

## On Fire for Jesus!

(Daniel 3:16-28) Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” <sup>19</sup> 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 <sup>20</sup> and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. <sup>21</sup> So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. <sup>22</sup> 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, <sup>23</sup> and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace. <sup>24</sup> 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, Your Majesty.” <sup>25</sup> 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.” <sup>26</sup> 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, <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> 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 Christ Jesus, who loves us and gave himself for us, dear fellow redeemed,

It’s the kind of advice that you might find on a bumper sticker, a coffee mug or as a wall decoration – this advice: *“Dance like no one’s watching; Sing like no one’s listening; Love like you’ve never been hurt; and Live like there’s no tomorrow.”* All such advice takes aim at our inhibitions and suggests that if we just close our eyes and pretend it’s all about us, we might be able to enjoy life the way we’ve always wanted to.

Maybe the theme for our new worship series sounds like more of the same kind of advice: “Live like you’ll live forever.” But it’s not the same – not at all. Here the focus isn’t on us. It’s on the One who has given us life unending. Living like we’ll live forever is liberating. Instead of turning inward and making life all about us, we get to live for others, doing everything we can to help them know the Savior who has given himself for them. To this end, you and I can strive to live the life of a courageous witness. With this in mind, we’ll take as your theme today: **On Fire for Jesus!** 1) who saved us from the flames. 2) who saves us when we’re in the flames.

Who better to demonstrate what this all means than the three men in our text – Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. These three were Jewish nobility and some of the first individuals to be taken captive from Israel to Babylon in 605 B.C.. They went from riches to rags. But not for long. In no time at all, it became apparent to their captors that these three men were extremely gifted. Soon they were enrolled in a three-year training program designed to produce future leaders and administrators. At the conclusion of the course, we’re told: **In every matter of wisdom and**

**understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom. (Daniel 1:20).** As a result, the king gave these men important positions in his government.

The fact that these men were foreigners, didn't bother the king. He was an arrogant man who took great satisfaction in building his kingdom on the backs of the best and brightest of the people he had conquered. His great pride is on full display in the verses leading up to our text. The king credited his great success to his ability to earn the favor of his gods. For this reason, he built a 90-foot gold statue to honor them and himself. To add insult to injury, the king commanded that when people everywhere heard the sound of the horn and flute along with other instruments, they must fall down and worship the image of gold or be thrown into a blazing furnace. What a dilemma for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, worshipers of the one true God. Can you imagine their sense of dread knowing that soon they'd have a life-or-death decision to make?

What would you do? We haven't been asked to bow down to a gold statue, but the music plays for us too. It plays when boyfriend or girlfriend decides that if the relationship is going to continue, it needs to get physical. The music plays for us when the job requires us to decide between our ethics and the company's bottom line. The music plays for us when our friends speak favorably about a lifestyle that we know to be contrary to God's will and Word. What will we do in all such situations?

Decision day arrived for the three men in our text. The music played and everyone bowed down to the 90-foot statue. Everyone, that is, except for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Oh, how they stood out! Immediately they were hauled before the king, a man who did not want to part with their valuable service. So, what did he do? He gave them one more chance: **"Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe 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?" (Daniel 3:15).**

*As this drama plays out, there's a part of me that feels like shouting, "C'mon guys, get smart! Just bow down. God will understand. He's the one who put you in this position of power to help his people. You've got to be worth more to God alive than you are dead!"* You know what I'm doing, right? I'm rationalizing. I'm coming up with excuses for why it's ok to put self over God just this one time. Do you ever do that? It's not exactly what you'd call "being on fire for Jesus" is it. But we do it, just the same – and always with far less on the line than Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

If those three were tempted by the king's second-chance offer, you'd never know it. Talk about being on fire for Jesus! The king had wanted to know who could possibly save these men from sure death. Listen to their courageous answer: **"King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."** (Daniel 3:16-18). "Who can save us, O king? Our God can. How can we be sure? Because he has given us his Word! Oh, he hasn't promised to save us from your fiery furnace. We don't know if he will do that or not. But it doesn't matter because of his promise to our fathers, a promised repeated again and again by his prophets – the promise to save us from the flames of eternal death. Your furnace, O king, is nothing compared to that of hell. If we die in the fire, our souls will be delivered safely to God in heaven."

