

From Furnace to Palace



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Daniel 3, Rev. 13:11–18, Exod. 20:3–6, Deut. 6:4, 1 Cor. 15:12–26, Hebrews 11.*

Memory Text: “Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king” (*Daniel 3:17, NKJV*).

Thus these youth, imbued with the Holy Spirit, declare to the whole nation their faith, that He whom they worshiped is the only true and living God. This demonstration of their own faith was the most eloquent presentation of their principles. In order to impress idolaters with the power and greatness of the living God, His servants must reveal their own reverence for God. They must make it manifest that He is the only object of their honor and worship, and that no consideration, not even the preservation of life itself, can induce them to make the least concession to idolatry. These lessons have a direct and vital bearing upon our experience in these last days.”—Ellen G. White, *In Heavenly Places*, p. 149. While facing the threat of death because of the issue of worship might seem a thing of some prescientific and superstitious age, Scripture reveals that at the end of time, when the world has greatly “advanced,” something similar will unfold, but on a worldwide scale. Thus, from the study of this story, we get insights into the issues that, according to Scripture, God’s faithful will face.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 25.

The Golden Image

Read Daniel 3:1–7. What likely motivates the king to make this statue?

Some time elapsed between the dream and the construction of the image. Nonetheless, it seems that the king can no longer forget the dream and the fact that Babylon is doomed to be replaced by other powers. Not satisfied with being only the head of gold, the king wants to be represented by an entire image of gold in order to communicate to his subjects that his kingdom will endure throughout history.

This attitude of pride calls to mind the builders of the Tower of Babel, who, in their arrogance, attempt to challenge God Himself. No less arrogant is Nebuchadnezzar here. He has accomplished much as ruler of Babylon, and he cannot live with the idea that his kingdom will eventually pass away. Thus, in an effort at his own self-exaltation, he builds an image to evoke his power and thereby assess the loyalty of his subjects. Although it may not be clear whether the image is intended to represent the king or a deity, we should keep in mind that in antiquity the lines separating politics from religion were often blurred, if they existed at all.

We should remember, too, that Nebuchadnezzar has had two opportunities to get acquainted with the true God. First, he tests the young Hebrews and finds them 10 times wiser than the other sages of Babylon. Then, after all other experts have failed to remind him of his dream, Daniel reports to him the thoughts of his mind, the dream, and its interpretation. Finally, the king recognizes the superiority of the God of Daniel. But surprisingly enough, those previous theology lessons do not prevent Nebuchadnezzar from reverting to idolatry. Why? Most likely, pride. Sinful human beings resist acknowledging the fact that their material and intellectual accomplishments are vanity and are doomed to disappear. We may at times act like little “Nebuchadnezzars” as we pay too much attention to our accomplishments and forget how meaningless they can be in the face of eternity.

How can we learn not to fall, even in very subtle ways, into the same trap that Nebuchadnezzar does?

The Call to Worship

Read Daniel 3:8–15 and Revelation 13:11–18. What parallels can we see between what happens in Daniel’s time and what will happen in the future?

The image of gold standing on the plain of Dura, whose name in Akkadian means “walled place,” gives the impression of a vast sanctuary. As if it were not enough, the furnace nearby can well evoke an altar. Babylonian music is to be part of the liturgy. Seven types of musical instruments are listed, as if to convey the completeness and effectiveness of the adoration protocol.

Today, we are bombarded from every side by calls to adopt new lifestyles, new ideologies, and to abandon our commitment to the authority of God as expressed in His Word and to surrender our allegiance to contemporary successors of the Babylonian Empire. The allure of the world at times seems overwhelming, but we should remind ourselves that our ultimate allegiance belongs to the Creator God.

According to the prophetic calendar, we are living in the last days of earth’s history. Revelation 13 announces that the inhabitants of the earth will be called to worship the image of the beast. That entity will cause “all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hand or on their foreheads” (*Rev. 13:16, NKJV*).

Six categories of people are said to give allegiance to the image of the beast: “small and great, rich and poor, free and slave.” The number of the beast, which is 666, also emphasizes six. This shows that the image erected by Nebuchadnezzar is just an illustration of what the eschatological Babylon will do in the last days (*see Dan. 3:1 for the imagery of 6 and 60*). Therefore, we do well to pay close attention to what transpires in this narrative and how God sovereignly directs the affairs of the world.

Worship isn’t just bowing down before something or someone and openly professing ultimate allegiance. What are other ways, much more subtle ways, that we can end up worshipping something other than our Lord?

The Test of Fire

For the three Hebrews, the image worship imposed by the king is a blatant counterfeit of the temple worship in Jerusalem, which they experienced in their earlier years. Although they hold offices in the empire and are loyal to the king, their allegiance to God sets a limit on their human loyalty. They are certainly willing to continue to serve the king as faithful administrators; however, they cannot join the ceremony.

