

The Companion of the Way

by

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE COMPANION IN THE FIRE (Daniel 3) - Three Hebrew Captives

I. THE SETTING -- THE DAUNTLESS THREE

Among the captives taken from Judah to Babylon in the days of Jeconiah were a number of youths of noble birth. The names of four of these are recorded in Scripture with special honor. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah left for all who should follow in the path of faith the lesson that there are *no days when it is too dark for GOD* to work and no circumstances in which He cannot sustain those who trust in Him. Life must have been desolate indeed when the gates of Babylon closed upon the weary captives. Involved in the tragedy that had befallen their nation for its sins, yet themselves of blameless character, these Hebrew youths found themselves attached to a court marked by pride, cruelty, and all the defiling influences of idolatry. Even their names were changed, and there were imposed on them new names associated with the worship of the false gods of Babylon. The tide ran swiftly against their spiritual life. Every factor of their environment was calculated to dim the memories of their unbringing and to efface from their hearts their earliest loyalties.

Challenged by the insidious temptation to partake of the king's meat and thus to acquiesce in offering to idols, they did not falter in their allegiance to the GOD of their fathers, to the One who had said, "**Thou shalt have no other gods before me . . . Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them**" (Exodus 20:3, 5). Preferring loss to defilement, and counting the fear of the Lord more precious than life itself, they resisted the temptation and were at last vindicated in their stand by the overruling care of GOD. Centuries earlier, He had said to His people, "**Them that honor me I will honor**" (I Samuel 2:30). The truth of this faithful word was clearly evidenced in the story of these young men. GOD gave them such knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom that they won the approval of the king. After the unfolding of the dream of the great image, Daniel was made ruler over the whole province of Babylon. His three friends, now known as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, were set over the affairs of the province. They were among the few who could be trusted by GOD with high positions in the affairs of earth. Proud Babylon is no more, and the scenes of its glory have long since been a desolate waste, but the four exiles who showed such fidelity have honorable place among the great cloud

of witnesses by which we are compassed about in the heavenward way.

More than twenty years passed, and the proud yet fertile mind of Nebuchadnezzar conceived a scheme for the unifying of his great empire. Its far-flung provinces lay secure in his dominion, but he sought control not only over the bodies but also over the souls of men. He built an image of gold, set this colossus in the plain of Dura, and ordered all who were prominent in rule throughout his territories to attend the dedication of the image and bow before it in worship (Daniel 3:1-7). Of all forms of tyranny none are more cruel or relentless than those which are found in the religious sphere.

Nebuchadnezzar attempted to enforce the spiritual despotism of a state religion, and allowed no alternatives to obedience save a terrifying death. If all the dignitaries of state prostrated themselves before the image of gold, itself the visible representation of the power and wealth of the kingdom over which he ruled as absolute monarch, then they and all their people would be subject to him in every domain of life -- physical, intellectual, and spiritual. The human personality would be *enslaved to the impersonal state*, and, worst of all, it would be denied the exercise of that homage of the creature for the CREATOR which is at once the necessary law of its being and yet the noblest freedom.

Faced with such a situation, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego manifested the same courage which had marked them in earlier days. To them, compromise was impossible. There could be nothing in common between the worship of the living GOD and the worship of an idol. As in a day still to come, when earth shall know the sway of its last and most awful tyrant, and when the choice will be clear-cut between the worship of GOD, with the threat of physical death on the one hand, and the worship of the beast and his image (cf. Rev. 14:6-11), so it was for the three Hebrews. The law of GOD was still true for them. They could not bow to any image. Better to them was a cruel death than such dishonor to their faith, and disloyalty to their GOD.

Watched relentlessly as the result of the envy of certain Chaldeans, they were accused to Nebuchadnezzar of flouting his decree. To the king's pride it was so incredible that anyone should disobey him that in rage and fury he sent for the fearless three and demanded of them, **"Then Nebuchadnezzar in his rage and fury commanded to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego. Then they brought these men before the king"** (Daniel 3:13). Then, having renewed his threat of the fiery furnace, he flaunted his impiety in the words, **"Who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands?"** (Daniel 3:15).

Similar words had been spoken by another monarch. In the days of Hezekiah, Sennacherib the Assyrian had said, **"No god of any nation or kingdom was able to deliver his people out of mine hand, and out of the hand of my fathers: how much less shall your God deliver you out of mine hand?"** (II Chronicles 32:15). GOD had heard the prayer of Hezekiah and of Isaiah the prophet, and He had saved His people from their peril. **"The angel of the Lord went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand"** (II Kings 19:35).

