

# BELPRES CHURCH

## Fireproof True Courage

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29 Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, 30 he said, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?"

31 Even as the words were on his lips, a voice came from heaven, "This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. 32 You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes."

33 Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like the ox. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird.

34 At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever...

Daniel 4:29-34a

New International Version

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Jesus, you make us brave so, by your word, encourage us so that whatever our lot, teach us to say it as well with our soul. We pray this in your name Jesus. Amen. Would you agree with the following sentence? Scared Christian is, or at least should be an oxymoron. Right? Jesus conquered even death, so what do we have to fear. So scared Christian or worried Christian is a contradiction in terms. Sort of like Jumbo Shrimp. Right? Or act naturally. Or California culture.

I used to live there, so I can say that. We should be brave. Right? But it is a scary world out there. Isn't it? We saw it again this week. Earthquakes, hurricanes, mass shootings. One of our high school students told me the scariest thing about Las Vegas for him was that his first thought when he heard it was, "Oh. Another one." And he did not want to become hardened to that. And as Christians, when we see something like that, we are called to be angry at the evil, and to lament,

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and to grieve in one hand, but hold onto hope with the other, because God is at work. And there are good things happening, as well as bad things.

For instance, some of you may have seen news reports about the Ocean Cleanup Project. It's this machine that, by 2020, three years, will have cleaned up half the Pacific garbage patch. That's good news, right? And it was invented by a teenager. He started working on it when he was 16 years old for a high school science project. Okay, who do you think won the science fair that year? Right? How'd you like to be one of the other students? Right? Look! I made a machine that saves the planet, what'd you do? A volcano using baking soda. Right? Even last week, we saw the worst, and we saw the best. Like Jonathan Smith, who saved 30 people during the shooting. There are good and bad things happening. And, as Christians, we are not called to shrink back in fear. We are called to move forward in faith. To act boldly and courageously. CS Lewis said, "The problem with preaching is it's often mild-mannered people exhorting mild-mannered people to be more mild-mannered."

We are not called to be mild-mannered. We are called to be brave. We are called to be warriors for God. Just like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the story that we just read. The Babylonians have conquered Jerusalem and taken the Jews into exile in Babylon, where they were despised foreigners hated for their religion and for their race. But, in spite of that, these three guys have risen to a position of prominence. They are governors of the Province of Babylon. So, they could live comfortably, have a couple of chariots in the garage, you know, raise families, take some vacations. So you would think ... you'd think that they'd wanna preserve that by not rocking the boat. You'd think that they'd want to hold on to all that by blending in and doing what everyone else is doing. You'd think that because maybe, like me, that's what you would do or be tempted to do.

And I'd find all kinds of reasons to justify it. Well, man, I can do way more good as a Governor than if I get in trouble and lose my job for, you know, not doing what everyone else is doing. But not these three. No, not these three. The text says, "King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, 90 feet high and 9 feet wide." Okay. That's a big statue. Right? And chapter two implies that the statue's of himself. So, I just ... I love that. Let's make a big statue of me. Right? And he says, "Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace."

So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisors, treasurers, judges, magistrates assembled for the dedication of the image. So, in other words. Everybody who's anybody is there. All the A-listers come to walk the red carpet. So now the pressure is on Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Right? Come on guys with the funny names. Come on. Worship the statue. What's the big deal.

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You don't even have to mean it. You can do it with your fingers crossed. All the cool people are doing it. One of the themes in this book is how do we have the courage to live out our faith in a culture that doesn't share our faith. And most of the prophets at this time in Babylon were saying ... the Jewish Prophets were saying to the exiles, "The way you do that is you seclude yourself. The Babylonians are completely evil. So just all hover together over in this little Jewish District over here, and you just stick together. And have no interaction with the culture around you 'cause it's bad, it's evil."

But God sends a different message. He says, "Seek instead seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile." And BelPres, that is our mission verse for this church. That is what we are called to do. And the Hebrew word for peace is Shalom, and it means more than peace. It means the complete, economic, cultural, relational, spiritual, social flourishing of the city that we're in. So, in other words, don't conform to the culture, but don't withdraw from it and yell at it either. That's a false binary choice, and our God is God of the third way. And God's third way is to enter the culture and transform it, which takes courage. Right?

