

A trip back to the Midwest last Summer. A stop overnight at a hotel in Knoxville, Tennessee. I entered the elevator alone with a man who wore a red hat. The hat said, "Make America Great Again." I looked at the man and said in a deep voice, "You must be a Trump supporter." I could see fear in his eyes as I spoke. Maybe he thought I was going to get in his face and start screaming at him, or spit at him. I picked up the fear in his eyes and said, "Don't be alarmed. I just wanted to compliment you. It takes real courage to wear a hat like that out in public. You really must believe in the man and what he is attempting to do.

It isn't just in the realm of politics where it takes courage to let others know what you believe in today's world. But also in our walk as Christians. What if tomorrow the government of the United States demanded that you cut off your membership at Open Bible because some of its teachings from the Bible were hate crimes, or face imprisonment or pay a yearly fine of \$100,000 to stay out of jail. Would you willingly disobey even though it would mean jail or eventual bankruptcy? In our text today three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did disobey such a decree even though it meant being thrown into a fiery furnace. How did these friends remain cool when the heat was on? How did they fireproof their faith? We too, want to Fireproof Our Faith.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, or the "3 Amigos" as I'll call them, were young men from Israel who had been dragged to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. Life wasn't too bad for the 3 Amigos. Together with their friend Daniel they became important officials in the Babylonian empire after graduating from the king's university with honors. It must have been exciting to hold influential positions in the greatest empire of the day.

Back in the 1500's there was a man named Martin Luther. He like the 3 amigos was involved in service. Luther was not serving the emperor, but the Catholic church under the leadership of the pope. But some dramatic changes took place with Luther as a priest and the three amigos as government employees. One day the 3 Amigos' received word that they and every other official were to gather at the plain of Dura where the king had erected a 90-foot statue. This was Nebuchadnezzar's idea of a team-building exercise. Every civil servant was to bow down and worship the statue in a show of loyalty. Anyone who disobeyed was to be thrown into a fiery furnace. This was not an idle threat. The king had burned people to death before.

What thoughts do you think were going through the 3 Amigos' minds? Did they consider: "If we don't bow down to this statue, we'll die and then what good will we be to the Lord and to his people? We're so young. We have our whole lives ahead of us. Surely God didn't bring us here only to let us die so soon! Anyway God will understand if we bow down just this once – especially if we're just going through the motions. If he does count that as sin, we can always ask for forgiveness."

Do you see the problem with those thoughts? They're egocentric. Were the 3 Amigos really indispensable in God's plan for his people? No. Just as we aren't indispensable to the work

of the church here. God doesn't need us to keep his kingdom going. It's a privilege for us to serve him. So what were the 3 Amigos to do? Since they realized that their goal in life was not to stay alive but to obey God, they did just that. While everyone else bowed before the king's idol they remained standing, with pounding hearts no doubt.

A similar event occurred in the life of Martin Luther. He was taught in the Catholic church that you are saved by your faith and works. You needed to go to mass regularly. You needed to be a good person in the community. You needed to say your prayers to Mary and the saints. But Luther had never felt he could do enough to satisfy God for his sins. He struggled and struggled with this, until as a Professor he sat down and studied Romans 1. In it he read about a righteousness has come to us from God - by faith. At that point Luther said to himself, "the Gospel is the good news that Jesus lived a perfect life as my substitute, and that he died on the cross. He didn't die for Himself, so He must have died for me. Jesus provided me with the righteousness I need. How does His righteousness become mine? Not by beating myself and trying to reform my life, but simply by faith in Jesus! Jesus became what He was not - sin - so that I would become what I was not - righteous!" This "tower experience" set him free from the deceit that he had been put under for his whole life - that he had to punish himself for his sins - and set him free from God's wrath. Luther discerned the truth, that a man is saved by God's grace through faith. He saw the Pope's teaching for what it was, a devastating eternal error. On October 31st, 1517, 500 years ago, he posted 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg to debate the Catholic Church on this teaching and others.

As time went on Emperor Charles V got involved. At the Diet of Worms, he told Luther to take back what he was teaching, to honor the pope. Luther could face the death penalty. What would Luther and the 3 amigos do? The three amigos could have just said "No, we will not bow down to the Golden image." Luther could have said, "No, I will not take back anything." But the three amigos and Luther gave a magnificent testimony to their God in their response. Listen to the 3 amigos, "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." Luther's response to the emperor was, "unless you can prove from the Bible that I have made wrong statements, I cannot and I will not take back anything. My conscience is bound by the Word of God. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise".

King Nebuccadnezzar was furious. He had been humiliated publicly in front of his officials. He immediately sentenced the three amigos to the fiery furnace. He had it heated up 7 times hotter with naphtha and pitch. The three amigos were tossed into the furnace with their hands tied. Some of the strongest soldiers died tossing the three amigos into the flames. After Luther responded to the emperor, the emperor declared that in the next 20 days, that anyone who wanted to kill Luther could do so. He had a bounty on his head.

Under no circumstances were the three amigos and Luther going to obey the king's command. Yes, they understood the consequences. And no, they didn't have any previous promise from the Lord that they would miraculously survive the fire or Emperor Charles' death penalty. But that didn't matter. If God wanted to rescue them, that was his business. Their business was to obey God, no matter what.

What made for a fireproof faith in the hearts of these men? Two things: they let go of their ego, and they lay hold of their God. Conversely we often falter in our faith because we think too highly of ourselves and not enough of the Lord. We mistakenly think that our goal in life is to save our own skin at all costs. And so we read more about the H1N1 virus than we do God's Word. We spend more time planning a get-away than we do thinking about how we can carve out time to help with church activities. We need to take to heart Jesus' words: "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?"

The 3 Amigos were ready to forfeit their earthly lives to hold on to their souls for eternity. The same with Luther. But what did God do. He protected them. He delivered his children who trusted in him. The three amigos left the fiery furnace with no burns, no hair singed, their clothing was not blackened or burned, and they didn't even smell like a campfire. God had sent an angel to protect them. Martin Luther was protected when the emperor put out a decree that in the next 20 days anyone could kill Luther. Elector Frederick took him to the Wartburg castle where he was kept safe. He proceeded to translate the NT from Greek to German, and when he left and went back to Wittenberg, he translated the OT from Hebrew to German so more people could read the truth about salvation for themselves.

Will God do the same for you? Will he keep you from all harm as long as you obey his commands? No. We don't have that promise just as the 3 Amigos had no guarantee their ordeal was going to end in a miracle. Still, fireproof your faith by letting go of your ego and laying hold of your God. Resist the temptation to compromise the truth of God's Word to keep the peace in the family for example. If you have to endure some flames as a result, God will see you through them. Doing things God's way isn't always easy but it's always the best.

Do you realize that the only thing Nebuchadnezzar's fire destroyed besides his soldiers were the ropes that had bound the 3 Amigos? Likewise the only thing that death can now destroy is the bond that tethers you to this sinful, sorrowful world. That's a bond we don't mind giving up, is it? How can we be certain that we'll survive death unscathed? Just as a baker doesn't mind thrusting his hands into a hot oven because he's wearing oven mitts, so we don't mind facing death because God has covered us in Jesus' righteousness so that God's wrath against our sin will not burn us. No, you may not be able to fireproof your church building but in Jesus, God has fireproofed you from his wrath. Be confident then Christian as you face fiery trials. The Bible says, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory forever and ever." Stand up For Jesus! Amen.