**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**DANIEL-003. HARMLESS FIRES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"13. Then Nebuchadnezzar in his rage and fury commanded to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego. Then they brought these men before the king. 14. Nebuchadnezzar spake and said unto them, Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, do not ye serve my gods, nor worship the golden image which I have set up? 15. Now if ye be ready that at what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and dulcimer, and all kinds of musick, ye fall down and worship the image which I have made; well: but 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? 16. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. 17. 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. 18. 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. 19. Then was Nebuchadnezzar full of fury, and the form of his visage was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego: therefore he spake, and commanded that they should heat the furnace one seven times more than it was wont to be heated. 20. And he commanded the most mighty men that were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. 21. Then these men were bound in their coats, their hosen, and their hats, and their other garments, and were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. 22. Therefore 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. 23. And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. 24. Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astonied, 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 unto the king, True, O king. 25. 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 3:13-25*

The way in which the Chaldeans describe the three recusants, betrays their motive in accusing them. Certain Jews whom thou hast set over the affairs of the province of Babylon could not but be envied and hated, since their promotion wounded both national pride and professional jealousy. The form of the accusation was skilfully calculated to rouse a despot's rage. They have not regarded thee is the head and front of their offending. The inflammable temper of the king blazed up according to expectation, as is the way with tyrants. His passion of rage is twice mentioned (vs. 13, 19), and in one of the instances, is noted as distorting his features. What a picture of ungoverned fury as of one who had never been thwarted! It is the true portrait of an Eastern despot.

Where was Daniel in this hour of danger? His absence is not accounted for, and conjecture is useless; but the fact that he has no share in the incident seems to raise a presumption in favour of the disputed historical character of the Book, which, if it had been fiction, could scarcely have left its hero out of so brilliant an instance of faithfulness to Jehovah.

Nebuchadnezzar's vehement address to the three culprits is very characteristic and instructive. Fixed determination to enforce his mandate, anger which breaks into threats that were by no means idle, and a certain wish to build a bridge for the escape of servants who had done their work well, are curiously mingled in it. His question, best rendered as in the Revised Version, Is it of purpose ... that ye do so and so? seems meant to suggest that they may repair their fault by pleading inadvertence, accident, or the like, and that He will accept the transparent excuse. The renewed offer of an opportunity of worship does not say what will happen should they obey; and the omission makes the clause more emphatic, as insisting on the act, and slurring over the self-evident result.

On the other hand, in the next clause the act is slightly touched (if ye worship not); and all the stress comes on the grim description of the consequence. This monarch, who has been accustomed to bend men's wills like reeds, tries to shake these three obstinate rebels by terror, and opens the door of the furnace, as it were, to let them hear it roar. He finishes with a flash of insolence which, if not blasphemy, at least betrays his belief that he was stronger than any god of his conquered subject peoples.

But the main point to notice in this speech is the unconscious revelation of his real motive in demanding the act of worship. The crime of the three was not that they worshipped wrongly, but that they disobeyed Nebuchadnezzar. He speaks of my gods, and of the image which I have set up. Probably it was an image of the god of the Babylonian pantheon whom he took for his special patron, and was erected in commemoration of some victorious campaign.

At all events, the worship required was an act of obedience to him, and to refuse it was rebellion. Idolatry is tolerant of any private opinions about gods, and intolerant of any refusal to obey authority in worship. So the early Christians were thrown to the lions, not because they worshipped Jesus, but because they would not sacrifice at the Emperor's command. It is not only heathen rulers who have confounded the spheres of civil and religious obedience. Nonconformity in England was long identified with disloyalty; and in many so-called Christian countries to-day a man may think what he likes, and worship as he pleases in his chamber, if only he will decently comply with authority and pretend to unite in religious ceremonies, which those who appoint and practise them observe with tongue in cheek.

But we may draw another lesson from this truculent apostle of his god. He is not the only instance of apparent religious zeal which is at bottom nothing but masterfulness. You shall worship my god, not because he is God, but because he is mine. That is the real meaning of a great deal which calls itself zeal for the Lord. The zealot's own will, opinions, fancies, are crammed down other people's throats, and the insult in not thinking or worshipping as he does, is worse in his eyes than the offence against God.

The kind of furnace in which recusants are roasted has changed since Nebuchadnezzar's time, and what is called persecution for religion is out of fashion now. But every advance in the application of Christian principle to social and civil life brings a real martyrdom on its advocates. Every audacious refusal to bow to the habits or opinions of the majority, is visited by consequences which only the martyr spirit will endure. Despots have no monopoly of imperious intolerance. A democracy is more cruel and more impatient of singularity, and especially of religious singularity, than any despot.

England and America have no need to fear the old forms of religious persecution. In both, a man may profess and proclaim any kind of religion or of no religion. But in both, the advance guard of the Christian Church, which seeks to apply Christ's teachings more rigidly to individual and social life, has to face obloquy, ostracism, misrepresentation, from the world and the fossil church, for not serving their gods, nor worshipping the golden image which they have set up. Martyrs will be needed and persecutors will exist till the world is Christian.

