

Fiery Furnace Faith

Daniel 3

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Context

The Prophet Daniel had been serving during the time King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had overtaken Judah. The king had experienced terrifying dreams that devastated him because of their content, and because of his inability to interpret their meaning. Daniel was able to interpret them to the king, foreshadowing the coming Kingdom of God that will overpower all kingdoms. This caused King Nebuchadnezzar to fall on his face, revering the name of God, and upon allowance, Daniel requested that the king name “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego over the administration of the province of Babylon, while Daniel was at the king’s court” (2:46-49).

The next thing we read is King Nebuchadnezzar, the king who just put the LORD God on the highest pedestal, setting up an idolatrous image of gold commanding all peoples to bow down before the golden image. In his command, it was also put forth to all the peoples in his kingdom that whoever chose not to worship the image would be cast into the fiery furnace. Some of the Babylonian people brought accusations against some Jews in the king’s own administration. According to the king’s decrees, he was justified legally in throwing them in the furnace, but biblically, he was not justified in even making the image by means of the second commandment.

When the Babylonians named Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as the perpetrators, the king was furious. When he confronted his three officials, he told them that the supposed God they serve (the one he heavily revered under the counsel of Daniel not too long ago) could not deliver them from the furnace, but that bowing to the image could deliver them from the furnace. Their response is essentially: We know our God can save us, but even if He chooses not to, we will still worship Him alone!

This infuriated the king even further, and threw them into the furnace. While watching them burn, so he thought, he noticed that there were four figures in the furnace. Once probed, his advisors characterized “the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods!” (3:25). The king had to get a better look for himself, and when he did, he called them “servants of the Most High God” (3:26). After this experience, the king decreed that only those who defamed the name of the God of these three Jews would be thrown in the furnace. The king against responded to God, but it quickly left him again.

God had given the king multiple chances to repent of his wickedness, but after the king continued to take credit for his great royal residence built out of his power and might for the glory of his own majesty, a “voice came from heaven, saying, ‘King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is declared: sovereignty has been removed from you...’” (4:31). After this, what was said was fulfilled and the king was brought down to his proper place, away from his people. Nebuchadnezzar was humbled, after losing everything, and looked up the heaven to praise and worship and honor the Most High God declaring God’s perfect Kingdom. The Bible says that following those reflections and revelations that Nebuchadnezzar had his reason *returned* to him, and he continued to “praise, exalt, and honor the King of heaven, for all His works are true and His ways just, and He is able to humble those who walk in pride” (4:37).

Expository Summary

I. One Last Chance

The infuriated King Nebuchadnezzar gives Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego one last chance after learning of their inferior view of him. In a sense of urgency, King Nebuchadnezzar orders the three defiant officials in his administration be brought to him to be rebuked. King Nebuchadnezzar gives the three Jews a chance to prove the allegations wrong by worshiping right in front of him at risk of being thrown in a fiery furnace. This worship indicates a legalistic-based salvation mindset.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego communicate their faith in their God to King Nebuchadnezzar. The three defy King Nebuchadnezzar's demand of an answer, but indicate the power of their own God, and affirmed their position of unwillingness to compromise their beliefs even if their God chooses not to deliver them. This phrase they use in verse 18 is the theme verse for this passage: *“even if He does not [deliver us from the furnace], let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”*

II. The King's Anger

This of course makes King Nebuchadnezzar angrier than he already was, and he takes several courses of action out of this anger. First, King Nebuchadnezzar orders the furnace temperature to be increased, then he orders his best military guards tie the three devout Jews up, but because the flame was so hot, the men could not throw the three Jews into the furnace, yet despite their flaw the three fell in anyway, tied up.

Basking in his great accomplishment, King Nebuchadnezzar is astounded to see four individuals in the furnace. Seeking an answer to who the fourth individual was, likely assuring one of his own men did not fall in with them, his guards affirm that only three fell into the furnace. The king describes this fourth individual in verse 25 as one with the appearance “like a son of the gods.” Nebuchadnezzar realized that this was a divine experience, causing him to realize that the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego was the one, true God. Nebuchadnezzar’s officials also saw this divine interference further solidifying the witness of the event to those in their community.

III. Nebuchadnezzar’s Response

As what happens throughout the Bible following a divine experience, there is a response, and the response in this divine experience is not from the eyes of those saved from the flame of the furnace, but from the eyes of the one who arrogantly denied the true God and threw the three into the flame. First, King Nebuchadnezzar praises God that He has servants such as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who worship unapologetically, confidently, faithfully, and with integrity. Second, he acknowledges that the God the three serve *is* the God worthy of worship. Third, the king *decreed* a reversal in policy, that rather than worshiping his items of idolatry, that anyone who disgraces the name of God shall be severely punished. Finally, King Nebuchadnezzar made the three devout Jews prosper in the kingdom, which could mean a many number of things, but likely, do to their position of political insiders, marveled around material wealth, land ownership, positions of authority within the king’s administration, and other manners from which power was derived in their culture.

Theology

The most notable theological contribution presented in this text is that God saves those who demonstrate authentic faith. While in the text, the three Jews were saved of their physical life, the principle of God's deliverance of His people for authentic faith can be established. To preface the three Jew's declaration in verses 17-18, it is vital to point out that the prophet Habakkuk had clearly articulated that it is by faith that the righteous shall be saved, so in all likelihood, these Jewish boys were aware of that, which likely fueled their demonstration of faith. King Nebuchadnezzar even exclaimed at the end of the text that no god is capable of delivering people like the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and his recognition of that caused him to fall into deep worship of God, as it should for all who experience the power of the one, true God.

