NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Legends: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego

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Hello! We want to encourage you, this is the weekend that comes around every so often that we ask you to pray. Not that you can’t pray other weekends about other things, but we are preparing to launch the sixth location at Potomac Yard, launch date September 12! The fun begins, the games begin, Sunday afternoon at 1:30 at Ebenezers will be out informational meeting. We want you to pray this prayer: Lord, where do you want me? We believe you are here because the Lord called you to be part of this thing called National Community Church, but we also have lots of locations, and as you pray that prayer, one of two things is going to happen: you are going to sense the Holy Spirit tapping you on the shoulder telling you to step out and be part of this launch team. If you sense the Holy Spirit doing that, I encourage you to obey that prompting and to step out and be part of this launch. For others, you are going to feel like God has you right where He wants you. The significance of that is this, we want to encourage you to take this opportunity as you sense the calling to stay at the location you are at, then step up and step in because other people are going to be going to the new location, so we need you to get even more involved in the location you are at. If all of us genuinely pray this prayer, some amazing things are going to happen in the coming weeks and we are so excited. The informational meeting is just that, an informational meeting. We will get your address, your email, your Social Security number, your bank account, ha ha! You are essentially making a life-long commitment to this campus! No, if you are interested in more information, we want you to make an informed decision. So, if you have any interest or if you feel the Holy Spirit tapping you on the shoulder, we want to invite you out to that informational meeting. We can’t wait to see what God is going to do.

I’ve got to be honest, I’m still shaking a little bit from the baptism video. That’s what happens to me when there is a serious adrenaline rush. For example, when I go paragliding, I’m shaking for a little bit. And when I drink too much caffeine, same effect. As I was watching that video, I can barely hold still because there is a rush of spiritual adrenaline when you see what God is doing. Sometimes it’s hard to tell from the outside but some wonderful things are happening inside of a lot of us, and nothing is more exciting than that. Thank you! I can’t believe I get to be part of these moments in people’s lives and that’s why we exist as a church. We are here to introduce people to Jesus Christ because He will change your life. It is an eternal process and that’s what makes it so exciting! Every day, every week, you keep growing in that relationship and discover more about who God is and it is why we are created. So, I’m excited.

I’m excited about this series we are in as well. If you have a Bible, turn to Daniel Chapter 3. We continue our series titled ‘Legends.’ We are cheating a little bit this week because we are talking about three legends, but it’s almost like these three are joined at the hip. This is kind of the Jewish trifecta, when I say Shadrach, you say Meshack and Abednego. Yes! Because it just runs together, it flows off the tongue. You’ve got your three Jewish legends we are going to talk about this weekend. Let’s dive in. We are going to read the entire chapter. You can’t read too much of the Bible. So we’ll break down this entire chapter then I’ll share a few reflections as we go along.

*1 King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, ninety feet high and nine feet wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. 2 He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. 3 So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it.*

*4 Then the herald loudly proclaimed, "This is what you are commanded to do, O peoples, nations and men of every language: 5 As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. 6 Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace."*

*7 Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.*

To say that King Nebuchadnezzar had a huge ego would be a huge understatement! Most of us aren’t building statues to ourselves. And most of those aren’t 90 feet tall and 9 feet wide. And to really appreciate what’s going to happen next, you’ve got to understand a little bit about this guy named Nebuchadnezzar. He wasn’t just an ego-maniac, he was a maniac. The first hint is building the 90 foot statue. That’s a tip-off that you have ego issues! But according to extra-biblical sources, a random fact, Nebuchadnezzar used to tear the flesh off of rabbits and eat them alive. You really didn’t want to know that did you? He was even a maniac at the table is what I’m saying. This guy, on every level, everything about him, what I want you to see is, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are not dealing a rational ruler. He is irrational and I think that helps us appreciate what they are about to do.

