

## ***FACING THE FURNACE, DANIEL 3***

Formidable Unforgotten #5 Rack, Shaq, and Benny

◆ **Intro:** Doing mission work, planting a church where there isn't one, witnessing in a land where you are the minority, saying what you know other people don't agree with... Know what that takes? People of conviction. See, conviction enables you to endure anything, because you have a foundational reason.

◆ Many folks know the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and the Fiery Furnace. Our questions today is "What does the story of Rack, Shaq, and Benny teach us?"

◆ 1. One thing for certain is that **following God (faith in God) is a conviction, not preference.** There isn't much inspiring about mere preference. But real conviction...! Just reading their response in v16 puts them in the hero category for me! I wonder how much of our lives we live by conviction as opposed to preference. Doug Fannon has pointed out that...

◆ 1) If your beliefs are such that other people must stand with you before you will stand, your beliefs are preferences, not convictions. 2) If family can pressure you to believe or not believe, you have a preference. 3) If the threat of lawsuits force you to change your beliefs or habits, you have merely a preference. 4) If the threat of jail or prison time makes you change what you believe, then you have a preference. 5) If under the threat of death; you change what you believe, you have a preference.

◆ A conviction is a belief that you will not change. A conviction is a line you will not cross. And that is the faith Christ calls us to.

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The call of God is a call of conviction. Lots of Churches are afraid to say anything about political issues like abortion, gay marriage, welfare misuse, etc. lest we lose our tax-exempt status. Well then, we do not hold a conviction about those things, just a preference. But when Jesus calls us to be his family, he calls us to come and die to ourselves, that is, to place his truth above our preferences.

◆ *"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name." 1 Peter 4:12-16, NIV.*

◆ Asian Access (or A2), a Christian mission agency in South Asia, listed a series of questions that church planters must ask new believers who are considering baptism. This is in an area hostile to Christians.

◆ 1. Are you willing to leave home and lose the blessing of your father? 2. Are you willing to lose your job? 3. Are you willing to go to the village and those who persecute you, forgive them, and share the love of Christ with them? 4. Are you willing to give an offering to the Lord? 5. Are you willing

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to be beaten rather than deny your faith? 6. Are you willing to go to prison? 7. Are you willing to die for Jesus?

◆ If the new convert answers yes to all of these questions, then A2 leaders invite that person to sign on the bottom of the paper, that of their own free will they have decided to follow Jesus. But here's the risk: If a new convert signs the paper and the government get a hold of it, he or she will spend three years behind bars. The one who did the evangelizing faces six years in prison. It takes conviction to follow Christ in Asia. It took conviction to follow Christ in Babylon, where the Jews were aliens in exile.

◆ How about you? Is your Christian faith a preference or a conviction? If you were accused of being Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Because true "faith is a conviction that everything God reveals in his word is true." And that affects our actions, doesn't it? Do you do things because you can get by with it? Or do you do things because they are right?

◆ **2. Following God will never be the easy road.** No promise of temporal victory this side of heaven. Oh there is plenty of blessing in following Jesus, but you are always going to stick out for not blending in as a God-follower in an evil world. If you are blending in, you are likely not following Christ much. Jesus said

◆ *"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own.*

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*As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.” John 15:18-19*

◆ Rack/Shaq/Benny were not confident that God would save them from the fire. Just that God *could* save them if it were to his purpose. They did not figure that following God meant an easy road. Jesus told us to expect persecution. Do you know why? Because we are aliens here. Obedience to the law of God doesn't fit. Not bowing to the statue didn't fit. It made everyone else feel uncomfortable. The peer pressure was enormous!

◆ The people gathered are all leaders, elite, officials. These are the DC folk; senators, congressmen and women, lawyers, governors, ambassadors, mayors, and police chiefs! All the big-wigs bowing. Rack/Shaq/Benny were “officials” as well. Chapter 2 is about their rise in the ranks. It would have been so easy to say, “Oh your majesty, there's just been a little mix up. We have no problem with you or your statue. Look, we'll bow right now!” It would have been so tempting to tell themselves, “Well this is for the greater good. If we keep our seats in the Senate, we can have good social influence in the Babylonian government. Besides, we don't have to *mean* it.” Then of course there was the threat of being melted to death in a smelting furnace of 900 degrees or more. (It takes 1640° to melt gold, more for brass.)

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◆What furnaces do we face today? Say anything contrary to the latest politically correct thing and you will be labeled a bigot, a hater, homophobe, narrow-minded, dumb, and horror of horrors - intolerant. (No one will notice that their name-calling is intolerant though.) Stand up for normal natural marriage today and your business gets sued, and the government penalizes you. State the scientific fact that a boy is not a girl and vs biologically, and people think you're the uneducated one! A UK Christian charity that helps people deal with unwanted same-sex attraction has been notified by their bank that their account will be closed. Facebook is censoring christian ministries for the same thing. Anchorage Assembly passed an ordinance last week making it illegal to help someone who wants to overcome confused sexual orientation! Read the Party platforms for yourself! One of them promises far more of the same. Read any party platform and look for how much aligns the God's Word. We face furnaces everywhere we turn. But here is where conviction is revealed or not.

◆JK Rowling received the Ripple of Hope Award from the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights (RFKHR) organization last year. But after they countered some of her views as "undermining the validity and integrity of the entire transgender community", she gave it back, saying, "no award or honor,...means so much to me that I would forfeit the right to follow the dictates of my own conscience."

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◆ Malta candidate for Prime Minister Bernard Grech said he would be ready to resign as PM if Malta votes for the introduction of abortion so that he would not be the PM under whom Malta introduces the controversial practice. That's conviction.

◆ **3.** Now we might at first object to the inevitability of furnaces in this world. But bear in mind that **Furnaces are often where we meet God.** Don't fear the furnace. The "son of God" showed up in the furnace, not before. (Many scholars think that this figure was the pre-incarnate Christ.) Not on the plain or in front of the king. The angel showed up for Daniel *in the lions den*. Why does God do it like this? The furnace is usually where we are attentive enough to notice that God is already present. When you get to the end of yourself, you will be able to see past yourself to the God who cares. That's why Paul could glory in his suffering and say "when I am weak, that's when I'm strong." That's what God meant when he told Paul, "My strength is made perfect in your weakness."

◆ When you think about it, it's the same thing God did when he sent Jesus to our planet. Immanuel, "God with us" in the fires of life. God could fix the world with a word. God could make our messes go away. But God prefers to meet us in the mess and take us through it so that we really know it's his power, not ours. Don't fear the furnace. Welcome the furnace. It's an opportunity for God to show up. Furnaces are nothing to God. If he wants

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to, he can save us from them. If he doesn't want to we who belong to him will still be his and will live in the end. You and I were not put here for the mere purpose of enjoying life. We were put here to know God, know his love, and his salvation and to witness with our conviction to a world where we don't fit. With what end? Freedom. The only thing burned in the furnace was the rope!