The fourth individual, an angel of the Lord, was Jesus; however, He was not in the form of an angel, because no angel is the Son of God (Heb. 1:5), but rather from the point of view of Nebuchadnezzar, He appeared to be a son of the gods. There are numerous examples in the Old Testament of the Angel of the Lord, or the son of the Gods implied to refer to the same. All the uses in the Old Testament are based on Moses' usage of them in Genesis and Exodus. I will briefly evaluate three of them. In Genesis 16, an angel of the Lord appeared to Hagar, and spoke on behalf of God and in the first person. Later, Abraham experienced the angel of the Lord who references God in the first person *from* heaven having the authority to provide on the same level as God the Father. Lastly, in the burning bush, Moses experienced God, but it was the angel of the Lord who appeared to him through the bush, yet Moses recognized that it was God calling to him through the bush.

The Angel of the Lord and God are apparently equated, if not specified with a name such as in the New Testament. After Jesus revealed Himself to the world, there is no reference to an Angel of the Lord in the same manner in which an angel of the Lord is referenced prior. Most notable is the angel of the Lord in Matthew 1, speaking to Joseph, whom we learn elsewhere is Gabriel who spoke to Mary as well. While the Bible is not explicit about the status of the angel of the Lord, there are plausible arguments for Jesus pre-incarnate working as who human authors called the angel of the Lord.

If the implications of Jesus as the angel of the Lord in the Old Testament are true, then Jesus' ministry as a deliverer began far before His on-earth ministry. If, on the other hand, the angel of the Lord who identified himself as Gabriel is the same angel in all biblical situations, then the shift goes from Jesus to God, which is hardly a shift at all, since Jesus is God.

Principles and Application

When government prohibits you from worshiping God, do not compromise your faith, and hold firm. You might die in the process (not perhaps in the United States), or you might still experience persecution by the government, such as a loss of job in the realm that I am in (public school teaching), but in all that suffering, Jesus says in Matthew 5 that we are blessed when we suffer for the sake of Him. Peter reiterates this in his first letter.

When those in authority over us punish us, whether we deserve it or not, we should demonstrate submission to them as authority figures over us. God places people

in authority over us and we honor God when we submit to them, because if we can submit to a sinful, earthly ruler, then we can definitely submit to a heavenly divine Ruler. Submission, as we see in this text, is not equal to blind obedience, but through strategic obedience. Obey when it does not compromise your faith, and righteously disobey when asked to compromise your faith.

When God works in your life, let the testimony speak for itself. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did not seek personal recognition. In fact, following their fall into the furnace, we do not hear them speak again. When giving a testimony, do not sugarcoat God's work with your ability as a believer; let the testimony speak for itself to those who listen. Not everyone may accept a Spirit-derived testimony, but by those who do accept it, the witness of God's power in your life will cause him or her to acknowledge the power of God living in you and fall into worship.

Outline

- I. The infuriated King Nebuchadnezzar gives Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego one last chance after learning of their inferior view of him. (vs. 13-15)
 - a. In a sense of urgency, King Nebuchadnezzar orders the three defiant officials in his administration be brought to him to be rebuked. (vs. 13)
 - i. King Nebuchadnezzar questions the three Jews based on the allegations brought against them. (vs. 14)
 1. King Nebuchadnezzar not only gives the three Jews a chance to prove the allegations wrong by worshiping right in front of him at risk of being thrown in a fiery furnace, but they must worship in front of him *very well* providing a sense of legalistic-based worship. (vs.15)
- II. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego communicate their faith in their God to King Nebuchadnezzar. (vs. 16-18)
 - a. The three defy King Nebuchadnezzar's demand of an answer. (vs. 16)
 - i. The three indicate the power of their God. (vs. 17)
 - ii. The three indicate their further unwillingness to compromise their beliefs even if their God chooses not to deliver them. (vs. 18)
- III. King Nebuchadnezzar, angrier than ever before, throws the three into the fiery furnace. (vs. 19-23)
 - a. King Nebuchadnezzar, angrily, orders the furnace temperature increased seven-fold. (vs. 19)
 - b. King Nebuchadnezzar, angrily, orders his best military men tie up the three. (vs. 20)
 - i. The military men tied the three up in all their garments (vs. 21)
 - ii. The flame was so hot that it made it extremely difficult for the military men to throw them into the furnace. (vs. 22)
 1. The three fell in the furnace anyway still tied up. (vs. 23)
- IV. King Nebuchadnezzar is amazed at the sight of four individuals, not tied up, walking around the furnace, and orders them removed. (vs. 24-27)
 - a. King Nebuchadnezzar's officials affirm his request to verify that they threw only three into the furnace. (vs. 24)
 - b. King Nebuchadnezzar declares in astonishment that he sees four men roaming the furnace. (vs. 25)
 - i. King Nebuchadnezzar saw with his eyes that the God they served was the one, true God. (vs. 26)
 - ii. King Nebuchadnezzar's officials also saw with their eyes the supernatural protection that occurred for the three. (vs. 27)
- V. King Nebuchadnezzar responds to the miracle he just witnessed. (vs. 28-30)
 - a. King Nebuchadnezzar recognizes the God that the three serve as well as their devotion to that God. (vs. 28)
 - b. King Nebuchadnezzar decrees that any that disgrace the name of God shall be severely punished. (vs. 29)
 - c. King Nebuchadnezzar blessed the three with many riches. (vs. 30)