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“All God’s miracles are acts of deliverance. Finally, that’s the message our Lord wants to share with us. He is the Deliverer. We can look to Him for providing us liberation, freedom, and escape from the power of evil. And these Old Testament acts of deliverance are to prepare us for the supreme act of deliverance when Jesus rose from the dead to give us eternal life.”

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THE HEAT IS ON

If you remember, King Nebuchadnezzar had changed the names of the Hebrew wise men working in his court. Rather than retain their Hebrew names, the king assigned new Babylonian names. So, the Hebrew wise men Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah became known as Beltshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. In Daniel 3, we revel in a grand and spectacular miracle provided by God to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

King Nebuchadnezzar had been duly impressed with Daniel’s interpretive abilities, and after Daniel’s work of deciphering the king’s dream, the king had praised the God of the Hebrews as being the strongest deity in the world. However, the remarkable miracle didn’t seem to have a long-term effect on the pagan king.

One day the king got it into his head that he should construct an image of gold some 90 feet high. Clearly, this image wasn’t made of solid gold, but it was gold plated, and it was to be constructed as an attempt to unify the leadership of the Babylonian Empire. We have a flag around which we rally; this idol was to be a similar sort of rallying point. Now, it was common for ancient potentates to erect colossal images of themselves (even Constantine, the first Christian king of the Roman Empire, created such monstrosities). But the statue constructed by King Nebuchadnezzar seems to have been one of a local deity, as suggested by verse 14 when the king asked Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego: “Is it true that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up?”

Some suggest the image was of the Babylonian god which Nebuchadnezzar gained the first part of his name. Nebuchadnezzar means “Nabu, protect my son!” or “Nabu boundary!”

Nebuchadnezzar erected his monstrous statue and commanded his most important officers to worship the image at a special dedicatory service. Indeed, as soon as various musical instruments were played, the people were to bow down. One of the instruments that “sounded,” called the “pipes” in the NIV, probably consisted of a goatskin bag with two reed pipes. One pipe would fill the goatskin with air; the other pipe was pierced with holes providing various notes. In other words, this is the world’s first mention of the bagpipes — and we’re sure not talking about Scotland here! Interesting, some believe the Greek word for this instrument is “symphonia” from which, of course, we get our modern English word for the gathering and playing of many musical instruments. Perhaps these instruments were the signal for the high point of the dedication, but when the music began, it was to mark the precise moment of obeisance. And the king warned that should anyone disobey the king’s call to worship, he or she would be thrown into a blazing furnace.

When the music sounded, we read that “the peoples, nations, and men of every language” fell down and worshipped the idol. That particular phrase is used three times in this chapter to indicate the various nationalities and races included in the edict to worship. The same phraseology is used in other chapters when referring to the people of Nebuchadnezzar’s empire (see Daniel 4:1, 5:19, 6:25). And the same phraseology is used by Daniel in describing the coming of Christ in Daniel 7:14. Many centuries later, when the apostle John wrote the book of Revelation, he would imitate this particular phrase in describing our heavenly worship of the Lord (see Revelation

5:9, 11:9, 13:7, and 14:6). John wants to emphasize how Jesus’ ministry supersedes the events and experiences of the Old Testament. Nebuchadnezzar may have been a powerful king, but the Lord Jesus is the King of kings!

Well, of course, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego would not violate the First Commandment by obeying the king’s edict to worship an idol. They refused to bow down. As is so often the case when someone breaks the rules, there are those who will tell the authorities. Some of the Babylonians tattled on the three Hebrews, reminding the king he had decreed that whoever disobeyed would be thrown into a fiery furnace. The king was livid.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were dragged before Nebuchadnezzar and accused of disobedience. The king told the three Hebrews that they would either begin worshipping the idol, or they would be burned alive. Notice how closely Nebuchadnezzar’s arrogant question resembles the arrogance exhibited by Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, as he encircled Jerusalem. The words are almost identical. Nebuchadnezzar said, “If you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?” Does that sound familiar?

The three Hebrews responded with one of the Bible’s great statements of faith. First of all, they asserted their right not to defend themselves. After all, the deeper things of faith can never be proven or argued except by the believer’s example of living. They also acknowledged the king’s power to toss them into a fiery furnace. But, they declared that God possessed the power to deliver them from that same fire. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego recognized it might not be the Lord’s will to provide such a miraculous deliverance, but they declared that even if He did not intervene, they would always worship the God

of Israel. What an expression of faith! The faith of these three Hebrews echoed the faith of Jesus Himself in the Garden of Gethsemane as He prayed for deliverance from His upcoming death on the cross. “Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36, NIV). Jesus, of course, wasn’t given an escape from the cross. But, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego would be delivered from the holocaust.

How greatly we would benefit from a faith such as this! We know that God can provide deliverance from our most difficult trials. But can we also confess that should He not provide deliverance in the manner we wish, we will not curse Him or delete Him from our lives, but continue to trust in His good will and providence? If we can truly assent to that confession, we will demonstrate a spiritually mature approach to the challenges we face. God may not help in the manner we wish, but our faith will go on. By approaching our trial in such a fashion, we become powerful witnesses of our love and trust in the Lord.

In fact, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were such powerful witnesses. When the three Hebrews refused to obey the king, Nebuchadnezzar completely lost his cool. He was enraged. He was so determined to snuff out these insolent followers of the Lord, he ordered the furnace to be heated seven times its normal temperature. Since the “furnace” was probably a kiln whose temperature was controlled by a number of bellows forcing air into the chamber, it would be easy to increase the heat. Of course, the Bible often uses the number “7” to suggest completeness, so Nebuchadnezzar’s command for the furnace to be seven times hotter than normal may be a way of expressing ultimate, complete fire and heat.

In any case, the furnace became so hot that when Nebuchadnezzar’s soldiers brought Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to the top of the furnace

and were preparing to throw them in, the heat pouring from the blazing inferno killed some of them. However, the three Hebrews, their arms and legs tied to prohibit any possibility of escape, were heaved into the fire. Notice, they were still wearing their robes, trousers, turbans, and other clothes. It was customary to strip criminals before an execution in ancient Babylon, but the three Hebrews are dressed to the teeth, presumably to make their fiery deaths even more certain.

Apparently, the kilns used by the Babylonians had an opening both at the top and the side, because when King Nebuchadnezzar looked into the kiln to see the burning of his insolent subjects, he discovered to his amazement that the cords which had bound the three men were loosed, and a fourth figure was with them. The fourth figure must have borne an impressive appearance because the king described him as looking like a son of one of the gods. Later, the king would acknowledge this figure as an angel from the God of Israel.

The king was so flustered and amazed by this remarkable miracle that he ordered Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the furnace. And they walked out! When they emerged, there were no burns anywhere. Even the hairs on their head were not singed. Not only were their robes untouched by the fire, they didn’t even carry the smell of the inferno from which they strode.

Strangely, Nebuchadnezzar wasn’t converted to Judaism. Any other person on the face of the earth might have followed the Lord when confronted by such a dramatic miracle. But, at least the king guaranteed the Hebrews a right to worship God freely. And the king declared that anyone obstructing their worship would be cut into pieces and their houses destroyed. I guess this must have been one of Nebuchadnezzar’s favorite forms of execution, because when he was blustering against the wise men of our last lesson,

