

Our 4<sup>th</sup> Amigo

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who is with us always, even in the fiery furnace, Jesus Christ our Savior, amen.

Do any of you know how old the common Marshmallow is? (SLIDE) More than 50 years? 100? Would you believe the marshmallow was around before Columbus discovered America? There's a very real possibility that Jesus, Mary and Joseph might have actually eaten marshmallows while in exile in Egypt. You see, historians estimate that the marshmallow came into being over 4000 years ago. They claim marshmallows got their name when pharaohs discovered squeezing the mallow plant, which grows wild in marshes, a sweet, sticky substance surfaced. Thus the name was given Marsh Mallows... Honey was flavored with the extract. The delicacy was so special, it was reserved for gods and royalty alone. Today's marshmallows don't actually include any mallow; they are a combination of corn syrup, corn starch, sugar, and gelatin. Why all this talk about marshmallows? Well, we're going to be talking about a big fire. (SLIDE) If there's going to be a big fire, you want to make sure somebody brings the marshmallows. The fire we're talking about is the one in the fiery furnace where Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego may have toasted marshmallows instead of being consumed by the flames. These three, I'll call the 3 Amigos, were Daniel's friends, hauled off into exile by the conquering king Nebuchadnezzar. (SLIDE) They had been educated in the finest Babylonian schools and were part of the Kings court officials. You

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might say they were civil servants. When Daniel successfully interpreted the King's dream the 3 Amigos were promoted above other Chaldeans, which set up the court intrigue in our story of the Fiery Furnace. What made the 3 Amigos so special? They didn't bow. They didn't bend. They didn't burn.

The Chaldeans didn't like the fact that these Jews got all the breaks and the favored positions. As they coveted, they waited and plotted. The 3 Amigos' civil service routine was interrupted one day when they received word that they and every other official were to gather at the plain of Dura where the king had erected a 90-foot statue. (SLIDE) This was Nebuchadnezzar's idea of a team-building exercise. Every civil servant was to bow down and worship the statue in a show of loyalty. Anyone who disobeyed was to be thrown into a fiery furnace. This was not an idle threat. The king had burned people to death before (Jeremiah 29:22) and not too far from the statue stood a furnace already emitting a column of smoke as if to provide the exclamation mark to the king's decree. When the time came, Nebuchadnezzar built the golden idol in the province headed by the 3 Amigos and they didn't bow. The 3 Amigos didn't bow... Now the Chaldeans couldn't wait to tell the King how they wouldn't bow down and worship the idol. (SLIDE) It was all kind of petty and nasty and smarmy in-house politics. Politics aside, the King didn't like being snubbed. So, he sent for the 3 Amigos.

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It's one thing to disobey the king from a distance, but quite another to disobey him right to his face. (SLIDE) Yet, despite their fear and the very real threat to their lives they didn't bend. What thoughts do you think were going through the 3 Amigos' minds? Did they consider: "If we don't bow down to this statue, we'll die and then what good will we be to the Lord and to his people? We're so young. We have our whole lives ahead of us. Surely God didn't bring us here only to let us die so soon! Anyway God will understand if we bow down just this once – especially if we're just going through the motions. If he does count that as sin, we can always ask for forgiveness." All of those thoughts and probably a hundred more go through my mind when I'm faced with a tough decision or a moral dilemma. I'm certain I'm not alone here... We all try to justify doing what we want, rather than what we know to be God's perfect will.

So, our 3 Amigos didn't bow, nor did they bend to the pressure to worship a foreign idol. They even told the King that God would save them, but even if God didn't save them, it wouldn't change their own love for God. This stoked the king's anger even more. The furnace was turned up to broil and the 3 Amigos thrown in the fire. (SLIDE) When I toast marshmallows in a bonfire they get all gooey and toasty brown. Sometimes, if I get them a little too close to the fire they start to burn and even fall off my stick right into the heart of the fire.

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Just like my marshmallows, we don't have any promise from God to save us from the fiery furnaces of this life. Sometimes the flames consume and our lives are forever changed. The promise we do have is that even in the hottest of flames, our God in the form of Jesus Christ will always be with us and He will never abandon us. (SLIDE) I, along with many other Bible scholars and theologians believe the fourth Amigo in the fiery furnace was Jesus. My favorite Bible verse is from Matthew chapter 28 the second half of verse 20, where Jesus says, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Martin Luther must have felt the fires of the furnace when the Cardinal, sent from Pope Leo X demanded him to recant his writings, especially where he proclaimed we are saved by God's grace, through faith in Jesus Christ. (SLIDE) Our beloved Martin Luther was standing in front of the Emperor of the entire Roman Empire when he declared, "I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen." Like our 3 Amigos Martin Luther didn't bow, he didn't bend, and he didn't burn either.

This story has one big message for all of us today. No matter what we face in life, no matter how hot the furnace or what kind of fire we find ourselves in, we are not alone, God is with us. (SLIDE) Some of us face the fires of grief over the

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loss of a loved one through death, estrangement, or divorce. Some are facing the fires of financial troubles. Some are facing major health problems with no good treatment options. The Good News for us today is whatever the woe, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ is with us all the way. (SLIDE) The issue isn't whether we'll spared the flames and fires of life or whether God will keep us from suffering. That's not really suggested at all, anywhere in scripture. Jesus even said we can expect to feel the heat. "In this world you will have trouble....but have faith, for I have overcome the world." The biblical faith is this: God doesn't promise to take us out of the flames and the fires of life. God promises to be right there with us, smack dab in the middle of the flames and the fire.

One last observation before we move on. I noticed as I re-read this story for the umpteenth time, that when the king looked into the fiery furnace he saw the 3 Amigos, along with a fourth person and all were unbound. The fires didn't even singe a single hair on their heads, but it did burn the bindings that bound them.

(SLIDE) Our faith in Jesus Christ does that same thing for us. We were bound just as tightly as the 3 Amigos, but God in his mercy on the Cross of Jesus Christ, He has removed the bindings that bound us to our Sin. Thanks to our 4<sup>th</sup> Amigo, Jesus Christ we are free from the bonds to sin, death, and the devil. We are free to roast marshmallows on the fire that was meant by the devil to torment and torture us.

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May the God of the Fiery Furnace be with you always. (SLIDE) May you trust your eternity to the 4<sup>th</sup> Amigo who will never leave you alone in the midst of the fires that threaten to consume you. May you walk tall, never to bow, never to bend, and never to burn, but always rejoicing in the eternal love of our Savior and our 4<sup>th</sup> Amigo, Jesus Christ. Amen.