

“Surviving the Fiery Furnace – Confidence Over Arrogance

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Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. 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." Daniel 3:16-18

One of the states of mind that the evil spirits of hell love to inspire in us is one in which we feel we have no option but to do something undesirable. Like Nebuchadnezzar threatening Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego they can assert their view like they had all the power. They want us to believe that something like ultimate destruction is the inevitable result of failing to follow their dictates. But the truth is that we do have other choices we can make. Choices that in the long-run provide for a much happier and more useful life.

The teachings for the New Church present the idea that Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon has a similar meaning to the people who built the Tower of Babel. As stated in *Apocalypse Explained*:

"Babylon" (or Babel) means the church consisting of those who by means of the holy things of the church strive to gain dominion over the whole world, and this by dominion over people's souls, claiming to themselves authority to save whomsoever they will; and these finally seek dominion over heaven and hell and make it their own. And to this end they draw and transfer to themselves all the Lord's authority, as if it had been given them by Him. (*Apocalypse Explained* 1029)

It is an incredible perversion of religion to take on the Lord's authority to oneself. We might wonder how someone could possibly get to this corrupt state. But this passage goes on to make an observation that can us a reason to pause in our assessment of this state of corruption. It states:

The church consisting of [those who by means of the holy things of the church strive to gain dominion] is very different in the beginning from what it becomes in process of time. In the beginning they are as it were in zeal for the Lord, for the Word, for love and faith, and especially for people's salvation. But in that zeal the fire of domineering lies hidden; and in process of time as dominion increases this breaks forth. . . . (*Apocalypse Explained* 1029)

Clearly a state of mind that starts with what seems like a laudable goal, apparently wanting good things for others, if it seeks control as its means will over time lead to something incredibly corrupt. Whether you are parent, spouse, or anyone trying to influence others trying to control others can be a serious spiritual fault. Anytime a person starts to think that it is vital that someone else make the right choice, absolutely avoid some danger, or even that it is crucial that others should see things a certain way, that person is mentally setting up an idol, golden in their mind, that others should bow down to.

When Nebuchadnezzar had all the many court officials gathered to worship his golden idol, they were told they would hear “the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music.” This was the signal that they should worship the golden idol. This symphony of many instruments reflects the manipulation of many motivations that people can use when they are trying to dominate others. They can appeal to pride, to personal benefit, to concern for reputation. They can appeal to insecurities or a sense of superiority. They can appeal to self-interest or to a natural generosity. They can emphasize risks, loss, disapproval, isolation. Anything is fair game if the goal seems important enough to a person. The ultimate threat for not worshipping the idol was complete destruction. For us this is often less focused on loss of our natural lives, but instead of something we have come to care about. In a religious context it can be the threat of eternal damnation in hell for failing to do what another human being has proscribed. Can you see how someone could get to this state of mind because they were so committed to getting someone else to think, speak and act in a certain way? Many of us are familiar with the faulty concept that “the end justifies the means.” In this context if you’re firmly and inflexibly committed to a goal, that goal can become a golden idol that you absolutely expect others to worship. Particularly if you think some idea or practice is important for the spiritual welfare of the church and the people attending it, then you can be prey to that idea that any means to accomplish this goal is appropriate and should be pursued.

While some people can be bullied or coerced into believing, saying and doing certain things the Lord offers us a radical freedom to reject this attempted coercion. Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego’s response to Nebuchadnezzar is an incredibly powerful example of how this freedom of choice can take place. When Nebuchadnezzar learned that these three men had not obeyed his command, he raged at them repeating his demand and the consequence of disobeying. It is possible to picture in this situation that Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego could have been insulting, but they weren’t. Their words reflect a calm even respectful response. They said they believed in a God who could save them, but even if God didn’t save them, they were not going to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar’s idol. He responded by having them thrown into an impossibly hot furnace. But he rapidly recognized that he had no power to harm them – in the middle of that furnace they were not alone. The Lord was with them and they could emerge without the least harm to themselves or their clothing.

One of the powerful qualities that the Lord has instilled in us as human beings is a desire for inner spiritual freedom. We have a deeply ingrained desire to resist being compelled by an outside force. So the teachings of the New Church have the following powerful statement about human nature:

The Lord in no way compels anybody. No one who is compelled to think that which is true and to do that which is good is reformed, but instead thinks all the more what is false and wills all the more what is evil. This is so with all compulsion, as may also become clear from all the experience and lessons of life. . . . (*Arcana Caelestia* 1947:1)

With skill and determination sometimes people can be led or manipulated into thinking, saying and doing certain things. A person making this effort may think that it is for the natural or spiritual welfare of the person who is being manipulated. In reality it is not, as stated in the following teaching of the New Church.

