

God's Way Out

"For Us and For Our Little Ones"

"Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance."

Ezra 8:21.

Lesson 13. The Way Out of a Fiery Furnace

If you who are reading this story are passing through some fiery trial--remember that "the form of the fourth," the sympathetic Savior, will ever be near you as you do His will and trust in His loving-kindness.

HOW soon we forget! The dream of the great image left a big impression on Nebuchadnezzar the king. He felt he had indeed received a revelation from God. But as the years rolled on, the impression faded away. Victory after victory had flushed him with pride. Success after success had dulled his once keen perceptions of God--as success often does.

Since the year 602 BC he had ground down all resistance from Judah and its capital, Jerusalem. He had burned the city with fire, executed King Zedekiah's two sons, put out the eyes of the king, and carried him off prisoner to Babylon. [1] He would show them who was master! When the city of Lachish closed its doors against him he built furnace fires against the walls until the hard stone crumbled into powdery lime. [2]

Nebuchadnezzar's Plan to Unite the Empire

How could he weld these newly conquered cities and countries together into the great empire of Babylon? Someone had a bright idea. Why not set up a mighty image that would represent Babylon? Then educate all the people to worship this symbol of empire? That image which the king had seen in his dream--that was a remarkable symbol. Why not actually make a copy of that, with its glorious head of gold, and call on all men to bow down and pay homage to it? They would then see Babylon in its rightful place as the golden city, head of all kingdoms.

"Yes, yes! Excellent suggestion! We will make a mighty image like the one I saw in my dream," determined Nebuchadnezzar. "But no! Not of diverse metals. It shall be all of gold. All of gold. Else may one of the conquered nations take courage and think to become that 'other kingdom inferior to thee.' No, Babylon shall endure forever." It is human nature to try to forget unpleasant truths, and Nebuchadnezzar did not like to think Babylon would pass away. No, no!

So the word went out to the goldsmiths, the image-makers, and the artificers, and a site was selected on the Plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. There the goldsmiths set up their burning fiery furnace and began their work. By a rough irony, the gold used had been pillaged from the conquered countries; the image was therefore a union of the wealth and worship of them all. What a stir it must have caused! How the Babylonian merchants and the Euphrates boatmen must have discussed it! Listen how the boatmen talk:-

“Has thou seen the king’s great image, Tartanis? Never has such a wonder been set up before.”

“Nay, Rabsaris, never! They tell me it measures full ninety feet from the foot of the pedestal to the tip of the helmet. Nine feet across are those golden shoulders and chest. And thou and thy two sons could safely sit inside that head.”

“How it gleams, and glimmers in the sunlight with its excellent brightness! But the form thereof is terrible!”

“Thou speaks truth, Rabsaris. Our lord will brook no opposition. Great is Nebuchadnezzar! Ruthless is Babylon!”

“But, Tartanis, why have they left the ugly gold-furnace near the golden image? Why has it not been taken down and removed?”

“Nay, I know not, Rabsaris. Maybe our lord has some plan on foot.”

When the dedication day was fixed, the great king sent out messengers to the leading officers of all countries of his dominion. They were to repair to Babylon at once to take part in the ceremonies of that great day. What a “Pageant of Empire” it was! What a gorgeous scene that assembly-ground presented when the great day arrived!

Here were the princes and the governors in colorful array. Grave judges sat with careful treasurers, and counselors mingled with sheriffs and captains of armies. The greatest dignitaries of the Civil Service and the high officers of the king’s vast army gazed up at the golden image. Nebuchadnezzar planned to impress their minds so deeply that they should all go back home saying, “Great and glorious is Babylon! Babylon will endure for ever.”

But God had greater plans for that day. Unseen to human eye, there were other watchers. “Thou, God, sees me,” was true that day as it always is. There were angel watchers present, too, for when God’s children are in danger, then “the angel of the Lord encamps round about them that fear Him, and delivers them.”

Well may it be that the whole vast assembly of heaven had its eyes turned to the plain of Dura that day as the great drama, "Force or Freedom in Worship," was played.

