

THE *HOT* WORD FROM THE BIBLE  
The Fiery Furnace Daniel 3  
July 26, 2009

There have been many legends about the things President Abraham Lincoln said and did. This is another one:

One day as Lincoln was working hard on an important matter that was vexing him, he was disturbed by an intrusion of three men who, without apology, proceeded to lay their claim before him.

The spokesman of the three reminded the President that they were the manufacturers of a new kind of torpedo, which, if the government would only adopt it, would soon crush the rebellion.

“Now” said the spokesman, “We’ve been here to see you time and again; you have referred us to the Secretary of War, the Chief of Ordnance, and the General of the Army, and they gave us no satisfaction. We have been kept waiting, until money and patience are exhausted, and we now come to demand of you a final reply to our application.”

Mr. Lincoln listened to the insolent tirade, and, with a twinkle in his eye said, “You three gentlemen remind me of a story I once heard of a poor little boy who had lost his mother. His father wanted to give him a religious education, and so placed him in a family of a clergyman. The little boy was instructed carefully in the scriptures. Every day the boy had to memorize and recite one chapter of the bible. Things proceeded smoothly until they reached the chapters which detailed the story of the trial of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace. When asked to repeat the names, the boy said he had forgotten them.

“His teacher told him that he must learn them, and gave him another day to do so. The next day the boy again forgot them. ‘Now,’ said the teacher, ‘you have again failed to remember those names and you can go no farther until you have learned them. I will give you another day on this lesson.’

“The next day the boy came to recite, and got down to the stumbling block, and the clergyman asked him, ‘Now tell me the names of the men in the fiery furnace.’ At this point in his tale the President looked hard at his three interrupting visitors, as he concluded the story. ‘Oh,’ said the frustrated little boy, here come those three infernal bores! I wish the devil had them!” (Lincoln’s Yarns and Stories Colonel Alexander K McClure, from [sermonillustrations.com](http://sermonillustrations.com).) Needless to say, the three men left the President’s office.

Now I’m not going to call our heroes of this morning’s scripture “the three infernal bores” throughout this sermon, but I do remember my tongue tripping over their names when I was a child and reading this story. I suppose that’s why the children’s television series “Veggie Tales” shortened them to “Rack, Shack and Bennie.”

But this morning Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego deserve to have their full names shared and remembered for their courage literally “under fire.”

This story from the book of Daniel is hauntingly familiar to 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans. We hear at the beginning of Chapter 3 that the egomaniacal king, Nebuchadnezzar, commanded that a statue of gold, presumably of himself, be built in the Dura plain—which is just south of the modern-day city of Baghdad.

The statue was to be 90 feet tall and 9 feet wide. When you consider that the Statue of Liberty is 130 feet tall, you can get some idea what a huge statue this was.

The most recent infamous leader of that same land, Saddam Hussein, likened himself to a modern-day Nebuchadnezzar. One of the most indelible images of the war was the toppling of the statue of Saddam in Baghdad. But that was at the end of his reign of terror. Our scripture this morning is in the thick of the Babylonian tyrant’s rule.

When Nebuchadnezzar’s statue was complete, he commanded the presence of all Babylon’s citizens at the dedication, and he had an orchestra there ready to play. When the music sounded, everyone had been coached to prostrate

themselves on the ground to worship the king through his graven idol. The penalty for not doing so was to be thrown into a fiery furnace.

Back in chapter 2, four young Jewish men had made themselves known to old King Nebuchadnezzar. They were Daniel and his friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. All of them had been captured by the Babylonian army as it stormed through Judah. The Babylonians herded the strongest, brightest, and most skillful of the conquered people back to their land.

Early on in their exile, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had shown their intellect and skill. The king appointed them as administrators of the province of Babylon, quite to the chagrin of the local politicians who had been angling for that position for years.

Out of jealousy or out of prejudice, certain Chaldeans became tattletales, and reported that the Jewish administrators had not bowed down when the music played at the big statue dedication. Even when King Nebuchadnezzar confronted the three himself, reminding them of the penalty, the three refused to bow down before the golden idol.

Now why didn't the three just bow down and get it over with? They wouldn't have to mean it in their hearts! They could have just pretended and stayed out of trouble. Wouldn't God have known the truth behind their actions?

What Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were experiencing in Babylon was "conformity pressure." Similar to peer pressure, conformity pressure is when a majority of people already agree upon or share a particular value. When new people appear on the scene, they learn that in order to get along, they must accept the beliefs and practices of the majority. If the "newbies" reject the practices of the group, they find themselves at best ostracized, and at worst, in physical danger, which is exactly what happened to the three friends.

It's not that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did not conform to *anything* in Babylon. They had already been somewhat flexible in order to survive and thrive as they did.

But when it came to disobeying their sacred laws, they drew the line. For after all, the first and second of the ten commandments say “You shall have no other god before me” and “You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God....”

This was the line that could not be crossed for the three. And so, the King could do nothing less than follow through on his decree.

We now get to my favorite part of the scripture. When Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego responded to the king’s threat, they said, “If you’re going to follow through on your punishment, our god whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if he doesn’t save us, be it known to you, O king, that we will never serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up.”

