The Fiery Furnace

Bible Stories Anthology — Daniel 3

Copyright 2026

Distribution of this study as is in its entirety is permitted & encouraged.

Author: John Lobota

Research Assistant: Claude Cowork

papertiq@bellsouth.net

> **Romans 15:4** *For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.*

Why These Stories Were Written — Romans 15:4

Paul had just quoted a thousand-year-old psalm and applied it to Christ (Romans 15:3, quoting Psalm 69:9), and then he explained why he could: *whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning*. **Written aforetime** — the scriptures that already stood before this present age of grace opened at Pentecost: the record God gave through Moses, the prophets and the writings, along with the Gospel accounts of Christ's earthly ministry, which belong to that same time before Pentecost. (When Paul wrote these words, the scriptures he had in hand were the Hebrew scriptures; the Gospels had not yet been written down.) **Written for our learning** — "learning" is the Greek word for *teaching*, the very word rendered "doctrine" in 2 Timothy 3:16. These are not quaint tales; they are doctrine in narrative form. Adam, Ruth and David never knew us, but God did, and He had their lives recorded with us in mind — written *for* us, though not all of it written *to* us, which is why we read Israel's history as our instruction and not as our marching orders. **Through patience and comfort of the scriptures** — "patience" is literally *remaining under*, the staying power we gain from watching men and women stay under a load; "comfort" is a *calling alongside*, the strength God brings when He meets them there, which is why Paul calls Him "the God of patience and consolation" in the very next verse. **That we might have hope** — not a wish, but confident expectation: the return of Jesus Christ and everlasting life with Him. That is why these accounts exist, and it is how they should be read.

But If Not

On a wide plain outside Babylon stood a golden statue ninety feet tall, flashing in the sun.

Around it were gathered the rulers of the greatest empire on earth: governors, generals, judges, treasurers, every official of every province, in their finest robes, row upon row. A royal herald lifted his voice: *When you hear the music, fall down and worship the image. Anyone who does not fall down will be thrown, within the hour, into a blazing furnace.*

The horns sounded. The harps and pipes began to play. And across the plain, thousands upon thousands of men went down on their faces.

Three men stayed on their feet.

They were young Jews, captives from Jerusalem, now high officials of Babylon. They did not shout. They did not make a speech. They simply did not bow.

They were brought before the angriest king in the world, given one more chance, and told: *And who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands?*

Their answer has been remembered for twenty-five centuries: *Our God is able to deliver us, and He will. But if not, we still will not bow.*

This is the story of three men who would rather burn than bow — and of the fourth man who walked with them in the fire.

The Setting

When. The reign of **Nebuchadnezzar II**, king of Babylon from **605 to 562 B.C.** In 605 B.C., in **"the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah"** (Daniel 1:1), Nebuchadnezzar came against Jerusalem and carried off some of the temple vessels and some of the young men of the royal family and the nobility. Among them were Daniel and his three friends. The story of the furnace comes some years later. Scripture does not date it. (The ancient Greek translation of Daniel adds "in the eighteenth year" of Nebuchadnezzar — 587 B.C., the very year Jerusalem and its temple were burned [Jeremiah 52:12-13, 29] — but that date is not in the Hebrew and Aramaic text, and this series does not build on it.)

The world. Babylon was the capital of the Neo-Babylonian empire, on the river Euphrates in what is now Iraq. Nebuchadnezzar rebuilt it into one of the wonders of the world: massive double walls, the Ishtar Gate glazed in blue and decorated with lions and dragons, great temples and a towering ziggurat. It stood on the very ground where men had once built the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:9; story 06). Babylon was a city of a thousand gods, chief among them **Marduk** (called **Bel**, Isaiah 46:1) and his son **Nabu** (**Nebo**).

The exile. God had warned Judah for generations through His prophets that if they kept worshipping idols, they would be carried away. **"And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years"** (Jeremiah 25:11). Now it was happening. The people of the true God were living as captives in the capital of idolatry.

The dream before the image. In the chapter just before this story, Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that troubled him: a great statue with a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of brass, legs of iron, and feet of iron mixed with clay. A stone **"cut out without hands"** struck the statue and ground it to dust, and the stone became a mountain that filled the whole earth (Daniel 2:31-35). God gave Daniel the meaning: four kingdoms would rule the world in turn, and then **"shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed"** (Daniel 2:44). Of the head of gold Daniel told the king: **"Thou art this head of gold"** (Daniel 2:38). Nebuchadnezzar fell on his face before Daniel and said, **"Of a truth it is, that your God is a God of gods, and a Lord of kings"** (Daniel 2:47). He promoted Daniel, and at Daniel's request set his three friends **"over the affairs of the province of Babylon"** (Daniel 2:49).

