

With Us in the Fire

*“Lo, I see four men
loose, walking in
the midst of the
fire, and they have
no hurt; and
the form of the
fourth is like the
Son of God.”
—Daniel 3:25*

THROUGH FAITH THEY “quenched the violence of fire,” wrote Paul, no doubt referring to the three Hebrew young men in the fiery furnace. (Heb. 11:34) Faith is “the evidence of things not seen,” and certainly Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, from

the natural standpoint, could “see” no way of escape from the wrath of Nebuchadnezzar in the event they should defy his command to worship the golden image he had set up. However, their faith in the divine power to care for them took the place of sight, so they were determined to obey God rather than man. One “like the Son of God” stood with them in the fire and delivered them from what otherwise would have been certain death.—Heb. 11:1; Dan. 3:1-25

Jesus taught his followers, “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.” (Matt. 22:21) The Apostle Paul wrote that we should be subject to the

powers that be. (Rom. 13:1; Tit. 3:1) However, with the servants of God in every age, there have been times when their allegiance to divine principles has prevented them from rendering unqualified obedience to earthly rulers. On such occasions they have had placed upon them the necessity of deciding what belongs to God and what can properly be rendered to Caesar.

This was the position in which the three Hebrews found themselves when confronted by Nebuchadnezzar's demand that they worship the golden image which he had caused to be erected. This was an especially severe test which had been thrust upon them, for it came soon after they had been given high positions of trust in the government at the personal request of their great friend and brother-in-exile, Daniel. (Dan. 2:48,49) From the standpoint of their own special interests and advantage, it would have seemed much better for them to have obeyed the king's edict to worship the image.

The Lord often tests his people by permitting circumstances to come into their lives which offer an easier path to serve him, and with plausible reasons why the way of fewer hardships would be better. It could easily have been so reasoned by the three Hebrews. Certainly their exaltation to stations of authority in the kingdom had been the result of divine overruling, and it seemed evident that God wanted them in these strategic positions for the purpose of rendering some special service to him and to his people. This being true, from the standpoint of human reasoning it would seem foolhardy to take a stand against the king which would destroy this advantage, and cost them their lives as well.

However, these ardent servants of Jehovah did not take this view of the situation, for a vitally important principle was at stake. The law of their God clearly stated that they were not to worship other gods, neither were they to bow down to images, and these facts overshadowed every other consideration in reaching their decision. (Exod. 20:1-5) To them, no matter what good might result, or what advantages might be gained by yielding to the king's demand, to do so would still be disobedience to divine law. Like the Apostle Paul, they did not believe that they should do evil that good might follow.—Rom. 3:8; 12:21

It can be very easy, as well as pleasing to the flesh, to fall in with the crowd, especially when, as it were, the band plays, and the conformists are hailed as heroes and receive blessings of the powers that be. This was the alluring opportunity offered to the three Hebrews, but they chose to be nonconformists, thus refusing the deliverance that was offered to them in return for obedience to Nebuchadnezzar. (Heb. 11:35) The issue was clearly stated when a herald for the king announced to the gathered representatives of the kingdom, "O people, nations, and languages, That at what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of musick, ye fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king hath set up: And whoso falleth not down and worshipping shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace."—Dan. 3:4-6

It must have taken considerable time to erect the golden image which stood for Babylon's gods.

The three Hebrews, being highly placed in the government, would be aware that sooner or later they would have to face the issue of loyalty to their God as against bowing down to this graven image. It was not something which had been forced upon them suddenly when the instruments began to play. Undoubtedly they had made up their minds in advance just what they would do when the crisis came, and they could not be swayed from their position, either by the emotional appeal of the music or by the mass hysteria of heathen worshipers.

