

Jesus, Friend of Children

(Matthew 18: 1-14; 19:13-15)

He may have been 4. He may have been 5. I don't know. His name may have been Amos, or Enoch, or Benjamin. Again I don't know. Nobody knows.

But for one brief hour he was the luckiest boy in all the world. Jesus picked him out of a crowd of children and told everybody around to become like this little boy or they would never enter His kingdom of love.

What a dear, sweet boy he must have been! So kind, loving, and obedient! The goodness in his heart must have been shining from his face, and Jesus saw it.

He couldn't have been one of the rough kind, rushing around shouting and making a nuisance of himself. He couldn't have been shoving the other boys about or teasing the little girls and making them cry. No. He was just standing there quietly and respectfully, looking up at Jesus with wide-open eyes, watching everything He did and listening to every word He said, so happy to be near Jesus.

Then he heard his name called. The Bible says Jesus "called a little child and had him stand among them."

"John," He said -- and the boy's name could have been John, couldn't it? -- "Please come here a moment. I need you."

Little John, blushing and smiling, ran toward the Master, while all the other children pressed near to see what would happen next.

Then, perhaps with one hand placed gently around little John's shoulders, Jesus said to the grownups who were listening to Him, "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

His disciples had just asked Him who would be the greatest in His kingdom, and this was His answer. The kingdom of heaven is for the humble, the teachable, the gentle, the kind, the unselfish. Unless the disciples stopped wanting the best things and the best places for themselves, they would never see heaven.

"Whoever humbles himself like this child," Jesus said, "is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."



Then Jesus went on to say something else that was on His mind. His voice was stern as He warned the grownups never to lead a child into sin. If anyone did, He said, "it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea."

Little John and the other children must have thought, "How wonderful to have Somebody to care for us like this! Why, not only is Jesus our Friend, He's our own Big Brother!"

They became more sure of this as Jesus went on to say to the grownups, "See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven." Then He added, "Your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost."

How dearly Jesus must love children! Jesus and His angels know everything that happens to any boy or girl in all the world. If anyone starts bullying His "little ones" or tempting them to do wrong, he had better look out! Jesus will deal with him, for He is a wonderful Big Brother!

You can imagine how the children, hearing Jesus say such things, came to love Him more and more. He was their hero. They were ready to do anything He said and follow Him anywhere He went.

Mothers loved Him too, because He loved their children. They brought their babies to Him and begged Him just to put His hands on them and bless them.

The Bible tells about one such happy scene. Boys and girls were crowding around Jesus as usual. There was lots of fun and innocent laughter as there always is when children get together. Then mothers began to come with their little ones in their arms.

"Bless my little Jacob!" I can hear one saying.

"And my little Rebekah!" said another.

"And my precious Daniel! Please, Jesus, put Your hands on him!"

Jesus would smile as He cuddled the babies in His arms, whispering gently to one after another, "Bless you, darling! Bless you, little sweetheart!"

To the mothers I am sure He said, "You will bring them up right, won't you, so they will love God and keep His commandments."

The suddenly somebody spoiled it all.

"Get away, get away!" one of the disciples was saying. "Leave the Master alone! Can't you see He's tired? He has more important things to do than bless you children. Get away!"

Hurt and disappointed, the mothers and children looked around, wondering what they had done wrong. Maybe some of them started to go away. Then Jesus spoke up. He told them to stay, and he rebuked the disciples for

acting like this.

"Let the little children to come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these," He said.

What a nice, kind thing for Him to say!

And He hasn't changed a bit since then. He said it on that afternoon long ago. He says it today. "Don't stop the children from coming to Me!" He wants every boy and girl in all the world to come to Him. No matter where you live, or how you dress, or what language you speak, His invitation is to you. Just come. And you may be sure He will never turn any child away.

But what did Jesus mean when He said, "the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these"? Are all children ready for heaven? Oh, no indeed. I can think of some who are so naughty and rude and disobedient they would turn heaven into a madhouse if they should ever get there. Others are so destructive they would tear the New Jerusalem to pieces in no time at all if Jesus were to let them in.



