

## “Fireproof!” (Daniel 3:1–30)

Have you ever had a bad day? No! I mean, have you ever had a *really* bad day? Some time after one of the best days of my life, I had one of the worst days of my life. Let me introduce myself. You no doubt know me as Shadrach. However, I prefer my Hebrew name Hanniah, which means, “The Lord is gracious.” You may recall, as a teenager, I went on the *Daniel diet* and lost twenty pounds! Oh, I’m sorry. Just a little bit of Hebrew humor. Anyway, my three friends and I proposed an alternative to the Babylonian diet and God blessed. At the end of our diet we were fatter and healthier than all the king’s men. By the time we graduated from Babylon U, the king pronounced that we were ten times better than his men. We were the talk of Babylon! A short time later, however, King Nebuchadnezzar was sleepless in Babylon. He was having nightmares and was in dire need of an interpreter. When none of his sages could declare and interpret his dream, the king decreed death for all of his wise men, including *me*. That’s when my man Daniel stepped up, with our lives on the line, and declared and interpreted the king’s dream. Nebuchadnezzar was so pleased that he promoted Daniel to second in command. Fortunately, Daniel didn’t forget the little people. His first act of official duty was to request that my friends and I be promoted to administrators of the province of Babylon. This was too good to be true! I had a bright and prosperous future. I had moved from captivity to prosperity. This was the greatest day of my life.

**Act 1: King Nebuchadnezzar’s golden statue (3:1–7).** But then the bottom fell out. Just when I was really getting comfortable in my lush and lucrative administrative position, the king decided to build a statue.<sup>1</sup> This wasn’t just any ole’ statue.<sup>2</sup> The statue that Nebuchadnezzar built was ninety feet tall and nine feet wide.<sup>3</sup> It was gigantic! I had never seen anything like it. Furthermore, the entire statue was gold plated.<sup>4</sup> It was a stunning sight to behold. To make things even more spectacular, Nebuchadnezzar had this statue built outside of Babylon in a town called Dura, which means “walked place.”<sup>5</sup> Dura was a flat location with no hills or knolls, which permitted the statue to be visible from nearly anywhere. It was a breathtaking sight sparkling in the radiant sunlight.<sup>6</sup>

However, the majestic splendor of the statue turned repugnant when King Nebuchadnezzar called all of his political officials to a dedication and informed us that we had to worship this statue.<sup>7</sup> Gulp! When we gathered together, the king’s herald explained that the moment the king’s orchestra began playing we were to fall down and worship the golden image.<sup>8</sup> Anyone who chose to disobey this order would get “fired” (literally)—cast into a fiery furnace. For the people of Babylon, this command was no big deal. After all, most people in the ancient Near East were polytheists, and used to acknowledging many deities. They could easily integrate this statue into their religious scheme, especially under the duress of capital punishment. But this was not true of me. My belief in one God prohibited participation in this ritual. This would have been a violation of the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Exod 20:3). So when the king’s orchestra began to play, I chose not to bow to the golden statue.<sup>9</sup> Even though thousands of people all around me went to their knees, and then fell like a wave on their faces before the statue, I remained standing, and so did my friends Meshach and Abednego.

**Act 2: Shadrach and the teens accused (3:8–12).** My friends I could have gotten away with our nonconformance if it weren’t for certain enemies who turned us in. These informers were professional colleagues who hated to see us rise so quickly and so high in the Babylonian government. We had beaten them out for best honors in their school, and now we are rapidly rising in the ranks of the government—and we are foreigners to boot! But before you come down on these men too hard, ask yourself: How would you like it if a teenager from another country was promoted over you? How would you feel? How would you respond? These Babylonians were jealous of us and thought they had the perfect plan to get rid of us—they appealed to King Nebuchadnezzar’s sense of vanity. These enemies called us out by name and told the king that we had disregarded him by not serving his gods or worshipping the golden image which he had set up.<sup>10</sup>

