

3. Courage under fire

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Chuck McIlhenny, pastor of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in the Sunset District of San Francisco for over twenty years, often was attacked at his home with fire-bombs, his church services were interrupted by lesbians and homosexuals, because he stood for the truth of God and declared that homosexuality is wrong.

One day he found out that there was a council meeting being held the next day in San Francisco for one particular issue about homosexual rights. So he decided that he should be there. He didn't take anyone, any placards, or he didn't march against them, or screamed at their faces with insults. He just went to the city-council meeting.

He sat there and heard the meeting. The council was about to take a vote. The chairman said, "Is there anyone who has anything to say?" No one moved. He stood up and said, "I'd like to say something." He walked to the platform, stated his name, that he was a citizen residing in the Sunset District, San Francisco. "What would you like to say?" He replied, "Well, I'd like to say nothing for myself, but I would like to quote three individuals that I've respected for years." And he read to them from Moses in Leviticus, from one of the Psalms by David, and from Paul in Romans 1.

Didn't preach, didn't scream, didn't sermonize – just closed it. They said, "Wait. Before you sit down, who are those people – Moses and David and Paul?" And someone said, "You're reading from the Bible, aren't you?" "Yes," He said, "I am." And one of the council members then said, "I vote no," and another and another. And it didn't pass. He sat down. That is straight thinking and courage.

The Webster's Dictionary defines "Courage" like this:

1. The quality of mind or spirit that enables a person to face difficulty, danger, pain, etc., without fear;
2. To act in accordance with one's beliefs.

Tonight we are going to witness the three Hebrew men who literally stood up for what they believed in spite of a threat of death by fire. If they thought living in Babylon under the power of king Nebuchadnezzar was bad, it just got worse, when they faced this blazing trial. However, the issue doesn't only remain in the courage of these three men, but also goes into "why-terrible-things-happen-to-good-people" and God's faithfulness.

A. THE GOLDEN STATUE IN DURA

Daniel 3:1-7 Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its width six cubits. He set it up in the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. 2 And King Nebuchadnezzar sent word to gather together the satraps, the administrators, the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces, to come to the dedication of the image which King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. 3 So the satraps, the administrators, the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces gathered together for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up; and they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. 4

Then a herald cried aloud: "To you it is commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, 5 that at the time you hear the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, you shall fall down and worship the gold image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up; 6 and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace." 7 So at that time, when all the people heard the sound of the horn, flute, harp, and lyre, in symphony with all kinds of music, all the people, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the gold image which King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Between the chapter 2 and the chapter 3, 16 years has been passed by. The Septuagint, a Greek version of the Hebrew Old Testament, says that Nebuchadnezzar built the statue in the eighteenth year of his reign and the incident in the chapter 2 was happened at the second year of his reign.

Imagine seeing this 90 feet tall – that is eight story high and 9 feet wide golden statue in the middle of wide open plain of Dura. I am sure that it was a sight to behold.

It seems that Nebuchadnezzar deliberately made an entire statue of gold, saying that the day of his reign and authority would never end - in contradiction to God's declared future in chapter 2. In other words, he was defying the God-given destiny of his kingdom as if he is going to win over God.

Since the gold head of the statue we studied in chapter 2 was representing Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon kingdom, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if this golden statue resembled the king.

Now the king constitutes himself not only as the head of state, but also as the head of religion. Politicians have always wanted to use some type – any type – of religion to strengthen their grip on the people.

To get the production of this gigantic statue done easy, they had a blazing furnace facility to melt gold within the premise. All these people stood there and heard what the herald proclaimed, and they looked at the blazing furnace. They quickly came to their own conclusion: "Worshiping another god on top of what we already have is not so bad. I don't like to be a barbeque today."

B. ANTI-SEMITISM IN DURA

Daniel 3:8-12 Therefore at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and accused the Jews. 9 They spoke and said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, live forever! 10 You, O king, have made a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, shall fall down and worship the gold image; 11 and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. 12 There are certain Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego; these men, O king, have not paid due regard to you. They do not serve your gods or worship the gold image which you have set up."

Anti-Semitism is nothing new. Ever since God chose Israelites as His people, satan is after those Israelites to cut off the line of David, so that Jesus wouldn't be able to be born as an Israelite. But he failed, so he is taking his frustration out on these people: i.e. Nazi's racial cleansing, KKK's racial prejudice, the Nation of Islam's hostile attitude towards Israel, the Skinhead and Neo-Nazi, the list goes on.

C. THE KING'S OUTRAGE AND THREE MEN'S COURAGE

Daniel 3:13-18 Then Nebuchadnezzar, in rage and fury, gave the command to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. So they brought these men before the king. 14 Nebuchadnezzar spoke, saying to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the gold image which I have set up? 15 Now if you are ready at the time you hear the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, and you fall down and worship the image which I have made, good! But if you do not worship, you shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?" 16 Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. 17 If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. 18 But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up."

To his credit, Nebuchadnezzar did not accept the accusation on hearsay. He made sure of it with a personal interview. This was an even greater test for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. It is one thing to make a stand for God. But it is a greater thing to stick to our stands when pointedly asked, "Is it true?" Peter could stand up for Jesus after His arrest, but he denied Jesus when asked, "Is it true?"