The faith of these young men is astounding! They trusted that God would deliver them from the fiery furnace. AND if God didn’t, they would still remain faithful to their God’s commandments. Miracle or not, they would continue to trust in the Lord.

How many of us have struggled at one time or another, that when our prayers did not get answered the way we wanted them to—when God didn’t get us out of a situation that way we thought He should have—we were angered and wanted to reject Him. The faith of the Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—to trust in God even if they ended up consumed by their physical suffering, is awe-inspiring to many of us who have struggled with our anger at God in the past.

Their words riled Nebuchadnezzar to the boiling point, and he had the fire stoked up 7 times its usual temperature, so hot that when the soldiers who were sent to throw Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in were burned to a crisp themselves.

We’re going to leave our three friends in the fiery furnace for just a few seconds to lift a prayer of thanksgiving that we live in a nation that affirms a freedom of

religious practice, unlike the Babylon of old. That doesn't mean that there's not *conformity* pressure in this country. Many of my non-Christian friends feel it in the way our national holidays revolve around Christian holy-days, or in the way that many Christians express our passion about our love for Jesus Christ.

For the most part, I don't have a problem with Christian conformity pressure. The Judeo-Christian faith traditions primarily founded this nation—and it is a connective value that is still strongly prevalent in the majority of believers in this country.

I do have a problem when Christian conformity pressure becomes abusive—whether it is non-violent judgmental harrassment or violent attack. Many in this room have seen in their lifetime the results of our most recent fiery furnace when the ovens flamed again for people faith. The Holocaust will continue to haunt us with its horrible threat to human dignity and life.

And so we go back to our three friends in the fiery furnace. The scriptures tell us that all who watched to see what happened to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were surprised to see a fourth presence in the fire with them. It looked, according to King Nebuchadnezzar like an angel of God.

And sure enough, when the fire died down and the three men came out, they were undamaged—not even an eyebrow singed, not even smelling of smoke, because they had been protected by God.

As faithful followers of the Lord, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were not saved from enduring the fiery furnace, but they were saved from being consumed.

There, in a nutshell, is the plain, simple, hard truth of our faith.

Friends, God doesn't promise us that we will be saved from entering into the fiery furnaces of life. Indeed, we all know we've had our own individual brushes with the heat of hard times.

But the Good News of this scripture today is that because we hold fast to our faith, because we hold the line on our beliefs, we can trust that God will be in the fire with us so that we WILL NOT be consumed.

Think about it—

\*When you thought you would just crumple up and be washed away by your tears after you lost the love of your life—you were in the fire of lonely despair, but you were not consumed.

\*When you stood up to your boss whose lack of ethics compromised your own values of right and wrong and you suffered the consequences of job harassment or even unemployment, yes, you were distraught, but you were not consumed.

\*When you made the decision to leave a life of addiction, and you felt like you were burning up inside with the pain of withdrawal and urgent need; still, you were not consumed.

The apostle Paul knew first hand about being thrown into life's fiery furnaces, and this is what he had to say about it—from the Message translation of II Corinthians 4: "We've been surrounded and battered by troubles, but we're not demoralized; we're not sure what to do, but we know that God knows what to do; we've been spiritually terrorized, but God hasn't left our side; we've been thrown down, but we haven't broken. What they did to Jesus, they do to us—trial and torture, mockery and murder; what Jesus did among them, he does in us—he lives! Our lives are at constant risk for Jesus' sake, which makes Jesus' life all the more evident in us. While we're going through the worst, you're getting in on the best!"

Many Christians believe that fourth person in the fiery furnace with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego was the Christ, the Messiah, and that he's right there with us, too.

In closing, I share with you about a man whose life, when you think about it, was a series of fiery furnaces—one right after another. When he was 7 years old, his family was forced out of their home on a legal technicality, and he had to work to help support them instead of going to school. At age nine, his mother died.

At twenty-two, he lost his job as a store clerk. He wanted to go to law school, but his education wasn't good enough. At twenty-three, he went into debt to become a partner in a small store. At twenty-six, his business partner died, leaving him with a huge debt that took years to repay. At twenty eight, after courting a girl for four years, he asked her to marry him. She said no. At thirty-seven, on his third try, he was elected to Congress, but two years later, he failed to be reelected. At forty-one, his four year old son died. At forty five, he ran for the Senate and lost. At forty seven he failed as the vice-presidential candidate. At forty -nine he ran for the Senate again and lost. At fifty one he was elected president of the United States—and the country was thrown into Civil War. (James L. Hewett. Illustrations Unlimited. Tyndale. 1988. pp 17-18).

Yes, I'm talking about the man with whom we started the sermon—President Abraham Lincoln. Some historians reflect that it was BECAUSE of all the fiery furnaces he endured throughout his life that he was able to handle a nation at war with itself. Some theologians believe that it was BECAUSE of all the fiery furnaces he endured that the once skeptical agnostic became a deeply religious man who clung to the truth of Jesus' teaching.

I pray that if any of you are going through such a fiery time today, if you feel like you're being consumed by pain, by despair, by oppression, by heavy burdens—hear the Good News. You are not alone. Christ is with you—and you will not be consumed.

Amen

(greatly adapted from a sermon from Aug. 1, 2004)