

Characteristics of True Heroism – Daniel 3:8-18

I. Introduction:

- A. This evening lets look at a theme which is complimentary to our lesson last week.
1. Let's consider the background to the so-called three "*Hebrew children*" visit to the "*burning fiery furnace.*"
 2. Christian adults need to do this sort of thing from time to time, because we all can get quite sentimental about these classic Sunday School Bible stories.
 3. As kids we heard them, perhaps taught by teachers who weren't well prepared.
 - a. Or the first time we heard them, we were very young, so we got the pared down version.
 - b. And as a result we learned the stories slightly askew.
 4. For example, most Christians don't know these men by their real names – their "*Christian*" names.
 - a. *Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego* were applied to them by their captors.
 - b. Among themselves they probably never used those names – they may have been disgusted by them.
 5. They were *Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah* to Daniel.
 6. We ought to know them by names which glorify the Lord, not the idols of the Babylonians.
- B. And here is something else:
1. A moment ago, I facetiously used a term often ascribed to these three but which is totally in appropriate.
 2. I called them the three "*Hebrew children,*" because that is so commonly used.
 3. For those of you whose Bibles have Bishop Ussher's dates at the beginning of each chapter, you'll see that when Daniel and his friends were elevated to their high positions, the year was said to be **603 B.C.**, just three or four years after the first fall of Jerusalem.
 4. But the year Ussher ascribes to chapter 3 is **580 B.C.**
 5. If my math is correct, and if Ussher is correct, about 20 years has passed between these two events.
 6. Even though these three are still young men according to my standard, it's a stretch to call them "*children.*"
- C. Besides, what is the definition of the word "*child*"?
1. There are lots of definitions, some of which deal with years or with relationships, but not with maturity.
 2. It may not work in an ordinary dictionary, but for me, "*maturity*" and "*childishness*" are mutually exclusive.
 3. There is no such thing as a **mature child**, even though we are surrounded by **IM-mature adults**.
 4. For me, when a child displays maturity, it's an indication that perhaps we shouldn't call him a "*child*" any longer.
 5. These three young men, display a maturity and character which definitely take them out of the ranks of children and puts them among men – even heros among men.
- D. And that brings up my subject for this evening – "*hero.*"
1. What are some of the definitions of **that** word?
 2. There are the mythological definitions, but they don't apply because **this** isn't a **myth**.
 3. And **the principal male character** in a novel may be called "*the hero,*" but this doesn't really apply, because this is not a mere story.
 4. Coming closer to reality, a hero is someone noted for special achievement in some area, as the heros of medicine.
 - a. These young men are definitely "*heros of faith.*"
 - b. They are related to the "*hero*" we looked at last week – their friend Daniel.
 5. The definition most fitting to my purpose is the one which says, "*a hero is a person noted for feats of courage or nobility of purpose, especially one who has risked or sacrificed his or her life.*"
 6. A hero is not necessarily someone who stumbles into a situation, and who because of the circumstances risks his life to save another.
 7. By definition, a true hero acts – not on the spur of the moment – but who deliberately gives up himself for a purpose – a principle.

- E. Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah were true heroes – even though they might have personally denied it.
1. They probably would have said that they were behaving only as any other saint would have behaved – or **should** have behaved.
 2. They weren't **trying** to be **martyrs** in the ordinary definition, although they were witnesses to God's Truth.
 3. The Greek word from which "**martyr**" is derived means simply "**a witness**" – someone who might sacrifice everything for the sake of his testimony to the truth.
 4. The Bible calls Stephen a "**martyr**" because he gave his life as a witness of the living Christ.
 5. These men were merely doing what they believed that Jehovah expected from them – standing firm for the truth of the Lord. Any saint of God should have done the same thing.
- F. I deliberately cut off our scripture reading before we got to the burning, fiery furnace.
1. I want us to focus our attention on some of the principles behind the choice that these young men made.
 2. Even though they may be considered "**characteristics of heroism**," actually they are simply common, Christian principles.

