

Walking in the Fire

Daniel 3:19-25; Isaiah 43:2

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God never promised that His dear children would never be cast into the fire of persecution and tribulation. In fact, to the contrary, we have been promised that no child of God is without such suffering for Christ and His truth (John 16:33; Acts 14:21-22). But what we have been promised is that we will not walk alone in the fire of tribulation—the Lord will walk with us to strengthen and to encourage us (Isaiah 43:2; Hebrews 13:5—a double negative, *ou mē*, is used twice for the most emphatic promise—“no not”). Why does the Lord take us through these fires?

Through fiery trials, we learn in the school of Christ that God is using persecution, tribulation, betrayal, or rejection to grow our faith in leaning upon Him, to teach us patience and perseverance even when the fire is heated seven times stronger, to comfort others with the comfort we have received from the Lord, and to put off the world and the flesh in denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following Him. May we become good students in the school of Christ as we cast away all bitterness, anger, and self-pity and learn that Jesus is never so near to us as He is when we walk through fiery trials and tribulations.

The main points from our text are: (1) The Cost of Following Christ (Daniel 3:19-23); (2) You Are Never Alone in Suffering for Christ (Daniel 3:24-25).

I. The Cost of Following Christ (Daniel 3:19-23).

A. Review

1. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had been threatened with a most severe consequence (a fiery furnace) for refusing to obey Nebuchadnezzar’s order to bow down to the golden image. They were even given a second chance to comply with this order (that was probably unheard of from such a totalitarian king), and then they were promised that if they submitted to the king and bowed before his image they would be spared that dreadful death in the fiery furnace.

2. The terms were quite clear from the perspective of the king: turn or burn (turn to me or be burnt alive). But these three godly young men saw the terms quite differently: serve and worship God or serve and worship the king; resist tyranny and obey God or submit to tyranny and disobey God. Their testimony was very clear in Daniel 3:16-18. They were not defiant for defiance sake, but were defiant for Christ’s sake—they stood not against lawful authority, but against tyranny. We are not anti-government. We are anti tyrannical government and pro godly government under Christ the King. We love our country, and pray for its faith in Christ, repentance of national sins, and its reformation according to God’s commandments.

3. Some may object that they could have outwardly complied with the king’s demand, but inwardly protested to the king’s command. After all, it is a matter of the heart and what we truly believe inwardly is all that counts with God—He looks not on the outward appearance but on the heart (this was likewise the position of the Nicodemites— Nicodemus). Listen—when our bodily safety is prized above our faithfulness to Jesus and His truth, we have made an idol of our body and this earthly life. Our body and earthly life have become a graven image before which we bow. We are to keep the Sixth Commandment, but not at the expense of the First Commandment (Matthew 10:39).

B. When Nebuchadnezzar heard the testimony of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, he revealed his pride through his great fury once again (Daniel 3:19).

1. Earlier he was in a “rage and fury” (Daniel 3:13), and now he is “full of fury”. Why? Because these courageous young men feared offending God more than they feared offending him—because

they resisted his tyranny—because they didn't do what he wanted them to do and bow before his image. It was his pride that was hurt, and it led him to be "full of fury" even to the point of his face becoming contorted and distorted (devilish). That is what our sinful anger does to us—it causes us to think, speak, and act in a devilish way. Stop and ask yourself why you became angry. Was it because your plans were altered or someone disappointed you? If it was, then take this sin to the Lord quickly, nail it to the cross, seek forgiveness, and obey Him. Repeat the process till that sinful anger no longer controls you, but you (by God's grace) control it.

2. The king's fury is also expressed in demanding that the furnace be heated seven times hotter than normal. Since they had no thermometers, it probably meant adding seven times more wood/fuel to make the fire that much more intense.

C. As soon as the extra wood/fuel is added to the fire, the king commands the strongest of his guards to immediately bind and cast Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego with all of their clothes yet upon them into the fiery furnace (Daniel 3:20-23). Amazingly, in every way that the king expresses his fury and seeks to inflict greater pain upon these godly young men, God glorifies Himself by way of a greater demonstration of His almighty power. Look at what the Lord did.

1. The king heated the fire seven times hotter, but this only revealed all the more the greater power of God in preserving His children (Psalm 76:10).

2. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were bound and fully clothed when thrown into the fire. The fetters were intended to show they were under Nebuchadnezzar's power. However, their walking in the furnace unbound showed they were under God's power. The clothing with its fabric would be an added combustible fuel to the fire to bring greater pain. And yet the fire not only did not touch the skin of these three faithful young men, it did not even touch their clothes to singe or to leave a burnt odor on them.