**Act 3: The confrontation with Nebuchadnezzar (3:13–18).** Needless to say, this didn't go over very well. The king was filled with rage and anger<sup>11</sup> and gave orders for my friends and me to be brought before him. Nebuchadnezzar then asked us: "Is it really true that you don't serve my gods and worship the golden image that I have set up?" I could see that the king was looking us over and no doubt thinking to himself: "These are three young, promising lads whom I recently promoted to a high place in government. They are inexperienced foreigners, so I will have mercy on them. Yet, this insubordination doesn't look good; it's a bit embarrassing." The king then smiled at us and said, "Boys, surely there must be some misunderstanding. Perhaps you have failed to understand the severity of this situation. I will give you a second chance. The moment you hear the sound of my orchestra, fall down and worship the image that I have made. If you don't worship the image, you will be cast into a fiery furnace, and your God will not be able to deliver you out of my hands."

I instinctually turned to look for Daniel. For a split second, I forgot that he was away on special assignment in some distant part of the empire.<sup>12</sup> I would have to stand on my own two feet and weather this storm without Daniel's navigation. Many thoughts ran through my mind. I thought to myself, "I've taken my stand, but now I really need to submit to the king or else I will die. Certainly God would not want my friends and me to die, would He?" I also had this thought: "We have a loving God who is slow to anger and quick to forgive. We will bow just this one time and then ask forgiveness."<sup>13</sup> God is more understanding and forgiving than these Babylonians." I even thought: "The Babylonians don't understand God's laws. We don't want to offend their culture and ruin our witness. We will bow now so they will listen to us later. Anyway, we're in the king's palace, nobody that we know will see us."<sup>14</sup>

In that moment, I was also looking for some divine revelation. I wanted God to reveal to me that He was going to deliver me. I needed a quick vision or an angel whispering, "Don't worry. God is going to save you." But nothing like that happened. Heaven was silent. As I stood before the king, I knew we might die.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, I determined it was better to "burn than turn." So my friends and I replied: "**O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able<sup>16</sup> to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up**" (3:16–18).<sup>17</sup>

**Act 4: Shadrach and the teens punished (3:19–23).** After we had spoken these fateful words, we knew we had uttered a death wish. The king's face turned bright red, his nostrils flared, his forehead wrinkled, and his features distorted. He was hot! The only thing hotter than his face was the superheated furnace! The king turned the furnace up full blast.<sup>18</sup> I can still see his face and hear his sinister laugh. He was a sadistic man and he took such pleasure in the thought of watching us burn. With thousands of his subjects listening and looking on, the king commanded his most valiant warriors to tie us up. These soldiers practically hog-tied us so that we could not move. They then picked us up like small sacks of grain, slung us over their shoulders, and walked us over to the mouth of the furnace. The furnace was a large, domed kiln with an opening at the top and an earthen ramp leading up to it. It had a door on the bottom for putting in charcoal and taking out ashes. This was a common form of capital punishment during this period.<sup>19</sup> The men made sport of us with a "one, and a two, and a three, heave..." However, the furnace was so hot, the moment these soldiers said, "Geronimo!" they were instantaneously burned to a crisp—cremated on the spot. The thousands who gathered near for our execution observed these horrific deaths. As I was falling down to the bottom of the furnace, I wondered, "Where is God in the midst of my crisis? I was faithful; I obeyed. Why didn't God come through? Where was God?" I knew I was going to die. There was no way I was going to survive the fall. I was sure I was going to break every bone in my body like pottery earthenware. But somehow, in miraculous fashion, when I hit the ground, my body didn't shatter and splatter. I couldn't believe it! Of course, I then wondered how long it would take for me to suffer and die in the midst of the flames. I waited for the searing pain, for the numbness, for the smoke inhalation to suffocate my lungs, but it didn't come.