Like ... withdraw from the culture, huddle up in our Christian bubble, only have Christian friends, Christian music, Christian bumper stickers, all of that stuff, Christian cars, Christian food, Christian whatever else, right, Christian toothpaste, Christian toothbrushes. Right? Like just kind of ... that's safe. Right? Like just kind of hover over there, that's easier. Conform to the culture, easier still. But enter the culture and transform it, that takes courage. And you'll notice, these three men are not stridently yelling at the culture. In fact, the King doesn't even know they aren't bowing down to the statue until some mid-level bureaucrats come to him and tell him. And they say, "There are some Jews whom you have set over the Province of Babylon." Ooh, do I hear some professional jealousy going on there? What's wrong tiny little bureaucrat? Did someone take your job? Right? "And they pay no attention to you, your majesty."

See, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, they're flying under the radar. They are not picking every culture war they can find just to yell at the culture and make a point. They accommodate the culture as much as they can, and when they can't, they stand firm quietly. And you may have noticed; there's this repeated refrain in the text that Gabe read very admirably. "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." It's repeated so often, it gets annoying. Right? Like, "As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute-" yes, yes, I know, get on with the story.

You know it's ... former teacher in me wants to edit it. But it's on purpose. Right? It's this hypnotic thing. It's what Fuller Seminary President Mark Laberton calls "the mesmerizing rhythms of our culture" that cause us to conform to our cultures idols that go by names like success, and comfort,

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and consumerism, and sex, and alcohol. But Jesus calls us to neither withdraw from the culture, nor conform to the culture, but instead live in it differently in a way that brings his healing. "Well, how do I do that?"

You know what? There's no formula. There's no one, two, three steps. Here's what you do. It's about partnering with the Holy Spirit every single day, asking Him to show you opportunities you have to bring God's healing where you live, work, play, or learn. It's about the creativity of the Holy Spirit giving you eyes to see those moments. There's no one, two, three formula. Three weeks ago I mentioned how much I love chocolate chip cookies and how I can't resist 'em. I'm fine if I don't have any. I'm not tempted. But if I have one chocolate chip cookie, game over, and I'll eat a dozen or two in a sitting. Right? Well, after that, several of you made me chocolate chip cookies.

Godly, biblical people, who love their pastor and are going to Heaven. Did I mention I also like Lakefront property? One woman put them in separate little plastic bags, one cookie per plastic bag, and she labeled them Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday ... which I followed for a couple of days, but then I saved the rest and ate 'em all in one sitting. How we live courageous lives that bring healing? It's not like that. It's not laid out that neatly for us, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. We have to listen to the nudges of the Holy Spirit that show us, give us opportunities to how we can live differently, courageously, in a way that heals. Let me give you some for instances.

I've read multiple news reports from the secular press here, as well as secular European press that churches in Europe, particularly Germany ... churches that have sat empty for decades are suddenly filling back up. Some churches are doing mass baptisms of three or four hundred people and who is filling up those empty churches? Muslim refugees. Muslim refugees who are finding Jesus and experiencing His Grace and His love that sets us free from shame. And how are they finding Jesus. The way people always find Jesus. Because there are some Christians who are not listening to the voices of fear, but are rushing to care for them, bring them meals, help them find housing, all kinds of stuff.

Now, I don't know what a country's policy should be about refugees. I'm not ... I don't know ... that's a complicated issue, lots of opinions. I'm not making a comment on what the policy should be. What I am saying is what Christian character should be. Whatever the policy, Christians should not be the voice of fear. We are called to move in faith, not fear. One of the things that interest me is for decades, all the way back to when I was in college, pastors around the country have been urging Christians to pray for what's called the 10/40 window. Right? Countries between 10 degrees and 40 degrees latitude, most of them Muslim countries, pray that they would come to know Jesus. Then to urge that for decades, question ... Did we think that would

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happen in a way that didn't involve us? Did we think that would happen in some easy, comfortable way for us? Maybe some missionaries go. Some Christians seemed to think that's how it was gonna go down. But what if they come here? Maybe we're the answer to that prayer if we have the courage to love in tangible ways.