*8 At this time some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. 9 They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, live forever! 10 You have issued a decree, O king, that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, 11 and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. 12 But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, O king. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up."*

I read this and I’ve got to be honest, my first thought was that brown-nosing was a very ancient practice. I don’t go up to people and say, ‘O Daniel, live forever.’ It’s an ancient greeting. I don’t even know the modern equivalent of live forever but it’s more than have a good day, right? This is like, ‘You’re amazing, live forever!’ And then along with the brown-nosing, tattle-telling is pretty ancient too. Hey, there are these Jewish guys over here not doing what you said to do! I’m guessing that some of you have an issue with colleagues or classmates and I don’t doubt that some of them maybe gossip about you or maybe someone is taking credit for something that you’ve done or someone if difficult to work with because of their Myers-Briggs personality type or whatever, but can I get a little reality check? They are probably not trying to frame you and kill you! I think there is something about this story that can inspire us and help us in a very practical sense in terms of how we live our lives Monday through Friday, most of us in a work context or some of us in a classroom context or even a home context.

*13 Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, 14 and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? 15 Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"*

*16 Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. 17 If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. 18 But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."*

One little observation here – this little paradigm shift is critical. I love the fact that they don’t take this threat personally. ‘You are not insulting us, you are insulting God.’ And that’s what he is doing. ‘What god will rescue you from my power?’ They knew that God is big enough to stick up for Himself. I wonder how many of us waste a lot of energy sticking up for the Almighty. He is going to stick up for you, and we are going to see how He is going to do that.

*19 Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual 20 and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. 21 So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. 22 The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, 23 and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.*

Let me pause here for a moment. I think it is easy to read this and not really fully appreciate what is happening. We don’t feel it because we can’t feel the flames. I know it’s been hot lately. I know we’ve had a heat index of over 100 consistently, but seriously, it says that they heated the furnace seven times hotter than normal. In other words, they turned up the heat as high as it could go. Here’s the deal, if you do a little bit of research, this is interesting, I think it is significant. Scholars believe that based on the technology of the 6th Century B.C. that probably they had an ability to heat that furnace to about 1500 degrees Celsius and since most of us function in Fahrenheit, the equivalent is 2,732 degrees. To put that into perspective, the temperature at the surface of the sun is 9,900 degrees. In other words, this furnace is potentially one-fourth the temperature of the surface of the sun! All that to say – it’s really, really hot! This goes beyond execution, this is torture. I don’t think you can imagine a more horrific or painful death. So we read it and I don’t know that we put ourselves in their sandals because it’s really hard to feel how you would react and what you would think in this circumstance. I think part of what helps me appreciate it is the fact that I’ve been in the burn unit. One of the most marked moments of my life, I was in Bible College doing an internship. I didn’t really do a lot that summer except manage a men’s softball league. I thought I would be preaching or doing the glamorous parts of ministry but I didn’t do any of that, I just did pretty much anything that anybody else didn’t want to do. They shouldn’t have done this, but for whatever reason, my first hospital visit was to the burn unit. It was a man who had tried to commit suicide by lighting himself on fire. 95% of his body was burned. All you could see was his eyes. I remember a couple of things about it. I remember the tears. All you could see was his eyes. He couldn’t communicate with me, but I tried to communicate with him and pray for him. But the other thing I distinctly remember was the smell of the burn unit. There are few things that are more painful or more horrific than that. I think the reality of this situation is that these guys are on the brink of being thrown into a fiery furnace and the reality is, I don’t think any of us can imagine how we would respond in that kind of circumstance. That’s the reality of it, yet what they do is pretty remarkable. They take a stand. ‘We don’t need to defend ourselves.’

*24 Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?"   
      They replied, "Certainly, O king."*

*25 He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods."*

*26 Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!"   
      So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, 27 and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.*

*28 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."*

*30 Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon.*

Listen, there are so many layers to this story. Right at the end here, I love this fact. This isn’t just a promotion is it? It is divine promotion. I think a lot of us try to manufacture promotions. One of the ways we do it is we compromise our integrity. And when you compromise your integrity, what you’re really compromising is a divine opportunity. Why? Because if they had compromised their integrity here, what would have happened? They wouldn’t have been thrown into the fiery furnace. And what else wouldn’t have happened? A fourth man wouldn’t have appeared and the miracle would have never happened.

I think if you forget everything else, here’s what I want you to see this weekend in this story. Our integrity sets the stage for divine intervention in our lives. Our lives are just like their lives. There are moments where we are tempted to compromise based on our own logic or reason, like maybe I just need to compromise here for that promotion, but the end never has and never will justify the means. It is always the means that justify the end and it’s about doing the right thing and I love the fact that that’s exactly what they do. I think that’s going to make even more sense in a couple of minutes.

