

“OBEYING GOD RATHER THAN MEN.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Daniel 3.8-18

Introduction.

“We must obey God rather than men.”

How those words must have rang out in the senate chamber of the Jerusalem council. They were the words of the man who only a short time before denied that he ever knew Jesus. What boldness now. How did those words ring in the ears of the chief priests and elders and scribes?

Is there in Scripture a greater illustration of those words than in our text this evening? Christians all over the world through all the centuries have drawn great courage and strength from this text. I wonder if any other text in the Bible is more responsible for the martyrdom of many saints embolden to lay down their lives like these three men?

The accusation out of malice, vss. 8-12.

The image has been raised up.
The royal decree has been issued.
The people have gathered.
The music has played. Everyone has bowed down.

Well, almost everyone. The pressure to conform could not have been stronger, but out of the countless thousands, three stood alone and did not bow. Only three.

Where was Daniel? This is the only chapter in the book where Daniel is not mentioned. Not a word is offered as to why, so any guess would be pure speculation. Whatever the reason, clearly God did not intent for him to be a part of this story.

There are always wicked people in this world who find pleasure in the downfall of others and do what they can to speed up the process. The Chaldeans maliciously accuse the Jews.

Was it professional jealousy? There are people who chafe at the success of others. Some of these could be those passed over when Nebuchadnezzar made them overseers in Babylon.

Was it racial bias? Slaves being made prefects was sure to ruffle some feathers, and fill them with envy and hatred. The Jews had their jobs.

Under the pretense of faithfulness to Nebuchadnezzar they try to destroy the reputations of the Jews. They knew how to push the king's buttons.

There are two kingdoms. The kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God. These two kingdoms are always in conflict, always in contradiction to each other. You cannot serve both.

Three charges are brought, disrespect for Nebuchadnezzar (false charge), refusal to worship their gods (true), and refusal to bow down to the image (true).

They make it sound personal, "these Jews don't like you, don't serve your gods or worship your golden image. They are thumbing their noses at you."

They tell Nebuchadnezzar there is a subversive element in the midst, three Jews who were ungrateful and sacrilegious. They were rebellious against the authority of the king and they were a threat to the national unity.

There are times as a Christian when it is the loneliest thing to be, times you are left twisting in the wind, with no one else there for you; when you are left hanging out to dry, when you are thrown under the bus. Sometimes it will seem like the whole world is against you.

It happened to Peter in the temple.

It happened to Polycarp, the Bishop of the church in Smyrna, in Asia Minor, around 160 AD.

"Swear, reproach Christ, and I will set you free" demanded the Roman Proconsul. "86 years have I have served him," Polycarp declared, "and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?"

It happened to Athanasius when he was told to give up his theological views on the Trinity, that the whole world was against him. He famously declared, "Then it is Athanasius against the world."

It happened to Martin Luther when he was order to recant his writings against the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church.

“Unless I am convicted by scripture and plain reason - I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other - my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.”

It may happen to us, in the world or in the church. It may happen at a time when no one else will notice. It may not be in a crowd or in an arena. It may be subtle, it may be silent.

Christians will increasingly be painted as malcontents, disobedient, lawless, difficult to get along with, unruleable.

The official intimidation, vss. 13-15.

The king knows these three men, they are familiar to him. These are the men with ten times the wisdom of all his own wise men. These are the men who showed integrity, who served the king faithfully.

The wrath of a king is truly a fearful thing. Anyone who has experienced the wrath of someone in authority, a teacher, a boss, a coach, a parent, a police officer knows a little of what this is like.

People in authority hate when their authority is questioned or challenged or ignored, even when their demands are unjust or foolish.

The king has just three words, burning fiery furnace. What about that don't you understand?

Can we pause here and just soak in the enormous pressure these three men were under? Can we pause to consider the enormous pressure Christians are under all over the world to cave in on their beliefs, on who they worship? Can we tremble at the enormous pressures that are being brought to bear on the Christian church in America, and even on the CRC to bend and even give in and surrender on huge social, political, ethical and moral issues?

