

THE FURNACE OF BLAZING FIRE

SERIES: FORTIFIED FOR FAITHFULNESS

By Steve Zeisler

The names Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego have captured our imaginations in various settings. They have been set to music. Parents have used them to put their children to bed: "Shadrach, Meshach, and To-Bed-We-Go." My favorite rendering is "Your Shack, My Shack, and the Bungalow." But despite the catchy sound of these names, the actual story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel 3 is intense and dramatic. We have much to learn from their encounter with Nebuchadnezzar and the fiery furnace.

You will recall that at the end of chapter 2, because Daniel was able to interpret King Nebuchadnezzar's dream, the king made him a very senior official in the empire of Babylon. At Daniel's suggestion, the king also gave Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego positions of authority in the province of Babylon. In chapter 2 the men were still less than twenty-two years old. By the time the events of chapter 3 took place, about twenty years had elapsed. During these years they had been serving as officials in the government, and as a matter of course they had gained responsibilities, authority, and enemies.

As I've observed before, the events of the first half of the book of Daniel took place during the period of the exile of Judah in Babylon. The exile signified the end of Israel's history as a nation. Having once been given the Promised Land, and later a succession of kings, the Jewish nation proceeded to disintegrate over a number of centuries. The exile was the last stage of its disintegration. Nebuchadnezzar subsequently repopulated Judah with other peoples. The experience of most of the Jews in exile, therefore, was one of living in communities of humiliation, sorrow, and difficulty. Three and four generations lived together remembering Jerusalem and their lost land, suffering the indignity of exile, and wondering if God would ever turn their fortunes around.

It is one thing to live in community with those who sorrow along with you. But the experience of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who were taken into captivity twenty years earlier than the majority of the exiles, was entirely different. As young teens they were given terrible circumstances early in life without mentors or leaders to help them. Set in a world of Babylonian power where God was not known, they were called to be God's representatives, witnesses to the truth to the unbelievers surrounding them.

The New Testament tells us that we too are required to be witnesses to the truth, so these men will serve as great models for us. Most of us live surrounded by more unbelievers than believers. We don't typically live in communities of faith where every association around us is with people who are like us. The vast majority of us work in environments that are certainly unbelieving, if not actively hostile. Maybe you are more often influenced by those who are not of the faith in your family or cultural settings. So we want to learn from the calling of these men to be witnesses.

To speak the truth, to live the truth

Consider the word "witness" for a moment. In the New Testament the word for witness is *martureo*. You might rightly suspect that this is where we get the English word "martyr." The responsibilities of being a witness may indeed include giving up your life. Being a witness begins with what you say and then almost always proceeds

into who you are. These are the two big concepts behind the responsibilities of a New-Testament Christian witness, and they apply for us as witnesses today. We need to actively declare the truth, the great themes of the gospel. But we also need to live the truth. There are times when speech is no longer required and the focus of those who are looking on is whether we believe and live what we say, whether our life will back up what we've talked about.

In some ways chapters 2 and 3 of Daniel provide a stereo effect in looking at these two concepts. Chapter 2 is about speech. God stirred Nebuchadnezzar in his dreams, and he was troubled and couldn't sleep. He was angry and threatening because his astrologers and diviners couldn't answer his questions. God was acting, and he needed somebody to explain what future events the terrifying dreams were revealing. Who would speak for God? Believing people are called, as Daniel was in that setting, to say what needs to be said. We were reminded in the last message (Discovery Paper #4701) that we are "stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Corinthians 4:1). We are the ones who can tell those with broken hearts the truth. We are the ones who can shed light on the path, answer the desperate, and correct the lost. We've been given the words to say, and those words are life itself. Recall the old gospel song *I Love To Tell The Story*:

"I love to tell the story
Of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and His glory,
Of Jesus and His love....

"I love to tell the story,
For some have never heard
The message of salvation
From God's own holy Word.

"I love to tell the story,
For those who know it best
Seem hungering and thirsting
To hear it like the rest....

