

# The Fiery Furnace



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Daniel 3.*

**Memory Text:** “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” (*Isaiah 43:2, NKJV*).

When Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, was brought before a tribunal, the proconsul said, “Swear by the fortune of Caesar . . . swear and I will release you; reproach Christ.”

“Polycarp responded: ‘Eighty and six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How can I speak evil of my King who saved me?’

“‘I have wild beasts,’ said the proconsul, ‘and will expose you to them unless you repent.’

“‘Call them!’ said Polycarp, who, never relenting, died a martyr’s death.”—Adapted from Elon Foster, *6000 Sermon Illustrations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956), p. 273.

This week we will see how three Hebrews, like Polycarp, faced a test concerning faithfulness and worship. The first battle in this world was over worship (*Gen. 4:4-8, 1 John 3:12*); the last will be, as well (*Rev. 14:9-12*). How important that we understand the issues involved.

**The Week at a Glance:** Why did Nebuchadnezzar have the golden image made? Who delivered the three boys, and of what is that deliverance symbolic? What is the difference between believing in God and knowing God?

\*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 16.

## **The Image of Gold** (*Dan. 3:1-7*).

For a time after the vision in Daniel 2, Nebuchadnezzar was influenced by the fear of God. However, the prosperity attending his reign filled him with pride, and, in time, he resumed his idol worship. He determined to reproduce the image he had seen, but his image should be entirely of gold—symbolic of Babylon as an eternal, indestructible, all-powerful kingdom that should stand forever.

**Why** was the king's act of making the statue an act of defiance against what Daniel, in chapter 2, said would happen? See *Dan. 2:34, 35*.

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The event in Daniel 3 is not dated, but it must have been several years after the vision of Daniel 2 (603 B.C.). A possible date is 594 B.C., when Zedekiah, as ruler of Judah, was summoned to Babylon (*Jer. 51:59*), most likely in connection with the dedication of the golden statue.

**What** did Nebuchadnezzar hope to achieve by inviting all the officials of the realm and demanding their worship of the golden statue? *Dan. 3:4-6*.

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Kings in ancient times always had to be wary of the danger of an internal revolt. A ceremony such as we find in this chapter, where all the officials had to show public allegiance to the king, would have served well to bring them all into line. The act of bowing to the image would have indicated, at least outwardly, obedience and loyalty to the king himself.

The death penalty for not bowing down to the idol seems rather harsh, but absolute monarchs or rulers in any age have never taken kindly to challenges to their authority. The king dared anyone to defy his power and authority, and the officials knew he meant it. The fiery furnace was no idle threat either. Jeremiah 29:22 records that the king burned to death two Jewish men called Zedekiah and Ahab. This makes the stand of the three Hebrews all the more remarkable.

**Nebuchadnezzar, obviously, struggled with his legacy—he wanted it to last forever. We all, to some degree, struggle with this same problem, the sense of our own mortality and transience. What's our only hope, and why? See 1 John 2:16, 17.**

## TEACHERS COMMENTS

**Key Text:** *Isaiah 43:2.*

### Teachers Aims:

1. To affirm that God requires our faithfulness and obedience to Him.
2. To understand that believing in God is not enough; we must know Him as our Lord and Savior.
3. To know that at the end of time, Michael, the great Prince, shall deliver His people.

### Lesson Outline:

#### **I. Nebuchadnezzar's Pride** (*Dan. 3:1-7*).

- A. King Nebuchadnezzar defies Daniel's interpretation of the dream.
- B. The king constructs a golden statue to symbolize Babylon as an eternal kingdom.
- C. The king exalts temporal Babylon above God's eternal kingdom by commanding all his subjects to bow down to the statue.

#### **II. The Three Hebrews Defy the King** (*Dan. 3:8-18*).

- A. Officials of all ranks attend the ceremony on the plain of Dura to worship the statue.
- B. Daniel's three friends refuse to bow down to the golden image.
- C. Their refusal is seen as an act of treason against the power and the authority of the king.

#### **III. Trial by Fire** (*Dan. 3:16-23*).

- A. The Hebrews obey Nebuchadnezzar as far as their consciences permit them to obey.
- B. The three Hebrews determine to obey God rather than humanity and are thrown into the furnace.
- C. Nebuchadnezzar sees a fourth person, the Son of God, in the furnace too.
- D. Miraculously, the fire singes neither their hair nor their clothes.

