

Sunday School Lesson
“Stories of Faith” Series
Lesson 2: The Fiery Furnace

Opening Thoughts:

Subject of Vacation Bible Schools themes and Children’s Musicals, the story of Daniel, his friends, and the fiery furnace is an inspiring story of standing firm in one’s faith. Most importantly, it lays out the difficulties faced by the Judeans while in exile, and how they overcame them to remain faithful.

1. When have you heard the story of the fiery furnace?
2. When have you stayed faithful during times of difficulty?
3. What does it mean to be in exile?

Please open with a time of prayer.

Background:

Within the canon of the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Daniel is the primary apocalyptic work. Similar in scope to Revelation in the New Testament, Daniel is centered around the difficulty faced by the people in exile. However, this is not a single layered story. Daniel is generally thought to have been written during the Hellenistic period, sometime between 400 and 150 BCE. This was an era in which the nation had returned from exile but was struggling for identity considering the Greek, Persian, and Egyptian influence. The writer of Daniel takes the struggle of the exilic era and retells the story to encourage and lift the people in their current situation.

The story of the fiery furnace with Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego is one of the most dramatic stories in the Hebrew Bible. The Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar, orders that the people must pay homage to a new graven image of the Babylonian god. However, the three young men refuse. When challenged, they continue to refuse and are eventually tortured and set for execution. When thrown into the furnace, however, God protects them from harm. The king is overwhelmed by the moment and releases the men. The king then allows the people to worship their God.

The simple and straightforward nature of the story is easy to digest and points to the truth that is being conveyed: stay faithful and God will stay with you in difficult times. This was an important message for the Judeans during both the exile in Babylon and in the later Hellenistic period as they faced the very real possibility that their religion, their culture, and their people may not survive.

1. Have you ever had to stand firm in your faith? What did it look like?
2. How would living in a state of exile change the way you looked at your faith?
3. Considering the nature of this work is apocalyptic, how do you think the difficulties faced by the people in exile change the Jewish faith moving forward?

Main Passage: Daniel 3:19-27

¹⁹Then Nebuchadnezzar was so filled with rage against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that his face was distorted. He ordered the furnace heated up seven times more than was customary, ²⁰and ordered some of the strongest guards in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and to throw them into the furnace of blazing fire. ²¹So the men were bound, still wearing their tunics, their trousers, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the furnace of blazing fire. ²²Because the king's command was urgent and the furnace was so overheated, the raging flames killed the men who lifted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. ²³But the three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down, bound, into the furnace of blazing fire. ²⁴Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up quickly. He said to his counselors, "Was it not three men that we threw bound into the fire?" They answered the king, "True, O king." ²⁵He replied, "But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the fourth has the appearance of a god." ²⁶Nebuchadnezzar then approached the door of the furnace of blazing fire and said, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!" So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. ²⁷And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king's counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men; the hair of their heads was not singed, their tunics were not harmed, and not even the smell of fire came from them.

1. What is the main point of this passage? What stands out?
2. What are some of the false gods we sometimes bow to? How does it change our faith?
3. What does this story tell us about the power of God?

Reflection:

The push and pull between idols and God is a strong temptation. Mentioned in the 10 Commandments, a common theme of the prophets, one of the central messages of Jesus' ministry, and even seen in Revelation as part of God's judgment, we as humans are forever tempted. The three young men in our story above followed God fully. They trusted in God's leading, and were respected, even in Babylon. However, they too faced a crisis of faith. The king ordered all the people to pay homage to a new idol. The temptation must have been strong, perhaps even with many making excuses to do so. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did not budge. Even when faced with death, they stayed firm. Upon their release from the furnace, the King, seeing their faith, has a radical change of heart as well. The power of faith is not just an internal matter but is about what God can do. It is tempting to say, "I have faith", but not understand the implications. Saying, "I have faith in God" is to say, "I trust where you lead". In that leading, God will show us ways in which our faith can transform the world.

1. What do we learn about God from this story?
2. What do we learn about ourselves?
3. When have you stepped into the furnace? What happened?