This week, I heard a story about a high school student, 17-year-old high school student, his name is Josiah. And his church was building a Bible School in South Sudan because kids can't get an education there. So they're building this Bible School to help 'em get an education. And God just nudged this high school student, Josiah, to be involved in that. So one day in math class, he and a friend designed a t-shirt that they could sell for money. I find that interesting that they did in a math class, don't know how that happened, but anyway. So Josiah made a bunch of these t-shirts with a "Hope For Sudan" Logo on them, put 'em all in this beat up old suitcase, 'cause it was the only one that he had that was big enough to hold all of them. And took 'em to school to sell.

And on his way to school, he was wondering, "Gosh. I wonder if people are gonna make fun of me." And when he got to school, he found out that some of them did, made fun of him for the design of the t-shirt, fun of him for being a Christian, made fun of him because his suitcase was all old and beaten up. But some kids asked about it. They were interested. And he'd say, "This is to build a Bible School in Sudan so that kids there can get an education. But also, because they don't know that God loves them." And maybe this will help them know that. And then he organized a 400-mile bike ride to raise even more money. And he's raised five or six thousand dollars out of the 30K needed to build this school. And he says, "You know, before this, all of my time went to eating, sleeping, and playing on my PlayStation." No mention of homework there, but ...

I think about God, but I never do anything about it. But it's so exciting when you see how people have hopped on board with this thing. Some of my friends are even asking me about God and about my church. See, that took courage. He had to put himself out there as a Christian, try something that may not have worked. He got made fun of along the way, here and there. But his courage is making a difference in his life, in his school, and in Sudan. When we move in faith, not fear, Jesus works through us to heal our culture. A school, an office, a neighborhood. Jesus works through us. And the emphasis there is move in faith, not fear. We may feel fear, that's normal. We may feel fear, but we don't act in fear. Christians move in faith, not fear. And that's what Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego do here. They have the courage not to bow down to the idols of their culture.

So then, the King throws them into the furnace. But it says, "The fire did not harm their bodies. Their robes weren't even scorched." Which led Nebuchadnezzar to say, "Praise be to the God of

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Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego." This pagan king praises God, and then he says, "I decree that anyone who says anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be cut into pieces, and their houses be turned into piles of rubble." Okay. So he's growing in his faith. Okay. Still a little work left to do. Okay? And then he says, "For no other God can save like this."

Their courage leads a tyrant King to praise God. See, fear is not a strategy. It's not a very good one anyway. I mean, I actually use it all the time. But, it's not a great strategy. Right? But when we live with true courage, Jesus brings healing through us. And so many of you do this. Andrews House, where some of you are taking homeless youth into your homes to push back on poverty and loneliness. Some of you are mentoring, serving, tutoring, at East Side Academy, or at Jubilee Reach, which you just heard about. My goodness. You heard Brent's testimony. This church ... so many of you gave money to launch that thing 'cause you were moving in faith, not fear.

Finding ways to bring Jesus healing where you live, work, play, or learn ... lots of you are doing this, even if it costs you something. And it always will cost you something. Which brings me to my favorite part of this story. One of the best verses in the Bible. Shadrach and his friends refuse to bow down to their culture's idols. And they say, "If we are thrown in the blazing furnace. The God we serve is able to deliver us from it." See, that's how we get courage. Because we know that our God is able. The God revealed in Jesus is able, and that gives us courage. He is able to heal diseases, rescue the oppressed, set people free who are trapped in addiction, revive a failing marriage. He is able to forgive our darkest sins, set us free from our deepest shame, soften the most hardened hearts, and reconcile people who are filled with hate.

He brings hope to the hopeless, life to the lifeless, strength to the weak, endurance to the weary, and he brings joy in the fiercest storm. So we are unafraid because our God is able. There you go. You can say Amen to that, or you can just look pleasantly pleased. Either ... I just ... whichever one you wanna go with. Our God is able. That's how we have courage. " ... and he will deliver us from your Majesty's hand," they say, "But even if he does not, even if he does not, even if he does not, we will not serve your Gods or worship the image of gold that you have set up." Those are the words of free men. Because see, they understood we're all gonna die. What's a few more weary years? We're all gonna die. And all the stuff we chase, success, reputation, comfort, it's all gonna be gone, and all we're left with is the legacy we leave behind. But if we die with Jesus, we wake up with him as well, where there is freedom, and victory, and joy. Death is not the worst thing that can happen to us. Jesus has conquered it.

