

THE FIERY FURNACE

(Daniel 3)

Purpose: To teach courage – through Christ.

Nebuchadnezzar was a powerful king of Babylon. The time of his reign was 600 years before the birth of Christ, and the size of his empire was very great indeed.

Within the royal court were people of many different languages and customs, people that had been conquered by the king and then forced to help him rule.

On one occasion, King Nebuchadnezzar summoned the various rulers of the provinces to gather in the court, and he watched them assemble from his royal pavilion. This was a special occasion, and no one would dare not to come.

The king stood up. The great moment had arrived. By standing, the king was giving the signal that the court was to come to order.

Trumpeters stepped forward and sounded a royal fanfare.

And the herald, whose job it was to read the official announcements, stepped forth with a big scroll in his hands.

The captains and the princes and the governors all stood very quietly, waiting to hear what the message from the king would be. As they listened, they heard the herald read:

“O people, nations, languages, hear ye the king’s command!” And the herald went on to tell them that the king had had a gigantic statue made in his own likeness.

The statue was 90 feet [28 metres] tall, and made of gold.

This was to be their god. At the sound of the musical instruments, everyone was to bow down and worship this golden image. The next thing the people heard was enough to put fear in the hearts of even the bravest men:

“Whoso falleth not down, and worshipeth the image of the king, shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace.”

So when the musical instruments played...

...the people fell down and worshiped the golden image, just as the king had commanded them to do.

Two Chaldeans were worshiping close together when suddenly one of them saw something that made him tug at the other one’s robe, in an effort to get his attention.

“Look!” the Chaldean said. *“It’s just as we thought! The three of them, see? They’re not bowing down. They’re refusing to worship the golden image.”*

And the Chaldean was absolutely right. Three young princes, the rulers of the capital city itself, were openly disobeying the king.

These men had been brought as captives from the distant land of Judah. Their names had been changed, and because of their abilities they had been given high positions within the kingdom.

Hananiah, “Beloved of God,” was called Shadrach, or “Circuit of the sun.”

Mishael’s cherished name was changed from “One who is like God,” to the heathen name, Meshach, meaning “Sungod.”

And Azarish, whose name meant “The Lord is my help,” came to be known as Abednego, “The god of commerce.”

Nebuchadnezzar had changed the names of Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, but their hearts remained the same. These men believed in Jehovah as the One, the Almighty God. To kneel down before an image was something God had told them never to do.

The two Chaldeans lost no time reporting what they had seen to the king. They were jealous of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

And they slyly reminded King Nebuchadnezzar that these men that had refused to bow down before the image were the very men the king had placed over the affairs of Babylon.

“How dare these men disobey me!” shouted the king.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were hurried to the royal pavilion. The king asked if it were true that they had refused to bow down and worship the golden image. And they told the king, yes, it was true.

King Nebuchadnezzar’s pride was about the most important thing he had, and for these three young men to openly disobey him, even in the face of death, was a serious blow to a man of his importance.

So the mighty ruler of the vast Babylonian empire decided he would give the men another chance. If only they would do as they had been told, he would forgive them for their disobedience.

But the brave young men replied, *“Our God is able to deliver us out of your hand, O King. But even if He chooses not to, we will never serve your gods nor worship your golden image.”*

The king was furious! He commanded the furnace be made seven times hotter than it usually was.

And he ordered that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be taken to the furnace and put to death for their wilful disobedience.

It wasn’t long until the fiery furnace was made seven times hotter than it usually was.

The three young men from Judah were securely tied...

And one by one they were thrown into the midst of the flames.

Shadrach, who was Hananiah, “The beloved of God;”

Meshach, who was Mishael, or “One who is like god;”

And Abednego, the one whose real name was Azariah, “The Lord is my help.”

And when the soldiers had thrown them in, they turned and ran from the terrible heat.

But before they could escape, the flames leaped out of the furnace and burned them to a crisp.

Then the king saw something that made him jump to his feet. He couldn’t believe it was possible. No! It couldn’t be!

Forgetting about his dignity and his pride, King Nebuchadnezzar ran with the rest of the people to get a better look at the strange thing that had happened.

“Look!” shouted the king. *“Do all of you see what I see?”*

“Did we not cast three men, bound, into the midst of the fire?”

“I see four, and they’re loose and walking around, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.”

King Nebuchadnezzar knew in his heart that Jehovah was the true and the living God. And he called to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to come forth, to come out of the flames.

The people were amazed as the three Hebrew boys walked out of the furnace, unharmed by all they had been through.

Not a single hair of their heads was singed. They didn’t even smell of smoke.

Nebuchadnezzar fell to his knees, and he lifted up his head and cried, *“Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who hath delivered his servants who trusted in him.”*

Shortly thereafter, a new decree was read to all the nations under Nebuchadnezzar’s rule. No one was to speak against the God of the brave young men from Judah.

And Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were promoted to even higher places within the kingdom. But their real happiness was in their freedom to worship God.