
Loyalty to the Sovereign

A sermon on Daniel 3 by Coty Pinckney |
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Is loyalty a good thing? Where do your loyalties lie? To Family? Friends? School? Political Party? Country?

To whom should a Christian express loyalty? To God, surely. To anyone else? If so – what do you do when loyalty to someone else requires disloyalty to God?

In the first 2 chapters of Daniel, this teen and his friends have protected themselves from seeing Nebuchadnezzar as their patron, their source of well-being, so that they might keep before their minds that God is their security, their hope. Having guarded their hearts in that way, they were able to respond wisely to the king's irrational anger at the inability of the wise men to tell him his dream.

But in those first two chapters, there has been no direct conflict between serving the king and following God. They were able to deal quietly, behind the scenes with the food issue. Then, in obeying Nebuchadnezzar's command to explain his dream, Daniel became God's mouthpiece to Nebuchadnezzar. The king was overwhelmed that someone could tell him his dream and interpret it.

In chapter three, however, we find a direct conflict between loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar and loyalty to God. How should these young men act?

You face similar questions every day. How do you answer them? How *should* you answer them?

The issue came up obliquely in [last week's sermon](#). The main point of chapter 2 is that wisdom and might belong to God, not to any earthly creature. We thus should seek God Himself, and He will give us the wisdom and might we need to live for His glory. A logical question, then, is: Should a Christian ever work to attain earthly wisdom or power? We answered: Yes. The point of the chapter is not that there is no such thing as earthly strength or knowledge, or that all earthly strength and knowledge are bad. Quite the contrary. Jeremiah told all the exiles, including Daniel, to work for the welfare of Babylon (Jeremiah 29:7). We should do the same, working for the welfare of the city or culture or country where we find ourselves. But we must remember that all earthly wisdom and ability come ultimately from God. And we must acknowledge that there comes a point when all earthly power, all earthly wisdom is useless. It cannot meet our deepest needs.

The point is similar this week: We shall see in the lives of these men that loyalty to earthly persons is right and good. We are to live in this world, contribute to it, change it, influence it, and love people in it. That requires some sense of loyalty. But loyalty to God trumps all other loyalties. It *must* trump all other loyalties, or God is not your god. You have made a god of something else.

Let's see how these truths come out in the lives of these three men. (By the way, unless I'm reading from the text, I'll refer to these men by their Jewish names, Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael. These names honor the true God; their Babylonian names, which I presume they hated, honored false deities.) We'll look at the chapter under three headings:

- Loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar
- A Conflict of Loyalties: God or Nebuchadnezzar?
- The Result of Loyalty

Loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar

Recall the last verse of the previous chapter:

Nebuchadnezzar appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego over the affairs of the province of Babylon. Daniel 2:49

Nebuchadnezzar assumed the loyalty of these three men after Daniel interpreted his dream, and gave them important positions in the provincial civil service. By the time chapter 3 opens, they apparently have several years of experience. Remember, these Jews are foreigners; they have no political constituency lobbying for them to stay in power. The very fact that they remain in their positions is a tribute to their faithful, loyal service to the king during this time. If Nebuchadnezzar had had even the slightest suspicion that they were disloyal, he could have dismissed them without hearing a word of objection. They have served faithfully.

But now Nebuchadnezzar complicates their lives. He makes an image of gold, an idol. Perhaps this image results from his dream recorded in chapter 2. Remember, in that dream he saw a statue whose head and shoulders were gold, and whose lower parts were various different metals. The gold represented Nebuchadnezzar and his empire; each successive lower part represented a coming empire that would supplant Babylon. Does the king eventually reject Daniel's interpretation, and argue that his own Babylonian empire would last forever? Is that why he creates a statue whose entire body is gold? We don't have enough information in the text to do more than speculate. But the idea is interesting.

In any event, it is highly unlikely that this is image of Nebuchadnezzar himself. In this chapter, the image is always referred to as "the golden image Nebuchadnezzar set up," not "the golden image of Nebuchadnezzar." And as far as we know, Babylonian and Assyrian kings never made idols of themselves for their subjects to worship.