**Summary:** It is a wonderful comfort to know that our God is able to deliver us both physically and spiritually from any danger. However, no matter how threatening the circumstance, He gives us the strength to remain faithful to Him.

## COMMENTARY

### I. The Cost of True Worship.

The world regards worship as something one does on Friday, Saturday, Sunday, or whatever one's chosen day of worship is. If the worshiper is motivated to be nicer to people or to be vaguely ethical, that too is acceptable so long as one does not go to extremes.

However, the Christian attitude toward worship is quite different

## **Three Hebrews Defy the King** (*Dan. 3:8-18*).

**Who** reported to the king that Daniel's friends refused to bow down to his image? *Dan. 3:8*. What possibly motivated them to tell the king?

In so vast a crowd, the king probably could not see that three men were still standing, and certain men went to him to inform him. These Chaldeans were, more than likely, jealous of the honors bestowed on the three Hebrews, and they gladly took the opportunity to report them.

**What** is the relationship between the images in Daniel 3 and Revelation 13:11-18?

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Prophecy tells us that in the last days another image will be set up to enforce religious uniformity. A universal economic boycott and ultimately a death decree will be issued against all who refuse to worship "the beast and its image." Also, in both chapters, the number six, as a symbol of man under the control of Satan, is prominent (*see Dan. 3:1*). The worship of the golden image by the people in ancient Babylon is referred to six times (*see Dan. 3:5, 7, 10, 12, 14, 18*). And by God's design, in the book of Revelation, the warning against worshipping the beast and his image is also given six times (*see Rev. 13:15; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4*).

On the plain of Dura officials of all ranks attended. The ceremony of dedication was an act of worship of the power and might of Nebuchadnezzar, which the three Hebrews refused to do. The whole story illustrates the close connection between state and religion. This kind of union has, in fact, characterized most nations throughout history. The idea of a secular state, one that keeps as much as possible out of the domain of religious affairs, is a fairly recent phenomenon.

The conversation between the king and the three Hebrew youths is one of the most remarkable recorded in Scripture—an autocratic king and three young men who defy his order because of their belief in the God of the universe. What a scene!

**What are some things that now, today, we are tempted to worship? Are we, even as Christians, slowly but surely getting caught up in worshipping something other than God? How can we know if we are, and how can we protect ourselves from this subtle form of idolatry?**

## TEACHERS COMMENTS

in that worship has something to do with the real world and how one behaves in it, and that occasionally it will cause inconvenience, even serious consequences to life and limb.

Worship, as exemplified by Daniel and other biblical figures, can be risky. It is not a harmless activity to either the worshiper or the society that witnesses it. Not only will it change the way you conduct the rest of your life; it is exclusive. There is only one God who should be worshiped, and the Bible teaches us that the specifics matter, most notably the specific day of worship (*Gen. 2:2, 3; Exod. 20:8-11; 31:13-17; Deut. 5:15; Ezek. 20:20; Mark 2:27, 28; Luke 4:16; Acts 13:14; 16:13; 17:2*). It is not a case of one option being slightly better than another. Having faith in and falsely worshiping counterfeit gods does not make one slightly holy. However, having faith in and properly worshiping the true God can make one extremely holy. Only the latter is acceptable. The comparison of Christianity with consumer goods is wrong. Imagine telling someone that their soap, unlike yours, does not make them clean but dirtier.

Presently, many of the conflicts that could be caused by the proper worship of the true God lie so far beneath the surface in many places of the world, they seem not to exist. However, one of God's prophets informs us that in the not-too-distant future, true worship once again will be physically dangerous: "Those who honor the law of God have been accused of bringing judgments upon the world, and they will be regarded as the cause of the fearful convulsions of nature and the strife and bloodshed among men that are filling the earth with woe. The power attending the last warning has enraged the wicked; their anger is kindled against all who have received the message, and Satan will excite to still greater intensity the spirit of hatred and persecution."—Ellen G. White, *Cosmic Conflict* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1971), p. 539.

