

January 14
Lesson 7 (NIV)

A BOLD

FAITH

DEVOTIONAL READING: Romans 12:9-21

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Daniel 3

DANIEL 3:19-23, 26-28

¹⁹ Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual ²⁰ and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. ²¹ So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. ²² The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, ²³ and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.

²⁶ Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!"

So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, ²⁷ and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.

²⁸ Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God."



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KEY VERSE

Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God."—**Daniel 3:28**

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the deliverance of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from death, and relate Nebuchadnezzar's reaction to that deliverance.
2. Identify circumstances or issues in today's world that require a response of bold faith from Christians.
3. Write a message of encouragement to a Christian who is imprisoned because of his or her faith.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. No Compromise
- B. Lesson Background

I. Fury of the King (DANIEL 3:19-23)

- A. Attitude Change (v. 19a)
- B. Draconian Response (vv. 19b-21)
- C. Collateral Damage (vv. 22, 23)
Reacting to "Error"

II. Work of All-Powerful God (DANIEL 3:26-28)

- A. Different Attitude (v. 26)
- B. Thorough Inspection (v. 27)
- C. Proper Credit (v. 28)
Surprised by . . .

Conclusion

- A. The Flames of Fellowship
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. No Compromise

No Compromise is the title of an album by Keith Green (1953-1982), a Christian musician. But it is also a description of his life. Green's confrontational lyrics and spoken messages put him at odds with believers and unbelievers alike at times.

Probably the greatest controversy he stirred was decrying commercialism in producing Christian resources, including his own music! In 1979, Green began refusing to charge money for concerts or albums. He and his wife mortgaged their home to finance his music personally. By May 1982, Green had shipped out more than 200,000 copies, 61,000 for free. He refused to compromise his principles, accepting the consequences.

We all struggle with doing the right thing—when to speak up and when to shut up. Sometimes we don't even know what the "right" thing is! It can be the same when it comes to our faith. Because we love God, there will be times when we may face derision, isolation, or worse for standing up for him. Three captives in a foreign land give us a great example of refusing to compromise in the face of deadly consequences.

B. Lesson Background

Last week's study focused primarily on the young man Daniel, although his three friends in captivity were involved in everything that occurred (Daniel 1:11-20). All four of them had been taken into exile in Babylon in about 605 BC.

Daniel is described as having the ability to "understand visions and dreams of all kinds" (Daniel 1:17). He was able to relate to King Nebuchadnezzar the content of his dream when no one else could, then provide the interpretation. Daniel left no doubt as to the accuracy of his words when he concluded by telling the king, "This is the meaning of the vision" (2:45).

In response the grateful king acknowledged Daniel's God as "the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries" (Daniel 2:47). He also made Daniel "ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men" (2:48). Daniel then requested that his fellow countrymen Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be placed as "administrators over the province of Babylon" (2:49). But their new positions of authority did not make them exempt from tests of their faith.

Today's lesson text finds Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego on "the plain of Dura" (Daniel 3:1). Its location is not known; some suggest it was a few miles south of the city of Babylon. There King Nebuchadnezzar built an image of gold. Some scholars propose that the image depicted the king himself (based on 2:38). But another possibility is that the image represented the king's patron god, Nabu (or Nebo in Isaiah 46:1), which the first part of Nebuchadnezzar's name refers to.

Anyone who refused to bow to the image faced death (Daniel 3:6). Obedience to such a command clearly violated the first two of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:3-6), so the young Hebrew men refused to worship the image. Their disobedience was reported to King Nebuchadnezzar, who had the three brought before him.

The king offered them a chance to change their minds (Daniel 3:15), but the three restated their determination not to bow to the king's image. They affirmed that their God was able to deliver them from the furnace, but whether he would choose to do so or not made no difference in their devotion to him. They would not yield to the king's demand (3:16-18).

We note that this test was quite different from the one recorded in last week's text from Daniel 1. There Daniel was in a position to suggest an alternative concerning the diet that he and his friends were to eat. But in Daniel 3 no alternatives were available. The choice was clear: bow and live, or refuse and die.

