

Enduring a Fiery Trial

Under the inspiration of God, the apostle Peter gave a warning to the believers concerning a time of trial to come:

“Beloved, think it not strange concerning *the fiery trial* which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy” (1 Pet. 4:12-13).

These words provide both a warning, and an encouragement to stand fast. In times past, believers have had to literally undergo a fiery trial (and we shall consider such a case shortly), when they were burned alive for holding fast to the testimony of Jesus Christ. But the encouragement given to enable them to continue in faithfulness, is that a crown of life will be given to those who so suffer, even those who “love his appearing” (2 Tim. 4:8).

In our day circumstances are different, and especially in the western world there is generally much less open persecution towards Messiah’s brethren - but with this freedom there comes responsibility. It is part of the perversity of human nature that when open fiery trials and persecutions are brought to bear, men and women become galvanised into action, and are compelled to take one side or another, whether for Christ, or for Mammon. But when things are allowed to become more comfortable and lax, the boundaries of the front line in this warfare become blurred and folk fall into a state of apathy and ignorant indolence. This is the circumstance in our day: a danger of becoming conformed to the principles that govern the World, as distinct to the Commandments of Christ.

It is a Divine Principle that those who wish to be part of Yahweh’s treasure when he makes up his jewels (Mal. 3:7) will have to go through a time of difficulty and affliction: a refining process to remove the dross, and bring forth a refined nature. So Peter again teaches:

“the trial of your faith being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ ...” (1 Pet. 1:7).

The “fiery trial” therefore, is not inclusive of being put to the literal flame only, but is also a figure used to describe the afflictions that come upon the righteous to further develop their faithfulness and dependence upon Yahweh. In our present considerations, we wish to examine two cases of a Fiery Trial being endured: firstly that of Israel (symbolically), and secondly (literally), that of Daniel’s faithful friends who were cast into the furnace.

ISRAEL’S FIERY TRIAL

Isaiah chapter 43 gives the promise of deliverance following trial:

“When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, *thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee*” (Isa. 43:2)

As foreshadowed in the Burning (but not consumed) Bush (Exod. 3:2), Israel were to be brought through the fire of affliction, but would at the end, be delivered. Though the flame would be kindled upon them, for those who remained steadfast, they would pass through unharmed, and even benefit from the experience. The entire nation was to suffer, that with the dross being removed, only the righteous would remain.

Deuteronomy chapter 4 speaks of Egypt as being an “iron furnace” thus:

“... Yahweh hath taken you, and brought you forth *out of the iron furnace*, even out of Egypt, to be unto him a people of inheritance, as ye are this day” (Deut. 4:20).

Of course, Egypt was not a literal furnace, but the hardship imposed upon Israel – purely upon the basis of who they were – is likened to passing through the furnace, like the bricks they had to make in order to build up Pharaoh’s cities. The words used are most instructive: When Moses sought to release the people that they could to into the wilderness to serve Yahweh, it was claimed that the

people had too much time on their hands, and were thus conspiring against Egypt: "...they be idle; therefore they cry, saying, let us go and sacrifice to our God" (Exo. 5:8).

In these things, we see a parallel with our own days. Not in quite the same way, but certainly with the same end. Modern slave-masters, as the ministers of Sin seek to erode the time brethren and sisters have to spend with their families, and in worship to Yahweh their God. If we have "spare" time, we are being idle, and need more work to do! Employers increasingly impose more labour upon their workers, often requiring them to work more hours overtime, without extra pay even. Those who seek to develop a career for themselves must devote their lives to serving worldly masters, with less and less time being available to read and meditate upon the Divine principles of Scripture. The pressure is there to conform to the ways of those around them, and seek to better themselves in every material way. Regarding the Truth as being too restrictive, spurning the narrow way that leads to life, men choose a broader way, which is able to accommodate them, their desires and aspirations. They encourage us to wander from our narrow, "restrictive" path, to join them in their freedom. Yet, "while they promise liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage" (2 Pet. 2:19). Contrariwise, Christ's brethren follow the Truth that shall set them free (Jno. 8:32), and will find true liberty at the last, when in joyful immortality they shall follow the Lamb whithersoever he goes.

