

The Fiery Furnace



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Daniel 3.*

Memory Text: “‘When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you.’” (*Isaiah 43:2, NKJV*).

When Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, was brought before a tribunal, the proconsul said, “‘Swear by the fortune of Ceasar . . . swear and I will release you; reproach Christ.’”

“Polycarp responded: ‘Eighty and six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How can I speak evil of my King who saved me?’”

“‘I have wild beasts,’ said the proconsul, ‘and will expose you to them unless you repent.’”

“‘Call them!’ said Polycarp, who, never relenting, died a martyr’s death.”—Adapted from Elon Foster, *6000 Sermon Illustrations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956), p. 273.

This week we will see how three Hebrews, like Polycarp, faced a test concerning faithfulness and worship. The first battle in this world was over worship (*Gen. 4:4-8, 1 John 3:12*); the last will be, as well (*Rev. 14:9-12*). How important that we understand the issues involved.

The Week at a Glance: Why did Nebuchadnezzar have the golden image made? Who delivered the three boys, and of what is that deliverance symbolic? What is the difference between believing in God and knowing God?

*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 16.

The Image of Gold (*Dan. 3:1-7*).

For a time after the vision in Daniel 2, Nebuchadnezzar was influenced by the fear of God. However, the prosperity attending his reign filled him with pride, and, in time, he resumed his idol worship. He determined to reproduce the image he had seen, but his image should be entirely of gold—symbolic of Babylon as an eternal, indestructible, all-powerful kingdom that should stand forever.

Why was the king's act of making the statue an act of defiance against what Daniel, in chapter 2, said would happen? (*See Dan. 2:34, 35.*)

The event in Daniel 3 is not dated, but it must have been several years after the vision of Daniel 2 (603 B.C.). A possible date is 594 B.C., when Zedekiah, as ruler of Judah, was summoned to Babylon (*Jer. 51:59*), most likely in connection with the dedication of the golden statue.

What did Nebuchadnezzar hope to achieve by inviting all the officials of the realm and demanding their worship of the golden statue? *Dan. 3:4-6.*

Kings in ancient times always had to be wary of the danger of an internal revolt. A ceremony such as we find in this chapter, where all the officials had to show public allegiance to the king, would have served well to bring them all into line. The act of bowing to the image would have indicated, at least outwardly, obedience and loyalty to the king himself.

The death penalty for not bowing down to the idol seems rather harsh, but absolute monarchs or rulers in any age have never taken kindly to challenges to their authority. The king dared anyone to defy his power and authority, and the officials knew he meant it. The fiery furnace was no idle threat either. Jeremiah 29:22 records that the king burned to death two Jewish men called Zedekiah and Ahab. This makes the stand of the three Hebrews all the more remarkable.

Nebuchadnezzar, obviously, struggled with his legacy—he wanted it to last forever. We all, to some degree, struggle with this same problem, the sense of our own mortality and transience. What's our only hope, and why? (*See 1 John 2:16, 17.*)

Three Hebrews Defy the King (*Dan. 3:8-18*).

Who reported to the king that Daniel's friends refused to bow down to his image? *Dan. 3:8*. What possibly motivated them to tell the king?

In so vast a crowd, the king probably could not see that three men were still standing, and certain men went to him to inform him. These Chaldeans were, more than likely, jealous of the honors bestowed on the three Hebrews, and they gladly took the opportunity to report them.

What is the relationship between the images in Daniel 3 and Revelation 13:11-18?

Prophecy tells us that in the last days another image will be set up to enforce religious uniformity. A universal economic boycott and ultimately a death decree will be issued against all who refuse to worship "the beast and its image." Also, in both chapters, the number six, as a symbol of man under the control of Satan, is prominent (*see Dan. 3:1*). The worship of the golden image by the people in ancient Babylon is referred to six times (*see Dan. 3:5, 7, 10, 12, 14, 18*). And by God's design, in the book of Revelation, the warning against worshipping the beast and his image is also given six times (*see Rev. 13:15; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4*).

On the plain of Dura officials of all ranks attended. The ceremony of dedication was an act of worship of the power and might of Nebuchadnezzar, which the three Hebrews refused to do. The whole story illustrates the close connection between state and religion. This kind of union has, in fact, characterized most nations throughout history. The idea of a secular state, one that keeps as much as possible out of the domain of religious affairs, is a fairly recent phenomenon.

