

A Bold Confession

Daniel 3:16-28 (NIV)

¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, "King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷ If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. ¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." ¹⁹ 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 ²⁰ and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. ²¹ So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. ²² 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, ²³ and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace. ²⁴ 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, Your Majesty." ²⁵ 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." ²⁶ 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, ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ 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.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are three Jewish men who were exiled to Babylon and trained for positions within their new government. They get into their current situation that we heard about today because King Nebuchadnezzar had a giant gold statue built and commanded that everyone worship it whenever they heard the musical invitation. If someone failed to do so, the penalty was being thrown into a fiery furnace. The king's command was blatant idolatry, a sin against God to worship anything or anyone other than God. So, the three men must obey God rather than men, including their king.

It was only a matter of time until other politicians brought this fact to King Nebuchadnezzar's attention. And Nebuchadnezzar was furious! Yet, he tempered himself just enough to summon the three men and let them have a second chance of sorts. Basically, the king told them if they will bow down the next time they hear the music, then everything will be fine. If not, it's the fiery furnace for you! Nebuchadnezzar even taunts them by saying, "Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" (verse 15)

Enter our Bible reading: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, "King 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 deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." (verses 16-18) The three men gave a bold and clear confession that no matter what, they won't ever worship another God. They already knew and believed that God would save them, even if they died in a fiery furnace. So, they carefully, purposefully, and boldly chose to say more to the king.

Are we so bold in expressing our faith in God? I don't think anyone here has lived under the threat of being tossed into a fiery furnace if you didn't bow down to a gold statue, but our profession of our faith is challenged frequently, maybe daily. We wage an internal conflict of what we can say in the classroom regarding our beliefs as people might look at us weird, distance themselves from us, unfriend us. We wonder if expressing our faith at work can get us written up, rebuked, fired. Just the other week I was asked by someone who doesn't share my faith, "What's it like being a minority religion in Utah?" I hesitated on how bold I should be with my confession. Would I say something that would offend them, scare them away, make them defensive? How bold would I be?

The oft quoted rule of etiquette is to not discuss politics or religion in polite company. This advice is given to avoid escalating conflict that will bring you hardship as well as an unlikely outcome of winning someone to your opinion. Our world tempts us to be timid in regards in speaking our faith as it points out all the pain and sufferings that can come because of it. Basically, they want us asking, "What do I have to lose?" knowing that we don't want to lose. That has led us to pull back and shy away from talking about our faith.

But is the question, "What do I have to lose?" the right question to be asking when it comes to confessing our faith? It wasn't the question Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were asking. They already knew they were destined for the fiery furnace. They weren't even trying to avoid what appeared to be their death sentence. They knew that they were saved. They knew the promised Messiah would come, crush Satan, and deliver them from their sins. So, they considered what they had to gain as they stood before King Nebuchadnezzar.

Yes, they could gain the king's fury by defiantly refusing him to his face to do what he wanted, but they could also share with Nebuchadnezzar a God who can and does deliver people even from the most powerful forces on earth. Even though Nebuchadnezzar had laid waste to Jerusalem and conquered the Jews, their God was still in control and he, in his might, would deliver them one way or another, whether miraculously or through death. What could they gain with a bold confession? They could gain Nebuchadnezzar as a delivered brother in Christ as God worked faith in his heart through their confession.

At first, King Nebuchadnezzar's reaction was probably what the three men expected. "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... 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." (verses 19-20, 22) It looked like their bold confession only got them a hotter death.

However, the most powerful kings cannot thwart God's deliverance. 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, Your Majesty." 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." (verses 24-25) The king saw first hand Shadrach's, Meshach's, and Abednego's powerful God deliver them. He ordered them out and everyone "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." (verse 27b) How completely God delivered these three men, just as they believed he would!

What was gained by the three men's bold confession as God delivered them? The king's heart changed. 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." (verse 28) Although we can't read exactly what he believed, we know from his confession that Nebuchadnezzar now knew that their God is a God who delivers from even the most powerful kings and that this was a God worth trusting in and praising.

The world wants us to have timid hearts when it comes to confessing our faith in God, to not raise conflict or tempers with bold confessions of faith. But God does not give us a spirit of timidity; he gives us one of courage. Yes, a bold confession invites conflict and fury. Jesus told his disciples that they would be betrayed and hatred on account of him. "You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues." (Mark 13:9a) You stand to lose your freedom and gain pain, but not just bad things. Jesus continued, "On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them." (Mark 13:9b) With a bold confession, God promised that they would stand before politicians and people of power and authority. They would get the same opportunity share a powerful God who delivers with someone so that they too may believe and be delivered by God.

Countless Christians have lost their lives because of their bold confessions, but every single one of them was counted by God and delivered by his mighty hand as they were rescued from this world and taken into heaven. We don't know who else was gained by their bold confessions, but God knows. Jesus boldly confessed that he will build his church and that the gates of hell will not prevail. God delivers more people as the Holy Spirit creates faith in their hearts by our bold confessions of God. To think of how many people were delivered as Martin Luther boldly confessed to them that righteous people live by faith alone, trusting only in what God has done for us to save us. Through Luther, God reached the common people as well as professors, governors, electors, and emperors.

With a bold confession, we stand to gain a soul delivered by God. A friend of mine told a great story illustrating that. Someone he knew had been out going door to door as part of an outreach group inviting the community to the local church. It had been a long day where they had received many rejections and very few positive conversations. One of the last houses they visited that day, a man came and answered the door. As soon as they announced that they were representing one of the local churches, the man said that he was not interested and moved to close the door. The missionary said, "Fine. Go to hell." The man turned around and said, "What did you say to me?" The missionary repeated, "I said that you can go to hell." From that bold statement, the missionary then shared the mission of the church, which was to bring Jesus to people because only Jesus delivers people from hell. That man actually came to church that Sunday and went on to join that church. The missionary certainly might have invoked the man's wrath, had choice words shouted in his face, maybe even a physical confrontation or a phone call to the police. Instead, God delivered this man from hell. That's what we stand to gain with a bold confession.

We can certainly receive hate, betrayal, and hurt when we give a bold confession of God just as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego experienced. But we also stand to gain a brother or sister in Christ delivered by God from the clutches of Satan and eternal death in hell. God, forgive us for when our confession of you is timid. Make us bold to share you with others as you give us the words to speak, reminding us that you are the God who delivers both us and the people we share you with. Amen.