II. First, it should be understood that IT CAN BE DANGEROUS to be a CHRISTIAN.

- A. I don't suppose that hermits and secluded monks have much to fear in claiming to be Christians.
1. And if someone's vocation in life is fixing people's plumbing, it may not matter if one is a child of God or not
 2. But there are some positions and responsibilities, where conversion to Christ really could put that new believer into some sort of danger.
 - a. The **university science professor** may never rise above ground level in his profession, if he says that he believes in divine creation as is literally taught in **Genesis 1**.
 - b. And even though it is sometimes popular for **politicians** to claim to be Christians, for those to actually and deliberately behave and consistently vote like Christians, will rarely keep them in office.
 - c. That **Muslim woman**, living in Saudi Arabia, who puts faith in Christ Jesus, and who determines to serve the Lord, puts her life at risk.
 - d. I have heard about **pharmacists, nurses** and **doctors** who were fired because they refused to participate in abortions or other ungodly medical procedures.
 - e. There are hundreds of **missionaries** whose lives are in constant danger because the people with whom they work hate the name which is above all other names.
 3. There are dozens, if not hundreds of offices, positions and situations where it is dangerous to follow the Lord and the principles of the Bible.
- B. And here were Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, who were promoted above some of the local prodigies, having been made administrators over the province of Babylon, despite their faith in Jehovah.
1. For some time they had filled their posts and carried out their responsibilities in a fashion which could never be faulted – because they were honest, virtuous men.
 2. Some of their heathen rivals earlier may have initially felt that it would only be a matter of time before their youth or incompetence would have become manifest, but it never appeared.
 3. There were probably dozens of Babylonians who were filled with envy, irritation and wrath toward these young men.
 4. Some had been looking for an opportunity to destroy them, and now that opportunity has serendipitously arrived.
- C. The Christian should not be surprised when the world turns against him.
1. He shouldn't be surprised when he is not promoted, while another ungodly man is.
 2. We may very well be fired or laid off without cause, but we know that there is a reason – the Lord Jesus.
 3. We may very well be in some way persecuted.
 4. We shouldn't be looking for opportunities to become martyrs, but if it comes our way, we shouldn't be surprised.
 5. The sad thing is that most of us aren't Christian enough before this world to warrant that persecution.

III. Heros know that PRINCIPLES SUPERCEDE EXPEDIENCY.

- A. What is “*expediency*?”
1. Synonyms include words like “*relevance*” and “*appropriateness*.”
 2. Let’s say that the oil light comes on in the dashboard of my car.
 - a. That could indicate something very serious, which might ruin the motor of my car.
 - b. It is expedient that I do something right away – at the very least, check the oil level in the engine.
 - c. Expediency demands that I put some oil in as quickly as possible.
 3. Expediency is about doing whatever is appropriate under the circumstances.
 4. But the word might refer to selfishness and doing those things which benefit me rather than someone else.
 5. My dictionary supplied the sentence – the senator was merely “*an ambitious politician, guided by expediency rather than principle.*”
- B. Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah were put in an unenviable position.
1. While Daniel probably declared that his responsibilities required that he remain at his post, so that he couldn’t get out to the plain of Dura, his three friends couldn’t come up with an excuse big enough to avoid this image dedication.
 2. At the appropriate moment one of the king’s heralds tapped on the microphone and then announced,
 - a. *“To you it is commanded, O people, nations, and languages,*
 - b. *That at what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of musick, ye fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king hath set up.”*
 - c. Furthermore, *“whoso falleth not down and worshipping shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace.”*
 3. The circumstances suggested that when the music started Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah should fall on their faces in mock reverence before this fancy chunk of gold.
 4. If they considered their lives to be important, **expediency** demanded that they bow like everyone else.
- C. But the point is – what is expedient is not always appropriate.
1. Principles always supercede expediency, and they should be maintained in that way.
 2. A principle refers to an elemental law – a basic truth – an eternal benchmark or standard.
 3. A principle is something which cannot and does not change, so in some ways it is like Bible doctrine.
 4. And the Bible is from where Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah derived their principles.
- D. I suppose that you have noticed that some of the Ten Commandments contain warnings and also blessings.
1. But really, those threatened punishments and blessings are beside the point – they come after the principles.
 2. *“Thou shalt have no other gods before me.*
 - a. *Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image ...*
 - b. *Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them.”*
 3. Here are some principles for which there should never be raised any argument or quarrel.
 4. But the Lord goes on –
 - a. *“for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me;*
 - b. *And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.”*
 5. I can’t say whether these men concerned themselves with these two promises, but they considered the principles of the first two commandments as absolute.
 6. Even the **appearance** of worshiping any other god, was incomprehensible to these three men.
 7. There were principles involved here.