I few weeks ago, I talked about this idea of testing. II Corinthians 13:5 says: *Test yourself*. The word ‘test’ in the Greek references purifying fires that were placed under molten metal to expose hidden defects. Remember this? The metal would get hot, the defects would surface, and it would refine the metal, if you will. We don’t know a whole lot about ancient furnaces, but there is a high likelihood that this very furnace was used for this very purpose, to refine metals, and then on occasion when crazy Nebuchadnezzars got carried away, to throw people into them. Is this not an unbelievable picture of exactly what we talked about several weeks ago? This is a test. It is an integrity test. I want to tell you that legends, there are lots of reasons why the different legends that we’ve talked about are legendary. There are different reasons why they are in the Bible. But this one, there is no question, this is an integrity test.

I want to share a few thoughts with you over the next couple of minutes and I want you to jot these down and I want you to do a little bit of self-reflection.

Number one, your integrity is your destiny. Your integrity is your destiny. We focus a lot on things like how are we going to do what God has called us to do and the when and the where and the what, but God’s primary concern is always who. It is who we become through the process. It’s about making the right decision along the way. How many people have forfeited divine intervention or miracle because in a moment of weakness, they’ve made a decision? Like, in this one instance, I’m going to compromise my integrity. The Bible is full of stories about difficult work places. They are all over the place, very difficult people to work with, and this is one of those examples. I don’t think any of you have a boss who has ever made a statue of themselves and asked you to bow down to it, right? Is that safe to say? Yet some of you have bosses with huge egos and very difficult to work for, and in a sense, they want you to bow down to them, and I understand that there are difficult situations where you would be tempted to do that, but I want to challenge you in those moments to draw some inspiration from this story. What would happen if you didn’t compromise your integrity? What would happen if you actually took a stand for righteousness to do the right thing? What would happen? A couple of things could happen. You could get fired. But do you want a job where you have to compromise your integrity? Honestly, if you get fired for doing the right thing, someone has just done you a tremendous favor. It’ll be painful in the short term, but I guess my thought is, can we not be people who just do the right thing? We are just going to do the right thing, no matter what the circumstances, no matter what the consequences, we are going to do the right thing because our destiny is our integrity. And it is our integrity that is our destiny. And I’ll tell you what, this is an example of epic integrity.

What enables them to take this stance? I know a lot of us fail the integrity test. Here’s some good news – God gives retakes. Have you experienced that? He will let you take that test over and over again and He will give you another opportunity to get it right. That is the grace of God. You will have opportunities to take that test again. I think this is a church where we are less concerned about your past-tense mistakes than your future-tense potential. It is not about what you did yesterday, it’s about what you are going to do tomorrow. Who are you becoming? Not who have you been. All of us have made mistakes, but it’s about allowing the grace of God to change us and refine us so that we can become who He has called us to be. What is it that gave them the integrity to, in a sense, say go ahead and kill us? It’s so easy for us because we know how the story ends. It ends with a promotion. But that’s not how they are seeing this thing. They believe that God can deliver them but there is a high likelihood at this point when you are thrown into a hot furnace that you will burn to death. That’s the end of the story for them, but they are still not willing to compromise their integrity. Why? What I’m about to share could revolutionize their life.

Number two, they understood that God is our advocate. God is our advocate. They said, ‘We don’t need to defend ourselves.’ Why? Because they weren’t their own advocate. They weren’t advocating for themselves. There was a God advocating for them. What do I mean by that? Well, there are a lot of names for God. One of them is this name Advocate. It is both in the Old Testament and the New Testament. You are going to love this, it is so cool. It has a legal connotation. The concept is that you are on trial and who is going to defend you? That’s the job of the advocate. An advocate comes to the defense of whoever is on trial. So, here’s what is so beautiful about this, this isn’t just the personality of God, but both the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ are referred to as Advocate in the New Testament. Did you know that? Both of them share this name. That is unique and uncommon. I love it because we’ve got dual representation. We don’t just have one of them advocating for us, we have both of them! One of them can do the job, but to know that two of them are advocating for us. Whew! That feels good! It gives me a little bit of holy confidence!

