

## The Persecuted Church

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Acts: The Irresistible Church Series

Acts 4:1-37

### SYNOPSIS OF THE SERMON

The book of Acts underscores that the church of Christ was birthed out of persecution and that the growth of the gospel goes hand-in-hand with persecution. The Kingdom of God moves forward by the words, the works, and the wounds of Christ. This informs us that being a Christian is a dangerous endeavor, one that, at times, involves suffering and persecution. The story in Acts 4 reminds us, however, that persecution also unleashes the Holy Spirit and presents us an opportunity to demonstrate the maturity of our faith, and strengthens us to persevere in the midst of our circumstances.

### GETTING THE CONVERSATION STARTED

These questions can be used as ice-breakers in the beginning *OR* interwoven between the questions below to draw the group into the discussion.

1. Have you ever had to choose between doing what is “right” in the eyes of society versus what you know God is leading you to do? How did you experience that tension? What was your response? Share and discuss.
2. What are some things worth standing up for in your community? What are some of the “big” issues in our current society that we as Christians should not bow down to?
3. Paul Tillich, a German-American theologian suggests that our mind is “a factory of idols”; do you agree with this? What may be some of the things that occupy the throne of our lives? If it is not the God of the Bible, then who or what is it?

### INTERACTING WITH THE SERMON

1. In 5 minutes or less. Briefly give a synopsis of this week’s sermon. What insight, principle, or observation from this weekend’s message did you find to be most helpful, eye-opening, or troubling? Explain.
2. For preparation, Read Daniel 3 and summarize it for the group. A portion of the chapter (vv. 16 – 28) is below:

*<sup>16</sup> Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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." <sup>19</sup> 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<sup>20</sup> and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace.<sup>21</sup> So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace.<sup>24</sup> Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisors, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?" They replied, "Certainly, O king."<sup>25</sup> 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."<sup>26</sup> 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,<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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.*

- To prepare for group time, please read Daniel 3 in its entirety and summarize it for your group.
- What do you believe led King Nebuchadnezzar to erect the image of gold? What impact would bowing down to this image have had on Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego?
- What was the threat the King made to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego? As Christians today we are not confronted with the same threat as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, or are we? Have you ever been confronted with a similar threat? How did you respond? Explain.
- How did Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego respond to the threat of King Nebuchadnezzar? (vv. 16 – 19) What do you suppose gave them the resolve to be so bold in their response? Were they fully confident that they would be delivered? How does their response inform us as Christians when we are uncertain about the future? Have you ever stood up for the Gospel knowing that your life/reputation might be at stake? Share your experience.
- What consequence did Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego face for their response? (vv. 19 – 24) What role in the story, if any, does the divine figure that was seen in the fire with them play? Discuss how this may apply to someone in the midst of their fiery trials and/or tribulations? (See 1 Peter 4: 12)
- What does King Nebuchadnezzar say after Shadrach Meshach and Abednego come out of the fire? (vv. 28- 30) Has anyone in the group ever experienced or witnessed a modern day miracle? What feelings or responses from yourself or others did it create? Share your experiences. How did Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's response to persecution point people to God? How can our responses to stress or persecution help others see God?

3. At the end of the story, the faithfulness of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendego in the midst of persecution brought honor to them, but most importantly brought glory to God. How does this inform us as Christians when facing persecution?
  - For ministry take some intentional time to invite the Holy Spirit into the moment.
  - Identify any challenges members of your group may be facing. Pray for one another, being mindful that the Spirit of God may save us *in* the fire but not always *from* the fire.
  - Pray that God's Spirit shine through your group that others may see your good works, and glorify the Father in Heaven. (Matthew 5:16)