In fact, after a few seconds I realized that I didn't feel any different. It began to dawn on me that I wasn't even warm. Moreover, it hit me like a stack of furnace bricks that I was no longer bound and could walk around in the furnace without being harmed.<sup>20</sup> I immediately remembered what God had said in Isaiah 43: "When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you. For I am the LORD your God" (Isa 42:2c–3a).<sup>21</sup> Where was God in the midst of my crisis? He was in the midst of the furnace with me.

**Act 5: Shadrach and the teens vindicated (3:24–27).** Once the king recognized what happened his eyes grew wide and his face became ashen. He then leaped to his feet and cried to his officials, **"Was it not three men we cast bound into the midst of the fire?" They replied to the king, 'Certainly, O king.' He said, 'Look! I see four men loosed and walking about in the midst of the fire without harm, and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods!' Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the furnace of blazing fire; he responded and said, 'Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, come out, you servants of the Most High God, and come here!'"** At this point, I was tempted to reply, "No, you come in here! We'll see how you do in this fiery furnace." I also found it humorous that the big bad king called us out by name, but he made no mention of that fourth person! I wanted the Most High God to come out with us and mess him up! But being the Hebrew gentleman that I am, I walked out with my two friends. As we stepped out of the furnace, the political officials examined us and discovered that the fire had no effect on our bodies, nor was the hair of our head singed, nor were our clothes damaged, nor had the smell of fire *even* come upon us. I must confess, even I was blown away. God had made us "fireproof." However, he saved us *in* the fire, not *from* the fire.

I was also intrigued by how God chose to deliver us. He could have saved us without a whole lot of fanfare by simply having us walk out of the fire unscathed. But instead He chose to save us by the presence of a fourth man. This resulted in Nebuchadnezzar referring to this deliverer as "like a son of the gods." Not a bad insight for a pagan king. Unbeknownst to King Nebuchadnezzar, he was viewing an Old Testament manifestation of the one and only Son of God.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the king exclaimed that we served *El Elyon*—the Most High God—sovereign over all.<sup>23</sup> Once again, God's sovereignty is put on display. He is truly large and in charge.<sup>24</sup>

**Acts 6: Nebuchadnezzar honors God (3:28–30).** When Nebuchadnezzar realized the magnitude of God's miracle, he blessed our God and then made a decree that anyone who spoke anything offensive against our God should be torn limb from limb and their houses reduced to a rubbish heap. Does this sound familiar (cf. 2:5)? Obviously, this was Neb's favorite line. Nebuchadnezzar wasn't a big fan of moderation. The king had no sense of humor at all. First, he was going to kill us, then he was going to kill anyone who insulted our God. Go figure! In the end, the king caused my friends and me to prosper in the province of Babylon. So once again, we transitioned from captivity to prosperity.

This dreadful day turned out to be the best day of my life. God didn't save me *from* the furnace but He did save me *in* the furnace. As a result, I was safer in the furnace than when I was standing in front of the king. If I had not been thrown in the fire, I would surely have been killed some other way. But since the furnace was God's will for me I was safer in the flames than anywhere else. If there's one thing that I learned from this experience, it's this: *When you stand for God, you never stand alone.* God stands with you and He will not abandon you—not in this life nor in the life to come.