*What a bold confession! What a courageous witness – the kind that comes only from those who know they will live forever because of God's saving love. Now, if you're like me, you might be feeling ashamed as you think about all the times you've failed to be on fire for Jesus with far less at stake. How often we've cared more about what the crowd thinks of us than what God demands*

of us. How often we've been more concerned with the momentary sting of embarrassment than we have with sin's eternal wages. What should we do? There is only one thing for us to do. We will lay our sin and shame before the cross of the One who bore it all for us.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego point us to the promise of our Savior God. The Christ they were waiting for has come. He lived his entire perfect life as a courageous witness to God's holy demands, which he fully met. And now, in grace, he credits us with all that courage and perfection. We claim it by faith, even as we claim his perfect sacrifice for sin as our very own. Jesus saved us from the blazing furnace of hell we deserve by enduring that fiery punishment in our place. To prove it, he raised himself from death to life and by his resurrection, gives you and me and all believers a new life that will never end – not even if we die. This is why we want to be on fire for him who stood in for us and faced all the heat of God's wrath as our Substitute.

Jesus saved us from the flames of hell, but as the three men in our text found out, there are always flames to face of a lesser kind. In his rage, King Nebuchadnezzar had Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego thrown into a furnace so hot that its unbearable heat killed even their executioners. In his twisted anger, the king remained on hand to witness the men's gruesome cremation. But much to his amazement, they didn't burn. Instead, they walked around in the furnace and even entertained a guest, one, who according to the king's testimony, looked like a "son of the gods." Moments later, the same king who had mocked the faith of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, found himself praising the Most High God for rescuing his servants in such a miraculous way.

There is a powerful truth here for you and me to witness and to live by – the same truth that inspired Martin Luther to carry out the Lutheran Reformation 500 years ago. God, who has rescued us from the flames of hell, did not choose to spare his three servants from the experience of being thrown into the fiery furnace. The men fell into the flames. I can't imagine the horror of that moment. But it was only momentary. Why? Because God met them in the flames to keep them safe. Jesus did the same for Martin Luther. Martin was charged with heresy for teaching that sinners are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, for the sake of Christ alone. In his day, heretics were burned at the stake. Emperor Charles V demanded that Luther renounce his teachings. Luther's responded: "I cannot and will not recant. May God help me." And that's exactly what God did. He went with Luther into the fire that was the Lutheran Reformation of which we are the beneficiaries.

What Jesus did for the three men in our text and for Luther, he promises to do for us. It's right here in Isaiah 43: **"When you walk through the fire, I will be with you, the flames will not set you ablaze."** (Isaiah 43:2). Jesus can, of course, spare us from all the fiery ridicule and embarrassment we may experience as we live our faith and speak his truth. But even if he doesn't, it's ok! Because he meets us in the flames to shield us. Consider this: when the three men came out of the blazing furnace not so much as a hair on their head was singed. They didn't even smell like smoke. Jesus watches over us in the same way! He does this, not only to bless and keep us his own, but to use our witness and what we experience to bless many others. Like King Nebuchadnezzar, people today still take notice of the power of God's love at work in those who live like they'll live forever. Even when people mock and ridicule us, they cannot help but marvel at our courageous witness. When we refuse to cave to pressure, when we stand up at a time when everyone else is bowing down, it gives people pause. They are left to wonder what could be so important, so valuable to us, that we are willing to suffer their insults rather than surrender to their thinking. In fact, they may be intrigued just enough to listen and learn a little more about the One who loves them and has given himself for them. When that happens, who knows? Soon they too may be on fire for Jesus who saved them from the flames of hell and is with them to add their bold witness to our own and in this way reach even more lost souls with the good news of eternal life in Christ. To this glorious end we pray as Luther did, "May God help us, for Jesus' sake. Amen.