II John 2:1 says: *I am writing these things so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ*. So in this instance, Jesus Christ is our advocate to our heavenly Father. Then in John 14:16, here’s what Jesus says: *I will ask the Father and He will give you another advocate to be with you forever.* Is this like a double warranty? This is like a double guarantee; we have Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit acting as our advocates.

Here’s what I want you to see. When you make a decision to disobey God and you step out of the guardrails of his good, perfect, pleasing will, in a sense, something happens, you are stepping outside of the protective covering of God. What do I mean by that? If you sin, you are going to experience the consequences of sin. Here’s the good news, you can go right back, II John 2:1, you can do right back to the Advocate and confess your sins and your sins are forgiven and forgotten. So the penalty for sin is taken care of, but there are still consequences because we step outside of his will. But if we live within that good, pleasing, perfect will, here’s a way of thinking about it. It’s almost like we come under an umbrella of God’s authority. Like this legal umbrella that covers us and it’s no longer our reputation at stake, it is his reputation. We aren’t at risk because we are under that covering of his authority.

I want to assure you today, I think some of us at different points, we wrestle and struggle with fear, the enemy and depression and that stuff is very real, but it’s almost like the blood that covered the doorposts on that Passover day when the death angel passes over and the Israelites are getting ready to exit Egypt, and wherever that blood covers, the angel passes over. There was an umbrella of covering, of protection and if you have put your faith in Jesus Christ, then his blood forms a covering over your life. It is a legal covering and a spiritual covering. That ought to change our lives right there. But we have to be careful to live underneath that protective covering. And when we sin, we step outside of that legal jurisdiction and we compromise that.

Here’s what I want you to see. The reason why Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had such confidence and maintained their integrity is that they knew they didn’t have to defend themselves. They knew that what they were doing was right and they were under the umbrella of God’s covering. Did that protect them from the fiery furnace? Not a trick question, they still got thrown in. But they didn’t get burned. So, the most flammable part of our bodies is our hair and their hair was not singed. And this is beautiful, they didn’t even smell like smoke. Are you kidding me? It says they went in fully clothed, tunics, turbans, the whole nine yards, they were fully dressed. Years ago, before we built Ebenezers Coffeehouse, my offsite office was Bagels and Baguettes and they had this killer bacon egg and cheese bagel and I would go there and eat them and study. I loved them! But every time I went there, I could never go back to the office without every knowing immediately where I had been, because I smelled like bacon, overwhelming bacon fumes coming at you. That odor seeped into the fabric of my clothing and my hair and everything else. That’s just the nature of things. This is absolutely remarkable that they don’t even smell like smoke. Jewish rabbis, in commenting on this story, say what this teaches us is the completeness of God’s protection. It didn’t keep them from the furnace. We are going to end up in the furnace every now and again, but if you land in that furnace because you’ve maintained your integrity, then I promise you, you are under the umbrella of God’s authority and He is your advocate, and on that you can stand. That’s what gives us confidence.

Number three, accountability is one key to integrity. It’s a thread in this story and we hardly notice it because again, when I say Shadrach, you say Meshach, and Abednego because they go together. We don’t even think about the fact that there are three of them. Can I just make a simple observation? If it is one of them, by themselves, I think they are, how should I say this, one-third less likely to maintain their integrity, or maybe three times more likely to compromise? Is that fair for me to say? It is far more difficult to stand your ground when you are all by yourself. I think we miss this but this is significant, there are three of them, and I think because there are three of them, there is a level of accountability to one another. So, let me get really practical, some of you are struggling with integrity in certain areas of your life and what you are trying to do is you are trying so hard to take your stance and maintain your integrity and not do the wrong thing but then you keep doing the thing you don’t want to do. I’m convinced that for some of you, it is because you are trying to do it by yourself. So if you are Meshach, who is your Shadrach? Who can bring some accountability to your life to help you stand when you are tempted to bow down to the wrong thing? So, for many of us, I think accountability is one huge key to integrity.

