

MESHACH, SHADRACH AND ABEDNEGO

Daniel 3

The book of Daniel, not named for its author but for its main character, is a book about faith, loyalty and integrity. The author of Daniel is a Jew living under Syrian persecution and rule some 160 years before the birth of Jesus. The symbolic stories that he tells, which are set in time a few hundred years earlier, are directed to the Jewish community that is undergoing many trials and sorrows. The author wants his people, the Jews, to know that triumph and peace will come out of their current tribulations—that they need not fear the future! Daniel is a word of encouragement to a discouraged people. It is a call to devotion. It is a challenge to faithfulness. The author of Daniel tells stories from the past in order to encourage those living in the present—just as we do today.

In the third chapter of Daniel we find the story of Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego. Like Daniel, the main character of the book, these three are exiled from Israel and living under captivity in a foreign land. Because of their exceptional abilities they are singled out for special privilege, education and leadership even in the land of their oppressors.

One day King Nebuchadnezzar decides to build a golden idol that everyone in the land is ordered to fall to their knees and worship. Whoever will not do so will face the immediate penalty of death by being thrown into the fiery furnace.

Not long after this decree is made it is reported to the king that three of the Jewish exiles, Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego, who have been given privilege in the kingdom are refusing to bend their knees before the idol. They refuse to worship the golden image. The king has them brought before him and he tells them what he has heard about them and then says to them, *“If you do not worship the image I have built you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace...”*

Listen now as I read Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego’s response to the king. **(Read verses 16b-18)**

Did you hear what these three said to King Nebuchadnezzar? *“Our God is able to deliver us from the furnace **but even if He does not** we still will not worship the golden image you have built!”* What a statement of faith! Do you hear what they are saying? *“We believe in our God’s ability to deliver us **but even if God does not** our faith in God will not be shaken! We still will not bend our knees and worship this golden image.”*

Too often I hear such things as, *“Oh I prayed to God to intervene—to heal me, to get me out of my mess, to provide money, to find me a partner or even a date—but God has not done so. I am not sure that God even cares. Why should I*

worship and believe in a God that does not intervene on my behalf?” I also hear such things as this, “What does it matter if I compromise a bit on what I believe to be right? So what if I bend my knee in order to protect my identity, to save my job, to save my life? After all, is being a person of integrity that important? Does it matter that much if I live authentically?” These statements about God not intervening and living a life of compromise are a lot different than the faith and integrity expressed by Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego. Their faith is built upon who God is not upon using God as a good luck charm, as a miracle worker, as their own little genie in a bottle. And their integrity, it is built upon who they are not upon who others, even the others who control life and death, want them to be.

Let’s now go back to the story and read what happens. **(Read verses 19-28)**

Remember, this is a story to encourage a discouraged people. It is a story about faith, loyalty and integrity. This is a story about taking risks for what is right and good instead of compromising for comfort and safety. Friends, this **is not** a story about God testing the faith of Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego. This **is** a story of faith, loyalty and integrity. This is a story about the power of taking a stand for what is right instead of bending the knee to what is false!

Certainly the purpose of the story when it was originally written and told was to emphasize to the Jews living under persecution that there would come a day of triumph. That they could face the future without fear! Yet, my friends, the amazing thing about this story for me is not that Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego came out of the furnace unscathed but rather that they were willing to go into the furnace for what they believed in. Their statement of faith is amazing! “*Our God is able to deliver us from the furnace but even if He does not we still will not bend our knee before the golden image you have built!*” For Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego doing the right thing and being people of integrity were more important than being delivered from the fiery furnace!

Hear me my friends! As energizing and challenging as this story is, the reality is, things do not always turn out good. Faith in and loyalty to God does not promise an immediate reward or safety. Living a life of integrity does not promise being kept out of the fiery furnace. There are not always happy endings! Yet, whether or not the ending is happy, whether or not the flames consume, we can be assured that God walks among us—that God faces with us the flames and even the cross—just as He did with Meshach, Shadrach, Abednego, and Jesus!

The three young Jewish men, Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego, were delivered from the fiery furnace and I can only imagine that the Jews held in Nazi concentration camps, some two thousand years later, recalled this story every time they saw the smoke rising from the ovens that burned the bodies of their family and friends. And it gave them hope!

Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego came out of the furnace alive but in order to

come out they had to go in. And friends, they went in because they would not compromise their faith or their integrity. They accepted the risks that living a life of faith and integrity often presents! Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego is not a story about coming out of a burning furnace alive; but rather, it is a story of being willing to go into the furnace.