

CONVICTION UNDER FIRE

How do you maintain faithfulness to God in a culture that is always working in opposition to what you believe? What will you do if a line is drawn in the sand and you have to choose between compromising what you firmly believe in or death, if you do not? And here is an even better question, DOES IT EVEN REALLY MATTER? After all, as Christ followers can't you and I just pretend to go along to get along and just try to fly beneath the radar so as not to draw any negative attention to ourselves?

Today we are in **Week 3 of Prepare The Way**. Last week we introduced you to the prophet Jeremiah and we talked about how Jeremiah was trying to confront the people of Judah (the Southern Kingdom of Israel) regarding their disobedience. You see, they were trying to quench their spiritual thirst with the empty wells of their neighbors instead of drinking from the life-giving water that comes from the God who had established them as a nation. Jeremiah's ministry consisted of calling the people to repent of their disobedience by warning them that if they did not repent and turn back to God they would end up like their brothers in the Northern Kingdom, overtaken by their enemies with their kingdom destroyed and the people taken captive. Of course if you know the rest of the story Judah doesn't heed the warnings of Jeremiah and they end up being taken captive by the Babylonians. Today as we continue our journey Through The Bible we are going to introduce you to another prophet who not only served Judah during their whole time while in captivity, but who was also one of those taken into captivity himself. Of course the prophet I am talking about is the Prophet Daniel.

We will talk more about Daniel next week, but this week I want to focus our attention on three of Daniel's friends who were also taken into captivity with him. Their names were Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. For those of us who grew up in church you probably know them better as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. It is believed that Daniel and his friends were somewhere around the ages of 12 or 13 when they were first taken captive to Babylon. Because they were part of the socially elite class in Judah they were taken to the palace and would serve at the pleasure of the King of Babylon.

Daniel 1:3-4 (NIV) **3** Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service 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.

Since they were to serve the king it was very important that they be trained to think like Babylonians rather than Hebrews. In an attempt to brainwash them and to normalize the Babylonian way of life Daniel and his three friends would be given Babylonian names that were associated with some of the chief gods of Babylon. For example, **Daniel's** name which means - "**God is my judge**" was changed to Belteshazzar - which means "*Bel protect the King.*" **Marduk**, who was known as the chief Babylonian god was also referred to as "Bel" (an ancient

semitic word that means Lord). As a result, Daniel's Babylonian name would declare that it was Marduk who protected the king. The same thing was done to Daniel's three friends.

Aku was known as the Babylonian god of the moon. Therefore, **Hananiah** whose name means - "**The Lord is gracious**", was given the Babylonian name, Shadrach which meant "*Command of Aku*". The declaration of his Babylonian name would mean that he is now under the authority of the moon God Aku. **Mishael** which means "**Who is like the Lord**" was changed to Meshach which meant "*Who is what Aku is*". In other words, is there anyone like the moon God Aku? And finally there was **Nebo** who was known as the Babylonian god of agriculture. As a result, **Azariah** which means "**The Lord is my helper**" was given the Babylonian name Abednego which meant "*Servant of Nego*". Each one of their original Hebrew names glorified God so their names were changed in order to force their allegiance to the gods of Babylon.

Even though their surroundings and their names changed, Daniel and his friends never wavered in their allegiance to God. As a result, God allowed Daniel to gain great favor with King Nebuchadnezzar. The favor he garnered with the king was very much like what Joseph achieved with Pharaoh back in **Week 5** of "**In the Beginning**" when he was able to interpret Pharaoh's dream in **Genesis 41**. In Daniel **Chapter 2** King Nebuchadnezzar has a dream that disturbed him so much that he called for all of his magicians, astrologers, and sorcerers and asked them not only to interpret the dream but to also recite the dream back to him in order to authenticate their interpretation of it. After all, if they could not tell him what the dream was they certainly would not be able to give him the right interpretation concerning it. Of course, all the wise men of the land were unable to do it so the king became angry and decided to have all of them put to death which would also include Daniel and his three friends. With their lives hanging in the balance, Daniel and his three friends sought God's face for the ability to recite and interpret the dream for Nebuchadnezzar. Of course God being merciful and gracious He answered their prayer and Daniel was brought before the king to recite and interpret what the dream meant. Before he does so Daniel is quick to let the king know that what he is about to tell him would not be possible without God's help. In fact, Daniel says this in verses 27-28 of Chapter 2, **Daniel 2:27-28 (NIV)** **27** Daniel replied, "No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, **28** but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come.