TRUST IN THE LORD

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego trusted in Jehovah, the God of Israel. They knew that he was able to deliver them, and would, if he chose to do so. Yet, they did not know just how their God would intervene to save them. Faith does not need to know just how and when the Heavenly Father will make good his word on behalf of his people. It is enough to know that he is able, and that his infinite wisdom directs the time and manner in which his grace is made to abound toward those who put their trust in him.—Prov. 30:5

Neither Daniel nor the three young Hebrews were popular among the other rulers of the realm, who were always glad when they could find, or even create, an opportunity to discredit them in the eyes of the king. Here was just such an opportunity. Doubtless these young men were explicitly watched by the others to see if they would bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's image when the music began to sound. When they did not, their disobedience to the king was immediately reported.—Dan. 3:12

Nebuchadnezzar was understandably angry. He was a dictator over his empire, and was not accustomed to having his decrees ignored or flouted. Yet, he was in a peculiar position. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had been especially honored by him at the request of Daniel. The king felt under some obligation to Daniel because of the wonderful service rendered in the recalling and interpretation of his dream in which he saw himself as the golden head of a great image. Perhaps it was because of this, and despite his rage, that he gave the disobedient Hebrews a second chance.

Seemingly, the king now spoke personally to the three, and asked them if it were true that they deliberately had not bowed down to his image. He did not doubt the report that had been given to him, but he wanted to know if the Hebrews had willfully refused to obey, or whether it had been merely a case of misunderstanding. To make sure of this he said, “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 which 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?”—Dan. 3:14,15

The issue was now clear-cut. Nebuchadnezzar had not only threatened the three Hebrews, but had defied their God. The faith and courage reflected in their reply to the king are shown in their immediate response: “We have no need to answer thee in this matter.” (vs. 16, *Revised Version*) By this answer they clearly showed that they were much more

interested in being obedient to God than having the king's favor restored to them.

Then these courageous young men gave the reason for their boldness: "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." (vss. 17,18) The king had endeavored to frighten them with the assertion that their God would be powerless to interfere with what he proposed to do if they disobeyed, but this did not cause their faith to waver in the slightest.

"Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us." Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego knew this. What they were not sure of was whether it would be God's will to deliver them from the fiery furnace. However, even if it were not, they did not propose to accept deliverance on the condition offered by Nebuchadnezzar. While they did not understand God's great plan of salvation as his people are privileged to know it today, the three Hebrews evidently believed that they would be raised from the dead—that death was not the end of their eternal existence. Thus, while they were confident of Jehovah's ability to thwart Nebuchadnezzar's purpose to destroy them, yet if this were not his will, they would still be faithful to their God and thus prove worthy of deliverance in a "better resurrection."—Heb. 11:32-35

GOD'S DELIVERANCE

When Nebuchadnezzar realized that the failure of the Hebrews to worship his image was by willful

design, and that they could not be frightened into changing their minds even when another opportunity was afforded, he was “full of fury, and the form of his visage was changed” against them. He ordered the furnace to be heated seven times hotter than usual, and commanded that the “most mighty men” in his army be used to bind these disobedient ones and cast them into the furnace. The heat was so intense that even these “mighty men” were killed as they cast the three Hebrews into the flames.— Dan. 3:19-22

The king had made good his threat. (vs. 23) As dictator of the realm, there was no other course he could take. He had satisfied the demands of his fury, and perhaps was quite pleased with the thought that nothing could interfere with the supremacy of his rulership. Nebuchadnezzar had learned to know something of the ability of Israel’s God, who earlier had enabled Daniel to recall and interpret his dream when all the wise men of the kingdom had failed. In spite of the king’s momentary satisfaction, this was not a reassuring thought. Under ordinary circumstances a king of Babylon would not be especially concerned over the fate of criminals he had condemned to death. This was not an ordinary circumstance, however, and it seems that as soon as the heat of the furnace subsided sufficiently to permit inspection, Nebuchadnezzar went personally to peer into the flames.

We do not know the exact thought which went through the king’s mind as to why he troubled himself to look into the furnace. However, had he been completely sure of his position, he would have known that there would be little or nothing to see

in the furnace except the flames. Nebuchadnezzar was astonished by what he saw. Daniel's God—the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—had delivered them, not by removing them from the fire, but by preserving them alive in the flames!