### II. Useful Quotes About Worship.

"Human beings bring worship and honor and glory and praise to God. . . . This is not a onetime occurrence: The psalmist promises to carry on this activity as long as life lasts. The praises of the Lord are on the lips of the psalmist continually."—*The Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2000), p. 431.

"God's creatorship distinguishes Him from all other gods (1 Chron. 16:24-27; Ps. 96:5, 6; Isa. 40:18-26; 42:5-9; 44). We should worship the God who made us, and not the gods we have made. By virtue of His creatorship He deserves our total allegiance. Any relationship that interferes with this allegiance is idolatry and subject to divine judgment. Thus, faithfulness to the Creator is a life-or-death matter."—*Seventh-day Adventists Believe* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1988), p. 73.

## **The Fiery Trial** (*Dan. 3:16-23*).

**What** are the key elements in the response of the three young Hebrews to the king's death threat? *Dan. 3:16-18*. **Rephrase what they said.**

The word *deliver* is a key word that appears throughout the book of Daniel. When Nebuchadnezzar asked them, “ ‘Who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?’ ” The three Hebrews replied that their God whom they served was “ ‘able to deliver’ ” them from his hands (*Dan. 3:15, 17, NKJV*). After the miracle in the fiery furnace, the king confessed, “ ‘there is no other God who can deliver like this’ ” (*vs. 29, NKJV*). Daniel's experience in chapter 6 illustrates further that the God whom Daniel served is “able to deliver” His people. Finally, at the end of the book we read that at the end of time Michael, the Great Prince, shall stand up to deliver everyone who is found written in the book of life (*Dan. 12:1*).

**Why** did the three Hebrews refuse to compromise in this matter of bowing to the golden image? *Exod. 20:3-5*.

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**Look up** *Matthew 10:28*. **How does this text apply here?**

In spite of the king's rage and fury, the three men would not bend or budge. They obeyed Nebuchadnezzar as far as their conscience permitted. They journeyed to the plain of Dura, but when their conscience told them, No farther, they refused to join the other worshipers, knowing that they had “ ‘to obey God rather than men’ ” (*Acts 5:29, NKJV*). They refused to break God's law, which forbade idol worship, regardless of whether or not God would deliver them.

Throughout Christian history there have been those who have responded similarly. *Fox's Book of Martyrs* traces the lives of thousands of Christians who were killed for their allegiance to God.

***Compromise is a favorite word of politicians. But is there a place for compromise when it comes to matters of faith? If so, in what way and under what circumstances? What things, if any, can or should be compromised? How can we tell if we are compromising or simply being prudent?***

## TEACHERS COMMENTS

“The New Testament takes over the concern of Old Testament prophets that worship be integrated into the life of faith. Thus, passages that prioritize mercy over sacrifice (Hos. 6:6) or decry worship with lips but not heart (Isa. 29:13) are quoted in new contexts (Matt. 9:13; Mark 7:6, 7). Genuine worship is not merely for show (Matt. 6:1-18) but involves surrender of the self to God in faithful obedience (Rom. 12:1).”—*The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), p. 1392.

## Inductive Bible Study

**Texts for Discovery:** *Exodus 20:1-11, Daniel 3, Romans 8:28-39, Revelation 14:1-5.*

- ① Daniel and the Israelite princes were probably in their mid to late teens when they were taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar. The events of this chapter may have taken place a dozen years after that; when the idealism of youth is often replaced with the reality of compromise made for the sake of career or financial gain. The three Hebrews stood to lose everything if they refused to worship Nebuchadnezzar’s image. What did they hope to gain?
- ② Every society puts a premium on conformity. Nebuchadnezzar became a symbol of religious oppression when he demanded conformity from his subjects on pain of death. What does God use to inspire our obedience? In our religious practice, is self-expression encouraged or repressed? Should it be either? *See Rom. 2:1-4, 5:6-11.*
- ③ With what words did the three Hebrews state their intention to be faithful to God? (*Dan. 3:16-18*). Compare their statement with Job 13:15. What was the practical effect of such a statement? What modern situations in everyday life might call for the same response?
- ④ The three Hebrews would have been lost to history had they not chosen to obey God. Their courageous stand made them role models for persecuted believers through the centuries. How did Nebuchadnezzar describe the three when he called them out of the fire? (*Dan. 3:26*).
- ⑤ The most shocking lesson from Daniel 3 is that the three Hebrews had to feel the heat from the flames before they could experience the fellowship of walking (literally) with Christ in the furnace. What is the implication for those of us waiting to see Jesus? *Read Phil. 3:7-11.*

## **One Like the Son of God** (*Dan. 3:24, 25*).

**Read** carefully Daniel 3:14, 15. The king asked the three boys a question at the end of verse 15. What was the question; how was it answered?

