

## “If It Be So”

***“If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.”***  
—Daniel 3:17,18

**WHEN THE NATION OF** Israel was conquered by the Babylonian empire, many of their citizens were taken captive and brought to Babylon. Among these were three young Hebrews who were given the Chaldean names, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. In addition to these three, there was also Daniel, who later became one of God’s outstanding prophets. All four of these young Hebrews were given

special training by the servants of Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king. Shortly thereafter, when Daniel was able to tell the king about his dream in which he saw a great humanlike image, and interpret it for him, Nebuchadnezzar gave him a high position in the government.—Dan. 2:1-48

Daniel seized the opportunity to request of the king that his three friends also be given suitable positions in the government, to which he agreed. (vs. 49) Later, Nebuchadnezzar erected a great golden image,

and directed that all the officials in his government attend the dedication of this immense statue. This, of course, included the three young Hebrews. It was further commanded that upon a certain signal, played on musical instruments, all should bow down and worship this image.—Dan. 3:1-5

The three young Hebrews properly concluded that this would be equivalent to worshipping a false god. This would constitute idolatry, which was forbidden by the law of their God. Thus, when the signal was given they did not bow down before the image. (vs. 12) This information was communicated to Nebuchadnezzar, and the three young men were brought before the king. He decided to give them another chance, and said to them, “Now if ye be ready that at what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and dulcimer, and all kinds of musick, ye fall down and worship the image I have made; well: but if ye worship not, ye shall be cast the same hour into the midst of a burning fiery furnace; and who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands?”—vss. 13-15

At this juncture, it is worth noting that no mention is made of Daniel in this account. Where he was on this occasion, we do not know. However, it is possible that, due to his higher position, Daniel was away at the time, conducting business on behalf of the empire. Nevertheless, if he had been present on this occasion, we can be assured that, like the other three Hebrews, Daniel would not have bowed down and worshipped the king's image.

With steadfastness, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to king Nebuchadnezzar with the words of our opening text. They said that God was able to

deliver them from the fiery furnace if it was his will to do so. However, if it was not his will, they would still be delivered, through death, from the hand of the king. In either case, they said they would not worship the king's image. In the response of these three young men, we have a remarkable display of faith, which was based on the promises of God.

## **THE RESURRECTION HOPE**

The Apostle Paul indicates that “in the law and in the prophets” it was taught that there would be “a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust.” (Acts 24:14,15) The three young Hebrews who refused to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's image were undoubtedly of the “just” class, and would know about God's promises of a resurrection. Their faith allowed them to conclude that if the God of Israel did not see best to deliver them at that time from the fiery furnace, he would surely deliver them from the captivity of death in his own due time. Hence they were willing to confront the king and rely upon the wisdom and will of God to deal with them as seemed good in his sight.

This was proper reasoning. Centuries later the Apostle Paul wrote, “If the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept”—I Cor. 15:16-20

God's faithful servants of the Old Testament did not understand fully his loving arrangements

through the redemptive work of Christ, whereby the dead would be restored to life. However, the evidence is that they did have the hope of a resurrection, and it was this that made much of the difference in the manner in which they served God. As part of their life of faith, they were willing to “sleep” in death until the time came for the resurrection promise to be fulfilled. Those who did not exercise such faith in God’s promises readily drifted away into idolatry and into other sins. They additionally would likely have had no scruples against bowing down to the great image which Nebuchadnezzar set up.

## **WE ARE ALSO TESTED**

The example of the three Hebrews is a meaningful one to us who have covenanted to do the Heavenly Father’s will. We have many assurances in the Bible that our God is able to care for us in every time of need. With these assurances we can be enabled to meet every test of faith and obedience which his wisdom may permit to come upon us. Even in the case where a crisis in our life as a Christian may come in the form of a temptation from the Adversary, God permits it as a test of our fidelity to him.

These tests come to us in many ways. Often small things are involved, and we find ourselves confronted with a decision as to whether we will follow the course of righteousness set forth in the Word of God, or whether we will take an easier way. This may be the way of less sacrifice, which would be more pleasing to the flesh. We know, however, that if we choose the Lord’s way, he is able to overrule to his own glory and to our deliverance from trial, if it be his will to do so.

Our decisions as followers of the Master must not be based on the expectation that if we choose the hard way the Lord will lift the burden. Rather, we should act based on what we believe the Lord wants us to do, regardless of what the outcome may be so far as our own immediate circumstances are concerned. In doing so, we should always keep in mind, as the three Hebrews did, that our God is able to deliver us, and that he will deliver us in his due time, even if that due time is not until our resurrection.

### **“BUT IF NOT”**

Another meaningful statement in the reply of the three Hebrews to Nebuchadnezzar is contained in the three words, “But if not.” They did not know whether it would be God’s will to deliver them from the fiery furnace. However, they did not intend to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar’s image. They forthrightly told the king that under no circumstances, even the threat of death in the fiery furnace, would they serve any Babylonian gods, or worship the image he had set up.—Dan. 3:18

We too are given two viewpoints when confronted by tests of faith and obedience. The one is, “If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us.” The other, “But if not,” we will not serve other gods—neither the world, the flesh, nor the Adversary. The three Hebrews knew that God would deliver them out of the hand of the king, but just how or when, they did not know. The same is true with us. We are assured of ultimate deliverance into the kingdom, but just what the Lord’s providence may be in the meantime we do not know. It is a matter of faith.

