

OUR GOD IS ABLE

"Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, answered and said unto the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up." Daniel 3:16-18.

This prophecy of Daniel was written to steady the hearts of patriotic Jews who were passing through one of the most severe persecutions that men have ever undergone. The scene which is portrayed in this third chapter is one of the most sublime and majestic that the human mind can conceive.

Nearly six hundred years before Christ there was ruling a great conqueror by the name of Nebuchadnezzar. From the second chapter one might get the impression that Nebuchadnezzar was not far from the kingdom. His dream had troubled him, but Daniel had interpreted it. Then the king made this confession to Daniel, "Of a truth it is, that your God is a God of gods, and a Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets, seeing thou couldst reveal this secret." Thus he acknowledged that the God of the Jews was the greatest of gods and was a great interpreter of secrets, and yet in short time we find this man setting up an idol and persecuting to the death those who would not worship it.

To commemorate his great victories, Nebuchadnezzar had erected on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon a magnificent image of gold, ninety feet high and nine feet across the base. This was dedicated to his god. He proceeded to take measures to secure the recognition of his new god by all the subjects of his vast empire. In preparing to dedicate it with great pomp and parade, he dispatched heralds to assemble the people at the designated time. When they had assembled, he issued a decree that all of the people of his kingdom, whenever they were near this great image and certain music sounded, were to stop everything they were doing and fall down upon their knees and worship his god. He also announced that if anybody failed to bow down and worship this image he would be cast into a fiery furnace.

In that land three Jewish lads were living. They had been captured as boys by this same Nebuchadnezzar when he invaded Judah, their homeland, and had been brought back and trained in the palace of the king. Their Jewish names had been taken from them, and they had been given Babylonian names, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They had had a remarkable success. Because of their great gifts and the integrity of their characters and their lovable natures, this king had promoted these three Hebrew youths to positions of high authority. They were governing three of the provinces of the Babylonian empire. Naturally such recognition from the great king to these slaves aroused jealousy in certain quarters.

Nebuchadnezzar was an absolute monarch and could order exactly what he wanted. His will was law; no man dared to dispute with him. Who would differ with a man who could back up his arguments with a fiery furnace or with a threat to cut you in pieces? The requirement of the king and the fearful penalty of disobedience were proclaimed in the hearing of all. At the given signal all but these three bowed themselves and acknowledged and worshipped the new god. These three young men had been brought up on the Second Commandment, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them nor serve them." They could not worship any god except Jehovah. Some jealous Chaldeans immediately went to King Nebuchadnezzar and said, "O king, live forever. You have three Jews here who are defying your authority. They refused to worship your god."

Filled with wrath, the king summoned them into his presence, as though to awe them by his majesty and intimidate them by his anger. He said unto them, "Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, do not ye serve my gods, nor worship the golden image which I have set up?" They did not try to evade the issue but replied, "We are not careful to

answer thee in this matter." They did not try to make the king think better of them than he did by resorting to a skilful argument. They were clever men, and, if they had cared to use their eloquence, they might have found a way of getting out of the trap without either publicly denying their God or doing any disrespect to the golden image. Neither were they going to do any juggling with their own consciences to bow down to the image, for instance, with some private reservation of their own.

Needless to say, the king was furious; but, angered as he was, he gave them one more chance. However, it should be quite clear in their minds as to what it meant to defy the ruler of Babylon. He told them that if, in the future, whenever they heard the sound of the flute or the cornet, they should fall down and worship his god, all would be well, and he would overlook their past disobedience. But, if they refused, then they would be cast into a fiery furnace and burned to death. With his rebuke he thus offered them another opportunity of complying with the imperial edict and thus escape the punishment threatened.

These three young men, facing their grave crisis, answered at once, giving him to understand that they could neither comply with his demand, nor were they concerned especially about the consequences of refusal. There is an indescribable grandeur, sublimity and nobility about their answer. They said, "If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up."

Here is a marvelous example of the courage of dedication to God. Strangers in a foreign land, they would not worship a strange God. They might have said to themselves, "It is perfectly useless to resist. We cannot contend against this man. If we submit, we do it unwillingly; and, surely, being coerced into it, we shall not be held accountable. A man cannot be expected to knock his head against a brick wall nor throw his life away, so we will just bow our heads and worship the image." Thank God, they did not do so. Or, they might have said, "Don't you think that while we are in Babylon we had better do as the Babylonians do?" God has never given anybody permission to do abroad what they could not do at home. A very soothing salve for their conscience might have been found in the absence of any command to renounce their own religion. They might have encouraged each other to submit by saying, "We are not called upon to renounce our God. We need not believe the idol to be divine nor confess the least faith in it; in our hearts we can make a mental reservation as we bow and say to ourselves we are prostrating ourselves to the music and not to the idol." Anything will serve for an excuse when the human heart is bent on compromise. A strong argument might have been secured from the fact of the universal submission to the decree. They might have said, "Everybody else is doing it." "It is only for once, so it would be ridiculous for us to throw away our lives for such a trifle." "We can do more good by living than we can by being cast into that furnace." Neither of them reasoned after this fashion.

This matter did not trouble them in the least. They knew what they were going to say. They did not deliberate. They did not hesitate. They avowed their faith in the Omnipotent God, knowing that, if He chose, no mighty man of Babylon could ever throw them into that furnace. They told the tyrant to his face that God could save them out of the fire. Their God was almighty, and they put their trust in Him. They knew that God was able to deliver them. But whether it pleased Him to deliver them or not, their duty was clear, and they chose to burn to ashes in the fiery furnace, if needs be, rather than bow down to a heathen god. In modern phraseology they said, "We believe that our God will deliver us from the furnace and from thy hand, but, if not, even then we are going to follow the course which we believe to be right." The spirit of these men was expressed by Job when he said, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him."

