

**The Fiery Furnace**  
**Daniel 3**  
**Week 9**

**Opening Prayer**

Ask if anyone would like to open in prayer. They can pray on their own or use the prayer printed below. It also might be a good idea to reach out to a group member prior to your meeting and ask them ahead of time if they'd be willing to open in prayer. That's a great way to encourage participation without putting anyone on the spot.

*Gracious God, as we come together to place our lives in front of your Holy Word, we pray that you would give us wisdom and understanding. May we approach this sacred text with humility, curiosity, expectancy and love. Be among us and in our conversation through the power of your Holy Spirit. We pray in the name of the one to whom this whole story points, Jesus the Christ, amen.*

Depending on time constraints you may want to take a bit of extra time to check in with folks and see how they're doing. You could also wait and do this at the end of the session before closing in prayer.

**Check-in question**

*Each week, give an opportunity for folks to either respond to the check-in question below or, if they'd rather, share something that came up for them as they were reading the other texts assigned for the Big Read this week.*

If you spent any time in Sunday school growing up, you probably heard some form of lesson on this story of the fiery furnace. **Before reading the story together, try to remember some of the main points from what you learned as a child. Do any of those apply today?**

**Background**

The story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is a Sunday School favorite. A lot of us might have learned this story by recreating the events on a flannel graph. There are not a lot of characters and the story line is fairly simple. King Nebuchadnezzar built a huge idol and ordered everyone in his kingdom to worship it. Whenever he played music the people were supposed to bow down to the idol. This was a problem for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego because they only worshiped the one true God. The edict was clear - either worship the idol or burn in the furnace. The resolve of these three young men was not swayed. No matter the outcome they were going to remain faithful to God. In Daniel 3:16-18 you can see the outcome didn't

determine their faith. They were going to remain faithful whether God saved them or allowed them to burn.<sup>1</sup>

In chapter 2 Nebuchadnezzar had a dream about a statue that represented four kingdoms, which would rule the world until the Messiah would come and destroy them all. The head of that statue was gold and represented Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom—Babylon. Daniel explained that the rest of the statue represented future kingdoms that would arise to rule the land of Babylon.

In chapter 3 Nebuchadnezzar builds his own statue—gold from head to toe. It is an act of defiance and a statement that his kingdom will last forever, never to be overthrown. He requires that all government officials come to pay homage and worship the image, under penalty of death. Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (here called by their Babylonian names: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) refuse. As he is prone to do, Nebuchadnezzar flips out and demands their obedience, threatening to burn them to death if they don't comply.

One interesting feature of this chapter is the repetition of long lists. Three times we are told of the "satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and all other provincial officials." Four times we are reminded of the cacophony produced by the "sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes, and all kinds of music." There is also a detailed description of their garments, "robes, trousers, turbans, and other clothes." Any guess why they didn't use a little shorthand? What is being communicated by the lengthy descriptions and repetitions?

**Focusing on repetitions:**

The repetition seems to add to the sense of extremes in the story. The long list of officials in v2 ("the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces") repeats once in full (v3) and once in abbreviated form (v27). As translated, we get the impression of the entire Babylonian bureaucracy. The story creates an impression of an over-the-top large audience. The long list of musical instruments in v5 ("horn, pipe, lyre, trigon (something like a lyre or harp, only triangular), harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble" – literally, and "all the kinds of music") repeats three times. So, this dedication ceremony is shaping up to be extremely elaborate.

There is also a long list of the clothes that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are wearing (v21) when they are heaved into the furnace, which doesn't exactly repeat, but which is called to mind in v27: that's a lot of clothes not to have been scorched or to smell like smoke. And heating the fire to seven times its normal intensity (v19) – that's a lot of blazing fire. It's as if the Babylonians are the Texans of the ancient world.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.firstmbchurch.org/sites/default/files/LifeGroup%20Discussion%20Questions%202-18-18.pdf>. 18 February 2018.

