

February 11 Lesson 11 (NIV)

Faith in the Fiery Furnace

Devotional Reading: Isaiah 43:1–7

Background Scripture: Daniel 3:1–30

Daniel 3:19–28

¹⁹ Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual ²⁰ and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. ²¹ So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. ²² The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, ²³ and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.

²⁴ Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?"

They replied, "Certainly, Your Majesty."

²⁵ He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods."

²⁶ Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!"

So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, ²⁷ and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.

²⁸ Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God."

Key Text

Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God."—Daniel 3:28

Faith That Pleases God

Unit 3: The Righteous Live by Faith

Lessons 10–13

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- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Abednego Uh-*bed-nee-go*.

Aramaic Air-uh-**may**-ik.

Cyrus Sigh-russ.

Deuteronomy Due-ter-*ahn*-uh-me.

Meshach Me-shack.

Nebuchadnezzar Neb-yuh-kud-**nez**-er.

Shadrach Shay-drack or *Shad-rack*.

Introduction

A. The Power of Witness

Salvadorians remember Óscar Romero (1917–1980) as a hero who advocated for the needs of the people in El Salvador. During his time as the Roman Catholic archbishop of San Salvador, he worked against the unjust treatment of his impoverished compatriots. This work included calling out the frequently violent intimidation tactics by the government and guerrilla groups. His belief that the church should show preferential treatment to the poor served as the basis for his work with Salvadorians. His witness was only as effective as his commitment to loving and following God.

However, his commitment ultimately cost him; he was assassinated by extremist groups while observing Mass. Before his assassination, Romero reflected on the risks he faced as a Christian who advocated for the needs of others. He accepted these risks and expressed hope in the promised bodily resurrection of believers.

Christian history recounts numerous stories of people who stood for their faith. Such people committed to live with complete devotion to God. When we commit to trusting in him, we will inevitably have our faith tested. Today's Scripture recounts the ultimate example of such testing. How would three Jewish men respond to threats from the most powerful individual in their world?

B. Lesson Context

By telling the stories of the prophet Daniel and his associates, the book of Daniel depicts Jewish life in a foreign land. A series of deportations from Judah by the Babylonians began in 605 BC (see Daniel 1:1–2). These continued until Judah fell in 586 BC (see 2 Kings 25). Among the deported were talented young men selected for their fitness for service to the Babylonian king (see Daniel 1:3–4). Daniel and his associates were taken to Babylon during this time, in approximately 605 BC. The book describes the wisdom of Daniel and his friends as they lived and served in Babylon (example: 2:17–24). Their positions required that they demonstrate some loyalty to the Babylonian king, evident in their name change (see 1:6–7). This book's events occur from the time of their arrival in Babylon until at least 537 BC, “the third year of Cyrus king of Persia” (10:1).

Part of the book of Daniel is preserved in Hebrew (Daniel 1:1–2:4a; 8:1–12:13), while another part is preserved in Aramaic (2:4b–7:28). The use of two languages indicated the different cultures depicted in the book: Hebrew for the Jews and Aramaic for the Gentile empires (2 Kings 18:26; Ezra 4:7). Today's Scripture comes from the part of Daniel preserved in Aramaic.

Today's lesson Scripture is the second part of the narrative that begins at Daniel 3:1. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon (reigned 605–562 BC), had erected a large image of gold at “the plain of Dura” (Daniel 3:1). This location is suggested to have been several miles south of the city of Babylon. Royal subjects, advisors, and kingdom officials arrived for the image's dedication ceremony and to worship it (3:2–5). Refusing to worship the image would result in inevitable death in a “blazing furnace” (3:6). But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—men the king had placed in a leadership position (see 2:49)—refused. They had confidence that the Lord would be with them (3:17–18).

I. Royal Anger

(Daniel 3:19–23)

A. Heated Response (vv. 19–21)

19. Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual

Nebuchadnezzar's fury becomes a central point in the early chapters of the book of Daniel. He became angry when his wise men could not interpret his dreams (see Daniel 2:10–13). The refusal of the three Jewish men to bow before the golden image led the king to be "furious with rage" (3:13). The king's anger continued. Whatever goodwill *Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego* had experienced from the king (examples: 1:19–20; 2:48–49) was lost. The king had once demonstrated some sense of worship of the God of Israel (see 2:46–47). However, when the worship of the true God prevented Nebuchadnezzar from receiving worship, the king resorted to anger and wrath.