Not by such judgment upon the king, but nevertheless by the intervention of the same One, **"the angel of the Lord,"** did GOD deliver His servants from the fiery death. First, however, their testimony was given to His power to save, and their faith was tested to the utmost.

"O Nebuchadnezzar, 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" (Daniel 3:16-18). Full well they knew that it was not a case that might be made the subject of petition; they knew the man before whom they stood and that without hesitation he would mete out the threatened doom. They knew that they could do nought but refuse his command. Their path had been clear to them throughout the events leading up to that moment of crisis. But they knew also that though Nebuchadnezzar was king of kings (see Daniel 2:37), it was only by the sovereign will of the GOD of Heaven that he had received the kingdom. The king was powerful, but GOD was all-powerful.

Their hearts were at rest with a calm which this world could not give. On the one hand, GOD was certainly able to deliver them; on the other, if He were pleased to call them through death from the toil of earth, they would submit to His perfect will. He had promised, **"When thou walkest through the waters, I will be with thee; . . . when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee"** (Isaiah 43:2). No malice of man could hinder the fulfillment of the promise of their GOD. Upon His presence they relied; He would not fail them, nor forsake them, whether in life or in death. With this confidence, therefore, they said to the king, **"He will deliver us out of thy hand."**

Filled with fury, till his very face was distorted, Nebuchadnezzar gave vent to his anger by the utterly needless order that the furnace be heated seven times more than usual, an act whose only result was to bring about the destruction of the mighty men who carried out his sentence on the three Hebrews. There is no rage like that which is *baffled by the serene constancy* of its intended victims. Goaded by his frenzy, the king hastened the matter, and his men paid the price for his folly. The three confessors were bound in their full attire and cast into the midst of the furnace. Every circumstance attendant on their ordeal was made to minister to the exhibition of the power of GOD; even their garments bore their part in the triumphant witness. Doubtless the instigators of the matter were full of satisfaction at the apparent removal of the Hebrews from their high office, but their joy was short-lived.

II. THE REVELATION -- MORE THAN CONQUERORS

"And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, fell down bound in the midst of the burning fiery furnace" (Daniel 3:23). They were now past all mortal aid. GOD had permitted this extremity to show that their deliverance was from Him -- and Him alone. Before they were cast into the furnace, it was in Nebuchadnezzar's power to do what he pleased, whether to send them to the fire or to withhold them from it. But once they had passed within the furnace, the proud king could do nothing. He could watch, but was powerless to intervene. He could not even save his own mighty men from the fierceness of the flame. He must learn that the end of human prowess marks but the beginning of divine strength. GOD is not bound by the limitations of His creatures; their puny resources are as nothing to His infinite greatness.

"Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astonished, 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, True, O king. 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 3:24-25). Never had the king been so amazed. No wonder of his career, whether of brilliant conquest or of royal achievement, could stir his heart with the emotion which he now betrayed. The fire to which he had condemned the three who had dared to defy him had but destroyed their bonds. They walked at liberty in the flame, as though at home in its embrace. Its terrors had gone, and its blaze enwrapped them as with an atmosphere of glory.

Moreover, they were not alone. With them there walked One whom the startled king described as like in form to the Son of GOD. Clearly the presence of this One was the secret of their deliverance. The king beheld the transcendent form and the majestic mien which proclaimed Him to be no mortal but a being from Heaven. We would not expect the king to imply by his words such an appreciation of the person of this wondrous visitant as they convey to us. He was but a heathen and acknowledged many supposed deities, even as later in life he spoke to Daniel of "the holy gods" (Daniel 4:9). Not till the restoration of his reason (4:34) did he seem to attain to the knowledge of the one most high GOD. While his words spoken as he gazed into the furnace would be capable on heathen lips of the sense, "**the son of God,**" it is nevertheless possible that in the strong emotion of the moment, as was certainly the case immediately after when he addressed the three Hebrews as "**servants of the most high God,**" he spoke only of their GOD. But whatever his degrees of perception of these things, his words were overruled to express, in the speech of those who know the one true GOD, the most sublime fact. It was indeed the Son of GOD who walked with the three in the fire.

