

F E A T U R E

When the Fire Answered Back

Mena Massoud and Elijah Alexander on the day God seemed to enter the set of Daniel and the Fiery Furnace, the weight of biblical storytelling, and why the furnace still tests faith.

Interview by Paul Salfen

We could really use a movie like this right about now.

That was the first thing Paul Salfen told Mena Massoud and Elijah Alexander when they sat down to talk about Daniel and the Fiery Furnace. The biblical epic, written and directed by brothers Matthew and Daniel Kooman and released in theaters September 18 through EKKL Entertainment, follows the young prophet Daniel—played by Massoud, best known as Disney’s live-action Aladdin and also a producer on the film—through his early years in Babylon under King Nebuchadnezzar, played by Alexander of The Chosen. The story culminates in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to bow to a golden statue and their deliverance from the furnace.

Massoud and Alexander both spoke with the ease of people who had lived inside the world for a while. “We made it,” Massoud said. The shoot felt like family, they agreed, even with the usual film challenges. Every morning they woke up excited to work on it.



Mena Massoud as Daniel and Elijah Alexander as King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel and the Fiery Furnace. Courtesy of EKKL Entertainment.

G O D E N T E R E D T H E S E T

When Salfen asked if any particular day or scene stood out—the moment when they looked around and thought, we’re doing it—the answer was immediate. One scene they have talked about quite a bit was the filming of Daniel chapter 2. Nebuchadnezzar has had a dream. Daniel and his three friends, under pain of death for themselves and all the Magi, must not only interpret the dream but tell the king what he dreamed. In the biblical account, only God can reveal such a thing.

They shot it in 12-minute takes, rare for film. “It had a very theatrical element to it,” one of them explained. Massoud as Daniel and Alexander as Nebuchadnezzar went toe-to-toe, delivering verbatim Scripture—the long prophetic story and the king’s response. “There were moments on set where people were going, this might have been exactly what happened. This is what it felt like. This is the mood in the room.” The weather itself seemed to respond to the words Massoud was speaking as Daniel. “It was almost like God entered the set and it was coming to life.”

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— Mena Massoud & Elijah Alexander

That shook him to the core. “You want there to be an authenticity to the work and you want it to be like fear and trembling. You want it to actually land for people and you’re treating it with a reverence. And then that actually happens and you feel the presence of God. That’s a whole other thing altogether.”

THE LONG HAUL

Salfen noted that audiences will see the film and think they want to tell stories like this, but it is far easier said than done. What advice would they offer someone who wants to follow in their footsteps?

Be ready for the long haul. The project has been three years running so far. “We’re 20 years into our filmmaking journey and we’ve really asked God, what stories do you want us to tell? And following his leading.” They needed his presence and prodding because of the obstacles. Any film faces challenges, but biblical films carry an extra level of pressure and opposition. “We definitely felt that, but couldn’t do it without knowing that God wanted us to be making it and feeling his presence along the way.”

The other borrowed advice from a grade 12 social studies teacher: “If there’s one career you should never do, it’s film directing.” Maybe that will prompt someone young to take up the cross anyway. There is a big responsibility in telling a story people grew up knowing, one that will affect them.

HOLY REVERENCE

What keeps them on the right path? Film has impacted them specifically. It is an incredibly powerful medium. “Once read a great commentary that said, if Jesus came in 2026, he’d be a filmmaker. Don’t know if that’s entirely true, but I think that the story medium is a way that you can reach people. I mean, he told parables. He told stories. Would he have had a film crew around if he came now? I think so.”

If Jesus came in 2026, he’d be a filmmaker.

— Mena Massoud & Elijah Alexander

Millions have already streamed the behind-the-scenes and trailer content. They believe millions more will see it in theaters. You have to approach it with a kind of holy reverence because it is biblical text. They want it to land with an authenticity audiences can get behind and be excited about in the biblical context. They have been negatively impacted by some films based on the Bible that were not made by believers or people who gave reverence to the text. “We really wanted to be different that way, uphold it with reverence and follow in the footsteps of some great pioneers and filmmakers that have forged ahead with biblical stories.”



THROUGH THE HOTTEST FIRE

What do they hope people will get out of it? There is so much, and the story remains relevant.

“I hope people will just look at their own convictions and test their faith. Where are they at with their own faith? And what are they willing to stand for? And to know that there’s a God that’s there, that when you put your faith in him, he will get you through the hottest fire and that you can be refined even by walking through that fire. So to just stand for your faith and what you believe.”

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— Mena Massoud & Elijah Alexander

FIND MENA MASSOUD & ELIJAH ALEXANDER

Daniel and the Fiery Furnace is in theaters now. Official site: daniel.movie. Mena Massoud is best known as Aladdin (2019) and also produced the film. Elijah Alexander is known for Atticus in The Chosen. Directed by the Kooman Brothers (Matthew and Daniel). Executive producer Michael W. Smith.

Interview conducted by Paul Salfen for AMFM Magazine, October 2026.

Paul Salfen is Managing Editor of AMFM Magazine and a veteran interviewer of film, television, music, and sports figures. He is the author of Going For It!, a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting on the record.