

# Faith To Face The Fire

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*"Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" —Mark 9:24*

It is not a lack of faith when a person does not believe or expect that God will do something. On the surface, this sounds startling and—to be frank—faithless. It seems to contradict everything we have ever learned about faith. However, this misunderstanding of faith may be making some of us feel less faithful than we may really be.

The example of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego in Daniel 3 will help us see it more clearly. These faithful men believed and knew that God *could* do something even as miraculous as saving them from the fiery furnace. Nothing is impossible with God (Mark 10:27). This is why they say, "Our God whom we serve *is able* to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace" (Daniel 3:17). They knew God's power and abilities. However, they were not so bold as to think or believe He would deliver them "at their request," or according to their personal desires and timing.

While they do say, "He *will* deliver us from your hand, O king" (verse 17), this statement refers primarily to their ultimate spiritual deliverance, not their physical deliverance from their present distress. How do we know this?

It becomes clear when we read their next words: "*But if not*, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up" (verse 18). They did not know that God would save their physical lives from the fires of the furnace. What they believed is that their spiritual, eternal deliverance was assured, thus they could make this courageous and resolute declaration.

Their faith and belief had developed over time because of their experiences with interventions God had performed in their lives. Whether they were healed or blessed or saved from harm, God had demonstrated to them His willingness, power and mercy to intervene in their lives, and had built strong faith in them. Whatever their situation, they absolutely trusted God and His judgment according to His wisdom. Such life experiences—beyond merely reading of God's past interventions in His Word—are a vivid and compelling means of developing faith.

Thus, when they stood before Nebuchadnezzar, the most powerful man in the world at the time, they boldly announced, "Our God can and will deliver us." They knew that, even if Nebuchadnezzar burned them to ashes, God would ultimately deliver them spiritually. Like other Old Testament saints, they knew of and believed in the God of salvation (Genesis 49:Job 13:16; Psalm 18:2, 46; Isaiah 12:2; Jeremiah 3:23; Micah 7:7; etc.).

Nevertheless, they did not know whether God would actually allow Nebuchadnezzar to throw them into the fiery furnace. They did not know if He would allow them to die the horrible death of burning alive. They did not know at all what God would choose to do. They just absolutely believed that they were in God's capable, loving and merciful hands.

**No Lack of Faith**

This not knowing what God will choose to do is not in any way demonstrating a lack of faith. Indeed, Nebuchadnezzar's "mighty men of valor" threw them bound into the midst of the fire, and God chose to save them out of it by an awesome miracle (Daniel 3:19-26). The officials in Nebuchadnezzar's court "saw these men on whose bodies the fire had no power; the hair of their head was not singed nor were their garments affected, and the smell of fire was not on them" (verse 27).

This kind of physical deliverance is highly unusual. Like these three men, we cannot trust that God will save us from death according to our will or desire. In some cases, God does not intervene and allows His people to die. This should not surprise us, for Hebrews 9:27 states clearly, "It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment." If God decides that it is time for us to die—whatever the means—it is His right as Creator to allow it.

Sometimes suffering and pain and even death has a greater purpose, like the example of the man in John 9:1 who had been born blind. When the disciples ask Jesus who had sinned, the blind man or his parents, Jesus says, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him" (verses 2-3). This man had been born blind, and he and his parents had to suffer for all of those years until Christ came, so that Jesus could heal him to give glory to God. Lazarus had to endure even death to make a witness for God to the people (John 11, particularly verses 4, 11-15, 42).

### **Usual Deliverance**

God does not usually deliver us miraculously out of the situations of life or from the natural consequences of our own choices. He allows us to reap what we sow (Galatians 6:7). He does this for good reasons.

Recall the great numbers of people who have had to suffer over the centuries for being Christians. Some were thrown to the lions, beheaded, burned or crucified, yet God did not deliver them. Did they lack faith? Not necessarily. God's "failure" to deliver them occurred not because they lacked faith. We certainly cannot conclude that God could not deliver them. He chose not to deliver them out of their trial at that time for a reason perhaps only He knew. Maybe they had proven their faithfulness to God by holding fast and not giving in, and He judged that they had grown sufficiently in His image.

When Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego were brought before the king, they acknowledged that they did not know what God would do for them. They just trusted that, since they had done all they could do to affect the situation, whatever happened did so according to God's will and plan for them. They were also sure that, no matter where matters appeared to be heading, they would not compromise their beliefs and faith in God's wisdom, judgment and determination on how their situation would finally turn out. They were living by faith (II Corinthians 5:7; Galatians 2:20), but their faith was not necessarily the means of their deliverance. Ultimately, God decided that in this situation at that particular time that He would save them to His glory.

### **Being Disappointed**

When we are going through a severe trial, we redouble our efforts to get close to God and seek His will on what we should do. It seems that quite often circumstances turn out far differently than we desire, and we react with disappointment, discouragement or dejection. Being disappointed when things do not go our way has little or nothing to do with a lack of faith, although it may show spiritual immaturity.

Our thoughts are not God's thoughts, and our way is not God's way (Isaiah 55:8). So the fact that God answers prayers only according to His own purpose, in His own time and manner, tells us that things will rarely happen the way we ask for them to happen. His way of looking at what needs to occur is light-years different from what we might perceive needs to happen.