The conversation between the king and the three Hebrew youths is one of the most remarkable recorded in Scripture—an autocratic king and three young men who defy his order because of their belief in the God of the universe. What a scene!

What are some things that now, today, we are tempted to worship? Are we, even as Christians, slowly but surely getting caught up in worshipping something other than God? How can we know if we are, and how can we protect ourselves from this subtle form of idolatry?

The Fiery Trial (*Dan. 3:16-23*).

What are the key elements in the response of the three young Hebrews to the king's death threat? *Dan. 3:16-18*. **Rephrase** what they said.

The word *deliver* is a key word that appears throughout the book of Daniel. When Nebuchadnezzar asked them, “Who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?” The three Hebrews replied that their God whom they served was “‘able to deliver’” them from his hands (*Dan. 3:15, 17, NKJV*). After the miracle in the fiery furnace, the king confessed, “‘there is no other God who can deliver like this’” (*vs. 29, NKJV*). Daniel's experience in chapter 6 illustrates further that the God whom Daniel served is “able to deliver” His people. Finally, at the end of the book we read that at the end of time Michael, the Great Prince, shall stand up to deliver everyone who is found written in the book of life (*Dan. 12:1*).

Why did the three Hebrews refuse to compromise in this matter of bowing to the golden image? *Exod. 20:3-5*.

Look up **Matthew 10:28**. **How does this text apply here?**

In spite of the king's rage and fury, the three men would not bend or budge. They obeyed Nebuchadnezzar as far as their conscience permitted. They journeyed to the plain of Dura, but when their conscience told them, No farther, they refused to join the other worshipers, knowing that they had “‘to obey God rather than men’” (*Acts 5:29, NKJV*). They refused to break God's law, which forbade idol worship, regardless of whether or not God would deliver them.

Throughout Christian history there have been those who have responded similarly. *Fox's Book of Martyrs* traces the lives of thousands of Christians who were killed for their allegiance to God.

***Compromise* is a favorite word of politicians. But is there a place for compromise when it comes to matters of faith? If so, in what way and under what circumstances? What things, if any, can or should be compromised? How can we tell if we are compromising or simply being prudent?**

One Like the Son of God (*Dan. 3:24, 25*).

Read carefully Daniel 3:14, 15. The king asked the three boys a question at the end of verse 15. What was the question; how was it answered?

“Who is the God who shall deliver you?” he asked. It was the same God who (*in chapter 2*) the king had confessed was “‘the God of gods, the Lord of kings’” (*vs. 47, NKJV*). How quickly, though, the king forgot. All through the Bible we can find similar examples of God manifesting His power in a remarkable way, only for people to so quickly forget.

What did the words “Son of God” in verse 25 mean to Nebuchadnezzar? Did he recognize who the fourth Being really was?

Verse 25 alternately can be translated “son of the gods,” which simply means a supernatural being. In verse 28 Nebuchadnezzar identifies the fourth Being as an angel, but the biblical text does not indicate whether Nebuchadnezzar understood the true nature of the fourth Being.

Christians, of course, understand the Son of God as Jesus Christ Himself (*Matt. 8:29, Rom. 1:4, Heb. 7:3, 1 John 3:8*). Here, in this chapter, we see a small foretaste of the total victory over death that Christ gives to all His followers at the end of time. He delivered these three boys in a remarkable manner then, and He will deliver all of His followers in even a more remarkable manner when He returns.

What do these texts tell us about the deliverance that we, as Christians, have in Christ? *Rom. 7:24, Gal. 1:4, Col. 1:13, 2 Tim. 4:18, 1 Thess. 1:10.*

Think about Nebuchadnezzar, who one chapter earlier praised the same God he now defied. In what ways do we find the same thing happening in us? God works something miraculous in our lives, and before long we are doubting and questioning Him. What can we do to protect ourselves from this common spiritual trap?

Nebuchadnezzar's Change of Mind

(*Dan. 3:26-30*).

When the three young Jews walked out of the fiery furnace with heads held high, the effect on the assembled multitude must have been tremendous. They saw that “the hair of their head was not singed nor were their garments affected, and the smell of fire was not on them” (*Dan. 3:27, NKJV*).

