

Daniel 3:16-28

Pastor Paul Horn

“They trusted in their God... and were willing to give up their lives.”

16 Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. 17 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. 18 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.”

19 Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual 20 and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. 21 So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. 22 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, 23 and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.

24 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.”

25 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.”

26 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, 27 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.

28 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.

In 586 B.C. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquered Judah and captured the city of Jerusalem. He deported all of the most prominent people in Jerusalem, the young educated men. In Babylon, the king instructed these young men in the ways of Babylonian law and practice. And he found four Jewish men

who were more learned and honest and hard working than his own people; Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Today's story focuses on our three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

One day, in honor to himself, King Nebuchadnezzar erected an image of gold, 90 feet high, nine feet wide, and he set it up in a valley to make it look even more impressive. He summoned all of his governors, advisers, judges, magistrates, any government officials from his kingdom, and gathered them in the valley before the golden idol. The king gave them specific instructions. When they heard the sound of the orchestra playing, they were to bow down and worship the image of gold. If not, they would be immediately thrown into a blazing furnace. How's that for motivation? This situation posed a problem for our three Jewish friends. Even though they were foreigners, they were high ranking officials for the king. They owed allegiance to their king. But they also believed in the only One True God, and they knew his commandments. Wouldn't God have forgiven them if they did it and in their heart of hearts didn't mean it? Couldn't they ask for forgiveness later? No one would know. Couldn't they say a prayer in to the true God as they bowed down? Surely he would understand! If they did not, they would die a horrible death! What would you do?

Whenever we come to a crossroads in our Christian living, and we're not sure which way to turn, we must ask, "What is God's will in this situation? What has God commanded me? In this situation he says, "You shall have no other gods. you shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below, you shall not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God." (Exodus 20) God demands full obedience to him. If they had bowed down to that golden image, wouldn't they have been guilty of breaking the first commandment, making themselves their own gods, valuing their own lives more than the Word of God? Wouldn't they be guilty of breaking the second commandment, by dishonoring God's holy name? Would they not have been guilty of violating the third commandment by not putting their full trust in God's promises; by not trusting the LORD to do what he says he will do, they would be calling God a liar. Again, what would you have done?

It's hard to answer that question, because we have never been in that situation where we had to decide between denying our God or forfeiting our life. We thank the Lord Jesus that he has protected us from those who want to physically harm us or even murder us because of our faith. Thank Lord Jesus free to worship him here in America without threat of punishment.

Yet, doesn't our gracious Father still place us into situations so that we might boldly profess our faith in Jesus? Does he not give you opportunities to rely on his sure promises, even in the face of persecution or uncertainty? What will you do in these situations? Will you stand up and refuse to bow down to self indulgence and pride or will you bow down and deny God's will?

Do you remember the story of the widow who gave her best to her Lord, and the best was all she had, two small copper coins? She trusted the Lord's providence that he would provide for her bodily needs. Will you be so bold as to say, "I'm still going to faithfully give my best to my God, of my money, whatever God has blessed me with, of my time and abilities, and I will trust in his promise that he will give me what I need." Or will you withhold from him, scared that he won't do as he promised and give

you what you need for your body and life? When a religious debate comes up at school or work, and the questions are raised, “Why do you Lutherans baptize babies? Why do you not allow everyone to come to Lord’s Supper? Why do you not allow gays and lesbians or women to be pastors? Why can’t men and women live together if not married? Isn’t it good enough that we all believe in Jesus?” Sure, it would be easy for us to say, “Yes! Let’s agree on justification, that we are declared not guilty because of Jesus Christ’s all atoning sacrifice on the cross. The rest we can agree to disagree. After all, maybe we’d have more members and not so many would be offended.” No! Why, are we, as Lutherans, so confessional? Why do we stand up and profess what we believe and why will we not compromise on any of the truths of Scripture?

Why did a young Augustinian monk named Martin Luther, on October 31, 1517, nail 95 theses to Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany, challenging the Roman Catholic Church to a debate on Scripture? Why did he make the statement that based on Scripture, the pope is the antichrist? Because the pope was and continues to hold the Christian church captive, promoting the false teaching that our good works somehow contribute to our righteousness before God. Martin Luther continued to preach that we are saved by faith alone, grace alone, Scripture alone, because it is the truth of Scripture. Why did Martin Luther not join forces with the Reformed churches of Germany? Because the Reformed churches taught that Baptism does not save, but is only an external act that shows the individual has already been saved. They were teaching that those who partake of the Lord’s Supper are not really taking Christ’s body and blood in Lord’s Supper, just the bread and wine, and it doesn’t do anything for you anyway. Why did Luther separate himself from these people?