Then Nebuchadnezzar built a statue — and made the whole of it gold.

Where. "The plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon" (3:1). *Dura* means "wall" or "fortified enclosure," and several places near Babylon bore the name. The exact site is not known. (In the 1800s a large square brick platform was found at a mound called Tulul Dura, south of Babylon, and was suggested as the base of the image, but this cannot be proved.)

Who.

- **Nebuchadnezzar**, king of Babylon.
- **Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego** — the Babylonian names of **Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah**, three young men of Judah.
- **Certain Chaldeans** — members of Babylon's priestly and learned class, who accused them.
- **The king's officials and counsellors.**
- **The "most mighty men"** of the army, who bound and threw them.
- **A fourth figure** in the fire.

Where was **Daniel**? Scripture does not say. He may have been away on the king's business, or his rank may have spared him from being accused. The text is silent, and this series does not guess beyond it.

The administration. The **Mosaic Law**, with Israel in exile among the Gentiles. The first commandments of that Law stood over this whole scene: **"Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image … Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them"** (Exodus 20:3-5). These were also the years Jesus later called **"the times of the Gentiles"** (Luke 21:24) — the long age, beginning with Babylon, when Gentile kingdoms would rule over Jerusalem.

The Story, Told Faithfully

Four Young Men and Four New Names

The story really begins in Daniel 1. Nebuchadnezzar ordered the master of his eunuchs to choose young men of Israel's royal family and nobility,

> **Daniel 1:4** *Children in whom was no blemish, but well favoured, and skilful in all wisdom, and cunning in knowledge, and understanding science, and such as had ability in them to stand in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans.*

"Children." The Hebrew word (*yeled*) covers boys and young men. They were probably teenagers. They were to be trained for three years in Babylon's language and learning and then serve in the king's court. It was a deliberate plan: take the brightest young men of a conquered nation and make them Babylonians.

The first step was to change their names.

> **Daniel 1:7** *Unto whom the prince of the eunuchs gave names: for he gave unto Daniel the name of Belteshazzar; and to Hananiah, of Shadrach; and to Mishael, of Meshach; and to Azariah, of Abednego.*

Their Hebrew names each honoured the God of Israel:

- **Daniel** — "God is my judge."
- **Hananiah** — "Yah has been gracious" (*Yah* is the short form of the LORD's name).
- **Mishael** — "Who is what God is?" — that is, *Who is like God?*
- **Azariah** — "Yah has helped."

Their new names pointed to the gods of Babylon. **Belteshazzar** means "protect his life," a prayer to a Babylonian god (Nebuchadnezzar himself says it was **"according to the name of my god,"** Daniel 4:8). **Abednego** means "servant of Nego," very likely a form of **Nabu** (Nebo), the god of writing and wisdom. The exact meanings of **Shadrach** and **Meshach** are uncertain; scholars have suggested several Babylonian forms, and none is proven.

So the plan was clear: new language, new learning, new names, new gods. Babylon could change their names. It could not change their hearts. In the furnace story they are called by their Babylonian names thirteen times — but the God they served was still the God of their Hebrew names: the God who is gracious, who helps, and to whom no one is like.

> **Daniel 1:8** *But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.*

"Purposed in his heart." Long before the furnace, the four friends had made a decision about small things: they would not eat the king's food, which would have included meat not prepared according to God's Law and, very likely, food first offered to Babylon's gods. God honoured them, and at the end of their training the king found them **"ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm"** (Daniel 1:20). Faithfulness in a small thing in chapter 1 prepared them for faithfulness in a great thing in chapter 3.

The Golden Image

> **Daniel 3:1** *Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, whose height was threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof six cubits: he set it up in the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon.*

"An image of gold." In his dream the king had seen a statue whose head only was gold — and the gold head, Daniel told him, was Nebuchadnezzar himself. Now he made an image that was gold from top to bottom. Scripture does not say whose image it was — the king himself, or one of his gods. Verse 12 links the image with the worship of the king's gods (**"they serve not thy gods, nor worship the golden image"**). Either way, the message was the same: *Babylon will not be followed by another kingdom. Babylon is all gold, and it will last.* The king answered God's dream with a monument of defiance.

Very likely it was not solid gold. Statues of the ancient world were usually made of wood or another base and overlaid with gold, as Isaiah described: **"The workman melteth a graven image, and the goldsmith spreadeth it over with gold"** (Isaiah 40:19). But to the eye it was a mountain of gold.

"Threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof six cubits." A cubit was about eighteen inches, the length of a man's forearm. Sixty cubits is about **ninety feet** — as tall as a nine-storey building. Six cubits is about nine feet. A figure ten times taller than it was wide would look strangely thin as a human shape, so it was probably a figure set on a very tall base, or a tall pillar crowned with a figure. Out on a flat plain, it could be seen for miles.