3. The king chose "the most mighty men" he could find to cast them into the fiery furnace. He expected that his mighty men would survive the intense fire, and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego would be consumed in the fire. To the contrary, God consumed "the most mighty men" who were only at the mouth of the furnace and preserved His faithful ones who were cast into the full heat of the furnace.

4. In every way the king attempted to display his power over God's people and to intensify their suffering, God turned each of these attempts by the king into an occasion to demonstrate His supreme power and His great love to save His people even when in the midst of the fire (this is what we are taught in the lives of Joseph, Job, and Jesus). Dear ones, be not afraid when it appears the fire of tribulation is heated seven times hotter, God is about to do something greater in displaying His glory and His love (whether He delivers you physically or spiritually).

II. You Are Never Alone in Suffering for Christ (Daniel 3:24-25).

A. Nebuchadnezzar was astonished at what he saw—he couldn't believe what he was seeing. What did he see?

1. He saw four men in the fire instead of three.

2. He saw them all loosed and free from their fetters.

3. He saw them walking about in the fire unhurt rather than fleeing to escape the fire (neither they nor their clothes were harmed).

4. He saw a fourth man who the king said was "like the Son of God".

5. The mightiest king on earth at that time could not with all the power at his disposal destroy God's people. How often the Lord allows the folly of rulers to reach such a height of wrath against Him and His beloved church, just to reveal the impotence of earthly rulers before the Almighty King, Jesus Christ.

B. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were given a very special token of God's love in the fire: the

bodily presence of the Lord's angel or even perhaps the presence of the Lord Jesus Himself.

1. Nebuchadnezzar, being a pagan, likely looked upon the fourth figure as some bodily manifestation of one of the gods ("and the form of the fourth is like a son of the gods" Daniel 3:25). But who was it? It was either one of the Lord's angels (as in the lion's den), or it was the Lord Himself (similar to His appearance to Abraham at the time of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18:1-2).

2. God could have sent an angel (or come Himself) before they were cast into the fire to encourage them that He would be with them, but He waited until they were in the fire. They only had the promise of God that He would be with them in the fire (Isaiah 43:2). But that special sense of Christ's presence was given to them in the fire.

3. Let not the enemy convince you that because you are in the fire that the Lord Jesus has left you or deserted you—that you are all alone. How is it that the faithful throughout history have been able to endure the fiery furnace of suffering, tribulation, loss, rejection, or death? Not by going it alone. But by knowing with faith the promise of God (who cannot lie) that they are not alone—they were never alone.

C. Application

1. The strongest of Nebuchadnezzar's men were destroyed by the very fire in which the three young men were preserved. The fire of suffering (misery and death) in this world is a curse to unbelievers and it destroys them, but the same fire of suffering in this world (even death itself) is blessed by the Lord to purify, sanctify His people and draw them unto Himself for His love, comfort, and growth in grace (Galatians 3:13).

2. God doesn't promise we'll escape the fire of persecution, afflictions, sorrows, or rejection when we resist what is unlawful and boldly stand for what is faithful to God's commandments. Neither the prophets, the apostles, the martyrs—not even Jesus escaped the fire of persecution. Remember—no one can force you to disobey the Lord—regardless of the threatened consequences. The three faithful young men did not know that God would physically save them from the flames, but they did know the king could not force them to disobey their God and Savior.

3. God does promise He will always be with you. It is often the "feeling" that we are all alone that frightens us the most as we face those fires of suffering, rejection, and betrayal in standing for Christ and His truth. God gave to these three godly young men one another to know they were not alone (and He has given us one another); but most importantly, God gave to them Himself to know they were not alone. If we want to enjoy the presence of God in the fire, we must enjoy His presence daily when we are not in the fire as we commune with Him daily in prayer, reading, memorizing, studying, and meditating upon His Word (as we commune with Him in family worship and Lord's Day worship). If our worship is not personal and near to the Lord, but rather distant and more like a machine that has been programmed to follow certain directions, we cannot expect to have the near presence of the Lord in the midst of the fire. You cannot know His presence if you are under His condemnation, but you can through His justification.

4. And that is particularly true as we face death. I cannot think of anything worse than to be facing death without the presence of the Lord Jesus with me. And at the same time, I cannot think of anything better and more glorious than to be facing death with the presence of the Lord Jesus while clinging to this promise: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: [Why?] for thou art with me" Psalm 23:4. Let's enjoy His presence here and now in order that we might enjoy it when we breathe our last breath here on earth and might enjoy His presence forever in the glories of heaven ("in thy presence is fullness of joy" Psalm 16:11). Amen.

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