IV. A related point was – the AVOIDANCE OF SIN is more important than the AVOIDANCE OF SUFFERING.

- A. Do you remember when **Satan** came to the Lord in regard to **Job**?
1. There were actually two conversations, and it is recorded of the second –

2. *“Again there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan came also among them to present himself before the LORD.*
 - a. *And the LORD said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?*
 - b. *Still he holdeth fast his integrity, although thou movedst me against him, to destroy him without cause.*
 - c. *And Satan answered the LORD, and said, Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life.*
 - d. *But put forth thine hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face.”*
3. Satan had been a keen observer of man for centuries, and he knew what men fear most.
 - a. Intelligent men don't fear dragons, werewolves, vampires and zombies.
 - b. But we fear **pain** – what a dragon might do to us, or a demon, or a virus, or a door-knob if we bump it.
4. Not realizing that Job was a man of principle, **Satan dared God** to permit Job to **suffer**.
5. He fully expected the poor man to crumble into a puddle of tears, turning his back on all that the knew about the Lord and His grace. But Satan was wrong.

B. And he was wrong about Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah as well.

1. When Nebuchadnezzar tried to establish his state religion, he employed two common techniques.
2. With music he appealed to the flesh, pleasing the ear – tickling the fancy of the weak-minded sheep.
3. While that was in his left hand, in the right he held a sword – threatening a very cruel death to anyone who refused to worship as he dictated.

C. We know *“it is appointed unto men once to die.”*

1. If it was up to you, how would you like to die?
 - a. If someone gave you a choice, what method would you choose?
 - b. My point is silly, of course, but think about it for just a moment.
 - c. I don't know about you, but to die in a fire would be way down my list.
2. And that was exactly what Nebuchadnezzar was hoping and using.
 - a. He didn't threaten a swift beheading, being run through with a spear, poison darts, or a firing squad.
 - b. He threatened the searing of the lungs, then the blistering and roasting of the flesh.
 - c. It may not have lasted very long, but this kind of death would involve almost every nerve in the body.
3. He thought, *“This will get everyone to obey – it will even make Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah bow.”*
4. But as far as these three young men were concerned, the avoidance of sin was more important than the avoidance of this terrible suffering and death.
5. They were men of principle.

V. Another principle here is that HUMAN AUTHORITY does not supercede DIVINE AUTHORITY.

- A. The establishment of an American state religion is coming closer and closer.
 1. State governors are trying to tell churches how, or even if they can, assemble.
 2. As we see in Alberta, pastors can be arrested for putting God before government.
 3. We are on the verge, here in America, when it will be illegal to preach on certain subjects.
 4. The condemnation of homosexuality as a sin hated by God, will eventually become a punishable crime.
 5. And to say that the deliberate death of an unborn baby is *“murder”* will some day be considered slander against the women who have had abortions.
 6. In fact, to point out anyone's sins, or to attack sin in general, will be considered defamation of character.
 7. When that day comes, each church will have to decide whether or not God's word is our rule for faith and practice, or if the civil law takes precedence.
- B. This choice was in essence the question before Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.
 1. Man's law demanded that they bow, but God's law demanded that they reject such idolatry.
 2. They determined to stand for the Lord, no matter what the human law said the consequences would be.

- C. And a corollary to this principle is that *right* and *wrong* are *not open to dispute*.
1. Despite what society might say today, and despite the fact it may have said it for 6,000 years, *truth is not open to debate*.
 2. Societies' morés may evolve over time, or to be precise – may constantly degenerate – but the principles and values under which God has placed us are eternal.
 3. There are still ten commandments in the Decalogue, and there never will be only eight, or nine, or five.
- D. These three men may be looked upon as heroes of the faith.
1. They may be considered to be martyrs for the truth of God.
 2. But actually they were only doing what God expected from any and all of his saints.

VI. There is one more thing – GOD HONORS THOSE WHO HONOR HIM.

- A. I need not tell you that Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah kept their testimony before the Lord intact – they followed the principles which God had given them.
1. Also, Nebuchadnezzar kept his testimony and his word – as foolish as it was.
 2. These servants of God were cast into the burning fiery furnace.
 3. But God kept the general principle of His word – they went into the fire – and they came out again.
- B. As these men will tell the king – Jehovah was under no responsibility to save them from the flames.
1. But that didn't dissuade them from doing what was right.
 2. They were not going to dishonor the Lord, rather they were willing to give their lives to honor Him.
 3. And then as we know, God chose to honor them for their service – He delivered them.
 4. In fact, He actually manifested His presence with them in the sight of the wicked who were watching.
 5. What a huge honor that was for these men.
- C. Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah were led by the command of God to defy – in the most polite and Christian way possible – the dictates of the dictator.
1. It was absolutely necessary on their part – they had no alternative while still maintaining their relationship with the Lord.
 2. And as we might expect, the Lord further glorified Himself by delivering them.
- D. It shouldn't be our hope to face the same kind of trial, but it should be our desire that when tests come our way, that we will be able to act with the same principles.