Notice the numbers: sixty and six. Babylon counted in sixties (we still divide an hour into sixty minutes and a circle into 360 degrees because of the Babylonians). The book of Revelation later describes an image of the beast, set up for the whole world to worship on pain of death, and gives the beast's number as **"Six hundred threescore and six"** (Revelation 13:18). As this series understands it, the sixes of Daniel 3 and the 666 of Revelation 13 are a striking picture of man setting himself up in the place of God — but Scripture does not link the two numbers directly, and nothing should be built on the comparison.

> **Daniel 3:2** *Then Nebuchadnezzar the king sent to gather together the princes, the governors, and the captains, the judges, the treasurers, the counsellors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the provinces, to come to the dedication of the image which Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up.*

Eight ranks of officials. From the highest satraps down to the district magistrates, every official of the empire was summoned. Several of these titles are Persian words, which is just what we would expect

from Daniel, who lived on into the Persian period and wrote these chapters down there. This was a state ceremony — a loyalty test for the whole government.

"The dedication of the image." The word *dedication* (Aramaic *chanukkah*, the same root as the later Jewish feast of Hanukkah) means its formal opening and consecration.

"Which Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up." Notice how often this phrase is repeated. In the Aramaic, the words "set up" are used of the image nine times in this chapter (3:1, 2, 3 twice, 5, 7, 12, 14, 18). The Bible is drawing attention to who made this god: a man. The great idol of Babylon was nothing but what **"Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up."** The repetition is a kind of quiet mockery. Isaiah used the same method when he mocked idols that men carry around and set in their place, where they cannot move (Isaiah 46:6-7).

The Herald and the Music

> **Daniel 3:4** *Then an herald cried aloud, To you it is commanded, O people, nations, and languages,*
> **Daniel 3:5** *That at what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of musick, ye fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king hath set up:*
> **Daniel 3:6** *And whoso falleth not down and worshippeth shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace.*

"O people, nations, and languages." All the peoples of the empire, united in one act of worship. It is the opposite of what happened at Babel on this same ground (Genesis 11:1-9): there God scattered the nations and confused their languages because they united against Him; here a king gathered the nations and languages back into one, to bow to his golden image.

The orchestra. Six instruments are named:

- **cornet** — a horn (Aramaic *qarna*, literally "horn");
- **flute** — a pipe or whistle;
- **harp** — a lyre (Aramaic *qathros*, the Greek *kitharis*);
- **sackbut** — a small triangular harp with a high tone (*sabbeka*);
- **psaltery** — a stringed instrument (*pesanterin*, the Greek *psalterion*);
- **dulcimer** — Aramaic *sumponyah*, the Greek *symphonia*, which may mean a bagpipe or the whole ensemble playing together.

Three of these names are Greek words. Some have argued that this proves Daniel was written much later, after Alexander the Great brought Greek culture east. But Greek mercenaries, merchants and craftsmen were active across the Near East long before Daniel's time; Babylonian records from Nebuchadnezzar's own reign list rations for Greek (Ionian) workers in Babylon. That musical instruments should carry the names their makers gave them is no surprise — we still play pianos and violins under Italian names.

The list of instruments is given in full **four times** in this chapter (3:5, 7, 10, 15), and the list of officials twice (3:2, 3). Each time we hear the whole parade again. The writer lets us feel the pomp, the noise, and the pressure of it all. Everything in Babylon was designed to make a man bow — and then three men did not.

“Shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace.” The punishment was announced in advance, and it was immediate: *the same hour*. There would be no trial and no appeal.

Was this a real threat? Babylon did execute people by fire. Jeremiah, writing to the exiles in Babylon, spoke of two false prophets **“whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire”** (Jeremiah 29:22). The furnace (Aramaic *attun*) was most likely a large brick kiln, the kind used to fire bricks for Babylon’s great buildings — a shaft open at the top, with a doorway at the bottom for feeding the fire and drawing out the finished bricks. The plain of Dura was a place for such work. The furnace was not built for this ceremony; it was already burning nearby.

> **Daniel 3:7** *Therefore at that time, when all the people heard the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and all kinds of musick, all the people, the nations, and the languages, fell down and worshipped the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up.*

“All the people … fell down.” The whole crowd went down at once. The pressure of everyone around you doing the same thing is one of the strongest forces in the world.

The Accusation

> **Daniel 3:8** *Wherefore at that time certain Chaldeans came near, and accused the Jews.*

“Certain Chaldeans.” Here *Chaldeans* does not mean the whole nation, but the class of priests, astrologers and wise men who served at court (as in Daniel 2:2). These were the very men whose lives Daniel had saved in chapter 2, when the king had ordered all the wise men killed. Now some of them saw their chance against the Jewish outsiders who had been promoted over them.

