

are reviled and bless; they are insulted and repay the insult with honor; they do good yet are punished as evildoers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred. To sum it all up in one word -- what the soul is to the body, that are Christians in the world.

A third point I want to make about their convictions was they were going to obey because God was God and not for what God would do for them. Notice something about their response. It is not about us, but about God. It is not about putting God to the test. It is not about saying I need to do this so I can be blessed, so I can be lifted up. I am going to live by convictions because if I do, then God will bless me. That may happen, but that is not the motivation for the three. Their conviction is based on the character of God.

Notice, God can save us and even if God does not, we are still not going to bow down. Both of those answers have to do with God's character. They knew God could save them. They had incredible faith in the power and love of God. They knew a God who was able and who loved them. However, they also knew a God who sometimes let his people pass through trials. They knew God was God and that God was free to act or not act as God intended. This did not change their conviction of what was right to do.

This is where sometimes we miss the idea when it comes to conviction. Sometimes we follow Jesus' commands because we think it will give us a blessing. Just saying that puts the emphasis on our selves and not on Jesus. Do we worship God for what God can do for us or because God is God.

John Piper in his book "God is the Gospel" asks some disturbing questions. The thesis for his book is that God; God Himself is the good news. That the good news of the gospel is not so much what Christ has done for us, or that we are going to have eternal life, or that we are forgiven of our sins, all of this is true. However, the good news is that the God of the universe delights in us and we delight in God.

He asks a very disturbing question that is hard to consider. The question Piper asks is this:

Would you still want to go to heaven if Jesus was not

there?

His point in this disturbing question is to cut through all of our me-centered aspects of our faith and worship. Do we desire Jesus more than anything? That is the hard question.

The three Jewish men had convictions that had moved from what can God do for me to God is God and I will follow God and please God. Even if God does not rescue me.

That is real conviction. Why do we follow Jesus? Is it for the blessing or is it because Jesus is the Son of the Living God, the resurrected one. The King of Kings and Lord of Lords. If this is true, what other response should we have?

There is a moment when many were turning away from Jesus after he had taught a hard teaching. Jesus, we are told, turned to the twelve and asked an honest question "are you going to go too." Are you going to leave? Is it too hard? Peter's answer is a gem. Peter says, "Where else can we go. Only you have the words of eternal life."

All of a sudden, following Jesus is not about what is hard and not hard. It is not about what helps me fit in and what makes me stand out. All of a sudden following Jesus is about finding real life and no other will do. There must come a time when we decide I am going to follow Jesus because it is Jesus and that is enough. That is the conviction we find in the Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

Somewhere hot! Most of us don't have to look for those moments in life they find us at work, at school, in a conversation with neighbors, in moments when we are struggling to find our way in a changing culture. What are we to do in those moments? Follow Jesus, not because it is popular. Follow Jesus and be the difference others see and experience. Follow Jesus because it is Jesus and that is enough.



Trinity Baptist Church

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VACATION SPOTS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT Somewhere Hot!

Daniel 3:16-30

This is our fourth stop on our Vacation Spots of the Old Testament. Come summer, most of us choose a vacation spot somewhere hot. We go down to the beach or the lake or even just a staycation and sit by the pool. Now to be sure there are some who like to go to the mountains and get away from the heat, but most of us choose somewhere hot.

However, somewhere hot is not where we want to be when it comes metaphorically. We don't want to be in "hot water" or put on the "hot seat." We definitely don't want to "pass through the fire" or get "raked over the coals." No, when it comes to everyday life, we are not out looking for somewhere hot. Yet, many times we find ourselves in such places. We find ourselves on the "hot seat" with everyone watching us. We find ourselves passing through the fire of life.

Today's story is one of the most familiar stories of the Old Testament. The three Jewish boys who were not really boys, but men who stood up against the most powerful force on the earth. They were three men whose faith had remained strong through many changes in circumstances and although their place, surroundings, nation and peers had changed, they kept as priority that which was the most important... their faith in the one true God. This of course is the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

Their story begins with the defeat of their own nation and their exile from Judah to Babylon. In the first chapter of Daniel, we are told that Nebuchadnezzar's army besieges Judah and something that was very common was to bring out of a besieged and conquered area political slaves. One-way to control another land was to essentially empty the land of their brain trust.