[A person is not to put] pressure on another or playing on his emotions to get him to corroborate truths known to oneself, but should listen to and accept his responses as they are in his own mind. For those who put pressure on another or play on his emotions to get him to corroborate truths known to themselves make this other person think or speak not from himself but from them. And when anyone thinks and speaks from another the truths present with him are thrown into disorder; nor is he improved by this, unless he is the kind of person who is still ignorant of those truths. (*Arcana Caelestia* 9213:6)

While the Lord calls us to be deeply respectful of the spiritual freedom of others, it does not mean we have to passively allow them to do whatever they want. We can provide consequences for saying or doing things that have been deemed destructive or harmful (*Divine Providence* 136: 2). If someone is determined to transgress the established order of speech and act, they are free to do it and in so choosing they are also choosing the consequence.

The freedom the Lord offers us includes the freedom to choose to be better than part of our mind inclines to. This is sometimes called “self-compulsion.” As the second lesson today stated:

The internal level of thought . . . can be compelled by love and by a fear of losing it. Fear of God in its true sense is just that. To be compelled by love and by a fear of losing it is to compel oneself. To compel oneself is not contrary to one's freedom and rationality. (*Divine Providence* 136: 9)

The Lord offers us the incredible power to stand up for what is true and good. This is a spiritual gift given to those who have grown to deeply love what is good and true. Those who receive this gift of rational goodness are incredible forces in this world as stated in the following passage:

Rational goodness never fights, no matter how much it is assailed, because it is gentle and mild, long-suffering and yielding, for its nature is that of love and mercy. But although it does not fight, it nevertheless conquers all. It does not ever think of combat, nor does it glory in victory. It is of this nature because it is Divine and is of itself immune from harm.

May each of us seek this strength from the Lord's presence in our own lives. May we also dedicate ourselves to turn away from the state of mind represented by Nebuchadnezzar that seeks to control others and strives to make them do what we want. AMEN.

Lessons: Daniel 3:13-27, *Divine Providence* 136

Daniel 3:13-27

¹³ Then Nebuchadnezzar, in rage and fury, gave the command to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. So they brought these men before the king. ¹⁴ Nebuchadnezzar spoke, saying to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the gold image which I have set up? ¹⁵ Now if you are ready at the time you hear the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, and you fall down and worship the image which I have made, good! But if you do not worship, you shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?"

¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. ¹⁷ If that *is the case*, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver *us* from your hand, O king. ¹⁸ 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."

¹⁹ Then Nebuchadnezzar was full of fury, and the expression on his face changed toward Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. He spoke and commanded that they heat the furnace seven times more than it was usually heated. ²⁰ And he commanded certain mighty men of valor who *were* in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, *and cast them* into the burning fiery furnace. ²¹ Then these men were bound in their coats, their trousers, their turbans, and their *other* garments, and were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. ²² Therefore, because the king's command was urgent, and the furnace exceedingly hot, the flame of the fire killed those men who 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 King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished; and he rose in haste *and* spoke, saying to his counselors, "Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?" They answered and said to the king, "True, O king." ²⁵ "Look!" he answered, "I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God."

²⁶ Then Nebuchadnezzar went near the mouth of the burning fiery furnace *and* spoke, saying, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come *here*." Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego came from the midst of the fire. ²⁷ And the satraps, administrators, governors, and the king's counselors gathered together, and they 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.

Divine Providence 136:1, 2, 9

No one is reformed by threats and punishments, because they compel. People know that the external self cannot compel the internal self, but that the internal can compel the external. They know, too, that the internal self so refuses to be compelled by the external that it turns away. And they also know that external delights entice the internal self to a state of consent and of love. They may know as well that it is possible for one to have a coerced internal self and a free internal self. . . .The external self cannot compel the internal self, but that the internal can compel the external: Who can be forced to believe or to love? No one can be forced to believe this or that any more than he can be forced to think that something is so when he does not think it is; and no one can be forced to love this or that any more than he can be forced to will something that he does not will. Belief, too, is a matter of the thought, and love a matter of the will. Still, the internal self can be compelled by the external not to speak ill against the laws of the country, the moralities of life, or the sanctities of the church. The internal self can be compelled to this by threats and punishments, and also is so compelled and must be so compelled. But this internal is not the internal self that is peculiarly human, but the internal which the human being has in common with animals, which can be similarly compelled. The human internal resides above this animal internal. By the internal self we mean here the human internal, which cannot be compelled. . . .The internal level of thought . . . can be compelled by love and by a fear of losing it. Fear of God in its true sense is just that. To be compelled by love and by a fear of losing it is to compel oneself. To compel oneself is not contrary to one's freedom and rationality.