The church is supposed to be salt and light, to be a preserving and prophetic presence, but how can it be that when its salt loses its saltiness and its light become dim or goes out?

Daniel has written this carefully to remind the Jewish readers how stupid idol worship and idolatry are. Notice the words he puts in the mouth of the king. “Fall down and worship the image that I have made.” Worship an object that someone has made!

Nine times Daniel says set up, the king set up the image, set up, set up, set up. Do you get it? This thing is no more divine than a vacuum cleaner or an ATM.

The king wants us to be impressed but clearly it's ludicrous. It's a farce. The emperor has no clothes. Idols and idolatry are empty.

Yet we all do it. We give allegiance and loyalty and devotion and adoration to creatures and created objects. The reason we do anything wrong is because of idolatry, some idol in our heart.

What makes you anxious or worried or upset? What makes you angry? What don't you have that you really want?

“What do you enjoy day-dreaming about? What is it that occupies your mind when you have nothing else to think about? Do you develop potential scenarios about career advancement? Or material goods such as a dream home? Or a relationship with a particular person? One or two day dreams do not indicate idolatry. Ask rather, what do you habitually think about to get joy and comfort in the privacy of your heart?” (Tim Keller).

Psalm 139:23-24 Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!
24 And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

Daniel is showing the Jews how to face the pressure of idols, the intimidation of rulers and peers and emotions. The way is to see behind it, to see the farce.

This is a Wizard of Oz moment, to pull back the curtain on idols and gods and fears and desires and wants and see that they are nothing compared to God. If we can see the emptiness compared to God, we can laugh in the face of idols and images and objects.

Daniel 3:15 “And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?”

“There is no power in heaven greater than my power.” He has no fear of God. How quickly does godlessness fill the hearts of kings and those in power and authority?

There is no piety in this man, no true sense of God or submission to Him or reverence toward Him. He places himself above God. “Fall down and worship the image I have made.”

The stubbornness of faithfulness, vss. 16-18.

Let's put ourselves in these three men's sandals for a moment. Maybe they confer among themselves, maybe they mull over the options. There are plenty of reasons to give in.

Number one, pure survival instinct. Who wants to die and who wants to die like that?

Or how about the argument that this image is really nothing, it's not a god, so not a big deal.

Or what good will they be to the Jewish people if they are dead? If they live they can help them. These are good and godly men and we need more men like them, so don't die like this.

Or their death won't end up honoring God because they will say it was for insubordination or civil disobedience.

And what about the fact they are getting a second chance, maybe this is from God. The king is being kind. He likes you and has called you in and is opening an opportunity for you.

Instead they immediately give a plain and simple answer without arrogance or defiance, without apologies or excuses. They plead guilty to two charges, they will not worship any false gods and they will not bow down to the image Nebuchadnezzar made and set up.

What matters most to these three men? Deliverance? Living longer? Not experiencing pain?

If you noticed another repetition in this text you would get a clue. Worship and serve are used 16 times. The point is what really matters is not personal security or well-being, but worship.

Daniel 3:18 Be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

They fear God and place God's glory above even their own lives. The threat of death was made in vain, it didn't affect them at all.

This is the real miracle of Daniel 3, that there were three found among the multitude who did not bend the knee, who didn't bow down.

What gave the three the strength and courage to stand firm in the face of death? What would give you the power and nerve to do what they did?

First, they had a deeply held conviction of the sovereignty of God.

Their theology and doctrine is not just academic, not just for some ivory tower. This is meat and potatoes truth and sustains their body and soul. God is in complete control and

rules over all of this, so we trust Him completely no matter what happens. Their faith is greater than any furnace.

They didn't just have a general idea that God is powerful, they believed God could do things completely contrary to human experience or wisdom, like even deliver people out of fires.

But they are not presumptuous. They affirm the power of God and the freedom of God. They have no doubt of God's power and ability, only of God's pleasure or desire or will. God is able to do whatever according to His own good pleasure He chooses to do.

The bottom line, it doesn't matter what God does or doesn't do, we will not bow down and worship your stupid idol. Their obedience to God is not based on what God will do. They obey God for who He is not for what He does for them.