What Is the Furnace For?

There is quiet as the king takes his place on the royal throne. The great orchestra with its instruments of music is stilled, awaiting the signal for the special pieces arranged for that day.

Listen! The king's herald is calling. His loud, strong voice booms out over the vast assembly: "To you it is commanded, O people, nations, and languages, that at what time you hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of music, you fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king hath set up. And who so falls not down and worships shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace."

"Ah! So that is why the gold-furnace was left on the site." Who would dare to disobey when faced with the possibility of death by burning in that awful fire if one refused to worship the image? Now comes the test. The cornet blares out the awaited signal. The sounds of music are heard in the great dedication hymn. Louder and louder rise those barbaric notes from voices and instruments; and with one accord the people fall down and worship. They worship the golden image which Nebuchadnezzar the king has set up:-

"Spirit of Babylon, hear us call!
Lowly before thee now we fall;
Mighty in battle, glorious as gold;
Thou shall be young when we grow old;
Spirit eternal, hear!"

Heroes Who Dared the King's Wrath

But there were three Hebrew officers who stood erect. They bowed not the knee. They worshipped not. The dull, sinister fires of the gold-furnace gleamed threateningly on Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, but they heeded not. Had not God said: "Thou shall have no other gods before Me?" [4]

Worship a graven image? Had not God commanded: "Thou shall not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them." [5] No, they would not worship. Had not all the trouble come upon their nation through this very thing? Inward voices may have

suggested excuses: "Oh, everybody else is doing it. Why be different, Shadrach? Whom does it hurt, anyway?"

Or, "Oh, just pretend, Meshach. Kneel down and gabble out: 'Foolish, senseless, metal idol god, I would never dream of worshipping thee!'"

And Abednego's fast-beating heart may have heard voices saying: "God is love. He will never condemn you for a little sin like this when life is at stake."

But the three Hebrew men were of sterner stuff than to make excuses. "We are here to witness for the true God, and, come life or death, we will play the man! Never will we deny our God!"

Tinkling dulcimers may have reminded Shadrach of the musical streams of far-off Judea and his mother's teaching. He would be loyal to her and to God! Had she not taught him God's precious promise: "When thou walketh through the fire thou shall not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the Lord thy God." [6]

Ominous beating of drums may have warned Meshach of the, tyrant's wrath. But he, too, would be loyal to God! The sound of the cornet may have reminded Abednego of the Archangel's trumpet, when the King of heaven shall appear. He would be loyal to Him at all costs! When earthly governments command that which God forbids, then we ought to obey God rather than men.

Informers Were Looking On

But crafty eyes had been watching them, and jealous tongues were whispering as the people rose to their feet. Soon Nebuchadnezzar heard that his authority had been flouted and set at naught by men whom he had signally honored and favored. Yes, certain of the Chaldeans, forgetting that they owed their lives to these brave Hebrews, accused them now before the king:-

"O king, live for ever. Thou has made a decree, that every man who shall hear the sound of the music, shall fall down and worship the golden image," which thou has set up; and whosoever refuses is to be cast into the burning fiery furnace.

"There are certain Jews whom thou has set over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; these men, O king, have not regarded thee: they serve not thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou has set up."

"Can this be possible?" raged the king. "I worshipped the God of these Hebrews. I have allowed them freedom to worship their invisible God. How dare they

humiliate me before all my lords on this memorable day? Will they be so intolerably rude as to refuse a little thing like this?"

"Bring them to me!" he commanded.

"Is it true, O Shadrach, Mechach, and Abednego, do not you serve my gods, nor worship the golden image which I have set up? Now" his voice was as heated and menacing as the great furnace – "if you be ready that at what time you hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and dulcimer, and all kinds of music, you fall down and worship the image which I have made; well! But if you worship not, you shall be cast the same hour into the midst of a burning fiery furnace; and" his voice rose, angry and threatening, "who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands?"