“Who is the God who shall deliver you?” he asked. It was the same God who (*in chapter 2*) the king had confessed was “‘the God of gods, the Lord of kings’ ” (*vs. 47, NKJV*). How quickly, though, the king forgot. All through the Bible we can find similar examples of God manifesting His power in a remarkable way, only for people to so quickly forget.

**What** did the words “Son of God” in verse 25 mean to Nebuchadnezzar? Did he recognize who the fourth Being really was?

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Verse 25 alternately can be translated “son of the gods,” which simply means a supernatural being. In verse 28 Nebuchadnezzar identifies the fourth Being as an angel, but the biblical text does not indicate whether Nebuchadnezzar understood the true nature of the fourth Being.

Christians, of course, understand the Son of God as Jesus Christ Himself (*Matt. 8:29, Rom. 1:4, Heb. 7:3, 1 John 3:8*). Here, in this chapter, we see a small foretaste of the total victory over death that Christ gives to all His followers at the end of time. He delivered these three boys in a remarkable manner then, and He will deliver all of His followers in even a more remarkable manner when He returns.

**What** do these texts tell us about the deliverance that we, as Christians, have in Christ? *Rom. 7:24, Gal. 1:4, Col. 1:13, 1 Thess. 1:10, 2 Tim. 4:18.*

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**Think about Nebuchadnezzar, who one chapter earlier praised the same God he now defied. In what ways do we find the same thing happening in us? God works something miraculous in our lives, and before long we are doubting and questioning Him. What can we do to protect ourselves from this common spiritual trap?**



## TEACHERS COMMENTS

### III. What the Bible Says About Worship.

“Thou shalt have no other gods before me. . . . Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them” (*Exod. 20:3-5*).

“And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him” (*1 Kings 18:21*).

“I will sing unto the LORD as long as I live: I will sing praise to my God while I have my being” (*Ps. 104:33*).

## Witnessing

Our lesson this week focuses on a particularly critical component of the Christian life: faithfulness to God’s guiding principles no matter the circumstances and no matter the pressure to compromise.

This is an age of finding *middle ground* at any cost. We make no secret that we are willing to negotiate just about anything and everything. How difficult would it really be to follow the example set by the three Hebrews who refused, absolutely refused, to compromise, who would not betray their heavenly Father even if it meant accepting a hideous death by fire rather than ignoring God’s admonition to worship only Him?

As members of God’s remnant church, we refuse to have graven images or similar symbolism found in, on, or around our church buildings. We do not pray to any god other than our heavenly Father. Yet, is it possible that, in our personal lives, we are guilty of a form of idolatry when we spend 60-plus hours a week at work or spiral deeply into debt in order to buy the newest audio system, a summer place at the beach, a brand-new Land Rover . . . you get the picture! Are we in danger of becoming so enamored with material things and acquisitions that we gently but persistently shove God aside in order to “worship” the good things found in this earthly life? Material things are meant to bring comfort and ease to life, but when acquiring them usurps time and energy meant to be devoted to God, then they become curses instead of blessings. What kind of example does this set for our children? How do we respond to them when they insist on buying that \$150 pair of Nike shoes? Can you really tell them not to be materialistic when you are sitting in front of your new 35-inch high-definition plasma TV, which took many hours of overtime or strained your finances to acquire?

During the week ahead, focus on what faithfulness to God, in its fullest sense, means to you and those closest to you. God expects our faithfulness in time, talents, and resources. Strive diligently to reexamine your priorities so that your example will demonstrate to those around you that you are as faithful to His Word as were those three young men so many years ago.

