

... May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and of you, who are ROCK, REDEEMER, and COMFORTER of us all. Amen.

Daniel 3:14-15 ... Each week we are visiting with a familiar biblical story which invites us to listen and respond with courage, trust, & live with hope. Today the focus is with a well-known story from Daniel ... and God's encouraging words for leading God's People.

The book of Daniel is about 60% stories and 40% vision reports. The stories (chapters 1-6) show God's people living in a foreign world. The early-exiled Jewish leaders rise within the government and have great influence. Remember Jeremiah's letter imploring God's people to 'bloom where you are planted'? This story of three friends is a good example of 'Living in Hope', with that principle. The challenge is staying true & faithful to God and God's ways. If you take time to read the book of Daniel, you will hear of God's people taking their place, bearing witness, and making a difference in an unbelieving world.

There were four young men who became important servants in King Nebuchadnezzar's palace, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. As was common, they were renamed Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

According to the first verse in chapter 3, the King Nebuchadnezzar had an obelisk-type structure erected in Babylon, made of gold, nine feet wide & ninety feet tall. It had an image on it. The king decreed that whenever the musicians played anyone near was to bow down in worship of the idol. Failure to do so would result in such persons being thrown into a fiery furnace.

Daniel served within Nebuchadnezzar's household; the three friends were made high officials in Babylon. Coming near to see the site of the statue, they did not bow down to worship. Doing so would have violated the second Commandment, which prohibits bowing and worshipping idols. The three men knew the consequences of such faithfulness to God, losing their jobs, and also their lives. It was reported to the King that they did not follow the decree, and Nebuchadnezzar was mad. Even given a second chance to bow down, Shadrach Meshach and Abednego would not. Sounding a lot like Pharaoh, 'What god will rescue you from my power?' the three men respond in this way:

“King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷ If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us^[c] from Your Majesty’s hand. ¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”(3:16-18, NIV).

Wow, that’s courage! No doubt they were afraid of the rage-filled, rash ruler. They refused to compromise their values or faith just because a person in power demanded it. Commentator Daniel Bunn puts it this way, ‘This response is reflective of the ethic of our Wesleyan tradition: we respond in certain ways in certain situations not because we are guaranteed an outcome, but because they reflect the virtue that marks us and our community as belonging to God. Wesley wrote of these verses, ‘*They were resolved to suffer rather than sin, and leave the cause to God...if God be for us, we need not fear what man can do unto us*’ (Notes, Dan 3:18).¹

Have you faced this type of situation...been asked to compromise your values or your faith under an implied or direct threat? I can assure you, many have capitulated and regretted it later. Others refused, and paid a price with demotion, or being sent to some far out station. I can promise you from personal experience, obedience to virtue and faithfulness has its own rewards.

As for the three men the King watched thrown into the super-heated fiery furnace, listen to v24-25: 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.”

There’s some debate about this fourth figure seen in the furnace...an angel, a vision of God, perhaps even a pre-figure of Jesus Christ. The spiritual truth in this is the good news for us to take to heart and share with all we meet... in resisting evil and refusing to compromise values or faith, God is with us, even in the fiery consequences and difficulties that may come. If we are walking in God’s ways of love, humility, mercy & justice, we need not fear, but live with hope.

Let’s pray ... *Lord, grant me the courage to stand strong when others ask me to do what I know is wrong. Be with me in the fiery furnaces of life. Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, help me to trust you with my future, my life, my all. Amen.*

¹ Wesley One Volume Commentary, Nashville: Abingdon, 2020. In *Daniel*, by Daniel D, Bunn, Jr., 487.