### THREE HEBREWS DELIVERED

As it resulted for the three Hebrews, God permitted them to be cast into the burning fiery furnace, but they were so fully protected that the flames did not hurt them. When the king investigated he discovered that instead of there being three in the fiery furnace, there were four, the fourth being “like the son of God.” In other words, while the Lord permitted these faithful servants to pass through this “fiery trial,” his presence was with them and they were not injured. The fire had no power upon their bodies, “nor was an hair of their head singed, neither were their coats changed.” They did not even have the smell of fire on them.—Dan. 3:20-27; I Pet. 1:7

The Apostle Paul wrote that it was through faith that these Hebrews “quenched the violence of fire.” (Heb. 11:34) Upon the basis of faith we too can pass through fiery trials with our “inward man,” or “new creature,” unscathed. (II Cor. 4:16; 5:17) We know that our ultimate deliverance will be into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We also realize that this deliverance will mean the death of the flesh and all its interests. Therefore, regardless of what happens to our flesh, and irrespective of the timing of such experiences, we know that God is in charge and is looking out for our eternal, spiritual welfare.—II Cor. 4:14-18; 5:1

We have Jesus for an example. God permitted his enemies to put him to death. Yet Jesus, as a New Creature, came through his “fiery furnace” uninjured, with not so much as the smell of “smoke” upon him. So it will be with us. Our faith can “quench the violence of fire” also, even one which may destroy

our flesh, but the severity of our trials will not harm us as New Creatures. We will know that through all of them our Heavenly Father's presence is with us, by his Holy Spirit, and by all the other means of grace which he, in his love and mercy, is pleased to provide.

## **GOD'S PROVIDENCES VARY**

The Lord's providences in the lives of his people vary. This is brought to our attention by the Apostle Paul, as he presents us with a sizable list of faithful ones of the past, and states briefly some of their works of faith. Of Abraham he said, "When he was tried, [he] offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, Of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure."—Heb. 11:17-19

Notice how Abraham's faith in God's ability to raise the dead entered into his obedience in presenting Isaac for sacrifice. Abraham believed that in the event he sacrificed Isaac, he would be restored to him. His faith was sufficient to give him assurance that he would sustain no permanent loss in obeying God's request to offer Isaac in sacrifice.

Surely this was a great test of faith! Abraham was no different in his feeling for his son than any other devoted father would be. In addition, Isaac was a very special son. Abraham had waited many years for his birth, and when he was born it was the result of a miracle. He might well have wondered why God would perform a miracle to give him this son and then ask him to slay the boy for a burnt offering.

However, Abraham's faith rose above any misgivings he may have had. He prepared the altar, and laid Isaac upon it. He even raised his knife to slay his beloved son. Then the Lord intervened, and provided a ram as a substitute for Isaac. Does our faith lead in paths of obedience to this full extent? We frequently do not understand why God indicates certain paths for us, but are we willing to enter those paths? Do we build our "altars," and place the "wood" upon them? Do we go so far as to raise the "knife" in obedience to the Lord's will?

The enabling power of faith should lead us thus along the pathway of obedience, even though when no "ram" is provided to remove the stress of the trial from our own hearts. We have made a covenant of sacrifice with the Lord, and it should be no cause for wonder, or for hesitation, when he gives us the opportunity to live up to the terms of our covenant. On the other hand, the Lord has his own due times and ways, and we believe that every devoted child of his can testify that "rams" have often been provided. This is especially true where the Lord knows that a particular trial may be too severe for us.

While we have covenanted to die, following in the footsteps of Jesus, in most cases this turns out to be a gradual laying down of our lives, which calls for an extended period of faithfulness, often nearly a lifetime. It is in the experiences of daily laying down our life, and giving up our will, that our faith enables us to accept the Lord's providences. We also have this promise: "God . . . will not permit you to be tried beyond your ability; but with the trial, will also direct the issue, that you may be able to bear it."—I Cor. 10:13, *Wilson's Emphatic Diaglott*



## DANIEL'S EXAMPLE

In Paul's summary of those ancient heroes of faith he speaks of those who "stopped the mouths of lions." (Heb. 11:33) Daniel was one of these. It was in the days of Darius, who was king of the Medo-Persian Empire. Daniel had the king's support, but other officials in the realm were jealous, and sought a way to have him destroyed. They succeeded in deviously persuading Darius to issue a decree that for thirty days no one was to ask a petition "of any God or man," other than the king. Those who disobeyed were to be punished by being thrown to the lions.—Dan. 6:1-8

Darius signed the decree, not suspecting that it was in reality a conspiracy against his beloved Daniel. Once signed, however, it could not be changed, for such was the law of the Medes and Persians. Daniel, of course, continued his prayer habits as usual, doing so in open view. He was apprehended and brought before the king. Darius was helpless, and could do nothing but order that Daniel be cast into the den of lions, which was done.—vss. 9-17