I. Fury of the King

(DANIEL 3:19-23)

We may wonder why Daniel himself plays no part in the account of the fiery furnace of Daniel 3. No fewer than six proposals have been offered to explain Daniel's absence from this account: (1) he was away on government business, (2) he was busy in a cabinet meeting, (3) he was too ill to attend, (4) his governmental status was so high (2:48) that although he was present he was not expected to bow to the image, (5) he was not present at the ceremony because the categories of invited officials (3:2, 3) did not include him, and (6) his reputation was so highly established that jealous opponents dared not call his actions into question.

The bottom line is that we simply don't know why Daniel himself isn't a participant in the incident of today's lesson. It is likely in any case that Daniel and his three friends pray continually and fervently for one another.

A. Attitude Change (v. 19a)

^{19a}. **Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed.**

Kings do not like to hear the word *no* or see their commands disobeyed. The half-verse before us describes the intensity of Nebuchadnezzar's anger in this regard. That the three men dare to defy his edict, especially after being given a second chance to obey, results in the king's being *furious*. He is seething; he is

ready to explode.

What the king undergoes on the inside is visible in his body language as *his attitude toward them* changes. Perhaps the king's face turns red or he clenches his teeth in his rage.

What Do You Think?

What are some appropriate ways to respond to anger directed at Christianity by secular culture?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- When the anger is justified
- When the anger is unjustified
- Considering biblical examples

B. Draconian Response (vv. 19b-21)

^{19b}. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual

The king's rage quickly turns into action. The furnace mentioned may be a type used for firing bricks. Or it may be used solely for executions, since burning people alive is often used by the Babylonians for capital punishment. The king seems to demand that the intensity of the flames match the intensity of his anger.

²⁰. and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace.

To tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego does not require extraordinary strength—anyone can do it. But to *throw them into the blazing furnace* will mean having to get very close to the intense fire. This will require top-notch physical fitness; thus the summons to *the strongest soldiers*.

²¹. So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace.

The three men are not prepared in any special manner for what appears to be certain death. And why should they be? Whatever they are wearing is about to be consumed by the fire, so any change of clothing would be unnecessary and a waste of time. Their sentence is to be carried out immediately with no delay whatsoever. Not a minute is therefore spent on removing a stitch of clothing—not their *robes*, not their *trousers*, not *turbans*, nor any *other clothes* they happen to have on.

The fact that the king desires the men to be bound may seem curious. If their execution is so urgent, why not save a couple of minutes and throw them into the furnace unbound? The importance of the details will be seen later.

What Do You Think?

How can we prepare for religious persecution, or is such preparation even possible? Explain.

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding attitude
- Regarding spiritual disciplines
- Considering [Psalm 119:157](#); [Matthew 5:10-12, 43-45](#); [John 15:20](#); [2 Corinthians 12:10](#); [2 Timothy 3:10-12](#); [Hebrews 10:32-39](#); [Revelation 2:10](#)

C. Collateral Damage (vv. 22, 23)

²². The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego,

Two things we see here are startling indeed. The first is the fact that the fire is so intense that the executioners cannot get close enough to the furnace to throw in *Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego*—the three condemned men—without incurring their own deaths.

The second is the fact that those who die are the ones most physically able to survive their task: “the strongest soldiers” of [verse 20](#)! Perhaps they did not have time to take adequate precautions against the searing heat because *the king's command was so urgent*. The nature of the furnace's design may also play a part (see below).

What Do You Think?

In what ways can we show solidarity with persecuted Christians across the globe?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In tangible ways
- In intangible ways

²³. and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.

Most commentators believe the furnace involved is of an upright design, perhaps built into an embankment. This theory is consistent with the description of the *three men* falling into it since such a design could require stairs be climbed first. The need to climb stairs would expose the executioners to the fiery heat for a longer period of time, perhaps causing them to faint and fall to their own deaths.

