

# Trial by Fire

9-9-12

I still remember the first science-fiction novel I ever tried to read. The novel was *Armor*, by John Steakley, and I picked it up in my brother's bedroom when I was about 6. He laughed at me when I told him I was going to read it, but I stuck it out until I was about 100 pages into the book, which is when the battle scenes stopped and it got boring.

I eventually finished the book when I was in my teens, but today, the thing that sticks out about it to me is not the cool battle scenes (although they are still cool), but the epigram at the beginning of the book. It quotes one of the characters in the book as saying, "You are what you do when it counts." I think that's true generally, but it's especially true for Christians. What defines us as men and women of God is what we do in the clutch, when the pressure's on, when the right thing is the hard thing, when we know or suspect that there will be serious negative consequences for doing what God wants. This morning, we're going to look at three men who showed who they were by what they did when it counted. We're going to consider Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and their trial by fire.

## The Fiery Furnace

During the first portion of this lesson, we're going to examine the story of the fiery furnace itself. This story begins with a **PROCLAMATION** made by King Nebuchadnezzar. We read about the proclamation in Daniel 3:1-7. This seems like a weird thing for a king to do to us, until we set this incident in its historical context. This is not primarily a religious move by the Babylonian king. This is a political move. Each of the ancient nations we read about in the Old Testament had its own collection of gods. When one nation succeeded in conquering another, the people believed that it was because one set of gods had triumphed over the other set. It was the custom, in fact, for the victorious army to take the idols of the defeated nation home with it and install them in the temple of their god. When Nebuchadnezzar, then, asks the people of all these different nations to bow down before his image, he's actually asking them to acknowledge the overlordship of Babylon. Just about all of these people are polytheists, they acknowledge the existence of the Babylonian gods just as much as they do their own, so they're happy to comply with the command of the king.

However, due to the action of certain **INFORMERS**, Nebuchadnezzar finds out that obedience to his command wasn't universal. The story continues in Daniel 3:8-12. As was true of Daniel himself, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had risen high in the service of Nebuchadnezzar. However, the same kind of people who would later accuse Daniel before Darius the Mede now bring charges against his three friends. Once again, the issue here isn't only religion. For Nebuchadnezzar to trust these men in his administration, he has to know that they have entirely transferred their allegiance from Judah to Babylon. Their names have already been changed, from Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, which are all good Jewish names that glorify the God of Israel, to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, which are all good Babylonian names that glorify the gods of Babylon. However, changing what's on the driver's license isn't enough. Nebuchadnezzar also has to know that these officials on whom he relies aren't still more attached to the nation of Judah than they are to Babylon. That's something they have to prove by worshipping his image. The informers know that when the three men don't, their behavior will lead Nebuchadnezzar to suspect that they are plotting treason.

We see the resulting **CONVERSATION** between the three Jews and Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 3:13-18. At least from a human perspective, the Babylonian king is being very reasonable here. He's furious, but he's going to give these men a second chance. If they bow down and worship the golden image, all will be well. If they don't, it's the furnace for them. By contrast, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego appear very unreasonable in their response. They flatly refuse to give homage to the Babylonian god. They say that their God, who did not keep Babylon from conquering Judah, is going to save them, but if not, they're still not going to bow down. They're daring the king to kill them.

However, the answer that was exactly wrong from the perspective of the world is exactly right from the perspective of the word. The Second Commandment forbade the three Jews from worshipping the image, and God expected them to do the right thing, regardless of the consequences. In one of the most courageous stands we see anyone take in Scripture, they told Nebuchadnezzar to his face that they were going to do the right thing, no matter what. In spiritual terms, everything that happens through the rest of this story is anticlimactic. Even if Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego die in the furnace, they will still have found victory through God.

