

But what if there's fire?

Daniel 3:16-18

(Skit: "Keeping your Cool in a Heated Situation: A Sketch about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego" by Martha Bolton, produced by Lillenas Drama)

It was during the reign of King Jehoiakim that Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem. Among the many political prisoners and slaves who were deported to other parts of the Babylonian empire were three young men named Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

The names of these three young men were painfully ironic reminders of the smashed faith of the Jewish people. God had always protected the people of Israel. Even in the midst of seemingly unavoidable disaster, God had always miraculously turned the tide...and the people of Jerusalem had been saved. God had ALWAYS defended his people and his temple.....until now.

Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian warriors had destroyed the city, they had destroyed the temple. In the minds of many of the people, they had even destroyed God.

Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. They had once claimed these names with pride and with trust. Their names were reflective of God's strength and grace and aid. For you see, their Hebrew names testified to their faith and trust in God. The name Hananiah meant, "the Lord has been gracious";

Mishael signified, “He is one who comes from God”; and the name Azariah declared, “The Lord is my Helper.” The names which were once carried with such pride and joy were now names of ridicule and hilarity. Can’t you hear the taunting voices of the Babylonian conquerors? Hey Hananiah, tell me about how the Lord has been gracious to your city! Tell me how he has been gracious to you, a captured prisoner of war.” “Hey Azariah, the Lord is your Helper, huh? With a helper like that, who needs an enemy?”

The sting of their defeat was sharpened by the very mention of their Hebrew names. Hananiah, “the Lord has been gracious”. Mishael, “One who comes from God.” Azariah, “The Lord is my Helper.”

In Babylon, the names of these young men were found to be unsatisfactory. And so the Babylonian officials sought out new names for these three intelligent prisoners. To Hananiah, they gave the name Shadrach. No longer would he be ridiculed by the name which meant, “The Lord has been gracious.” Instead, Shadrach meant, “the inspiration of the Sun.” Instead of being known as “One who comes from God,” Mishael was named Meshach, which meant, “One who belongs to the goddess Sheshach.” No longer would Azariah be known by the seemingly ridiculous name, “The Lord is my Helper.” He was called Abed-nego, which meant, “Servant of Nego, the morning star.”

And so we meet these three young men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego. Their godly lives had been shaken up by captivity. Their God-praising

names had been reduced to names of ridicule and scorn. Finally, they had lost their godly names completely.

Who of us has gone through the trauma of a Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego? I know that some of us are struggling with the move to Colorado Springs. But who of us has been deported from our home and our family into the midst of a foreign and pagan nation? Who of us has had our faith and our God turned into the ridicule of an entire nation?

As we open the book of Daniel, we catch a glimpse of these three Jews. But surprisingly, these three men had remained faithful. Despite all the chaos, despite all the turmoil, despite their painful disappointment, they had nonetheless remained faithful. And miraculously, God was blessing their lives. The Bible tells us that, along with Daniel, these three young men found favor in the eyes of Nebuchadnezzar. And like a phoenix rising out of the ashes, their lives were elevated above the misery and poverty of captivity, and they were placed into positions of high honor in the king's service. They had been faithful, and God had blessed. God had given them position. Even in a foreign nation, God had given them status. For three young defeated captives, God could not have given them more. Considering their situation, they had everything they could hope for.

But then the trouble started again. Nebuchadnezzar got the idea from a dream to build a golden statue of himself. Everyone in the kingdom was

commanded to bow down to this statue whenever they heard the royal music. For the Babylonians, this new decree was not a problem. They recognized many gods. They worshipped many idols. They bowed down to many statues. One more idol for worship was not a problem.

But for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, to bow to the golden statue would be to deny God himself.

The dilemma that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego faced is a dilemma which we also face today. Oh the details are certainly different. The immediate consequences are not so evident. I mean, if we refuse to bow down to the gods of money or power or position in our times, no one is going to throw us into a burning furnace. And yet the dilemma, despite some of the details, is much the same. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had to decide if they would choose to save face, and bow down to the golden statue, or if they would choose to save faith, and remain true to God.

I am sorry for the play on words, but I am convinced that the reality of our Christian lives is very often a matter of choosing to save face or to save faith.

We choose to save face when we water down the message of the Gospel. We decide that our personal convenience is more important than divine obedience and we bow to the idol. We reason that no one would understand if we would witness about Christ, and we bow to the statue. We argue that

honesty and integrity are impossible to maintain in the dog-eat-dog realm of the business realm, and so we bow to the statue. We rationalize that God will understand our dilemma of not being able to tithe, and so we bow to the statue. We have to save face with our friends, and so we bow. We have to save face with our colleagues, and so we bow. We have to save face with our family, and so we bow. We have to save face with our own personal finances, and so we bow. And in the name of saving face, the gospel is heard, the gospel is denied, and the gospel is completely rejected.