“Accused the Jews.” The Aramaic is a vivid idiom: they *“ate the pieces of”* the Jews. To eat someone’s pieces meant to slander him, to tear him apart with words behind his back. It is the same phrase used in Daniel 6:24 of the men who accused Daniel. Jealousy and religion together make a cruel mix.

> **Daniel 3:12** *There are certain Jews whom thou hast 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 hast set up.*

Notice the poison in their words:

- **“Jews”** — they are foreigners.
- **“Whom thou hast set over the affairs of the province of Babylon”** — you promoted them, and this is how they repay you.
- **“These men, O king, have not regarded thee”** — they despise *you*.

The charge was turned into a personal insult to the king. And yet, mixed in with the slander, the accusers told the truth: **“they serve not thy gods, nor worship the golden image.”** That is a charge any servant of God should be glad to have proved against him.

One More Chance

> **Daniel 3:13** *Then Nebuchadnezzar in his rage and fury commanded to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Then they brought these men before the king.*
>
> **Daniel 3:14** *Nebuchadnezzar spake and 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?*

“In his rage and fury.” Two words for anger, stacked together for emphasis. Nebuchadnezzar was a man of violent temper (compare 2:12, where he ordered all the wise men of Babylon killed in a rage).

“Is it true?” Yet he gave them a hearing. Perhaps he valued them; perhaps he could not believe it.

> **Daniel 3:15** *Now if ye be ready that at what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and dulcimer, and all kinds of musick, ye fall down and worship the image which I have made; well: but if ye worship not, ye shall be cast the same hour into the midst of a burning fiery furnace; and who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands?*

“Well.” The word is not in the Aramaic. The sentence simply breaks off: *If you are ready to fall down and worship …* — and the king leaves it hanging. The meaning is plain: *then all will be forgiven.* Leaving out the end of a sentence like this is a figure of speech called **aposiopesis** (“becoming silent”): a sudden breaking-off, which lets the hearer fill in the rest and makes the unspoken words all the stronger.

“And who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands?” Here is the heart of the chapter. A question asked not for information but to make a point is called **erotesis** (a rhetorical question). Nebuchadnezzar meant: *No god can save you from me.* He had forgotten his own words in chapter 2: **“your God is a God of gods, and a Lord of kings.”** A hundred years earlier, the Assyrian field commander had shouted the same boast at Jerusalem’s walls: **“Who are they among all the gods of the countries, that have delivered their country out of mine hand, that the LORD should deliver Jerusalem out of mine hand?”** (2 Kings 18:35; story 32). That night 185,000 Assyrians died. Kings who ask *who is that God?* are about to find out.

“But If Not”

> **Daniel 3:16** *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter.*

“We are not careful to answer thee.” In old English, *careful* meant “full of care, anxious.” The Aramaic means *we have no need to answer you about this.* They were not being rude. They were saying: *There is nothing to discuss. You have asked whether we will bow. We will not, and we do not need to argue the point.* They did not plead, bargain, or explain away. Notice too that they called him simply **“O Nebuchadnezzar”** — not *O king, live for ever* (3:9), the flattering form the Chaldeans used.

> **Daniel 3:17** *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.*
>
> **Daniel 3:18** *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.*

These are some of the bravest words ever spoken. Take them one phrase at a time.

“If it be so.” That is, *if we are thrown into the furnace* — if that is how it must be.

“Our God whom we serve.” The king had asked, *Who is that God?* They answered: *our God* — the one *we serve.* Not Babylon’s gods. Theirs. The word *serve* (Aramaic *pelach*) means to worship and to work for; it is the same word used of the king’s gods in verse 12. The question was not *whether* they would serve a god, but *which* God they would serve.

“Is able to deliver us.” First, God’s power. Nebuchadnezzar had said no god was able; they said theirs was. **“Ah Lord GOD! behold, thou hast made the heaven and the earth by thy great power and stretched out arm, and there is nothing too hard for thee”** (Jeremiah 32:17).

“And he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king.” Second, their confidence. They believed God would deliver them. Notice the exact words: *out of thine hand*. Nebuchadnezzar had asked, *who shall deliver you out of my hands?* They answered with his own words.

“But if not.” Third, their surrender. *But even if God does not deliver us from the fire* — even if His plan is that we die — *our answer is the same.* They did not doubt God’s power. They did not know His plan. And they would not make their obedience depend on getting the outcome they hoped for.

This is faith at its purest. It does not say, *I will obey God if He gives me what I want.* It says, *I will obey God, and leave the outcome to Him.* Job said the same: **“Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him”** (Job 13:15).

