

## **DANIEL 3:18**

### **“BUT IF NOT..”**

“King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its breadth six cubits. He set it up on the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent to gather the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Then the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces gathered for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. And they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. And the herald proclaimed aloud, ‘You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace.’ Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

“Therefore, at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and maliciously accused the Jews. They declared to King Nebuchadnezzar, ‘O king, live forever! You, O king, have made a decree, that every man who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, shall fall down and worship the golden image. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into a burning fiery furnace. There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men, O king, pay no attention to you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.’

“Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought. So, they brought these men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, ‘Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?’

“Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, ‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.’”<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

“**M**ike has taken an unpopular stand, but it is a necessary stand.” The speaker was a close friend who was challenging another man with whom he had been speaking. “He will be attacked; and when he is attacked, you will have to choose where you stand.” His words were quite brave; however, within less than a year, the man who was speaking so bravely would leave the congregation, creating what he referred to as a church of one. Reflecting on his bold statements, it becomes apparent that he held few convictions, other than a determination to have his own way.

Convictions are wonderful things. Convictions are easy to voice and difficult to embrace. The thing about convictions is that they can be—and usually prove to be—rather costly. However, without convictions, people are reduced to spineless creatures that twist and turn whichever way necessary to find an exit from difficult situations. Without doubt, one of the finest examples of convictions is revealed in a place where we might least expect to find them.

The young men were sons of the nobility, perhaps even members of the royal household. When the nation had been conquered, they were taken captive and transported to a foreign land. Whether they had witnessed the death of their own parents and siblings, they had undoubtedly seen many of the people of the land killed before their eyes. The indignities heaped on their young lives was only beginning. Each young man was castrated, made a eunuch and forced into training to serve the king of the nation that had conquered their homeland. They would now receive an advanced degree—pampered and fed only the finest foods. They would henceforth live out their lives in the service of the conquering king.

The king gave each of the men a new name, showing that he was now fully in control of their very existence. One of the young men had received the name Daniel (*God is my Judge*) from his parents; from now on, he would be Belteshazzar (*Bel's Prince*). Another of the young men was named Hananiah (*The LORD has Been Gracious*); his new master gave him the name Shadrach (*Command of Aku (the moon god)*). As you are no doubt aware, another of these young men had been named Mishael (*Who Is What God Is?*); he received the new name Meshach (*Who Is What Aku (the moon god) Is?*). The fourth young man we will meet had been named Azariah (*The Lord has helped*). To show ownership, the king renamed this young man Abednego (*Servant of Nebo* (a principle god of the Babylonians)). Their parents had named each of these young men in demonstration of their dedication to the Living God; the king changed each name to a name reflecting their dedication to his pagan gods.

Apparently, the parents of these young men had been serious about the business of dedicating their children to the Living God. From earliest days, each boy was instructed in how to please God. The boys determined to honour God and to honour the training they had received from their parents. The boys would keep kosher, demonstrating their commitment to the commands of God given to the Jewish people. These four young men made a pact that they would not dishonour their God. They would not eat the food offered by the king; they would not risk eating food that was ritually unclean.

Let me speak to this matter briefly. Young men and young women, do not imagine that you can live for your own pleasure and make the right decision in time of stress. The vast majority of young men and women are practical pagans, choosing what they want to do rather than honouring their parents and honouring the God of their parents. Then, when challenged to be godly, they fail miserably. Whinging and whining, they pout that God deserted them. Of course, it was they who deserted the Living God. If you will not live holy and righteous in the easy time, it is doubtful that you will stand firm in the hard time. Still, many young people talk a good game, avowing and averring that they will stand for God when the time comes.

**DANIEL 3:18**  
**“BUT IF NOT...”**

God took note of the convictions these young men held and He blessed them, endowing them with skill and understanding. Therefore, we read, “As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore, they stood before the king. And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom” [DANIEL 1:17-20]. Skill and understanding will go a long way in equipping anyone for life. Those possessing skill and understanding don’t have to demean others in an attempt to make themselves look good—they are good, and they know it.