These men had strong convictions. They held clear and definite views about life. They

had standards by which they were striving and principles which they refused to sacrifice. When the commands of an earthly sovereign were reasonable, there was nothing to do but obey them, but, when such commands came into conflict with the laws of the God of heaven, they were to be resisted to the last drop of blood.

We will never be or do anything worthwhile unless we have convictions. Have you and I got clear convictions about God, life, honor, friendship, duty and responsibility? Have we convictions about the ambitions that are legitimate for us to pursue, the motives by which we may be inspired, the methods it is permissible for us to adopt and the relationships into which we as Christians can honorably enter? Real convictions can be very costly.

It is people with convictions who really get things done. Joshua and Caleb had convictions about what God could do with people who really trusted Him, and they lived to see Canaan won. Gideon had convictions as to what a little band of resolute men could accomplish in the overthrowing of a mighty host, without a single blow being struck, and the many thousands of Midianites fleeing in all directions through the darkness were eloquent testimony to the power of his convictions. George Mueller had strong convictions about what could be done through prayer, and twelve hundred orphan children living in the Ashley Down Homes in Bristol were evidence of the worthwhileness of his convictions. It is convictions that unify one's personality, concentrate his energies and finally compel the admiration of an onlooking world. But, we must make sure that our convictions are not just prejudices, but that they are grounded in the principles of the New Testament and true to the best Christian thought and experience which these nineteen centuries have yielded. Are we ready to carry them through persecution and death and present them fearless and unafraid at the Judgment Seat of Christ? That, after all, is the acid test.

Our sophisticated generation can learn much from these three ancient heroes. They faced the same temptations that every generation faces. There isn't anything old about this story. It is as modern as this morning's newspaper. Here are three young men who had to face and make a decision upon which everything depended. They had positions of high honor. Naturally they cherished these positions as you do yours. They were in love with life. They had everything for which to live. Their temptation was this: Shall we not conform to the practices of this pagan land in which we are living through no fault of our own—we were captured and brought here?

They gave the lie to that cheap philosophy current on the streets today: "A man's got to live." That is one of the greatest lies ever uttered. No man has to live. They were among the first men on record who repudiated that other fallacy which is so easy and superficial and cheap: "When in Rome, do as the Romans do."

These heroes can teach us some things that we desperately need to learn. Challenged to join the fickle multitude in acclaiming an earthly king and in bowing to a popular idol, with a burning furnace in front of them as an alternative to obedience, this is their answer in substance: "Our God is able to deliver us. More than that, if He does not deliver us we are still not going to worship your idol."

We admire greatly their magnificent courage, their devotion and their sense of duty. Courage is a quality that is universally admired and is not owned by any one nation, class or race. How we admire courage and devotion to duty! A Tennessee boy of the Confederacy can still thrill our jaded spirits. Sam Davis had such a high degree of devotion to his duty that, when offered his release if he would tell who gave him certain papers, he chose death rather than be disloyal to his comrade. His last words were: "If I had a thousand lives, I would lose them all before I would betray my friends." We thrill at courage like that.

Even more important is the sublime faith of these three ancient heroes who said: "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us, O king. You are the greatest monarch on earth

and your pagan gods, you think, have brought you world-wide conquest. But we serve a greater God than your gods. We will never lose faith in the power of our God." Oh, don't we need that faith today?

Surely the great lesson for us in these three young men of the long ago is not merely their magnificent courage, nor their sublime faith, but their triumphant submission to God's will, whatever that will may be. "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us." But, if He doesn't, what then? That great scholar Josiah Royce once said, "Faith is that power by which man is enabled to stand anything that can happen to him in this universe." It doesn't take much faith to believe in a God Who answers all of our prayers in the affirmative just as we want Him to do. But how about it when He does not answer us that way?

If God does not deliver, what then? First, you can stake your all upon this fact: God will be with you, and His presence and love will sustain you. Millions have found that to be true. After these three lads were thrown into the fiery furnace heated seven times its normal temperature, the keeper saw that they were unharmed; they were walking about in the furnace. He called Nebuchadnezzar, and in stupefaction the king looked upon something that he could not believe although he was seeing it. In amazement he cried to the keeper, "Didn't we throw three men into the furnace a while ago?" "Yes--- Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego." "I see four. One has joined them, and he is like unto the Son of God." Isn't that glorious! God was with them.

God did a far bigger thing for them than they had expected Him to do. He did not deliver them from the peril at all, but He delivered them in it, and that is an infinitely greater thing. He did not effect their escape from the furnace, but He gave them an experience of fellowship in the furnace that they had never dreamed of, for the Lord Himself was with them in it. God will certainly do infinitely greater things in our lives if we will only submit to Him, stand with Him and obey Him. God always stands by and blesses those who are true, loyal and faithful to Him.

Whatever comes to you, God is able to answer the prayer of your heart. Whether He does it or not, He knows best. Whatever comes, He will never forsake you. He will be with you. His love and strength will sustain you.

"Fear not, I am with thee; O be not dismayed,
For I am thy God, and will still give thee aid;
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand."

One of life's greatest achievements is the building of a faith that will enable you to say, "The God Whom I serve is able to deliver me, but if He does not do so, He will still be my God."