“Be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.” They ended with the same phrase the whole chapter has been repeating — *which thou hast set up* — but in their mouths it was a quiet verdict: *a thing you made.* They would not bow to it.

Notice what they did *not* do. They did not lead a rebellion. They did not insult the king. They did not refuse to serve Babylon in their work; they had served faithfully in the province. They obeyed every command of the king that did not require them to disobey God — and refused the one that did. The apostles later said it in a single sentence: **“We ought to obey God rather than men”** (Acts 5:29).

Seven Times Hotter

> **Daniel 3:19** *Then was Nebuchadnezzar full of fury, and the form of his visage was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: therefore he spake, and commanded that they should heat the furnace one seven times more than it was wont to be heated.*

“The form of his visage was changed.” His face twisted with rage. In chapter 2 he had fallen on his face before Daniel. Now his face was distorted against Daniel’s friends.

“Heat the furnace one seven times more than it was wont to be heated.” “Seven times” is a way of saying *as hot as it can possibly be made* (compare Proverbs 24:16, **“a just man falleth seven times, and riseth up again”**; Leviticus 26:18, **“seven times more”**). Seven is the number of completeness. This is an idiom, not a measurement: stoke it to the utmost. It was the act of an enraged man; hotter fire would only have killed them faster.

> **Daniel 3:20** *And he commanded the most mighty men that were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace.*
>
> **Daniel 3:21** *Then these men were bound in their coats, their hosen, and their hats, and their other garments, and were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace.*

“The most mighty men that were in his army.” Elite soldiers — as if three bound young men might somehow escape.

“Bound in their coats, their hosen, and their hats, and their other garments.” The exact meaning of these three Aramaic words for clothing is uncertain: *sarbal* may be trousers or a long cloak, *patish* a

tunic or leggings, and *karbela* a cap or turban. The point is clear: they were thrown in fully dressed, in their official robes, with no time to remove anything. Every thread of cloth on them was fuel for the fire. That detail matters at the end of the story.

> **Daniel 3:22** *Therefore because the king's commandment was urgent, and the furnace exceeding hot, the flame of the fire slew those men that took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.*
>
> **Daniel 3:23** *And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace.*

"The flame of the fire slew those men." The heat was so fierce that the soldiers who carried them up to the opening at the top were killed by the blast. The king's rage killed his own best men. The fire was real. No one should imagine that the furnace was somehow cool.

"Fell down bound into the midst." Notice the words *fell down*. Everyone else on the plain had *fallen down* before the image (3:7). These three *fell down* only one way: bound, into the fire.

(The ancient Greek translation of Daniel inserts a long passage after verse 23, known as **the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men.** It is found in the Apocrypha, not in the Hebrew and Aramaic scriptures, and is not part of the text this series follows.)

Four Men Loose

> **Daniel 3:24** *Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astonied, and rose up in haste, and spake, and said unto his counsellors, Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? They answered and said unto the king, True, O king.*

"Astonied." Old English for *astonished, stunned*. The king had been sitting, watching. Suddenly he jumped up.

"Did not we cast three men bound …?" He needed his own officials to confirm what he knew. *Three men. Bound.* Yes, O king.

> **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.*

Every word is a wonder.

"Four men." Three were thrown in. Four were seen.

"Loose." They had been bound. The fire burned their ropes and nothing else.

"Walking." Not writhing, not screaming, not trying to escape. Walking, calmly, in the midst of the fire — as men walk in a garden.

"And they have no hurt." No injury of any kind.

"And the form of the fourth is like the Son of God." Who was the fourth? The Aramaic is *bar elahin*, literally **"a son of the gods."** *Elahin* is plural; Nebuchadnezzar was a worshipper of many gods, and he was describing what he saw in his own way: a being of divine appearance, a heavenly figure. The King James translators printed "the Son of God" with capitals, and many readers have taken the fourth to be Christ appearing before his birth. But this series follows Scripture's own explanation, given in

Nebuchadnezzar's next words: **"Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who hath sent his angel, and delivered his servants"** (3:28). The fourth was **God's angel**, sent to be with them. The Old Testament often calls angels "sons of God" (Job 1:6; 38:7), and it often shows God acting through an angel who carries His authority (Exodus 23:20-21). Jesus Christ is the Son of God because God is his Father (Luke 1:35), and he began to exist when he was born in Bethlehem; the angel in the furnace was God's messenger, sent to stand with God's servants. As this series understands it, that is the plain reading of the chapter.

What matters most is this: **God did not keep them out of the fire. He met them in it.** He could have struck the king dead, or put out the furnace, or broken the soldiers' arms. Instead He let His servants go all the way in — and then came to be with them there. Isaiah had written the promise down a century earlier:

> **Isaiah 43:2** *When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.*

When thou walkest through the fire — not *if*. And they were walking.

