

TESTED BY FIRE

Daniel 3:1-30

Rev. Philip Parker

Imagine being exiled from the country in which you were born, required to embrace a culture completely alien to everything that you had known, forced to serve in a government ruled by a foreign king. That's precisely what three Jewish lads were subjected to when they were taken away in captivity by Nebuchadnezzar, the ruler of the Babylonians. Even their names were changed. They were now known as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—names which indicated that they now served the gods of the Babylonians, not the God of their Hebrew ancestors. Talk about your world being turned upside down, that's what had happened in the lives of these three men. Nevertheless, they had remained true to the God of Israel, and they were willing to stand up tall and straight for Him no matter the consequences.

Those consequences were soon upon them after Nebuchadnezzar erected a huge golden statue on the plain of Dura. It may have been a statue of the king himself or perhaps of the god whom he believed had led them to victory against his nation's enemies. In any case, its erection had a singular purpose. Bowing down and worshipping the statue was a visible demonstration that Nebuchadnezzar was the supreme ruler over all of his subjects. Anyone who disobeyed him would be severely punished. In other words, he and he alone would dictate the standards of behavior and belief which everyone had to obey.

For Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, this was so to speak a "bridge too far." Crossing that bridge would be a denial of their faith, and they were simply not willing to go there. When the royal orchestra began to play, they were not willing to bow down to an idol of gold. When they were brought before the king, they were not willing to bend under the pressure of royal authority. Even when they were threatened with annihilation in a fiery furnace, they would not surrender their allegiance to God in exchange for freedom. They told the king, "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." That is the kind of faith that God's people need today, the kind of faith that does not cave in, even in the face of sustained adversity.

Years ago I had the opportunity to hear the testimony of an individual who faced just such a time of testing. It took place during his last year in high school, which at first glance might appear to be not nearly as life threatening as what Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had faced. But stay with me for a few moments and I think you will recognize the similarities. Larry Phillips was a star athlete on his football team. If I remember correctly, he was the starting quarterback. The previous year the team

had won most of their games. They expected going into the new fall season that this was going to be the year when they won the district championship and perhaps even the state title. Larry was a devout Christian and after giving careful consideration to what he felt was God's will for his life, he decided that the Lord had some other things for him to do during his senior year rather than playing football. The disbelief and then the outrage beginning with the coaching staff and continuing throughout the school was intense. He was immediately ostracized by everyone. Even though it was emotionally painful, he would not bow down to the idol of a perceived football championship, and he would not bend under the pressure of friends and teammates who tried to force him to change his mind. He remained true to his convictions even though it was one of the most difficult and lonely times in his life. He refused to be burnt in the fiery furnace of their rejection.

Now what about you and me in this age of politically correct speech and life styles? Where should we stand in a world that is becoming increasingly secularized, a nation that has abandoned its Christian heritage. Let's be honest, America was founded upon the principles of the Christian faith. For example, in the 1800's if you wanted to be a lawyer, you studied the works of Sir William Blackstone, the foremost authority on legal jurisprudence. His writings were based upon the Scriptural doctrines found in the Bible. Not only that, but schools and frequently courts of law had the Ten Commandments inscribed upon the walls of their buildings. Additionally, the Founding Fathers of our nation not only embraced but emphasized the importance of the Christian faith. Writing to the Militia of Massachusetts in October of 1798, John Adams said, "We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Avarice, ambition, revenge, or gallantry would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." In light of what is happening today in cities all across America, his warning has become prophetically fulfilled.

So, what are we to do? Bow down and bend to the dictates of those who want to force their values and beliefs upon us? Or should we stand true and unbowed just like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Perhaps we need to be reminded of what Jesus said so long ago. Speaking of the events that would transpire before His return, He said, "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Matthew 24:9-13). His words were echoed in what Paul had to say to Timothy in his second letter. He wrote, "You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kind of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of

them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:10-12).

So make no mistake, unless you run and hide you will face persecution even right here in America. It's already beginning to take place. Just recently I read about a Naval chaplain that was court-martialed for praying in Jesus name. Had not the US Congress reversed this decision, he would have lost everything including his 16 year career and pension. Speak too loudly, stand up for your beliefs and there will be consequences. Just recently the General Assembly in Virginia based laws regarding gender discrimination. Churches now face significant penalties if they are found to be in conflict with these new laws.

Golden statues on the plain of Dura. New anti-Christian laws and polices enacted by secular governmental bodies. It's like a time warp reaching out from the past into the present. But have no fear, for God will not only deliver you but He will honor you just as He did Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Remember my story about Larry Phillips and how he stood up for Christ? Because of his testimony and the way it was expressed through his life, guess who was invited to be the speaker at his high school class reunion. So here's God's promise to us. If you don't bow and you don't bend to those who want you to forsake your beliefs and your God, you will never burn! Your conscience will not be scorched because you failed to remain true to the Lord, and you'll not have to worry about the flames of a fiery hell separating you from God for all of eternity.