

When the king asked Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to compromise their beliefs, they had two options. **Option One: If you can't beat the heat, join it.** That is, compromise your faith to fit in with your culture. Nebuchadnezzar likely considered bowing down to his statue the equivalent of taking a pledge of allegiance. He could see no reason but insubordination for refusal to worship as requested and therefore he does not hesitate to prescribe a brutal punishment in the furnace.

Verse 7 reads, “as soon as they heard...all the peoples, nations, and men of every language fell down and worshipped the image of gold.” The response was total and immediate. The king had achieved the unity he sought. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow down. There were lots of good reasons why it would have been smarter for them to compromise with the king's request.

- They could have said, “Look, if we get ourselves killed, who is going to look out for the welfare of the Jewish people? We're no good to anyone if we're dead! Even if it means bowing down to this idol, we need to survive.”
- They could have said, “When in Babylon, do as the Babylonians do. We're just trying to fit in so that we can stay relevant in our culture. God will excuse us.”
- They could have said, “We'll bow down, but we won't actually worship the idol. We'll just make it look like we're worshipping the idol, but we'll really worship God in our hearts.”
- They could have said, “We'll worship the idol just this one time, then we'll ask for forgiveness. No harm done!”
- They could have said, “The king gave us these really sweet jobs, so I guess we owe him. We'll bow down to his idol.”

All these rationalizations sound sensible...at first. But God's word trumps them all. The Second Commandment is very clear: you shall not make for yourself an idol (Ex. 20:4). God's people are to bow down to God and God alone. There is no compromise on this.

In the first season of the popular TV show "24," Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) is a federal agent charged with protecting a presidential candidate from an assassination plot. Jack receives this assignment because he is a man of great integrity. In the show's first episode, Jack's integrity is put to the test. He reports some fellow agents for taking bribes, and some of his own comrades have turned against him. Jack's boss comes down hard on him and tries to persuade Jack not to be so honest in his job. Jack has an explosive confrontation with his boss and explains his actions, saying. “You can look the other way once, and it's no big deal, except it makes it easier for you to compromise the next time. And pretty soon, that's all

you're doing — compromising — because that's how you think things are done. You know those guys I blew the whistle on? You think they were the bad guys? They weren't the bad guys. They were just like you and me, except they compromised once.”

It's easier to compromise, to go with the flow, to take the road more traveled. But if we want to beat the heat, there is another option. **Option Two: If you want to beat the heat, fight fire with faith.** Nebuchadnezzar, despite his furious rage, will not condemn these men on hearsay alone and gives them the opportunity to recant. He defied any god to deliver them from the hands of his Babylonian majesty. They have nowhere to run or hide — but they choose to fight fire with faith. They say to the king, “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” (v. 17-18).

Fireproof faith has complete confidence in God's power. It is one thing to have a general conviction about God's omnipotence; it is quite another to believe that God can do what seems to be completely contrary to nature — namely, deliver people from fire. God has promised to preserve and keep God's people. If necessary, God will violate God's own natural laws to do it.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were not blind to the realities of the situation nor to the fact that God works out God's purposes in the way that God chooses, not the way we would choose. So there was a second element to their faith: Fireproof faith is completely submissive to God's will.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego knew that their deliverance was not in their deliverance, but in their God. They knew that should God deliver them, God's name would be vindicated. They also knew that should they die, their faith would not be compromised.

These men of faith would not have regarded their deaths in the flames to be a failure of faith, but rather an indication of God's will. Faith means trusting in God and His word. Having faith does not mean that we will always know or understand what God's specific purpose in our lives may be. Faith means a ready willingness to follow God whatever God's purpose.

At the beginning of the movie "First Knight," Lancelot is asked by a farm boy how he can become as good a swordsman as Lancelot is. Lancelot tells him three things. First, you must

dedicate yourself completely. "I can do that," the farm boy says enthusiastically. Second, you must learn to wait for the right moment when the swordfight will be won or lost. "I can do that," exclaims the farm boy again. "And third," Lancelot continues, "you must not care whether you live or die."

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego chose faithfulness to God over personal safety. They chose the tough road of obedience over the easy way of compromise. They went into the furnace not knowing if they would live or die; but they went in faithful to God and God vindicated them. God vindicates those who fight fire with faith (19-30)

It is worth noting that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had to endure the ordeal of the fire before being delivered from the flames, or more accurately in the flames. There is no suggestion here or elsewhere in Scripture that a believer will be cushioned against trouble and suffering except by the presence of the Lord with him in their hour of need. Rich Mullins, a Christian songwriter, put it this way: "You meet the Lord in the furnace a long time before you'll meet Him in the sky."

Instead of three men bound, Nebuchadnezzar sees four men loose in the furnace. The fourth is like "a son of the gods," and it dawns on the king that there really is a God who can deliver out of his hand. The three men are free to make their way to him out of the furnace at his command.

What was the identity of the fourth being in the fire? Scripture doesn't say. The vital thing is that God fulfilled God's promise to never leave nor forsake God's people. Jesus tells us, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). In times of testing, God's people fight fire with faith.

How fireproof is your faith? Is your faith in Christ strong enough to meet the challenge of a personal tragedy? An unanswered prayer? Criticism? Personal threats? Loss of health? Loss of possessions? Persecution? Let Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be our example and our encouragement to fight fire with faith.

Trial By Fire

Sunday, January 18, 2015

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Daniel 3: 1, 4-6, 8-12, 16-20, 24-28

Two summers ago, our family visited Gettysburg National Park. Being a history nut, I insisted we take all the tours. I wanted my kids to learn about the great battle that occurred in this tiny Pennsylvania town, where Union and Confederate forces struggled over the future of our country.

The town itself was full of Civil War re-enactors that week; men and women in costume paraded up and down the streets. The man I remember most clearly is the "soldier" who donned the blue coat of a Union major and the gray pants of a Confederate private. Blue coat and gray pants. That uniform wouldn't have worked very well back in 1861. It would have gotten its wearer shot by both sides! It would be like wearing a Gopher cap with a Bison sweatshirt: there are some things on which you cannot compromise!

To compromise one's beliefs as a Christ follower is a constant pressure in our culture. Often the pressure is subtle: occurs in a conversation or while watching TV or in front of the computer. How can we stand up under that pressure? The pressure to compromise is a pressure that God's people have always faced; none more dramatically so than three young men in Babylon named Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

King Nebuchadnezzar made a golden statue and he ordered all the people to bow down and worship it. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused. The king, in his anger, ordered them thrown into a fiery furnace for their disobedience.