Come Forth

> **Daniel 3:26** *Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the mouth of the burning fiery furnace, and spake, and said, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, ye servants of the most high God, come forth, and come hither. Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, came forth of the midst of the fire.*

"Came near to the mouth." The king who had kept his distance from the flames now approached the door at the bottom of the kiln.

"Ye servants of the most high God." One hour earlier he had sneered, *Who is that God?* Now he answered his own question: *the most high God*, the God above all others. He still did not say *the only* God — but he had been forced to confess who was greatest.

"Come forth, and come hither." They did not rush out when the ropes burned. They stayed in the fire, walking with God's angel, until the king himself called them out.

> **Daniel 3:27** *And the princes, governors, and captains, and the king's counsellors, being gathered together, saw these men, upon whose bodies the fire had no power, nor was an hair of their head singed, neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire had passed on them.*

The same officials who had bowed to the image now crowded around three men, inspecting them. And their examination was thorough:

- **"The fire had no power"** over their bodies.
- **"Nor was an hair of their head singed."** Hair burns at the slightest touch of flame. Not one was scorched.
- **"Neither were their coats changed."** The same robes they were thrown in with — not even discoloured.
- **"Nor the smell of fire had passed on them."** Anyone who has stood near a campfire knows the smell of smoke clings to everything. These men did not even smell of smoke.

The only things the fire had touched were the ropes that bound them — and the soldiers who threw them in.

This is a figure of speech called **polysyndeton** ("many ands"): the repeated *nor … neither … nor* makes each detail stand by itself, so that the reader cannot miss how complete the deliverance was. Jesus later promised His disciples, in a time of persecution, **"But there shall not an hair of your head perish"** (Luke 21:18).

The King's Confession

> **Daniel 3:28** *Then Nebuchadnezzar spake, and said, Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, 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.*

"Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego." The king who had demanded that all nations bow to his image now blessed the God of the three men who had refused.

"Who hath sent his angel." God's agent in the fire (see above).

"His servants that trusted in him." The key to the story. Their deliverance was not because they were brave, but because they *trusted* (Aramaic *rechats*, to lean on, rely upon). **"Blessed is the man that trusteth in the LORD, and whose hope the LORD is"** (Jeremiah 17:7).

"And have changed the king's word." That is, *they set aside the king's command*. Even Nebuchadnezzar had to admit: they were right to disobey him.

"And yielded their bodies." They handed their bodies over to the fire rather than give their worship to a false god. Paul uses the same picture of the believer's whole life: **"present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God"** (Romans 12:1).

"That they might not serve nor worship any god, except their own God." Nebuchadnezzar understood exactly what the issue had been: their God allowed no rivals.

> **Daniel 3:29** *Therefore I make a decree, That every people, nation, and language, which speak any thing amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made a dunghill: because there is no other God that can deliver after this sort.*

"Cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made a dunghill." Nebuchadnezzar was impressed, but not changed. He was still threatening people with dismemberment (the same threat he used in Daniel 2:5) — only now on behalf of a different God. He had learned that the God of the Jews was powerful. He had not yet learned that this God wanted his heart. That lesson would come later, through seven years of humbling, in Daniel 4.

"Because there is no other God that can deliver after this sort." The king's question — *who is that God that shall deliver you?* — received its answer from his own mouth.

> **Daniel 3:30** *Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, in the province of Babylon.*

"The king promoted." The men who would not bow were raised higher. Their enemies' plot ended in their promotion. Jesus said: **"whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted"** (Matthew 23:12).

This is the last we hear of Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah in the book of Daniel. They have one more mention in the Bible, centuries later in the book of Hebrews, without their names but unmistakable: among the heroes of faith who **"Quenched the violence of fire"** (Hebrews 11:34).

Where the Story Leads

To the Messiah

The stone cut without hands. The image of gold was Nebuchadnezzar's answer to the dream of chapter 2, in which a stone **"cut out without hands"** destroyed the great image and became a mountain filling the earth (Daniel 2:34-35, 44-45). That stone is the kingdom of God, and its King is Jesus Christ, **"the stone which the builders rejected"** that **"is become the head of the corner"** (Matthew 21:42). Babylon's gold did not last. God's kingdom will.

The one who refused to bow. At the start of his ministry, Jesus was shown **"all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them"** by the devil, who said, **"All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me."** Jesus answered: **"Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve"** (Matthew 4:8-10). The three young men refused to fall down before a golden image; the Son of God refused to fall down before the god of this world himself.