They knew the interpretation of the dream and how in the end God's rule and reign would be supreme. God's kingdom would prevail over all the others.

Second, they knew the Bible.

Exodus 20:3-5 You shall have no other gods before me. 4 You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything ... 5 You shall not bow down to them or serve them.

God forbid bowing to idols and they weren't going to disobey God. They knew the Word of God and had it in their hearts and minds. They knew what it said and they were committed to doing what it said.

If you want to do the right thing in hard times you must know the Word of God. They trusted God's Word over anything else.

Third, they were willing to die for what they believed.

You can believe in the sovereignty of God and in the truth of His Word and yet not be willing to pay the price, to make the ultimate sacrifice. We can know what to do but not obey.

Death by flames is not the worst thing, it is not a failure on God's part or a lack of faith on their part. And it is not the ultimate thing. God is.

We must learn to prefer the life to come to this life. But this is only done by faith that there is a better life to come than this life.

Is this not the supreme example of casting their cares on God and trusting their lives to Him? They were not anxious, but turn all they had over to God.

We are presented opportunities to deny God every day. We face challenges to compromise and find ourselves unwilling to pay the price. We fear man or being shunned or shamed or thought foolish or ending up alone.

We must be as bold as these three and not even entertain for a moment any thought of denying God. Now days we debate, we waver, we consider the options, we lean first this way then that.

What use is our life except to worship and glorify our creator and God? If we can do that while living, great. If we can do that by dying, all the better.

Joseph Tson, a pastor in Communist Romania, was arrested in the summer of 1977 and expected to be killed. He said to the authorities, "I have to tell you I am ready to die. I have put my affairs in order. Your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying. When you kill me you send me to glory? You cannot threaten me with glory."

Let me put it as plainly as possible. ***Suffering is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian.*** Maybe not necessarily dying, but suffering in some way, suffering loss, dying to certain things, losing certain rights or privileges. Dying to the flesh and its desires. Dying to self and getting our own way.

Our life is not our own, we belong body and soul to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ. May we be as faithful to Him as He has been to us.

Implications and applications.

Most of you have heard this story dozens of times. Have you ever wondered to yourself what you would do in their sandals? Have you ever wondered if you would be able to stand up under the pressure or if you would cave in in the face of certain death?

God doesn't give us grace for imaginary situations. God only promises to give us what we need for what He brings to us. If He wants us to go through a particular fire, then He promises to give us His sufficient and sustaining grace as He walks with us through it.

We face these choices and battles on a daily basis; will we bow down to any number of shiny idols our world puts in front of us? Again and again we are presented with pleasures or desires or attitudes or actions that promise to make us happier or feel better.

We are more like the huge crowd before the king's image, bowing down along with everyone else.

Idols are like the blaring music, always getting our attention, always pulling us away from the old, quiet, hard path of obedience. There are so many sights and sounds, so many ungodly attractions, desires and appetites. We start to daydream about what if and what could be and what we would like and before long longings grow and frustrations over unmet expectations and a fire begins to burn deep within us.

We are tempted to bow down to the idol of approval, respect and admiration. We are tempted to bow down to the idol of going along to get along at work, school, church and family.

If we don't bow down we face the furnace of shame, being mocked, made fun of, disapproved of, left out of the inner circle, or not being on the right side.

Parents and grandparents, use this story to teach your children and grandchildren to never go against their conscience, to maintain integrity and faithfulness to God at all costs and at any costs. Be willing to lose everything else except your integrity and your conscience. Protect your soul against any compromise with the devil.

A clear conscience is a most precious and rare jewel to be guarded. Even when it appears to be of no good or advantage to you or your future, walk by faith and not by sight. Those who seek God first and put God first will lack no good thing.

Those who have a firm foundation laid in the Lord and in heaven above, will not tremble at anything in this life.

Prayer: Holy Father, the godless are all around us, and Satan puts so many temptations in front of us to deny you or diminish your glory by giving worship to some other god. grant by your Spirit that we only give our worship to you, that we only give glory and praise to you, that we not be moved by any threat to be unfaithful to you.