This stand for the truth caused them to face a severe **PUNISHMENT**. We read about it in Daniel 3:19-23. The king had warned them that they would end up in the fiery furnace if they disobeyed, and to the fiery furnace they went. If I had to guess, I would guess that the furnace the king appropriated for this purpose was the kind of furnace that people in the ancient Near East used to smelt iron. It was called a bloomery. Bloomeries had both an opening at the top, into which the charcoal and iron ore was shoveled, and an opening at the bottom, from which the smelted sponge iron was extracted. This fits the facts of the story. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego could have been thrown into the furnace from the top, the flames could have killed the men who carried them, and Nebuchadnezzar could have looked into the

bottom opening, if the bloomery were large enough, and seen the three men and their unexpected companion. Such a furnace wouldn't get as hot as a modern blast furnace, but it would have been enough to reduce the Jews to ash.

However, the Scripture tells us that the attempted execution had a different **RESULT**. It is related in Daniel 3:24-27. Nebuchadnezzar realizes that unlike the men who had thrown them in the furnace, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are alive and well, and they've picked up a companion who obviously isn't exactly human. The king instructs them to come out of the furnace, and he glorifies God for saving them from the flames. Because the Jews were willing to die for what they knew was right, God was willing to rescue them from death. They trusted in God's power, and so the fire had no power over them. This sets out a clear precedent for us to follow. God doesn't want servants who will follow Him when it's easy and abandon Him when obedience is hard. Instead, faithfulness means faithfulness all the time.

## Jesus Under Fire

We see, then, that God expects obedience to Him no matter what, and this is most important to Him when obedience is most difficult. We see the foremost Scriptural example of this kind of courage when we consider Jesus under fire. There were many times when He was under pressure to do the wrong thing, but did the right thing anyway, and this study will help us to prepare our minds for the Lord's Supper.

One of the first places where this unbending attitude reveals itself in Jesus concerns **HEALING ON THE SABBATH**. Let's read together from Mark 3:1-2, 5. We saw a similar story in a lesson about a month ago. Apparently, this was a stunt that the Pharisees liked to pull over and over again: scrounge up some poor soul who needed healing, and see if they could use Jesus' own compassion to bait Him into violating their Pharisaical traditions. Here, as always, Jesus takes the bait. If the Pharisees are so spiritually bankrupt that they have a problem with Him doing good on the Sabbath, that's their problem, not His. Jesus didn't come to earth to coddle the self-righteous. He came to teach the truth and practice the truth, and if preaching the Father's will made Him enemies, He wasn't going to be concerned about that. Indeed, Jesus never once let fear of the consequences deter Him from saying and doing what was right.

We also see Jesus' dedication to carrying out God's will despite the consequences in the story of **MALCHUS**, who was a slave of the high priest. We encounter Him in John 18:10-11. Remember, this chaotic scene occurs in the garden of Gethsemane after Judas has led the Jewish mob to arrest Jesus. Once all of these guys with torches and swords and clubs show up, Peter starts fighting back and cuts off Malchus's ear. If this had continued, my guess is that the result would have been an ugly nighttime brawl, which Jesus could easily have used to escape His enemies. Instead, Jesus, who is the only One who can stop the fighting before it really gets started, does precisely that. He even heals the wound of the unfortunate slave. The result is that no one else is hurt, but Jesus is taken into custody that threatens His life.

Jesus does this for two reasons. First, He is motivated by concern for His disciples. If He allows the fight to continue, it is likely that many of His followers would be arrested or even killed. They could have held off the high priest's goon squad for long enough for Jesus to escape, but they would have paid the price. Jesus, however, stops the fighting, because the lives of His friends are more important to Him than His own life.

Second, though, Jesus meekly surrenders Himself because He wants to please God. We will sometimes face situations where some unpleasant result will follow doing what God intends. However, in Jesus' case, God intended not only the action, but the unpleasant result too. God's goal for Jesus was for Him to die, and if Jesus wanted to obey, He had to make a beeline for that goal. As a result, He surrenders not only His chance to escape but His own life.