So we can be unafraid. See they understood that sometimes God saves us from the fire. The job that comes in the nick of time. The miracle cure to the disease, it happens. It just doesn't always happen. In fact, there's lots of miracles in the book of Daniel, but prior to this, for centuries prior

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to this moment, there had been no miracles in Israel for centuries. And God didn't stop them from being conquered. Sometimes God saves us from the fire, but God always saves us in the fire with his presence. So after they're thrown in the furnace it says, "Then King Nebuchadnezzar leapt to his feet in amazement and asked "Weren't there three men we threw into the fire. Look. I see four men walking around in the fire unharmed, and the fourth looks like a Son of the Gods."

So, who is that guy? Who's that fourth guy? Right? Who can appear out of nowhere? Who can cheat death? Who looks like a Son of the Gods? Well, it's Jesus. And yes, historically, He hasn't been born here, but He's God so He can show up wherever He wants. Right? Throughout the Old Testament, you get these previews of Jesus and this is one of them. And I don't know about you, but I spend a lot of time asking God to deliver me from the furnace. Make me comfortable. Make me happy. Make good things happen. Make me safe. But the danger to my soul is that the primary goal of my life becomes furnace avoidance. And I get afraid of even the lowest level flames. And my soul shrinks down to me and mine. But these three men had already won before they were thrown into the furnace. They'd already won. They were already free. They were unafraid, even of death, which made them fireproof.

They could handle anything because they understood that either God was gonna save them from the fire, or He would save them in the fire with His presence. Either way, they come out winners.

See, God ... our job, our health, our reputation's all gonna go away. God is the only thing that is eternal. So, through it all, if our eyes are on Him, we are fireproof because we are focused on the one thing that can never be taken away. And I've told you countless stories of people going through job loss, divorce, cancer, you name it, all kinds of things who experience God's presence in a way that gives them supernatural strength, peace, and joy. There's always a fourth man in the fire with us, and his name is Jesus. I do not have a great answer for what happened in Las Vegas. I know God is angry at evil, and I know that he laments with us. I know that he knows what it's like to suffer because, in Jesus, he suffered. I know somehow he pulls resurrections out of death. And I know that if we act courageously, through us he will make a difference.

We can have the courage, for instance, to instead of kind of just giving pat answers that make us feel better, but cheapen the experience of grief, we could instead have the courage to sit and lament in grief with people. Christians could lead the country in having respectful conversations about public policy, instead of blasting others on social media with angry slogans. And that takes courage to have kind of respectful, nuanced dialogue, 'cause when you have a respectful, nuanced position, actually, both sides hate you. So it takes courage. Right? And I'm not sure that our culture of rage contributes to mass shootings, but it sure isn't helping. So maybe Christians could lower the temperature. We could refuse to participate in a culture that glorifies violence in

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movies, and in games. And instead, spend our money on more positive things until Hollywood gets the point, and we teach 'em a lesson. Not a complete answer, but it could be a start. And it's worked in the past.

You know, the Roman Empire was as violent as they come. The Romans never saw a problem to which violence wasn't their preferred solution. They used to watch people die in the Colosseum in painful deaths, and they'd call that a fun Sunday afternoon, until enough people knew Jesus that pretty soon, that didn't seem fun anymore. It just seemed cruel, and the games were driven out of business. 250 years ago, the most prosperous economies in the world were all driven by slavery, but within one generation, they were forced to abandon it for moral reasons. Because Christians like Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, awoke a sleeping giant called The Church.

And millions of Christians started asking the question, "Where does my tea come from? Or the cotton in my clothes?" And they gracefully articulated their cause in the marketplace of ideas, while all the ugly racists could do was sputter an inarticulate hate. And everyone knew which side love was on. When we move in faith, not fear, Jesus can change a school, a workplace, a city, a country. And in the process, we experience God and our lives get bigger. You know, I gotta wonder. I gotta wonder if when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were like old, did they ever get together for like a reunion? Right?

Like they maybe wear their old robes, you know. That is if their wives hadn't thrown them away like my wife sometimes does with my old sacred clothing because she has no sense of history, tradition, fashion, or taste. But I digress. And did they reminisce? You know, like "remember the look on Nebuchadnezzar's face when we didn't get burned up? That was so awesome!" Their lives got bigger. But more than that, they experienced community and comradery. They did it together with each other 'cause that's the only way you can go into a furnace is with community. And they experienced God. There was a fourth man with them in the fire, and I gotta wonder did that fourth man tell them how proud the Father was of their courage. And how, for centuries, people who faced suffering would draw strength from their story.

