

DANIEL 3:1-30, Part 4 Oct 23, 2016

A FIERCE FIRE FOR the FAITHFUL FOUR

The old saying is that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Last week I was sent a document many in my age bracket need to read. It provides a list of solid evidences that you are no longer a kid anymore. For example, you know you are getting old when you enjoy hearing about other people's operations. You know you are getting old when you have more hair on your ears than your head. You know you are getting old when you get into a heated argument about pension plans. Indeed. Those are some indicators that may help some of you. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon could have used a list like that, except his list would have said, "You know your royal head is getting too large when..." And one of those would be, "When you start to tell your subjects when and where and how and what they must worship." Last week we looked at the hot king and the cool kid. Today we look at the hot king and the faithful four. 3:1 *Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, the height of which was sixty cubits and its width six cubits; he set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon.* This image, likely of wood, coated with gold, would have been 90 feet high. Look up at the peak of our ceiling, then double that height. That is 90 feet. It was a huge, skinny thing that was too tall to stay indoors, so they put it in this plain of Dura outside the capital city. 2-8 *Then Nebuchadnezzar the king sent word to assemble the satraps, the prefects and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates and all the rulers of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up. 3 Then the satraps, the prefects and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates and all the rulers of the provinces were assembled for the dedication of the image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up; and they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. 4 Then the herald loudly proclaimed: "To you the command is given, O peoples, nations and men of every language, 5 that at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe and all kinds of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king has set up. 6 But whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire." 7 Therefore at that time, when all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe and all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshiped the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up.* Now, in a way, that is a

vision of the destiny of humanity isn't it? According to Revelation a day is coming when men from every tribe and tongue and nation will bow down at the command of the King to worship, and those who don't go into the pit of fire. Only problem here is that they had the wrong object of worship and that is not a small problem. When you have the wrong object for your worship, your worship goes from a good thing to an abomination. Now we know from reading this and from reading the previous two chapters that some friends of ours are facing a real problem here. Big D and the pious three, also known as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are all upright, law-keeping Jews who could never bow down before an image like this. What is going to happen to our friends? Will they be caught? Will they wind up in the fire? Certain individuals in the kingdom wanted to make sure they did. So **8-9** *For this reason at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and brought charges against the Jews. 9 They responded and said to Nebuchadnezzar the king: "O king, live forever! They kept saying that to kings, even though it never worked. **10-12** You, O king, have made a decree that every man who hears the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, and bagpipe and all kinds of music, is to fall down and worship the golden image. 11 But whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire. 12 There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the administration of the province of Babylon, namely Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. These men, O king, have disregarded you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up."*

You will notice at this point that someone is missing. Where is Daniel? Did Daniel capitulate and compromise? I can't imagine. Daniel may not have been accused because of his high standing with the king, or maybe because he was running the government in the capital and was not at the dedication. We don't know. But we know he would have been proud of his friends. **13a** *Then Nebuchadnezzar in rage and anger gave orders to bring Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego; this guy is in serious need of an anger management program. **13-15** Then Nebuchadnezzar in rage and anger gave orders to bring Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego; then these men were brought before the king. 14 Nebuchadnezzar responded and said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? 15 Now if you are ready, at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery and bagpipe and all kinds of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, very well. But if you do not worship, you will immediately*

*be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire; and what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?” Ah-ha. Do you see what he is saying there? In the king’s mind, who really is god? Nebuchadnezzar believed in nobody and nothing more powerful than himself. This has been the taunt of wicked tyrants for centuries. “What God is there who is greater than me?” A few of them, like Nebbie actually got to find out before it was too late. **16** *Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. I think they imply here that the king already knows enough about their God and their devotion to Him to answer his own questions. **17-18** If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. 18 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. “Isn’t that an incredible statement!! Here are three men with faith, with convictions, with a soul!**