### **Scripture References**

Daniel 3:1–30

Exodus 20:3–6

Deuteronomy 6:4–5

Isaiah 12:2; 43:2; 48:10

Matthew 10:28

Acts 5:28; 20:24

1 Peter 4:12–14

### **Study Questions**

1. What kinds of idolatry do evangelical Christians get ensnared in? What forms of idolatry have I struggled with in my past? What idols are presently competing with my worship of God? In what practical ways can I resist and avoid idolatry in my personal life? Read 1 Corinthians 10:14 and 1 John 5:21.
2. Am I currently in the midst of a fiery furnace? How have I dealt with this suffering in the past? How am I dealing with this trial right now? What is God teaching me through this experience? Do I have another believer who will stand with me when the heat is on? Martin Luther (1483–1546), the great reformer and founder of Lutheranism said, “To go against one’s conscience is neither safe nor right. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise.”
3. Nobel Peace Prize winner Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) once said, “Example is not the best way of teaching, it is the only way.” How am I an example to my family, friends, coworkers, and church? Where do my strengths and weaknesses lie? How can I ensure that I point others to Christ as I attempt to lead and serve?
4. What is the greatest challenge to my integrity? Who can help me overcome this area? Dwight Eisenhower (1890–1969) once said: “In order to be a leader, one must have followers, and to have followers one must have confidence. Hence the supreme quality for a leader is unquestioned integrity. Without it no real success is possible, no matter whether it is a section game, on a football field, in an army, or in an office. If one’s associates find him guilty of phoniness, if they find that the individual lacks forthright integrity, he will fail. His teachings and actions must square with each other. The first great need therefore is integrity.”
5. How has God met me in my time of need? What was my response? What did I learn about myself? What did God teach me about Himself? How will I respond the next time I am in a trial?

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel doesn't tell us how much time has elapsed between the events of Dan 2 and 3. Evidently, this is not important in the interpretation of the account. However, the statement in Dan 3:12 that, "There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the administration of the province of Babylon," supports the idea that little time elapsed between Dan 2 and 3.

<sup>2</sup> We know very little about the image which Nebuchadnezzar set up. Whether this image was a representation of the king, of a known deity, or something totally different, we are not told. We should not seek to learn what God has withheld from us.

<sup>3</sup> The golden statue is "sixty cubits *and* its width six cubits" (Dan 3:1). A cubit is about 18" (elbow to tip of hand). Hence, the NET is correct to translate: "It was ninety feet tall and nine feet wide."

<sup>4</sup> This seems to mean overlaid with gold, and we have biblical examples of this, such as (1) Aaron's golden calf (Exod 32); (2) Isa 40:19; 41:7; 44:10; (3) Jer 10:4, 14. See also Ernest C. Lucas, *Daniel*. Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity; Leicester: UK: Apollos, 2002), 88; Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*. The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 109.

<sup>5</sup> The location of the plain of Dura is uncertain, but there is some evidence that it was approximately sixteen miles south of Babylon (see Miller, *Daniel*, 111). There, archaeologists have discovered what is believed to be the base of a very large statue amidst some ruins which bear the name "Dura." Some believe these are the remains of Nebuchadnezzar's statue, but we can't be certain.

<sup>6</sup> The identity of the statue is not given. It is possible that the statue depicted Nebuchadnezzar; however, most commentators argue against this view. Archer writes, "We have no evidence that statues of a Mesopotamian ruler were ever worshiped as divine during the ruler's lifetime. Such practices may have been followed in the Egypt of Ramses II (though we have no decisive proof of this) but hardly in the Sumerian, Babylonian, or Assyrian empires. It is far more likely that the statue represented Nebuchadnezzar's patron god, Nebo (or Nabu). Prostration before Nebo would amount to a pledge of allegiance to his viceroy, *Nabu-kudurri-usur*, i.e., Nebuchadnezzar." Gleason L. Archer, Jr., "Daniel," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), Electronic ed.

<sup>7</sup> The various categories of people in the list are political officials from around the empire, which may signal that this was Nebuchadnezzar's attempt to solidify control over the diverse elements of his vast empire.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel 3 mentions "worship/pay homage to" (*segid*) eleven times (3:5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15 [twice], 18, 28). This verb is not used anywhere else in the Hebrew OT.