**THE CHALLENGE DEMANDING CONVICTIONS** — The king built an image of gold. Ninety feet tall and nine feet wide, the image dominated the plain of Dura. We aren’t told what the image was or what was represented by this particular image, though it is possible that it compelled a form of emperor worship, much as would become common during the Roman era. What is important is to note that bowing down before this image, even in “going along to get along,” people would be guilty of idolatry.

To ensure that this fusion of Babylonian patriotism and paganism became universal, a royal edict was proclaimed. “The satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces” were commanded to appear for the dedication of the image. Anyone who was anybody was compelled to be there.

When they arrived, they were notified that there would be a rock concert to complement the dedication. Man, what music those present must have heard! There were horns, pipes, lyres, trigons (when did you last hear a trigon?), harps and bagpipes (trigons and bagpipes?) playing. The names of some of these instruments are strange to our ears. Other translations speak of the zither, the flute or the psaltery. As if these were not enough instruments, we are informed that there was “every kind of music!” It must have been something like “Band Aid” or “Live Aid,” gathering musicians from all over the world to focus attention on feeling good about themselves in the midst of a world tragedy.

However, all those officials of the Babylonian aristocracy and bureaucracy were not gather simply to enjoy the music—they were there to worship before the image! So, we read, “The herald proclaimed aloud, ‘You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace.’” Well, you can be certain that when the king speaks, all the political flunkies and sycophants are going to do what he says. “Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up” [DANIEL 3:4-7].

The command was given and the overwhelming majority went along to get along. However, there will always be some who creates a problem by refusing to check in his brains at the door. So, lest anyone should dissent from the king’s command, some extra incentive was provided when the messenger warned, “Whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into a burning fiery furnace” [DANIEL 3:11]. The tune that was playing would change from “We Are the World” to “Burning Love,” or maybe “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes.”

**DANIEL 3:18**  
**“BUT IF NOT...”**

What is important for the message this day is to take note of the fact that these three young men held convictions—convictions and not preferences. There is a difference between convictions and preferences. All of us have preferences; a preference is an inclination that can be jettisoned if necessary or convenient. The act of jettisoning a preference can be for a reason as simple as a better offer is presented. Ridding oneself of a preference can mean that one averts a threat through divesting the preference. What is important to note is that a preference is not mandatory to the definition of what we are. Contrasted to preferences are convictions. Convictions can be changed only through altering core principles, foundational beliefs.

Let me take a moment longer before we focus on the importance of convictions in the Christian life to allow us to address the transience of much that passes as vital, even essential, in modern Christendom. We often hear people aver commitment to a congregation. However, if willingness to invest life and work is any indication, convictions among modern Christians may be somewhat rarer. We often hear people aver doctrinal convictions. Contemporary Christians are able to tolerate a fair degree of movement in this area so long as they are not made to feel uncomfortable. We hear a great deal from evangelicals about convictions concerning marriage and concerning life. However, if the ease with which Christians move in and out of relationships or the willingness to welcome an unexpected pregnancy is any indication, we desperately need to shore up these areas. My point is simply that Christians frequently speak of convictions while holding preferences. Preferences may guide daily choices, but convictions dictate life choices.

**CONVICTIONS ARE A COSTLY COMMODITY** — These three young men, already brutalised by the kingdom, compelled to serve within the court of a foreign king were now commanded to jettison their God. Their formative years were spent within the Jewish Faith. From earliest days, these men would have been taught the commands of the LORD God delivered through Moses. “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

“You shall have no other gods before me.

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments”

[EXODUS 20:2-6].

To bow down to the king’s idol would be lèse majesté against the Living God. These men could not act in that fashion without dishonouring God Himself. Unlike many in our day, they were unprepared to rationalise disobedience by saying that they were able to dissociate the act from the belief.

These three men likely had sung, or they would have heard sung, the Psalm which declares:

“Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;  
he is to be feared above all gods.  
For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols,  
but the LORD made the heavens.”

[PSALM 96:4, 5]

They would have been familiar with the Psalm which condemned Israel for idolatry:

**DANIEL 3:18**  
**“BUT IF NOT...”**

“They made a calf in Horeb  
and worshiped a metal image.  
They exchanged the glory of God  
for the image of an ox that eats grass.  
They forgot God, their Savior,  
who had done great things in Egypt,”

[PSALM 106:19-21]

Undoubtedly, these men knew the reality of the Psalmist’s words:

“The idols of the nations are silver and gold,  
the work of human hands.  
They have mouths, but do not speak;  
they have eyes, but do not see;  
they have ears, but do not hear,  
nor is there any breath in their mouths.  
Those who make them become like them,  
so do all who trust in them.”