But if this were happening in our day, rather than in an ancient book, you know what many would say? Many would say these young fellas are being foolish and fanatical. They would shake our heads at their religious folly. Now remember, these were not the only Jews among the king’s officials. There were others who were not quite so narrow minded, who were broad minded enough to accept and participate in the religious observances of their Babylonian hosts, who weren’t about to risk life and limb for the sake of some antiquated religious rules. And frankly, they were probably embarrassed by the fanatical conduct of their countrymen. Think about it. **19ab** *Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with wrath, and his facial expression was altered toward Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. What do you suppose he would have looked like with his altered expression? He was really giving our friends the evil eye. And then it got worse **19c** He answered by giving orders to heat the furnace seven times more than it was usually heated. Go figure. Are we to think that a cold fire was not sufficient? But the king wanted the fire as hot as his emotions. **20-23** He commanded certain valiant warriors who were in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in order to cast them into the furnace of blazing fire. 21 Then these men were tied up in their trousers, their coats, their caps and their other clothes, and were cast into the midst of the furnace of blazing fire. 22 For this reason, because the king’s command was urgent and the furnace had been made extremely hot, the flame of the fire slew those men who carried up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. 23 But these three men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, fell into the midst of the furnace of blazing*

fire still tied up. Now apparently, there was some way, either from the top or the side, for the king to look into this furnace. **24-26** *Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astounded and stood up in haste; he said to his high officials, "Was it not three men we cast bound into the midst of the fire?" They replied to the king, "Certainly, O king." 25 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!" 26 Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the furnace of blazing fire; he responded and said, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, come out, you servants of the Most High God, and come here!" Then Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the midst of the fire.* Now why did they come out? This had to be an experience of a lifetime. They were having fellowship with a heavenly being in that fire. But they came out in obedience to the king, whose word they obeyed when it did not conflict with God's word. **27-29** *The satraps, the prefects, the governors and the king's high officials gathered around and saw in regard to these men that the fire had no effect on the bodies of these men nor was the hair of their head singed, nor were their trousers damaged, nor had the smell of fire even come upon them. 28 Nebuchadnezzar responded and said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent His angel and delivered His servants who put their trust in Him, violating the king's command, and yielded up their bodies so as not to serve or worship any god except their own God. 29 Therefore I make a decree that any people, nation or tongue that speaks anything offensive against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb and their houses reduced to a rubbish heap, inasmuch as there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way."*

You get the impression that in ancient Babylon there were no misdemeanors, and there were no prisons. Everything was a capital offense. They didn't mess around. **30** *Then the king caused Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to prosper in the province of Babylon.*

Well, that is your story, a truly awesome story. What can we draw from this account for our own lives? We will look at two applications. The first is the central importance of faithful obedience to God, even unto death. Let's look at that under two headings - first the faithful obedience. In his book, *Purity of Heart*, Soren Kierkegaard writes this: *Eternity will not ask whether you were rich or poor, high or low, only, "were you faithful?"* C.S. Lewis writes this: *In King Lear there is a man who is such a minor character that Shakespeare has not given him even a name: he is merely "First Servant."* All the characters around him - Regan, Cornwall,

and Edmund - have fine long-term plans. They think they know how the story is going to end, and they are quite wrong. The servant has no such delusions. He has no notion how the play is going to go. But he understands the present scene. He sees an abomination, the blinding of an old man, taking place. He will not stand for it. His sword is out and pointed at his master's breast in a moment; then he is stabbed to death from behind. That is his whole part: eight lines in all. But if it were real life and not a play; that is the part it would be best to have acted. Why does he say that? The man is not a star. The man did not accomplish anything great. How could Lewis say that of all the characters in *King Lear* that *First Servant* is the one he would have been? Because he was a man of principle and conviction and conscience. He was faithful in his short role. Had things gone another way it might have been so with our three friends in Daniel. Had God not delivered them from the fire you would have never heard from them again. But would they still be heroes? You bet, simply because they did what was right. And God says, "That is what counts in my eyes." It is not how great a work you do, how great a calling is yours, but how faithful you are where God has placed you. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego understood the centrality of faithful obedience. It wasn't their primary concern to be useful or strategic or influential, but faithful. You see, they could have said, *Hey, God put us in an important place here in Babylon. Our people need us to keep serving in our leadership roles. It wouldn't be smart for us to lose all that just to keep the first commandment.* But they saw that faithful obedience comes before influence. We don't primarily ask how we can influence the world for God, we ask, how can we obey Him. He is the Master. He will influence the world just fine, if we obey Him. And when you do that you don't need to worry about yourself and what you get. So many will say, "Hey, you gotta look out for #1." But my God promises to do that for me if I will keep my focus on obedience.

