

¹⁶Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego answered King Nebuchadnezzar, “We have no need to answer you about this matter. ¹⁷Since our God, whom we serve, does exist, he is able to save us from the blazing fiery furnace. So, he may save us from your hand, Your Majesty. ¹⁸But if he does not, you should know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods, and we will not worship the golden statue that you set up.”

¹⁹Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with rage, and the expression on his face changed against Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego. He said to heat the furnace seven times hotter than it was usually heated. ²⁰He ordered some men, who were soldiers from his army, to bind Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego in order to throw them into the blazing fiery furnace. ²¹So these men were bound in their coats, their pants, their turbans, and their other clothing, and they were thrown into the middle of the blazing fiery furnace. ²²Because the king’s order was urgent and the furnace was extremely hot, those men who carried Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego were killed by the intense heat of the fire. ²³But these three men, Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego, who had been tied up, fell into the blazing fiery furnace.

²⁴Then King Nebuchadnezzar was startled and immediately stood up. He said to his advisors, “Didn’t we throw three men, who had been tied up, into the middle of the fire?”

They answered the king, “Certainly, Your Majesty.”

²⁵He said, “Look! I see four men, who are untied and walking around in the middle of the fire, unharmed. What is more, the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.”

²⁶Then Nebuchadnezzar approached the door of the blazing fiery furnace. He said, “Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out!” Then Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego came out from the middle of the furnace. ²⁷The satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the royal advisors gathered together and looked at these men. The fire had no power over their bodies. Not a hair on their head was singed, their robes were not damaged, and the smell of fire had not stuck to them.

²⁸Nebuchadnezzar said, “Blessed be the God of Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego, who sent his angel and saved his servants, who trusted in God and ignored the king’s command. They gave up their bodies and did not pay homage or worship any god except their God.

I’m sure you’ve heard the stories. A bus of Christians in the Middle East is pulled over by Islamic terrorists. One by one, they are pushed out onto the street. They are asked if they will denounce Jesus and give their allegiance to Allah. Some agree and are left to live. Others refuse. They will not even speak against their Savior. By knife or by gun, their earthly lives come to an end in mere seconds. But why didn’t they just go with it? Why didn’t they just say the things their captors wanted them to say? Why would they throw their lives away for their religious beliefs?

I think we all hope that if we were placed in that position, we would boldly proclaim the God who loved us from eternity. But then we think of all the times we are threatened with less and still put our tail between our legs and slink off in fear. Let’s look at three of God’s servants and learn from them what it means to stand on the promises of scripture.

You probably already know the account of Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego. These three men had been taken in captivity from the southern kingdom of Israel, the kingdom of Judah. Because of their family lineage and because of their qualifications, they were made government officials to Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Babylonians. This meant that they would have their names changed to Babylonian names and live among the heathen and disgusting Babylonian culture. And yet, even living life surrounded by unbelievers, these three men knew God’s word. Many Israelites taken into captivity had lost their faith and been sucked into the Babylonian

culture. But not these three. Though they would not be surrounded by the constant reminders of God's promises like they were in Judah, they kept the word front and center in their lives.

And that made it difficult when a new law came down. Nebuchadnezzar had commissioned a golden idol to be made, and the new law stated that whenever special music played, all people were to stop what they were doing and bow down to it in worship. Almost everyone went along with it. The punishment of disobedience was death. But when the time came to bow down and worship, they refused. Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego knew they were not to serve other gods. They knew the First Commandment, that there is no God except the true God, and that only he should be worshiped. They were uncomfortable with this sin because they knew the truth.

We do not live in a land where the worship of other gods is a legal requirement. No one has forced you and I to bow to an idol. But societal norms do make Christianity counter cultural. You know that your faith does not always fit so neatly into the world around you. The world tells you to prioritize self, but God tells you to prioritize others. Youth sports and clubs have become so big that they gobble up every day of the week, including Sunday morning. It can be hard to have your kids in extra curriculars and still maintain regular attendance at church. It's become all too acceptable to believe that there is no rightful authority over you, whether it is raging against the government, ignoring spiritual authorities at church, or even picking and choosing what from God's word to believe. Christians have been trained not just to tolerate sinful and destructive behavior, but to give approval to it and even participate in it. You hear it in people saying, "whatever makes them happy," as if right and wrong is only judged on how a person feels at that moment.