The faces of the Hebrew men may have paled at the blasphemous words. Their limbs may have trembled. But true courage acts even when the face is pale and the limbs tremble.

We Will Be Loyal to God

"O Nebuchadnezzar," they said, with brave dignity, "we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. 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 if not," even if not – "be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou has set up.

"Will not? Will not?" Nebuchadnezzar raged in fury. "We shall see! Ho, furnace master! Heat the furnace fires hotter! Heat them seven times hotter than is wont." "Captain, ho, captain! Bring thy mightiest men, here. I will roast these Hebrews. They shall see."

The Dread Ordeal Is Come

"Hotter, furnace master! Heat the fire seven times hotter' Hotter by far than when they melted the gold! I will teach these impudent, disloyal scoundrels.

"Ho, captain! Are these thy mightiest men? Let them bind these traitors fast. Then hurl them into the midst of the flaming furnace. Right in! Right in! Even Moloch's fire-walkers would be consumed like chaff in those roaring flames. Right in."

Swiftly the three men were bound with ropes. Then the brawny soldiers carried them like trusses of straw to the furnace mouth, swung them back and forward thrice, then hurled them into the leaping, crackling flames! Into the midst of that volcano like fiery furnace! The horror of it!

The furnace master's men had worked at the huge bellows only too well. The brawny soldiers who had thrown the heroes in staggered blindly back from the fire, their faces scorched, their hair burned off. Staggered back a few paces and fell in a crumpled heap--dead! Dead!

A shocked stillness fell over the assembled lords. "Those ill-fated Hebrews!" they gasped. Suddenly a murmur arises from those near the royal throne. What is the matter with Babylon's king? Why does Nebuchadnezzar start up from his seat? Why stares he so fearfully into the furnace? Why has the crimson fury of anger gone? Why is his face so white and awe-stricken? Are wailing fiery ghosts threatening him from the flaming furnace?

As if in a dream, he speaks fearfully to the lords nearby: "Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?" "True, O king," they reply wonderingly.

"Lo!" came the astounding words from his lips: "I see four men loose, walking" - free - "in the midst of the fire and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God." The Son of God, of whom Daniel used to speak!

He stepped forward. "Shadrach!" he shouted, "Meshach! Abednego! You servants of the Most High God, come forth, and come hither."

And behold, the three Hebrews walk forth unharmed from the jaws of that burning white-hot hell! What a hubbub there was! How excitedly the spectators talked and pointed!

"See, the ropes are burned off!"

"But their faces are not singed!"

"Not a burn on them!"

"Look, their sandals are not scorched where they trod upon the white-hot coals!"

"Not even the smell of fire is on them!" says an evidence weighing judge who is near enough to apply that test. And now the voice of the king is heard, ringing out over the excited chattering:-

"Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego," he exclaimed, "who hath sent His angel, and delivered His servants that trusted in Him, and have changed the king's word, and yielded their bodies, that they might not serve nor worship any god, except their own God."

"I make a decree," he proclaimed, "That every people, nation, and language, which speak anything amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, shall be cut in pieces, and their homes shall be made a dunghill."

It is doubtful if ever a professional Babylonian story-teller (and there were many of them) could have aroused such interest as did these princes, governors, counselors, judges, and treasurers when they told of the burning fiery furnace, and asserted with Nebuchadnezzar that: "There is no other God that can deliver after this sort."

And if you who read this story are passing through some fiery trial--remember that "the form of the fourth," the sympathizing Savior, will ever be near you as you do His will and trust in His loving-kindness. God will not leave you alone in your trials. It may seem at times that the flames of affliction or sorrow will consume you. You may be tempted almost beyond endurance by some fascination which Satan holds before you. Do not yield. Jesus "is able to keep you from falling." He will bring you out of the fiery furnace, and you will yet praise Him for His goodness.

REFERENCES:

1. 2 Kings 25:7.
2. The Bible Comes Alive, Page 128.
3. Prophets and Kings, Page 504.
4. Exodus 20:3.
5. Exodus 20:4, 5.
6. Isaiah 43:2, 3.

