

*UNEDITED DRAFT*

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Two things typically determine our attitude, decisions and behavior: internal convictions and beliefs; or external pressures. Battle is going on all the time. We find ourselves in position and circumstances on a fairly regular basis where you can speak or act according to your beliefs and internal convictions, or you can speak and act based on the external pressures. Do you stay faithful to God and do what you know is right, or do you do what is expedient now because of the external pressure or present circumstance. So we're talking about situations where there is not a gray area. If we presented your scenario to you before you were in it, you would not hesitate to objectively and firmly declare what the right thing to do is. But when you are caught up in the moment and facing that temptation or that external pressure from other, suddenly it becomes much more difficult.

This is exactly what was happening in this story of the three men in the fiery furnace. Imagine someone came to those 3 men a month earlier and asked them, "Hypothetically, let's say a man who has great authority over you demanded that you bow down and worship a false god. What should you do?" Well, of course you don't do it. There is only one true God. But in the heat of the moment, it's not all that easy.

So let's take a look at the story and find strength to stand and resist temptations when they come. We're looking not only for unwavering faith, but **visible faith**. Faith that makes itself evident, even when external pressures tempt us to hide it. Do you waver and compromise and yield to external pressure and current expediency? How can we strengthen our faith so that we will follow the faith God has put in us rather than cave under pressure?

**STORY:** So we look at the story of three young Hebrew men, Hananiah, Azariah and Mishael, otherwise known by their Babylonian names: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. These three men along with Daniel were identified as particularly intelligent and gifted. The king of Babylon had an extremely wise program in place that ensured such talent didn't go to waste. Other countries simply enslaved the people of a conquered country. But the Babylonians would take the best and brightest and use them for the advancement of the country.

They were enrolled in a type of 3 year long Babylonian university for three years to learn its culture, language and leadership abilities along with a fourth man named Daniel. They graduated with honors and were given leadership positions in the government.

**CEREMONY**

Nebuchadnezzar, the king, was both egotistical and intelligent. He decided that it would be unifying for his kingdom by unifying the religion. And so he built a huge gold image 9 feet wide and 90 feet tall. He organized a huge ceremony in which everyone who was someone would come to a dedication ceremony. Everyone with government authority was invited.

**COMMAND**

At the ceremony the command was given. **"As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace."** The command was intended to unify the

people around a single false god. It was also a sign of patriotism and political unity. But ultimately it was an act of worship, and it was directed to a false god.

People invariably do whatever they need to do to get by, bowing to the system, to the powers that be. They do what they have to do to keep their position. Unlikely that this was all of the Jews. The rest? Did what they needed to do. They too bowed down.

But there were three Hebrew men who would not compromise, and who would not bow under eternal pressure. They knew God's command, "You shall have no other gods. You shall not bow down before graven images." They knew that giving reverence worship to this false god would be displeasing to the true God. They decided to follow their inner conviction and the true faith by fearing and loving the one true God above all things. They were willing to risk their lives for the principal of following the LORD God, the God of the covenant.

So at the sound of Nebuchadnezzar's great orchestra, immediately all were to bow and worship. But three men stayed standing. And their actions were noticed.

### **CONSPIRACY**

Some were jealous about the position of the three Jewish men and conspired against them. It didn't bother them that they were not bowing down. It bothered them that they had such power while they were not promoted. This was their chance to eliminate their rivals, remove them from their positions of authority and move in to their positions.

So they tattle on the three. They first remind the king of his command, then continue: **"But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, O king. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up."**

Accusations: Pay no attention to the king: Not true. Serve nor worship: true.

### **COERCION**

The accusation immediately had its desired effect. **"Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"**

So the king is generous enough to give them another chance. He restates what the consequences will be if they do not obey the command. And then he tips his hat as to just how powerful he believes himself to be. "What god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" The king believes he is more powerful than any god... he makes himself to be an all-powerful god. In speaking these words, the king makes a grave error. In a sense, he pushes the Lord's hand. You want to see which God? Okay, you WILL see which God!

### **COURAGE**

Now imagine the pressure on these three men. They respect the King and have done nothing but help him and his country. They have done nothing subversive. They must be hurt that they are thought of this way. There is the pressure and threat of being burned to death. What will they do? What will they say? They could have found very good reasons for simply obeying the king's order. What good will they be to God dead? But they were resolute and uncompromising. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, **"O Nebuchadnezzar, 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, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”**

Note that they don't know how this will all end up. Death? Freedom? Ultimately, they knew it was in God's hands. No matter what happened, it would be a win for them.

God asks the same uncompromising faith from us. No matter what, obedience to him is always the best answer.