According to Romans 13, we ought to obey rulers and laws of the land. But Acts 5:29 make it clear that no Christian is to disobey the Lord by obeying the government. When the government tries to control our conscience and tell us how to worship, we obey God rather than human beings, regardless of the cost.

Acts 5:29 But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men."

King Nebuchadnezzar just declared a war against Almighty God by saying v15. A bad choice, really, really bad choice!

What a determination of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego for God! They knew and believed beyond the shadow of doubt that God could rescue them. But they were cautious not to assume that God might have a different way than they thought. No matter what, these brave people would not worship Nebuchadnezzar's gods or his image.

True faith does not presume that God will always make things go our way. True faith obeys God first and leaves the outcome up to Him.

D. FIERY TRIAL AND THEIR GOD

Daniel 3:19-27 Then Nebuchadnezzar was full of fury, and the expression on his face changed toward Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. He spoke and commanded that they heat the furnace seven times more than it was usually heated. 20 And he commanded certain mighty men of valor who were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, and cast them into the burning fiery furnace. 21 Then these men were bound in their coats, their trousers, their turbans, and their other garments, and were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. 22 Therefore, because the king's command was urgent, and the furnace exceedingly hot, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. 23 And these three men,

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. 24 Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished; and he rose in haste and spoke, saying to his counselors, "Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?" They answered and said to the king, "True, O king." 25 "Look!" he answered, "I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God." 26 Then Nebuchadnezzar went near the mouth of the burning fiery furnace and spoke, saying, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here." Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego came from the midst of the fire. 27 And the satraps, administrators, governors, and the king's counselors gathered together, and they saw these men on whose bodies the fire had no power; the hair of their head was not singed nor were their garments affected, and the smell of fire was not on them.

I don't think that Nebuchadnezzar liked to be told, "No." Nebuchadnezzar had an uncontrollable temper. In an extreme outrage of emotionalism, Nebuchadnezzar vented his anger against these men whom he had previously favored.

Some people are like Nebuchadnezzar when it comes to anger. When they get upset with somebody or something, it becomes completely uncontrollable. We may say, "Well, I am not that bad." But if you cannot control your anger and throw temper tantrum around, it is an evidence that one of the aspects of the fruit of the Spirit – Self Control – is not working well in your life. Don't say, "I cannot help. That is how I was born." That is a very lousy excuse to tell God. Let God change you.

Nebuchadnezzar was expecting these Hebrew men would scream for help and mercy, rather he heard them sing a song while they were thrown in, "Goodness, gracious, great balls of fire!"

Please note that there are four places mentioning these Jewish boys physical condition: they were BOUND. Now note what they had before they were thrown into the furnace and guess what was missing after they were told to come out of it. The only thing missing is the rope that bound them. The fire didn't burn them, as a matter of fact, it freed them. The fire from God always just takes away from us the things that are holding us back.

God in His infinite wisdom allows us to go through fiery trials. In fact, He promises that we will go through them.

1 Peter 4:12 Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you;

Since I am a major wimp when it comes to pain, this is one promise of God I don't care to go through. But I do know and admit that the trials God allows me to go through are good for me and for my growth in Him.

The trials come sometimes because of my dumb actions, or simply it is the time for me to accept according to God's curriculum for Joonho Kim. Every trial and test we go through are custom tailored for our needs by God.

Another amazing fact was to see a fourth Man whom Nebuchadnezzar described as being in the form "like the Son of God." That should be translated "like a son of gods." Nebuchadnezzar had no knowledge of the living and true God at this time,

although Daniel had spoken of Him. Having no spiritual perception, Nebuchadnezzar could only testify to His unusual appearance – He looked like one of the sons of the gods. However, I do believe that the fourth Man was the Son of God, the preincarnate Christ.

This is a great example to remind us that no matter how dark and difficult the situation is that our God is with us and He will not forsake us, nor leave us high and dry.

E. ANOTHER PROMOTION AFTER THE FIERY TRIAL

Daniel 3:28-30 Nebuchadnezzar spoke, saying, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, who sent His Angel and delivered His servants who trusted in Him, and they have frustrated the king's word, and yielded their bodies, that they should not serve nor worship any god except their own God! 29 Therefore I make a decree that any people, nation, or language which speaks anything amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made an ash heap; because there is no other God who can deliver like this." 30 Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego in the province of Babylon.

Twice they had the sentence of death upon them, twice they have been miraculously delivered, and twice they have been promoted.

Before Jesus returns, we Christians may have to go through the "furnace of fire." But we need not fear, because He is with us. It is far better to go through a furnace of fire than to live in a lake of fire for all eternity.

F. APPLICATIONS

1) God is sovereign, whether the result of our obedience is triumph or tragedy.

The Lord does not promise that He will spare us from all struggles or save us from all difficulties. However, He does assure us that He will bring good out of everything even though we may not understand why bad and difficult things happen to us.

2) Suffering is necessary, whether it seems fair or not.

Sometimes we may suffer and persecuted for doing what is right in God's eyes. Situations like this may not be fair, but they can be used for our good. Our God often uses the heat of adversity and trial to remove sin from our lives and transform us into Christ's likeness.

3) Deliverance is impressive, whether it is witnessed by the godly or the ungodly.

These three Hebrew boys could not impact Nebuchadnezzar's life so powerfully if they had not been mistreated by this king and delivered by God. The Lord can do the same through us if we respond to tribulations with an attitude of trust in Him, regardless of the possible outcome.