuchadnezzar, "We do not need to defend ourselves before you in this. We know our names. We know our God. We know our job to protect one another. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it and he will deliver us from your majesty's hand."

I want you to read something because this is important. It's about moving forward together despite what's going on around us.

Think about this. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, they know where they're headed to. They know the furnace is there. They know that the fire and the coals are getting stoked and hotter and hotter.

But even if he does not, we want you to know your majesty. We know who we are. We know our names and we know our family and we know our God.

We will not serve your gods. We will not worship the image of the gold that you have set up.

And this is a breathtaking view of what it looks like to stand shoulder to shoulder with brothers and sisters who will have your back and pick up their shield and protect you.

Nebuchadnezzar doesn't like this.

So we go to a further portion of the scriptures 24 to 28. You can see his reaction. He leaps to his feet in amazement.

He asks his advisors because Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are now in the furnace.

And he says, "Wait a second, weren't there three that we threw in there?"

They said, "Certainly your majesty."

He said, "But look, I see four men walking around, like walking around in the fire. They're unbound. They're unharmed. Like they are moving forward. They're taking ground. And that fourth one, he looks like a son of the gods."

So Nebuchadnezzar, he approaches the opening of the blazing furnace and he shouts, "Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, servants of the most high God, come out, come here."

And they're looking at him and they look like they're protected because the fire hadn't even like damaged their robes.

And they were so well protected because of what that fourth man in the fire did as they came together to stand in faith that they didn't even smell like smoke.

Hebrews 11, 34, even gives attribution that this is Jesus. He is the one that quenched the fury of the flames, the writer says.

Man, think about how wonderful this is.

On the one hand in this story, you got Nebuchadnezzar who wants obedience by making a decree from on high.

And in another place, you've got faithful brothers protecting one another. And a Jesus who doesn't have to make a decree because he's standing right next to them to be the protection and the help that they need as they carry the shield of faith.

And that's the story of grace. That's the story of Jesus for you.

He's walking through and willing to walk through a fire just to spend time with you, just to be in community with you and your friends as you're studying the world, as you're praying together.

That's the Jesus that is wanting to bond you all together so you can all pick up the shield of faith and move forward through the fires of this world.

And this, this is the gospel.

You didn't do anything to get Jesus into that fire. But he would do anything to move into it just to save you.

So don't you want some more friends who are going to walk into the fire so you can experience that so you can feel not alone?

I want to give you some characteristics from the three of the Bible, all those famous threes. It's going to go with the acronym FIRE because you want some friends who are going to walk in the fire.

That first one, the F is going to be, you need people who are faithful like Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, those wonderful servants of the Lord who said, like Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, those wonderful servants of the Lord who said, even if we're going to keep walking through this fire, Lord,

you need people whose allegiance to the Father is so close that they will walk through anything rather than bow down to this world.

You're going to need I, intercessors, people that are going to lift you up and pray for you. Just like Moses had Aaron and Hur and Joshua, you're going to need people that are going to hold up your arms in prayer and you're going to hold their arms up too because you're walking through fire and you need God's word to course through you.

You're going to need friends who are relentless, that's the R, like David's three, that subset of the mighty men who'd be willing to break through enemy lines and break through your strongholds with God's word to make sure that you're protected, that you're shielded.

You're going to need E, eyewitnesses, like Peter, James, and John.

You're going to need some friends who, like Peter, James, and John to Jesus, walk through all of the valleys of difficulty and celebrate all the joys of the mountain.

You're going to need eyewitnesses that have access to every area of your life.

So may you, as you follow Jesus, find some friends who can go into the fire, who are faithful, intercessors, relentless eyewitnesses to your life.

Because I'll tell you what, as we walk forward, it's not with an actual shield.

As we walk forward together in faith, name by name, side by side, you're the shield. You're the one who gets to guard and protect your friend.

And that sounds a lot like Jesus to me.

In fact, it reminds me of his word.

As we talk about the community we need in Matthew 18, 20, he says, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am with them."

So you had Elijah by himself, but then made whole again.

So you had Elijah by himself, but then made whole again. And then you added Jonathan and David.

So they actually had two people together.

And now we realize we need three people in a community.

And isn't that cool?

How long we have Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, we now have three.

And wherever two or three are gathered in his name, there he is also.

Because he's the fourth man in the fire.

And he wants to see us all moving forward and not alone. Amen.

Let's close with a word of prayer.

Jesus, we thank you for our names and we thank you for our baptism. And we thank you for this family.

We thank you that you have protected us and you've given us a shield of faith.

We thank you that you've given us a community here where we can protect one another.

And that faith is in you as our object and no one else.

And so when the fires of this world come to get us, we are thankful that we can look to our left, we can look to our right.

There is one there, there is two there, there is now three there.

And we can be so thankful that there is now a fourth there, because there is another in the fire and that is you, Jesus.

And all God's people said, amen.