Read Exodus 20:3–6 and Deuteronomy 6:4. What do these texts convey that surely influenced the stand these men took?

Following the instructions issued by the king, all the people at the sound of the musical instruments bow and worship the golden image. Only the three—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego—dare to disobey the king. Immediately, some Babylonians bring the matter to the king’s attention. The accusers seek to enrage the king by saying: (1) it was the king himself who put these three young men over the province of Babylon; (2) the Jewish men do not serve the gods of the king; and (3) they do not worship the gold image that the king had set up (*Dan. 3:12*). But in spite of his fury against them, the king offers the three men a second chance. The king is willing to repeat the whole procedure so that these men can retract their position and worship the image. Should they refuse, they will be thrown into the fiery furnace. And Nebuchadnezzar closes his appeal with a most arrogant claim: “And who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?” (*Dan. 3:15, NKJV*).

Endowed with supernatural courage, they respond to the king: “If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up” (*Dan. 3:17, 18, NKJV*).

Though they know their God can deliver them, they do not have the guarantee that He will. Nevertheless, they refuse to obey the king’s command, even knowing that they could be burned alive. Where do we get that kind of faith?

The Fourth Man

Read Daniel 3:19–27. What happens? Who is the other person in the fire?

Having thrown the faithful Hebrews into the fire, Nebuchadnezzar is puzzled to perceive the presence of a fourth person inside the furnace. To the best of his knowledge, the king identifies the fourth figure as “the Son of God” (*Dan. 3:25*).

The king cannot say much more, but we do know who that fourth person is. He appears to Abraham before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, wrestles with Jacob beside the brook Jabbok, and reveals Himself to Moses in a burning bush. He is Jesus Christ in a preincarnate form, coming to show that God stands with His people in their troubles.

Ellen G. White says, “But the Lord did not forget His own. As His witnesses were cast into the furnace, the Saviour revealed Himself to them in person, and together they walked in the midst of the fire. In the presence of the Lord of heat and cold, the flames lost their power to consume.”—*Prophets and Kings*, pp. 508, 509.

As God says in Isaiah, “ ‘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’ ” (*Isa. 43:2, NKJV*).

Though we love stories like these, they do raise the question about others who are not miraculously delivered from persecution for their faith. Those men surely knew the experience of Isaiah and Zechariah, who were put to death by impious kings. All through sacred history, even to our day, faithful Christians have endured terrible suffering that ended for them, at least here, not in a miraculous deliverance but in a painful death. Here is one case in which the faithful receive a miraculous deliverance, but, as we know, such things don’t usually happen.

On the other hand, what is the miraculous deliverance that all of God’s faithful people will have, regardless of their fate here? (See *1 Cor. 15:12–26*.)

The Secret of Such a Faith

As we reflect on the experience of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, we may ask ourselves: *What is the secret of so strong a faith?* How could they have been willing to burn alive rather than worship the image? Think about all the ways that they could have rationalized bowing in submission to the orders of the king. And yet, despite realizing that they could have died, as so many others had done, they nevertheless stood firm.

Read Hebrews 11. What does it teach us about what faith is?

In order to develop such a faith, we need to understand what faith is. Some people have a quantitative perception of faith; they measure their faith by the answers they seem to receive from God. They go to the shopping mall, and they pray for a parking space. If they happen to get a space upon arrival, they conclude that they have strong faith. If all the slots are filled, they may think their faith is not strong enough for God to listen to their prayers. This understanding of faith becomes dangerous because it attempts to manipulate God and does not reckon with God's sovereignty and wisdom.

Indeed, true faith, as manifested by Daniel's friends, is measured by the quality of our relationship with God and its resulting absolute confidence in God. Authentic faith does not seek to bend God's will to conform to our will; rather, it surrenders our will to the will of God. As we saw, the three Hebrew men did not know exactly what God had in store for them when they decided to challenge the king and to remain faithful to God. They decided to do the right thing despite the consequences. This is what really characterizes a mature faith. We show real faith when we pray to the Lord for what we want but trust Him to do what's best for us, even if at the time we don't understand what is happening or why.

What are ways we can exercise faith day by day, even in "little things" that can help our faith grow and be ready for greater challenges over time? Why, in many ways, are the tests over the "little things" the most important ones?

Further Thought: “Important are the lessons to be learned from the experience of the Hebrew youth on the plain of Dura. In this our day, many of God’s servants, though innocent of wrongdoing, will be given over to suffer humiliation and abuse at the hands of those who, inspired by Satan, are filled with envy and religious bigotry. Especially will the wrath of man be aroused against those who hallow the Sabbath of the fourth commandment; and at last a universal decree will denounce these as deserving of death.