What, then, is faithful, fervent prayer supposed to avail (James 5:16)? The apostle James says it "avails [profits, benefits] much," but what does it produce? In our human blindness, we often cannot see the fruit of fervent prayer. We want to see our prayers produce what we desire to happen, but this is carnal, shortsighted thinking. What our fervent prayers do is something that God knows will prepare us spiritually for His Kingdom, or otherwise, He would not expect them of us.

In many cases, there is usually no apparent movement or result from our prayers. Sometimes, God suddenly intervenes, helps or alters some aspect of a situation, but for the most part, it seems, God stands back and lets us reap exactly what we have sown. Does He not say in Numbers 32:23, "Be sure your sin will find you out"? Jesus modifies this only slightly in the New Testament: "For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, nor hidden that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have spoken in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have spoken in the ear in inner rooms will be proclaimed on the housetops" (Luke 12:2-3).

At first, that God would let us face the consequences of our mistakes may sound cruel and unmerciful, but from an eternal point of view, it has a significant upside. The experiences of this physical life are preparation for our position in the God Family in the next (John 14:1-3). If we see what wrong behavior produces—suffering, pain, destruction, death—we become determined never to do it again, and this determination not to do evil becomes part of our character. We have added a layer or two of godliness to the image of His Son that God is creating in us.

In addition, our prayers in such situations, combined with the results we see from God's answers, should teach us something about God Himself. If we are truly seeking to be more like Him, we will come to understand more fully how He thinks and decides. Again, as we take on the mind of Christ, we further prepare for "real life" in God's Kingdom. Prayer, then, becomes a tool for bringing our minds in line with God's mind.

Finally, faithful, fervent prayer increases the compassion and awareness of the one praying. It shows our brotherhood with those who are ill or oppressed or in need, as we go to the One who can truly do something positive about the problem. Striving together in prayer with others for the same purpose brings about a unity with them (Romans 15:30; II Corinthians 1:11)—something we could all use these days.

God knows what He needs to do and what He will do before any of our prayers go up to Him. Usually, we are the ones who must change our minds so that we come in line with His way of thinking about a situation. He does not need someone whom He acknowledges is inferior to tell Him what needs to be done. He certainly hears our prayers, but because He is sovereign and faithful, He answers them as we want only when it accords with His purpose for us. Otherwise, His answer is "No" or "Not now."

### **Faith's Reality**

Paul defines faith as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). We could put it another way: Faith is believing that God is there, in control, and will do for us

whatever is best for us. It is believing that no matter what happens, even if it is or seems to be "evil," that God allowed it or even initiated it for our ultimate learning and growth. If we truly believe these things, we can live accordingly.

An interesting exchange occurs in Mark 9:23-24: "Jesus said to [a man with a demon-possessed son], 'If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes.'" Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, 'Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!'" This man had earlier brought his son to Christ's disciples, who could not heal him. He did not know if this would be another time when his prayer would seem to fall on deaf ears, as had been the case throughout the child's life. His sense of unbelief came because of witnessing God's seemingly intermittent intervention and involvement in his and his son's lives. In a way, it resulted from God's apparently inconsistent way of dealing with everything in life. We may have perceived God's approach like this some time in our past.

This man believed, much as Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego believed, knowing that God *could* intervene to heal his child, but he did not know whether God *would* do so. Far from demonstrating a lack of faith, it is approaching life realistically. Faith is not foreknowledge of God's actions, but trust that whatever action God takes is best. In both of these situations, God intervened only after they had shown this confidence in Him. And by casting out the demon, Jesus certainly helped to bolster the father's faith!

We must recognize that God's intervention occurs for reasons far more important than because He is a "nice God" who answers prayers. Strictly speaking, God establishes no precedent by intervening to save others. We have no guarantee that He would do the same for us in a similar situation because many other factors could be at work to cause Him not to intervene for us. Frankly, a human being would have to be remarkably godly to be absolutely sure what God would do in any situation.

Not knowing what God will do is a matter of trust and a willing and peaceful submission to His will. We show that we defer to God's wisdom of the best thing that needs to happen for us to gain the maximum spiritual benefit.

We can begin to apply this understanding immediately. God has either caused or allowed many of our plans, desires, and actions to derail and fail. Rather than being discouraged about them, we can be confident and at peace that God in His wisdom had a perfect reason for their failure. If we consider them deeply enough, we will probably figure out why and have reason to rejoice in God's handling of our affairs.

### **When We Pray**

When we pray to God, we must trust and yield to God's own faithfulness toward us. We have to know without doubt that He *can* deliver us—and ultimately will deliver us spiritually. We must also learn not to be terribly disappointed when He does not intervene in the way we think He should. We have to trust that, if He does deliver us, there is a purpose for it, and if He does not deliver us, there is also a purpose for it. Whether or not God delivers us as we think He should does not necessarily indicate that we lack faith.

God is aware of all of the suffering that goes on in the church, in our families and around the world. He knows every hair on our heads and every sparrow that falls (Matthew 10:29-31). He, however, is working out a purpose, and sometimes our suffering plays a role in fulfilling it. As loyal children, we have to be willing to play it to please and glorify Him.

Often we do not know what our situation is all about, and God is certainly not quick to tell us. For us, it is a matter of believing, just like Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego, that no matter what, we will not compromise our beliefs. Although we may not like what is happening in the moment, we must also be willing to yield to whatever God allows. Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego were not keen on being thrown into the fire—and did not know if they would survive it—but they trusted and yielded in absolute faith to God.