Notice now the second part of the lesson. It is faithful obedience to God. To God. There is a conflict here in Daniel isn't there? It's a conflict we find often in Scripture. It was there in Egypt between Moses and Pharaoh. It was there in Israel between Elijah and Ahab. It was there in Jerusalem between Peter and the Sanhedrin. Will you obey God or government? What did Jesus say? He said, *Render to Caesar, the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's*. Remember the context of that teaching? They asked Jesus if they should pay taxes to Rome. Jesus pointed out that their coins had the image of Caesar on them. Implying that yes, they should pay taxes, he said, if it has his image on it he has a claim to it. And the same goes

with God. Where has God placed his image? We are his image. What therefore does Jesus mean? He means that we belong to the Lord. We are His. We are branded with the stamp of heaven and must devote everything we are to Him. Daniel 3 is about standing up against an unjust power and declaring both a dependence on God and an independence from men. Our American fathers said, “No” to King George. That took courage. Many who signed the declaration of independence paid for it with their lives. They knew it could cost them that. And it sure took a lot of courage, even more, on the part of our three friends in Babylon. They were face to face with an angry monarch and the amazing thing is this. What weighed more in their minds was the face of God whom they could see only by faith. But here is what they understood long before Jesus said it. Luke 12:4-5 *I say to you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. 5 But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!* I love the way Jesus puts this. He says, “All they can do is kill you!” I’m sure you have said this to someone: “Go ahead and ask, all he can do is say *no*.” Jesus says, “All men can do is kill you.” But God, can continue the punishment way past the grave. Fear Him. Please Him, and don’t worry about the king. We fear God and obey Him because that is wisdom. We also faithfully obey the Lord in spite of the consequences because He deserves it. Romans 12:1 *Therefore, I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.* The King James Version translates that as “reasonable service of worship.” Paul says that the only reasonable response to Jesus is to lay down your bodies as sacrifices. You say, “*O Jesus Lord and Savior I give myself to Thee for Thou in Thy atonement didst give Thyself for me. I own no other Master, my heart shall be Thy throne.*” And if that means my body lands in the fire, so be it. I will be faithful. I will obey my Savior and my God. How far are you and I prepared to take that? Look again at the wording of our lesson. The lesson is about the importance of faithful obedience to God unto death.

It is time we talk about that last prepositional phrase. C.S. Lewis said this: “*I didn’t go to religion to make me happy. (By that he means cheery, happy in the light sense) I didn’t go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable I certainly don’t recommend Christianity.*” Stories like ours today show us why. Someone said, “We all want to follow Jesus until we find out where He is

going.” Where is it that Jesus goes? Is it not to a cross? To a place of suffering and death? As it was for Shakespeare’s old *First Servant*, faithfulness can mean death. It can certainly mean a whole lot of suffering. Does the New Testament pretend otherwise? Far from it. When you read the Bible you discover a whole lot of wonderful people are dying prematurely and the story doesn’t get any better as the church is established. Christianity is presented in Scripture as a costly treasure but one that is well worth the cost. Jesus asks, “What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?” To faithfully obey the Lord is worth any cost, including physical life itself. Christians, the real ones, would rather die than sin. Think about that for a moment. Can you say that about yourself that you would rather die than intentionally, purposefully sin against God? Is there even anything you would be willing to die for? If you have nothing worthy dying for, my friend, you have nothing worth living for. But Jesus gives us plenty of reason to live and reason sufficient to die if we must.