The king's command that *the furnace* be heated *seven times hotter* than usual is a hyperbolic figure of speech. A mention of the number *seven* in Scripture typically indicates fullness, totality, or completion (examples: Leviticus 26:18, 21, 24; Proverbs 24:16; Matthew 18:21–22). There was likely no way to accurately measure the furnace's temperature to know whether it was seven times hotter. The command intended to communicate that the furnace should be heated to the maximum temperature it could reach.

20. and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace.

Nothing in the narrative indicates why Nebuchadnezzar chose *the strongest soldiers in his army*. These soldiers would have been the best of the best in the king's military. They were likely an elite fighting force valued for their physical strength and power. Perhaps the king anticipated that the Jewish men would put up a fight when they realized their destination.

Furnaces in the ancient Near East were usually made of clay bricks or stone. Their layout consisted of at least two chambers (the main chamber and a fire chamber) and a flue. Large furnaces smelted metals, refined precious metals, or fired ceramics. Simpler furnaces, made of one compartment like a modern-day pizza oven, were used for baking. A large *furnace* to hold *Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego* reveals the Babylonian empire's vast construction and military needs. The text does not say, but perhaps this furnace refined the gold for the king's image!

21. So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace.

The exact *clothes* worn by the three Jewish *men* are unknown because the underlying Aramaic words are relatively rare. Their clothes were likely more in the style of Persia rather than that of Israel. This detail reveals that the king had the men *bound* as they wore flammable clothing. Such wearable "fuel" should have ignited when the king's toughest men threw the three Jewish men *into the blazing furnace*.

B. Urgent Command (vv. 22–23)

22. The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego,

Angry outbursts followed by acts of haste and harshness were typical for Nebuchadnezzar. After the king heard that his wise men could not interpret his dreams, he angrily ordered their execution (see Daniel 2:10–13). When hearing of the king's directive regarding his wise men, Daniel questioned why such a "harsh" decree had been issued (2:14–15).

In this verse, Nebuchadnezzar's *urgent* command toward the three Jewish men again revealed his brutality. The king's *command* affected the three Jewish men and led to the death of the "strongest soldiers" (3:20, above).

23. and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.

The narrative repeats two details already known: the names of *these three men* and the intensity of *the blazing furnace*. That these three men *fell into* the furnace was not the result of an unfortunate accident. They had refused to follow the directive to "fall down" and worship Nebuchadnezzar's image of gold (Daniel 3:5). Now, the king forced the three men to "fall down" to a burning death—or so he thought.

II. Divine Presence

(Daniel 3:24–28)

A. The King's Astonishment (vv. 24–25)

24. Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?" They replied, "Certainly, Your Majesty."

Throughout the book of Daniel, the leaders in Babylon reacted with fear and amazement when God demonstrated miraculous power (examples: Daniel 2:46–47; 5:1–8; 6:19–23; see lesson 12). Nebuchadnezzar's response before us continued that trend. *King Nebuchadnezzar* intended to execute the three Jewish men. However, something unique and miraculous caused the king to be amazed. As in the other examples, this occurrence was something only God could bring about.

The king's *advisers* consulted with the king on various kingdom matters. The book of Daniel lists this group alongside other regional rulers of Babylon (example: Daniel 3:27). It is unlikely that they held positions of political power. Instead, they consulted and advised the king, in the same way that cabinet members might consult a head of state (see also 6:7). In this instance, their consultation simply confirmed what the king already knew regarding the *three men* they had *tied up* (compare 3:23, above).

25. He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods."

The identity of the *fourth figure walking around in the fire* has long been a subject of discussion among students. The translation (with capitalization) found in the *King James Version* "Son of God" indicates one possibility: this fourth person was the preincarnate Christ. However, this option provides interpretive difficulty and more questions than answers. For example, it leads us to question what Nebuchadnezzar did to merit this unique vision of the preincarnate Christ. Although we cannot rule out this possibility, this option is challenging to hold.

It is notable, however, that the title comes from the lips of the Babylonian king and not from one of the Jews. Nebuchadnezzar worshipped many pagan gods (example: Daniel 3:14). He likely did not recognize that this figure was the one true God. From his perspective, this figure was a member of the pantheon of pagan gods that he worshipped. Thus the translation *like a son of the gods* makes sense for how this polytheistic king would interpret what he was seeing.

The phrase “son(s) of God” can refer to angels (examples: Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7) or presumed deities (example: Genesis 6:2, 4). This option explains the likely identification of this mysterious figure (see Daniel 3:28, below). This angelic presence protected the three men amid their fiery trial (compare Exodus 23:20; see also Psalms 34:7; 91:11). The Babylonian king received a sign. The God who sent this angelic presence protected his people from being hurt.

