

Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility—⁴ young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king’s palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians.⁵ The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king’s table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king’s service.

⁶ Among these were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.⁷ The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.

⁸ But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way.⁹ Now God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel,¹⁰ but the official told Daniel, “I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you.”

¹¹ Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah,¹² “Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink.¹³ Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see.”¹⁴ So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

¹⁵ At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food.¹⁶ So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.

¹⁷ To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

¹⁸ At the end of the time set by the king to bring them in, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar.¹⁹ The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king’s service.²⁰ In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.

²¹ And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus. (Daniel 1:3-21)

Stand Firm in your Faith!

Have you ever thought about the persecutions the early church faced? That was a tough time to be a Christian. People died rather than deny their faith. But they weren’t the only ones who suffered. Some Christians were thrown into filthy dungeons or were sent to work in mines where they never saw the sun again. You have to wonder which would be harder – being killed or that kind of a living death? Which one would be a greater challenge to your faith? Would Christians today be willing to make those kinds of sacrifices? That’s a tough question, and I’m glad that we don’t have to answer it. By the grace of God, we’re free to practice our faith in this country. But does that mean that it’s easy to be a Christian? Does that mean that there are no challenges to our faith today? I wish it did. But you know as well as I do that it does not. Just as we have taken advantage of the freedom God has given us in America to preach the gospel, the devil has taken advantage of that same freedom to create an environment that is hostile to spiritual conviction. Every day that we live here, he challenges our faith. This morning, we want to study the example of four young men who lived 2500 years ago, but who faced challenges to their faith in an unbelieving society. We want to learn from them the attitude that God calls us to have today.

I.

Those men were Daniel – of Daniel and the lions’ den fame – and his three friends, best known to us as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego – the three men in the fiery furnace. Through these men, God issues a call to us: **Stand firm in your faith even the world wants you to hide it.**

In this first chapter of Daniel, these four men were teenagers. They had been born and raised in Israel. But the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar had deported tens of thousands of people into exile. Daniel and his friends were taken. Once they got to Babylon, they were drafted into the king’s civil service. Nebuchadnezzar

was looking for people who would have no choice but to be loyal to him. So he chose people who were never going home again, people who had lost everything and he brought them into the palace and he gave them a good life there. He provided food and shelter. The king chose men related to the Jewish royal family and the nobility – men who weren't used to begging. This would mean they knew how to act in proper society. But it would also put pressure on them to remain loyal to Nebuchadnezzar.

He put them into a three year training program. They were going to learn to speak and act and think like Babylonians. One of the king's officials even gave them new names. The king was trying to make them accept a new life. But there was one problem with his plan, and you see it in the new names the king's flunky gave them: Babylonian life and culture meant Babylonian gods. God is mentioned in the Hebrew names of all four of these men. Daniel, for example, means "God is my judge." Their parents had carefully chosen names that reminded their children of the relationship God had with them. The Babylonian names repudiated that faith. As you read on in the book and you come to the fiery furnace, you see how the king tried to force these men to leave behind the faith of their fathers and join in his idol worship.

Well, the king could draft them into his civil service. He could make them dress and talk like Babylonians. He could even make them change their names. But he could not make them abandon their faith. They refused to be known as pagans. They were teenagers living as prisoners in a foreign country with no hope of going home and no one to protect them. They were at the king's mercy, but they decided to rely on God's mercy. They would not hide their faith. That's striking, because all they had to do was keep their religious beliefs private. All they had to do was avoid offending the king and they could've had a pretty nice life.

Does that sound familiar? Here in America, most people don't care what we believe, as long as we keep it to ourselves. Religion is a private matter, people say. Most Americans want "God" to be a part of our society. But they don't want us to insist on our God. When I was a missionary in Colombia, we used to read the *Miami Herald*. One week, some Christian church paid to have an ad placed on the plastic bag the papers were delivered in. When the publisher found out, he canceled the ad. He refused to let it run because he didn't want to force people to see that Christian ad with their breakfast. New tires, a sale at Penny's – that would've been OK. But not an ad for a Christian church. That's our society. So the safe and easy thing is just to keep it to ourselves.

But is that what God wants from us? Jesus told us to let our light shine before men. Peter tells us to always be prepared to explain our faith to those who ask. That means that those people have to know that we are Christians, that we have specific beliefs we hold to. Of course, it also means that we should be models of Christian love. But Christian love does not include hiding our beliefs because other people might not like them. Sometimes, it's hard to be open about our faith. Last week, my uncle died very suddenly. That side of my family is all Catholic. As we were walking into the church, one of my cousins asked me if I had any words of God's wisdom for a day like that. And I chickened out. I didn't want to get into a religious debate at my uncle's funeral, so I ducked the question. I don't think Daniel would've done that. The real pressure to keep our faith to ourselves comes from the fear in our own hearts. We don't want to get everybody mad at us. We don't want to feel embarrassed or put on the spot. So the unbelieving society around us wins.