Why stand up for all the truths of Scripture? They are God’s Word. They are truth. Jesus said, “If you hold to my teachings, you are truly my disciples, then you will know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” If we compromise on any part of doctrine, however small or great, it is false doctrine. And the Bible describes false teaching as gangrene. You know what happens when gangrene infects a foot, right? You have to cut it off! Once false doctrine infects the body of believers, it will destroy the whole body of believers. If just give up and agree to disagree, allow open communion, homosexual pastors, deny infant baptism, deny justification by faith alone, deny the teaching of Real Presence in the Lord’s Supper, then we are denying God’s Word; then we are denying the truth, and what else will we compromise on?

What will you do? When confronted with the option to agree with false doctrine and go against God’s will for your life, will you go along, or will you choose to stand up, even if it means possibly being persecuted? What did Martin Luther do? Threatened to be condemned as an outlaw, he stood up to the Emperor himself, Charles V, and boldly said, “I will not take back what I have written. To do so would go against my conscience and the Word of God. Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me. Amen!”

What did our three friends do? They stood up to the king and did not bow down to the golden image. Even when they were brought before the king who gave them a second chance, they said to his face, “We will never bow down to your gods. And if we are thrown into furnace, our God has the power and

ability to save us. If he decides not to save us, our faith is fully resigned to his will. We will die a horrible death. But we will go to a place of untold glory and joy!" The angel of the LORD answered the prayer of his faithful servants and he himself stood with his children in that furnace and protected them, so that not even a hair on their heads was singed, nor did they smell like smoke. The king had to confess, "They trusted in him and defied my command, and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God." Vs28

Where do we get the strength, the courage, the faith to be so bold? We lament, "So many times have I failed to stand up for God's Word! So many times have I sinned by doing what I wanted rather than the will of God! So many times have I shrunk back in cowardice because I was afraid of what others might say! I wish that I had the faith of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. I wish I had the faith of Martin Luther!" You do! Your faith is the same as those men. Your faith points to the same person: Jesus Christ. Your faith is grounded on Christ and his Word alone. Your faith is in what Christ Jesus did for you! He did not shrink back from being persecuted. He stood up for all the truths of Scripture, where we have not. He did not shrink back from confessing his name, "I am the Christ, the Son of God," even if it meant his sure and certain death sentence. He did not shrink back from death, and offered his body to the flames of hell, so that you and I would not have to endure suffering for all the times we have disappointed our God. Jesus has made satisfaction! He was the perfect witness. As faithful as Martin Luther was, as our three friends were, as the apostles were, none could do what Christ Jesus did for you. He was the perfect substitute. He put his full trust in his Father as he walked to the cross, trusting that his death would make full payment for all your sins. As he breathed his last breath, he put his full trust in his Father, knowing that his Father would raise him from death three days later.

Why were these men faithful confessors, unafraid, unyielding? How did they not allow Satan to break down their confidence, as he does with us so often? How did they subdue their sinful flesh, would have caused them to run away in fear? They trusted in their God. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, looked forward to a Savior who would rescue them from Satan and hell and their own sins. If God was going to keep his promise of a Savior, and he would, he would certainly keep them safe even in the face of death. Martin Luther looked back and saw his Savior who had saved him from death and hell. That same Savior would certainly stand by him as he faithfully confessed the truth. You also will be faithful and bold confessors. Because you will put your trust in the same Savior who died and rose for you. You will not falter. You will not shrink back in fear, even in face of death. For even if we are murdered because of our faith in Christ, we will not fear our grave, for our faith is in Christ's empty grave, which means our grave will be vacant on the Last Day. Our faith is in his cross, where he bore our sins. Our faith is in his promise, "Blessed are you who are persecuted for my sake, your reward is in heaven."

We will put our trust in our God, who is our "Refuge and Strength, an ever-present help in trouble." We will listen to the Words of our God, these from the writer to the Hebrews, "So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. For in just a very little while, 'He who is coming will come and will not delay. But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.'" But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved." (Hebrews 10:35-39)

Your confidence will increase because you will study the Scriptures, and your faith will grow bold as you read these stories about men in the fiery furnace, or of their friend Daniel, who would have rather been thrown to hungry lions than to pray to someone who was not his King and Savior. Your faith will be strengthened when you read about Peter who stood before the Sanhedrin and when they commanded the disciples not to preach in Jesus' name anymore and he replied, "We must obey God rather than men." Your heart will warm when you study the history of your Lutheran Church and the Reformation and read about the German princes who stood before Emperor Charles V in 1530. They were commanded that they would have to conform to Catholicism or else lose their land, money and rank as princes, and maybe even their heads. At this the German princes fell on their knees, stuck out their necks before the emperor and said, "We would rather have our heads loped off than deny the truths of Scripture."

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, Martin Luther, Daniel, the apostles, trusted in their God and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives. May it be said of us, "They were willing to give up their lives, because they trusted in their God!" Amen!