

**+ Daniel 3:16-28 + We Only Serve the True God +
+ 1st Sunday of End Time: Reformation Sunday + 28 October 2012 +**

“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.” Could I do that? Would I have the guts to take a stand like those three young men made before one of the most powerful rulers in ancient history? Would I clearly confess my faith in the face of such very real death? Would I say “No”, when the world around me says “Yes or it’ll cost you your life”? Would I give the reason for the hope that I have under extreme pressure?

...Or would I keep my mouth shut? Would I not even bother to make such a stand in the hope that God will overlook a moment of spaghetti-spined compromise? Would my heart give out? Would I give in where those three young men stood firm? Would I not even murmur a word?

Such questions just leap off the page as you read Daniel’s vivid account of three young men—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—who stood firm in the face of an angry king and his blazing furnace. It’s simply amazing how those three faithful believers—no older than twenty-something college kids—could stand up under such extreme pressure, yet they did.

How could they do it? Did God perform a miraculous titanium-spine transplant? Were they simply brave, bold, and didn’t know better? On the other hand, how could any Christian do that? Countless Christians have faced the same deadly challenge to their faith and responded the same way—from the three young men to the countless thousands who have died under Communist, Fascist, or Muslim regimes. How could they withstand such a hurricane of pressure on their faith that in many cases cost them their lives? How could they do it? **WE ONLY SERVE THE TRUE GOD.**

As you enjoy the comforts of being a Christian living in 21st century America, where physical persecution for your faith is thankfully not a reality, it’s easy to think you’ll stand firm if the pressure ever heats up, but have you when it’s gone up even a little? No one is stoking a blazing furnace because you didn’t deny the faith, but when God’s Word is called into question, when absolute truth is denied, when the lives of the helpless and aged and unborn are disregarded, when society dictates what you will think about something like marriage or that you’re not allowed to say someone is wrong because the Bible says so, have you simply kept your mouth shut and backed off from taking a stand? Have you ever held back because you wanted to save your skin in the face of increasing peer pressure and the reality that it’s hard to say “No” when the world says “Yes or this is what’s going to happen to you...”? Yes, most, if not all, of us have.

It’s hard to look the king in the eye and say, **“We only serve the true God”**, isn’t it? It was hard for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They had already been through so much in their young lives—enduring the destruction of their homeland and exile to a foreign land a thousand miles away. The Lord in his grace, however, had blessed them richly and made them high officials of King Nebuchadnezzar, that is, until they literally stood up for their faith. When the king had a gold image of himself built to make the people prove their patriotic loyalty to him by their worship, these three young men refused to bow down to anyone except the true God.

Even when Nebuchadnezzar howled with rage over their lack of loyalty, they still stood firm. ***“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.”*** This wasn’t some fanatical confession. No, this was trust in the true God’s ability to deliver his people, yet those men realistically understood that the Lord might deliver them through death rather than a miracle. They stood firm because they knew what the true God had done and could do for them. He had remained faithful to them through terrible times and would never, ever let them down.

This infuriated Nebuchadnezzar all the more. He ordered the furnace stoked until it was ***“seven times hotter than usual”***. This wouldn’t be a long, slow march to execution, but a raging rush to death. The king commanded some of his strongest soldiers to throw these three disrespectful traitors ***“into the blazing furnace”***, but ***“the king’s command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames...killed the soldiers”*** as they tossed the three men into the furnace.

You’d expect the young men to practically disappear into the flames, especially since they were ***“wearing their robes, trousers, turbans, and other clothes...”*** They probably expected it too, even as they trusted in the Lord, but God had other plans that day. Rage was soon replaced with amazement as the king leaped from his throne and peered into the blazing furnace. ***“Weren’t there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?”*** ***“Certainly, O king”***, his advisors told him. ***“Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and***

the fourth looks like a son of the gods.” Not only were Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego safely walking around the inside of the blazing furnace, but the Lord had sent an angel to protect them there.

Humbled by the way the true God had delivered his faithful servants, Nebuchadnezzar called to the three men, ***“Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!”*** They stepped out of the furnace as if they were coming in from a walk, and all the government officials crowded around them. ***“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.”*** The fire was left helpless, and all Nebuchadnezzar could do was praise the true God. ***“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.”*** The Lord delivered his faithful servants and brought glory to his name from the mouth of a pagan king.

How could they do it? Would I be able to stand firm in the faith like they did? Would you? By nature, you and I could not and would not stand firm. On your own, you’d be no different than all those people who bowed down to a golden image to prove their loyalty to an earthly king. You’d be no different than Peter who publicly boasted that he’d rather die with Jesus than deny him, but only days later denied Jesus at the mere questioning of a servant girl. By nature, you and I have no confessional backbone.

The truth is, by nature, neither did Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They were sinners too, whose natural inclination was to compromise God’s Word to save their skins, but that’s not what they did. They stood firm in the faith. So did Daniel and the other prophets. So did Peter and John and the apostles whose response to those who commanded them to stop preaching about Jesus was ***“We must obey God rather than men”*** (Acts 5:29). So did Paul and early Christians with names like Polycarp and Irenaeus and Perpetua and Athanasius when they stood up for the truth under the threat of death or exile and endured to the end.

So did Martin Luther when his concern for the spiritual welfare of his flock and the truth of God’s Word led him to stand up for the faith in his writings, in public debates, and before rulers who demanded that he take back what he had written under threat of death. His response was no different. ***“Unless you can prove from the Bible that I have made wrong statements, I cannot and I will not take back anything. My conscience is bound by the Word of God. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.”*** So did those who stood firm in the following centuries—people who were tortured and executed, driven out of their countries, whose jobs and children were taken away, whose pastors were put to death, and whose congregations were driven underground. So do countless others who remain faithful to the Word of God in places where conversion to Christianity is an automatic death sentence or a life of exile. They stood firm and still stand firm, and so can you in the face of society’s pressure and persecution—not because you’re so bold and so strong, but because you serve the only true God who saved you.

You can have the same confidence that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had in the midst of extreme pressure because the God you serve ***“is able to save you from it”***. How can you be so sure? Look to the precious Word of God and find what you can find nowhere else.

Do you have a God who knows how hard life is for a believer in this world? Yes! See that in your Savior Jesus who walked this lonely sod in your shoes and endured to the end for you. Do you have a God who loves you and can take away the guilt for all those times when you’ve caved in to the pressure of this world? Yes! See that in your Savior Jesus who threw his shoulder under the cross you deserved and marched the lonely road to death for your sins enduring God’s awful condemnation to forgive you of all your sins. Do you have a God who has power over life and death and all things? Yes! See that in your Savior Jesus who kept his promise and abandoned his tomb for you on Easter morning. Do you have a God who promises to deliver you when you are forced to take a stand and then saves you? Yes! See that in the Savior who has overcome the world for you and will deliver you in the day of trouble, whether in this life or by bringing you into the life to come. At the same time, know that you have a Savior Jesus who gives you the words to say and enables believers like you to give a clear confession of faith about the hope that you have—a hope founded on the truth of God’s Word alone given to you by grace alone through faith alone.

How could Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego do it? How could Daniel and Peter and Paul and Luther and so many others do it? How can believers today stand firm in the faith to the end? They had and have a God who saves, a God who overcame the world and conquered Satan and death. That’s your God too. He’s the only true God and we only serve him. May the God of our fathers cause us to stand firm on the bedrock foundation of his Word until the Day of his return. To him be glory and honor forever! Amen.