[PSALM 135:15-18]

These men knew, as all mankind knows intuitively, even if they ignore the reality of that truth, that people become like what is worshipped. Those who worship a desert demon characterised by a blood lust become brutal like that demon. Those who worship a promiscuous, licentious demon become themselves licentious, lecherous and lascivious. Among our contemporaries, we can observe that those who worship power become unrestrained and abusive in the exercise of their power. Those who worship pleasure neglect restraint and self-discipline in their never-ending pursuit of what is unattainable—self-fulfilment and satisfaction. Those who worship possessions discover to their sorrow that they can never accumulate enough “things.”

Contrasted to such demonstrably negative objects of worship, those who worship the unseen God, the Father of all mercies, become merciful and gentle. Those who fear the Living God do not fear evil men. Those who worship a church or a creed, can never rise higher than the thoughts of those who drafted the creed; but those who look to the Saviour of mankind will find themselves moved with compassion for the lost of this dying world.

These three young men were undoubtedly familiar with the words of Isaiah, who wrote at the LORD’s direction:

“Assemble yourselves and come;  
draw near together,  
you survivors of the nations!  
They have no knowledge  
who carry about their wooden idols,  
and keep on praying to a god  
that cannot save.”

[ISAIAH 45:20]

**DANIEL 3:18**  
**“BUT IF NOT...”**

Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah held convictions concerning their relationship to the Living God, they had convictions concerning how they were to serve and honour the LORD God. If they had not known before this day, they would soon enough discover that godly convictions come with a price for those holding the convictions. One cannot permit life to be guided by conviction without conflict in the world. This is the basis for Peter’s words in his First Letter. “Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you” [1 PETER 4:1-4].

I encourage you who listen to consider well the cost of holding to this Holy Faith. Though there will assuredly be a cost for holding godly convictions, it is a small price to pay in light of eternity. Peter has also encouraged those who read his First Missive when he writes, “Who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil” [1 PETER 3:13-17].

How unlike much of modern Christendom are Peter’s words! “In your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.” Standing firm begins with conviction; and conviction is an issue of the heart. Those who are convinced of the truth stand firm in the truth. This is the import of Paul’s admonition, “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” [GALATIANS 5:1]. The need for convictions lies behind the final words of encouragement delivered to the saints in Corinth. Paul urged them, “Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong” [1 CORINTHIANS 16:13].

You know the story quite well. The refusal to dishonour the Living God was noted by others who were willing to bend. Sycophants whinged to the king, “O king, live forever! You, O king, have made a decree, that every man who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, shall fall down and worship the golden image. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into a burning fiery furnace. There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men, O king, pay no attention to you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up” [DANIEL 3:9-12].

The king commanded these men appear where he issued his threats. “Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought. So, they brought these men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, ‘Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?’” [DANIEL 3:13-15]?

**DANIEL 3:18**  
**“BUT IF NOT...”**

Who, indeed, could deliver these three men from the king’s hands? What god had power to thwart the tyrant’s wish? If the men should insist on holding to their convictions, though those convictions would demonstrate the serious nature of what was believed, there would be a price! All that was necessary to avoid the danger was a little compromise.

In the early days of the Faith, Christians were sometimes hailed before Roman officials in order to compel them to demonstrate loyalty to the Empire. They were to put a pinch of incense on the altar of the Caesar, muttering “*Kúrios Kaísar.*” However, those with conviction would refuse, saying, “*Mè kúrios Kaísar, Kúrios Iesoûs*”—“No! Caesar is not lord; Jesus is Lord!” This lends emphasis to Paul’s words, “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit” [1 CORINTHIANS 12:3b].

These three young Hebrew men demonstrated that their convictions were not preferences when they replied, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up” [DANIEL 3:16-18].

