

## **“Faith in the Fiery Furnace”**

**Lesson Text:** Daniel 3:19-28 **Background Scripture:** Daniel 3:1-30

**Devotional Reading:** Isaiah 43:1-7

### **Daniel 3:19–28 (NIV)**

*<sup>19</sup> 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 <sup>20</sup> and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. <sup>21</sup> So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. <sup>22</sup> 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, <sup>23</sup> and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.*

*<sup>24</sup> 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, Your Majesty.”*

*<sup>25</sup> 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.”*

*<sup>26</sup> 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, <sup>27</sup> 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.*

*<sup>28</sup> 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.*

### **TODAY’S LESSON AIMS**

- **Learning Facts:** To understand that God has a way of delivering from evil, and even using evil for good.
- **Biblical Principle:** To know that we should place our faith in God, not man.
- **Daily Application:** To commit to bearing faithful witness to God in facing a personal “fiery furnace.”

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **The Power of Witness**

Salvadorians remember Óscar Romero (1917–1980) as a hero who advocated for the needs of the people in El Salvador. During his time as the Roman Catholic archbishop of San Salvador, he worked against the unjust treatment of his impoverished compatriots. This work included calling out the frequently violent intimidation tactics by the government and guerrilla groups. His belief that the church should show preferential treatment to the poor served as the basis for his work with Salvadorians. His witness was only as effective as his commitment to loving and following God.

However, his commitment ultimately cost him; he was assassinated by extremist groups while observing Mass. Before his assassination, Romero reflected on the risks he faced as a Christian who advocated for the needs of others. He accepted these risks and expressed hope in the promised bodily resurrection of believers.

Christian history recounts numerous stories of people who stood for their faith. Such people committed to live with complete devotion to God. When we commit to trusting in Him, we will inevitably have our faith tested. Today's Scripture recounts the ultimate example of such testing. How would three Jewish men respond to threats from the most powerful individual in their world?

## LESSON CONTEXT

By telling the stories of the prophet Daniel and his associates, the book of Daniel depicts Jewish life in a foreign land. A series of deportations from Judah by the Babylonians began in 605 B.C. (see Daniel 1:1–2). These continued until Judah fell in 586 B.C. (see 2 Kings 25). Among the deported were talented young men selected for their fitness for service to the Babylonian king (see Daniel 1:3–4). Daniel and his associates were taken to Babylon during this time, in approximately 605 B.C. The book describes the wisdom of Daniel and his friends as they lived and served in Babylon (example: 2:17–24). Their positions required that they demonstrate some loyalty to the Babylonian king, evident in their name change (see 1:6–7). This book's events occur from the time of their arrival in Babylon until at least 537 B.C., "the third year of Cyrus king of Persia" (10:1).

Today's lesson Scripture is the second part of the narrative that begins at Daniel 3:1. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon (reigned 605–562 B.C.), had erected a large image of gold at "the plain of Dura" (Daniel 3:1). This location is suggested to have been several miles south of the city of Babylon. Royal subjects, advisors, and kingdom officials arrived for the image's dedication ceremony and to worship it (3:2–5). Refusing to worship the image would result in inevitable death in a "blazing furnace" (3:6). But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—men the king had placed in a leadership position (see 2:49)—refused. They had confidence that the Lord would be with them (3:17–18).

### Royal Anger: Daniel 3:19–23

King Nebuchadnezzar had been known to become angry when he didn't get his way. His anger becomes a central point in the early chapters of the book of Daniel. He became angry when his wise men could not interpret his dreams (see Daniel 2:10–13). Now the refusal of the three Jewish men to bow before the golden image led the king to "furious with rage" (3:13). Whatever goodwill *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego* had experienced from the king (examples: 1:19–20; 2:48–49) was lost. The king had once demonstrated some sense of worship of the God of Israel (see 2:47). However, when the worship of the true God prevented Nebuchadnezzar from receiving worship, the king resorted to anger and wrath.

