

## IS YOUR FAITH FIREPROOF?

Daniel 3:25

"He answered and said, Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God." Daniel 3:25.

We put shatter-proof windshields in our cars. That is good. Many a face has been saved from disfigurement and many a life has been spared by it. Yet more important than shatter-proof windshields is a shatter-proof faith in God.

We build fireproof structures. Many a person owes his life to such a building. But more important than fireproof buildings is a fireproof faith by which the soul is held steadfast amid the threat of the wreck of all things earthly. Precisely such heroic faith flashes out from the storm from which our text is taken.

To commemorate his great victories, Nebuchadnezzar had erected on the plain of Dura in Babylon a magnificent image of gold, ninety feet high and nine feet across the base. In preparing to dedicate it to his god with great pomp and parade, he dispatched heralds to assemble the people. When they had assembled, he issued a decree that all 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. If anyone failed to obey the king's decree, he would be cast into a fiery furnace.

In that land were three young Hebrews whom Nebuchadnezzar had captured in Judah, given the Babylonian names of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, trained in his palace, promoted to positions of trust and honor because of their fidelity, and used in his service. This recognition from the king aroused the jealousy of some of his other subjects, and that was understandable. The jealous courtiers determined that in some way they would remove these three foreign interlopers. The edict that all must worship Nebuchadnezzar's golden image, erected to celebrate his victories and to enhance his glory, afforded them a welcome opportunity. Their conduct in this regard was typical of those who act under the power of sin and Satan. Ungodly people are always jealous of the influence and power of the people of God; and, if they cannot overcome them by fair means, they do not hesitate to use foul means.

The jealous native officers undertook to bring about the discharge, or at least the demotion, of these young Hebrews. But nothing could be found in their conduct, or in the administration of their responsibilities, to justify charges against them, until a situation was brought about in which their religious faith was involved. After the requirement of the king and the fearful penalty of disobedience had been proclaimed in the hearing of all, at the given signal all but these three bowed themselves and acknowledged and worshiped the new god. Having been brought up on God's commandments, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them nor serve them," these young men had no thought or intention of worshiping any other than the Creator of heaven and earth, Jehovah.

Some jealous Chaldeans informed Nebuchadnezzar that these three had defied his authority. Filled with wrath, the king summoned them into his presence, as though to awe them by his majesty and intimidate them by his anger. His folly was demonstrated in the fact that, when he conquered the Jews, he thought he had conquered the God of the Jews. The Bible teaches that the insults and threats which are directed against the children and servants of God are in reality directed against God Himself, and God so considers them. The primary offense of these men was not in worshiping their God; that privilege was allowed them. The primary offense of these men was not in worshiping their God; that privilege was allowed them. Their offense was in allowing their loyalty to God to interfere with the demands of the king. Satan doesn't mind people being religious just so

long as they make their religion secondary. Another step in the king's folly was that, after assuming that he had conquered the God of the Jews, he believed that his demands should take precedence over the demands of their God. When he discovered that he could not get these men to break faith with their God, he determined to destroy them. From the days when Christ Jesus was here in the flesh until now, when Christian people have refused to give their first loyalty to the world they have been scorned and criticized and persecuted. The devil still holds a club over the heads of those who refuse to obey his commands, and who insist on giving God first place in their lives. He will give Christians all kinds of trouble if they stand firm in their faith in God's Word, loyal in their devotion to Him, and faithful in their service for Him. These young men proved themselves as being loyal to God, faithful in their duties as officers, and loyal to God amid the temptations and trials of life, even when they were threatened with destruction. How easy it would have been for those men to have bowed for the moment to the great image! They could have made a mental reservation and told God that they didn't mean to be disloyal, and that they were only bowing to the image to save their lives, but they refused to do it.

When the king offered them another opportunity of complying with the imperial edict and thereby escaping the threatened punishment, the three young men answered at once and gave him to understand that they would not comply with his demand, nor were they concerned especially about the consequences of their refusal. There is an indescribable grandeur, sublimity and nobility about their answer. To the king they replied: "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." In substance they were saying: "Your threats are against God. It is for Him to take up or not as He wills. We hope for deliverance, but we are not certain about that. However, there is one thing about which we are certain, and that is our duty to God. That duty is the sovereign of our lives and to that we will be loyal."

What a marvelous example of the courage of dedication to God! Strangers in a foreign land, 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."

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. They might have said, "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. 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.

Thomas Carlyle was never weary of insisting that the final question which every man is compelled to answer is: "Wilt thou be a hero or a coward?" These three Hebrew gallants for God met their ultimate question head on, and came out on the side of the heroes.

## I. The Dauntlessness of Their Faith.

The magnificence of their faith is seen in their unwavering refusal to be disloyal to their God, with a seven-times heated furnace as the only alternative.

This matter did not trouble them. They did not hesitate. Avowing their faith in God, they told the tyrant king to his face that their 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.

When the faith of God's man rises to its highest and best level, it does not stake its final confidence upon any visible circumstance however favorable, or upon any human force however powerful, or upon any earthly security however strong, but upon the naked fact of God and His ability in the end to vindicate the trust we have put in Him. Such dauntless faith was never more bluntly stated than when they said, in modern phraseology, "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." Nor was it ever more briefly or more beautifully declared than when Job said: "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (Job 13:15).

