

Daniel 3:6-28

⁶Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego answered King Nebuchadnezzar, “We have no need to answer you about this matter. ⁷Since 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. ⁸But 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.”

⁹Then 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. ²⁰He 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. ²¹So 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. ²²Because 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. ²³But these three men, Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego, who had been tied up, fell into the blazing fiery furnace.

²⁴Then 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.”

²⁵He 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.”

²⁶Then 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. ²⁷The 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.

²⁸Nebuchadnezzar 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.

Consequences

I.

The date: a long, long time ago. The place: Babylon. Three Jewish men who had been selected by King Nebuchadnezzar to serve in his government—men whose names had been changed to fit the Babylonian government—were faced with a decision. Would they fall on their knees and press their faces to the ground before Nebuchadnezzar’s statue? If they did, it would all be subterfuge, right? They wouldn’t *really* be worshiping that statue, they would just be doing the pragmatic thing to preserve their lives. It probably seemed reasonable. Their lives would be spared to be able to show other Israelites the true God. But the true God had given his Commandments through Moses; the very First Commandment said that no believer was to worship any other gods—only the true God should be worshiped. What would they choose? What would be the consequences of their decision?

When there is a decision to be made, a wise person considers a wide range of possibilities—of consequences. Any action—or *inaction*—might lead to something else. There can be a veritable spider web of possibilities. One consequence can affect something else, and something else after that, and yet another thing after that.

Long before the time of today’s First Reading, King Nebuchadnezzar had made a

decision that had certain consequences. He sought the best and brightest from each nation he conquered. He put them in a rigorous training program so that eventually he could incorporate many of them into his government. This created a sense of good will among the conquered peoples who came to live in Babylon. An additional benefit was that *he* had excellent advisors from many different backgrounds.

There was a lot of diversity among the people in Babylon from all these different nations. It might be nice to create a sort of melting pot—to get them all on the same page. Babylon had conquered all these diverse peoples. All of them needed to realize that the gods of Babylon were obviously more powerful than their own gods. He would put up a statue and demand that all bow down and worship before it. The base and the statue combined were 90 feet high, visible from a great distance.

The decree was made. Bow down to the statue of the gods of Babylon. There were consequences for refusal: “Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into the blazing fiery furnace” (Daniel 3:6, EHV).

Shadrack, Meshak, and Abednego were the Jewish men who now faced this impossible decision. They probably had watched as the base and statue were erected. As members of the government, they knew about the new decree long before the day came when they stood on the plain with many other people, waiting for the horns, flutes, and lyres to sound the signal to fall down and worship the statue.

What would be their decision? No doubt they prayed; they talked among themselves about their upcoming decision.

II.

Thoughts go through your mind when you consider the consequences. Maybe they could find another way. Perhaps they could seek an exemption if they would just explain their position. Perhaps they could just fake it as they got to the ground with everyone else; surely God would understand. Just cooperate, assimilate, and tolerate. They could accomplish so much good for the people of God if they just could stay alive.

As they considered their course of action and the web of consequences that might result, they didn’t have the benefit of God speaking to them directly from the heavens. There was no new and special promise forthcoming. But they *did* know the clear Word of God. They knew the Commandments given through God’s prophet Moses. Ringing in their ears was that First one: You shall have no other gods.

The day came. The signal sounded. Thousands obeyed the king’s decree and fell to their knees and bowed before the statue. Three did not. Shadrack, Meshak, and Abednego did not bend the knee; they did not bow; they stood. They didn’t have to say a word; simply standing among all the kneeling spoke volumes.

King Nebuchadnezzar was furious when told about their actions. He had made clear the consequences for those who refused to comply, but these men were important to his government—he didn’t want to lose them. The king gave them a second chance. “Now, if you are ready...you must fall down and worship the statue I made. But if you do not worship, you will immediately be thrown into the blazing fiery furnace. What god will be able to save you from my hands?” (Daniel 3:5, EHV).