"I love to tell the story,
'Twill be my theme in glory
To tell the old, old, story
Of Jesus and His love." (1)

But sometimes it is not words that are called for. The focus of our responsibility before God and those who look on is to *be* the truth, to live it out, to act as we should, to embody the gospel and to challenge others with our lives rather than our speech. And that is what we have come to in chapter 3.

At the heart of the story is a speech in the middle of the chapter. The king's fury against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had been aroused. Verse 16: "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, 'O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter....'" Essentially they were saying, "You've raised issues, but we are not going to enter into a dialogue, explain ourselves, or look for a way out." Verses 17-18: "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." They were declaring, "Regardless of anything else, there are two things we know are true: First, we count on God to determine our future. And second, we will not bow."

I hope the power of this example reminds us that there are times when who we are speaks louder than anything we could say as a Christian testimony. It is the choices we make, the lives we live, and the commitments we hold to come hell or high water, that will impress people. The things that we do either honor God or they don't. These three men can inspire us in this.

Let's start at the beginning and read the story.

"You must worship the image of gold"

Verses 1-2:

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. He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up.

Ever since Nebuchadnezzar's dream recorded in chapter 2, he liked to think of himself in terms of gold. He decided to declare a national outdoor festival in which a great statue was erected, and the leaders of all the people in the empire were to come and in unison glory in Nebuchadnezzar's greatness. He wasn't starting a new religion, he was attempting to magnify himself and unify his empire.

A similar kind of public festival or display in my generation's heyday was Woodstock. Another example in a culture like ours is the Super Bowl. It's an event in which many people join together and acknowledge something that is important to them. Well, as far as Nebuchadnezzar was concerned, he was most important, and he built an image that would glorify him and strengthen his empire.

Verses 3-7:

So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it.

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 sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of 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 horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

What was in Nebuchadnezzar's mind here? It is significant to realize that he had decided to use a party environment to accomplish this drive to glorify himself. He might have gathered everybody together with war horns, battle drums, rattling chains, and threats of extinction. He might have been harsh and cruel. But he

thought of himself as an enlightened despot. Everybody should party in his honor, then at the sound of the music humiliate themselves by falling on their faces to worship his image. He considered it a privilege for them to be invited into a celebration to honor his greatness.

Nebuchadnezzar lived in a time when everybody had their own gods. He didn't require them to change gods when they were conquered. They could privately believe whatever they wanted—as long as they knuckled under and agreed that the god of the victorious army was the chief of the gods.

The idea that anyone would not go along with this celebration was impossible for him to accept. He was being magnanimous, sharing his brilliance with them. That partly explains the fury he would feel when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused. Saying that the most self-impressed people in the world are not impressive, or speaking of a God who is higher than theirs, is the most infuriating thing you can do to such people. Claiming that what men call great is merely ridiculous would be bound to ruffle the feathers of someone like Nebuchadnezzar.

The crisis moment

Verses 8-12:

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 sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. 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.

Jews are always difficult to conquer. They never easily go along with the notion that other gods are in charge. Specifically, as the astrologers in effect put it, "They pay no attention to you O magnificent King Nebuchadnezzar, O Head of Gold who will live forever! They aren't impressed by the image you built!"

Verses 13-15:

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 and worship the image of gold I have set up? Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"

He was declaring, "My hand is the strong hand! My fire is the blazing fire! My image is exalted! What I say is what is, and no gods will rescue you!" The challenge to them is direct.

The enemies who turned in our three heroes were like the enemies of unbelievers in any time and place. There will be people in some settings in your life who hate you, reject you, disapprove of you, and would undermine you for no other reason than your faithfulness to God.

So the opportunity presented itself to the enemies of these three Jews. It doesn't appear to have been planned. (In chapter 6 we will see an occasion when Daniel's enemies deliberately plotted to put him in the same kind of vise.) What happened in this case was that jealous officials realized that during the music when everybody was supposed to fall down, there were three men standing on the edge of the crowd who never bowed. These three men, political opponents whose worldview they hated, could be put in serious trouble over it, and they seized the opportunity.