Even so, this is all rather speculative since (1) the “thrown into” of [verse 21](#) does not require interpretation of a vertical drop from a height (compare [Matthew 7:19](#)) and (2) the wording in the verse before us of falling can also be used to describe the final part of any kind of toss of a person whose feet are *firmly tied*. A problem with this kind of theory is that a furnace designed this way might not allow the king to see in ([Daniel 3:24](#)).

Michael Servetus (1511-1553) was a Spanish theologian. He was also what is sometimes referred to as a polymath—a person with expertise in numerous areas of learning. For Servetus, this included medicine, law, mathematics, astronomy, and literature. A prodigious writer, he authored books in many fields of learning. Among those was *On the Errors of the Trinity*, in which he challenged orthodox views.

Ideas deemed to be heretical frequently resulted in capital punishment in those days, and with the same fury shown by Nebuchadnezzar centuries before. For his views, Servetus was burned at the stake in Geneva, Switzerland, where the Protestant reformer John Calvin held great sway. Calvin wholeheartedly approved the death sentence for Servetus. The writings of Servetus are seen by some to have led to the creation of Unitarian churches in Europe.

Unpopular stances have been suppressed with violence for centuries. Nebuchadnezzar took this route, as did the Romans in the time of Christ, etc. This raises the question for Christians: How do we treat others who disagree with us, whether in religion, politics, or other areas of life?

—C. R. B.

II. Work of All-Powerful God

(DANIEL 3:26-28)

Daniel 3:24, 25, not part of our lesson text, records what occurs after the three men are thrown into the furnace. No doubt Nebuchadnezzar expects to hear cries of agony from the three rebels, but instead observes “four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods” (3:25). Some speculate this person to be a preincarnate appearance of Jesus. Later the king will state that the God of the three men “sent his angel” to protect them (3:28).

HOW TO SAY IT

Abednego Uh-*bed-nee-go*.

Babylon Bab-uh-lun.

Babylonian Bab-ih-*low-nee-un*.

Meshach Me-shack.

Nabu Nah-boo.

Nebo Nee-bo.

Nebuchadnezzar Neb-yuh-kud-*nez-er*.

Shadrach Shay-drack or Shad-rack.

Either way, a miracle has occurred as the previously bound men (Daniel 3:20, 21, 23, 24) are now “unbound” and moving with apparent ease within the “blazing furnace” (a phrase used eight times in chapter 3). Even more astounding is the fact that the men are unhurt.

A. Different Attitude (v. 26)

26. Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, “Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!”

So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire,

Nebuchadnezzar had asked rhetorically about the ability of any god to deliver *Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego* from the fire (Daniel 3:15). But having just witnessed what happens (or doesn’t happen) to the three men, the king’s attitude changes dramatically.

Gone is the arrogant and contemptuous spirit as Nebuchadnezzar acknowledges the God of these men to be *the Most High God*. In calling the three to *come out*, he refers to them as *servants* of that same God. We note that, having disobeyed the king’s previous command, they *do* obey this one! This command is that of a humbler, gentler man than the one who was raging at them a few minutes earlier. That the three are able to walk out says something about the design characteristics of the furnace.

The king does not address the fourth individual. Perhaps he is no longer present, or this may reflect Nebuchadnezzar’s uncertainty as to his identity.

B. Thorough Inspection (v. 27)

27. and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.

All the king’s officials gather around the three men, amazed at what they are seeing. These three men have just emerged from a blazing furnace, with flames too intense for some of the king’s strongest men. Yet the Hebrew men show no evidence whatsoever of exposure to fire. They do not even smell of smoke! They have emerged from the furnace just as they were when they were cast into it except for one thing: their bindings are gone (Daniel 3:25).

What Do You Think?

How can you use a personal experience of God’s deliverance as a witness to others?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

As a witness to fellow believers

As a witness to unbelievers

C. Proper Credit (v. 28)

28a. Then Nebuchadnezzar said, “Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants!”