This same pattern is even more apparent when Jesus answers the fatal question **"ARE YOU A KING?"** Let's read together from John 18:37. As was true of the story of the fiery furnace, the story of the trial and death of Jesus has many political overtones. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego get in trouble because obedience to God has led them to do something apparently treasonous, and in this text, Jesus does the same thing. As Jesus and probably even His enemies know, Jesus is not a threat to take up arms and attempt to overthrow the Jewish and Roman governments. The kingdom He is interested in exists in the hearts of men, not somewhere on a map. In that spiritual sense, Jesus is indeed the King.

However, Pilate and the Romans weren't interested in that sort of spiritual subtlety. They were fine with non-Romans as kings, provided those kings were puppets set up by the Roman emperor. Puppet kings, like the Herods, made the Roman Empire easier to govern. Jesus, though, was not an officially sanctioned Roman quisling, and if He was a king, He was a threat, and whenever the Romans felt threatened, they reacted with fatal amounts of force.

If Jesus identifies Himself as a king to Pilate, then, He is signing His own death warrant. Jesus knows this perfectly well, but He does it anyway. Once again, there are two reasons for this. First, it's true. Jesus is a king, of the lineage of David, and He reigns as King to this day. How could He deny that without denying Himself? Second, Jesus knows that God expects Him to sign His own death warrant. He has to go to the cross for His Father's plan to work. I'm sure these were not easy words for Jesus to say. I can't imagine making a statement in the sure knowledge that I will die because I made it. However, Jesus did the right thing, because doing the right thing was what He had to do.

Finally, let's consider the **LESSON** that we should take from these things. The Hebrews writer explains in Hebrews 12:3. During His time on earth, Jesus faced brutal trials, ferocious temptations to do anything and everything

but what God wanted. If we ever get to feeling sorry for ourselves, if we ever get to thinking that our walk with God is hard, we need to get down on our knees and give thanks that God doesn't demand from us what He demanded from Jesus. For us, dying for God is a sobering abstraction. For Jesus, it was reality. I can't imagine the faith and courage that led Jesus to walk into that without flinching, to endure all of the pain and abuse and hatred, but that's what He did. If Jesus went through all that for us, surely we can face the trials before us for Him. If He didn't get weary or frightened and give up, then with His help we can keep going, even when the way before us appears difficult.

That's what it means to be a Christian. Jesus did what was right every time, and He defied the consequences. He did that because He loved God, and because He loved us. He expects us to love Him and love one another, and to show that by doing what is right and defying the consequences too. Let's think about Him and His will for us as we partake.

## Our Trials Today

As I said a moment ago, we are blessed enough to live in a society where the government doesn't thirst for the blood of followers of Christ. I doubt any of us have even known a Christian who died for his faith rather than renouncing it. However, there are still trials and hardships that we must face today, despite the consequences.

The first of these trials concerns **WORSHIP**. Jesus describes what God expects from our worship in John 4:23-24. In context, Jesus is contrasting the temple-centric worship of the Jews and the mountain-centric worship of the Samaritans with the way that His followers will worship in the near future. In that day, location won't matter anymore. We worship God in this building on the first day of the week, but it is equally valid for us to worship Him by singing in the shower. What is important is not location, but that we worship in spirit and in truth. Wherever we worship, we must do so as an expression of the reverence and joy within us, not by rote. However, our worship must also be in truth. It must express the truth, and it must be carried out according to the truth. This is not a popular position in the religious world around us. I'm aware of a few exceptions, but 99 percent of the denominational churches out there worship the way they want to worship, with scant regard for the pattern of the Scripture. Our decision to follow the pattern inevitably drives a wedge between us and those who think like that. There are plenty of people in churches of Christ today who think that the instrument is an important evangelistic tool, that we can really start packing in the visitors as long as we put a praise-and-worship band up on the stage. They may even be right, though the evidence on that point is mixed to say the least. However, there's something that needs to be more important to us than pleasing the worldly visitors who may happen by. Our first priority must be pleasing God, by worshiping Him both in spirit and in truth.

