



1) The King Comes to Rescue His People

Threats can make us do a lot of things we don't want to do. "I better do what my boss says, or he'll fire me." "I better do this project, or my teacher won't let me pass the class." "I better do what my boyfriend wants, or he'll dump me." "I better clean my room or mom and dad will take away my tv privileges." "I better say 'yes sir!' or be dishonorably reprimanded and demoted." Sometimes it doesn't take much of a threat to get us to change our minds. But what level of threat would it take for you to turn aside from serving the Lord? This morning we see how three men responded to the greatest threat in their life—a threat directed against their faith. And we see God's response for his threatened people.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego knew how useless it was to resist orders. They were Israelites living in the land of Babylon over 2500 years ago. But they were not there willingly. When they were young the Babylonians attacked their homeland. They were brought to Babylon under threat of torture and execution. So they went. All the Jews in Judah faced these threats. The armies of king Nebuchadnezzar defeated them. He then proceeded to suck their spirits dry. With a sword lingering over everyone's head, he carted off the fighting men, requisitioned every artist for his service, and forced the skilled workers to exile. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were made to serve king Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. They were trained in the ways of the Babylonians for three years, then entered the king's service. Life was different. They lived in a new land, served a new king, learned a new language, even took on new names instead of their Hebrew names. Their whole existence was turned upside-down as they caved into to force and threats and intimidation. They had no choice.

Today we read about another intimidation tactic of King Nebuchadnezzar. He announces that all the rulers, judges, and magistrates in all the provinces and all the lands under his control had to assemble. He had constructed an image of gold in the plain of Dura in Babylon. This image was visible for some distance as it stood about ninety feet tall. Whenever the music sounded everyone had to bow down to the golden idol. The decree: "If anyone doesn't obey the music by bowing down to the idol they must be cast into a blazing furnace of fire." How's that for persuasion?

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were forced once again to submit. The king gave the command and the music played. Everyone bowed in fear -including the highest officials. They saved themselves from the fire. All except three men. Nebuchadnezzar was furious when he heard about it. He had the three men brought before him. He personally repeated his ultimatum: "When you hear the sound of the music, then you are to bow down to the image I made. If not, then you will be thrown into the furnace of blazing fire." He further added, "Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"

The devil operates by fear and threats. There are Christians today who are under a similar threat. How would you like to be a Christian in Egypt today? Some are told, "convert or we won't be held responsible for what happens to you and your family tonight." Would you cave in? One Christian Pakistani woman, Asia Bibi, was arrested in 2010 and unjustly sentenced to death for her Christian beliefs. Christians around the world have been praying for her for nine years. Four days ago, her appeal was finally reviewed, and she was acquitted. But the threat against her life is still so strong she can't safely leave the jail and may never be safe out of the country. Other threats are closer to home. These threats aren't always for physical harm. There was a family connected to our church body; they sent children to our high schools and attended a WELS church. But when it came time for running for higher office this member quickly disavowed any loyalty to the WELS' teachings. Was this the only Christian politician who suffered a memory lapse when it threatened their career?

And those who cave in to threats are not small in number. There are many churches that have bowed to pressures. They reason "It's a small compromise. No harm done." But they act on fear, not faith. There are many pastors who are pressured teach lies. If they leave their church, they will lose their pension. Many in fear bow to pressure. If you were in Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's shoes, you'd probably have witnessed many other Jews bending to the pressure. They weren't struck dead by God for just trying to save their lives, right? Many compromise the truth today. Is it alright to follow?

But those who don't bow aren't alone either. Nearly 500 years ago, Martin Luther knew about the man who years before him tried to stand up to the lies of the papacy. That man was thrown to the flames and burned alive. But when Luther was summoned to a trial at Worms, he went. When forced to recant the gospel he wouldn't bow to threats. But I'm sure it wasn't easy! Still today the threat against Christians is as real as the blood of the saints who died in centuries past.

What about you and me? Where do you draw the line and refuse to turn aside from honoring God? No one is threatening to burn us alive, but there are threats. What about the young child who leaves behind his Christian home each weekday for school? What does she do when her teacher laughs at her for saying God instituted marriage as one man and one woman? Does she cave into pressure to swallow the lie of her teacher? What does a college student do when he has a professor that will only let him pass the class if he defends antichristian philosophy? Does he stand up or bow down? Do you draw the line when social ties make you turn aside from God? Do you draw the line when family threatens to isolate or abandon you? When is the pressure enough? What would it take to make you bow to pressure and stop bowing to the true God? Only you can answer that. Are you and I anything like Luther and the saints before him? When I find myself bowing down to the pressure for the little threats I wonder, "How would I ever do what the persecuted and threatened before me did? How would I ever stand against the flames, real flames, of intimidation?"

Listen to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's bold response. These words ought to be inscribed on the heart of every believer. When threatened to turn aside from the Lord, even in the smallest way, every believer should be quick to say, "We don't have to defend ourselves or give you an answer." The three continue, "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." This is a twofold confession. 1) God is able to save me. 2) Even if he doesn't right now, I'd rather die under your threat than turn from the Lord!