Certainly, there is a time and a place for everything. We don't really want to adopt an "in your face" policy – that's not at all what we see Daniel and his friends doing this morning. But we do need to ask ourselves searching questions about the way we choose our times and places to speak. How often are we looking for the best opportunity to be clear? How often are we just chicken? Fear comes from sin. When we give in to fear, we show how sinful we still are.

What is the cure to fear? The cure is Jesus! He came to drive out fear. But he doesn't do that by telling us to man up. He does it by zeroing in our sin and fear and on what they cause. He zeros in on death and hell because that's what sinful fear wins for us. And then he tells us we are free from those terrors because he took our place in life. Jesus was never afraid to stand up for the truth. He was never afraid of what his enemies or his friends would think. God credits Jesus' courage and Jesus' faith and Jesus' heart to us. God counts us perfect because he was. God counts us perfect because Jesus paid for our sin. He faced the greatest fear of all: our fear of death and hell. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus experienced all that death does to our hearts. On the cross, he experienced hell itself, when his Father abandoned him. Then he experienced the death that our sin has coming. He took our place and God says that our record is cleared. Our debt to him is paid in full. Jesus rose to make sure we know that. He rose to say that there is no reason for us to ever be afraid again.

That love Jesus showed is the only source of courage for our lives. The gospel reminds us that if Jesus died for us and rose for us, he will stand with us in those moments of doubt and fear, those moments when we feel alone and surrounded by unbelievers. Jesus conquered death and hell for us. He can and will carry us through those situations. That is his promise to you and me.

II.

It would've been easy for Daniel to hide his faith. He and his friends could've consoled themselves with all kinds of excuses. It wasn't easy to be a believer in that place and time. But they understood that if you do such a good job of fitting in that people don't know you're a follower of Christ, then those people will assume that you have no problem doing things God says you can't. Daniel and his friends stood firm in their faith and when temptation came, they took a stand. That lesson is one we can never hear too much of. **Stand firm in your faith even when sinners want you to compromise it.**

For these four Jewish men, the situation came to a head right away with the food provisions that the king assigned to them. Eating this food would have compromised the principles God had given them. Without a doubt, some of the food consisted of things God prohibited Israel to eat, like pork and shellfish. Even the meat they could eat probably was served with blood in it. God required the Jews to drain the blood out. Further, under Jewish dietary regulations, virtually all of the food would be unclean because it had been in contact with other food that was unclean. The long and the short of it was that Jewish people just couldn't eat and drink what Nebuchadnezzar put before them.

Daniel dealt with this situation in a Christian manner. First of all, he made up his mind to follow what God commanded, even though this could get him into a lot of trouble. The other three men joined him in this resolve. God did not design our Christians lives as a "go it alone" affair. One of the great benefits of having brothers and sisters in the faith is facing temptation together so that we can encourage each other to do what God commands.

But these men did not make a scene. They did not spit the food out of their mouths or start a hunger strike. In fact, it would appear that they tried not to draw any real attention to themselves at all. Daniel first went and asked the man the king had put in charge to allow him to follow his conscience. When that man was too afraid to allow it, Daniel didn't yell at him or bully him. He accepted his position. And he went instead to the guard who actually was in charge of them. He offered him a deal: give them ten days. He asked the guard to let us live observe God's will for the Jews for ten days and then he could judge the results for himself. Daniel trusted that God would not punish them for doing what God had commanded. And he was right. God preserved their lives and their health to the point where the guard recognized that he would look good if all the Jewish civil servants obeyed God's law. So the problem was taken care of.

Now, it could've gone another way. Sometimes, God allows us to suffer when we do what he commands. But always, he turns that pain into blessing for us. God promises that he will always do what is best for us. God calls us to trust in him and live the way he tells us to do. That, of course, is the challenge. There are so many times in our lives when it's easy to sin. So many of the people in our lives – even other Christians – invite us to disobey God. It happens in connection with the entertainment we pursue. It happens in connection with the way we talk about people who aren't here to defend themselves. People we care about make those sins seem like no big deal. And so often we go along. We compromise our faith when we listen to them instead of listening to God.

What do we deserve for that kind of sin? God should just give up on us and send us to hell. But Jesus came to take away the hell we deserve. He came to give us what he deserves, which is God's love and favor. God does not give up on us because Jesus has won a permanent place for us in God's family. God continues to love us. That love is what changes us. Do you want to have the strength to live for God? Do you want to break the pattern of listening to sinners instead of listening to your Lord? Well, the solution is not for me to stand up here and hammer you with do's and don'ts. The solution is for you to confess your sin to God and then hear his love and forgiveness. Yesterday's failure is gone forever. God washed it away in the blood of Christ. Today, God looks at us as if we had never been that weak and sinful. Hearing that is our power to change. Hearing that is God's way of working in our hearts so that we want to stand firm in him forever. My friends, stand firm in your faith. Amen.