

Faith in the Fire

Daniel 3

Go with me, 2600 years ago, to the plain of Dura near Babylon, where King Nebuchadnezzar had summoned every leader - the satraps, the administrators, the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces - from his far-flung empire. Imagine the sight - multitudes of people from various nations, speaking many languages. And they all had gathered for one purpose - to honor King Nebuchadnezzar and his gods!

Ever since Daniel interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream for him, the king could not stop thinking of himself as that head of gold. I'm sure it must have bothered him greatly to think that his great kingdom would be left to others inferior to himself. The king was attempting to consolidate his power and test the loyalty of his subjects. Could Nebuchadnezzar reverse the scattering of the nations and the confusion of the languages that happened so long ago in Babel? Surely he could unite all these diverse people, nations and languages and ensure that his kingdom would never fail.

So Nebuchadnezzar had erected a huge, golden image ninety feet tall. And now these leaders, having made their way to the great plain of Dura, were compelled to bow in worship as soon as the royal orchestra began playing. It was that or death!

But three Hebrew men - Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego - refused to bow. These men had been taken captive from Jerusalem by the Chaldeans and brought to Babylon. Here they had been trained in the language of the Chaldeans and, along with Daniel, had been appointed as leaders in the government. Now, all around them, men from other nations were bowing to the golden image, conforming to the king's decree. But they would not!

Jealous leaders reported their non-conforming behavior to Nebuchadnezzar accusing them of disrespecting the king and his gods by not bowing in worship to the gold image. When the king heard this, he flew into a rage. He thought, "How dare any member of my own government stand against me in disobedience!"

It was not unusual in those days to punish violators of the king's decrees by casting them into a burning oven. Jeremiah speaks of "...Zedekiah and...Ahab, whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire" (Jeremiah 29:22). No doubt, Nebuchadnezzar was used to seeing bodies thrown into an open furnace - to see the instant flash of the burning bodies and smell the stench of burning flesh.

When the guards brought the three Hebrew men before the king, Nebuchadnezzar bellowed, "So - you refused to bow before my god when the music sounded. Well, I'm going to let you try it again. And if you don't bow this time, you'll be thrown in and roasted! And what god is able to deliver you from my hands"

These Hebrew men didn't want to die. They were human beings, like you and me. Anyone would be crazy to want to die roasting in a fire! Yet these men had

an incredible faith placed in their hearts by the Holy Spirit. And so they replied to the king, "O king, we don't even have to think about our answer to you. We will not bow! Our God is able to deliver us. But even if He doesn't, we will not serve your gods or worship the gold image."

Now the king was in such a rage, he ordered his soldiers to stoke the furnace seven times hotter than usual! You can be sure these three men could feel the heat of the white-hot furnace from where they stood. And they probably saw the strong soldiers falling exhausted as they stoked the furnace, overcome by the intense heat.

Then the three Hebrew men were bound hand and foot. The mightiest soldiers in the king's army had picked them up and were carrying them to the mouth of the furnace to cast them in. But the flames were so hot, the soldiers began to fall themselves, one after another - slain from the heat!

Somehow, the three Hebrews were finally cast into the oven. But the king was puzzled. There had been no sudden flash of roasting bodies, no smell of burning flesh. He peered into the fire - and he was astonished at what he saw!

The three Hebrew men were walking about on top of the coals - as if they were walking on rose petals! The fire had only burned their bonds, not their bodies.

Nebuchadnezzar turned his advisors and said, "How many men did we throw in there?"

"Three, O King," came the answer.

"But I see four!" the king replied. "And none of them is burning. None is even hurt. And one of them has the appearance of the Son of God!" (see Daniel 3:24-25).

You know the rest of the story. Because the Lord has already delivered these men death in the fire, the king calls for them to come out of the furnace. The king and the whole court saw that not only had they been delivered from the flames, they didn't even smell like smoke!

King Nebuchadnezzar praised the God of these three men for delivering them from the fire. He knew that they trusted in God by surrendering their bodies rather than worship anyone but their God. The king testified that there is no other God who is able to deliver like that.

What an amazing story! Children are enthralled by it from their earliest days and it never fails to refresh the heart of the saints of God. It has been and will continue to be an oasis of encouragement to saints who refuse to bow the knee to the gods of this world. Jerry Vines outlines this chapter with three points about these faithful Hebrews: they would not bow; they would not bend; they would not burn!