Darius was unable to sleep that night, and early in the morning went to the lions' den and called to Daniel, hoping that he would find him still alive. Daniel was indeed alive, and replied, "O king, live for ever. My God hath sent his angel, and hath shut the lions' mouths, that they have not hurt me: forasmuch as before him innocency was found in me."—vss. 19-22

Here we have an illuminating experience. The Lord permitted Daniel to be cast into the den of lions, but through his angel gave him protection. Even so, it must have been a harrowing experience. Just to

be thrown among lions would be most unnerving. We are not informed as to whether Daniel had any assurance from the Lord that he would be guarded by an angel. Thus, even though he actually was protected, it must have been a severe test of his faith.

Our experiences are often similar. The Lord may permit us to be surrounded by circumstances which threaten to engulf and crush us. Perhaps he intends to send his "angel" to deliver us, but we cannot be sure. As we often sing, "God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform." In order that our faith might be tested to the full, he seldom reveals in advance just which direction his providences are leading. By faith, though, we wait on him.

The "lions' dens" into which we are thrown may not be literal, as in the case of Daniel. We may not be locked up in a prison dungeon with our feet made fast in the stocks, as were Paul and Silas. However, the Lord knows just the circumstances which will serve best to test our faith. It is at these times that we look up to him in faith and say, "If it be thy will, Lord, we know that you are able to deliver us, but if not, give us strength and courage to endure until we have proven worthy of that great deliverance in the first resurrection. Help us to lean on your might, that we might be faithful even unto death, and thus receive the promised crown of life."

The ministry of the holy angels is a very real thing in the life of every servant of God. (Ps. 34:7; Matt. 18:10; Heb. 1:14) An angel closed the mouths of the lions which threatened Daniel. In the case of Paul and Silas a great earthquake shook the prison walls and broke their chains asunder. In both instances, though, the tests were severe before these

miraculous deliverances took place. Our tests may also be severe, and many times the Lord will provide a way of escape. The time shall ultimately come, however, when there will be no way to go except through the floods and storms and fires of trial, and into the kingdom itself.

## **OTHER EXPERIENCES**

Not all the Old Testament heroes of faith were delivered from their trials in miraculous ways as were the three Hebrews and Daniel. Paul says, "Others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not [the fulfilment of] the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect."—Heb. 11:36-40

Here was faith being demonstrated in a different way. There was no miracle to keep the smell of fire from the sheepskins and goatskins which many of these wore. They were stoned, but no angel was there to divert the stones in other directions. They were slain with the sword, with no one to stay the hands of the wielders of the weapons. They were destitute, afflicted, and tormented, not clothed in regal garments of government, protected and honored. They wandered in deserts, mountains, dens and caves of the earth, having no home or resting place.

Nevertheless, their faith rose above all these staggering experiences. It was a faith by which they were convinced that despite the fact that the God of Israel may have seemed to desert them, they knew that he had not. By this living faith, amidst suffering and death-dealing experiences, this group of faithful servants of God received a “good report.” That is, they proved worthy of the reward which awaits them of being “made perfect” after the completion of the “us” class of Christ’s footstep followers of the present Gospel Age.

## **JESUS ENDURED**

Paul refers to these faithful ones of old as a “great . . . cloud of witnesses.” (Heb. 12:1) The faithful ones of the New Testament also serve the Lord’s people today as a cloud of witnesses. When we need encouragement, what a blessing it is to go with Paul on one of his missionary journeys, or to fellowship with him through his epistles. To contemplate upon Peter’s experience in the prison when, being delivered by an angel, the iron gate opened miraculously, is an inspiration to faith and fidelity.

Paul reminds us of the greatest example of all when he wrote, “Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.”—vss. 2-4

Surely to look unto Jesus should help us through any trial. Jesus knew that it was the Father’s will

for him to lay down his life. However, the joy that was set before him by the promises of God enabled him to endure all his trials, including his final one on the cross. It will be even so with us. Many times we will need to draw on this source of strength.

As Paul reminds us, though, we “have not yet resisted unto blood.” That is to say, we have not yet been faithful even unto death as Jesus was. We know that our Heavenly Father will support us by his Spirit. He will strengthen us in all our trials, many times providing partial deliverance from their severity. Nevertheless, finally there must come that resisting “unto blood.” It will be then that we need to lean on the Lord more than we have ever done before, and we can do so with the assurance that he will not fail us.

When Jesus was arrested, he said to Peter, “The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?” (John 18:11) He did drink that cup, completely and victoriously. We also have a cup to drink. (Matt. 20:22,23) May our dedication to the Heavenly Father be so complete that we will not hesitate to partake of it to its final dregs, even “unto blood.” Let us do this with the clear understanding that God’s power could spare us this final test, but that divine wisdom and love know that this would not be best. Let us realize more and more, day by day, that if we are to share with Jesus in the throne of his glory we must be faithful now, even unto death. May our faith be so strong that we will rejoice in the fact that there is no other way to kingdom glory.—Rev. 2:10 ■