## **CONSEQUENCES**

**Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed.** [Literally, he screwed up his face toward them. He's out of his mind angry that they would dare to stand against him.] **He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.**

How ridiculous he acted in his rage. If you really want to make them suffer, you don't make the furnace hotter. They just die faster and with less pain. But he had lost control of himself. If the furnace represented his justice, it had to be hotter!

And what did the three men think? It became evident God was not going to save them from the fire. Their only hope was that God would somehow save them through the fire.

## **COMPANION**

**Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, “Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?” They replied, “Certainly, O king.” He said, “Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.”**

Son of God. Preincarnate Christ? Maybe. Angel? Maybe. Either one. God sent his messenger to protect them. He sent them to encourage them.

## **COMMENDATION**

**Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, “Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!” So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.** [If you ever sat around a camp fire, you know how easy it is to start smelling like smoke. You also know how long that smoke smell remains. It's hard to get rid of it. Well, here they came out of a fire which they stood in and not only were they unburned, they didn't even smell like fire. **Then Nebuchadnezzar said, “Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God.**

Conversion? No, doesn't seem so, especially as you read the rest of Daniel. But he does recognize that their God is the most powerful of them all. He's still polytheistic, but puts a new

God at the top of the heap. He probably figured it was a good safety net to acclaim and protect that God.

Can you imagine being in that kind of situation? It still happens in our world today. There are (or were) Christians in Syria, Nepal, Pakistan, North Korea must make the same choice: renounce Christ, or die. What would you do?

LAW: It's not likely you will be in that situation. But you will face temptations and trials. Satan, the world and our own sinful flesh all collude to put pressure on us so that we will cave and not do what is right.

Perhaps you are working in a **business situation** and you have a moral or ethical decision to make. Internally you know very well what God would have you do. But external pressures are pushing you to do the opposite. If you would compromise just a bit with your beliefs, if you'd fudge the truth slightly, exaggerate the numbers, hide a detail, misrepresent a benefit, slip an extra reward to a vendor, falsify a little information... it would help your situation. You'd close the deal, or look good to the boss, or advance your career.

Maybe in a **relationship** you have a decision to make. You know what God's will is when it comes to your sexuality. You know what you believe. But with the external pressure, do you hold to God's word, or do you cave?

You know God wants you to be a **bold witness** for his name and his truth. But when doors open for you to publicly declare yourself a Christ-follower... when you have opportunities to witness about Jesus... when the crowd you are with speaks or does what you know is offensive to God... are you bold? Do you speak or remain silent? Do you act in holiness, or go with the crowd?

If we're honest we'll admit we haven't always been faithful.

GOSPEL: Which is why God sent one for us who was. The faithfulness of the three men was but a shadow of a greater faithfulness of a greater man. Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem... God in human flesh. Throughout his life he was tempted time and again to be unfaithful to God. "Turn this *stone into bread!*" Satan said. "Why trust God with your life, when you can take care of yourself?" Jesus refused. That reminds me of another incident with bread. Jesus *fed 5,000 people* with just 5 loaves of it... and two small fish. Afterwards the people adored Jesus, and desired to make him king." This was a temptation too. Forget the cross – enjoy the glory! Give the people a free lunch every day and they will adore you! But he did not. He clearly taught that the bread they needed to eat was his body, and the drink – his blood. They were confused and disgusted and many left him for good.

At the *Garden of Gethsemane*, another great temptation: abandon the plan of salvation – forget the way of the cross and all its suffering and its painful death and the Father's wrath. Run! But he didn't. He said, "Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer." And he went to meet him.

We have been faithless for far lesser reasons. But remained faithful unto death – even death on the cross. That cross represents the full payment price for all your unfaithfulness (and mine.) When our faith wavered, and we decided to keep silent, or to give in to the pressure, or to do what was disobedient, or to fit in with the crowd, or do what was expedient for us --- for that you have a Savior, dear friend. His track record of perfect faithfulness is yours. Your track record of caving became his. His name is Jesus. He embraced the cross so the Father could embrace you. "**If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself.**" (2 Tim 2:13.)

My prayer is that God's faithfulness to you which is infinitely greater than any faithful response we could have, might motivate you to unwavering faith, courage and boldness.

When Martin Luther was invited to a meeting

On this Reformation Sunday,

ILLUSTRATION: Martin Luther in loneliness when invited to formal hearing known as "The Diet of Worms," to appear before King Charles V and the Roman prelate, and all of the princes assembled – a meeting likely to end with his excommunication and possible execution, Luther said this: "If they use force, as is probable, for they do not wish me to come that I may be instructed, my cause shall be commended to the Lord, for He lives and reigns who preserved the three children in the furnace of the Babylonian king. If He is unwilling to preserve me, my life is a small thing compared with Christ. Expect anything of me except flight or recantation. I will not flee, much less recant, so may the Lord Jesus strengthen me."

May God give you that same unwavering, unshakeable unrelenting faith that shows itself in courage and boldness publicly in your daily life! Amen