

<p>The Bible's Most Amazing Stories: The Fiery Furnace</p>
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Passages from Daniel 3

King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, ninety feet high and nine feet wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. Then the herald loudly proclaimed, "This is what you are commanded to do, O peoples, nations and men of every language: As soon as you hear the music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace." Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the music, all the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

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 music must fall down and worship the image of gold. But there are some Jews 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."

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 have set up?"

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."

Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed and they were 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." Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!"

So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed

their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.

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." Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

The Golden Statue

The plot tension of the story is introduced when Nebuchadnezzar made a huge golden statue and then insisted that everyone present bow down and worship it. The people of the time would by and large have had little difficulty with this request. After all, most people in the ancient Near East were polytheists, used to acknowledging many deities. They could easily assimilate this statue into their religious scheme, especially under the duress of capital punishment. But this was not true of the Judeans in exile. Their belief in one God prohibited participation in this ritual, and their adversaries knew it.

Like many ancient idols it was made from a precious metal, in this case gold. Analogies with other idols known from this time period suggest that the statue was gold-plated not solid gold. The sheer size of the statue is startling. It probably either sat on a large dais or was a long, thin statue as was common among other cultures (though none have been recovered this big) (Tremper Longman, III, *NIV Application Commentary: Daniel*, Zondervan, 96, 98).

The golden statue was understood to represent a god or even in the minds of some identified with a god. It was a deity represented by statue constructed from precious materials and intended to represent a deity of some sort. It was therefore the appropriate object of adoration. The three friends knew exactly what the statue stood for, and they also understood that they could not be faithful to the true God and bow the knee to the statue. They also realized that the cost was heavy indeed, namely, their lives.

They understood their God's will concerning their participation in the ritual on the plain of Dura, because God had expressed that will through the Ten Commandments centuries before and had laid the foundation with the first two commandments (Exodus 20:3-6). By not worshiping this deity, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego became role models for God's people when faced with the seduction or the threat of the worship of deities constructed by human minds and human hands (Longman, 104).

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego

The three friends answer Nebuchadnezzar by acknowledging God's ability to save them, but then they envision the possibility that God may choose not to do so. In other words, they answer Nebuchadnezzar in light of the possibility that they will be burned to ashes in the blazing furnace. Whichever is the case, they say, they will not worship the golden image.

The original hearers of this story would have found great significance in this response. They knew that some of their own people have died at the hands of the persecutors. Was this

because God was unable to deliver at those times? Was it because these others did not have the requisite faith? No, it was that God, in his unfathomable wisdom, did not choose to save them. No matter what the result, deliverance or death, they will not give into the evil powers of the world. They will stay faithful to God (Longman, 101).

Verses 16-18 contain one of the greatest dramatic scenes of the Old Testament literature. Since time immemorial this scene has served as a paradigm for every tiny group of resisters standing before tyrannical authority. In the three Jews standing before Nebuchadnezzar one can see the forebears of Peter and the apostles before the High Priest in council, saying, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29); Paul, before Felix and Agrippa (Acts 24-26); and above all, Jesus before Pilate (Matt. 27:11-14). In the calm solidarity of the young men who have an absolutely firm grip upon their identity and who know clearly what they are commanded to do, standing before the towering, wrathful authority, one sees the spiritual ancestry of those who refused to bow to earthly kings and governments and instead trusted in God. John Calvin himself loved the scene: "When, therefore,...death was placed straight before their eyes, they did not turn aside from the straightforward course, but treated God's glory of greater value than their own life, nay, than a hundred lives, if they had so many to prove faith..." (W. Sibley Towner, *Interpretation: Daniel*, John Knox Press, 51).

The friends' faith was not in their deliverance but in their God. It was of the same order as Job's: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15). With Paul, they wanted to glorify God in their body either by life or by death. In a sense it was all one to them, as long as God's name could be exalted (Phil. 1:20). They knew that should God deliver them, His name would be vindicated. They also knew that should they die, their faithful testimony would display the worthiness of their God and the unworthiness of Nebuchadnezzar's self-created idol. By the manifestation of the truth they would commend themselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. Death would work in them, but life would surely spring forth in others through their witness (Sinclair Ferguson, *The Communicator's Commentary: Daniel*, 78).

Nebuchadnezzar's Acknowledgement of God

At the conclusion of this panel Nebuchadnezzar straightforwardly and instantly leaps to an acknowledgment of God's power. The God of the Jews can *deliver*; this thematic word resonates to its first use in the king's sarcastic question (v. 15), and to the tentative but faithful use of it in the testimony of the Jews (v. 17). It will resonate again in Daniel's own trial by lions in chapter 6 and finally at the moment of universal divine deliverance (12:1). His use of the epithet "Most High God" (v. 26) is not necessarily a statement of faith, but rather is a respectful acknowledgement known in extra-biblical literature and even in the mouths of pagan seers: Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18-20) and Balaam (Num. 24:16), of a demon-possessed person (Mark 5:7), and a pagan slave girl (Acts 16:17). In his benediction (v. 28), however, the king assumes that the virtue in the piece is God's and he responds to that virtue in a way which, while a bit extreme for our senses, is nonetheless thoroughly sincere. He does not identify the God of the Jews as his god, but at least he acknowledges God's reality and undoubtedly in so doing declares Judaism a legal religion to be tolerated in his realm (Towner, 56-57).

Home Group Questions

1. What would have been wrong with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego bowing down to the statue to save their lives?

2. What type of idols do we encounter in our lives that we give honor to?

3. What are the consequences for refusing to worship the idols of our culture?

4. Read Daniel 3:16-18. What do you observe about their faith? What did they expect God to do? How did being uncertain of what God would do effect their attitude toward Nebuchadnezzar?

5. What does this teach us about having faith in uncertain times?

6. Can we prepare for times when our faith is tested? If so, how?

Questions for the Family

7. What about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego make them heroes of the faith who we should follow? What does this story teach us about the power of God?

Questions for Personal Application

8. Put yourself in the place of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Do you have the type of faith that trusts God in difficult situations? What would your response have been to the king's command?