We are also tried in the area of **EVANGELISM**. Consider the attitude of Peter and John on the subject, as expressed in Acts 4:18-20. This is a fiery-furnace moment for the two apostles. Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, they are given a choice between obeying God and incurring the wrath of the state. However, also like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, to Peter and John, this apparent choice is no choice at all. If the Sanhedrin wants to punish them for proclaiming the risen Savior, so be it. Punishment or not, though, they aren't going to stop preaching.

How often is the same thing true of us? None of us have ever been threatened with death for telling the lost about Jesus, and yet, we often allow a host of lesser fears to stop our mouths. We worry about whether people will like us if we bring up spiritual topics. We worry about whether we will know the right thing to say. We worry about whether right now is a good time to raise the subject. For all of these reasons, we stay quiet, even if we can't put our finger on one bad thing that will happen if we speak up. Friends, how would we like to defend that attitude to the three Jewish captives? How would we like to explain it to Peter and John? Fear is no excuse for disobedience.

A subtler but equally dangerous trial often faces us in the area of **GOSSIP**. Consider with me the clear commandment of Matthew 18:15. If we have something against our brother, we are commanded to go to our brother and discuss the matter with him until we arrive at some sort of resolution. We are not commanded to go to our buddy. We are not commanded to go to our family member. We are especially not commanded to go to Facebook and share our ugliness for all to see. The devil likes to entice us with all of these options. He likes to make them look like legitimate alternatives. In reality, we only have two options. If we have something against our brother, either we go to him, or we lose our souls, and all of those other things are nothing more than variations on "lose our souls."

There is never a good bargain for losing our souls, but losing our souls because we gossiped is a really terrible bargain. Imagine the following conversation in hell: "So, what are you in for?" "I was a robber and a murderer." "How about you?" "I was a womanizer." "You?" "Well, I faithfully went to church all my life, but I couldn't resist the temptation to run my mouth about people I went to church with, so I ended up here too." How foolish that would be! And yet, when we gossip, that's the path we are headed down with our own souls. Clearly, it's not an easy choice to refrain from gossip. People may get angry at us when we refuse to join in the backbiting. However, it's still right.

Likewise, how about the temptation to **LUST**? Jesus' words on the subject are unequivocal in Matthew 5:27-28. However, even though the Bible teaching on the subject is so clear, one of the most widespread problems among Christian men and even Christian women is the problem of lust and pornography. The Internet is an amazing thing. It allows us to seek out and give expression to whatever we have in our hearts. If we want to use the Internet to keep in

touch with brethren all over the world or find resources for Bible study, we can do that. If we want to use the Internet to learn more about our various interests and hobbies, we can do that. Finally, if we want to use the Internet to fill our hearts with unspeakable filth, we can do that too. No more sneaking around to adult video stores over the county line! It's all right there, at the click of a mouse. When the sin is so easy and the payoff is so great, is it any wonder that so many succumb? And yet, rather than fighting the evil within us, we too often make excuses. If we're not married, we blame our porn use on not having an outlet. If we are married, we blame it on a spouse who isn't as giving as we might like him or her to be. Brethren, neither those excuses nor any other excuses can ever justify sin. We have to obey God, period. Is that hard sometimes? Well, yeah, but so what? When we chose to follow Jesus, were we really expecting easy? If so, why? What is right is right, and it is always right. What is wrong is wrong, and it is always wrong. Lust is no exception.

Finally, let's consider the subject of **BAPTISM**. Once again, the Bible speaks plainly here, in Acts 22:16. Once again, though, this isn't a popular concept with the "Christian" world around us. Few and far between are the churches that teach immersion of believers in water for the forgiveness of sins, even though the evidence shows that such was the practice of the first-century church. Jesus Himself says at the end of Matthew 28 that in order to make someone a disciple, the apostles first had to baptize and then had to teach. Scripturally speaking, someone who hasn't been baptized for the forgiveness of his sins isn't a disciple of Christ at all. That's not a popular thing to say, but it's what the Bible teaches. How about us? In our lives, do we want to do what's easy and popular? Or do we want to do what's right?