Jesus was thinking of sweet, innocent, unspoiled children when He said, "The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." He had in mind those dear boys and girls who respect and obey their parents and who try to be helpful and unselfish at home and at school. Heaven will be made up of people like this.

And if we are not like this now? Then we must change or be left out. That is why Jesus wants us to come to Him, so He can change us. He wants to make us as kind, patient, tenderhearted, and sweet-tempered as He was as a boy.

The Fiery Furnace

(Daniel 3:14-29)

Only a few people close to the royal platform could see and hear what happened next, but everybody tried to. While the great golden statue still towered above them, the crowds surged forward to catch a glimpse of the three young men who had dared to defy the king. Many a little boy, I am sure, climbed on his daddy's shoulders to get a better view of what was going on.

"Is it true . . . that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up?" Nebuchadnezzar asked Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Then he offered them one more chance, for he had liked these young men from the first time he had seen them. The band would play again. If they would fall down before the image, everything would be all right. If not, they would be thrown into the blazing furnace. "Then," asked the king, "what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"

It was an awful moment for the three young men. Nobody likes to be burned alive. They could see smoke rising from the furnace which the king would use to punish people like them, and they knew very well that Nebuchadnezzar would do exactly as he had said if they disobeyed him again.

They could have said to themselves, "Well, just bowing down once won't matter very much. We wouldn't really be worshipping the statue. We would just do it to please the king who has been so good to us." But they did no such thing. They remembered the commandment of God, "You shall not make for yourself an idol. . . . You shall not bow down to them or worship them." * And they decided that they must obey God rather than man.

"O Nebuchadnezzar, . . ." they said respectfully, "the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

At this the king became furious and could hardly contain his rage.

"Heat the furnace!" he roared. "Make it seven times hotter than it ever was heated before!"

Servants ran to obey. Some started to throw more fuel on the fire. Others worked the bellows to fan the flames to white heat. Meanwhile the strongest men in the king's army were called to tie up the three young men with ropes.

Hotter and hotter grew the fire, until the king and the whole royal party could feel the heat of it. Now the problem arose as to how to get the young men into it. It was too hot. Nobody could get near it. Even the mighty men who had bound Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego drew back, wondering what to do next.

“Throw them in!” yelled the king in his wild anger.

The soldiers obeyed. Picking up the three young men, they moved forward, three them into the furnace, then fell to the ground and died from the terrible heat.

Nebuchadnezzar did not care. His foolish jealousy was satisfied. Nobody would dare disobey him again. As for the three young Hebrews and their God, at this point he was glad to be rid of them.

Suddenly a cry was raised. “Look! There’s somebody in the fire!”

“What!” cried the king. “Impossible!”

But there was. Wide-eyed with amazement, Nebuchadnezzar gazed through the open doors of the blazing furnace.

Yes, there *was* somebody inside it. Two people in fact. No, three, four!

Others were looking now, everybody who could get close enough to peer in.

“Weren’t there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?” cried the king.

“Certainly, O king,” said those about him.

“Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.”

Forgetting his royal dignity, forgetting the tens of thousand so eyes that were upon him, Nebuchadnezzar left his throne and hurried as near as he dared to the door of the furnace.

“Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego!” he cried. “Servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!”

They came. They were not burned in any way. Their clothes didn’t even smell scorched. The fire had burned only the ropes that had bound them.





Everybody gathered close to see the astounding sight. “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.”

How much the vast crowd saw of all this we do not know. But we can be sure that the amazing story was told and retold 10,000 times that day. Nebuchadnezzar was quite overcome by the experience. He never said another word about his great golden idol. Instead he declared to all about him, "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.

“Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way.”

It was a wonderful deliverance, and God used it to cheer the hearts of His people in the days of their captivity. It must have been a comfort to them to know that He was willing to walk in the fire with those three dear faithful young men!

Perhaps He will do the same for you someday.