The king's command that *the furnace* be heated *seven times hotter* may be a hyperbolic figure of speech (an exaggeration for effect). Seven times hotter may suggest completeness. A mention of the number seven in Scripture typically indicates fullness, totality, or completion (examples: Leviticus 26:18, 21, 24; Proverbs 24:16; Matthew 18:21–22). There was likely no way to accurately measure the furnace's temperature to know whether it was seven times hotter. The command intended to communicate that the furnace should be heated to the maximum temperature it could reach. The king's anger must have affected his mind, for the best way to punish the men wasn't to increase the temperature but to decrease it. A hotter fire would kill them instantly and then burn them up, but a lower temperature would cause them to suffer intense pain before they died.

In verse 20 of today's lesson, nothing in the narrative indicates why Nebuchadnezzar chose *the strongest soldiers in his army* to tie up the three and throw them in the furnace. These soldiers would have been the best of the best in the king's military. They were likely an elite fighting force valued for their physical strength and power. Perhaps the king anticipated that the Jewish men would put up a fight when they actually saw their destination.

The furnace was used for smelting ore (valuable metals). It had a large opening at the top through which fuel and vessels full of ore could be placed into the fire, and there was a door at the bottom through which the metal was taken out. An opening in a wall enabled the smelters to check on the progress of their work, and through holes in the wall they could use bellows to make the fire blaze even more. The unit was large enough for at least four persons to walk around in it. It was into this furnace that Nebuchadnezzar cast the three faithful Jews, fully clothed and bound. Such wearable "fuel" would have ignited when the

king's toughest men threw the three Jewish men into the superheated furnace. It seemed like certain death for the men who refused to obey the king.

### **1. What consequences did Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego face for not worshipping the golden image? (Daniel 3:19-21)**

#### **What Do You Think?**

Who in your life best exemplifies faith while in the "fiery furnace"?

#### **Digging Deeper**

What qualities do they have that you can emulate?

Angry outbursts followed by acts of haste and harshness were typical for Nebuchadnezzar. After the king heard that his wise men could not interpret his dreams, he angrily ordered their execution (see Daniel 2:10–13). When hearing of the king's directive regarding his wise men, Daniel questioned why such a "harsh" decree had been issued (2:14–15).

In this verse, Nebuchadnezzar's *urgent* command toward the three Jewish men again revealed his brutality. The king's commandment to increase the temperature of the flame led to the death of his "strongest soldiers" (3:20, above).

The narrative repeats two details already known in verse 23: the names of these three men and the intensity of the fiery furnace. However, that these three men *fell into the blazing furnace* was not the result of an unfortunate accident. They had refused to follow the directive to "fall down" and worship Nebuchadnezzar's image of gold (Daniel 3:5). Now, the king forced the three men to "fall down" to a burning death—or so he thought.

### **2. What happened because of the king's haste? (Daniel 3:22-23)**

#### **Divine Presence: Daniel 3:24-28**

King Nebuchadnezzar viewed the spectacle from near the side entrance of the furnace where the three had been cast bound onto the piping hot floor. However, something unique and miraculous caused the king to be astonished. At that point Nebuchadnezzar literally could not believe his eyes and asked for confirmation of what he saw. The king's counsellors consulted with the king and simply confirmed what the king already knew regarding the three men bound (compare 3:23, above). However, the king saw *four men walking around in the fire*.

The appearance of the fourth man was definitely distinct. Even Nebuchadnezzar could recognize that. Was it Christ who was with His servants during this trial? It certainly could have been, even though the scriptures themselves give no confirming statement to that effect. The only other possibility would have been one of God's angels sent to minister to the three. They often had glistening appearances as in Matthew 28:23 and Revelation 10:1; 18:1. The phrase "son(s) of God" can refer to angels (examples: Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7). No doubt, the Babylonian king received a sign. The God who sent this angelic presence protected His people from being hurt.

### **3. What caused the king to be astonished when he looked into the fiery furnace? (Daniel 3:24-25)**

#### **What Do You Think?**

How has God made His presence known to you in times of danger or distress?

#### **Digging Deeper**

How can you witness about God's presence either during trials or following them?

