

The Fiery Furnace



During his reign as King of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar set up a massive golden image in the plain of Dura, outside Babylon, in a nearby province. It was approximately 90 feet tall and 10 feet wide, or maybe 10 feet in thickness. A dedication ceremony was ordered by the King. The various dignitaries representing the civil and military authorities in the land were summoned to stand before the image. No doubt this added more importance to the occasion in the mind of the people in Babylon.

Various kinds of musical instruments were present for the dedication of the idolatrous image. We might not know today exactly what the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery and dulcimer were in these ancient times but we can accurately summarize that they comprised both “wind” and “string” instruments. The *harp* was probably similar to what we think a harp to be: an eight to ten string instrument strummed by the hand. The *sackbut* might have been a stringed instrument in the form of a triangle. A *psaltery* was yet another stringed instrument but a different shape than the harp or sackbut, offering different pitched sounds. The *cornet* was some kind of horn, and the *flute* was another kind of wind instrument with holes placed along the instrument to offer different notes. Double pipes were played as well. Sometimes a leather bandage was placed over the mouth of the player to prevent the escape of breath from the corners of the mouth. The *dulcimer* may have been a stringed instrument offering sweet sounds, by plucking brass wires with little sticks. Or, some believe it was a “bag pipe” with one or two pipes coming out of a bag made of animal skin. These and many other instruments were present at this dedication ceremony to offer a variety of sound to the already charged sense of sight.

Nebuchadnezzar did not bring all the dignitaries, music and people together to just view the image and hear some music, but all were commanded to bow down before the image and offer worship. If any refused to do so, they were to be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace (*Daniel 3:6*).

Daniel’s three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who had been placed in authority over the king’s affairs in the province of Babylon, did not bow down to offer worship before the golden image. This was noted and reported to the king, which showed disrespect not only to the image, but to the king himself (*Daniel 3:12*). He was filled with rage!



He commanded that the three men be brought before him. Maybe they just made a mistake, and just happened to not bow in worship, so he said, “*Is it of purpose, O Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that ye serve not my god, or worship the golden image which I have set up?*” (*Daniel 3:14*). He gave them another opportunity to do “well” before the king and bow

when they hear the music played. However, if they refuse to do as the king commands, they will immediately be thrown into the fiery furnace (*Daniel 3:15*). What the king was about to hear from these three made him even more furious! They replied, “*O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer thee in this matter. 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 has set up*” (*Daniel 3:16-18*). Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were not being smart-alecks by saying we have no need to answer thee in this matter, but they were simply saying they do not need to huddle up, discuss the situation and change their course to meet the King’s current request. They were men of conviction, not deterred by fear or circumstances.

Daniels’ three friends, like Daniel, were guided by God’s unalterable Law. God had long ago commanded his people to not have any other gods before Him. No images were to be erected or worshipped (*Exodus 20:3-4*). Idolatry was clearly condemned, and God still condemns having any other gods before Him today in any form (*Col. 3:5*). Like in Daniel and his three friends’ day, we are always to serve God according to what God’s word says (*cf. Lk. 10:26-28*). Worshipping is a form of serving, and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were not about to do either (*cf. Deut.6:13, Matt. 4:10*).

These three men did not give in to “peer pressure” or the popular thought of “everybody is doing it so, why can’t I?” (*Daniel 3:7*). They did not give in to the king’s request thinking they should be polite and show gratitude for their promotion by the king (*Daniel 2:49, 3:12*). They proved that godly young people are not governed by “situation ethics” when certain death would dictate that these men should save themselves, go against what God has taught, and live to serve God another day. The fiery furnace before them, even heated seven times hotter, was not a situation to make them change their mind and conviction. They believed God was able to deliver them from the king’s fiery furnace, but even if they were to die in the flames, they would not sin against God and disobey His clear Word.

It is interesting to see the choices the king offered, and how they differ from the choices Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had in their mind. The King said you can worship my image and live, or you can refuse and die. The three young men had the choice to not worship the image and die, or not worship the image and maybe God would deliver them. Worshipping the image was not a matter of choice to the three men, regardless of the choices offered by the king. God not delivering them from death had nothing to do with His “ability” in their mind, but it had everything to do with His “will.” We respect God’s will and submit to it when we pray to God “*according to His will*” while, like the three friends of Daniel, we “*keep His commandments*” (*I Jn. 5:14, 3:22*).

When Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego stood by their convictions, they were bound and thrown immediately into the fire fully clothed. The mighty men acted so quickly at the king's



urgent command, and the flames were so hot that these men were killed by the fires. The men thrown into the fiery furnace bound were now seen as loose and walking in the flames.

Nebuchadnezzar also saw something else. He saw four men in the flames, not just Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. He said the “*aspect of the fourth is like a son of the gods*” (*Daniel 3:25*). The brilliant and majestic image of the fourth man was God’s “angel” sent to deliver his servants who trusted in Him (*Daniel 3:28*). The king and all the dignitaries that were there not only were amazed that these men were still alive, but their hair was not even singed, neither did their clothes smell like smoke that billows from a fire (*Daniel 3:27*). God not only delivered them from death, He did so miraculously!

Nebuchadnezzar may not have come to believe that there is only one God, but He was forced to acknowledge God’s unique power. In his decree he demands that no one speak against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego because “*there is no other god that is able to deliver after this sort*” (*Daniel 3:29*). Daniel’s three friends were miraculously delivered from certain death by the one true God, and were “promoted” by Nebuchadnezzar (*Daniel 3:30*).

Discussion Questions:

1. Describe the image Nebuchadnezzar set up?
2. What did people see and hear that day that might make one think this dedication ceremony is “important”?
3. Why did Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego not bow down and worship the image?

4. Discuss how many young people could rationalize that one could bow before the image on this occasion, and it would be OK with God.

5. Discuss how “liberating” it is to live under conviction of the truth of God’s law, when you are forced to make difficult decisions. (Give some examples from the difficult decisions you have to make as a Christian today).

6. Why should we *not be forced to believe* that the fourth man in the fire was Jesus, the Son of God?

7. If a miracle is defined by “*that which transcends natural law*”, give the pointers in the account of the fiery furnace that prove it was a miracle.

8. What encouragement do Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego give you as you serve the One True God?