

Daniel 3:8–30 — The Burning Fiery Furnace (Part 2)

The Good Confession; Subjection to Kings; The Lord Walking in the Fire; Bonds Burned Off but Garments Untouched; Faith Without Precedent; and Nebuchadnezzar's Insufficient Response

Scripture Reading: Daniel 3:8–30; 4:17, 34–35; 1 Peter 2:13–14; Romans 13:1–2; Colossians 1:16; 1 Timothy 6:12–13; John 20:29

“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 thy 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)

“Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of God.” (Daniel 3:25)

The Good Confession: Quiet Confidence Under Threat of Death

First Timothy 6:12–13 calls believers to strive earnestly in the good conflict of faith, laying hold of eternal life, having confessed the good confession before many witnesses, just as Christ Jesus witnessed the good confession before Pontius Pilate. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are a perfect illustration of that command centuries before it was written. They stand before a king who has already stated the penalty: anyone who does not bow will be cast into the burning fiery furnace that same hour. Their response is not bravado, not a demonstration, not a calculated opportunity for witness. It is simply and quietly the truth: our God is able to deliver us. He will deliver us out of thy hand, O king. But if not —

we will not serve thy gods nor worship the golden image.

The but if not is one of the most remarkable phrases in the Old Testament. They are not confessing faith in a guaranteed outcome. They are confessing faith in a Person. They did not know exactly what God would do. There was no precedent for deliverance from a burning fiery furnace in their history. Before this, no one had ever been delivered from such a thing. That is the nature of faith: trusting in God when there is no prior example to point to, just as Abraham reckoned on resurrection before there had been a resurrection, because he knew what God had promised and knew that God could do what was needed to fulfil it.

Subjection to Kings: 1 Peter 2, Romans 13, and Colossians 1

The question of what believers should do when civil authority requires something wicked has a clear answer in Scripture, and it is precisely the answer Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego give. Three New Testament passages establish the principle. First Peter 2:13–14: be in subjection to every human institution for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme or to rulers as sent by him. God's intent for rulers was that they chasten evildoers and praise those who do right; the fact that many rulers do not live up to that intention does not withdraw the authority God established through them.

Romans 13:1–2: let every soul be subject to the authorities above him, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist are set up by God. He that sets himself in opposition to authority resists the ordinance of God, and shall bring sentence of guilt on himself. These verses were written during the reign of one of the most evil emperors the Roman Empire ever produced. The Holy Spirit writing through men was not working in an era of just and pleasant kings; the application to evil rulers was fully anticipated. The founding of the United States in armed rebellion against a king, whatever its historical justifications, was not of God: Romans 13:2 does not leave room for it.

Colossians 1:16: by him were created all things, the things in the heavens and on the earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones, lordships, principalities, or authorities — all things have been created by him and for him. Government itself was created by Christ and for Christ. Its authority derives from him regardless of whether those who hold it acknowledge him. The practical conclusion from all three passages is identical to what Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did: full subjection to the king in all things, until and only until the king commands participation in something that God has explicitly forbidden. Then, and only then, a quiet refusal — not rebellion, not agitation, not organizing a resistance, but a personal refusal to commit the specific sin being demanded.

The accusation of the Chaldeans in verse 12 — these men regard thee not — was a false accusation. They did regard the king. They had served faithfully in the administration of Babylon. They were not men of disobedience or insubordination. But they could not worship an idol. The accusers knew what would get the king's attention, and they used it. The charge was false; the specific refusal was real.

Nebuchadnezzar's Setup: The Government Was Not Committed to Him for This

Daniel 4:17 preserves the later word given to Nebuchadnezzar himself: the Most High ruleth over the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will, and setteth over it the basest of men. Not the finest men, not the most righteous men. God commits government to men knowing exactly the manner of man they are, and he does it for his own purposes which are not thwarted by their character. Nebuchadnezzar received the authority over the earth directly from God to represent God to the material creation — just as Adam had done. He was not given that authority to build a ninety-foot golden idol to himself and command universal worship. That is not what government was established for, and chapter 3 is the record of the moment that became absolutely explicit.

The Lord in the Furnace: Omnipotence Revealed

The furnace was heated seven times hotter than usual. The men who threw the three in were killed by the heat. Then Nebuchadnezzar, watching, saw four men loose, walking in the fire, and said the appearance of the fourth is like a son of God — a divine being, someone of a different category from the others. He is not specifically identifying the pre-incarnate Christ with precision; he is recognizing that what he sees in the fire is qualitatively different from a man, something in the nature of the divine.

At the end of chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar had seen omniscience: God knowing what he had dreamed, knowing what he had thought in his heart. Now he sees omnipotence: God able to do what no fire can prevent. He had asked, who is the God that shall deliver you out of my hands? The answer is: the God who is already in the furnace with them, walking with them. The Lord does not associate himself with the outward winners. He was not there when Nebuchadnezzar declared Daniel's God to be remarkable. He was there when three bound men were cast into an impossible situation and had no resource but him.

The detail about what happened to their clothing is instructive. The bindings were burned off. The garments — hosen, tunics, cloaks, outer robes — were untouched. Not a hair of their heads was singed. The smell of fire had not passed on them. The fire burned precisely what needed to be burned — what held them back — and left untouched everything that belonged to them. Their cloaks, the outermost garment visible to the world, representing their testimony, were not damaged. The bonds that had been placed on them by the king's command, which would have restrained their testimony, were consumed. They came out of the fire not diminished but freed.

Faith Without Precedent; Dying Grace for Those Called to It

There is sometimes a temptation to ground faith in examples: someone else faced a similar thing and the Lord delivered them, therefore I can trust the Lord in this. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had no such example. A fiery furnace deliverance had never happened before. Their faith was not in a formula or a historical precedent; it was in the living God who could do what had never been done. John 20:29 speaks to exactly this: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.

The question sometimes arises, could I stand firm if I faced something like this? The answer a wise older believer once gave is worth remembering: that is because the Lord has not called you to do that. He is giving you living grace now. If he calls you to die, he will give you dying grace. God gives the grace for what he calls us to in the moment it is needed, not in advance. The way to be ready for the large tests is to practice faith in the small ones — to live daily with dependence on the Lord so that faith, exercised repeatedly in ordinary things, is there and strengthened when something extraordinary is demanded.

Nebuchadnezzar's Response: Still Not Enough

At the end of the chapter, Nebuchadnezzar declares: blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who hath sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him... there is no other God that is able to deliver after this sort. He makes a decree that anyone speaking against this God shall be cut in pieces. He promotes the three men. And he still says the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego — not my God. Not: I want this God to be my God.

He has now seen both omniscience and omnipotence. He has received two extraordinary interventions from the God he acknowledged to be the God of gods and Lord of kings. He has watched that God make fools of his own wise men, survive his own furnace, and confirm his servants before his entire court. And he has not yet submitted. The Lord is still not finished with Nebuchadnezzar.

Chapter 4 records what it finally took — the stripping of his mind, seven times passing over him as he grazed in the field like an ox — before Nebuchadnezzar came to the point of genuine confession and praise. What a demonstration of the depth of man's resistance to God, and of the patient persistence of God's grace.

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.