

## **Even If**

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The first time I heard the story of Daniel, I wasn't really paying attention . . . until our Sunday school teacher bribed us with candy if we would only sit still long enough for her to get through the lesson. She used a black flannelgraph board and cutout pictures to tell us about Daniel and his three friends in Babylon. She told us how the three young men in Babylon boldly stood firm in their faith against a powerful king. They were miraculously delivered from a fiery furnace because they trusted God. She then asked, "Who will stand up for Jesus like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego?"

One by one, we stood and proclaimed our allegiance to God. "I will trust God no matter what kind of fire comes!" we all shouted. Then we received our Jolly Rancher reward. Simple enough. The lasting image of this story became for me three flame-retardant young men miraculously standing alongside Jesus—a fireproof Savior for any situation. The story stuck.

Over the years, through encountering my own fiery furnaces, that Sunday school story has grown bigger and deeper for me. As I look more closely, imagining the emotions and tensions embedded in the drama of Daniel 3, the response of the three young men is as surprising as the miraculous deliverance from the fire. Let me explain.

Nebuchadnezzar was the king of Babylon, the most powerful man on the planet. He had conquered every rival power, including the small province of Judah. Not even the previous super-power, Assyria, could conquer Jerusalem. But the Babylonians marched in, laid siege, took over the city, and forcibly removed the people of God from their land.

Nebuchadnezzar had the entire world at his fingertips, but he desired more acclaim. So he came up with a great idea: "Since I'm the greatest, why not have everyone acknowledge that I'm the greatest?" He built a huge statue, summoned all the officials of the empire, and, on the day of the statue's dedication, played his Nebuchadnezzar-ian theme song so everyone could bow down to it. I imagine that it was quite a demonstration of absolute rule, a choreographed ritual of worship and nationalistic loyalty.

Everything was going according to plan. Nebuchadnezzar was excited to see the reflection of his own worth in his prostrate subjects. Except . . . three high-ranking officials in his own province— Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—refused to bow!

In a furious rage, the king summoned them to the site of the fiery furnace to explain themselves. How dare his own officials ignore his decree? Maybe there was some sort of

misunderstanding. These Babylonian officials were, after all, not from around there. Perhaps something got lost in translation.

The king sought confirmation: “Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up?” (Daniel 3:14).

By not bowing down, these three officials refused to engage in Babylonian-sanctioned worship. It was not just a rejection of Babylonian culture or a display of personal preferences. It was an act of treason against the king.

Nebuchadnezzar threatened, “*If you are ready*, when the music plays, you will bow down and worship the image I have made. *And if not*, you will immediately be cast into the midst of a fiery furnace” (see verse 15).

Nebuchadnezzar finished his threat with a rhetorical question just to make sure these young officials understood the situation they were in: “And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?” (verse 15). In other words, “If you refuse me, who can save you?” The most powerful man on the planet stated his case, asserted his authority, and surely expected contrition and fealty.

The king’s straightforward threat is what makes the response of the young men so stunning. With equal parts defiance and matter-of-fact explanation, they declared that they didn’t even really need to answer the king in this matter. The answer to his question was so obvious, they didn’t even think it warranted an answer.

“*If this happens*, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the fiery furnace, and he can save us from your hand. *And if not*, you need to know we won’t serve your gods or worship this image” (see verses 17–18).

Nebuchadnezzar’s ultimatum was met with an equally resolute declaration: “*Even if God does not deliver us*, we won’t worship any other or bow down to you.” They weren’t oblivious to the threat before them. This wasn’t naive optimism or blind faith. With the heat of a fire drying out their eyes, they refused the king.

The two parts of their response to the king make up one of the most powerful declarations in the Bible. They declared . . .

1. their confidence in a good God who was able to deliver them
2. their resolve to worship him *even if* he didn’t

In other words, the God whom they served, the God of the Bible, is more powerful than the king they stood before. Their God could override the king’s decree and neutralize his threats.

“My God is bigger than your god.” You probably expected as much from a Bible story. Faith against the odds.

But this is where it takes an unexpected twist. They went on to declare not only that God could save them but also that *even if* their all-powerful God chose not to demonstrate his power to save (seemingly giving Nebuchadnezzar the win), they would not give their loyalty to another. Their allegiance belonged to God regardless of how he chose to act or not act on their behalf. And consequently, no matter how much the king huffed and puffed, they would not give their loyalty to him.

*Even if*. These are the two words that can transform your expectations and strengthen your faith. The *even if* declaration can help you stand before a fire and trust God even when the outcome is not yet decided. It refuses to succumb to the current pressure or disappointment, and in that sense, it is a surprising declaration in trouble. It expresses confidence and resolve when all the conditions seem to warrant doubt and compromise.

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