

Sermon – 12/08/2007 am

Fiery Trial

Study Text: Daniel 3:19-30

In this well-known story from Daniel the fiery death that faced Shadrach, Meshach and Abde-Nego became a fiery trial. God wonderfully intervened to save them from death and bring glory to himself. God demonstrated that his power is greater than that of even the most powerful earthly king, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.

Wonderful story of victory that it is, remember that the faith of Shadrach, Meshach and Abde-Nego was not dependent upon being delivered from the fiery furnace. Their bodies may well have been consumed in the flames, but their faith would never be destroyed. Moreover they were not saved from the fire, but through the fire.

When we turn to the New Testament we read *Beloved do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you, but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's suffering* (I Peter 4:12). Peter may well have been reflecting on this passage from Daniel as he wrote to New Testament Christians who were suffering, and dying, at the hands of the Roman emperor.

A Fiery Heart

When king Nebuchadnezzar was told that some of his royal servants, namely three young Jews, would not worship his gold image, he had them appear before him. He gave them a chance to reconsider, but they stood firm – *we will not worship the gold image you have set up* (3:18). They explained that they served another God, the omnipotent and true God.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abde-Nego witnessed the good confession before the king, just as Jesus did before Pilate (I Timothy 6:13). Jesus said *my kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world my servants would fight* (John 18:36). Pilate did not understand what Jesus was talking about; nor did Nebuchadnezzar understand these young Jews. He simply saw three young men who were disobeying his royal decree – and he flew into a rage.

The expression of his face changed (3:19). In fact his whole attitude towards these men changed. He had previously promoted them (2:49) and had tried to get them to change their mind. But when they stood firm in obeying God and not man, he burned with hot anger against them. He ordered the furnace to be made seven times hotter. More fuel would have been added to the fire to make it as hot as it could possibly be.

Proof of the intense heat of the furnace is seen in the instant death of the strong guards who took Shadrach, Meshach and Abde-Nego and tied them up – fully clothed in their royal attire (3:22). They carried them to the top of the furnace to throw them in. But as they did so the roaring flames devoured them instead. The king's hot anger led to the unintended death of his own guards. This is often the way with hot anger and rage – innocent people get hurt.

A Harmless Fire

This was not a few smouldering coals that Shadrach, Meshach and Abde-Nego were forced to walk on as some sceptics might say. They were thrown into a raging fire that killed the guards instantly. They were expected to become just a handful of ashes at the bottom of the fire within a moment. But Nebuchadnezzar did not see their ashes at the bottom – he saw them walking around in the fire (3:25).

They young Jews were not hurt; they were not even harmed by the fire. Nebuchadnezzar stood amazed as he gazed in through the door of the furnace. He went closer to the open door and called to Shadrach, Meshach and Abde-Nego to come out. And wonder of wonders, they came out and stood before the king and all his officials.

The planned execution of these three young ‘traitors’ was a very public affair. All the leading officials were there to witness the king demonstrate his power and authority. *Who is the god who will deliver you from my hands* was his challenge. All would fear the word of the king after this day. All would bow down and worship his gold image after this day. But things did not turn out as he planned.

The hair of their head was not singed...and they did not even smell of fire (3:27). The smell of singed hair is very strong. These men were not even singed by the fire. Even if they had been wearing special ‘firemen suits’, they would have smelt of fire. They were saved in a supernatural manner as Nebuchadnezzar himself recognised.

These days some people start living in an unreal world because of all the TV drama that they see. They see ‘superman’ and ‘star wars’ and the like to the extent that they cannot discern what is real and what is unreal. Reading the book of Daniel they may think they are in this unreal world of fiction and fantasy. But we must be very clear that this is not fantasy. What we read in the Bible is a true story of faith and the power of our God.

The faith of these young men was vindicated in this miraculous deliverance. They knew, and they made known, that God was able to deliver them from the fiery furnace. But their faith was not dependant upon God delivering them – it was unconditional faith in God. They did not say ‘if God delivers us we will believe’. Christians should not think that God will keep them from all sickness, from all financial problems and all opposition. Tragically some think this and even ‘believe’ in God on this condition. Their ‘faith’ is more like that of Nebuchadnezzar than of Daniel’s friends.

What does Peter tell us? Fiery trials are part of life for a Christian. Our faith is strengthened, and God is glorified, when we go through trials trusting in Jesus. Are you able to *glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance, and perseverance character and character hope?* (Romans 5:3, 4). Do you find that trials strengthen your faith as the furnace tempers and toughens the steel?

Son of the gods

How were Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego saved through the fire? Was it their faith that saved them in some abstract or emotional sense? No! It was the God in whom they believed who saved them. This is clearly shown in what Nebuchadnezzar saw in the fire.

Remember Nebuchadnezzar was a heathen, and was certainly not expecting to see an angel deliver them. Nor was he having a vision at this particular time. *'Look' he answered, 'I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God'* (3:25). This translation is somewhat interpretive. The alternative, a 'son of the gods' is a more accurate translation .

As we just said Nebuchadnezzar was a heathen and as such not likely to identify the figure as Jesus, the Son of God. This is not to say of course that this was not a Christophany. Nebuchadnezzar later refers to this figure as an *angel* (3:28). He understood this angel to be sent by the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. The angel of the Lord appeared in the fire with these young men of faith and protected them from the flames.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had been taught the commandments from their youth. They knew the Scriptures and the promise of God. God's presence was with their forefathers as they travelled through the wilderness. God promised Joshua *I will be with you; I will not leave you or forsake you* (Joshua 1:5). They knew God was with them and was powerful to save. Nebuchadnezzar was astonished at what he saw, but would they have been astonished?

An 'angel of the Lord' stood by Peter in the prison and led him out past the guards and the through the locked gates (Acts 12). The church had been praying constantly but they were all astonished when Peter appeared at the front door. Why were they so surprised? Should they not have been expecting God to answer their prayers? Before we start to criticise let us examine our own hearts. Do you believe that God can do mighty things in your life?

But at the same time will you trust in God even if he does let you go through fiery trials? Will your faith grow stronger through such trials? Remember these young men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and seek to live like them.

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