SHADRACH, MESHACH AND ABEDNEGO

These three men, better known as Daniel's friends of like precious faith, endured a fiery trial in demonstrating a faithfulness we could do no better than to emulate. The circumstances of Daniel chapter 3 are well-known to us: seeing the representation of the Image revealed to Nebuchadnezzar in a dream, the king saw how his own empire would be succeeded by three other empires. Being carnally minded however, Nebuchadnezzar could not believe that his own empire would pass away into oblivion, and so constructed his own Image. Whereas the true image had a head of gold, Nebuchadnezzar's image was made all of gold. In it, the king sought to declare his empire to be a perpetual one, which would never fade away.

It is interesting to note that the origin of Babylon, in the building of Babel by Nimrod, was designed to accomplish the same end. Not long after the Flood, when all men but Noah's family of 8 perished, we read of how men sought to unite themselves together in building a tower for two reasons:

1. To make a name for themselves and
2. For safety, lest they be scattered.

Building their tower with bricks that had passed through the fire they thought they could maintain a unified perpetual existence. But Yahweh saw it and confounding their language, he scattered them across the face of the whole earth, confuting their endeavours. But what a contrast there is between the tower to the name and glory of Man, and the spiritual Tower which is the Name of Yahweh: "The Name of Yahweh is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe" (Prov. 18:10). And the Kingdom of Yahweh shall not be destroyed, or left to other people, but will be the only perpetual kingdom the world has seen.

Returning to the Idol that Nebuchadnezzar had set up, we find that a general command was given for all who lived under his reign to bow down and worship the image: "and whoso falleth not down and worshippeth shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace" (Dan. 3:6). Here is the threat of a real and literal fiery trial. In response, we read that "all the people, the nations, and the languages, fell down and worshipped the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up" (Dan. 3:7).

This is the way of the world: to worship that which gives glory to Man, for personal benefit. However, whilst all the people were bowing before a gentile idol, there were three men who stood tall. The stance which they took would be immediately obvious: all around them men were bowing down, but they themselves stood upright. This is what it means to make a stand for the Truth: it is to maintain personal integrity in a day of evil, when all around are falling before the altar of mammon. So the king commanded to bring the three offenders before him, and gave them another chance. Again, he commanded them to "fall down and worship the image which I have made", warning them "if ye worship not, ye shall be cast the same hour into the midst of a burning fiery furnace; and ***who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands?***" (Dan. 3:15).

Notice these words: the issue was no longer about whether or not mortal men should bow before worldly idols, it was a direct challenge to the God of the Hebrews, and whether or not He was able to save those who trusted in Him. So the men of faith expressed their confidence:

“... 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” (Dan. 3:18).

Notice the spirit of meekness that these men showed. There was no railing against the Babylonian deities, or those that served them: there was simply a quiet confidence in the saving Hand of their God. There was no presumption: whilst they trusted that Yahweh could save them, they did not assume that he would—either way, they would not bow before man-made idols.

So, the furnace was heated seven times hotter, and “the most mighty men” were commanded to throw Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego into it. Notice this point: Nebuchadnezzar commanded “the most mighty men” of his army—and just to deal with three Jews! The battle-lines were drawn, so to speak: the king utilised the mightiest men he had—what was the God of the Hebrews going to do? Surely with such a display of force, nothing could stop these men from being thrown into the fire!