We do not know how much time passes as the three young men are inspected by the king and his officials. In offering homage to *the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego*, the king recalls the appearance of an *angel*. Babylonian religion includes belief in many angelic spirits; it is impossible to know specifically which Nebuchadnezzar has in mind, if any. He acknowledges once more (as in [Daniel 3:25](#)) that whoever appeared with the three men in the flames was not an ordinary human. We note irony in the fact that the king praises the God of these men, yet continues to speak of them using their Babylonian names.

^{28b}. **“They trusted in him and defied the king’s command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God.”**

Nebuchadnezzar goes on to pay tribute to the three men who have dared to defy his earlier command to bow to the image. The basis of their courageous stand is their unshakable trust in their God. Because of this *the king’s command* is changed. Nebuchadnezzar’s demand was negated by the faith of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Faced with the choice of obeying either an earthly king or the heavenly one, they chose the latter. They have honored a much more authoritative word than King Nebuchadnezzar’s.

What Do You Think?

How do we know when we should defy rather than obey earthly authority?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Considering defiance passages such as [Acts 4:18-20](#); [5:27-29](#)

Considering obedience passages such as [Romans 13:1, 2](#); [1 Peter 2:13-17](#)

Considering the potential result of martyrdom

Nebuchadnezzar also notes that the three men have been *willing to give up their lives* in service to their God. They have not merely professed loyalty to God; they have backed up their profession with a willingness to die for him. They have declared that even if God chose not to come to their aid and spare them from the furnace, they would never compromise their trust in him ([Daniel 3:17, 18](#)). Nebuchadnezzar later admits that “no other God that can save in this way” ([3:29](#)).

Does this mean Nebuchadnezzar converted to the faith of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego? His words in response to their deliverance may make us think so. The king uttered similar words in [Daniel 2:47](#) after Daniel interpreted his dream. Even so, the king refers to “my gods” (plural) in [Daniel 3:14](#). Nebuchadnezzar will be disciplined severely by the Lord because of his arrogance ([4:1-33](#)). That experience will be followed by another tribute of praise to God ([4:34-37](#)). Nebuchadnezzar may view the Lord as the highest of many gods. There is room for doubt that he embraces true monotheism (the worship of one God alone).

SURPRISED BY . . .

C. S. Lewis (1898-1963), probably the most-read Christian apologist of the twentieth century, was a very reluctant convert to Christianity. Following what he called a “blandly Christian childhood,” Lewis turned to atheism to satisfy his heart’s spiritual longings. Eventually, it was his appreciation for beauty and art—and the joy these gifts of God bring—that caught him by surprise and led to his conversion. The conversion came, in part, because of the influence of some fellow intellectuals who had become Christians, including J. R. R. Tolkien, author of *Lord of the Rings*. Lewis found joy in turning to Christ, an experience he later wrote about in *Surprised by Joy*, published in 1955.

Nebuchadnezzar’s realization that no other god was like the God of the Hebrew people caught him by surprise. It did not come through intellectual conversations or exposure to beauty. It came, rather, through incontrovertible evidence of God’s power. Such surprising evidence resulted not in terror (contrast [Mark 4:41](#)) but in praise on the part of the king.

The God who surprised Nebuchadnezzar hundreds of years before Christ is the same God who surprised the residents of Jerusalem in the first century AD ([Acts 2:5-12](#); [3:11-16](#); etc.). He surprises us yet today at various times and in various ways. How we react will reveal our hearts.