Enraged at what he saw as defiance of his power, the king would wait no longer for these men to obey. “Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury, and the expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated. And he ordered some of the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. Then these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the burning fiery furnace. Because the king’s order was urgent and the furnace overheated, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace” [DANIEL 3:19-23]. Know that there is a cost for holding convictions.

**CONVICTIONS ARE A NECESSARY COMMODITY** — The day was April 18, 1947 and the Chaplain of the United States Senate stood before the assembled Senators and their guests, watched by all those seated in the gallery. The Chaplain offered a prayer for the Senators as they began their labours for that day. The opening words of the prayer Peter Marshall offered are, “Our Father, we yearn for a better understanding of spiritual things, that we may know surely what Thy will is for us and for our Nation. Give to us clear vision that we may know where to stand and what to stand for—because unless we stand for something, we shall fall for anything.”<sup>2</sup>

Surely, the admonition of Isaiah applies to us who name the Name of Christ the Lord!

“If you are not firm in faith,  
you will not be firm at all.”

[ISAIAH 7:9b]

Convictions, certainties, are required of any Christian who will stand firm in life. Without certainty, life becomes nothing more than a stomach-churning series of ups and downs as the popular view changes. And cultural views are constantly changing!

---

<sup>2</sup> 1949, **United States Congressional Serial Set. Prayers Offered by the Chaplain, The Rev. Peter Marshall at the Opening of Daily Sessions of Senate During 80th Congress 1947-1948, Senate Document 170, 80th Congress, Second Session**, (Prayer dated Friday, April 18, 1947), Quote Page 20, Published by United States Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. (HathiTrust)

**DANIEL 3:18**  
**“BUT IF NOT...”**

Without convictions, people become spineless, pitiable creatures within the moral world. The absence of convictions is revealed through statements that are sometimes heard, such as, “Personally, I would not have an abortion; but I don’t want to condemn someone who would have one.” If abortion is wrong sometimes, it is always wrong and not sometimes wrong. I am not saying we should not be compassionate for those who feel they have no other option than to make that choice; I am saying we must not agree with that choice.

It takes conviction to say when the road gets rocky in our marriage, “I vowed ‘For better or for worse,’ and I will not destroy my marriage because things are rough now.” Such a stance is all the more difficult when society urges us to put “self” first.

You must hold convictions to say, “I am committed to the congregation to which the Lord has appointed me.” Everyone will be offended eventually. How we handle disappointments demonstrates the reality of our convictions. It is easy to walk away when all we have are preferences. Too many of God’s saints act as if they are the sole determinant in joining and in leaving a congregation. They can ignore doctrinal deviation, but they must be in control. They can pass over ethical inconsistencies, but their feelings are preeminent. They are even able to overlook moral failure so long as they are not personally offended.

Surely, it is obvious that love for the brothers is witnessed in whether we walk with those same brothers! John stresses this point repeatedly. “Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes” [1 JOHN 2:9-11].

“If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen” [1 JOHN 4:20].

It is easy to say, “I love Jesus,” and difficult to live as though you love Him. Jesus calls us in unmistakable terms: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” [JOHN 14:15]. Among the first of His commandments is this: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” [JOHN 13:34, 35].

Don’t attempt to emulate Linus, who said, “I love mankind... It’s people I can’t stand!” We have quite enough professed Christians who say through their actions, “I love the church; it’s Christians I can’t stand.”

**CONVICTIONS ARE A PROFITABLE COMMODITY** — The message would be incomplete if we didn’t consider the outcome of the testing of these three men when they stood firm in their convictions. They were sentenced to a horrible fate, but they were delivered from a horrible fate. You see, that’s the thing, God may deliver His people; but He may choose to permit His children to experience the worst possible outcome so far as their life is concerned. God acts as He does to bring glory to His Name and not to ensure our comfort. We can focus on personal comfort, in which case we will discover that we actually hold preferences; or we can focus on God’s glory, in which case we will learn that we have been holding convictions.

Vile worshippers of a desert demon, people known as Daesh, ISIL or ISIS, kidnapped thirty Coptic Christian men from two villages in Egypt. These men were all shot or beheaded because they would not renounce their Faith to embrace the evil of their Muslim captors. Convictions are costly, but they hold the promise of great reward.

