

# 119

## MINISTRIES

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### **The Exiled Prophet, Part 4: When You Walk Through Fire (Daniel 3)**

Welcome back to our study on the book of Daniel. In our last teaching, we covered Daniel chapter 2. In that chapter, God gave Daniel and his three friends an interpretation of a dream that was troubling king Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel told the king both what was in his dream, and what its interpretation was. The king honored God for his interpretation, made Daniel the highest official in his court, and set Daniel’s three friends in positions of authority over Babylon. In this teaching, we’re going to look at Daniel chapter 3. Let’s begin.

In Daniel 3, King Nebuchadnezzar builds an “image,” and requires all of his officials to bow down to it. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refuse to bow to the image, and so the king has them thrown into a fiery furnace. However, God protects them from the flames, and they are taken out of the furnace unharmed. The king then glorifies YHWH for the miraculous protection that he provided for his faithful servants, and promotes the three men to even higher positions in his kingdom.

So, what was this “image” that the king had built? It is described in verse 1:

#### **Daniel 3:1**

[King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its breadth six cubits. He set it up on the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon.](#)

This is the same word for “image” that is used in Daniel chapter 2, when describing the human-shaped statue that Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream. It seems reasonable to assume that this image was a similar thing, an image of a person. However, Babylonian idols were usually housed inside of temples, not placed out in the open (A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, Revised Edition completed by Erica Reiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 255-256). They were also usually much smaller; sixty cubits—about ninety feet—would have been incredibly tall for a statue in the ancient world. The Colossus of Rhodes, the largest known ancient statue, was seventy cubits tall (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 34.18.4), so it would have been truly remarkable for Nebuchadnezzar to set up a human-shaped statue of comparable size.

If the image was not of a human form, another possibility is that it was a stele, which was a slab or an obelisk that had the accomplishments of a king inscribed upon it (Noel, Ted, *A Primer on the Book of Daniel* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009], pp. 28-29). If it was a giant stele, or a similar kind of monument that represented Nebuchadnezzar's accomplishments, then Nebuchadnezzar could have had a good reason to want all of his officials to bow down to it. See, in 594 B.C.E., a group of Babylonians revolted against Nebuchadnezzar, and had to be violently put down (Shea, William H., "Daniel 3: Extra-Biblical Texts and the Convocation on the Plain of Dura." *Andrews University Seminary Studies (AUSS)* 20.1 (1982) pp. 30-31). We don't know exactly when the events of Daniel 3 happened, but if they happened after this rebellion, and the image was a symbol of Nebuchadnezzar's government, then that might explain why the king was so insistent that everyone bow to the image. It might have been a test of loyalty for his, to see whether they supported Nebuchadnezzar or his enemies. To refuse to bow to it might have been seen as an act of treason, at a time when the king was looking to root out disloyal officials from his kingdom.

While we can't say for sure what the image was, or what reasons the king had for setting it up, it is clear that he wanted everyone to fall in line and bow to this image:

### **Daniel 3:2-7**

Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent to gather the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Then the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces gathered for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. And they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. And the herald proclaimed aloud, "You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace." Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

For Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, obeying this decree from the king was unthinkable. God explicitly forbids his people to worship graven images as it says in:

### **Exodus 20:4-6**

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD [YHWH] your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

As we discussed when we covered Daniel chapter 1, the worship of graven images was one of the big reasons that the Jews found themselves captives in Babylon in the first place. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were not going to make the same mistakes as their forefathers. They were faithful and obedient to God. However, they were also foreigners who had quickly ascended the ranks of political power in Babylon, and this made other Babylonian officials envious of them. Their faith was now providing their enemies with the perfect opportunity to get rid of them:

### **Daniel 3:8-12**

Therefore at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and maliciously accused the Jews. They declared to King Nebuchadnezzar, “O king, live forever! You, O king, have made a decree, that every man who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, shall fall down and worship the golden image. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into a burning fiery furnace. There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men, O king, pay no attention to you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

As we mentioned earlier, this event may have occurred after Nebuchadnezzar had experienced a rebellion, so this entire business of forcing the officials to bow to an image may have been a test of loyalty. For these three men to refuse to bow was not just disrespecting Babylonian religion, but could possibly be seen as a threat to the king himself. Of course, their objection to the image had nothing to do with their loyalty to the king; they weren't trying to overthrow the government, nor were they trying to disrespect Nebuchadnezzar. For them, this was a matter of honoring God, who is greater than any earthly king. Let's keep reading:

### **Daniel 3:13-15**

Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought. So they brought these men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, “Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?”

Now, the king puts these men directly to the test. They will bow to this image, or they will be burned alive. What decision are they going to make?

Remember in chapter 1 that Daniel and his friends were presented with a similar situation. They were told that they had to eat the king's food, which meant partaking in an idolatrous ceremony. In that situation, they managed to tactfully negotiate with the Babylonians, and came to a compromise that allowed them to obey God, while still keeping the Babylonians happy. However, here we have a situation where negotiation will not work. There is no compromise to be had; there is no way to make everyone happy. They can either bow to the image and dishonor God, or not bow and dishonor the king.

For believers today, it's preferable to have a Daniel chapter 1 situation, where we can be true to our convictions and still maintain good relations with the unbelieving world around us. It's best for our lives not to be threatened, and our loyalty not to be questioned as we pursue lives of faith and obedience to God. But, what should we do when our lives are threatened, and our loyalty is questioned? Should we give in to the world's unrighteous demands, so that we can continue living or staying in the king's good graces? Or should we stay loyal to God, even if it costs us our social status or even our very lives? Let's keep reading and find out:

### **Daniel 3:16-18**

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.