The king called his rulers and inquired of them concerning the number who had been cast into the furnace. He was told it was three, but now as he said, he saw four unbound men walking in the midst of the fire, apparently unhurt; and the form of the fourth was like the "Son of God." What subsequently occurred is not surprising. The three Hebrews were asked to "come forth" out of the midst of the fiery furnace, and a proclamation was issued by the king forbidding anyone in the whole empire to speak against Israel's God. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were then promoted to even higher positions in the realm than they had formerly occupied.—vss. 24-30

GOD'S PRESENCE

Many have wondered about Nebuchadnezzar's reference in Daniel 3:25 to "the Son of God." In the Hebrew text, however, there is no definite article to warrant the translation "the Son." The expression should more properly read "a son of the gods," and it is so rendered by a majority of Bible translations, including the *Rotherham Emphasized Bible*, the *Revised Version*, and the *English Standard Version*. In verse 28 the king identifies this fourth one in the furnace as an "angel," or messenger, whom the God of Israel had sent to deliver his servants. The expression properly translated "the Son of God" only appears in the New Testament, where it

is applied to Jesus, the only begotten Son of the Heavenly Father. (Mark 1:1; John 3:16; 5:17-25) In the Bible, angels, such as the king saw in the midst of the fiery furnace, are also referred to on a number of occasions as “sons of God.”—Gen. 6:2,4; Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7

However, the important consideration in this reassuring illustration is that God is able to deliver his people from the hands of their enemies. To Moses, God said, “My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest.” (Exod. 33:14) This means that he could be assured that the Lord would know of his needs, and would supply them, of whatever nature they might be. In a beautiful statement concerning God’s care over ancient Israel, we read, “In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them: ... and he bare them, and carried them all the days of old.”—Isa. 63:9

OUR TRIAL OF FAITH

“Without faith it is impossible to please” God, wrote Paul. (Heb. 11:6) It was the faith of the three young Hebrews that was on trial—their faith in God’s ability to deliver them from the fiery furnace, and their confidence in the wisdom of God as to whether it would be best to deliver them from the flames, or to deliver them in the “better resurrection.” True faith in God implies more than a belief in his power to physically deliver. Rather, it includes confidence in the rightness of his decisions with respect to every detail of his plan for the whole world, and his will for us as individuals in every experience of life.

When we behold the marvelous works of creation, it is not too difficult to believe that the Creator of

it all is able to care for us, and to deliver us from evil. However, to have confidence in his way and time to deliver is more difficult. The three Hebrews' faith in God extended to the "if not" view of the matter. It is in this respect that all the Lord's people have their severest tests of faith.

The situation today is quite different for the followers of God than it was for the three Hebrews. We are not commanded to bow down to a golden image, although the deceitfulness of riches might tempt some to bow down to the "god" of wealth. We are not called upon to worship heathen gods, but we need constantly to guard against the danger of bowing down to gods of our own making—idols which our wayward hearts might set up in place of God.

There is the god of ease, the god of pleasure, the god of pride, and the god of self. We might conceivably worship our home or our family, and allow them to take the place in our hearts which belongs to our Heavenly Father. We might have special interpretations of the Bible to which we bow down. It is only by resolutely refusing to bow to any of these modern gods that we demonstrate our faith in the true God, our loving Heavenly Father.

Let us resolve to be loyal to our God, not for reward, but because it is right. If the Lord delivers us from trial, which we know he has the power to do, we will rejoice and endeavor to use the favorable experiences of life to his glory. If he allows us to suffer, regardless of what may feed the flames, we know that he is with us in the "fire," and that he has sent his angel to protect us from spiritual harm. Thus, when we reach the end of the way there will be no hurt to the New Creature. All that will have

happened is the burning of the fetters of flesh that we may be free, and be exalted to rulership in the kingdom with Christ.

The three Hebrews were exiles in Babylon and subject to the powers that be. They had little or no choice as to whether they would occupy honored positions in the government, be thrust into prison, or cast into a fiery furnace. The changing scenes of their lives were brought about through their unwavering loyalty to God. The great lesson to us in their example is that they were obedient and steadfast, regardless of the result.

So with us today, we are as exiles in this “present evil world.” (Gal. 1:4) Although we are in the world, we are not part of it, but are “strangers and pilgrims.” (I Pet. 2:11) Let us be true to our God and to his standards of righteousness. Only our faith will enable us to do this, and to gain the victory. Let us not become “weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.”—Gal. 6:9 ■