

Reformation

Daniel 3:16-28

October 26, 2024 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

### Stand Firm in the Face of Flames!

Recently, some students in China who were learning more about Jesus and the Bible from some dedicated WELS people were detained by the police, interrogated, and then released with a warning. Additionally, the Chinese government has started a systematic campaign to destroy church buildings. In countries like Afghanistan, Vietnam, and Nigeria, Christians face brutal violence, forced conversions to Islam, and imprisonment for their faith. One statistic says that over 75% of Christians in North Korea die because of persecution. In Egypt, Christian women are targeted, kidnapped and sold as domestic servants where they are sexually exploited and physically abused. Many Christians are leaving family, friends and fortunes behind in Europe, the Middle East, Asia and other places to come to America to start life over just so they can worship the way they want.

A problem is that America is becoming more anti-Christian. During the COVID crisis, churches were forced to close, but casinos and strip clubs were allowed to stay open. Within the last two years, more than 120 Christian pregnancy centers, organizations and churches in the U.S. have been vandalized, desecrated or fire-bombed. A bumper sticker reads, “So many Christians, so few lions.”

Some 500 years ago, a middle-aged monk stood before the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, the most powerful man in the world at the time. The monk only had to say one word, “*revoco*,” “I recant. I take back what I said about the Bible being more important than what the Pope says.” and he could have walked free. Instead, he replied, “I can’t recant. Here I stand. God help me.” The emperor issued a death notice on Luther and he was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church.

How would we do if we were asked to give up our money, our job, our popularity, our friends, or our life for the sake of Christ? I’m not sure how I would do. My faith is fine when I’m surrounded by friendly people who believe the same as I do. But when I’m facing the unbelieving world, I usually feel small, scared and silent. I wish I had the faith of those who persevere in the face of severe persecution, people like Martin Luther or Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. After the Babylonians destroyed the nation of Judah in 586 BC, they forced the surviving Jews to

march hundreds of miles as captives to Babylon. Then and there King Nebuchadnezzar ordered that when certain music played everyone had bow down and pray to a gold statue that was 90 feet high. (It likely represented the god of Babylon.) If anyone did not bow down to the statue they would be thrown into a blazing furnace.

Satan must have tempted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego with thoughts such as, “What harm could it do to bow down just once? Just pretend that you are worshipping. For the sake of peace, wouldn’t it be better to just go along? You don’t want to cause trouble.” But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stood firm in the face of flames. They thought, “The king is ordering us to sin but God is more important to us than any earthly king. There’s nothing to decide. We are NOT going to bow down.” They preferred death rather than disappointing God.

When the music played and thousands upon thousands of people bowed down with their foreheads to the ground, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stayed standing. It was easy to spot them. King Nebuchadnezzar was furious. How dare those captive kids from a conquered country publicly disobey him? He offered them another chance, but they refused to his face. Now he was boiling. He ordered that the furnace be heated as absolutely hot as possible. The furnace must have looked like some sort of short silo made of bricks with an opening at the bottom so that you could clean out the ashes or look inside. The king challenged the three men (:15), “**What God will be able to rescue you from my hand?**” He ordered his soldiers to tie them up and throw them into the fire. The furnace was so hot that as soldiers got close to the top of the furnace they were overcome by heat and died. Somehow, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego got pushed into the fire.

You know what happened next. You heard this reading a few minutes ago. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, however, did not know how this story was going to end. What thoughts were running through their minds? They knew that God COULD save them from death, but they had no reason to expect that he would. They broke the king’s law and so they deserved to be thrown into a fire. Do you get the connection? We have all broken our King’s laws and we deserve to be thrown into a fire. We have not kept any of the Commandments perfectly as we should. Our minds wander into places they should not. Our words are not always so sweet and kind. We often do things that we should not have. Every sin is like bowing down to a false god as we do not what God tells us to do. We have not always stood firm in the face of flames like Shadrach,

Meshach, and Abednego. We deserve to be thrown into a fire far worse than King Nebuchadnezzar's furnace. We all deserve hell, constant pain of being burned and not able to escape it. No end, ever.