The plan backfired however, for the “because the king’s commandment was urgent, and the furnace exceeding hot, the flame of the fire slew those men that took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego” (Dan. 3:22), and so the king lost the mightiest men of his army. Moreover, whilst the flame consumed Babylon’s strongest, it had no effect upon the Hebrews. The circumstances mirrored those of Israel, which we considered earlier: “*when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned*, neither shall the flame kindle upon thee” (Isa. 43:2). Just as the furnace was heated seven times hotter, even so Israel were to pass through a fiery trial, and be punished 7 times more for their sins (Lev. 26:18), yet just as Israel were not to be destroyed, neither were these three men.

As the king looked into the furnace, expecting to see the burning carcasses of those who dared to defy him, “he was astonished”! Not only were the three men alive, but there was a fourth with them: “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” (Dan. 3:25). Their bonds had been destroyed enabling them to walk freely, and it would appear that the visage of the fourth man was in some way extraordinary, as the heathen king thought he was the son of one of his deities. But beholding “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”, he recognised that it was the God of the Hebrews who had delivered them, and the fourth man he saw was an angelic messenger. So he spake:

“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 are a number of points to be observed here: when faced with adversity, men of faith “trusted” in Yahweh, who sent His Angel to deliver them. The Sweet Psalmist of Israel trusted likewise, and cried out for deliverance:

“This poor man cried, and Yahweh heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles. The Angel of Yahweh encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them” (Psa. 34:6-7).

Here is a supreme example for us: do we cry out for the Angel to deliver us from adversity? Messiah certainly did; he “in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, *and was heard in that he feared*” (Heb. 5:7). Several times we read of Angels ministering to Him. We likewise should trust that they truly are with us, as “ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation” (Heb. 1:14).

Another aspect to notice, is that these faithful men “yielded their bodies” in being cast into the fire. That is, they willingly submitted themselves. But what was the furnace designed for? One suggestion is that in order to set up the idol of gold, there would have been a need for a furnace, or furnaces to melt the metal for it to have been so used. If this is the case, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego were to pass through the furnace used to prepare the gold—in the faith that they would be somehow saved. Maybe we have an allusion to this in the oft-cited words of Peter:

“... that the trial of your faith, being *much more precious than of gold that perisheth*, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:7).

The faith of these men, was much more precious than the gold that had previously passed through the furnace, and though they were tried by fire, nevertheless in the day of reckoning, when these things will matter, they would be found unto praise, honour and glory for so submitting themselves, and trusting in their God.

There is a third point we ought to mention: the Babylonians worshipped fire. They had a deity of fire, and so by being caused to pass through the furnace, the king was effectively offering them up as a sacrifice to his deities. It is as if he was saying: “Either you bow down and serve my gods, or I will offer you as a sacrifice to them—either way my gods will be served”. But the companions in tribulation did not struggle or resist: they quietly trusted in their God.

An interesting reference to note in this connection is Romans 12:

“I beseech you therefore brethren, by the mercies of God, *that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice*, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And *be not conformed to this world*: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind ...” (Rom. 12:1-2).

The major theme which runs throughout the book of Daniel is that of non-conformity. From the beginning of their time in Babylon as described in chapter 2, Daniel and his friends refused to be like the Babylonians. And when the decree went out for all men to bow before Nebuchadnezzar’s golden image, when all around them were bowing in subservience to Sin, they refused to be conformed to the world of idolaters. They presented themselves as living sacrifices, willingly submitting themselves to whatever their God considered necessary. Nebuchadnezzar thought he was offering them up as human sacrifices to his deity. But the reality was that these men were offering themselves to their God, in the faith that He would deliver them from death, if not in the immediate circumstance, in the world to come.

This is the main point to consider in this study: if nothing else, think on this principle: the danger of conformity is that you will become like everyone else. The Holy Ones of Yahweh are not like other men: they have no fear of the idols of mammon, and will refuse to bow the knee before the altars of superstition. They look beyond the time of present difficulty towards that time when Christ shall reign victorious over his enemies. And at that time, at the mention of His Name, “every knee shall bow ... and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Phil. 2:10-11).

Christopher Maddocks