The dream was about four kingdoms that would follow after Babylon and that would rule over the world and more specifically over the Jews. Of course now knowing the history of what would take place we now know that what God revealed to Daniel was the rise of the Medo-Persian empire that would follow the Babylonians, the Greeks that would follow after them, with the Roman empire being the third kingdom following the Greeks. The fourth kingdom however, was a reference to one that has yet to come and which we believe to be a reference to Jesus at His second coming. Listen to Daniel's description given to us in

Daniel 2:44 (NIV) "In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever."

This fourth KINGDOM that will come is GOD'S KINGDOM and it will rule and reign forever after all the kingdoms of this earth are defeated. This is just another reminder to the people of God that He has not forgotten them and that One is coming who will take away the sin of the world and who will set all things right. And for the Hebrew who was in captivity during Daniel's day and for those of us who are alive today and may be concerned about the state of our world, this was and is GOOD NEWS! Notice how King Nebuchadnezzar responds to Daniel's interpretation.

Daniel 2:46-49 (NIV) 46 Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor and ordered that an offering and incense be presented to him. **47** The king said to Daniel, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery." **48** Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men. **49** Moreover, at Daniel's request the king appointed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego administrators over the province of Babylon, while Daniel himself remained at the royal court.

But as is the case with all of mankind we sometimes think too highly of ourselves, and while we might praise God in one instance, when we allow pride and arrogance to become elevated in our heart, we can deny God in the very next breath. Especially if we do not have a personal relationship with Him! And Nebuchadnezzar was no different. In Ch. 3 the king becomes lost in the fog of his own glory and power and he decides to commemorate his glorious status with a golden statue of himself of which he foolishly commands the people of Babylon to bow down to and worship. Whoever refused to do so was to be thrown into a fiery furnace. Now this might not be any big deal to the average Babylonian. For them it is just another statue of many they already bow down to. What's one more? But for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego this is calling them to violate what they believe in, **that there is only ONE GOD they are to worship and there is no other**. In fact, this has already been demonstrated by Daniel in chapter 2 when he alone was able to interpret the king's dream. And now what message would it send if they bowed down to a statue of the king and worshiped him knowing that they are recognized as followers of God. In fact, the favor they have been enjoying has all been because they have remained loyal to God. But I want to call you back to the questions I opened this message with!

How do you maintain faithfulness to God in a culture that is always working in opposition to what you believe? What will you do if a line is drawn in the sand and you have to choose between compromising what you firmly believe in or death, if you do not? And DOES IT REALLY MATTER?

These are all great questions and my prayer is that you and I would wrestle with these important questions because I believe there is coming a day real soon when we will face such decisions and I believe it will happen here in America. Maybe not in my lifetime, but very possibly in my children's lifetime or my grandchildren's lifetime. In fact, these are decisions that some of our brothers and sisters are having to make in certain parts of the world right now. So let's not dismiss this as if it will never happen to us because it very well may and it may come sooner than you think. As followers of Jesus will we be faithful to Him when it matters most? Will we

have a deep enough CONVICTION that will allow us to make a lasting impact on those around us? Because it does matter! **And what our world needs now more than ever are for those who have a strong CONVICTION to stand up and stand out! A CONVICTION that not only believes that God is real but He is the rewarder of those who diligently seek HIM, serve HIM and honor HIM.**

Well let's take a look at what Daniel's friends chose to do and as we do I want us to see **THREE INGREDIENTS of GODLY CONVICTION that will make a lasting impact on those around us.** While you are finding **Daniel 3** let me **PRAY** for us before we begin.

INGREDIENT #1 - In order for a GODLY CONVICTION to have a lasting impact there has to be **a DISTINCT line drawn in the sand with a FIRM consequence.**

DANIEL 3:1-6 (NIV) **1** King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. **2** He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. **3** So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it. **4** Then the herald loudly proclaimed, "Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: **5** As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. **6** Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace."

First of all let's be careful that we the church are not guilty of what Nebuchadnezzar was guilty of by erecting our own statues we say people must worship that only become distractions to the ONE we should be worshipping - Jesus! Statues such as (you have to look a certain way, act a certain way, vote a certain way, belong to a particular denomination) These can become man-centered and not Christ-centered. They only become distractions that provide more barriers for people trying to find Jesus. Sin is a big enough barrier, let's not create any unnecessary ones. We need to make sure that whatever is fueling our conviction it is leading people to JESUS and Jesus alone!