Suddenly Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were pressed to answer the big question. They had figured out who they were and what they stood for, how to live rightly among unbelievers. They had worked on it for a long time. So now, in a crisis, how would they act?

Actions that speak louder than words

Verses 16-27:

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied, "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. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and 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.

The final paragraph of chapter 3 is a speech Nebuchadnezzar gave. As I mentioned previously, there are three speeches by Nebuchadnezzar at the end of chapters 2, 3, and 4, respectively, and we are going to look at all of those together when we get to chapter 4.

This story of the fire makes a point about suffering in general. What happens when, though we are innocent, we are bound and thrown into a situation of extreme difficulty, a trial, when we find ourselves in a place that is hard and dangerous and uncertain, when someone intends evil against us? Consider three statements that interpret the experience of the children of Israel. First, God is there with us. He doesn't expect us to face it alone, to just do our best and then come back and tell him what we've learned.

Second, at the end there is no regret. "There was no smell of fire on them." This is not to suggest there won't be any pain. In fact you very well may have scars from the trials you suffer. But remember what Paul said about his scars at the end of Galatians. He said, "These scars are the brand-marks of Jesus. These are marks claiming that the Lord owns me. I have gone deep with him in suffering these things—and I wouldn't have it any other way. There is nothing I regret at the end of the trials that God has taken me through."

Third, even though the three men didn't get burned, their bonds did get burned. The inhibitions, narrowness, and struggle were taken away. They were made freer in the fire than they had been before. Trials very often expand our experience rather than restrict it.

With this example of witness before us, what applications might we draw?

The choices before the crisis

First, be certain that there are times when the most important thing about you is who you are, not what you say. Your conviction, the stance you will not retreat from, is undeniable testimony to the truth that formed you.

Another application regards identifying the line that we shouldn't cross. For twenty years these men were officials of the empire. They served the king well and rose to positions of authority. They lived in the world without being of the world. They had to learn when to deflect opposition with love, faith, or wisdom, and when to confront. It wasn't easy for them to know when to speak up and when to be quiet. It is difficult to know when the moment is a crisis moment for you—when it's time to stand up to a family member, a boss, or someone else in authority. How do we know when to do that? In fact, we enter such moments only at the direction of God's Spirit within. He uses Scripture, the counsel of others, and finally his own authoritative witness to our hearts.

Until that moment arrives, what we can do is make decisions to become a person of character, to have the same resolution when no one is watching as when people are watching. We can make decisions to not compromise, to know what our weaknesses are, to say no when it's required or yes when it's required. We don't know when the day of crisis is going to come, but we can grow strong so that when it comes we are ready.

These three men told Nebuchadnezzar, "We're not impressed with your power, your wealth, your stories of greatness, your love for yourself." They told him they didn't want what he could give them—the standing, the personal riches, a great name, or anything else. They weren't frightened or intimidated by his threats. And they became such people over years—making small but important personal decisions for righteousness.

Let me mention three obvious areas where tension exists for people in this part of the world. The first is what we do for money. How important is it? Have we bowed, or are we in danger of bowing, before the god of money? Maybe it's time to say, "I'd rather make less and give more than I do now. I won't be made to live in a way that is dishonoring of the Lord for the sake of money."

The second is time. There is a point where we need to say, "I won't sacrifice worship, ministry, fellowship, family, and other things that are important and spend all of my life on things that aren't important just because the god of this age says, 'Bow to the idol.'"

The last is stature or prestige. There may be a time when you will have to say in some practical sense, "I have less in common with the beautiful, elite, and storied people of this world who don't believe than I have with the new converts at the rescue mission who love Jesus. And if it costs me my social standing, then so be it." Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:25, "The foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom."

Do you know the two things that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego knew? "The God we serve is able to save us, and he will rescue us. But even if he does not, we will not worship the image of gold."

Notes

1. A. Catherine Hankey, *I Love to Tell the Story*.

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Steve Zeisler
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