These Copt martyrs gave witness to the reality and truth of Jesus’ words. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

**DANIEL 3:18**  
**“BUT IF NOT...”**

“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” [MATTHEW 5:10-12]. Blessing is promised for those who suffer for Christ’s sake. Blessing is promised for those who are persecuted because they follow the Christ. Either we stake everything on God, who cannot lie, or we depend upon our own abilities to avoid trials. The former condition gives certainty; the latter condition yields only uncertainty and loss,

Either there is a great reward awaiting those who hold convictions, or they are fools. Indeed, the Apostle spoke truthfully when he wrote, “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” [1 CORINTHIANS 15:19]. If all we possess is a vague hope that things will turn out well, we are pitiful fools. The Apostles believed the Risen Saviour. They each experienced opposition, most of them ultimately dying horrible deaths. Yet, not one renounced the Saviour or their faith in Him. Men don’t die for a vague hope; and men don’t live for a phantasm, a will-o’-the-wisp, an illusion.

We are confident that this cannot be our situation; we are not bereft of consolation. Though we may question how strong our faith is, we do not question the One in whom we have placed that faith. In such confidence, the Apostle continued considering our situation. He affirmed, “In fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” [1 CORINTHIANS 15:20].

With the Apostle, we say, “I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me” [2 TIMOTHY 1:12].

We witness a moving scene in Heaven itself when the Revelator wrote of the opening of the seals holding fast the scroll which the Lamb of God receives before the throne of the Father. Though he wrote of those who would come out of the Great Tribulation, the precept applies to God’s holy people in this day. These are the words John wrote, “When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, ‘O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’ Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been” [REVELATION 6:9-11].

These souls which John saw were under the altar of Caesar! They are not calling out to God from beneath His altar; they are crying out for justification from beneath the altar on which they were sacrificed. The slaughtered bodies of God’s people give evidence of the power of the state, just as the Cross on which Jesus was sacrificed symbolises the power of the state.<sup>3</sup>

The altar of God is depicted in REVELATION 8:1-5: “When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.” Prayer is offered on the altar of God. Judgement proceeds from the altar of God. Slaughter of the righteous takes place on the altar of Caesar.

---

<sup>3</sup> An excellent presentation of this understanding is provided by David M. May, “Interpreting Revelation with Roman Coins: A Test Case,” *Review and Expositor* 106, no. 3 (2009), note especially pages 452–455

**DANIEL 3:18**  
**“BUT IF NOT...”**

I draw courage from the convictions of people who have been absent from this earth for two millennia. They suffered because of their Faith, and the Apostle sought to encourage them when he wrote, “We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore, we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.

“This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ” [2 THESSALONIANS 1:3-12].

Almost two decades ago, Chuck Colson referred to the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk. As you may be aware, the movie depicting this epic deliverance of the British Army from certain annihilation and destruction has recently been released in multiple cinemas throughout North America. However, there is a back story germane to the message today.

Colson wrote, “The time was June 1940 and the place was Dunkirk. The British Expeditionary Force, sent to stem the Nazi advance into Belgium and France, had been pushed steadily back to the sea.

“A pall fell over England. Hitler’s armies were poised to destroy the cornered Allied army. But as the British people waited anxiously, a three-word message was transmitted from the army at Dunkirk: ‘And if not.’

“The British people instantly recognized what the message meant: ‘Even if we are not rescued from Hitler’s army, we will stand strong.’”

“...The message galvanized the British people. Thousands of boats set out across the Channel in a gallant bid to rescue their army. And they succeeded. Nearly 350,000 troops were saved.”<sup>4</sup>

Some who listen today will soon face testing. You will hear statements meant to intimidate you, meant to cause you to fear. If you have preferences, you will close your mouth and silently accept the command to be silent. If, however, you are held in the grip of godly conviction, you will respond to those who would do you evil, “We have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us... and he will deliver us out of your hand... But if not...” May God give us conviction. May He make us stand firm in the face of threats. May He be glorified. Amen.

---

<sup>4</sup> Chuck Colson, “Dunkirk, ‘And If Not,’” August 4, 2017, <http://www.breakpoint.org/2017/08/breakpoint-dunkirk-and-if-not/>, accessed 4 August 2017