Jesus meets us in the furnace, 'cause he's a furnace kind of guy. So here's your homework. First, don't ask for less heat, ask to see Jesus in the furnace with you. And then, second, none of us are born with courage, we have to develop it. And the way you do that is by doing small acts of courage, and working yourself up to it. Right? It's like weightlifting. You don't start with the heaviest weight, you start small, and then you work up. So this week ask God to show you one act of courage that you could take, and then take it. Maybe it's to invite someone to church. Maybe lovingly confront someone who needs it. Maybe it's just to say I'm sorry to someone. 'Cause see, you know, rarely are we called to do some huge act of courage like save someone



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from a burning building.

More often, it's the smaller things. I heard a man named Paul talk about how he used to go to church with his wife, but it didn't mean much to him. But one weekend went on a men's retreat, had a mountaintop spiritual experience, felt Jesus presence, and when he got home, he was excited to tell his wife, Nancy all about it. And this is what she'd been praying for. Their marriage ... really rough marriage, lots of tension for lots of different issues. But now, he was kind of spiritually alive, so it's gonna get better. Right? And at first, she was excited but pretty quickly it all turned to anger. All the years of a difficult marriage where he had been cold to her, it just kind of started to come out.

And Paul was mad at Jesus, 'cause he thought Jesus job was to fix his marriage right away. Right? What's the point of Jesus? Right? To keep me out of the furnace ... this went on for months, and months, and months. Well, one Sunday they got in a fight on their way to church, happens to the best of us. Right? Did it happen to you today? There's a reason for that. We have an enemy. He doesn't want you to enjoy church. Right? So they fought on the way to church. When they got home, they fought. Right in ... they were really yelling at each other when they got home really loudly, and then some friends of theirs came walking up their front step 'cause they just stopped by to say hi.

They heard the yelling. They got back in their car and left. Paul got so frustrated, he hit the wall and all the pictures fell down. And then he saw his three-year-old son staring at him with these big frightened eyes. And he said, that's when I finally broke. And he started to cry, and a bunch of bottled up pain and frustration started coming out. And he said, "I'd always kind of thought ... I'd always kind of felt like crying or emotion was weakness. But God was showing me that I needed the courage to stop pretending that a broken marriage could be fixed overnight, and instead do the hard work of healing."

So he and his wife ended up holding each other and their son. They asked forgiveness for the way they'd treated each other, asked Jesus to take control of their marriage. He said it was a Holy moment where he experienced how much Jesus loved him. And feeling that love, he could turn around and love his wife. They got counseling. Over time, their marriage got awesome. It got better. And now they tell their story to other couples to encourage them when they're having a hard time, which takes courage on their part. Jesus didn't save them from the fire, but He did save them in the fire. They had to go into the furnace of counseling. Get painfully honest. Ask for forgiveness. But felt Jesus presence all the way through, which gave them courage.

'Cause it takes courage to stick with it when it's hard, courage to admit your mistakes and ask forgiveness. But out of the heat of that furnace, came an awesome marriage. They were saved in

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the fire. A couple weeks ago, I came across this picture of a firefighters hand reaching out through the smoke. And I love that image. Whatever fire you are in right now, health issues, relationship, school, job issue, or whatever furnace God may be calling you to serve him in some way that's gonna cost you something. Whatever the furnace, Jesus will meet you there. And through the smoke and fire extend his hand, and lead you through.

And when our eyes are on Him, we're fireproof, unafraid, because our God is always there and he is able. So Jesus, thank you for that. Thank you that you reach out through the smoke, and you lead us through. Lord, make us brave, make us courageous people, move through us, so the world will know that you live because you live in us. We pray this in your name Lord. Amen.

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## Discussion Questions

1. How does the tree in Nebuchadnezzar's dream fit him (appearance, visibility, abilities, etc.)?
2. What hope is conveyed by letting the stump remain (vv. 15, 26, 36-37)?
3. What words would you use to describe Nebuchadnezzar in this story?
4. What is wrong with the King's statement in verse 30?
5. What do you make of Nebuchadnezzar's statements in 34-35? What do you make of his restored greatness in verse 36?
6. How can you talk about your accomplishments without bragging or putting yourself down?
7. What lessons do you take away from this story?