How amazed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego must have been when they landed in the fire and realized that they were not getting burned. All miracles are miraculous, but this was especially amazing. Our God is constantly in control of everything in the world, including all the laws of physics. But there is another miracle even greater. When we close our eyes in death, we could expect to feel the eternal fires of hell. Instead, we will be even more amazed than Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. We will see Jesus himself welcoming us into heaven. That the greatest miracle of all. Jesus became fully human and was born into this world so that he could be our substitute. He always kept his Heavenly Father's will as first place in his heart, mind, and life. He was perfect in every way. Through faith alone, without any works – simple trust in the heart – he gives you credit for his perfection so that you are declared even better than Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. God declares you as perfect as Jesus. Then, Jesus suffered the punishment that we deserved for breaking God's laws. As Jesus hung on the cross, he experienced the reality of hell as he was forsaken by God. Because he endured the reality of hell for you, you do not need to fear the flames of hell. His death on the cross means that your sins are forgiven. His resurrection from the dead means that you will rise from the dead and live forever in heaven with him. That is the message that Martin Luther found in the Bible and filled him with joy and gladness. We, also, rejoice to know that we have been saved!

I know a boy who fell into a small campfire for just a few seconds. His hands were burned so badly that he was in the hospital for weeks. Being thrown into a fiery furnace would mean instant death. The cruel king sat down at a safe distance to watch the three men struggle, squirm and get scorched to death. Instead, he jumped up and asked (:24,25), **“Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire. ... Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed.”** The fourth man could have been Jesus himself who appeared in that furnace with the three men. Or, it could have been a created angel that God sent. Either way, God made his presence known that he was performing a miracle. The king called the three men out of the furnace. They walked out of the furnace and everyone saw that even though the ropes which tied them up were burned off, they were not harmed in any way. Their hair and their clothes were untouched. There was not even the smell of fire on them like we do when we stand by a campfire for just a minute.

The king had to eat crow and admit that the true God was greater than the god of the Babylonians. This miracle was also an encouragement to the Jews living in Babylon. It seemed as if God forgot them. Their country was destroyed. They were living in captivity. They were surrounded by evil and immoral people. It seemed as if God did not answer their prayers for help. Through this miracle, though, God let his faithful people know that he was still watching over them; he was still in control; and he was still going to take care of them. They could stand firm and not be afraid or discouraged. That's a great reminder for us, too. We are surrounded by evil and immoral people. We often feel like captives in a foreign land. It sometimes seems as if God forgot about us or does not answer our prayers. But we do not need to fear or be discouraged. God is still all powerful. He is still with us and he still promises to take care of us. We can stand firm, even in the face of flames.

The same God who brought Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to faith and gave them strength to stand firm in the face of flames is the same God who working in your heart and brought you to faith. How cool to think that the God who performed this miracle 2500 years ago is concerned about you personally. He gave Martin Luther the strength to stand firm and keep sharing the truth of God's Word. Our loving Lord continues to strengthen his people for the trials they may face. Jesus repeatedly told his followers that living as his disciples would bring hardship. Living according to God's Law is going to make us appear weird and old-fashioned to many, perhaps even evil. Sharing a message of mankind's sin and God's gracious salvation can cause offense.

Christians throughout the world have always faced some sort of push-back or criticism, or persecution. That continues today and will touch your lives as well. Maybe a friend or relative turns against you because of your confession of faith. Maybe that has already happened. It may happen that one of you is charged with a hate crime for not using someone's "preferred pronoun." As a pastor, I might get fined or jailed for preaching that homosexuality or abortion are sins. Who knows what challenges to our faith we will face? We might lose our job, our wealth, our reputation, our family, etc. No matter what might be taken from us, we know that because of Jesus, we have already escaped the flames of hell. We do not need to worry about the flames of persecution we face on this earth. Bring it on! We have God on our side. We will stand firm in the face of such flames because we know we are going to live forever in heaven. That is God's promise to you. Rejoice in it. Amen.