We choose to save faith when we obey God. We choose to save faith when we recognize that Jesus IS all the world to me. We save faith when our integrity before God is more important to us than our popularity before other people. We save faith when our treasure in heaven is of a higher priority than our treasure in the bank. We save faith when the purity of our life is more important than the panting of our passions.

Each and every day of our lives, we are forced to choose between saving face and saving faith.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego chose to save faith.

I am captivated by the only words that we ever hear these three men utter. In all of the book of Daniel, in the midst of all that we know about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, we nonetheless have only a couple of sentences which these men spoke. These words are found in vv. 16-18 of

Daniel chapter 3. They are the words which were spoken to Nebuchadnezzar when he commanded them to either bow to the statue or be thrown into the fiery furnace.

These words reveal the godly principles by which these three extraordinary men lived.

The first words that these three men utter in verse 16 are almost revolutionary. As Nebuchadnezzar challenges and threatens them, they answer, “Oh Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves in this matter.” The emphasis of this sentence in the Hebrew is placed unmistakably upon the word “WE”. Nebuchadnezzar, WE do not need to defend ourselves in this matter. The whole structure of the words portrays a trust and confidence that they had in Someone outside of themselves. The fact of the matter is that when we take a stand for God, WE do not need to defend ourselves. God Himself will be our defense!

Oh, how I wish that WE could find a freedom from needing to defend ourselves. We turn the focus so often completely upon ourselves. We defend our actions, we defend our attitudes, we defend our arguments, we defend our mistakes, we even end up defending our sins. And the focus of our argument always seems to revolve around one subject. ME! I! So often we act as if it's all about me... all the time... for everyone!

The striking thing about these three young men is that, although the names had been changed, their identities had remained the same. Despite captivity, despite imprisonment, despite the loss of their temple and their city and their land, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego understood that God *is* our Helper, that everything *does* come from God, and that God *is* gracious.

“King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves for doing what is right!” We do not need to defend ourselves. God is our Helper. God is our defender.

But the words of the young men continue in verse 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.”

After we have watched the little drama which we saw today, these words seem to be easy words to speak. WE know how the scene ends. We know that God DOES rescue these faithful men from the sting of the fire. But you have to remember: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did NOT know.

As I have studied and thought about these words in verse 17, I do not believe that these words were spoken like a prophecy. I don't think that these 3 men were saying that God WOULD rescue them. I think that they are pronouncing a profession of faith that God COULD rescue them. They understood that God is sovereign. They understood that God controls all of

creation. They understood that God is the rescuer of both THIS life and the life to come.

In faith, they pronounced the conviction that God would save them. One way or another, out of death or *through* death, God would rescue.

But the most decisive words are found in verse 18. In verse 17, our three young men proclaim, “If we are thrown into the fiery furnace, God is able to save us, he is able to rescue us.” Then we read in v. 18, “But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods.”

The faith of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego was a faith that said, “Even if we lose everything, even if we are hurt, even if we are alone, even if we feel abandoned, even if we cannot see the immediate evidence of God’s presence in our lives, even if everything goes wrong and we are threatened with losing everything, we will not give up. We will not let go of our faith. We will remain faithful to the God who called us. And we will NOT serve your gods!!”

God grant us the integrity of a Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

We are not called to an easy faith. So many people want to trust God and obey God only when the way is easy. Many want to serve God only while they can save face, only while they can maintain their status and their convenience.

But God calls us to complete obedience. Are you living your Christian life with integrity? Christ never promised us that we would have things easy.

As a matter of fact, Christ tells us that the way of faith will be filled with difficulties. He talks of carrying a cross. He speaks of opposition from the world. He mentions even opposition sometimes within our own families.

Too many of us want to follow God only while the way is smooth and easy. But what if there's fire? How will you live your life if there's fire?

Some people choose to run from fire. They hide, they duck, they will even disappear completely while the fire is present. But the result is that their lives are filled with emptiness.

You have probably heard it already, but I am reminded of the story I once heard about King George of England. When the late king George was visiting a pottery plant some years ago, two special vases were shown to him. Both were made of the same material and both had been painted in the same style and manner. But one was a beautiful ornament, and the other was blurred and unsightly. The king looked at the two vases and said, "You can sure tell the difference between the quality of the materials, can't you?" The manager looked at him and replied, "Your majesty, what you see here is not a difference in quality. The quality of both vases is exactly the same. They were both formed from the same clay, the same paints were applied to both vessels, and the same skillful artist did the painting." "Well why are they so different then?" King George asked. "Why is one of them ugly and useless, and the other is a priceless treasure?" The manager of the pottery plant answered, "It is really

quite simple, your majesty. The vase that is now priceless went through the fire, and the other one did not.”