Couple more observations, you control you. That’s one of my favorite things to say to my kids. You control you. They get upset about another sibling doing something to them. Hypothetically the youngest sibling talking about the older sibling doing something to them. I’ve said to my youngest son, “Who controls you?” And his answer is always, “I control me.” That’s one of the deals in our family; you are not controlled by the people around you. I want to tell you that you are not controlled by your boss or your spouse or your coach or your professor or whoever. You are not controlled by them. Here’s the problem many of us experience, we allow someone to control us. Let’s use a boss as an example. Here’s what happens, when you allow them to get under your skin and you downgrade to their level, if they gossip, you gossip; if they get negative, you get negative; and when we downgrade our integrity, here’s what happens, they are not just your boss at work anymore, now they are your boss at home. Then you take them on vacation with you. You’ve gone down to that level. But if you maintain your integrity, a couple of things are going to happen. Some people are not going to like you. That’s reality. One of the most important decisions you will have to make is who am I going to offend. Many of us spend our whole lives trying not to offend anybody. Here’s what I want to tell you – all you have to worry about is not offending God. See, Nebuchadnezzar had given them their positions. They were in positions of authority and they owed their positions to him. Would it not be a temptation then to bow down? But no, they didn’t care if they offended him, they were not going to offend the Almighty. If you want to maintain your integrity, what we need to understand is this, you cannot try to prove yourself to people. If you are trying to prove yourself to people, it is not going to happen. But if you try to prove yourself to God, even in a circumstance like this, honor God, then God is going to prove Himself to you. And He is going to prove you to others. What happens at the end of this story? Nebuchadnezzar, the crazy guy, ten minutes later, there is no other god, one extreme to the other. Their integrity wins the day and wins the respect.

Here’s my heartbeat, all I know is at the end of my life, I want those who know me best to respect me most. I’m so far from perfect. I had to make a phone call today to one of my kids to apologize because I said something that was out of line and the Lord convicted me and I had to make that phone call. So you are looking at a guy so far from perfect, but at the end of the day, what I really care about, the people who know me best, do they respect me the most? On one level, who cares if people who don’t know you respect you. In fact, I might even say this, do you want people to like you or to respect you? It’s hard to get both and there are moments where you will have to choose between those two things. I think we need a little tough love to remind ourselves that we need to choose to prove ourselves to God, not to the people around us.

Finally, here’s how I want to close. When we compromise our integrity, we compromise the opportunity. Often, we think if we compromise our integrity to take advantage of an opportunity, then we can restore our integrity and all will be good. But anytime you have to compromise your integrity to take advantage of an opportunity, you have compromised the opportunity. Your integrity is your destiny and your destiny is your integrity. It will catch up with you. But if you do the right thing, can you imagine especially in a city like this, a couple thousand people with epic integrity, I don’t care what the circumstances are or the consequences, I’m going to be a person who does the right thing because I’m not going to offend the Almighty. What I care about is honoring Jesus Christ and I’m going to do the right thing. I’m going to live under that umbrella of authority and I’m going to trust that my Advocate is going to intervene on my behalf.

The reason I want us to be those kinds of people is for this reason, when we compromise our integrity, we take God out of the equation of our life and we don’t allow Him to advocate on our behalf. We kind of like, ok, God I’m going to handle this one and advocate for myself. I’m a terrible advocate. But when you act in integrity, you set the stage for miracles. When you act in integrity, you never know when a fourth man might show up and a miracle might just happen. Let’s pray.

Father we look to you today because we need your help. This is an area where all of us have fallen short. Yet we read this story and we draw confidence from it and we are encouraged by it and Lord I pray that we would raise the standard and that it wouldn’t just be human effort or us trying to manufacture things but Lord that we would allow You to do a deep work within us and that all we have to do is obey and when we walk in obedience, we come under that umbrella of authority and we discover how true that name is. You are our Advocate. Lord I pray that we would live our lives in a way that we allow our Advocate, Jesus Christ and we allow our Advocate the Holy Spirit to act on our behalf because we are going to do the right thing. Lord for those right now that have experienced a conviction of your Holy Spirit in the last few minutes in an area where they are compromising, I pray that You would give them the courage to respond to the conviction in the way that You designed us, that is with confession. Lord I pray that we wouldn’t just confess that sin but that we would make it right. We can’t change the past but we can learn from it and that’s how we change the future. Lord I pray that You would help each one of us to make sure we are living our lives with integrity, relationally, emotionally, sexually, spiritually and that as we live with integrity and submit our lives to your will, we will begin to see the Advocate intervening on our behalf. That’s my prayer for every person at each of our locations, Amen.