Not spared the fire, but brought through it. The three were delivered *from* death. Jesus was not. When he prayed, **"O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt"** (Matthew 26:39), it was the "but if not" of Daniel 3 on a far higher level: *if it is not possible, I will still obey*. He went into death itself, and God raised him on the third day and exalted him to His own right hand (Acts 2:32-33). By his death, his resurrection and his ascension he did for all who believe what no angel could do — **"that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage"** (Hebrews 2:14-15). The God who sent His angel into the furnace sent His Son into death — and raised him out of it.

Every knee will bow — to the right one. Nebuchadnezzar demanded that all **"people, nations, and languages"** bow to his image. God has decreed that all will bow to His Son: **"That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow … And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father"** (Philippians 2:10-11). The difference is that this worship is not forced at the point of a furnace; it is the right response to the one God has made Lord.

The last image. Revelation describes a final world ruler whose false prophet will order an image to be made, and will **"cause that as many as would not worship the image of the beast should be killed"** (Revelation 13:15). Daniel 3 is a preview. Those who refuse in that day will also be delivered — some by death and resurrection: **"they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years"** (Revelation 20:4).

To the Grace Administration

Bodies presented to God. The three **"yielded their bodies"** rather than bow to an idol. The believer today is asked for the same whole-hearted devotion, every day: **"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by**

the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world" (Romans 12:1-2). Babylon's pressure was to *conform* — to bow when everyone else bowed. The word *conformed* means "pressed into the mould." The three would not be pressed.

Idols of today. "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21). Few people today bow to golden statues, but Paul names the idols of every age: **"covetousness, which is idolatry"** (Colossians 3:5). Whatever a man bows to — money, approval, comfort, success — is his god.

Obey God rather than men. Christians are told to respect and obey rulers (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17), and to pray **"For kings, and for all that are in authority"** (1 Timothy 2:2). The three young men did exactly this — until the king commanded what God forbade. Then the line was clear: **"We ought to obey God rather than men"** (Acts 5:29).

Faith that does not demand the outcome. "But if not" is one of the most important lessons in Scripture for believers. God is able, and He often delivers. But faith does not bargain. Paul had prayed three times for his own deliverance from a trial, and God answered, **"My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness"** (2 Corinthians 12:9). Paul himself was delivered many times — and in the end was executed in Rome, looking forward to **"a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day"** (2 Timothy 4:8).

Not alone in the fire. The believer is not promised a life without fiery trials. Peter wrote, **"Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you"** (1 Peter 4:12), and spoke of faith **"tried with fire"** that will be found **"unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ"** (1 Peter 1:7). But we are promised God's presence: **"I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee"** (Hebrews 13:5), and that nothing — **"tribulation, or distress, or persecution ... or sword"** — **"shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (Romans 8:35, 39).

Faithful in small things first. The three had refused the king's food in chapter 1 before they refused his image in chapter 3. **"He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much"** (Luke 16:10).

The resurrection hope. If God had not delivered them, they would have died and slept in the grave until the resurrection (Daniel 12:2) — and they knew it, and it did not change their answer. The believer's hope is the same: **"For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him"** (1 Thessalonians 4:14).

To the Topic of Faithfulness Under Pressure

- **Decide before the music starts** — Daniel "purposed in his heart" long before the crisis.
- **Pressure is real** — the music, the crowd, the officials, the threat.
- **Others will report you** — and twist the truth when they do.
- **You need not argue** — "we are not careful to answer thee."
- **God is able** — believe it.
- **God will deliver** — expect it.
- **But if not** — obey anyway.
- **Respect authority, but not above God.**
- **God meets His people in the fire,** not always before it.
- **The only things the fire burns are the bonds.**

- **Faithfulness can turn enemies into witnesses** — the king himself blessed their God.

The Main Takeaway

When Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon set up a golden image ninety feet high on the plain of Dura and commanded every official of his empire to fall down and worship it at the sound of the music or be thrown that same hour into a burning fiery furnace, three young men of Judah — Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, renamed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego — stayed standing; when the king asked them, "who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands?" they answered, "our God whom we serve is able to deliver us … 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"; the furnace was heated seven times hotter, the soldiers who threw them in were killed by the flames, yet the king saw "four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire," and when they came out, the fire had no power on their bodies, not a hair was singed, their robes were unchanged, and they did not even smell of smoke; Nebuchadnezzar blessed the God "who hath sent his angel, and delivered his servants that trusted in him," and confessed that "there is no other God that can deliver after this sort." God is able to deliver; He often does; but true faith obeys Him whether He delivers or not — and those who walk through the fire for Him never walk alone.