Friends, I have a question for you today. Are you willing to take the fire? God is certainly able to save you from it; God is able to rescue you from your troubles. God has the power to change the circumstances, he can erase the problem. God has the power and ability to deliver to you a new job, he can eliminate the colleague who is harassing you, he can heal your sickness, he can take away your financial woes, he can reconcile your family, he can fix your car. God has the power to save you from every problem and from even the hint of trouble.

But what if he doesn't? What if there's fire?

You know, I am convinced that the integrity of our Christian life is not proven while the way is easy...it is proven when there is fire. The effectiveness of our witness is not convincing while everything is going our way...it is convincing when there is fire. The reality and the blessing of God's call on our lives to be ministers and leaders within His Kingdom is not proven when all our tests and term papers are easy...it is proven by how we react and stick it out when there is fire!

Today, we live in a world of fire. Our culture challenges us everyday to step into the fire. It laughs at us, it ridicules us, it says that the Christian way is not worth it. What are you going to do? There is no avoiding it. We must

either save faith and step into the fire, or we must back down, save face, and bow to the statues of money, popularity, position, comfort, public opinion.

I am here this evening to tell you one thing: Step into the fire. It is not a popular decision. It is not easy. It will probably even hurt. But there is a marvelous truth that we can learn from the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. The truth that we learn is that the only path to true spiritual victory runs directly through the fire. There is no other way.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego chose to take the fire.

There is a very fascinating element to this story that we need to approach carefully in terms of our interpretation. But I think that it provides us with a significant truth about the journey of faith. In the skit that we watched, we heard the words that the Bible says that King Nebuchadnezzar uttered when he looked in on the three young men in the fiery furnace. You didn't miss that part of the story, did you? When King Nebuchadnezzar looked in at the three young men in the fiery furnace, he called out in amazement. We read his words in Daniel 3, verse 25. Nebuchadnezzar said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods." Do you hear what he says, "The fourth looks like a son of the gods." I know that we need to be careful before we jump to any major conclusions about the true identity of this "son of the gods" that this pagan king recognized in the fire. Most commentators believe

that this is probably a reference to an angel or some other kind of celestial being. But what do you think? Could this “son of the gods” actually have been THE Son of God? I don’t know. I think it’s possible, but I just don’t know. But here is what I DO know: these three young men did not encounter this “son of the gods” until they actually stepped into the fire!

The fact is, Christ himself also went through the fire. When Christ left his glory behind in heaven in order to take upon himself the flesh and form of humanity, he stepped into the fire. When he confronted the wrong priorities and self-righteous legalism of the Pharisees, he stepped into the fire. When he struggled and prayed and sweat blood drops of anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane, he stepped into the fire. When he surrendered himself to the abusive and cruel hands of the Roman captors, he didn’t run away from the fire. When he silently absorbed the abuse and ridicule of the Jewish religious leaders as they mockingly challenged him to come down from the cross and save himself, he endured the flames of the fire. When Christ struggled for his last strangled breath on the cross, and when he finally died on behalf of the sins of you and me, he went through the fire.

And do you know what? I am convinced that if we want to live Christ-like lives, we must go through the fire, too. As a matter of fact, I think that Christ LIVES in the middle of the fire. If you want to meet Christ, if you want to have true spiritual victory in your life, step into the fire.

I'm afraid that too many people spend their entire lives hiding from the fire. And the ironic thing is that a lot of these people even spend their lives hiding from the fire in the church. And then they simply cannot understand why they can't seem to gain spiritual victory. They can't understand why they can't seem to find the Savior. They wonder why they can't find the joy of Christ. They wonder why they can't discover the secret of the victorious life.

Do you want to find the Son of God? Do you want to meet the Savior? Step into the fire. That is where Jesus lived his own life...in the midst of the fire. And that is where he calls us to live as well. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stepped into the fire, and they met the Son of God. They met the Savior. They met the One who gives true spiritual victory.

How about you? Are you running and hiding from the fire? Have things gotten "too hot" for you in Colorado Springs? Does the way seem too difficult? Are the classes too demanding? Do the sacrifices seem to be too great? Stop hiding from the fire. Step into the fire! Take the challenge. Remain faithful to the call that God has given you.

I don't know what your fire is. It could be the difficulty of living in Colorado Springs where you are far away from your family. Your fire could be a difficult church you are pastoring, or a difficult job you are working. Your fire could be the doubt that God loves you or the doubt that God has called you or

the doubt that God could even use you with the kind of past you have experienced.

I don't know what the fire is you are facing. But don't run from the fire. Trust in God, pray for his strength, and step into the fire. In the midst of the fire, Christ is waiting for you!