<sup>9</sup> Deffinbaugh writes: "The weakness of the final kingdom, which in the king's mind causes the entire statue to collapse, is the mixture of races and a resulting lack of cohesiveness. This is the "problem" which king Nebuchadnezzar set out to "fix." Nebuchadnezzar, from the very beginning, seems intent on fulfilling a grand objective. He wants not only to establish a great kingdom, but it seems he envisioned a world empire. He hoped, like all ambitious despots and Satan, who stands behind them, to rule the world. Thus, in chapter 1 we find the king assembling a large pool of advisors representing the various schools of wisdom from all over the world. In this sense, he welcomed Daniel and his three Hebrew friends (remember that Solomon was renowned for his wisdom). When the king learned from his dream that the mix of races weakened the last kingdom, he set his mind to solve this problem rather than deal with the stone of his vision. How could he change the course of history? How could he eliminate the fatal flaws of that final kingdom to prolong the life of the statue and thus his glory? Daniel 3 suggests that the king determined to solidify his dominion by unifying the many races and nations under his rule with a common religion and object of worship. This posed a serious threat to the Jews." See Bob Deffinbaugh, "Faith and the Furnace" (Daniel 3) in *Daniel: Relating Prophecy to Piety*: [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org).

<sup>10</sup> We should note that this is an accusation by *some* Chaldeans (Babylonians) against *some* Jews. It is not a class action against a whole people. Indeed, many aspects of this story leave us with various questions. What about the other Jewish people? Were any others present? Did they conform?

<sup>11</sup> "Rage [*regaz*] and anger [*chema*"]": It takes two synonyms to convey the degree of the king's fury.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel has been given a lot of authority in the kingdom. Knowing Daniel's popularity, the king probably took advantage of his absence to issue this decree.

<sup>13</sup> Many Christians call this the 1 John 1:9 principle. Unfortunately, this principle can lead to abuse.

<sup>14</sup> Rodney Stortz, *Daniel: The Triumph of God's Kingdom*. Preaching the Word Commentary Series (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004),

<sup>15</sup> Ray Pritchard, "A Time to Disobey" (Daniel 3) in *Daniel: Courageous Living in Turbulent Times*: [www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/1999-11-28-A-Time-to-Disobey](http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/1999-11-28-A-Time-to-Disobey).

<sup>16</sup> The descriptive title, "the God who is able," is also in Dan 3:29 and in the NT (Rom 16:5; Eph 3:20; Jude 24).

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<sup>17</sup> Please notice what Shadrach and his friends didn't do. They don't seem to have made any speeches or to have called attention to themselves. There was no attempt to stop others from bowing down. No riots, no demonstrations, no press conferences, no abusive language, no violence, no resisting arrest, no running away, no lying about their actions, no request for amnesty, and no attempt to overthrow the king. The American church could certainly learn a lesson from these teenagers.

<sup>18</sup> In this instance, "seven times hotter" is a figure of speech for full tilt. The number "seven" is frequently used in Scripture to speak of completion or perfection (Gen 2:2-3; Prov 24:16; 26:16).

<sup>19</sup> Bob Utley, "Daniel": [www.freebiblecommentary.org](http://www.freebiblecommentary.org) (cf. Code of Hammurabi 110,157 and Jer 29:22).

<sup>20</sup> The Septuagint (Greek OT) is interesting in that it reads the king "heard them singing praises." If this singing in the furnace did in fact transpire, it reminds us of two other suffering saints Paul and Silas singing in the midst of the Philippian jail (Acts 16:25). Surely these are men who are controlled by the Holy Spirit, as their song is a supernatural song.

<sup>21</sup> Isaiah prophesied from 740-680 BC and the events of Dan 3 most likely take place between 605-586 BC. Hence, it is likely that the young men are aware of this text.

<sup>22</sup> Gene A. Getz, *Daniel: Standing Firm for God*. Men of Character Series (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 67.

<sup>23</sup> See Dan 3:26; 4:2, 17, 24, 25, 32, 34; 5:18, 21; 7:25.

<sup>24</sup> Daniel 3 is certainly a historical account. 1 Macc 2:59 tells how the dying Mattathias of Modin recalled the heroism of David and Elijah and said, "Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael believed and were saved out of the flame." In the NT, Hebrews 11:34 refers to Daniel 3: "[They] quenched the fury of the flames"—an allusion that appears in a long list of the heroes of the faith. Obviously the author of Hebrews believed that the events in Dan 3 took place in the sixth century B.C. exactly as they were related.