

AUTHENTIC TRUST
Daniel 3:1-30

The headline of the September 22 *Jacksonville, Florida Time-Union* was: "ECONOMY IS WEAK, SO IS TRUST IN CANDIDATES".

Polls have been conducted to determine which candidate the voters most trust to be Commander-in-chief; which candidate the voters most trust to handle the nation's economy, the environment, healthcare, Supreme Court appointments and a whole host of other issues. The website, Parents.com even did a poll to discover which candidate moms and dads would most trust to baby-sit their child. The winner only achieved a 26% approval rating: and that was THE WINNER! Only 4% trusted one of the major party candidates to baby-sit their child...and no, I will not be telling you which candidate that was.

In general, trust in government is low with only 26% of Americans saying they have any confidence in any branch of the federal government to handle the problems that face our nation.

A Gallup survey reports that trust in the media is at an all-time low. Consumer trust in product safety is at an all time low. Surveys show that people don't trust their employers and employers don't trust their employees.

Folk, we are in the midst of a crisis of trust. Many people feel like a ship that has lost its moorings, adrift in a sea of uncertainty and suspicion. Does God's Word have anything to say to people who are facing a crisis in confidence? Most assuredly it does. And we find it in the example of three Hebrew men who were captive in Babylonia during the time of King Nebuchadnezzar.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are generally known for one thing: they were cast into a furnace because of their obedience to the Lord. But I'd like for you to remember them for something else: they are examples of trust in the face of daunting circumstance. Their example should be an inspiration to all of us.

I'd like to tell you the story of these three men and then briefly draw out three principles we can discern from their lives.

The history of the Hebrew people, the Israelite nation, is one bracketed by bondage. You may remember that a young man by the name of Joseph was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers and that he ended up in Egypt, eventually rising to the position of second-in-command to the Pharaoh. He attained that position of influence because he had been a loyal servant, used by God, and had helped the Egyptians make wise preparation for a worldwide famine.

Joseph and his brothers and all their descendents lived as honored guests in Egypt for several generations. But eventually, a Pharaoh arose who did not know about Joseph. He did not know that Egypt owed its wealth, its power and its very existence to these immigrants. He saw Joseph's race, the Hebrew people, as a potential threat. For generations, they had refused to assimilate into Egyptian society. They did not worship the Egyptian gods but rather worshipped YHWH. They did not marry Egyptian spouses but rather remained racially different. They did not even eat the same foods that the Egyptians ate.

This Pharaoh was probably not the first and he certainly was not the last who was frightened by people who were different than he was. In his fear, he decided to try to force the Hebrews to assimilate into Egyptian culture. He enslaved them and made them do forced labor in his municipal building program in hopes that they would decide to conform to the culture for the sake of an easier life.

But the Hebrews devoutly and courageously maintained their honor by obeying their God and living by His commands rather than succumbing to the Pharaoh's pressure.

You, no doubt, recall that the Pharaoh, accustomed to getting his own way, decided to ratchet up the pressure by increasing the burden of slavery on the Hebrew people. He kept this up until eventually God intervened and raised up a deliverer by the name of Moses who would lead almost 2 ½ million Hebrews out of Egypt and toward Canaan, a land God had promised them.

When they got to Canaan, the Hebrew people became frightened and failed the test of trust: they did not trust God to give them victory over the nations that occupied the Land of Canaan so God made them wander in the wilderness for 40 years until that whole generation died off. Only then did He allow their descendents to possess the land that had been promised to them.

For almost 850 years, the Hebrew people were the nation of Israel. The race that began in slavery lived in freedom for almost 850 years. But the race that began as a people devoted to YHWH became a people disobedient to Him. The nation of Israel suffered a civil war and divided into two nations: Israel to the north and Judah to the south. Some had begun to worship false gods and most had simply become secular: their lives were not devoted to any deity.

So God brought punishment upon them. In 605 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, marched on Jerusalem, the capital city of the Hebrew people, and carried off thousands of its citizens as captive slaves. The nation that emerged from Egyptian captivity now disappeared into Babylonian captivity.

Among those Hebrews who were deported to Babylon, some were from the royal family and the families of the nobles of Judah, the nation of the Hebrews. It makes perfect sense that Nebuchadnezzar would do this. It is around the

deposed king, his descendents and the nobility that rebellion most often arises. Popular revolt seeks a catalyst and the family of the deposed often provide that.

So Nebuchadnezzar not only carried off Jehoiakim, king of Judah but also many members of his family and many members of other leading families in Jerusalem.

Now Nebuchadnezzar was an able politician. He figured that he would take some of the young noblemen of Judah, school them in the language and the culture of Babylon, and make them examples to their countrymen. If the other Hebrews saw that the young men of their leading families had assimilated into the culture of their captors and were living the good life, the rest of the Hebrews would likely follow.

It is very important that you understand that point. None of the rest of the story of Daniel makes a lot of sense unless you understand that the king of Babylon was trying to get the Hebrews to conform to the culture in which they were now living. As long as they saw themselves as God's people in exile, they were a threat. But if they saw themselves as Hebrew-Babylonians, they were more nearly to be trusted.

