

Sabbath School Lesson #4 – From Furnace to Palace – 18-24 Jan 2020

Christ would have us trust in Him with unswerving, uncompromising loyalty as did the three young Hebrews in the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. We take lessons from the reply of the three young Hebrews, when commanded by the king who had advanced them to posts of honour, to fall down and worship the golden image. The king set up an image to be worshipped and threatened to burn anyone in the furnace who dared refuse to worship the image. The three young Hebrews were not bowing to the image. They believed that God would deliver them from the fiery furnace: "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" (Daniel 3:17); "but," said they, "*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" (Daniel 3:18). Their faith, devotion, and loyalty were dominant in either life or death. This is the loyalty of the true soldier of Christ in all his conflicts with the enemy, in all calls of duty. History abounds in numerous examples of such uncompromising loyalty, beside which all mere human bravery pales into insignificance. This is the faith and loyalty demanded of the soldiers of Christ now.

The story in Daniel 3 concerns liberty of conscience. It occurred nearly twenty-seven hundred and twenty-seven years ago, in the province of Babylon. The circumstances were the following: On account of the disobedience of the great mass of the children of Israel, the Lord had suffered the whole nation to be conquered by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and many of the people had been taken from Jerusalem to Babylon. This Nebuchadnezzar was a heathen king, and so some time after the conquest of Babylon, he "made an image of gold" and set it up for all to worship or be "cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace."

The people knew that the king was in earnest, and so whatever their private scruples might have been against worshipping the image, they concealed them, and in appearance, at least, did homage to the golden image. Who that believes that the civil government has a right to make laws concerning matters of religion, dare say that they did wrong? Would they not be met with the statement that it is for the common good that there should be uniformity in religion? If so, who but the chief ruler of the State can prescribe the forms of religion?

Doubtless there were some who would suggest that they ought not to bow down to the image, but they could speedily be silenced, by the inquiry, 'Who are you, that you should set yourself up to know more than all the wise men of this nation, and the king himself?' Some might even recall a commandment to the effect that none shall bow down to any graven or molten images, but they would be met with the statement, 'if it were wrong, do you suppose that all the nation would be doing it? Has the world not worshipped images for centuries? Do not all religious teachers say that it is right? Do you not suppose that they know more about these things than we common people do?' Who could meet such an argument as that?

And then others would say to the doubtful ones: 'You do not have to worship the image, in your heart; you need not feel any reverence for it, but you can bow down before it in obedience to the king's command. If you refuse, you will be cast into the fiery furnace, and your family will be deprived of your support. What is the use of virtually committing suicide?'

But not of all, for there were three men in the vast assembly who did not bow down to the image. At that time certain Chaldeans came before the king, and, after repeating the decree, said, "There are certain Jews whom thou hast set over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; these men, O king, have not regarded thee; they serve not thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up." What made the offence more odious was the fact that they were foreigners. Such disobedience of a direct law could not be tolerated. So "Nebuchadnezzar in his rage and fury commanded to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego." Nebuchadnezzar said unto them, "Is it true [is it of purpose] O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, do not ye serve my gods, nor worship the golden image which I have set up?" And then in the kindness of his heart, he offered them another chance to redeem themselves from fire. But if on the second sounding of the music they did not bow down, then there should be no alternative, but they must be cast into the furnace.

Then what did those men do? Did they apologise, and promise obedience in the future? Did they plead that they had been very quiet in their disobedience to the law, so that no one

could take offence at their disregard of the image? Not they. Listen to their brave words: "O Nebuchadnezzar, 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." The consequence was that they were thrown into the furnace, which for their especial benefit was heated seven times hotter than usual. But before we notice the result, let us see what power these men were disregarding. If ever there was a king who ruled by Divine right, that king was Nebuchadnezzar. Hear what the Lord Himself had said: "Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; Thus shall ye say unto your masters: I have made the earth, the man and the beast that are upon the ground, by My great power, and by My stretched out arm, and have given it unto whom it seemed meet unto Me. And now have I given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, My servant; and the beasts of the field have I given him also to serve him. And all nations shall serve him, and his son, and his son's son" (Jeremiah 27:4-7). These three Jews knew this, for they were associated with Daniel on a previous occasion, when he received the interpretation to a dream which the king had, in which he said, "Thou, O king, art a king of kings; for the God of heaven hath given thee a kingdom, power, and strength, and glory. And wheresoever the children of men dwell, the beasts of the field and the fowls of the heaven hath He given into thine hand, and hath made thee ruler over them all."

God Himself, therefore, had given Nebuchadnezzar the right to rule. Moreover, He had commanded the Jews themselves to serve Nebuchadnezzar. The prophet Jeremiah, who remained in Jerusalem, in a letter which he wrote to his captive fellow-countrymen, at the command of the Lord, had said to them, "Seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the Lord for it; for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace" (Jeremiah 29:7). Surely then God must have been very angry with these three Jews for thus refusing to obey the king's dream. Not by any means. Although the fire was so hot that it slew the men who threw the three Jews into the furnace, the Hebrews themselves were not affected by it in the least. The fire simply destroyed the bands which held them, and they walked at liberty in the midst of the furnace, and the Lord Himself came down and walked with them, to show His approval of their act (see whole story in Daniel 3).

The point of this simple story is that, while "the powers that be are ordained of God," "there is no power but of God" (Romans 13:1). "Power belongeth unto God" (Psalm 62:11). God has never ordained any power to be above Him. This He could not do, for "He cannot deny Himself" (2 Timothy 2:13). He has never constituted any authority to contravene His authority. We learn that while we are to seek the peace of whatever country we may dwell in, and are to pray for civil leaders and for all that are in authority, the peace of any country is not found in disobedience to God, no matter what may be the laws of that country. While we are to be subject to the powers that be, it is to be for the Lord's sake. No man on earth is warranted in resisting authority. On the contrary we are charged not to resist evil, that is, we are not to oppose force with force. But as we have learned from this story, submission and subjection to the powers that be does not consist in obeying laws that are contrary to God's laws. In the case before us, the king gave all their choice: they might worship his image, or they might go into the burning fiery furnace. The most of the people showed their subjection by worshipping the image; but the three Hebrews showed their subjection by refusing to worship the image, and going into the furnace. They did not resist the power. They did not try to raise an insurrection. They served God by disobeying the king, and showed their regard for the king's authority by calmly accepting the alternative which he granted them.

The commandments of the Lord are very plain. A child may understand them. "If any man willeth to do His will, he shall know of the doctrine." All that is needed is a willing mind. It is self-interest that clouds the mind to the precepts of the Lord. But he who has no intention or desire but to do the will of the Lord, will not be confused as to his duty by conflicting human laws, but will say as did the apostles at a later time: "We ought to obey God rather than man." Only the man who is conscientiously resolute in serving God, can be rightly subject to the powers of earth. "The light that shines upon our path, the truth that commends itself to our conscience, will condemn and destroy the soul, or sanctify and reform it" [1T 307.1].