

### **Daniel - 3. The burning fiery furnace**

This series of talks is about Daniel and the stories which we find in the book of the Bible which bears his name. One of the two best known incidents recorded, is the story of the burning fiery furnace. Unintentionally, we have been working through the book of Daniel chapter by chapter. Two weeks ago I based my talk on the story in chapter one of Daniel and his three companions refusing to eat the food and to drink the wine of the Babylonians. Chapter two tells the story of Nebuchadnezzar's dream image.

Tonight we turn to chapter three which describes an image which Nebuchadnezzar erected and which he commanded everyone to worship. Daniel's companions, Sadrach, Meshach and Abednego resolutely refused to do so and were cast into a furnace heated seven times its normal temperature. Amazingly, they were unharmed, and at one stage during the ordeal Nebuchadnezzar noted in astonishment the presence of a fourth figure with them "a son of the gods". (Chapter 3, 25).

Previously, and because it is so important, I have spoken at length on what is the most striking lesson which the stories in this book of Daniel have for us. The importance of loyalty to standards and ideals, however unpopular a stand may be and irrespective of any consequences which may be threatened.

In every situation Daniel and his three companions were uncompromisingly loyal both to God and to what they knew and believed to be right. It didn't matter what others around them were doing. It didn't matter how tempting it was to give way, they weren't going to do so. As their conscience dictated so they acted. We need to think deeply and carefully about the example that is set before us.

Once a crowd is doing something we tend to think that we might as well give way and fall in with them. The crowd seemed happy enough to go along with Nebuchadnezzar's command to worship the image he had erected. However Daniel's friends were not going to follow the crowd. They would be their own masters and make their own decisions, however lonely and unpopular their action would be and despite the threat of punishment which hung over them.

It is interesting and again, because it is important, that it was because they were true to their conscience and to their belief of what was right, that Daniel and his friends prospered and the Lord was able to be with them. Things turned out so differently from what they or anyone else could have expected. In this particular incident their stand is said to have made an impression on others and to have influenced those others in their thinking about the Lord. It had been a witnessing to the Lord which clearly had its impact on those around them.

Look at what this is teaching us. However discouraging a situation may be, and however unwelcome a stand may be, yet if it is made, it will have an impact for good on those around us.

I have known situations, as I'm sure you have, where the general drift of conversation and proposed action has been negative and uncomfortably unpleasant. And then one person will make a stand. Perhaps an individual, in their absence, is being criticised. And one person speaks up for the good qualities which that person possesses. As a consequence there is a distinct change in the direction of the conversation. It might well have taken courage to speak up, but in so doing quite unforeseen and encouraging things follow.

Sometimes we can seem to be all alone, just as Sadrach, Meshach and Abednego must have seemed. Perhaps we have objected to violence on a television programme, rung up the station and felt an oddity for doing so. But then, in conversation, we find that the stand we have taken has struck a chord of sympathy and support in others.

The story is important in terms of our dealings with the world and with people, outside and around us. It is equally, if not more important when it comes to the world within us, for as Swedenborg shows us, this is what it more deeply treats.

The image which Nebuchadnezzar erected and commanded people to worship, is almost certain to have been an image of himself. Nebuchadnezzar had set himself up as a god. Babylon, over which Nebuchadnezzar ruled, is a symbol throughout the Bible of the love of self. Babylon represents the love of self which, like Babylon of old, strives to dominate and control our lives. And, like Babylon, it sometimes succeeds in doing so.

Nebuchadnezzar, the ruler of Babylon, is the embodiment of the love of self in our lives. The spokesman for it. Its mouthpiece. Its leading and most notable feature with us. And the love of self, like Nebuchadnezzar, at last comes to the stage where it wants us to exalt it, even to worship it, to fall down before it, to put it first in all things.

You and I are born with the tendency to love ourselves above everything. You and I know that unless we are on our guard, self all too easily comes to occupy a dominant position in our lives. It is there in conversation wanting to be heard and to be taken notice of. It is there when we are doing things for others, hoping that it will be acknowledged and rewarded in some way. It is there when we have been hurt by another person, perhaps shown up or embarrassed by them, and causes us to contemplate revenge. The love of self, like Nebuchadnezzar, wants to take over; it wants to control and supervise and direct the whole of our life. It is all the time striving to be in command.

What is so encouraging about the story is that it teaches us that we don't have to fall in with its wishes. If we make up our minds to do so, we are able to resist it. We can make a stand. Though the pressure may very well be on us to go along with what it wants. If an opportunity stares us in the face, we may be inclined to fall in and do what it commands of us. Yet we don't have to do so. For sure, it will involve us in an ordeal. But the Lord will be with us and see us through.

You cannot make a stand against an evil thought or inclination that comes to you, you cannot hold out against the love of self in your life, without it involving temptation conflict. Evil argues cogently and persuasively, and it can summon up emotion, feeling and passion to gain its objective. That emotion, feeling and passion is what is represented by the burning fiery furnace into which Daniel's three companions were cast. But it will not harm us, not if we continue to trust in the Lord and to hold fast to the principles and ideals He teaches us.

When he looked into the furnace, Nebuchadnezzar saw not three but four men in it, the form of the fourth being "like a son of the gods". In few places in the Bible is Divine protection at times of difficulty and temptation so openly talked about or so obviously meant. And there is much about the story which reassures and strengthens us.

If we were left alone in temptation we would succumb and be consumed by the fires of passion and hatred that are engendered at those times. Of ourselves we do not have the strength to resist. But if we look to the Lord and call upon His aid He will, as is said in the Psalms, "give His angels charge over us" (Psalm 91). We shall come through the experience unscathed and unharmed.

The promise of protection when in the midst of temptation, as demonstrated in the story of the fiery furnace, is what is meant in Isaiah at the beginning of chapter 43 "But now, this is what the Lord says— he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; "(verses 1-3).

"Nothing" wrote Swedenborg "can hurt those whom the Lord protects, even if they should be encompassed by all Hell both without and within." (*Arcana Caelestia* 968). But and at the same time, the Lord can only protect those who look to Him and who struggle to hold on to what He teaches. We read again, concerning this:

"Unless the Lord protected man, he could never be rescued from hell. And the Lord cannot protect man, unless he acknowledges the Divine, and lives a life of faith and charity; for otherwise he averts himself from the Lord, and turns himself to the infernal spirits." (para. 577).

As you read through the Bible and through the Psalms in particular, you will notice how frequently this theme of protection is spoken of, the best known example of it being in the twenty-third Psalm, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

The valley of the shadow means times of doubt and temptation; when our vision of the Lord and of His teaching is obscured; when evil and selfish inclinations are tugging at us and clouding our thinking on issues. In such states we can have perfect confidence that the Lord will protect us and bring us safely through the experience .

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