

The Fiery Furnace

Last week we were in Daniel 6, reading about King Darius sending his favorite and most trustworthy leader to a den of lions -- then staying up all night in hopes that his man Daniel would be rescued by the God that he continually worshiped. This week we're backing up three chapters to another of the favorite Sunday School stories, in which three young Jewish lads get tossed into a fiery furnace.

We won't be staying in the same book on consecutive weeks again in this series, so I'm going to draw attention to themes that are important to Daniel as a prophet and a writer. These are themes that we saw last week and that we will see again this week. One of the overarching themes in the book of Daniel is that God is sovereign, that even the most powerful rulers have to bend their wills to His will. You see that in the stories in Daniel that we aren't covering in this series and you see that in the visions that he recounts in the later chapters of his book.

So, let's get to this week's story, and the fate of three young Jewish men: Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. Their Babylonian names, given to them by Ashpenaz, the chief of Nebuchadnezzar's court officials, were Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Their story begins right at the beginning of the book of Daniel, where King Nebuchadnezzar besieges the city of Jerusalem and captures it, taking some of the best and brightest of the young nobles to be trained for three years to serve King Nebuchadnezzar back in Babylon. Among those who were selected for this service were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.

Now we jump ahead to chapter 3. Here we find that the king has done something foolish; he's ordered the construction of a 90' high statue made of gold, had it set up on the Plain of Dura and ordered everyone to worship it.

Verse 7:

Therefore as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

As we go through this passage, you may find yourself asking questions like, "What's a zither?" And so, I'll run through these instruments quickly. The horn was likely a one-note wonder made from an animal's horn. The flute and the pipes were most likely a series of pipes of different lengths strung together - think the 'pan flute'. The zither, harp and lyre were all stringed instruments of varying sizes - all with strings tuned to their notes which were plucked to make the required sounds.

Now, there was a reason that all these people responded to the sound of these instruments like Pavlov's dog learned to salivate at the sound of a bell. They were told that if they failed to worship the 90' gold statue on the Plain of Dura, they would be thrown into a blazing furnace. They thought about those two options - "We can pretend we think the king's statue is worthy of worship or pretend we could survive being thrown into a furnace ... losing a little integrity vs. losing our whole lives ... hmm" - and decided

that they would do whatever it took to avoid the furnace, and so they bowed down before the statue. Amazingly, the three young men who had come into the king's service chose not to bow.

At this time some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. They said to king Nebuchadnezzar, "O King, live forever! You have issued a decree, O king, that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, must fall down and worship the image of gold and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. But there are some Jews that you have whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon - Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego - who pay no attention to you, O king. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up. (Daniel 3:8-12)

This passage raises a whole bunch of questions for me. Is it always the right thing to obey the law, including reporting people for disobeying it? Why do so few rulers seem to be aware of the petty jealousy of those under them, those who are seeking to bring down others in order to aid their climb up the ladder of power and success? Where does this racial bigotry come from and why is it allowed to influence a royal court? Why do we allow people to frame the issues in a way that is so obviously biased and unfair? We could have some good discussion based on those questions, but we have to move on to get to the heart of the matter: a proud king Nebuchadnezzar who was not used to being ignored or disobeyed:

Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I set up? Now, when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand. (3:13-15)

You're not meant to miss the arrogance of the king. He believed he was the greatest, that his kingdom was supreme, that his every wish should be instantly obeyed and he was furious that these three men would defy his orders. His arrogance, his supreme confidence, is made clear by his final statement, "Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand." The three were also not lacking in confidence, but it wasn't self-confidence, it was humble confidence in their God:

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and He will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if He does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." (3:16-18)

This is the pivotal point in the account - the king has offered them a way out, but it has to be on his terms. His terms place him in the position of the highest authority which is something Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego cannot and will not accept. They believe in an even higher authority than the king and that's what they communicate in their reply:

1. "We do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter." The idea in this sentence is, "We don't need to be careful about what we say about this. We don't need to take time to think this decision over. We know what we're about, and we think that you know as well." They are respectful, not ridiculing the king's gods or his statue, but are simply stating their position - they will not bow to this golden image.
2. The second statement is just as remarkable, and just as jarring to Nebuchadnezzar: "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and He will rescue us from your hand, O king." What has the king just said? "Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand!" That wasn't a question - it was a defiant statement of Nebuchadnezzar's absolute authority. And they are replying to that statement: our God, the God we worship, will rescue us from your hand. You are not the ultimate power in the universe - He is. You are not the one we fear in the end - we honor our God.
3. Their third statement is the one that declares their absolute allegiance to God, the statement that their lives are not their own, and certainly not the king's, but belong to God alone: "But even if He does not (save us), we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." This is an act of defiance against the king, an act that places him in a subservient role to the true King and Lord of all. And Nebuchadnezzar does not respond kindly to this act of defiance:

Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot, that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.

Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?"

They replied, "Certainly, O king."

He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods." (3:19-25)

The king's attitude changed. He no longer wanted to see the three young men repent of their insubordination and worship the statue - he just wanted them punished for their crime of defying him, the ruler of the world, the great king over all the nations around him. How dare they? Heat the furnace seven times hotter than normal and throw these rebels into it! But when his orders are obeyed, the king is in for a shock. The three young men are not burned in the fire, they don't even seem to be harmed. They are

walking around with a fourth person, one that the king later describes as an angel (in v. 28). The question of what god will be able to rescue these young men from the hand of the king of Babylon has been answered: the God of Israel, the God of the Jews. The verses that follow describe the king calling the three out of the fire and the inspection that showed no harm to them - their hair wasn't even singed nor their clothing scorched.