So Nebuchadnezzar ordered several of the young sons of the Hebrew nobility to be brought into his royal court and given a graduate course on Babylonian life. We do not know the names of all of these young nobles but we know four: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. As part of their enculturation into Babylonian life, all four were given Babylonian names. Daniel became Belteshazzar. Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah became Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. All four had Hebrew names that included a reference to the God of the Hebrews but when they got to Babylon, they were given names that included references to Babylonian deities. Nebuchadnezzar did not want them wearing the name of their God now that they were in Babylon. That name might remind them of Whose they were and he couldn't have that!

For three years, they were tutored by Ashpenaz, the chief of Nebuchadnezzar's court officials. He taught them the language and the literature of the Babylonians and they were served the same food the King ate.

And that is where the next real problem arose. The Babylonians ate food that no devout Hebrew would ever eat. Babylonians ate pork; and shellfish. They probably ate turf & surf: a juicy steak and a large lobster. They might have had dairy with their meat (like steak smothered in milk gravy or double cheeseburgers). None of these were meals a devout observant Hebrew could eat.

So what were these four young men to do? If they ate the king's food, they would be disobeying God but if they refused the king's food, he could have them killed.

All four politely refused to eat the king's food. Ashpenaz worried that they would waste away and that he'd lose his job (or his life) if they were not in peak condition. The four suggested a little experiment. "Just let us eat our Hebrew diet for ten days and then examine us and see for yourself that we will be healthy." So Ashpenaz did just that and after ten days, the four Hebrews were in so much better condition than the rest of the young trainees that he took their royal diet away and put them all on a vegetable and water diet. (Don't you know that that made our four friends pretty unpopular with their classmates!)

Think of it, these men had been brought into the palace so they would conform to the culture and here they were, not conforming to the culture but transforming it!

Nebuchadnezzar was an able and effective king but he had one major character flaw: he was totally egocentric. Fairly early in his reign, he made a golden statue of himself. It was a huge statue, 90 feet high and 9 feet wide. He decreed that every subject in his land should bow down and worship at the statue any time they heard certain strains of music.

Now before we get too upset with Nebuchadnezzar, we ought to try to look at this from his point of view. He has some young noblemen from an ethnic minority. He was trying to get them to assimilate into his nation. They were balking. They kept their Hebrew traditions, their Hebrew language and their Hebrew diet. The king wanted them at least to pledge allegiance to him and one way to do that was to bow down to his image. It wasn't that big a deal to Nebuchadnezzar. Just bow down and pledge your loyalty to me above everything and everyone else. C'mon. Just go along to get along.

Wouldn't we feel better if all the Iraqis would just pledge allegiance to our flag? To our president? Wouldn't we all feel better if all the Muslims worshipped our God? Their religious traditions, their religious writings and their religious practices make us pretty nervous, don't they?

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow down to the king's statue. Word got back to the king and he was furious. He ordered them to worship his image but they still refused so the king decreed that they be burned alive in a brass furnace. He even ordered that the fire be stoked to seven times hotter than it would need to be to smelt brass then he had the three young Hebrew noblemen brought to the furnace to be thrown in alive.

The fire was so hot that the men who were forcing the Hebrews into the flames died before they ever got them into the fire. But the Hebrew men were not burned. In fact, after a reasonable amount of time, Nebuchadnezzar looked into the flames and asked, "Wasn't it three men that we tied up and threw into the fire? Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed and the fourth looks like a son of the gods."

Nebuchadnezzar ordered the men brought out of the fire and they not only were not burned, not a hair of their head was singed and their clothes were not scorched.

Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. ²⁹ Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way." (Daniel 3:28-29)

Do you remember that I said that Nebuchadnezzar was egocentric? Well, his ego was his ruin. One day as Nebuchadnezzar was walking on the roof of his royal palace he surveyed Babylon and 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?"* Immediately, God struck him down and for a time, deranged in his mind, he went around on all fours and grazed on grass like a cow. His hair became long and unkempt. His nails became like a bird's talons.

After a certain amount of time, Nebuchadnezzar came to his senses, repented and turned to God. And again, he testified that YHWH was God of all gods. Nebuchadnezzar was not only restored to his sense, he was restored to his throne and his authority and he reigned over Babylon for the rest of his life.

Alright. With that as background, what can we learn from this account about authentic trust? I believe there are at least three important lessons we can learn:

I. WHEN FACING THE FLESH – TRUST GOD

These three children of God were offered the choicest delicacies the king had to give but to indulge in them would have meant disobeying God. I'm sure they were tempted. But these three determined that they were going to trust God rather than their appetites. And God rewarded their trust in Him. He gave them improved health and made a positive example of them.

II. WHEN FACING THE FALSE – TRUST GOD

Some people say it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere. It doesn't matter which god you worship as long as you are devout. But these three men didn't buy that lie. They were willing to face death rather than compromise their faith and bow to any man or any idol. God rewarded their trust in Him by preserving their lives.

III. WHEN FACING THE FIRE – TRUST GOD

I Peter 4:12 says, “*Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you.*” (KJV). The fire of adversity is not unusual and it should not be unexpected. From the example of these three, we can learn not to face the fire unprotected – trust God.

CONCLUSION:

To trust God is to obey Him and to follow Him wherever He leads...even if He leads us through the fire.

INVITATION: #696 – “*God Leads Us Along*”