- **Worship God only,** whatever the cost.
- **Decide beforehand** where you stand.
- **God is able, and He will — but if not,** obey anyway.
- **Respect rulers; obey God first.**
- **God does not always keep His people out of the fire, but He meets them in it.**
- **The fire only burns the bonds.**

For Our Learning — The People

- **Nebuchadnezzar.** King of Babylon (605–562 B.C.); conquered Jerusalem; dreamed of the great image (Daniel 2); set up the golden image; was humbled by God (Daniel 4).
- **Hananiah (Shadrach).** "Yah has been gracious." One of the three; refused to bow.
- **Mishael (Meshach).** "Who is what God is?" One of the three; refused to bow.
- **Azariah (Abednego).** "Yah has helped." One of the three; refused to bow.
- **Daniel (Belteshazzar).** Their friend, the prophet; not mentioned in this chapter.
- **Ashpenaz.** Master of the king's eunuchs, who renamed the four (Daniel 1:3, 7).
- **The Chaldeans.** Babylon's priestly and learned class; some of them accused the three.
- **The officials of the empire.** Princes, governors, captains, judges, treasurers, counsellors, sheriffs and rulers — the audience for the dedication.
- **The most mighty men of the army.** Soldiers who threw the three into the furnace and were killed by the flames.
- **The fourth man.** God's angel, sent to be with them in the fire (3:28).

For Our Learning — Customs and Orientalisms

- **Renaming captives** with names honouring the conqueror's gods.
- **Training foreign youths** in the conqueror's language and learning for royal service.
- **Colossal statues** overlaid with gold, set on high bases.
- **Dedication ceremonies** with all officials summoned as a test of loyalty.
- **Royal heralds** proclaiming the king's commands to the assembled peoples.
- **Orchestral music** accompanying worship.
- **Falling down** (prostration) as the posture of worship.
- **Execution by fire** in Babylon (Jeremiah 29:22).
- **Brick kilns** — shafts open at the top, with a door at the bottom.
- **Counting in sixties** — Babylon's number system.
- **"O king, live for ever"** — the customary greeting at court.
- **"Ate the pieces of"** — the Aramaic idiom for slander.
- **Dismemberment and turning houses into dunghills** as royal punishments.

For Our Learning — Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a deliberate departure from the plain, ordinary way of saying something, used by God to add emphasis and feeling. These are the ones in this story:

- **Repetition (Epistrophe)** — "which Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up," repeated through the chapter (3:2, 3, 5, 7, 12, 14, 18), quietly stressing that the god was man-made.
- **Polysyndeton (many ands)** — the lists of officials (3:2, 3) and instruments (3:5, 7, 10, 15), each item counted; and "nor … neither … nor" in 3:27.
- **Idiom** — "accused" (3:8), literally "ate the pieces of," meaning slandered.
- **Synonymia (words of like meaning)** — "rage and fury" (3:13), stacked for emphasis.
- **Aposiopesis (sudden silence)** — "if ye be ready … ye fall down and worship the image which I have made" (3:15), the sentence broken off unfinished ("well" is supplied in the KJV).
- **Erotesis (rhetorical question)** — "who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands?" (3:15).
- **Idiom** — "seven times more" (3:19), as hot as possible.
- **Antithesis (contrast)** — "three men bound" and "four men loose" (3:24-25).
- **Polyptoton / echo** — "deliver … out of my hands" (3:15) answered by "deliver us out of thine hand" (3:17).

What the Bible Actually Says

- **The four friends were taken to Babylon as youths** and given new names honouring Babylon's gods.
- **They refused the king's food** before they ever faced the image.
- **The image was gold,** sixty cubits high and six cubits wide; Scripture does not say whose likeness it was.

- **Every official was ordered to bow** at the sound of the music.
- **The penalty was a burning fiery furnace,** the same hour.
- **Certain Chaldeans accused the three Jews.**
- **The king gave them a second chance.**
- **They said God was able and would deliver them — "but if not,"** they still would not bow.
- **The furnace was heated seven times hotter;** the soldiers who threw them in died.
- **The king saw four men loose, walking in the fire;** he later said God had **sent his angel**.
- **Not a hair was singed, their robes were unchanged, and they did not smell of smoke.**
- **Nebuchadnezzar blessed their God** and promoted them.
- **Daniel is not mentioned** in this chapter.
- **Hebrews 11:34** remembers those who "quenched the violence of fire."

God's Will and Intent

- **God wants worship that belongs to Him alone.**
- **God is able to deliver** from any power on earth.
- **God sometimes allows His people to go into the fire** — and goes with them.
- **God honours those who trust Him,** whether He delivers them from death or through it.
- **God can make even proud kings confess His name.**
- **God's kingdom will outlast every golden image** men set up.
- **God sent His Son, Jesus Christ,** who would not bow to the god of this world, who went through death itself, and whom God raised on the third day and exalted to His right hand — so that every knee will bow at his name, to the glory of God the Father.