Faith is always confronted with a choice. We can choose either the high road or the low road. The choice for these young men was not an easy one, nor will it be for us. Often it proves to be an agonizing experience. Faith always involves a risk. If a risk is not involved, faith is not necessary. If we can see the path ahead, we are walking by sight. We exercise faith only when the way ahead is not clear, when we are so placed that we do not have any alternative if God should let us down. There is always a risk in the pathway of faith.

Oh, the dauntlessness of faith! How great and gallant a thing it is! It was portrayed unforgettably by the young Hebrew exiles who submitted to the fiery furnace rather than break confidence with God and their God-implanted convictions. Their example tells us that loyalty to God is always more important than personal safety.

## II. The Difficulties Which Faith Encounters.

Our sophisticated generation can learn much from these ancient heroes. They faced the same temptations that people of every generation face. They had to make a decision upon which everything depended. They had positions of high honor. They cherished these positions as you do yours. They were in love with life. They had everything for which to live. They were tempted to conform to the practices of the pagan world in which they lived.

With those young men the choice was clear and final: bow down to the image of gold or be tossed into the fiery furnace. Give in weakly or burn for your refusal! So they found themselves hard against the truth that "All strong positions in life are faced with liability." Faith is forever being called upon to take risks. Faith is forever confronted with a choice: worship the image of the king or be seared in his inferno. All who obey customs and conform to styles as if they were slaves need to take a good look at these men who had fiber enough in their faith and iron enough in their courage to defy heathen custom in loyalty to the living God.

Television, radio and the billboards are glamorously persuading multitudes of our American young people that the door to "gracious living" swings on hinges that are well oiled with alcohol. And yet, for the practice of drinking alcohol no one has ever been able to make out a logical defense that would stand up before the brains of a moron. Any nitwit can see that drinking does not have a rational case. But the deadly cunning of the traffickers in alcoholic beverages has done a tremendous job of making drinking the socially acceptable thing. Christian people, youth and adults, have to face this

situation, and decide whether they are going to worship at the shrine of King Alcohol or to burn in the fiery furnace or ridicule and scorn. Those who love and follow Christ are not going to worship this golden image of alcoholic indulgence. The fires of violated custom may burn against them, but their faith can take the heat. Is your faith fireproof?

Caesar did not insist that the early Christians abandon entirely the worship of Christ. He simply asked that they worship Caesar also. This is the overwhelming majority of Christians refused to do. Consequently, many of them were put to death; some on crosses, many were sewn up in skins of animals and then torn to pieces by dogs that were set upon them, others were thrust into the arena at the famous Coliseum and fed to lions, and still others were covered with tow, smeared with pitch, chained to posts, and then set on fire to illuminate Nero's gardens. Theirs was a dauntless loyalty to Christ in the face of the direst difficulties. Theirs was a fireproof faith.

Today the fires that devoured many of the early Christians are burning again. Some of us read of the case of a fifty-year-old Christian lay leader in a Chinese village who refused to deny Christ and turn Communist. He was ordered to pluck out his own beard "strand by strand." When this process seemed too slow, his torturers burned it off, searing his face with a torch. After savage beatings the judge asked: "Will you still be a Christian?" He answered simply, "As long as I live." The judge then gestured to a soldier near by, and Li Wan-fu was promptly shot through the head. His faith was fireproof.

Reading that story, we find our own souls haunted with the lines:

"Must I be carried to the skies  
On flowery beds of ease,  
While others fought to win the prize,  
And sailed through bloody seas?

Sure I must fight if I would reign,  
Increase my courage, Lord;  
I'll bear the toil, endure the pain,  
Supported by Thy Word."

Christians often find themselves in the furnace which is kindled by men. The elements in all their fury, wild beasts in all their ferocity, and famine and pestilence in all their horrors, have scarcely proved such foes to men as other men have been. Religious animosity is the worst of all hatreds, and incites to the most fiendish deeds. Religious leaders across America know that the most unChristlike criticism and cruel treatment administered to them comes from church members, and usually from those who at some time or other have served as church officers. Christ reminded these leaders that "The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord" (Matthew 10:24).

### III. The Deliverance of Their Faith.

Two kinds of deliverance are set forth in this heroic incident. These confident young men said: "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace." In other words, "He can step in and spare our lives in spite of all your fury and vengeance." Then comes the words that lift their faith to the very pinnacle of grandeur and triumph: "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." In other words, if God does not spare our lives, He will enable us to conquer death itself, and win through to the everlasting victory of truth and right. Their first resource was their faith in the ability of God to deliver them. Their second resource was their confidence in the willingness of God to deliver them. Enshrined in their words, "but if not," they had a third resource which rendered

them invincible and fireproof, namely, their acceptance of the sovereignty of God. Even if God had not delivered them, their faith would not have been shaken. They knew it would be because God had something better for them. They knew God so well that they were prepared to accept His sovereign will even if they could not understand it. Anybody who has mastered this lesson is on the road to spiritual maturity.

After these three young men had been 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 does not always keep His children out of fiery furnaces, but He is always able to go down into the flames with them and to deliver them out of the hands of their tormentor. 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.

God always knows best. Whatever comes, He will never forsake His child. He will be with him, and His love and strength will sustain him.

How encouraging are the words:

"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."