Your mind has already jumped to the end of the story. After all, everything mentioned so far happened before today’s First Reading. You know that the three men walked out of the fiery furnace alive.

Shadrack, Meshak, and Abednego did *not* know the rest of the story as they stood there before the king. He clearly explained the consequences from *his* perspective: to refuse to

comply meant certain death.

Shadrack, Meshak, and Abednego explained the consequences from *their* perspective. God is *able* to save us, if that is what he chooses, “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” (Daniel 3:8, EHV).

The three men knew that God would protect them. They *didn't* know if that protection meant that he would keep them alive, but they knew that those who believe in the true God simply cannot comply with such a godless decree. Even if they were to die, they were confident that God's hand would be with them. Like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; like Moses and Elijah; like King David; they knew they had an eternal future awaiting them.

Such a bold confession of faith enraged the king even more. He no longer seemed to even care about the consequences. Though these three had previously been important in his government—so much so that he had given them a second chance—now they had guaranteed their death sentence.

The fire was to be hotter—seven times hotter than usual. They were to be tied hand and foot before they were thrown to their certain death. One of the consequences of his orders meant that the king lost some of his own soldiers as they carried out his orders.

The God of the promise protected Shadrack, Meshak, and Abednego in the furnace. A fourth man, who later was identified as an angel, was walking around in the blazing flames with them. The ropes tying their hands and feet together were gone, but their bodies and their clothing were completely intact. When they came out, the three didn't even smell like they had been sitting around a campfire for a few hours; not one hair on their heads was singed.

III.

There are consequences for sins. The consequences are far worse than a blazing fiery furnace—the consequence is hell. Forever. Jesus didn't want the world to be doomed to such a consequence, so he faced the fires of hell for us on the cross. It wasn't comfortable up there, with his arms outstretched.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” he cried out. The physical torture didn't compare to the anguish of being abandoned by the Heavenly Father as he faced the full force of the Father's righteous anger over the sins of the whole world.

Jesus hung there alone so that you and I would never have to face the consequences of our sins alone. He hung there so that he could cry out his final word from the cross: *tetelestai*; the word used to mark a bill paid in full. Translated into English, the word says: “It is finished!” (John 9:30, EHV).

Your bill and mine are paid in full. *His* suffering is credited to *your* account so that you never have to face the consequences of hell.

IV.

The date: April 7, 52. The place: Worms, Germany. The truth of the pure gospel of what Jesus—the Promised One that Shadrack, Meshak, and Abednego had trusted for salvation no matter what happened—was on the line.

Martin Luther had *thought* he was going for an honest debate about the truths of Scripture. When he arrived, he instead found himself on trial for what he had taught. “Will you recant?” he was asked. It was made clear that his very life was on the line.

For some time Luther had asserted that many teachings of the day were false doctrine—that they were harmful to faith in Jesus as the Savior. Would he take them back? Would he recant? If he did, perhaps he would live to teach and preach another day.

To Luther, the consequences were simple. To recant would be to fail to trust in the true God. To refuse to comply meant the same as the three men in the fiery furnace—he would face a death sentence.

Martin Luther presented his answer:

“Unless I am convinced by the testimony of Sacred Scripture or by evident reason—since I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for it is evident that they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against my conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me. Amen.”

The date: today. The place: modern American society.

If you pay any attention at all, you know that popular culture is against you. There are no 90-foot-high statues and people demanding you bow down to them. There isn't an official statement of church belief or a demand that you conform to it.

But more and more it seems there are thought police out there. God's Word doesn't line up very well with what people demand you say and think these days. What will you do? Will you cave in to peer pressure and agree to the godless perversions of the day? Will you just be quiet, trying to fit in as best you can without compromising your beliefs?

Consider the consequences. Hold on firmly to your faith in the Lord Jesus. Like Shadrack, Meshak, and Abednego, and like Martin Luther, remember that not even death can rip you away from your Lord Jesus. Then echo the words of Luther: “Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me. Amen.”