Why did these three men not give in to intimidation? It wasn't because God said he would toss them in the fire if they gave in. They knew God is not like the powers of this world. He does not want worshippers who worship under the threat of execution. Martin Luther once thought this was the way God operated: simply by threats. Growing up in the Roman Catholic doctrine he hated God. He saw God as someone who he couldn't love or trust. As a Roman Catholic priest, Martin Luther saw God only as an angry judge who condemned all who didn't perfectly obey him. But then he discovered in Scripture that God is the God who rescues the sinner from hell. When he was placed on trial and told to recant his writings about free forgiveness from God and against the lies of the papacy, he didn't bend. When he left his trial, he was declared a criminal and ordered to be apprehended and punished as a heretic. The spirit of the Lutheran Reformation stood firm as Luther shared in the same spirit as these three men. These three men didn't bow because they knew God rescues his people. Luther too would not bow down before the threats and lies of the pope.

This is what our church body came from. It was born in the face of threats to bow to lies. It was born out of the boldness to stand up for what is right and true, even when intimidated by fear to do what is wrong. It was born out of the same thing which kept Shadrach Meshach and Abednego from bowing down to an idol of gold: bold trust in God's goodness at all times.

Consider the first part of their confession! How simple it is to grasp with faith. "My God is bigger than you." When people try to intimidate you into turning aside from the Lord, remember that and say it. When the teacher or professor wants you to spurn the Lord say, "My God is bigger than you." When you are threatened to lose friends, family, or even your life you can say, "my God is bigger than you." Put yourself in the shoes of these three men in Daniel 3. They weren't emotionless beings who made their stand without the same struggles of fear we have. Nor was Luther a simple priest without the same fears and concerns that you and I have. But they had also the same God we have.

God is not only bigger than every threat against his people, he operates on a higher plain. He himself rescues his people from fire. Hell was our sentence. It wasn't a threat we could escape, it was our lot. And it was the lot we deserved. Jesus said, "Do not be afraid of the one who can harm the body, but the one who can punish both the body and soul in hell." The same words used here for furnace of fire are alluded to by Jesus in his description of hell. Hell is real. It is an awful state which follows death and follows the last judgment for our bodies. But our faith is not based on threats. The kings, precepts, and rulers from the surrounding principalities all gathered for the great dedication of a national god in Babylon. But they didn't bow down in faith. They bowed down when they heard the intimidating music and remembered the fearsome command. They bowed down to the flames of the furnace and the wrath of a king. But Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and Luther and countless other saints with us bow to the God who rescues his people. We bow in true worship to a God like no other.

Our reverence is based on rescue. God sent more than an angel to save us. He sent his one and only Son to deal with the flames of hell. Jesus bore every sin and all punishment in our place. He bore the sins of false worship. He bore the sins of when we caved into the pressure to turn aside from God for fear. And not a single hair on our head will ever taste the flames of hell. God has rescued us freely by his great mercy. Hell is real, but so is the rescue of God for all who trust in him. Our God is able to save us, and he does and will do it, just as surely as Jesus lives as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

And you don't go it alone. "The God we serve is able to save us." These three made their confession together. This is what the early reformers did with Martin Luther as they too put their lives on the line. This is what you do today as you gather to proclaim the Word of our God here each week. We join in confessing, "Our God whom we serve." And just as surely as the angel was sent by God to protect those three men so long ago, he sends his angels as promised, to watch over you. Finally, we are not alone as the very Son of God himself is with us always and forever. Why should we ever fear any threat?

The irony of what follows is to me the real joy of this story. Nebuchadnezzar's anger increases. He orders the fire to be seven times hotter than usual. What was he afraid of? Ironically the very strong men who were charged with throwing them in the fire died from the fire! Hadn't those strong men bowed down to the idol? Then glancing into the flames Nebuchadnezzar saw the three men walking about freely unhurt. And the king saw a fourth man in the fire. An angel of the Lord was there to protect them. When called, they walked out of the fire without a single hair on them burnt.

Nebuchadnezzar had gone too far. He himself personally oversaw the downfall of the city of Jerusalem. Its walls were completely torn down. Nebuchadnezzar saw to it that the temple was ruined. His forces extracted the bronze, gold, and silver from the temple. And all the goods were carted off to Babylon. He had shown the people of Jerusalem and their God who was their boss. Or at least he thought. But now he had crossed the line. It's not that the people were too beaten and broken. That's not the line he crossed. It's not that he was too boastful. That's not the line he crossed. No, the line he crossed was far more serious: he threatened three of God's saints and asked them to turn aside from their God, three people who trusted in Yahweh, the God of Israel. To any other we will not bend, we will not bow, and we will not burn. Our God whom we serve has our hearts not by threats, but by his love. He is a God who rescues his people.