Here is the problem with the American church. We have it too easy. There really doesn't seem to be a firm consequence for following Jesus. No firm consequence or cost for a distinct way of living. Think about American Christianity, especially here in the Bible Belt. We have plenty of churches to choose from. If you don't like this one there are several others you can attend that will cater to what you like. The most we have to suffer for Jesus is if we have to serve more than one Sunday a month at church, or we have to give up the only day we have off from work in order to go to church, or the service runs a little long and cuts into our Sunday activities. The biggest fear we have in sharing our faith is that someone might reject us, unfriend us on social media or no longer want to talk to us. Meanwhile, in other parts of the world some people have been kicked out of their village, rejected by their own family, had their church burned to the

ground or paid the ultimate price by being put to death just because they said they wanted to follow Jesus. This is the distinction Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had to make. Worship the statue of the king or be burned to death! Deny God or die! This distinction was a firm line in the sand that fueled and grew the early church at its beginning. This is also what is fueling the church in hostile parts of the world today. And this is what Jesus said in His word would be the result for those of us who want to follow Him.

Matthew 10:16-18 (NIV) 16 "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. **17** Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues. **18** On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles.

Matthew 10:22 (NIV) 22 You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.

Matthew 10:38-39 (NIV) 38 Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. **39** Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.

You see, we need a godly conviction that not only stands out and makes people take notice, but we need a conviction that makes them contemplate whether or not it is real enough for them to trust their life to it as well.

Even though Jesus told His disciples they would suffer, it was through these suffering and persecutions that the church would grow and authenticate its message . And this has always been the case throughout the history of the church. There is something about a strong conviction pressed out through suffering that makes it more real to those who are observing it in action. We need something to sharpen our conviction! Something that makes it stand out. Something that costs us a little something. Does your desire to follow Jesus cost you? What does it cost you? Following Jesus is a distinct choice! Jesus said He is THE WAY, THE TRUTH, THE LIFE! Is the way you follow Jesus DISTINCT? How is it distinct? Or do you blend into the world around you? In order for a GODLY CONVICTION to have a lasting impact there has to be a **DISTINCT line drawn in the sand with a FIRM consequence for doing so.**

INGREDIENT #2 - In order for a GODLY CONVICTION to have a lasting impact there has to be **something you STRONGLY BELIEVE in.**

Daniel 3:7-12 (NIV) 7 Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the nations and peoples of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. **8** At this time some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. **9** They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "May the king live forever! **10** Your Majesty has issued a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, **11** and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. **12** But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of

Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up.”

How strongly do we believe what we believe? Do you believe it so much that you are going to let it change how you live? Are you going to let it impact the things that you do? Are you willing to give up the stuff that competes for your worship of God? These three guys didn't want to let anything get in the way of their worship of God. They didn't want any distractions. They didn't want anyone questioning their allegiance to God! Therefore they did not bow down and they were putting their life on the line to do so. What about you? Can you imagine the impact the church would have on the world if we came after all sins in our lives the way we tend to come after the big ones like homosexuality and abortion in others? What if we personally dealt with things like gossip, lust, anger, gluttony with the same passion that we do when we talk about sexual sins or your favorite soap box issue that you like to get all lathered up about. And are you willing to bet everything on it? The problem is, do we really believe in Jesus like we say we do. Do we believe so much that we are letting it impact the way we are living right now at this moment. For Daniel's friends they strongly believed that there was no other God like their God and it was reflected by the way they lived their lives in that moment and in the Babylonian culture where they found themselves.. Decree or no decree, there was only ONE worthy to be worshiped and He is the GOD of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They believed His word to be true and so they wanted to honor it by not bowing down to engraved images or anything that was trying to be a substitute for God Himself. It was more than a statement of belief; it was a philosophy of life that impacted their daily behavior and was the cornerstone upon which they built their lives. Can you say the same thing regarding your belief that Jesus is LORD? Or do you just say you believe and then blend into the culture around you without any real strong convictions about what it means to follow Jesus? One thing is for sure! If you want to follow Jesus you will not blend into the culture around but you will transform the culture. The way you treat people will be vastly different. The way you love people will have an impact. The way you serve others will stand out. It will impact the way you live and it will impact others around you.

In order for a GODLY CONVICTION to have a lasting impact there has to be a **DISTINCT line drawn in the sand with a FIRM consequence** and there has to be **something you STRONGLY BELIEVE in**.

