

BaptistWay Bible Series for Aug. 14: Shadrach, Meshach & Abednego: Giving unlimited devotion to God

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We are so blessed to live in the United States of America. I can honestly say I have never felt threatened because of my faith.

Sure, there are times I have found myself in awkward positions because of my faith. Telling college friends I would not participate in certain activities may have brought some teasing, but nothing life threatening in the least.

Here in the United States, there is very little persecution as a result of faith. I have heard people say the way prayer has been taken out of schools is a form of persecution, and I find myself very uncomfortable with that correlation.

Throughout the last 2,000 years, and in many parts of the world today, Christians have faced true persecution. Many face imprisonment or death due to their faith in Christ. I marvel at the courage shown by so many people in the face of such persecution. I find myself wondering how I would respond. Would I stand up for Christ the way the past and present martyrs for Christ have?

Facing persecution for faith dates back well beyond the time of Christ. One of my favorite stories growing up was the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. I think I liked repeating their names—they were some of the few I could pronounce. These three men showed great courage and resolve when faced with the ridiculous demands of King Nebuchadnezzar.

The story is simple, if a person did not stop and worship the golden image of the king at the sound of the music, they would be thrown into the blazing furnace. This order blatantly went against the basic laws God had given the people of Israel through Moses. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were not going to follow such an order, even under penalty of death by burning.

These three men went to the fiery furnace thinking they were going to die. They did not know God was going to miraculously intervene and allow them to exit the furnace unscathed. How were they able to remain so loyal to God when they could have simply appeased the king and repeated the words he wanted to hear?

They could do this because their faith defined who they were. Asking them not to be loyal to God would be like asking them to change species. Their faith in God permeated every fiber of their being, and worshipping something other than God was impossible for them. Their decision to disobey the king was not a spur of the moment decision, but rather the result of a life lived in devotion to God. Their faith made this decision the only rational option for them, despite the consequences.

I wonder if we live our lives in a manner such as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego? Are we living our lives fully devoted to God? Is our faith something we do on occasions or is our faith part of our very being? Would we be able to make the same decision as these three men of God?

I know I struggle with questions such as these, but hearing some of the stories of the men and women who have stood up for their faith in the face of persecution gives me some strength. For example, Baptists have a strong history of those who have stood up for their beliefs in the face of persecution.

Thomas Helwys is one of the founding fathers of the Baptist tradition, and he lived in a time when the government dictated how one's faith would be

practiced. Helwys actually left England because of the persecution, but later went back and started what many believe to be the first Baptist church in England.

He then wrote a book titled *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* and sent a copy to the King of England. In the book, he declared the government had no right to tell people what to believe or how to conduct church. Helwys added a personal inscription to King James I in the book he sent. The inscription read: "The king is a mortall man and not God, therefore hath no power over ye immortal Soules of his Subjects, to make laws and ordinance for them, and to set Spiritual Lords over them."

Needless to say the king did not take this well. Helwys was branded a heretic and traitor. He was thrown into Newgate Prison which was filled with rodents, insects, disease, filth and hardened criminals.

All Helwys had to do to leave this horrible place was agree the king had the right to dictate belief and practice to Christians and to churches. Helwys stood up for his convictions to the end. His wife also was imprisoned and did not renounce her beliefs either. Helwys ended up dying in prison because he would not abandon his convictions.

I have so much respect for people like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and Thomas and Joan Helwys. Their faith was part of who they were as people. Their entire lives were influenced and led by God, and when the time came to stand up for their faith, they were ready.

I think we should live our lives in such a manner. Rather than asking hypothetical questions of how you would respond to persecution, ask yourself whether your faith defines who you are as a person. If our faith in God is part of who we are and not something we do every now and then, I believe we could stand up for God just as those in the past have done.