

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 pre-incarnate 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).

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 know the experience of Isaiah and Zechariah, who are 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).

Then the king commanded the furnace to be heated seven times hotter than it was wont to be heated; and when this was done, the three Hebrews were cast in. So furious were the flames that the men who cast the Hebrews in were burned to death.

Suddenly the countenance of the king paled with terror... . His voice trembling with excitement, the monarch exclaimed, “Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.”—My Life Today, p. 68.

How did that heathen king know what the Son of God was like? The Hebrew captives filling positions of trust in Babylon had in life and character represented before him the truth. When asked for a reason of their faith, they had given it without hesitation. Plainly and simply they had presented the principles of righteousness, thus teaching those around them of the God whom they worshiped. They had told of Christ, the Redeemer to come; and in the form of the fourth in the midst of the fire the king recognized the Son of God... .

He who walked with the Hebrew worthies in the fiery furnace will be with His followers wherever they are. His abiding presence will comfort and sustain. In the midst of the time of trouble—trouble such as has not been since there was a nation—His chosen ones will stand unmoved. Satan with all the hosts of evil cannot destroy the weakest of God's

saints. Angels that excel in strength will protect them, and in their behalf Jehovah will reveal Himself as a “God of gods,” able to save to the uttermost those who have put their trust in Him.—Conflict and Courage, p. 252.

A life in Christ is a life of restfulness. There may be no ecstasy of feeling, but there should be an abiding, peaceful trust. Your hope is not in yourself; it is in Christ. Your weakness is united to his strength, your ignorance to his wisdom, your frailty to his enduring might. . . .

We should not make self the centre and indulge anxiety and fear as to whether we shall be saved. All this turns the soul away from the Source of our strength. Commit the keeping of your soul to God, and trust in Him. Talk and think of Jesus. Let self be lost in Him. Put away all doubt; dismiss your fears. Say with the apostle Paul, “I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). Rest in God. He is able to keep that which you have committed to Him. If you will leave yourself in His hands, He will bring you off more than conqueror through Him that has loved you.—Steps to Christ, pp. 70–72.

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 stand 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 do not know exactly what God has in store for them when they decide to challenge the king and remain faithful to God. They decide 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?

Great light shone forth from Daniel and his companions. Glorious things were spoken of Zion, the city of the Lord. Thus the Lord designs that spiritual light shall shine from His faithful watchmen in these last days. If the saints in the Old Testament bore such a decided testimony of loyalty, how should God’s people today, having the accumulated light

of centuries, shine forth, when the prophecies of the Old Testament shed their veiled glory into the future!—Letter 32, 1899.

From age to age the heroes of faith have been marked by their fidelity to God, and they have been brought conspicuously before the world that their light might shine to those in darkness. Daniel and his three companions are illustrious examples of Christian heroism... . From their experience in the court of Babylon we may learn what God will do for those who serve Him with full purpose of heart.—My Life Today, p. 68.

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.

As in the days of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, so in the closing period of earth's history the Lord will work mightily in behalf of those who stand steadfastly for the right. He who walked with the Hebrew worthies in the fiery furnace will be with His followers wherever they are. His abiding presence will comfort and sustain.—Reflecting Christ, p. 370.

The present is a season of solemn privilege and sacred trust. If the servants of God keep faithfully the trust given to them, great will be their reward... . The earnest toil, the unselfish work, the patient, persevering effort, will be abundantly rewarded. Jesus will say, Henceforth I call you not servants, but friends. [See John 15:15.] The approval of the Master is not given because of the greatness of the work performed, but because of fidelity in all that has been done. It is not the results we attain, but the motives from which we act, that weigh with God. He prizes goodness and faithfulness above all else.—Gospel Workers, p. 267.

Missionaries for the Master are best prepared for work abroad in the Christian household, where God is feared, where God is loved, where God is worshiped, where faithfulness has become second nature, where haphazard, careless inattention to home duties is not permitted, where quiet communion with God is looked upon as essential to the faithful performance of daily duties.

Home duties should be performed with the consciousness that if they are done in the right spirit, they give an experience that will enable us to work for Christ in the most permanent and thorough manner. Oh, what might not a living Christian do in missionary lines by performing faithfully the daily duties, cheerfully lifting the cross, not neglecting any work, however disagreeable to the natural feelings!—The Adventist Home, p. 35.

“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.

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Read 1 Peter 1:3-9. Why does God rescue some and not others from suffering? Or is the answer to questions like this something that we just aren't going to get now? In cases where miraculous deliverances don't occur, why do we need to trust in God's goodness despite such disappointments?

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?

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?

Read Luke 16:10. How do Christ's words here help us understand what it means truly to live by faith?

Read again Daniel 3:15, when Nebuchadnezzar says, "Who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands?" How would you answer that question?

Final Comments

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.

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.

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.

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.

Further Commentary

Worship

Nebuchadnezzar seems to have understood quite well the message conveyed by the multi-metal 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, etc., 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 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.

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* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 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.

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.

Life Application

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?

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?

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 worshipping 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.