## **Nebuchadnezzar's Change of Mind**

*(Dan. 3:26-30).*

When the three young Jews walked out of the fiery furnace with heads held high, the effect on the assembled multitude must have been tremendous. They saw that “the hair of their head was not singed nor were their garments affected, and the smell of fire was not on them” (*Dan. 3:27, NKJV*).

Though there's a lot more involved in this account than what we have been told, it does seem clear that the Lord again revealed to this monarch His power and majesty in a way that did, indeed, reach the king. One might have thought that, after what He had already shown Nebuchadnezzar of His power (*chapter 2*), the Lord would have been through with the defiant and arrogant king. However, even despite this blatant act of defiance against Him, the Lord again showed His mercy and patience toward Nebuchadnezzar.

**What other examples can we find in the Bible of the Lord giving powerful leaders numerous chances? What do these accounts tell us about His character? What hope do they offer for us? See, for instance, Exodus 7–15, 2 Sam. 12:1-13. At the same time, what are the limitations of His patience with us?**

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**What effect did the miracle in the fiery furnace have on the king? Dan. 3:26-28.**

On the surface, then, it seems that the king certainly came to realize something of the might and power of the Lord of heaven and earth. Yet, as subsequent chapters will show, believing in God or even confessing His power isn't enough. The king needed, instead, to know the Lord (*John 7:3*). This is a crucial distinction. Knowing God is more than just knowing propositional truths about Him. The most unregenerate degenerate can believe in God's eternal nature, His creative power, and even His atoning death.

**It's one thing, though, to believe in the God of the Bible or to even acknowledge His power. Demons know about both (*James 2:19*). It's another thing to know Him as your Lord and Savior. Do you simply believe in God, or do you know Him (*John 17:3*)? Explain your answer. The answer makes all the difference in the world.**

## TEACHERS COMMENTS

“But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth” (*John 4:23, 24*).

“Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters” (*Rev. 14:7*).

## Life-Application Approach

**Icebreaker:** Have you ever prayed long and hard for a miracle? Remember how you felt when your prayer was answered? You probably went down on both knees to thank God for His care and love. You praised Him from the bottom of your heart and promised Him again and again that you would never forget He answered your plea. You gave thanks to Him as the one and only true God, and you pledged your total commitment to Him forever.

Have you kept that promise to Him? Why does it seem easy to forget how terrible things were before and to move away from leaning on Him for our every sustenance?

### Thought Questions:

- 1 Our Lord is a patient, forgiving parent. He offers us a way out of our dilemmas time and time again. He urges us to seek His help and to lean on Him. Can we abuse His forgiving and loving nature to the extent that He will withdraw His protection?
- 2 Senator Adlai Stevenson once said that it is often easier to fight for one's principles than to live up to them. As Christians, do you find this to be an accurate and true statement? Is it sometimes more prudent to give in than to hang on to an unpopular position? What counsel can you give that will help others to know when it is appropriate to compromise or mediate and when it is not?

### Application Question:

The Bible and Spirit of Prophecy tell us that God's faithful believers will face great hardships as the end of time draws near. Can it be expected that miracles such as the one that occurred with the fiery furnace and the three young Hebrews will be experienced during that time?

**Further Study:** Read Ellen G. White, “The Fiery Furnace,” in *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 503–513.

According to Ellen White, Nebuchadnezzar understood who the fourth Being was: “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.”—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 509.

### Discussion Question:

**In *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville wrote about a man who was asked to worship the idol of his pagan roommate, Queequeg. Follow the logic of the man’s reasoning. “I was a good Christian; born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church. How then could I unite with this wild idolator in worshipping his piece of wood? . . . But what is worship?—to do the will of God—that is worship. And what is the will of God?—to do to my fellow man what I would have my fellow man to do to me—that is the will of God. Now, Queequeg is my fellow man. And what do I wish that this Queequeg would do to me? Why, unite with me in my particular Presbyterian form of worship. Consequently, I must then unite with him in his; ergo, I must turn idolator.”—*Moby Dick* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1999), p. 70. What’s wrong with this reasoning? What does this tell us about how easy it is to rationalize wrong spiritual decisions?**

**Summary:** The three Hebrew boys refused to compromise where it mattered. As Christians, we need to know what matters and then never compromise on those things.