The answer of these three men is definitive. They are not afraid of the king; God can deliver them out of his hands. But, even if God does not deliver them, and they go to their deaths, it is still better for them to serve God.

What an inspirational response that is! God is so much greater than the powers of this world, that we don’t even have to worry about whether he delivers us from persecution in this lifetime. He is more than capable of doing so, but God’s kingdom is eternal, and ultimately, he will triumph no matter what threats we face from the temporary kingdoms of this world. As James says:

**James 1:12**

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

This “crown of life” that James speaks of is eternal life, a life that we receive after we die, a life that transcends the hardships and evils that we must endure during this life.

**Revelation 2:10**

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were not afraid, because they knew that their lives were not really in the king’s hands, but in God’s hands. Even if the king destroyed their bodies of flesh, God would give them crowns of life in his eternal kingdom. If we are God’s people, we share in that same hope, and can have the same assurance as these three men.

Returning to our story, Nebuchadnezzar did not find these men’s declaration of faith to be inspiring. In fact, he found it infuriating:

**Daniel 3:19-23**

Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury, and the expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated. And he ordered some of the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. Then these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the burning fiery furnace. Because the king’s order was urgent and the furnace overheated, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace.

So, it seems that these men were going to die for their faith. Just like so many faithful prophets and saints throughout history, they were going to pay the ultimate price for their obedience to God. But God actually had another purpose for this situation. God had already revealed himself to king

Nebuchadnezzar through a dream in chapter 2, and now he reveals himself again through a miracle:

### **Daniel 3:24-25**

Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, “Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?” They answered and said to the king, “True, O king.” He answered and said, “But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.”

Like he did in the Exodus, God wanted to use this situation to demonstrate his power to unbelieving people. However, Nebuchadnezzar was not defiantly stubborn like Pharaoh was; when God spoke, Nebuchadnezzar paid attention. Here, when he sees God miraculously save these men from their punishment, all of his rage instantly disappears, and he wants to see the truth; he wants to see what God is doing.

### **Daniel 3:26-27**

Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning fiery furnace; he declared, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here!” Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king’s counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men. The hair of their heads was not singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them.

When the three of them emerge from the furnace, we are told the full extent of this miracle: not only are the men unharmed, but their clothes are not damaged, and they don’t even smell like smoke.

This miracle is not just an amazing example of God’s power, but it is a picture of how God will judge the wicked and deliver the righteous. God’s judgment is sometimes depicted as a smoking furnace, like in the following verses:

### **Genesis 19:28**

And he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the valley, and he looked and, behold, the smoke of the land went up like the smoke of a furnace.

### **Matthew 13:40-43**

Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

So, after this life, the wicked will be consumed like weeds thrown into a furnace—like the men who threw Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into the furnace. However, in this life, sometimes God’s people must endure a furnace of their own:

### **1 Kings 8:50-51**

...forgive your people who have sinned against you, and all their transgressions that they have committed against you, and grant them compassion in the sight of those who carried them captive, that they may have compassion on them (for they are your people, and your heritage, which you brought out of Egypt, from the midst of the iron furnace).

**Psalm 102:1-3**

Hear my prayer, O LORD [YHWH]; let my cry come to you! Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress! Incline your ear to me; answer me speedily in the day when I call! For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace.

Many times, God does not save his people by keeping them out of the furnace, but by protecting them while they are in the furnace. The reason he does this is because the furnace's fire refines and purifies his people. For example:

**Isaiah 48:10**

Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction.

**Zechariah 13:8-9**

In the whole land, declares the LORD [YHWH], two thirds shall be cut off and perish, and one third shall be left alive. And I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call upon my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'They are my people'; and they will say, 'The LORD [YHWH] is my God.'

**Proverbs 17:3**

The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and the LORD [YHWH] tests hearts.

James says that these trials make us "perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." (James 1:2-4). God brings us through fire and refines us in this life so that we will not have any more impurities to burn away when we enter the next life (1 Corinthians 3:11-15). In fact, if we are faithful to God, then we will not even smell like smoke when we get there.

One more important thing about these trials is that God does not leave us to endure them alone. Just like God was there with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, he will be with us as we go through our own refining fires:

**Isaiah 43:1-3**

But now thus says the LORD [YHWH], he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD [YHWH] your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior..."

Let's finish Daniel chapter 3:

**Daniel 3:28-30**

Nebuchadnezzar answered and said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way." Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

So, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego begin this chapter being in the king's wrath, but end it being in

the king's favor. Nebuchadnezzar goes so far as to decree that their God must not be blasphemed. Everything turns out even better in the end.

If we face trials like this, ultimatums from tyrants, who demand that we must disobey God in order to obey them, we can look to this story for an example of what we should do. We should obey the eternal king of the eternal kingdom, not a mortal king whose kingdom will one day turn to dust. Sometimes, God will give us favor with the tyrant, and we will not have to endure the furnace; sometimes, we will go through the furnace and live, as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did. And, sometimes, God will allow the tyrant to destroy our earthly bodies. However, no matter which one of these situations happens, it all plays into God's plan. Whether God is keeping us safe, refining us through fire, or bringing us to our eternal home, he has everything under control. We do not need to fear the power of men.

**Psalm 56:11**

*In God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?*

In the next teaching in this series, we will examine chapter 4 of the book of Daniel. We hope to see you there.

*We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at [www.testeverything.net](http://www.testeverything.net)*

**Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.**

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