How did the three confessors meet this rumble of thunder about their ears? The quiet determination of their reply is very striking and beautiful. It is perfectly loyal, and perfectly unshaken. We have no need to answer thee (Revised Version). It is ill sitting at Rome and striving with the Pope. Nebuchadnezzar's palace was not precisely the place to dispute with Nebuchadnezzar; and as his logic was only Do as I bid you, or burn, the sole reply possible was, We will not do as you bid, and we will burn. The If which is immediately spoken is already in the minds of the speakers, when they say that they do not need to answer. They think that God will take up the taunt which ended the king's tirade. Beautifully they are silent, and refer the blusterer to God, whose voice they believe that He will hear in His deed. But Thou shalt answer, Lord, for me, is the true temper of humble faith, dumb before power as a sheep before her shearers, and yet confident that the meek will not be left unvindicated. Let us leave ourselves in God's hands; and when conscience accuses, or the world maligns or threatens, let us be still, and feel that we have One to speak for us, and so we may hold our peace.

The rendering of verse 17 is doubtful, but the general meaning is clear. The brave speakers have hope that God will rebuke the king's taunt, and will prove Himself to be able to deliver out of his hand. So they repeat his very words with singular boldness, and contradict him to his face. They have no absolute certainty of deliverance, but whether it comes or not will make no manner of difference to them. They have absolute certainty as to duty; and so they look the furious tyrant right in the eyes, and quietly say, We will not serve thy gods. Nothing like that had ever been heard in those halls.

Duty is sovereign. The obligation to resist all temptations to go against conscience is unaffected by consequences. There may be hope that God will not suffer us to be harmed, but whether He does or not should make no difference to our fixed resolve. That temper of lowly faith and inflexible faithfulness which these Hebrews showed in the supreme moment, when they took their lives in their hands, may be as nobly illustrated in the small difficulties of our peaceful lives. The same laws shape the curves of the tiny ripples in a basin and of the Atlantic rollers. No man who cannot say I will not in the face of frowns and dangers, be they what they may, and stick to it, will do his part, He who has conquered regard for personal consequences, and does not let them deflect his course a hairsbreadth, is lord of the world.

How small Nebuchadnezzar was by the side of his three victims! How empty his threats to men who cared nothing whether they burned or not, so long as they did not apostatise! What can the world do against a man who says, It is all one to me whether I live or die; I will not worship at your shrines? The fire of the furnace is but painted flames to such an one.

The savage punishment intended for the audacious rebels is abundantly confirmed as common in Babylon by the inscriptions, which may be seen quoted by many commentators. The narrative is exceedingly graphic. We see the furious king, with features inflamed with passion. We hear his hoarse, angry orders to heat the furnace seven times hotter, which he forgot would be a mercy, as shortening the victims agonies. We see the swift execution of the commands, and the unresisting martyrs bound as they stood, and dragged away by the soldiers to the near furnace, the king following. Its shape is a matter of doubt. Probably the three were thrown in from above, and so the soldiers were caught by the flames.

And these three men ... fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace Their helplessness and desperate condition are pathetically suggested by that picture, which might well be supposed to be the last of them that mortal eyes would see. Down into the glowing mass, like chips of wood into Vesuvius, they sank. The king sitting watching, to glut his fury by the sight of their end, had some way of looking into the core of the flames.

The story shifts its point of view with very picturesque abruptness after verse 23. The vaunting king shall tell what he saw, and thereby convict himself of insolent folly in challenging any god to deliver out of his hand. He alone seems to have seen the sight, which he tells to his courtiers. The bonds were gone, and the men walking free in the fire, as if it had been their element. Three went in bound, four walk there at large; and the fourth is like a son of the gods, by which expression Nebuchadnezzar can have meant nothing more than he had learned from his religion; namely, that the gods had offspring of superhuman dignity. He calls the same person an angel in Daniel iii. 28. He speaks there as the three would have spoken, and here as Babylonian mythology spoke.

But the great lesson to be gathered from this miracle of deliverance is simply that men who sacrifice themselves for God find in the sacrifice abundant blessing. They may, or may not, be delivered from the external danger. Peter was brought out of prison the night before his intended martyrdom; James, the brother of John, was slain with the sword, but God was equally near to both, and both were equally delivered from Herod and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews. The disposal of the outward event is in His hands, and is a comparatively small matter. But no furnace into which a man goes because he will be true to God, and will not yield up his conscience, is a tenth part so hot as it seems, and it will do no real harm. The fire burns bonds, but not Christ's servants, consuming many things that entangled, and setting them free. I will walk at liberty: for I seek Thy precepts--even if we have to walk in the furnace. No trials faced in obedience to God will be borne alone. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; ... when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned.

The form which Nebuchadnezzar saw amid the flame, as invested with more than human majesty, may have been but one of the ministering spirits sent forth to minister to the martyrs--the embodiment of the divine power which kept the flames from kindling upon them. But we have Jesus for our Companion in all trials, and His presence makes it possible for us to pass over hot ploughshares with unblistered feet; to bathe our hands in fire and not feel the pain; to accept the sorest consequences of fidelity to Him, and count them as not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed, and is made more glorious through these light afflictions. A present Christ will never fail His servants, and will make the furnace cool even when its fire is fiercest.