

The Fiery Furnace
Daniel 3:1-29
(Prophesied in the 6th Century B.C.)

God's people are continually being tested in regard to their faith. The prophet Daniel records in narrative form a series of such tests. One of them has to do with King Nebuchadnezzar and a golden image of himself that he sets up for all people in Babylon to worship.

Three Hebrew men refuse to bow down to this silly idol. The punishment is death in a fiery furnace. The king offers them a second chance, but they tell him to go jump in the lake. "We will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

Furious, the king has them tossed into the super-heated furnace. But when he takes a peak to check on their remains, he sees four images walking around in the flames! These Hebrews won't bow, budge, or burn.

Every generation of believers encounters the temptation to conform to their world, bow to the powers that be, and surrender their peculiar allegiance to the unseen God. To the rest of humanity, our faith feels like rebellion, stubbornness, and inflexibility. People who give their ultimate allegiance to God are not susceptible to usual forms of coercion.

The furnace is blazing. The idol-worshipping this-world-only secularists are eager to pitch you into the flames. They don't know that your faith is fire proof. When they see how you take the heat, they will give your God a second look.

Jason Bourne is a fictional character created by the novelist Robert Ludlow. The Bourne books and movies have been wildly successful in part because the hero is neither self-absorbed nor subject to intimidation.

I must confess—I enjoyed these books and movies. They are action-packed thrillers. A new author has composed a fourth book about Jason Bourne that I have not yet read, but I'll get to it. This series came to mind as I thought about the Three Hebrew Children that I have heard about, read about, and sung about all my life.

I. The Hebrew Identity—*Some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews (Daniel 3:8). 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 (Daniel 3:12).*

A. They are strange in customs. They worship a God that you cannot see.

B. They are diligent in character. They are honest, hard-working, and creative thinkers. They are great material for promotion. They get things done. In fact, they have become rulers themselves in this land of exile.

C. They are religious fanatics. They bow to no one but the God of heaven. Their religion is not about promotion, though it is a factor in their excellent service. Their religion is not about defiance though it leads them to refuse the king's command. Their devotion to the God of heaven is their distinguishing characteristic and their true identity.

D. Our greatest challenge in this life is to maintain our identity, free and clear, as followers of Jesus Christ and worshipers of the one true God. If we can accomplish this goal without

compromise and without confusion, we will bring glory to the God we love and we will distinguish ourselves as people of true integrity and strength.

II. The Hebrew Ultimatum—*If you are ready to fall down and worship the image I have made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace (Daniel 3:15).*

A. The king gives the three Hebrew children this ultimatum—bow or burn. He does so because he is furious. He does not understand their stubborn refusal to bow, and he is embarrassed before his other subjects.

B. The ultimatum is only necessary because the Hebrew children have stood up in a crowd of people and refused to bow.

1. I suspect that they are under surveillance just as they were in chapter 1 in regard to their diet. I do not think that their defiance of the king's command was ostentatious. They have enemies who are seeking to destroy them. Those enemies have no ultimate devotion to anything but their own safety, comfort, and promotion. They are jealous of these Hebrews who have been promoted ahead of them.

2. I suspect that these Hebrews are just trying to live in peace in their adopted homeland. They are not looking for ways to corner the king.

C. The ultimatum has no loopholes. The time for negotiation is over. They will either bow to the image or they will burn in the furnace.

D. We experience many such ultimatums. Some of them are publicly cast, as this one. Many others come to us in secret. We are tempted to compromise what we believe in order to accommodate the feelings of others or our own ambitions. Sometimes we just want to be part of the crowd and not stand out because of our faith.

E. The ultimatum is turned back upon the king. Now he must destroy three of his loyal subjects who are running important affairs of state. He is the one who is cornered.

III. The Hebrew Supremacy—*Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods (Daniel 3:25).*

A. The king is angry. He does not understand their allegiance to God. He cranks up the furnace so fiercely that the men who are responsible for getting the Hebrews die as they carry out their orders.

1. He thinks that he reigns supreme in his kingdom. No one, including the gods that he has heard about who are worshiped by his various subjects, can defy him and live. *Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand? (Daniel 3:15).*

2. His supposed supremacy is a factor of
a. his arrogant assumption that he is the ultimate power in his world
b. his mistaken notion that all gods have limited power or have no power at all
c. his miscalculation concerning the devotion of the Hebrews—that they will cave in to threats and intimidation.

B. The Hebrews have the upper hand.

1. They have proven themselves faithful and loyal in all respects prior to this silly edict.

2. They have consistently worshiped their God and him alone.
3. They are now acting in a manner consistent with their character and their faith.
4. They are willing to die for their conviction. They have the admiration and respect of the multitudes and of the king himself.

C. The God of the Hebrews is truly glorified and exalted.

1. Whether they live or die, the Hebrews have behaved in a way that brings honor to God.

2. God himself will be glorified either in the life or in their death. The rescue is not actually necessary to preserve the name of God. The Hebrews have been careful not to put God in a corner. They know that he cannot be manipulated. *The God we serve is able to save us, they insist. 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 (Daniel 3:17-18).*

D. God himself accompanies these Hebrews into the flames. He walks with them in the furnace. He would have been there—with his people—whether or not they were to be delivered. The presence of God was not a question for the Hebrews.

E. The deliverance of the Hebrews was an act of God's mercy not required by the circumstances but given for the purpose of identifying with added certainty the God of the Hebrews as the one true God of heaven.

F. The great act of deliverance has had an impact on millions of people through its retelling through the generations. But we should note that King Nebuchadnezzar's turnaround and climactic decree does not require the worship of the one true God. It only prevents the persecution of those who do worship him. This is important for a number of reasons.

1. Nebuchadnezzar has already demonstrated a willingness to require the worship of a particular god or image. The fact that he does not do so after this incredible miracle shows the limitation of miracles in the realm of faith. Faith cannot be coerced even in these circumstances. His pride stands between him and God.

2. Furthermore, the worship of the one true God cannot be a matter of political decree. It must be free, not coerced, to be real. Had the Hebrews bowed to the image, they would have been standing up in their hearts. They did not believe that the image was worthy of worship. You can put on a religious show and not mean it. God knows that, and so do we.