



# The Tri-Cities Edifier

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## But If Not

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During the Babylonian Exile, a trial of faith came upon three of the young Israelites who had been carried off from their homeland by Nebuchadnezzar. In his idolatrous arrogance he had set up a golden image 60 cubits high in the plain of Dura, near Babylon (Dan. 3:1). The king commanded all of his people and the nations he had subjugated to **“fall down and worship”** the image at the sound of a musical call to worship (Dan. 3:4-5). It is unclear if this image represented a Babylonian false god, a symbol of national grandeur, or perhaps even Nebuchadnezzar himself. Whatever the case, the penalty for failing to worship this image was severe. Violators of this order were to be **“cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace”**(Dan. 3:6, NKJV). In many ancient cultures, compulsion to worship the king or deities and symbols tied to national identity was common treatment of conquered peoples. In the late first century, Christians’ refusal to burn incense to Caesar and proclaim, “Hail Caesar” led many men and women of faith to their deaths. This likely is part of what John spoke of as worshipping **“the beast and his image”**(Rev. 14:9, 11). In the case of Rome, as was likely the case with Nebuchadnezzar, this was not so much about religious faith as it was about political loyalty. Those who showed reverence for the symbols of the ruling authority would likely remain loyal to the one in power.

For Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, three Israelite exiles—like Christians of the late first century and early second century, to bow before an image was more than simply showing political loyalty. Mosaic Law taught: *You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God(Exod. 20:3-5a).*

In His own temptation by Satan, Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:13 declaring, **“You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve”**(Matt. 4:10). To bow before an image would violate the command of God. Thus, for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, in spite of the fact that they had attained high positions **“over the affairs of the province of Babylon”** (Dan. 3:12a), their refusal to worship the image was seen as an insult and act of rebellion to the king himself. The accusation was made that in this refusal, **“these men, O king, have not paid due regard to you. They do not serve your gods or worship the gold image which you have set up”** (Dan. 3:12b)

Upon learning this, Nebuchadnezzar was enraged (Dan. 3:13a), but oddly enough he does not have them **“cast immediately”** into the fiery furnace, as his own decree had demanded. He actually commands them to be brought before him to question them in order to verify the truth of the accusation (Dan. 3:13b). This likely showed the esteem he held for these men, who had already distinguished themselves earlier in their exile (see Dan. 1:1-21). His interrogation carried with it what surely would have seemed like a generous offer to his fellow Babylonians. First, he asked if the accusation was true (Dan. 3:14). Yet, before they could even answer, he extended a second chance to them to **“fall down and worship the image”** (Dan. 3:15a). However, with this second chance, he adds a warning that strikes at the heart of his own idolatrous arrogance as well as the reason these faithful men could not worship this image. He warns, **“But if you do not worship, you shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?”** (Dan. 3:15b).

The very reason Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego could not worship a false god was because they knew the true God who held the power to **“deliver”** them from the hands of a mere mortal. It is this faith that led them to respond courageously, and I would like for us to focus on their brave response. First, they tell him, **“we have no need to answer you in this matter”** (Dan. 3:16). They didn’t wait until the hour of testing to make up their minds about their loyalties. Like Paul, they knew the one in whom they believed and were confident in His power of deliverance (cf. 2 Tim. 1:12). So, they

tell the king, **“If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king”** (Dan. 3:17).

We might imagine from these words that these men, as they had with Daniel earlier in the book (cf. Dan. 2:1-49), been given some prophetic insight into the future. But Scripture does not tell us that such a revelation was given to them. In fact, their next words make it clear this was not the case. They were not speaking from prophetic foreknowledge. They were demonstrating a faith in God’s ability and power. They say God **“is able to deliver them”** adding their firm hope that **“He will deliver us.”** They then go on to say, **“But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up”** (Dan. 3:18).

Most of us know the rest of the story. They are cast into the fiery furnace (Dan. 3:19-23), God delivers them (Dan. 3:24-27), and Nebuchadnezzar actually praises God, punishes their accusers, and promotes them to higher positions than they held before (Dan. 3:28-30). But let’s consider some things their bold response should teach us.

1. **It isn’t wrong to imagine that faith in God will produce certain conditions in our lives.** If it had been revealed to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego that God would definitely deliver them from the furnace it would have been meaningless to tell the king **“but if not . . .”** These words tell us that their confidence in telling Nebuchadnezzar, **“He will deliver us from your hand”** was based on their trust, hope, and assurance of God’s power—not their absolute certainty. We often face hardships and trials and in our trust in God foresee exactly how we imagine God will deliver us from them. Like these men, we don’t know the future by revelation, but it isn’t wrong to trust in God’s power to carry us through. Peter taught that you should cast **“all your care upon Him, for He cares for you”** (1 Pet. 5:7). But we must also recognize . . .
2. **Faith in God doesn’t guarantee that what we know God can do, He necessarily will do.** If God had not delivered these men, would it have changed the fact that God is still the only true and living God? No. God didn’t keep Abel from being killed or Stephen from being stoned, but that didn’t change God’s existence or power. John taught, **“Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us”** (1 John 5:14). How important it is for us to recognize, **“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,’ says the LORD”** (Isa. 55:8). This is why we must see that . . .
3. **True faith means we trust God even if the conditions He allows are different from what we expected.** These men’s faith was not shown merely in the recognition and hope that God would deliver them, but even more so in the bold declaration, **“but if not”** their obedience to Him would not change. It’s easy to serve God when every trial we face is brought to a happy resolution, but the real question is will we continue to serve God even if His deliverance is different than we had hoped for? Far too often, we put ourselves in the place of God and imagine “if there really is a God, here is what He will do!” When things turn out differently, we ask, “Where is God?” Or, “If there really is a God, why didn’t He act?” How important it is for us to have the kind of confidence shown by Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. We serve a God who can, and often does deliver us from life’s trials. The greatest deliverance He will one day grant is redemption from sin and death unto eternal life. Yet may we have the kind of faith—as we hope for certain types of deliverance—to say with confidence, **“But if not, let it be known”** to all **“we do not serve”** the gods of this world! We will serve God no matter what!