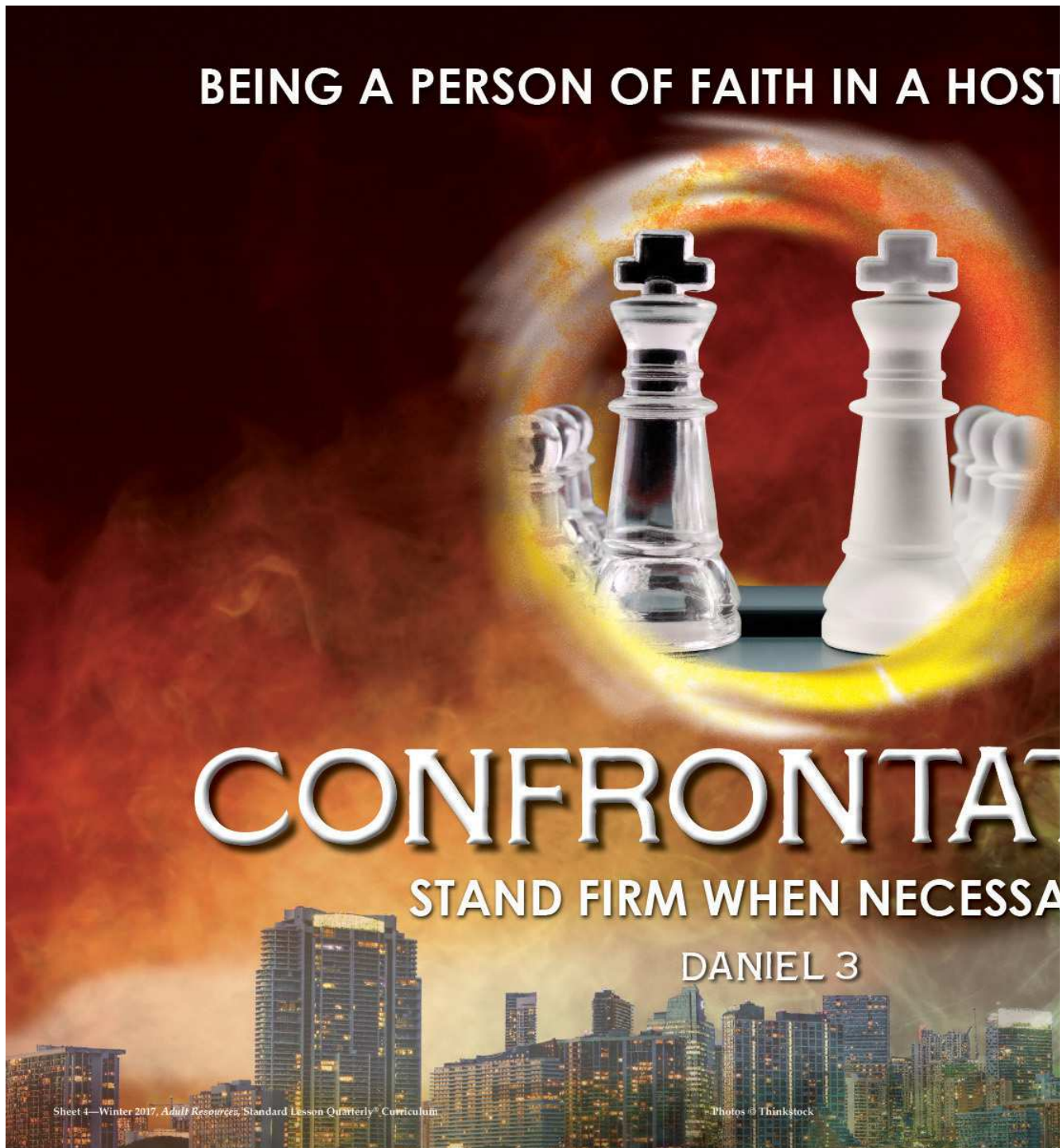
—C. R. B.

Conclusion

A. The Flames of Fellowship

The above title is used by Dale Ralph Davis in his commentary on Daniel as he discusses the events described in [Daniel 3:19-30](#). While he is not certain that the “fourth” man in the flames was a preincarnate appearance of Jesus, he does see the miracle of their deliverance as “a sample of the way Christ preserves his people but not a guarantee of his dramatic deliverance in every case.”

When the writer of Hebrews is describing the various accomplishments of those who chose to walk by faith, he refers to those who “quenched the fury of the flames” ([Hebrews 11:34](#)). Most likely he is alluding to the account of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Even so, some Christians who lived in the first century (the time during which the writer of Hebrews lived) experienced being burned alive during persecution instigated by the emperor Nero (reigned AD 54-68). The apostle Peter may have been referring to such persecution when he wrote of being “refined by fire” ([1 Peter 1:7](#)) and of the “fiery ordeal” ([4:12](#)). Yet we do not read any accounts of Nero witnessing (as did Nebuchadnezzar) someone escaping from the fire unscathed. Nor do we know of any instances where someone similar to the “fourth” man appeared alongside someone for rescue as the flames burned the person alive.