“The season of distress before God’s people will call for a faith that will not falter. His children must make it manifest that He is the only object of their worship, and that no consideration, not even that of life itself, can induce them to make the least concession to false worship. To the loyal heart the commands of sinful, finite men will sink into insignificance beside the word of the eternal God. Truth will be obeyed though the result be imprisonment or exile or death.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 512, 513.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read 1 Peter 1:3–9. Why does God rescue some and not others from suffering? Or is the answer to questions such as this something that we just aren’t going to get now? In cases in which miraculous deliverances don’t occur, why do we need to trust in God’s goodness despite such disappointments?
- 2 If this incident had ended with the death of the Hebrew men in the fiery furnace, what lessons could we take away from it still?
- 3 From our understanding of last-day events, what will be the issue, the outward sign, that will show whom we worship? What should this tell us now about how important the Sabbath really is?
- 4 Read Luke 16:10. How do Christ’s words here help us understand what it means truly to live by faith?
- 5 Read again Daniel 3:15, where Nebuchadnezzar says, “Who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands?” How would you answer that question?

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Daniel 3:17, 18*

Study Focus: *Daniel 3, Rev. 13:11–18, Exod. 20:3–5, Deut. 6:4, 1 Cor. 15:12–26, Hebrews 11.*

Introduction: The historical experience of Daniel’s friends offers us a concrete example of what it looks like to be put under pressure because of loyalty to God.

Lesson Themes:

- 1. Worship.** The most crucial issue at stake in this narrative is worship. Most likely, Nebuchadnezzar was not demanding exclusive worship. The three Hebrew youths could continue to worship their God, Yahweh. Had they just bowed before the image, they would have been spared any trouble.
- 2. Faithfulness.** The profound convictions of the three Hebrew youths did not allow them to perform an external gesture that would contradict their theology. For them, certain actions had profound consequences.
- 3. Deliverance.** Although the three exiles had no doubt about God’s ability to save them from the fire, they were not sure if that would happen. This uncertainty is implied in the expression “if not” (*Dan. 3:18*). So, they chose rather to die than to compromise their loyalty to God.

Life Application: We all face circumstances in our lives that demand we take a strong and definite stand showing clearly where our ultimate loyalty belongs. The most important lesson we learn from the episode of the fiery furnace is not the deliverance of three Hebrew exiles. Rather, the main message lies in the fact that the Lord strengthened them—they did not fear death—and walked with them through the fire.

Part II: Commentary

1. Worship

Nebuchadnezzar seems to have understood quite well the message conveyed by the multimedial statue of his dream. He did not want to be only the head of gold. He wanted his kingdom to be the entire statue from head

to toe. In pursuit of this goal, he attempted to usurp the attributes of the Creator. So, in making an image (Hebrew: *tselem*), the king ironically imitated God's act of creating humanity as an image (*tselem*) of Himself (*Gen. 1:26, 27*). So, Nebuchadnezzar, consumed by arrogance, built an image. But that was not a simple work of art; it was an object of worship.

And the accusation leveled against the three exiles was that they did not worship the gold image nor serve Nebuchadnezzar's gods (*Dan. 3:12, 14*). The plural "gods" suggests that the image may have been a representation of the Babylonian "gods" and not only that of a single deity. The measurements of the image (60 x 6 cubits) evoke the sexagesimal system of Babylon as opposed to the decimal system followed in Egypt. Moreover, the proportions of the image (10:1) indicate that it did not follow the normal proportions of a human figure (5:1 or 6:1). So, unless it was a figure that included a large pedestal, it may have looked more like a gigantic pillar or stele and may have been only partially sculpted.

In promoting such a liturgical event, the king may have intended to secure the allegiance of governors, ministers, and other government officials to the program and ideology of the empire. In the ancient world, religion and politics were tightly intertwined. So, patriotism was expressed by means of adoration of the national gods. Hence, the refusal of the three exiles to worship the gold image was not only an act of religious dissension but also an open rejection of the totalitarian claims of the Babylonian political and religious ideology. The Hebrew captives never would give to the empire what was due to God only.

2. Faithfulness

In a warning against idolatry, Moses reminded the Israelites that the only worthy recipient of Israel's worship was the God who had brought them out of "the iron-smelting furnace, out of Egypt," so they could be his inheritance (*Deut 4:20*; cf. *1 Kgs 8:51*; *Jer 11:4*). Moses implored the people to keep the covenant and, again, not to make any kind of idol. In this second reminder, Moses said the reason they should not succumb to idolatry was because their God "is a consuming fire, a jealous God" (*Deut 4:24*). Seeing into Israel's future, Moses told the people if (and when) they did fall into idolatry, God would drive them out of the promised land into lands where idolatry was the order of the day. If the people returned to worship and obey God alone, [H]e would not abandon or destroy them. He would remember [H]is covenant. God had saved them from the furnace of Egyptian bondage to make them [H]is own. In return [H]e required their faithful and exclusive worship. —Wendy Widder, *Daniel*, Story of God Bible Commentary, vol. 20, p. 65.