We are not in Babylon. We are not forced to bow down to statues when the music starts playing. But we are fooling ourselves if we don't think fitting in with God means standing on the outside looking in when it comes to our own culture. How do we stand against the way of our world when that way is at odds with God? Well, we first have to know what God says to be aware of it. I've met Christian people who are genuinely surprised about some of God's most fundamental truths. They don't see an issue with living together before marriage. They think it's ok if they hold grudges against those who have wronged them in the past. They think their time in worship is for their benefit and not for God's, so they only show up when they feel like the spiritual tank is running on empty. I would guess you have some blind spots when it comes to God's teachings too. In fact, all of us always have something to learn, something to grow in. And even the things that we've learned and know need to be constantly reshared to us.

Before you can speak the word or live the word, you have to know the word. Take it from the three men: you will live among unbelievers who don't know what a healthy spiritual life looks like. You need to be prepared, not just for your sake but for theirs, because the way you speak and the way you act has an effect on the people around you, and knowing what is good and pleasing in God's sight is the start of that. Be in the word regularly. Prepare yourself as you venture out into the world to be a light to people living in darkness.

The men didn't just know the word though. They spoke it. After refusing to bow down, they were brought before Nebuchadnezzar. He gave them one more chance to bow down. But they refused. They knew the penalty of speaking against the king's wishes, but they also knew that there was an even greater penalty if they kept silent. So, they confessed the truth. Their God had forbidden them from worshipping pretend gods. And they knew that their God, being the true God, was powerful enough to spare their lives. But he had not promised that. They understood that God would take care of them no matter what, so they were willing to die as martyrs for the truth or live as examples of God's power and authority.

The three men teach us a lot about how God's people speak his word to others. When we confess our faith with our words, we don't shy away from the truth. Yes, it is easy for us to give someone the impression that

their sinful actions are somehow acceptable. At times, we do it by downplaying their sin or by simply keeping our mouths shut. But our words matter. And I'm not saying you need to speak up every time someone is sinning. The three men do not hammer Nebuchadnezzar for mandating idolatry in the kingdom. But they are far from excusing it. Instead, we are to encourage others in what is right.

And when you are called on to speak your faith, when someone asks you whether you support them in their sin or challenges you because they know you probably don't, lovingly confess the truth. Tell them about how sin separates us from God and destroys us. But also tell them about the Son of God sent to rescue a world full of selfish sinners. And if God forbid, you should ever face these challenges with the threat of loss of friendship, imprisonment, or even death, remember the certainty God gave to Shadrak, Meshak, Abednego, and also to you. He will use his power to shield you from destruction, even if that means taking you home to heaven sooner than you expect. Keep on speaking. Keep on showing people their Creator and Savior.

There are times when words ring hollow though. Promises get made all the time that are not fulfilled. People boast about this or that, only to be shown as frauds. With so many blessings that come from free speech, one of the downsides is that people make a lot of claims that don't end up being true.

It would have been easy for the three men to say all those things to Nebuchadnezzar and look like heroes, only to recant and promise to bow down when they were tied up and started to feel the heat of the fire. But they didn't. They went into the furnace, ready to die for the truth of their God. And miraculously, God kept them safe in the flame, sending an angel to guard them.

Nebuchadnezzar realized this, and immediately had them brought out of the furnace. He was spooked. He had seen the power of God to keep these men from death. And so, Nebuchadnezzar proclaimed that their God, the God of Israel, was a powerful god. And while it seems that Nebuchadnezzar never came to saving faith in God and his promises, God was glorified by these three men before all in Babylon.

These men's faith was not simply talk. It was action. But how about ours? Sure, we walk the walk when it's easy, but how about when things are hard? Again, we might not face death threats for our faith, but don't we crumble under much less pressure? We live our faith up to the point that it becomes inconvenient for us. We live it until living it brings hard conversations or the loss of income. We live it until it makes us swallow our pride and admit the truth of God's word that we've screwed up.

For all the times we don't live our faith or defend our faith with our words, we turn to the author of our faith, Jesus. Here is where we find forgiveness. Here is where we find the power and motivation to speak and act boldly for the gospel. When you fail to live or speak the truths of God's word, receive the forgiveness that is won for you in Christ. Then get back out there so that others can see and hear you glorifying God.

Hold to the word in all things, brothers and sisters. Hold to the word so that the world can see the power of God and the beauty of all he has done for us, from creation to salvation. Amen.