It is entirely in accordance with the promise, "**I will be with thee**" (Isaiah 43:2), and the consistent teaching of Scripture touching the theophanies to recognize in the One who appeared in the fire the very Son of GOD, the Deliverer of His people. The circumstances of His appearance with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, illustrate delightfully the lesson of Romans 8:37. "**In all these things we are more than conquerors, through him that loved us.**" Had the three been miraculously preserved in the furnace, yet without any sign of the divine presence, they would certainly have been conquerors. But the surpassing wonder of their experience was not their deliverance, viewed in itself, but rather *the companionship of their Lord* in the furnace. In the added marvel of this sacred fellowship they were "**more than conquerors.**" So was it in Paul's day. So has it been with all who have known amidst their trials the joy of walking with the Son of GOD.

What was new in the path of the three was not the fact of the Lord's presence, but rather its manifestation. He had walked with them unseen throughout their years of testimony, and it was this which was the secret of their courage in the face of such dire peril. He had ever been with them to guard and to strengthen. All that the fire could do was to make visible, even to the sight of a heathen king, the presence that was already with them. How often in history have persecutors been compelled to own that their victims had a resource which they could not take from them, an unseen spring of cheer that defied all their hatred and their cruelties!

With the vast majority of the people of GOD, the Friend and Guide of the long road of life has been real only to the vision of faith. With the mortal eye that have braved every danger, and trusted GOD in the last breath. Some indeed "**quenched the violence of fire,**" but "**others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection**" (Hebrews

11:34-35). Stephen saw his Lord before he was dragged to the place of death and, serene in that heavenly vision, fell asleep under the weight of the cruel stones: others have borne like suffering and have seen the glorious face only when their eyes had closed to this scene. Never, however, has the fact of the divine presence ceased; it has been constant through every vicissitude of life.

III. THE BLESSING -- THE TRIUMPHANT TESTIMONY

"Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the mouth of the burning fiery furnace, and spake, and said, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, ye servants of the most high God, come forth, and come hither. Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego came forth out of the midst of the fire. 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" (Daniel 3:26-27). So complete was the vindication of the stand of the Hebrews that they were saluted of the king before they left the furnace by the title **"servants of the most high God."** Theirs was a service and a nobility surpassing that of the courtiers who thronged around the king. His prince and governors bowed at his word; the three owned a higher allegiance than that belonging to any earthly potentate. Around them gathered all the great men of Babylon, who marveled to see that the fire had no power either on the persons of the three Hebrews or on their garments. There was not even the smell of fire about them to tell of their ordeal. How often must these same dignitaries have recounted to their associates and to their families in the years that followed *the story of this amazing scene*, of the three who worshipped a GOD whom they themselves had not known, and of the mighty power of that great GOD! Thus the fame of the GOD of Israel would spread far and wide in a testimony with consequences which cannot be estimated.

"They have no hurt," said Nebuchadnezzar, and his princes saw that not a hair of their head was singed. **"I give unto you power . . . over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall be any means hurt you,"** said the Son of GOD to His disciples (Luke 10:19). How true it is that in the path of the will of GOD there is nought that can hurt His people! Amid the trials and sorrows of life they walk unscathed, and from their experience in trial and from the companionship of the Lord JESUS they receive eternal good. Only sin can hurt them, marring their fellowship with their Lord, vitiating their capacities for service, and wounding their own souls. However deep the sufferings of His martyrs, not they but their persecutors are hurt. Not for nought does the Lord speak to His tried ones, **"He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death"** (Revelation 2:11).

"Then Nebuchadnezzar spake, and said, Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, 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 . . . there is no other God that can deliver after this sort" (Daniel 3:28-29). Could Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego have foreseen as they made their choice to be true to their GOD whatever the cost that its sequel would be a doxology from the lips of the greatest of all Gentile monarchs? Could they have known, in those moments when they stood alone in the plain of Dura and all others were bowed in idol worship, that ere many hours were passed it should be an offence, binding upon all people in the empire of Babylon, to speak anything amiss against their GOD, the GOD of deliverance? *What a tribute it was to their*

faithful witness and to Him who maketh the wrath of man to praise Him! (Psalm 76:10).

When the records of the sustaining grace of the centuries are all complete, then lonely road and fiery trial shall yield their part to that great song of praise the gladness of which shall never cease. The road will be ended, and the trial long past, but the Lord who walked with His own will company with them forever, and they shall walk with Him not in the flame of trial but *in the blaze of His glory*.

~ end of chapter 8 ~