The Hebrew captives took no opportunity to rationalize away their commitment to the true God. They could have simply rationalized their decision in order to avoid a confrontation with the king: “Let’s just bow down to this image, but in our hearts, we’ll remain faithful to God. Who cares if we bow down!” But they did not act that way. It bears mentioning that in the polytheistic environment of the ancient Near East, no deity demanded exclusive loyalty. One could be a devotee of Marduk and also worship, say, Ishtar. Before the exile, many Israelites fell into this trap. They worshiped the Lord, but, at the same time, they sacrificed to Baal and other deities whom they presumed to be more helpful to them in certain areas of life. Only the covenant God of the Hebrews demanded exclusivity from His worshipers (*Exod. 20:3–5, Deut. 6:4*); and the Hebrew captives lived up to this demand.

3. Deliverance

The deliverance of the three Hebrew exiles owes nothing to the good will of the king. It was a supernatural intervention of God. That the furnace was heated “seven times” more (*Dan. 3:19*) may be a figurative way to emphasize maximum heat. Most likely the king wanted to make sure that no one would escape such a heat. If a low fire would extend the duration of their punishment and their torture, a more intense fire should kill them immediately. It appears that Nebuchadnezzar intended to make their execution a public display of the cost of contesting his authority. Interestingly, Jeremiah mentions two false prophets that were “roasted in the fire” by Nebuchadnezzar (*Jer. 29:21, 22*).

Although the three Jewish men firmly believed that God was able to protect them, they also knew that God did not always do so (*Dan. 3:17, 18*). “The laments among the Psalms testify to this. In [Dan.] 7:21, 23; 8:24; 11:32–35 it is made clear that there are times when the faithful people of God are called upon to endure suffering, sometimes even martyrdom. It is in response to the seeming injustice of this, and the apparent impugning of either God’s faithfulness to his people or his sovereignty, that the promise of resurrection (. . .) and judgment comes (*12:1–4*). Death is no barrier to either God’s faithfulness or his sovereignty.”—E. C. Lucas, “Daniel,” in T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 235.

One point that deserves a comment is the conspicuous absence of Daniel. Christian commentators and the Talmud have advanced several hypotheses as to the reason for his absence: (1) Daniel was away on business; (2) he had permission from the king to withdraw; (3) he stood so high with Nebuchadnezzar that no one dared to complain about him;

(4) his presence may not have been required; (5) he may have been sick; (6) Daniel was no longer involved in government; (7) Daniel was present, and he briefly bowed before the image, but the Lord does not let his name occur here because of his later faithfulness; (8) God kept Daniel away so that people would not say “that they were delivered through his merit”; (9) Daniel avoided the scene to keep from fulfilling the prophecy that “the graven images of their gods shall ye burn with fire” (*Deut. 7:25*); (10) Nebuchadnezzar “let Daniel depart, lest people say he has burnt his god in fire.” This summary is from Peter A. Steveson, *Daniel* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 2008), p. 56.

Although some options may seem more reasonable than others, the fact is that we do not know where Daniel was during that time. But on the basis of Daniel’s character as portrayed in Scripture, we can be sure that Daniel either did not worship or was not present at the ceremony.

Part III: Life Application

- 1. Like the three Hebrew exiles, Mordecai also refused to bow down before Haman (*Esther 3:1–5*). In both cases, the Lord brought deliverance to His servants. However, this does not happen always. Isaiah and John the Baptist sealed their faith with their own lives. In light of these outcomes, do you feel prepared to reap the unpleasant consequences of your rightful convictions? Why, or why not?**

- 2. The previous experiences of the exiles both in the matter of the king’s food (*Daniel 1*) and the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream (*Daniel 2*) somehow prepared the exiles to face the test of fire. What previous tests and experiences have you had that prepared you for bigger challenges later?**

3. This week's lesson may foster some self-examination. Ask your class members to reflect upon the following:

- What are some things that now, today, we are tempted to worship? In what ways are we, even as Christians, slowly but surely getting caught up in worshiping something other than God?

- Where do you draw the line between unswerving commitment to the Lord and fanaticism?

- When it comes to your relationship with those who still do not know the Lord, is there a place for compromise? If so, in what way and under what circumstances? What things, if any, can we or should we compromise? How can we tell if we are compromising or simply being prudent?

- Would you jeopardize your life for refusing to do a very simple act? If not, why couldn't you conform outwardly while inwardly feeling moral reservations?

- Which is better, to die for truth, or to avoid crises and live to continue our witness? Explain.