Though there's a lot more involved in this account than what we have been told, it does seem clear that the Lord again revealed to this monarch His power and majesty in a way that did, indeed, reach the king. One might have thought that, after what He had already shown Nebuchadnezzar of His power (*chapter 2*), the Lord would have been through with the defiant and arrogant king. However, even despite this blatant act of defiance against Him, the Lord again showed His mercy and patience toward Nebuchadnezzar.

What other examples can we find in the Bible of the Lord giving powerful leaders numerous chances? What do these accounts tell us about His character? What hope do they offer for us? (See, for instance, *Exodus 7–15, 2 Sam. 12:1-13*.) At the same time, what are the limitations of His patience with us?

What effect did the miracle in the fiery furnace have on the king? *Dan. 3:26-28*.

On the surface, then, it seems that the king certainly came to realize something of the might and power of the Lord of heaven and earth. Yet, as subsequent chapters will show, believing in God or even confessing His power isn't enough. The king needed, instead, to know the Lord (*John 7:3*). This is a crucial distinction. Knowing God is more than just knowing propositional truths about Him. The most unregenerate degenerate can believe in God's eternal nature, His creative power, and even His atoning death.

It's one thing, though, to believe in the God of the Bible or to even acknowledge His power. Demons know about both (*James 2:19*). It's another thing to know Him as your Lord and Savior. Do you simply believe in God, or do you know Him (*John 17:3*)? Explain your answer. The answer makes all the difference in the world.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Fiery Furnace,” in *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 503–513.

According to Ellen White, Nebuchadnezzar understood who the fourth Being was: “How did that heathen king know what the Son of God was like? The Hebrew captives filling positions of trust in Babylon had in life and character represented before him the truth. When asked for a reason of their faith, they had given it without hesitation. Plainly and simply they had presented the principles of righteousness, thus teaching those around them of the God whom they worshiped. They had told of Christ, the Redeemer to come; and in the form of the fourth in the midst of the fire the king recognized the Son of God.”—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 509.

Discussion Question:

In *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville wrote about a man who was asked to worship the idol of his pagan roommate, Queequeg. Follow the logic of the man’s reasoning. “I was a good Christian; born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church. How then could I unite with this wild idolator in worshipping his piece of wood? . . . But what is worship?—to do the will of God—that is worship. And what is the will of God?—to do to my fellow man what I would have my fellow man to do to me—that is the will of God. Now, Queequeg is my fellow man. And what do I wish that this Queequeg would do to me? Why, unite with me in my particular Presbyterian form of worship. Consequently, I must then unite with him in his; ergo, I must turn idolator.”—*Moby Dick* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1999), p. 70. What’s wrong with this reasoning? What does this tell us about how easy it is to rationalize wrong spiritual decisions?

Summary: The three Hebrew boys refused to compromise where it mattered. As Christians, we need to know what matters and then never compromise on those things.

As Little Children

It is easy to understand why children hold a special place in God's heart.

When Kathy Seeley, primary-unit teacher in an Adventist Academy in the United States, saw her children fervently drawing pictures one day, she asked what they were doing. The children announced that they were going to sell the pictures. Mrs. Seeley smiled at their enthusiasm—until she saw the children selling their pictures in the parking lot for three cents each. The children brought the money to her and announced that it was for missions.

Then they made bookmarks to sell. After another parking lot selling spree, Mrs. Seeley realized the children were serious about raising money for missions and provided craft supplies to help them. The children decided they wanted to use their money to build a church in Papua New Guinea.

Mrs. Seeley had contacted a missionary in Papua New Guinea who knew of a group of believers who had no church. The missionary e-mailed pictures of "their" project to encourage the children toward their goal.

When school closed for the summer the children had raised \$123 toward their goal. And when school resumed in September, the children were eager to continue their fundraising. Some picked blueberries and donated proceeds; a home-schooled child painted rocks and sold them.

And the school sponsored a yard sale with earnings going to the church in Papua New Guinea. Primary children priced donations for the sale and helped at various tables during the sale. When the sales were tallied, the children had earned more than \$1,000 in a single day. Their total earnings came to more than \$1,600, enough to build the church and provide a few

extras, such as hand-cranked tape recorders, so the illiterate villagers can listen to the Bible.



Some of Mrs. Seeley's school children with their offerings. Charlotte Ishkanian is editor of Mission.