

# The Refiner's Fire: On Suffering

Daniel 3:1-30

Since being diagnosed with cancer I have turned once again, for inspiration, to the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego cast into the fiery furnace. Of all the sermons I have preached it is Tarnya's favourite – and she is my best and most reliable critic.

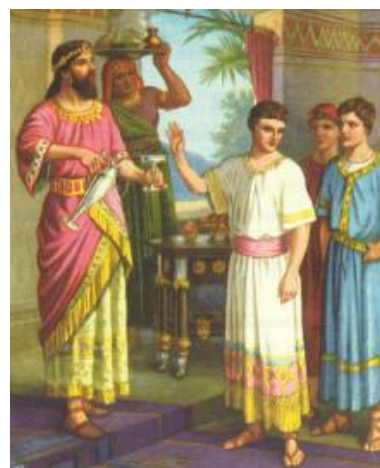
I have been almost overwhelmed by messages of support and family and friends (even people I barely know) have committed themselves to pray to God for my healing. I believe with all my heart that God is able to deliver me out of this "fiery furnace" – whether by miracle or by medical means. I too am praying for this, "but even if he does not ..." (vv. 17 and 18) I will not bow down to the false god's of fate and chance (saying, "Why me?" "Life's not fair") nor deny love of God and the Saviour who bought me at a great price.

There are several things we learn from the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the furnace.

## 1: A PARTNERSHIP LEADING UP TO THE FIRE

These three men had already been through a lot together leading up to the fire. Daniel and his friends were taken as captives to Babylon in 605 BC (Dan. 1:1). There they were to be trained for three years (1:5b), not in the Law of God, but in "pagan" language and literature of the Babylonians (1:4). Their God-honouring names were replaced with "pagan" names (1:6-7). They had "unclean" food set before them (1:5a). Yet they remained faithful to God (1:8).

How these men must have been an encouragement to each other in such difficult circumstances! I could never have come as far as I have without the love and support of so many partners in life and ministry. It is the midst of "fiery trials" that you become most aware of your need and most grateful to God for his provision.



## 2: THE PRESENCE OF GOD WITH THEM IN THE FIRE

Sometime later, Nebuchadnezzar set up an image of gold intending it to be worshipped by all (Daniel 3). Once again, the three youths supported one another in refusing to worship the image. As a result they were cast together into a fiery furnace. But God was with them in the fire by his angel.

The fire was under his control. He used the fire to set them free from their bonds (v. 25a). He did not allow the fire to do them any harm (v. 25b).

God is always with us. Even in the difficult times. He is in control. He is using the "fire" of suffering to set us free not from physical bonds, but from the bonds of sin: pride, prejudice, and self will. Thus suffering always has as its one great purpose: to make us more like Christ.



## 3: THE PERSISTENCE OF THE THREE MEN IN THE FIRE

It is easy to trust and obey God when it feels good to do so. The most inspiring thing about the actions of these three young men was that they steadfastly refused to deny God even when stripped of all pleasurable feeling.

C.S. Lewis, in *The Screwtape Letters*, has one demon comment to another junior tempter in training: "Do not be deceived Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending to do our enemies will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished and asks why has he been forsaken and still obeys".

The "enemy" here (from the devil's point of view), of course, is God. There are times when we obey God, almost incidentally. We do what God



wants us to do but we wanted to do it anyway. It feels good. It is when we do what God requires even when it does not feel good, even when there is no outward sign of God's blessing, even when we may feel forsaken – as was Christ on the cross – it is when we trust God in these circumstances that we prove the genuineness of our faith.

According to 1 Peter 1:7, the very things which may cause us to doubt are the things that reveal the genuineness of our faith. We need to make this vow: whatever happens I will not change my allegiance from God to Satan.

#### 4: THE PASSING NATURE OF THE FIRE

The fire did not last forever.

Our time of trial will not last forever. It may seem long, but God is working in it. Be patient. Pray. Don't let Satan use it to his advantage.

Even if the "fire" lasts a lifetime it is still not forever. We need to learn to view things from the perspective of eternity, as suggested by 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. There Paul (himself no stranger to suffering) puts his hope in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ as the guarantee of our resurrection to eternal life when Jesus comes again (v. 14). In light of this he does not lose heart (v. 16a). He remarks that "outwardly" we are all "wasting away" but that "inwardly" through faith in Christ we are "being renewed day by day" (v. 16b). And the troubles of this life, which he calls "our light and momentary troubles", are in fact, by God's grace, being used of God to work in us an "eternal glory which far outweighs them all" (v. 17). To see things from this perspective we need to focus, not on the "what is seen", which is "temporary", but on "what is unseen", which is "eternal" (v. 18). Often we need the fire of affliction to help us to see this.

#### 5: THE PERFECTIONS OF GOD ARE SHOWN BY THE FIRE

In the lives of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, God was able to bring good out of their situation. Nebuchadnezzar was confronted with the greatness of God (v. 28). He published a decree giving glory to God throughout his whole kingdom (v. 29). The youths were recognised for their integrity and promoted to positions of high authority in the land (v. 30).

Romans 8:28 and following is God's promise to all believers. God works together with us in all things for the good of those who love him.

I have cerebral palsy. I wouldn't have chosen it. I can't change it. And neither has God chosen to. I can testify however that God has brought good out of my cerebral palsy in the past. Now that I have been diagnosed with Leukaemia I pray that God will use that too.

Again, I believe with all my heart that God is able to deliver me out of this "fiery furnace". I am praying for this. "[B]ut even if he does not ..." (vv. 17 and 18) I hold fast to the truths I have long believed. God is our loving heavenly father. We can trust him to only lead us through those things which are necessary to make us the people we need to be – whether in this life or the next.



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