Other repetitions seem to reinforce the notion of “setting up” vs. “falling down” and the meaning associated with those postures. Once Nebuchadnezzar sets up the golden image (v1), it’s repeatedly referred to as “the image king Nebuchadnezzar had set up”. Arguably, Nebuchadnezzar can “set up” this image, since he is actually greater than the image. What Nebuchadnezzar wants people to do is to “fall down” before the statue; the “worship” that people are supposed to perform involves prostration. Eventually, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego do “fall down” – into the blazing furnace. But that falling down is actually an act of worship of the God of Israel. Their falling down into the furnace expresses their obedience to the God of Israel. And then, Nebuchadnezzar “rose up” (v24) – upward movement being something he likes to do, but in this case, it’s not entirely voluntary, it’s in response to a compelling manifestation of God, and it’s not an expression of superiority or control, but an expression of being overawed by an even greater power.

So the repetition of these verbs seems to mean something about who is in charge, and about what it means to worship, and to command worship.<sup>2</sup>

The most fascinating thing in this scene is the appearance of “one who looks like a son of the gods” in the fire. The three experienced what is called a “theophany,” or appearance of God. For other theophanies, see Genesis 18:1-33; 28:10-17; and Judges 6:1-23.

Nebuchadnezzar assumes that the fourth person in the fiery furnace is an angel sent from the Lord (v.28). However, verses 23-25 themselves give us no clue as to who this mysterious one is. Some say this figure is a heavenly being; it is God with his children as he was in the burning bush (Exodus 3:4). The term “one like a son of the gods” is reminiscent of the language of the prologue of the Book of Job, where before the trial begins, we hear of an assembly of “the sons of God” Job 1:6; 2:1. No definitive answer can be given. The only certainty is that the figure is a miraculous God-given presence.

The history of Christian treatment of this passage has, of course, been animated by the conviction that the figure is that of Jesus Christ. Very few scholars would imagine that such an idea was present in the mind of the writer of Daniel 3. However, the figure can serve as a kind of functional prototype of the coming savior, for whoever he may be, he is present as Immanuel. In him, God is with his people in the time of their deepest need and effects salvation for them from the direst threat to their existence. In that sense, a typological analogy between the mysterious fourth figure and the incarnate Lord of New Testament faith does not seem illegitimate.<sup>3</sup>

## Read Daniel 3

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<sup>2</sup>Daniel Bible Study. [https://www.cru.org/content/dam/cru/legacy/2012/02/Daniel\\_Study.pdf](https://www.cru.org/content/dam/cru/legacy/2012/02/Daniel_Study.pdf). 2010.

<sup>3</sup>Towner, W. Sibley. *Interpretation: Daniel*. John Knox Press, 1984.

## Initial Reactions

1. What from this story confuses, inspires, or resonates with you? What questions or curiosities do you have about this passage?
2. What does this story tell us about God? What does this story tell us about humanity?
3. Were there any images, stories or insights that stuck out to you from Sunday's sermon?

## Going Deeper

4. How do you think walking in the furnace affected the faith of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego? What do you think was going through their minds as they were walking up to the furnace?
5. What do you make of Nebuchadnezzar's commitment to the Lord (verses 28-29)?
6. Suppose the story read that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego died instantly in the fiery furnace. Would this outcome negatively impact your view of God's sovereignty? Would you still view this as a great story of faith even if they died?

## So What Questions

7. There are several lessons we can learn from this story. No matter the outcome these men were committed to their faith. Often times the direction of our life circumstances determines the level of faith we have. When things don't go in the direction we want, we start to question God and His plan. These men walked this road together. They were not on their own when it came to facing death. They had each other to rely on whenever doubt would start working its way into their mind. Who we choose to do life with will impact our faith  
**In what ways does the faith of those around you help or hinder your own?**
8. Why didn't God rescue them before they went into the furnace? They were rescued in the furnace. Is there a situation in your life you wanted God to intervene before it happened, but He allowed you to go through it anyway?

## Closing

Check in if you haven't already done so and ask for any prayer requests. Encourage group members to write down these requests and follow up as necessary. Close with prayer.