Visual for Lesson 7. Contrast this visual with [Matthew 17:24-27](#) as your learners wrestle with the decision of when to confront and when not to.

We can be assured from Scripture, however, that the Lord is always present with his people. That is true whether seen or not, whether “the flames of fellowship” are literal or not (compare [Isaiah 43:2](#)). One should note that the inspired writer speaks of those who by faith “quenched the *fury of the flames*” ([Hebrews 11:34](#)). Whatever flames one may experience while living in a broken, sin-cursed world, their *fury* is abated because of the presence of the Lord. Davis is right when he notes that no matter what fires we face—in operating rooms, funeral parlors, or empty houses—“the Fourth Man can always find his people.”

B. Prayer

Father, the account of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is so well known that it is easy to lose our sense of wonder at the bold faith these men demonstrated. Renew our wonder! And may we draw strength from acknowledging your presence with us in every circumstance, whether calm or chaotic. We pray in Jesus’ name, amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Our Father never abandons us.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Ask students to reveal how recently they have watched the 1939 movie *The Wizard of Oz*. Then say, “Let’s see how good your memory is. Would someone describe the scene where Dorothy meets the lion for the first time?” The description should include Dorothy’s initial reaction and what finally made her spring into action. (The answer is that when the lion goes after Toto, Dorothy acts to save him.) Invite volunteers to talk about times when they’ve stepped in and stood up for someone.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Between a Rock and a Hard Place” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students discuss in small groups or as a class.

After either activity, say, “We all struggle with doing the right thing—when to speak up and when to shut up. Sometimes we don’t even know what the ‘right’ thing is! It can be the same when it comes to our faith. As much as we love God, there are times when we may face derision, isolation, or worse for standing up for him. Three captives in a foreign land give us a great example of refusing to compromise in the face of unthinkable consequences. Let’s see what they have to teach us.”

Into the Word

Divide the class into three groups, giving each group a pen or pencil and some paper. Assign each group one of the following Scripture passages: [Daniel 3:13-18](#); [3:19-23](#); [3:26-28](#). Have groups read their assigned text and then work together to retell the events using only questions. For example, for the first passage: Why did King Nebuchadnezzar bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego before him? Why wouldn’t they bow before the image he created? What will happen if they are thrown into the furnace? Will their God save them?

Allow groups to work for several minutes, offering assistance as needed. When groups have finished, ask a volunteer from each group to read its question-based summary to the class.

Option: Have groups use the question-based format to present each Scripture passage as a short skit, in which the characters speak only in questions. Say, “There are many questions in this account, but Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego needed only one answer: *God is able.*”

Introduce further discussion as you say, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced a decision: either bow to the image King Nebuchadnezzar had built or be burned to death in a furnace. These men were well aware of God’s command against worshipping other gods. What do you think was going through their minds as they pondered this choice?” As discussion winds down, ask which of those questions would likely also go through the mind of a Christian facing martyrdom today.

Invite a volunteer to read aloud [Daniel 3:28](#). Make a transition by saying, “Sometimes Christians are challenged to endure great trials because of their convictions. Let’s take a look at Christians who have faced and are facing the difficulty of such challenges.”

Into Life

Tell students about www.prisoneralert.com, a site created by The Voice of the Martyrs. As a homework assignment, challenge learners to use this site later to send a message of encouragement to a believer who is imprisoned because of his or her faith. *Option:* Demonstrate the site for the class if Internet connectivity is available in your learning space. Offer the opportunity to write messages while the class is meeting. (This is preferable to a homework assignment.)

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “All Around the World” activity from the reproducible page. Have students use smartphones to research and report on the persecution of Christians in each country.