

**DANIEL 3:16–28.** (EHV)

Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego answered King Nebuchadnezzar, “We have no need to answer you about this matter. Since 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. But 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.” Then 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. He 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. So 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. Because 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. But these three men, Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego, who had been tied up, fell into the blazing fiery furnace. Then 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.” He 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.” Then 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. The 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. Nebuchadnezzar 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.”

If I say Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, most of you will give me a blank stare. But if I say Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego, some of you will perk up and say, “Oh yeah, the three men in the fiery furnace!” The latter three names are more familiar because they roll off the tongue better and have a rhythmical sound. But they’re the same three guys as the first three I mentioned.

You see, prior to *the* Babylonian captivity around 587 BC, there were a couple other preliminary Babylonian captivities. Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were taken captive in the first of those, around 605 BC. They now lived in modern-day Iraq. After being taken captive, they were selected to be trained for the king’s service because of their good looks, good learning, and general ability. After being selected, the chief of the officials gave them new names—Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego. Hananiah means “The LORD is gracious,” but Shadrak means, “command of Aku,” one of the names for the moon god. A gospel-centered name was turned into an idolatrous law-centered name. Mishael means, “Who is what God is?”—a punchy and

profound name stressing that God is utterly unique. But Mishak means, “Who is what Aku (the moon god) is?”—a slap in the face of his original name. And Azariah means “The LORD helps,” but Abednego means “servant of Nebo,” the Babylonian god of literacy, writing, and wisdom.

In Psalm 119, the psalmist describes the cords of the wicked surrounding him. The wicked were only beginning to draw their cords tightly around Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego. Soon after they were selected, they were put to the test as to whether they would continue to follow the food restrictions God had given the Israelites. Under the leadership of Daniel, another Israelite captive, they remained faithful to the Lord.

These three foreigners passed their three-year training period and were taken into the king’s service. The king took note of their great learning, insight, and wisdom, and they quickly rose among the ranks, and just as quickly aroused the jealousy of their fellow officials and royal servants who were native Chaldeans.

Around 594 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar decided to make a golden statue ninety feet tall and nine feet wide. We’re not told what the statue represented, but we can take a pretty good guess that it represented the chief Babylonian god Marduk, since we know Nebuchadnezzar promoted the worship of Marduk. But it’s clear that Nebuchadnezzar wasn’t just concerned about religion. He was also concerned about power. Many great leaders have recognized that they can both promote national unity and consolidate their authority if they can get their citizens to rally around the same thing. The 2009 movie *Invictus* tells how Nelson Mandela, the president of South Africa, sought to unite his divided country around the nation’s rugby team. President Mandela used sports, but many leaders before him, dating back to ancient times, have sought to accomplish the same goal through religion, and King Nebuchadnezzar was one of them. He knew that if he could get the citizens and provincial leaders of his kingdom to worship the same god, he would be uniting them under his own rule. So he commanded his provincial leaders and local citizens to bow down to the statue he had made.

But he didn’t just command the worship of this statue. He also used majestic music played on all kinds of instruments to compel the people to bow down to the statue by manipulating their psyche and emotions. And finally, in addition to his command and the music, he decreed that anyone who disobeyed him would immediately be thrown into the blazing fiery furnace—an apparently well-known furnace that had been used for executions before.

Some malicious or jealous Chaldeans, who were the dominant ethnicity at the time, noticed that the foreigners Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego did not pay attention to the command and did not bow down to the statue, and they tattled on them to the king. King Nebuchadnezzar was furious and summoned them before him. He told them that he knew about their disobedience and gave them one more chance, concluding, “What god will be able to save you from my hands?”

But they replied, “We have no need to answer you about this matter. Since 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. But 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 have set up.”

### **1. Christian Boldness—Where It Comes From**

Wow! What boldness in the face of one of the world's most powerful rulers! Where did that boldness come from? The answer is in their answer, and it's in their names. Their boldness came from the conviction that their God actually existed and was not merely some spiritual placebo of human invention or some ploy dreamed up for manipulating people. And not only did their God actually exist, but Hananiah—he was gracious—and Mishael—he was utterly unique—and Azariah—he helped. So this God's followers were always in a win-win situation. Either he would graciously deliver them from danger or he would use the danger to end their earthly lives and bring them to eternal glory. Imagine a third-grade boy being threatened by an eighth-grade boy on the way to school and telling the older, bigger boy, "Go ahead and bring it!" because he knows that his college-age brother is following him and watching out for him. That's the attitude Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego have toward King Nebuchadnezzar because they know the Lord is watching out for them.

### **2. Christian Boldness—What It Looks Like**

That's where their boldness comes from. But what does it look like? Well, we've already seen that it looks like bold words and a bold confession in the face of human pressure and temptation to sin. But Christian boldness is also willing to act on that confession.

Nebuchadnezzar was now burning mad. He ordered that the furnace be heated seven times hotter than usual and that Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego immediately be bound and thrown in as soon as the furnace reached the desired heat. So these three men were thrown into the furnace tied up with all of their clothes still on. In fact, the furnace was so hot that the men who carried out the king's orders died just from getting too close to the heat. But Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego went right in without struggle or complaint. Certainly they were nervous. Certainly their hearts were racing inside of them. But they knew their God was the true God, and so the alternative, denying the true God, was worse than being burned in any earthly fire. So down they fell into the middle of the furnace.