INGREDIENT #3 - In order for a GODLY CONVICTION to have a lasting impact there has to be **a RESOLVE rooted in the faithfulness of God.**

Daniel 3:13-15 (NIV) 13 Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, **14** and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? **15** Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?”

It is at this point that the king is fueled with rage because he cannot believe that there is anyone who is testing his decree. Probably because he thought these guys were not taking the decree seriously thus not taking the king seriously. Kind of like some of us when we were kids and our parents would give us an ultimatum that we didn't take seriously because we have heard them say it before without any follow through. (Examples: If you don't eat all your supper you are not going to get any ice cream or if you do that one more time I am going to.....) But this was not the case with Rach, Shack and Benny! They were putting their resolve in the FAITHFULNESS of their GOD not in the king's mercy or slackness! They weren't banking on the king not following through. They were banking on their God seeing them through!

Daniel 3:16 (NIV) 16 Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, "King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter.

When it comes to God we are not called to defend Him or our opinions or perspectives. We are simply called to give the reason for the hope that we have.

1 Peter 3:15 (NIV) 15 But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,

We spend too much time arguing theological points or trying to make a point with people that we forget that we are called to make a difference instead. We need to share how God has changed our lives and show them by allowing the hope, peace and love God has given us flow out of our lives and then tell them how they can have what we have and invite them to partake. But we must first have that hope and peace ourselves!

Daniel 3:17-18 (NIV) 17 If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. **18** But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

I want you to notice a couple of things here: First of all, they are not sure if they are going to die in the furnace or not but they are absolutely sure God will deliver them from the king. Which means, no matter what happens God has them and in Him they have the hope of SALVATION and DELIVERANCE!! Maybe not from their circumstance, but they do from death!! We have no guarantees concerning our circumstances in life but we do have a sure guarantee concerning our eternal life and forgiveness of sin.

Secondly, their defiance of the king's order is more about allegiance to God than it is in defiance of the king. In fact, even though they are not going to obey the decree because it is calling them to violate their convictions, they still honor the king and his position by the way they submit to their punishment and in the way they talk to the one in authority. We see this with Jesus also when he was arrested, tried and crucified! And we are called to do the same.

Romans 13:1 (NIV) Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.

The only way to stand firm in our conviction is to be rooted in God's faithfulness otherwise we will compromise. For these guys their confidence rested with God and God alone. Notice the result of their resolve!

Daniel 3:19-25 (NIV) **19** Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual **20** and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. **21** So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. **22** The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, **23** and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace. **24** Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?" They replied, "Certainly, Your Majesty." **25** He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods."

God not only delivers them in the end He also walks with them through the fire! We might not be delivered from our consequences but He will walk with us through them whether they are a result of obedience or disobedience! Do you trust in His FAITHFULNESS?

Daniel 3:26-27 (NIV) **26** Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!" So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, **27** and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.

God's FAITHFULNESS is FULL and COMPLETE! It lacks nothing! Not only did they not get burned, their clothes were protected, not a hair was singed. They didn't even smell like smoke! Btw, you cannot experience the faithfulness of God for yourself if you never put yourself in a place to trust HIM!

Daniel 3:28 (NIV) **28** Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God.

God is given an opportunity to be glorified and as a result a pagan King ends up giving praise to the ONE TRUE GOD! Not only did a pagan king give praise to God but their CONVICTION, willingly demonstrated, brought about changes that benefited God's people and ultimately led to opportunities for these three friends of Daniel to further influence the people of Babylon who

were serving false gods and digging for them empty wells that would never satisfy. Through their bold convictions they were able to have a platform with which to impact the lives of many others.

Daniel 3:29-30 (NIV) 29 Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way.” **30** Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

How do we maintain faithfulness to God in a culture that is always working in opposition to what we believe? WE do so with a GODLY CONVICTION that rests in the FAITHFULNESS of JESUS! DOES IT REALLY MATTER? Yes it does! It matters to all those God wants to reach through the testimony of OUR GODLY CONVICTION!

Worship Comes Back Up

Invitation:

Can you imagine how different things would have turned out in Israel had the people of God had the same convictions as Daniel and his three friends? It seems like it took being placed in captivity and losing their land before they were able to see the need to get serious about their commitment to God. What will it take for God to get our attention? Does the same thing have to happen to us in order to develop firm convictions that will impact the lives of others?

Will you live a life of GODLY CONVICTION so that no matter the cost to you personally you can glorify God in all things?

Your faith will be tested. Will you rest in the faithfulness of Jesus and let Him develop GODLY CONVICTIONS in your life that will impact your world?