But today, as we consider this true account in Daniel 3, I want us to focus on the faith of these three men and the faithfulness of the God they served.

Nebuchadnezzar's testimony of these three men and their God is in verse 28,

28 Nebuchadnezzar spoke, saying, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, who sent His Angel and delivered His servants who trusted in Him, and they have frustrated the king's word, and yielded their bodies, that they should not serve nor worship any god except their own God!"

The king recognized their faith, that they trusted in God and he delivered them. In the New Testament the writer of Hebrews also attributes their deliverance to faith in God. In that great chapter on faith he writes about the Old Testament saints:

[Heb 11:32-35a NKJV] **32 And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also [of] David and Samuel and the prophets: 33 who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again.**

Such heroes of the faith, who through faith quenched the violence of fire! Let's take a few moments today to consider the nature of their faith what it means for us as we face the fiery trials of our lives.

First they had,

1. An Absolute Conviction: God is Able to Deliver

Look again at how these three men answer the threats of the king:

16 Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter.

17 If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace,

I am sure that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego did not doubt the king's ability or his willingness to throw them into the blazing furnace. I am sure they had seen firsthand how cruel he could be to anyone who crossed him.

What gave them the confidence to speak so boldly? Three little words: **God is able**. What a thought this is. They knew their God and they knew what he could do.

God is able to deliver! God is able to save! God is able to rescue! And how did they know that? They knew what he had done in the past.

God had delivered Noah from the flood that destroyed the whole earth.

God had delivered Isaac on the altar by providing a substitute sacrifice.

God had delivered Joseph from the pit, from slavery and from prison.

God had delivered the whole nation of Israel from bondage in Egypt.

God delivered them from the death of the firstborn at the Passover.

God delivered them from Pharaoh's army through the Red Sea.

God fed his children manna and quail. He brought forth water from a rock.

God brought them into the promised land and subdued their enemies.

Over and over again, God proved His power to save, that He is able to deliver. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had been taught these stories since they were tiny children. Because they knew their God, they knew what he could do. Therefore, in their own time of crisis, they knew beyond any shadow of doubt that God is able.

Because they knew what God had done in the past, they knew what he could do in the present. This is why we study these accounts from God's Word. We discover who God is, what He has done, and what He can do. Knowing God gives you the strength to stand your ground no matter who is standing against you.

Do you know that God is able?

Second they had,

2. A Strong Hope: God Will Deliver

Hope is the confident assurance of faith. Listen to the hope in their voices as they stand before the mightiest man in the world. **"And He will deliver us from your hand, O king."** (Daniel 3:17b).

The fiery furnace was not too many yards away. They knew the price for disobedience and they disobeyed anyway. Why? Because they believed deep in their soul that somehow, someday, God would rescue them. They expected some kind of deliverance. They didn't know how or what or where or when.

Now what made them talk like this? I answer very simply. They had a big God. They believed in a God who could do anything. That's why Hebrews 11:34 (NIV) refers to them when it says, **"By faith ... (they) quenched the fury of the flames."** Hebrews 1:1 says, **"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."**

Humanly speaking, their chances of survival were zero. But they had hope in God. Though they had not yet seen God's deliverance, by faith they had seen God. That was enough to give them a living hope that even the king could not burn away. They had a strong hope. They believed that God would deliver them. They did not know how or when God would deliver, but all their hope was in Him.

Many of you stand in that same spot this morning. The circumstances seem stacked against you, but because of God, you can have hope. Without God there is no hope at all.

3. An Unwavering Resolve: But If Not ... We Will Not

And so we come to the most powerful words of all.

18 But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up."

There are various stages in the life of faith and this may be the highest of all. Here they are saying, "We know God can deliver us, and we believe He will deliver, but even if He does not deliver, we still won't bow down before your golden image." Basically they were signing their own death warrant, and they knew it. How many of us would have that kind of courage?

They knew it was better to die a thousand times with God's approval than to live one day without it. Better a fiery furnace than to live with the fire of a guilty conscience burning in your soul. They could die, but they dare not sin! Their convictions were not for sale. Not at any price, not even their own lives.

