

**Sermon Manuscript: Daniel 3:16-28**

***Face the Fire for God's Truth***

First Sunday of End Time/Reformation – October 31, 2021

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*Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "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."*

*Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.*

*Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?"*

*They replied, "Certainly, O king."*

*He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods."*

*Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!"*

*So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that 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.*

*Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "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. [NIV]*

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There is a lot of turmoil and contention in the world these days. People seems to be more divided than I can ever remember in my lifetime. I think we would all agree that we would like to see an end of the hostile climate. During these last month, have you been involved in an argument over things like vaccines, masks or other political and social issues? Have you had to face the fire of someone else's opinions that were contrary to yours? We know how uncomfortable that can be. It can mean strained or even broken friendships. The familiar story from the Old Testament before us today helps us to keep all of this in a more godly perspective. When can we let things pass? And when do we need to take a stand? Our three fellow saints in the lesson today show us that the time to take a stand is when we need to **FACE THE FIRE FOR GOD'S TRUTH**. The truth of God means that we fear God above all, love God above all and trust God above all.

## 1. Fear God above All

How do we keep our priorities straight when we are confronted with the issues like the ones that are being talked about these days? What side should we be on when it comes to race or government mandates? These are things that are certainly important but when we compare them to God's great oversight of this world, they shrink to a more manageable size. As we grow in our understanding of God and his Word, we learn to do as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did. They had learned to pick their battles.

Nebuchadnezzar forced these three believers to take a stand where a stand needed to be taken. Nebuchadnezzar was the king of the Babylonian empire. He was probably the most powerful man in the world of his day. We are told that he decided to establish a new religious practice for his empire. He built a golden idol that was 90 feet tall. That's as tall as our tallest steeple. Then he gave this command: *"This is what you are commanded to do, O peoples, nations and men of every language: As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace."* [Daniel 3:4-6]

This imperial decree was a problem for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They were young Jewish exiles that had been brought by the Babylonians from Judah to the capital. They were very gifted young men that the Babylonians planned to use as government officials. So they had very public offices. But they were also faithful believers in the God of Israel, the LORD. When this decree was issued by Nebuchadnezzar, they saw it as a challenge to their faithfulness to the one true God. As a result they could not obey it. Instead they refused to bow down to the idol. Their disobedience was reported to the king who called them in and confronted them with their refusal to obey. We read their response here. *"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."* [verses 16-19]

As believers, we are both citizens of the state and subjects in God's kingdom of grace. When we are faced with a choice between the two such as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, we must choose for God. If those in authority tell us to act directly contrary to God's will, we must refuse. But we must be sure that the authority is TRULY requiring us to disobey God. If we must refuse, it must be done with respect. As the apostles told the Sanhedrin, *"We must obey God, rather than men."* [Acts 5:29] We must stand firm with courage and still respect God's representatives among us in obedience to the Fourth Commandment. The reason for this is that God is the final and the highest authority. For this reason God needs to be feared. Sinners must fear him in terror because of his just anger against sin. But believers also fear him with the proper respect that he deserves as the Maker and Judge of all things as well as proper respect to his representatives. To fear God means to put his truth above all others.

For this reason, when we pick our battles, we want to make sure that we are also on the right side. Many authorities like to claim that God is on their side. This kind of loose talk is all too common as Scripture is misquoted and abused for human purposes. There are many human authorities or "influencers" that claim to have answers to our problems. We can get pulled into believing this or

that authority as being absolute. Those in the government promise peace and prosperity. Government aren't the only "authority." The "influencers" tell us what we think we want to hear. The media peddles fear to sell advertising and keep us coming back for more. There are many people who claim to have the truth but really are only deceiving people for their own purposes. There's lots of misinformation that deceives those who are too hungry for simple answers. We can be led down many rabbit holes. We can end up with some very strong opinions that may or may not be true. But we must remember that all human authorities and self-styled experts are flawed. They are tainted by sin. Their "truth" may only be passing, partial or patently false.

To make sure we are on the side of truth, we need to be on God's side instead of trying to put God on our side. This is what the fear of God truly is. It means to keep God in the first place of authority in our lives. This is done by making sure we are standing firmly on the Word of God and the truth it contains. To misuse God's Word by putting words in his mouth to support our opinions or desires is to sin against the Second Commandment but misusing God's name – misrepresenting his reputation.