And now we come to the point of the story, the lessons that the king has learned and wants to pass on to his people:

Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent His angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in Him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. Therefore, I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way. (3:28,29)

I find it interesting that Nebuchadnezzar, although profoundly impacted by what he has just witnessed, can't change his own nature. He wants to get "on side" with this God who is new to him, and his way of getting on side is to destroy anyone who opposes this God. He is all about burning people to death in a blazing furnace or cutting people into pieces and turning their homes into piles of rubble, and here he is offering his services to the Lord God Almighty - if He needs any of that sort of thing done. Of course, his offer is not appropriate, or needed, but it does tell us something important about the experience of conversion.

Nebuchadnezzar was a worshiper of several gods, but particularly Marduk. No doubt he would have credited Marduk with giving him success in his battles and would continue to offer sacrifices to this idol, but here he is confronted with something that Marduk could not match. The survival of these men in a furnace that soldiers could not even approach without losing their lives was a miracle, an event that defied nature. Battles could be won without the help of a so-called deity, but what the king had just witnessed simply could not happen - and the appearance of a fourth man into the inferno told the king that a greater power was involved. God had sent His messenger, His angel, and had delivered the three who worshiped Him. So Nebuchadnezzar changes his mind, completely, about the God of the Hebrews. He makes it known throughout his entire empire that he is now a believer in this God, because no other god can save in this way. This is his conversion experience, where he converts or changes, from loyalty to Marduk to a defense of the God who saved three men from the fire.

Nebuchadnezzar is hardly a changed man at this point. We find in the very next chapter that he is still arrogant, still obsessed with being the greatest, still glorying in the magnificence of his royal city, Babylon. We read in that chapter that God goes to great lengths to humble this ruler of men, and that He succeeds in bringing him low, to the place where he acknowledges once again that only God is truly great. That's a further step in the process, something more that Nebuchadnezzar had to go through in order to

fully acknowledge God - but it begins here in the story of the blazing furnace of a king's jealous anger.

What do we learn? One thing I love about studying the Bible is that it always has something to say to me. Yes, it can teach about history, about great men and women of faith, about things that happened that have a lasting impact on the world - but I'm looking for what it has to say to me, something that changes my life, that helps me know what to think, how to live, what to do next. So what kinds of things does Nebuchadnezzar's conflict with three exiles from Judah say to me, or say to you?

1. The first lesson that jumps out at me is that most people will go with the flow. If the line of least resistance is to bow down to a gold statue on the plain, then that's what most people will do. Some observers of Western society call us a nation of "sheeple", which means we can be easily led, manipulated, controlled by the powers that be. The media that controls the flow of news coverage, the educators who control what is considered important to be taught in our schools and universities, the politicians who pass the laws that determine the boundaries for our lives - they seem always able to convince the majority that their proposals are the most reasonable way forward, and they get minimal opposition from the general population. So, our challenge is to think about how these various influencers of our culture are attempting to squeeze us into the world's mold. If we don't think about it, we'll just go along, fitting in with the crowd, maybe feeling vaguely uneasy, but not with the kind of conviction about it that the three fire walkers had. Are we being asked to bow down to something that is less than God? Are we aware of those areas where Satan is applying his pressure? Let's think about how we live, the choices we make and what results will come from them.
2. The second thing that jumps out at me is how much the world runs on pride and ambition. The king of Babylon was proud and ambitious and so conceited that he was willing to build a 90 foot high statue of gold and demand that people worship it. What a foolish idea, but because of his power, he could command that and expect people to obey him. The astrologers who reported the three Jewish men were also ambitious and jealous and willing to turn them in. Was it because they felt the honor of Nebuchadnezzar was threatened? I doubt if they were as high-minded as that - more likely they wanted to look good in the king's eyes, maybe earn a promotion or some honor along the way. All around you are people who are so motivated by pride and ambition and envy that they will say and do a lot of ungodly things in order to reach their goals. We can't be like that, we can't find our drive, our motivation, in the same areas. It's great to have a vision, to work hard towards a goal, but it has to be about more than accumulating things or making other people envious of us. The kingdom of God calls us to higher ambitions, to greater goals, even to the point of partnering with God in building His kingdom, in using whatever success or reputation we have built, to draw others towards Him, to help them find their true purpose in life - that's godly ambition.
3. The third thing that jumps out at me is the confident refusal with which these men addressed the king. They were confident in the way they had lived their lives and stood their ground up until this point. They were confident that God could save them if He wished and that He was worthy of their lives even if He didn't choose to rescue

them. I could see myself in that same situation, mouth dry, words barely coming out, knees shaking, filled with fear. But there is none of that in this account. The three come across as being totally confident and assured that their cause is just and their God will vindicate them. One of the things this story is intended to do for us is teach us to trust God. It teaches that God is more powerful than any human ruler, that His purposes can't be destroyed by any human agency and that He is worthy of our trust. We see that in every story in Daniel and we should hear that point loud and clear.

4. The final "big picture" item that jumps out at me is how important it is to God to humble those who are proud. Nebuchadnezzar's response to God's rescue of the three in the furnace reminds me of James and John offering to help Jesus out by calling down fire from heaven to destroy some inhospitable Samaritans. The king offers to butcher anyone who speaks badly of the God of Israel and he does it because he can't think of any other way to respond and still maintain his pride. Humility is a gift that had yet to come to the king at this point, but humility is a gift that any of us can easily embrace. "Not my will, but Yours be done" is the prayer of the humble. "Lord, use me in Your service in ways that bring honor to Your Name," says that we have learned that it's not about me, it's not about us and our ambitions, but that God alone is worthy of the glory and honor and praise. Let's always continue to be learners, to allow God's Word to teach our minds, our hearts, and our will.