What is the most awful thing that could ever happen to you? Have you ever thought about that? What’s the worst thing imaginable to you? When I ask that I think about the death or suffering of my family, something like that could would severely test my soul. But as I go a little deeper I realize there is something much worse than that. You see nothing can happen to me that is nearly as bad as what I myself might do. No circumstance, however bleak could ever be as bad as bringing shame and disgrace to the name of my Lord by my own apostasy and sin. That apparently is what Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were thinking. No fire can be as bad as sinning. No punishment will ever rank with betraying a faithful and good Lord. They believed in miracles and figured that God wouldn’t let them die, but they also affirmed that even if He did, they would do right, they would be faithful - how far? Even unto death. Jesus faced that didn’t He? To die or to sin. He chose death. Or rather he chose obedience whatever that would mean. *Philippians 2:8* *Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.* Paul faced this. Many times it looked like his choice was to disobey or die. He chose to die or rather he chose obedience whatever that would mean. He said in *Philippians 1* that he was committed to boldly exalting Jesus Christ whether that was by his living or his dying. Were Paul and Jesus and our three friends, indifferent to their own happiness? Not at all. In fact, I will suggest to you that they want real, deep, lasting happiness more than any of us. They just believed it came from faithful obedience to God. They believed that the cost of righteousness, however high, is always

ultimately less than the cost of sin. And they believed in the promise of God, in a life beyond the grave that drove away the fear of death and enabled them to look beyond it to the rewards of heaven. The pious three said, “Whether God rescues us from the fire is His decision, not ours. But we will be faithful come what may.” And they were. And I don’t know about you but that kind of example stirs my soul and puts my puny challenges into perspective. What will be the cost of obedience for you this week? Some discomforts? Some funny looks? Some personal humiliation? Be like the pious three who said, “We would rather die than sin. We will be faithful unto death.”

As inspiring as the story is, the fact remains that according to the values of our world they were taking a stupid risk. If they worship the image they get to keep their cushy government jobs. If they refuse to worship it they risk the fire. What is worth that risk? This is our second major lesson. God rewards faithful obedience. Daniel’s friends seemed to know that. They were counting on that even as he will later. It wasn’t too many weeks ago that we studied what Jesus taught about being blessed when you are persecuted. In that study we focused on the future blessings that await the faithful. You better believe our three friends were looking toward a future reward here. But today we should focus on the more immediate reward of the Lord. Yes, in our story, they were never hurt. They came out of the fire and were honored by the king. But the outstanding reward that we read of didn’t come from King Nebuchadnezzar, but from the King of Kings who went with them into the fire. We read that incredible word of how Nebuchadnezzar saw with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego a fourth person who looked like *a son of the gods*. Go back to our title. We called this study *The Hot King and the Faithful Four*, not three but four and the fourth was not Daniel. Apart from Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who was the other hero of faithfulness here? The Lord. The Lord promises to be with us. Bow down for the tyrant and you’re on your own, but obey your way into the fire and God goes with you. As for me, give me the Lord, even if that means the fire too. Listen, my friend, when you suffer for Jesus there are special graces coming your way - guaranteed. I Peter 4:**14** *If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.* That is in the present. God comes in a special way in our special need. Here he comes, either in the form of the pre-incarnate Christ, or with one of his angels to have warm fellowship with his faithful servants. And this is according to his promise isn’t it? Jesus told his disciples, “Lo, I will be with you always.” The Lord says, “I will never leave you or forsake

you.” God’s requirements of us, His “you musts” are overshadowed by His “I wills.” In Isaiah 43:2 *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you.* Isaiah 43:5a *Do not fear, for I am with you.*

It is always interesting to me when the sacred breaks into the secular. About twenty years ago I remember one of the big networks did a movie about what it may be like to be hit by a nuclear bomb, something we may start talking about again with North Korea and Iran getting that capacity. The old movie called *The Day After* portrayed this incredible devastation with a remnant of survivors. I didn’t care for the movie really, but I loved how it ended. When the credits came up they were accompanied by this song. The first words are *How firm a foundation* - about the word of God which endures forever, but mostly the song is about God’s faithfulness to us in the midst of difficulty. Listen to the verses. *When through the deep waters I call thee to go, the rivers of woe shall not thee overflow; for I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless, and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress. When through fiery trials thy pathways shall lie, my grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply; the flame shall not hurt thee; I only design thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine. The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose, I will not, I will not desert to its foes; that soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake, I’ll never, no never, no never forsake.* It is this faithful God who goes into the fire with us, who has suffered yet more than we, who calls us to faithful obedience that is richly rewarded by His power and with His presence.