If you took the most educated, the royal line, and the most promising, then the thought was you could more easily control any nation you might defeat. Without leadership the defeated nation would not only be defeated, it would also be demoralized.

So, this was the practice of Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar. Included in those who were taken from Judah were Daniel, Hanania, Mishael and Azariah. These were boys or young men who were described as without physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for learning, well informed, and quick to understand.

In other words, they were considered the best of the best and the most promising of the young men from Judah. When they arrived in Babylon they were immersed in Babylonian life. They were taught its customs, how to dress, language, and history and even given Babylonian names.

Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah became the young men we know as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Another benefit they have in Chapter 1 is that they were given a choice Babylonian food. Yet, these three, along with Daniel, are Jewish men who also follow Jewish food codes. For them to eat of the Babylonian food would defile them and so when offered the food, they refused to eat. When pressured to eat, they strike a deal to allow them to eat what they want and then test them.

Do you remember the story when the time of testing was finished and the three, plus Daniel, were determined to be the fit and the healthiest? They were allowed to continue their diet of vegetables. In addition, we are told in their education they were extremely bright learning all types of knowledge and becoming astute in literature of every kind. In the end, these four were the top of the class as it were and they were not only seen as fit for the King's service, they were also seen as the cream of the crop.

When they entered the King's service, Nebuchadnezzar began to have dreams. None of his magicians, enchanters, sorcerers or astrologers could interpret the dream. In fact Nebuchadnezzar asked them to tell him the dream and then he knew they could interpret the dream. They replied no one could know another man's dream. But God revealed the dream to Daniel and when Daniel interprets that dream, Nebuchadnezzar is so impressed

TRINITY PULPIT

that he puts Daniel in charge and Daniel does not forget his three friends. They are named administrators over the province of Babylon.

This is where Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego's story picks up. While they were administrators in the service of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar decided to build a large statue to his own glory and power. He built this imposing statue, which would have been about 9 stories high on the plain outside the city of Babylon's walls. There are many reasons to build this statue outside the city and many miles away. One might be to make it a real surprise to those at the unveiling. Another was to place it on the plain so that everyone could see it as they approached the city of Babylon. How imposing that would have been for any army that might be marching to Babylon to see this incredible figure off in the distance that gets larger and larger as you approach it.

This statue was to be made of gold, not pure gold but probably gold inlay. We are not completely sure what the image was. Some say it was of Nebuchadnezzar himself. Others would argue it was not in his likeness, but maybe tied to a Babylonian god probably Marduk.

Although worshipping kings, as deity was common in this day, this was not the case in Babylonian culture. The statue was probably some form of deity that was essentially the deity of Babylon and a representation of the power of Babylon and of Nebuchadnezzar himself.

When it came time for the unveiling, Nebuchadnezzar put on a grand show. He invited his administrators and those who served him from all over Babylon. We get an exhaustive list of which all were invited. Here are three conclusions we can make from the guest list.

Everyone who was anyone had been invited. The Bible goes through this exhaustive list to tell us that seemingly people at every level of the administration and government were there and participating.

There were those from all nations that had been conquered by Babylon. This means that there were others who were either from Judah or other lands who had other histories than just Babylon who had been included in the King's service.

Finally, everyone seems to have put aside their own convictions and beliefs and embraced, at least in this moment, the Babylonian gods and King.

It, of course, was a big production. There was an impressive orchestra assembled for this unveiling. Both song and dance were planned that went something like this:

When the music played, everyone was to bow down to the great statue that Nebuchadnezzar had built. The intimidation factor was also involved, for if you did not bow down you would be thrown into the fiery furnace. Now this was not some ancient torture chamber but something very convenient. Obviously on sight there was a kiln used for the construction of this gold statue. When the announcement of what was to happen was made, the intimidation factor was apparent to all. The one making the announcement might have even pointed at the furnace.