### **3. Christian Boldness—How God Rewards It**

Now I don't know how exactly this furnace was constructed. It was certainly unique. It was large enough for three men to be thrown into it; large enough to be heated hot enough not just to severely burn someone, but to kill him, and large enough to be heated seven times hotter; large enough to kill at least three soldiers who got too close to it; large enough for these three men to fall into the middle of it. But it was also constructed in such a way that once people had been thrown into it, spectators could watch them burn without exposing their faces to the intense heat.

And because it was built in this way, we also get to see how God rewarded such boldness in this case. The three men fell to the bottom. But then they got up. And when they got up, three became four. Nebuchadnezzar stood up in surprise and said, "Didn't we throw three men... into the middle of the fire? ... 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." The fourth man was either an angel, or perhaps the Angel of the Lord, the Son of God before he took on human flesh as Jesus son of Mary. This angel was seemingly like a combination of an air conditioner, a flame retardant, and an air freshener. And notice that the four of them are walking around! I would think that if I was, say, Shadrach and I fell into the middle of the furnace and I

got up and realized that not only was I still alive, but I also wasn't burning up or even hot, and that there was now another majestic figure in the furnace with me, I would say to myself, "Okay, I'm actually not dying. I'm okay where I'm at. I'm just going to stay put and see what happens." But no, the Lord and his angel were able to instill such confidence in these three men that they realized they could treat the situation as if they were in a forest or a meadow. They go for a stroll!

So the king commanded them to come out, and we don't know how exactly that happened. Perhaps there were doors at the bottom of the furnace for cleaning out the ashes. But whatever the case, when they emerged, Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego had no burns, no missing hair, not a single strand of singed hair, no charred clothing, and there was not so much as a whiff of campfire on them. And this isn't just the testimony of the author Daniel; all the leading officials and advisors were gathered around these men, studying them closely.

Nebuchadnezzar responded to this miracle by speaking very well of their God and even giving a strong order against speaking against their God. We might get the impression that he converted. But a look at Nebuchadnezzar's life as a whole reveals that he was probably just talking big in the moment because he realized something miraculous had happened and he did not want to be on the bad side of the powerful god whose servants he had just tried to burn up. Nevertheless, note that Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego, and all the Israelites who are in captivity in Babylon, now receive legal religious protection. And Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego were also promoted in the province of Babylon.

That's how God rewarded Christian boldness in this case. In other cases—and these three men knew this and were ready for this outcome too—God rewards it not with earthly deliverance, but with eternal life.

In 1520, Martin Luther authored a book titled *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, describing the church leaders of his day like the Babylonian captors described here. And the church leaders for the most part continued to live up to his description, or rather lived down to it.

The following year, 1521, those church leaders put him on trial at the imperial diet or convention at the city of Worms. And it wasn't just the wicked church leaders who were tightening cords around him and putting pressure on him to deny the God of free grace. The devil himself was also clearly involved. On his journey to Worms, a balcony filled with people nearly collapsed in the church he preached at in Erfurt. At the next church he preached at, in Gotha, after his sermon a strong gust of wind or some other extraordinary phenomenon tore several stones out of the church's gable. When he reached his next stop, he came down with a severe illness, which lingered for much of the rest of his journey. People tried to scare him off his journey with discouraging comments about how, with so many cardinals and bishops in Worms, he would likely be burned to ashes as a heretic immediately upon arrival.

But in response to all of this, Luther said, "I shall enter Worms with Christ as my leader in spite of the very gates of hell." "I will go there, even if all the demons should be there."

Then of course there was the famous speech he gave once he actually arrived in Worms, before all the representatives of the empire and many more, that he would not be cowed into submission mere threats or force of will. His conscience was captive to the word of God and so

they would need to prove him wrong from the Scriptures if they wanted to stop him. “I cannot do otherwise. Here I stand. God help me.”

Two years later, when the first two Lutherans were burned at the stake in Brussels and Luther learned of it, he wept, because he thought he would be the first to die for the faith he was preaching and defending. In other words, Luther knew that God could deliver and protect him at the Diet of Worms, in spite of all his enemies gathered there, physical and spiritual, but even if God did not deliver him, he would not submit to teaching that contradicted and fought against the word of God.

Where does that Christian boldness come from? Just like with Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego, it comes from the conviction that our God actually exists, that he is not merely a placebo of human invention or some ploy for manipulating people, that he is gracious, that no one is what he is, that he helps—and that therefore we are always in a win-win situation. Either God will deliver us, or he will take us to eternal glory.

Do you have that conviction, friends? The conviction that comes from knowing the God who graciously took on human flesh and entered human history in the person of Jesus Christ to win your eternal salvation at no cost to you?

Then you go ahead and be that bold too.

Not to the glory of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Certainly not to the glory of Martin Luther, who doesn't appear anywhere on the pages of Scripture.

But to the glory of the God whom they glorified—the triune God, the only God, the world's only Savior and yours—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.