B. The King’s Directive (vv. 26–27)

26. Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, “Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!” So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire,

A furnace of this size would have likely had multiple openings. These may explain how *Nebuchadnezzar* could approach *the opening of the blazing furnace* and not be killed (compare Daniel 3:22, above).

Upon seeing the fourth figure, the king experienced a change of heart. His rage (see Daniel 3:13) diminished, and he addressed the men by their (Babylonian) names. Although they received these names from the king, their ultimate allegiances lay beyond Nebuchadnezzar. Instead, they were *servants* of God (compare 3:20). In this proclamation, Nebuchadnezzar admitted the folly of his previous statement regarding the power of God (see 3:15).

The title *Most High* refers to the God of Israel (examples: Daniel 4:17, 32, 34; 5:18, 21; 7:25). Surrounding nations may have used the title to refer to the primary god of their pantheon of gods. However, the people of Israel applied the title to the one true God, knowing there was no other God. The same title refers to God’s power (see Genesis 14:18–22; Psalm 83:18) and transcendence (see Acts 7:48). The title is also used when referring to God’s work (example: Deuteronomy 32:8) or as a reference to the Son of God (see Mark 5:7; see also Luke 1:32).

Nebuchadnezzar’s announcement of this title indicates some level of acknowledgment of the superiority of the God of Israel. However, the king had an imperfect understanding of the Lord’s power. The king’s admission that the Lord is “the God of gods” still allowed him to accept other pagan gods (compare Daniel 2:47). It would take a humbling experience before Nebuchadnezzar gave praise and honor to the one true God of Israel (see Daniel 4).

27. and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.

While the furnace had killed the king’s strongest men, the three Jewish men showed no evidence of exposure to fire or smoke. *The satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers* had bowed before the king’s image (see Daniel 3:2–3). But they ended up seeing the limits of the king’s power and the miraculous act of deliverance by the God of Israel.

C. The King's Worship (v. 28)

28. Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God."

The stories of Daniel 1–6 reveal a pattern to the ways that Babylon's royalty regarded the work of God. First, Babylon's king experienced a miraculous work of the God of Israel (Daniel 2:45b; 4:28–34a; 5:1–6; 6:19–22). Second, the king acknowledged the work as coming from the God of Israel. Third, in most instances, the king proclaimed the supremacy of Israel's God (2:47; 4:34b–37; 6:25–27; contrast 5:26–31).

This verse reveals that the same pattern occurred in today's Scripture. Nebuchadnezzar saw God's miraculous work of deliverance (Daniel 3:24–27). As a result, the king proclaimed that God be praised. The king changed his word and acknowledged that God's power to save was unparalleled (3:29, not in our printed text). However, the text does not indicate that the king believed *the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego* to be one, true, only God. Total and complete worship by the king to the one true God would eventually come (see 4:34–37).

The king's confession of worship resulted from the character and faithfulness of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They refused to bow before the king's image, even if their decision led to martyrdom, because of their commitment to the one true God. Their commitment to trust God was anchored in their rightly held belief in God's faithfulness (see Daniel 3:16–18). The Lord had promised to be with his people (example: Leviticus 26:12–13), and that promise came to fruition for these three Jewish men. The promises made to the prophet Isaiah applied to the three men: "When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior" (Isaiah 43:2–3; compare Psalm 66:12).

Conclusion

A. Faith and Courage

Two options face believers when we experience the testing of our faith. One possibility is that we succumb to the testing and quite possibly commit apostasy. The other option is to maintain faithfulness to God, despite the testing. Even when faced with death, the men in today's Scripture chose the latter option. They refused to bend their faith and go along with the king's demands for worship. Their faith in God—rooted in his long history of faithfulness—provided the courage they needed to withstand the testing and resist committing evil.

Although we may never experience the same testing these men faced, all believers will likely experience some amount of testing of our faith. However, we can be encouraged. Our victory has already been established (see 1 John 5:4). Even though our enemy seeks to devour, we can stand firm in our faith. God is faithful to his people, even when they are tested. When we face these experiences, we can have trust and respond with faithfulness to him (1 Corinthians 10:13).

B. Prayer

Most High God, you are the one true God. You are faithful to your people, and you continue to show your faithfulness to us. Through your Spirit, fortify our faith and trust so we can resist the temptation to worship other “gods”—large and small. Show us how we might support other believers in their trials of faith. Give us encouragement and strength no matter where you have called us. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Because of God’s faithfulness,
we can be faithful to him.¹