However, when the music played Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did not bow down. Others noticed this and they being the ones who had probably been jealous of the three Jewish men, who had risen to such power. These other administrators went and told Nebuchadnezzar that when the music played Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego would not bow down. In fact, they added a serious indictment and they said that they do not worship your gods O king and they will not bow down to the statue of gold you have created.

This infuriated Nebuchadnezzar. People cannot be allowed to live by their own convictions and beliefs. There needed to be uniformity. So of course, the King calls the three men into his presence and warns them personally what is going to happen if they do not bow down to the image of gold as instructed. The King warns them that they will be thrown into the fiery furnace and as the King asks "then what god can save your then."

The men's response is very insightful. They simply say "we do not need to defend ourselves in this matter for the God we serve will save us and even if he does not, we still will not bow down before your image of gold."

You know the story. The music played and everyone bowed down, but not Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So, the King ordered the furnace to be heated to 7 times its normal temperature. So hot was the furnace that the men taking the three to the furnace where killed by the flames. They bound the three with ropes and threw them in fully clothed. Yet, we are told that after the three were thrown in there appeared another man, a fourth man in the fire and they were all walking around unbound and un-hurt. Nebuchadnezzar yelled for the men to come out and we are told that they were not only unharmed, but there was not even the smell of smoke upon them.

Nebuchadnezzar was so amazed at what had happened he ordered that no one should ever speak against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Not only this, but the three were promoted in the province of Babylon.

This is an incredible story of God's salvation and the faith

and conviction of the three young men from Judah. It is a great story of conviction.

What does it mean to live our lives with conviction? It means to live our lives out of an understanding of who God is and what God expects of our lives not matter the circumstance. Conviction does not know situational ethics. Conviction does not change with the culture. It only changes as God leads to a deeper and fuller understanding through the work of the Holy Spirit. So, to have a conviction does not mean that you never change your mind or that you don't every find yourself viewing a situation differently. It means that this change is not a result of something outside God's guidance and Spirit.

Let me mention a few things about the type of conviction that we are encouraged to have by these three Jewish men.

First, we need to live by convictions against the pressure of the majority. One of the most telling parts of this story is not only the authority of the king, but also the conformity of everyone else. What is very telling is that in this group there were those of various nations and languages. This means that there were people there who had their own gods, their own convictions, their own beliefs and their own histories and yet, whether out of fear, pressure or feeling obliged toward the king the others fell down and worshiped as Nebuchadnezzar instructed. This occurs with everyone regardless of his or her station in the culture as described.

There is power in the majority. There is power in "everyone does it." There is power in "who really cares?" There is power in "what difference will it make?" We are not told, but we can imagine there were other Jewish men who in their hearts still worshipped God but may have bowed down with the others that day. You know there is a tendency for us to say "look God understands." This really does not mean anything. I still believe in God, I still follow Jesus but I just need to do this, this one time. I don't want to be different, I don't want to rock the boat, and I don't want to stand against the others.

Convictions allow us to follow God's ways regardless of the ways of our culture.

Second, conviction does not need to be shouted but can simply be quietly lived. The one thing I love about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is that from what we can tell they just did not go to the unveiling. They

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were not protesting the unveiling. They were not even trying to get everyone else to come over to their way of thinking. What we have here is a quiet and personal conviction who simply will not bow down to the stature of gold. In fact, their response is that we do not need to be defended in this matter. They are not there to start a revolution or to even be disrespectful to a king, since they were obviously respected and were willing to serve. They were just not going to worship the gods of Babylon or the statue of gold.

There is something for us to learn here. Most of the time, when we celebrate the convictions of others, it is to celebrate the ones who seem to make the most noise. I wonder sometimes how much of a difference we could

make in our culture if we as Christians did not spend so much time yelling back and forth with our culture and spent more time quietly doing what was right and following the commands of Jesus.

A second century writing describes Christians in this way:

For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs

which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct, which they follow, has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life.

They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all others; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death and restored to life. They are poor yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things and yet abound in all; they are dishonored and yet in their very dishonor are glorified. They are evil spoken of and yet are justified; they