

Don't Compromise Your Beliefs at Work

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Daniel

In the third chapter of the book of Daniel, Daniel and his friends suffer under a fit of king Nebuchadnezzar's arrogance. Whereas in the first and second chapters their humility enables them to prosper, in chapter 3 their faithfulness to God leads to suffering. Yet even in the midst of their suffering, God rewards them for their faithfulness.

For a while, it appeared as though Nebuchadnezzar himself would renounce his arrogance, submit himself to God and spare his empire the need to be overthrown by God's power. Regrettably, however, the very dream that led Nebuchadnezzar to recognize God's hand on Daniel may also be what incited the king to build a golden image that he required all his subjects to worship. The edifice signified the resurgent pride of the Babylonian king. Its gigantic structure (ninety feet high) was constructed on the level plain of Dura which would have exaggerated the commanding presence of the image.

The king's disgraced astrologers saw a chance for revenge on Daniel. They played off of the king's resurgent pride and accused Daniel's friends of failing to worship the image. The friends readily admitted their guilt and refused to worship the image, despite the king's threat to throw them in to a fiery furnace. After years of successfully bridging the tension between the pagan environment of the Babylonian court and their fidelity to God, they faced a situation where no compromise was possible without violating their

integrity. Previously, they served as models of how to thrive by following God in a hostile environment. Now they had to serve as models of how to suffer in the same environment. This they do with gusto.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up." (Daniel 3:16-18).

Today's workplace Christians seldom face such extreme hostility, at least in the western world. But we could be ordered to do something that we cannot do in good conscience. Or, more likely, we might wake up one day and realize that we are already compromising God's desires for our work by the goals we pursue, the powers we exercise, the relationships we misuse or the compromises we make. In any case, there may well come a day when we recognize that we must make a radical change, such as saying, "No," being fired, resigning, blowing the whistle or standing up for someone else. We should expect to suffer for doing so. The fact that we may well be doing God's will should not lead us to expect God will prevent us from facing the consequences imposed by the powers that be. Working as a Christian is not another shortcut to success, but instead brings the constant danger of suffering.

This episode is especially poignant because it shows that Daniel and his friends lived in the same world we do. In our world, if you stand up to a boss over an issue of, say, sexual harassment or falsification of data, the most likely outcome is that you will be punished, marginalized, sullied, misunderstood and maybe fired. Even if you succeed in ending the abuse and removing the offender from power, your own reputation may well suffer irreparable damage. It's so difficult to prove that you were right, and people are so reluctant to get involved, that the institution may protect itself by getting rid of you alongside the true offender. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego apparently expected no less for themselves, for they say outright that God may not intervene in their case. "If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us...let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods" (Daniel 3:17-18). To them being faithful to God was the right thing to do, whether or not it was path to success.

In this they are indeed models for us. We need to learn to speak the truth clearly, with humility, in our own workplaces. General Peter Pace, a former chairman of the U.S. military's Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said, "What I have come to really admire is something I call intellectual courage. This is the ability to sit in a room full of very powerful people, and see a conversation going in one direction, and feeling in your gut that something is not right, and having the temerity to say, 'I see it differently, and here's why.'" In practice, courage often results from being prepared. Daniel's friends knew the dangers inherent in their positions, and they were prepared to face the

consequences of standing firm in their convictions. We should know where the ethical edges in our workplaces are and think through in advance what we would do if asked to do something contrary to God's word. "You need to know in advance what your 'walk-away' conditions are and practice your resignation speech for every job you take," was the advice of a long-time Harvard Business School professor. "Otherwise you can be lulled into doing almost anything, step-by-step."