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## THE FIERY FURNACE

– *DANIEL 3.* – *SEPTEMBER 17.* –

**"The Lord is my Helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me." – Heb. 13:6.**

YEARS PASSED after the narrative of our last study. King Nebuchadnezzar had advanced the four Hebrew captives to positions of honor and trust. Just where Daniel was at this time we do not know, but his three companions, given new names, were governors of Babylonian provinces.

Nebuchadnezzar had conquered the world. He was the first to grasp the thought of the wisdom of having a universal government which would make wars to cease to the ends of the earth. He conquered the world and treated their rulers who were obedient with a measure of wisdom and justice and cruelly destroyed the others as a lesson illustrative of his indomitable power. His Kingdom, composed of various nations worshipping various gods, he wished to cement into one harmonious whole. He instituted [R4874 : page 346] a great peace celebration and brought his representatives from different parts of the then civilized world to Babylon; and with them came representatives of all nations. These were to be duly impressed with the greatness and magnificence of the Babylonian Power and of the futility of resisting it. They were to be given an illustration of the benefactions to result from having one government and having the entire world at peace.

Thus seen it was benevolence as well as wisdom which was at the foundation of Nebuchadnezzar's scheme. He had doubtless heard that the Israelites from of old were inspired by a certain promise from their God that at a future time their nation should be made the dominant one for the ruling and the blessing of all nations, kindreds, peoples and tongues. Nebuchadnezzar considered this theory of the Jews a wise one, and himself the opportune person to be the blesser of the world

in the name of his god, Bel-Merodach. Had not his god given him victories, he reasoned? Were not he, therefore, and his nation, the properly qualified ones for the great work of blessing the world? He would at least make the endeavor, no matter what the cost.

### **GOLDEN IMAGE OF BEL-MERODACH**

Nebuchadnezzar would honor the god whom he believed had given him his victories. He would make him the god of nations. The people from every part of his domain should be committed to the worship of this one god, that the having of one religion might help to cement the various incongruous elements of which his kingdom was composed. As a preparation for the great peace festival, a broad plain for maneuvers of the troops and gathering of the princes and nobles and visitors was selected. In the midst of the plain a golden image of Bel-Merodach was erected – ninety feet high. It is not necessary to assume that the image was of solid gold, although Herodotus mentions a statue at Babylon of smaller size which was of solid gold, weighing forty-three thousand pounds.

When the great day of celebration came, with the governors, princes, captains and provincial rulers, the judges, treasurers, counselors and lawyers in their various robes of office and surrounded and interspersed with the delegates from various nations, the banners flying and the musical instruments playing, it must have been an impressive sight. We may sympathize with the victorious Nebuchadnezzar in a certain measure of pride in the achievements of that hour and the peace program which it was to celebrate. Thus far his rule had been one of conquest; thenceforth, everything conquered, the world was to have a great time of peace, prosperity, jubilation.

At the appropriate time the religious unity of the empire was to be demonstrated by a general worship of the golden image of Bel-Merodach. Proclamation was made that soon the bands would begin to play and that then all would be expected to fall down and worship

and reverence the image which represented Nebuchadnezzar, in that it represented his god.

### **DISLOYALTY! INGRATITUDE! TREASON!**

Everything seemed to go well until it was reported to the king that three governors whom he had set over provinces had rebelled against his decree and refused to worship the image of Bel-Merodach – had defied the king's power – for like all mandates of olden times, the penalty for disobedience was so severe as to leave no room for opposition in a sane mind. Who were these three disturbers of Babylon's peace, spoilers of the great peace festival? They were the three young Hebrews whom the [R4874 : page 347] king had so graciously treated at the time of their captivity, who apparently owed so much to him. He had not only given them schooling, but he had exalted them to high positions in his empire. How ungrateful to their benefactor, how traitorous they were!

This, undoubtedly, was Nebuchadnezzar's view of the affair. Of all the governors he would be most sorry to lose these three who were so reliable, but on such an occasion he could never permit insubordination to his regulations, nor could he think it possible that these three men, now about thirty-five years of age, would challenge his authority and power knowing, as they must, his autocracy. The king, in further leniency, would give these headstrong governors further chance for their lives – for their *all*. The trumpets would again sound, and if they still persisted, the decree of death must be executed against them. The fiery furnace was ready.

The courage of these three Hebrews stands out on the pages of history as *sublime*. The king reminded them that none of the gods had been able to deliver any people out of his hand; their own city, Jerusalem, had been overthrown. They could hope for no succor, no rescue from the death that was before them if they persisted in defying the king of the whole earth. Their answer was that their God, Jehovah, they were sure was quite able to deliver them from the fiery furnace,

or from anything He might choose, and would do so. But if *not* – if He did not deliver them – and if they were certain of it in advance – nevertheless, they would be His faithful servants and worship Him alone. How sublime their faith and their courage! Such faith and such courage we may be sure is pleasing to the Lord. We must not expect that in every case God will thus deliver those who trust in Him; rather, as these Hebrews intimated, we are not able to know the wise plans of our God, nor what may be His will respecting what little remains of our lives. But of His power and love we are confident. We can trust Him where we cannot trace Him.

### **THE FURNACE SUPER-HEATED**

When we read that King Nebuchadnezzar became furious, we should sympathetically remember the circumstances. He had conquered the world, and would he now be defied by three men whom he had made what they were? He was giving a great lesson to all nations on the very subject of the necessity of obedience to his government. Could he allow some of his own representatives to defy that government? On the other hand, his appreciation of the men he was about to slay had been evidenced by the exaltation he had given them. Can we wonder that under all these conditions he felt furious? He was seriously disappointed at the only inharmony that had occurred in connection with his great project which he felt sure was to work such blessings to all the earth, and such honor to himself. In his fury he commanded that the furnace should be made seven times hotter – evidently forgetting that thereby the sufferings of anything cast therein would be diminished.

Recent explorations show that in that vicinity there were naphtha wells; for all we know this may have been the fuel used in the great, open furnace. The three Hebrews were bound in their clothing, and some of the strongest men of the king's guard were commanded to throw them into the furnace. As the bound men were thrown in, the flames came forth and enveloped those who had thrown them in, and

destroyed them. A Jewish legend tells that the fire streamed out seventy-five feet, perhaps driven by a gust of wind, or perhaps occasioned by the simultaneous throwing in of additional fuel, especially if that fuel was naphtha. The king already had had some evidence of the power of Jehovah God, and intently watched the furnace. But surely the young Hebrews who had such faith in Him were foolish. Yet as the king looked toward the furnace, to his utter astonishment he beheld four persons walking in the midst of the fire, unharmed. He went as close as safety would permit, saying to his counselors, "We cast three men into the furnace, but behold, I now see four, free, walking in the fire, and the fourth has an appearance like a son of the gods!"

What had he done? What should he now do? He called to the three, "Ye servants of the Most High God, come forth and come hither." They came, unharmed, and not even the smell of scorching was upon their clothing. Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged the miracle and praised the God who had thus by His angel of power delivered His servants that trusted in Him and who defied the king's mandates and yielded their bodies that they might not serve nor worship any god except their own God. "Blessed are all they that put their trust in Him."