This is the heart of the Reformation. When he was forced by the authorities of his day to take a stand, Luther said, "Here I stand" because he was taking his stand on God's Word. He wouldn't have gone against the authorities without the Word. He said, "I am bound by the Scriptures ... and my conscience is captive to the Word of God." And so, like Luther, we need to take our stand on the Word. To do that, we need to know that Word and its truth well. We also need to understand how to apply that truth to all the decisions and fires we face in our lives. This kind of understanding comes from learning and working with the Word – reviewing it here in worship and studying it with others such as in Bible classes when we have the opportunity. Through study and putting it into practice we will be prepared to face the fire of life's confrontations with God's truth. And the heart of that truth is the love of God we see in the deliverance God has given through Christ. Because of this love, we will also love God above all.

## **2. Love God above All**

The truth of God's Word is that God loves his people and saves them through Jesus Christ. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego faced the fiery furnace because of the stand they took for God's truth. Nebuchadnezzar was good to his word. He threw them into the furnace for their disobedience to his decree. But when they went into the fire, they weren't alone. As soon as they are thrown in, Nebuchadnezzar shouts in amazement that he sees a fourth man in the furnace. Who is this fourth man? He is none other than the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity who would one day take on human flesh to be our Savior Jesus. Jesus stood with these three and faced the fire for them. They came out of the fire completely unharmed. Their hair was not even singed! Their clothes didn't even smell of smoke! So complete was the saving that this fourth man provided for them. They came out of the fire to be witnesses to Nebuchadnezzar and the other Babylonians to the truth of God's love for them. They would show their love for the one true God in their lives.

In the same way, the truth of God's love will bring us through the fire unharmed. Jesus is with us through all the fire we face. When we are confronted with ridicule and persecution for standing up for God's truth, the world may reject us but Jesus is by our side. When we confess him before others, he confesses us to his Father. When we face the trials of life such as the current divisiveness

with patient love, forgiveness and understanding, Jesus is there to support us. When we were overcome by our sins and the fires of hell they deserved, Jesus was there to carry those sins for us to the cross and bring us through that fire unharmed without any smell of the brimstone we had earned. This is God's love for us. This is our most precious treasure. It is the heart of God's truth. It is on this love of Christ for us that we take our stand. It is because of this love for us that we in turn love God above all. *We love because he first loved us.* [1 John 4:19] Our love shows in willingness to face the fire with our bold confession and actions done for the Lord who saved us. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego together with Luther acted out of love for their Savior God who loved them. And we are filled with the same love.

### 3. Trust God above All

Finally we can face whatever comes trusting God above all because he is faithful to his true Word. The three trusted God to accomplish his purpose. When they faced the furnace, they did so, trusting that God could deliver them even from the heat of the fire. But even if he didn't they told Nebuchadnezzar that it doesn't matter. Whether they lived or died, they trusted that what God wanted done would come to pass. They were willing to give their lives knowing that eternity with God was the truth that really mattered. No earthly existence or acceptance of being part of the crowd could compare.

What mattered was that they knew they could trust God above all things. He had always been faithful to his true Word to their people in the past. He had earned his trust. Unlike human authorities who either don't keep their promises or, because of circumstances can't, God always follows through and fulfills.

We can also trust God above all things. This is how we can face the fires of our uncertain world. God's truth and promises cannot be broken or changed. *I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.* [Malachi 3:6] God authority doesn't change so we fear him by keeping him first in our lives. God's love for us doesn't change so we are forgiven and love him in return. God's purposes for us do not change so we can trust his will bring it all about according to his plans for us. And what are his plans? Jesus said, *"My Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life."* [John 6:40] All God does is aimed at our eternal salvation. And Paul said, *"We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."* [Romans 8:28] This tells us that even though we may not understand everything that God does in our lives, we know and can trust that it is all aimed in the direction of our home in heaven.

In this we can trust in God above all things as we go forward into an uncertain future. No matter what the future holds, the Lord's purposes will be accomplished through it. We should follow our consciences that have been trained by God's truth. We can trust that God will work through all things to accomplish his purposes. But we can also trust that we may not clearly see those purposes even though they will be accomplished.

In all the great sweep of history, the current contentious times are a small part of God's dealings with his world. Boldly face the fire of this world for God's truth that is the only thing that lasts forever. He has blessed us with his truth which we have in his Word. Amen.