Upon seeing the fourth figure, the king experienced a change of heart. His rage (see Daniel 3:13) diminished. King Nebuchadnezzar went near the mouth of the furnace and called the faithful Hebrew young men to come out of the furnace. He called them *servants of the Most High God!* That they were indeed! In this proclamation, Nebuchadnezzar admitted the folly of his previous statement regarding the power of God (see 3:15).

#### **4. What did the king proclaim after his astonishment? (Daniel 3:26)**

##### **What Do You Think?**

If you could not verbally proclaim your faith, what evidence could others provide that you are a servant of the Most High God?

##### **Digging Deeper**

In what situations can your faithful actions speak louder than your words?

While the furnace had killed the king's strongest men, the three Hebrew men showed no evidence of exposure to fire or smoke. The princes, governors, captains, and counsellors had bowed before the king's image (see Daniel 3:2-3). But they ended up seeing the limits of the king's power and the miraculous act of deliverance by the God of Israel.

#### **5. What effect did the fiery furnace have on the three men? (Daniel 3:27)**

Nebuchadnezzar saw God's miraculous work of deliverance (Daniel 3:24-27). As a result, the king proclaimed that God be praised. The king changed his word and acknowledged that God's power to save was unparalleled (3:29, not in our printed text).

The king's confession of worship resulted from the character and faithfulness of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They refused to bow before the king's image, even if their decision led to martyrdom, because of their commitment to the one true God. Their commitment to trust God was anchored in their rightly held belief in God's faithfulness (see Daniel 3:16-18). The Lord had promised to be with His people (example: Leviticus 26:12-13), and that promise came to fruition for these three Jewish men. The promises made to the prophet Isaiah applied to the three men: "When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior" (Isaiah 43:2-3; compare Psalm 66:12).

#### **6. What was the king's reaction to God's deliverance of the three men from the fiery furnace? (Daniel 3:28)**

##### **What Do You Think?**

What false gods does our society expect us to worship?

##### **Digging Deeper**

What are some specific ways you demonstrate that you will not worship these idols?

#### **POINTS TO PONDER**

1. Uncontrolled anger leads to harm. (Daniel 3:19-22)
2. God is always present in our time of need. (Daniel 3:23-25)
3. Accept responsibility and do the right thing when you are wrong. (Daniel 3:26)
4. God protects His children. (Daniel 3:27)
5. Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Daniel 3:28; Matthew 5:16)

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Faith and Courage**

Two options face believers when we experience the testing of our faith. One possibility is that we succumb to the testing and quite possibly commit apostasy. The other option is to maintain faithfulness to God, despite the testing. Even when faced with death, the men in today's Scripture chose the latter option. They refused to bend their faith and go along with the king's demands for worship. Their faith in God—rooted in His long history of faithfulness—provided the courage they needed to withstand the testing and resist committing evil.

Although we may never experience the same testing these men faced, all believers will likely experience some amount of testing of our faith. However, we can be encouraged. Our victory has already been established (see 1 John 5:4). Even though our enemy seeks to devour, we can stand firm in our faith. God is faithful to His people, even when they are tested. When we face these experiences, we can have trust and respond with faithfulness to Him (1 Corinthians 10:13).

### **What Do You Think?**

How do you react to global reports of the persecution of Christians?

### **Digging Deeper**

What does the faith of persecuted Christians inspire you to do?

## **PRAYER**

Most High God, You are the one true God. You are faithful to Your people, and You continue to show your faithfulness to us. Through Your Spirit, fortify our faith and trust so we can resist the temptation to worship other "gods"—large and small. Show us how we might support other believers in their trials of faith. Give us encouragement and strength no matter where You have called us. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

## **THOUGHT TO REMEMBER**

Because of God's faithfulness, we can be faithful to Him.

## **ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON**

Next week's lesson is "Faith in Times of Trouble," where we see Daniel's personal conviction of faith in God in the midst of injustice. We will compare and contrast Daniel's faith-expression with those of his three colleagues in this week's lesson. Study Daniel 6:1-28.