They hoped for a miracle but they didn't demand one. They left everything in the hands of God! Why? Because they knew God. They knew His power—that He is able to deliver. They knew God's character, that He is gracious and compassionate, abounding in steadfast love and mercy. They had seen God protect them in chapter 1 when they refused to eat the king's meat. They saw how God answered their prayers in chapter 2 so that they did not die with the other wise men in Babylon. That is the kind of God you can trust with your life.

So they said: "**but if not.**"

Can you say "but if not"?

If God says "no" to your cherished dreams and your fondest hopes, will you still trust Him? If God says "no" to your plans for the future, will you still serve Him? If God does not immediately deliver your loved one that you pray for through tears, will you still follow Him?

These three young men had an absolute conviction that God is able, they had a strong hope that God would deliver, but they knew that their personal deliverance might not be the most important thing to Him. That's a key insight because for most of us, when we get in a tight place, the only thing we can think about is making sure we get out okay. So when we pray, we say, "O Lord, please get me out of this jam." And sometimes we even say, "If it be thy will," but we don't say that very loudly because we hope God's will is the same as ours.

But often it isn't. We see through a glass darkly (1 Cor. 13:12). At best we see only a glimpse of God's purposes. But God sees the whole panorama of history and eternity stretched out before Him.

Consider these mysteries: In Acts 12 the Apostle James was killed with the sword; in the same chapter the Apostle Peter was miraculously delivered. Why?

My godly mother got ovarian cancer and died at 51, my grandmother lived to be 85. Why?

You raise both your children to know the Lord and one child is serving God and another turns completely away from God. Why?

One family knows prosperity and seems to have it made while another can barely make ends meet. Why?

Two soldiers go to war, only one comes home. Why?

Some prayers are answered, others apparently are never answered. Why?

The list could be extended to infinity. What do we do with such mysteries?

In the end there is only one answer. God is God and we're not! Psalm 115:3 reminds us that **"But our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases."**

That truth should not drive us to failure, but to faith.

What we find in Daniel 3 is faith in God, not just faith in God's deliverance. These young men are saying, "We are sure of God, but we are not sure what God will do."

At the beginning of this message I quoted Hebrews 11:34. But there is more to the story than that. The rest of the chapter gives the other side of faith. Living by faith is often very difficult. And it doesn't always end up the way we would like. Does living by faith mean you will always receive a miracle? The answer must be no. The rest of Hebrews 11 makes that very clear. Hebrews 32-35a that I read earlier record the Triumphs of Faith.

Verses 35b-38 record the Trials of Faith:

[Heb 11:35-38 NKJV] 35 ... Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. 36 Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented-- 38 of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, [in] dens and caves of the earth.

Who are these "others." What have they done to deserve such punishment? These men and women who endured such torment were living by faith just as much as Noah, Abraham, Moses or Joshua. Their faith was not weaker. If anything, their faith was stronger because it enabled them to endure incredible suffering. They are not "lesser" saints because they found no miracle. If anything, they are "greater" saints because they were faithful even when deliverance from earthly trials did not come.

Three little words echo across the years, from the plains to Dura in Babylon to a the Grand Valley of Colorado, and from places all over the earth where men and women, boys and girls are standing firm in their faith: **"But if not."**

Let's close by thinking about what God did for those men in the fire. He joined them there. How often we pray God would keep us *from* suffering, rather than keep us *through* suffering. Often God reveals Himself in our suffering in a much more personal and glorious way. So it was with these three. There was a fourth

like the Son of God with them in the fire. When we know Jesus we never have to face the fire alone.

How should you respond to this message?

First, we all have had to face fiery trials. Sometimes, if we were honest, we would have to admit that we backed down instead of facing the flame. Maybe that describes you! If so, you can come to the Lord today and get forgiveness and strength for the trials that will come.

Others may be in the fire even as I am speaking. Jesus is there with you! Have you met Him in there yet? If you need to seek His face and His help for your furnace, now is the time to come to Him.

Others of you are more like Nebuchadnezzar than you are the three Hebrews. By that I mean, you only have a nodding acquaintance with God. You know Who He is, but you do not have a relationship with Him. Come to Him today. He will deliver you from sin and the fires of hell and give you the gift of eternal life.