For whatever reason, Nebuchadnezzar wants his new idol to be honored, so he "sent to gather" his officials. He summons them, instructing them all to come, including Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael. (Perhaps he summoned only his provincial officials, and not those who served in his court. That would explain Daniel's absence.) The three Jews obey. They were loyal enough to do that. And not only do they come, but "they stood before the image." They obey the king as far as they possibly can.

This seems obvious, but so often expositions of this chapter focus on their conflict with Nebuchadnezzar. These three are loyal to Nebuchadnezzar. They give him the respect he is due. They do not reject earthly authority. Their actions are consistent with Romans 13:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. Romans 13:1-2

They obey Nebuchadnezzar as long as they possibly can. But soon, that becomes impossible.

Imagine their thoughts at this point: "What is he going to ask us to do? Is he going to require *everyone* to bow, or just one category of the officials? Is this going to be our final hour? God,

protect us, we pray. Give us courage to glorify You, whether by life or by death.”

A Conflict of Loyalties: God or Nebuchadnezzar?

They don't have to wait long to find out. The herald proclaims Nebuchadnezzar's command: All the officials are to fall down and worship the image. Anyone who fails to do so, anyone who disobeys, will be thrown in a fiery furnace made ready for this occasion.

What happens? Not surprisingly, the officials obey. They owe Nebuchadnezzar some measure of loyalty, and they are threatened that if they do not obey, they will be killed. For the typical Babylonian pragmatic polytheist, the choice is simply. Adding another god to their pantheon is no big thing; they don't have to claim that this image represents the *only* god. They might as well bow and save their skin.

Interestingly, few seem to have noticed that these three men did not bow. Presumably most of the officials had their faces in the dirt, making sure it was obvious they were bowing and worshipping! Or if they raised their eyes at all, they raised them to gaze at the image – they certainly don't want to appear disrespectful.

At first it may seem to the three Jews that this event will parallel their decision not to eat the food from the king's table. They will honor God, and almost no one else will know. But some Chaldeans “maliciously accuse” the Jews. They must have anticipated that these three would not bow down, so they kept their eyes on them. Just as they hoped, Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael remain standing. This is their chance.

Why are the malicious? What has caused their anger at the Jewish men? First, these three are foreigners. The Chaldeans are native to the area. Second, Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael are young. The Chaldeans probably regard them as foreign, young whippersnappers, and are jealous of their high positions in the civil service. They figure this is a great opportunity to get rid of them, and undoubtedly hope that three of their number will be appointed in their place.

So the Chaldeans remind Nebuchadnezzar of his decree. Look at their accusation in verse 12: “Certain Jews whom *you* have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon pay no attention to *you!*” They appeal to Nebuchadnezzar's pride: “They owe everything to you, but they are rejecting *you!*” What evidence do they give that the Jews are paying no attention to the king? Do they cite their job performance? Do they remind the king of some command he issued for the province of Babylon that Hananiah failed to implement? No. They have no evidence in that regard. Their only evidence is that they “do not serve your god or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

This statement is true. But the accusers greatly overstate their case. They take the one instance that in which these men remain loyal to God rather than obey the king, and contend that the three “pay no attention” to the king. Thus, their accusation is false and malicious.

Nebuchadnezzar becomes angry, and calls the three, asking them if the accusation is true. Before they answer, he gives them second chance, coupled with the same threat. Disobedience will mean death. Displaying his pride, Nebuchadnezzar closes with a question: “And who is the god who will deliver you out of *my* hands?” He is claiming, “There is no god stronger than me. This is all about me. Are you loyal to me or not?”

Look at their answer in verse 16 carefully: “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter.” Why do they

have no need to answer him? Because Nebuchadnezzar already knows they are loyal! They are saying: “We are loyal. You know it! You know our performance has been exemplary. You know what type of work we have done. We have served you faithfully and we will serve you faithfully.”

They continue: “If this be so” – that is, “if you throw us in the furnace” – “our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king.

This is a direct answer to the king's question: “Who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?” They reply, “Our God is able! We know it! He is sovereign over all affairs, over all kings, over all powers, including your fiery furnace.”

Daniel said something similar in chapter 2 after God revealed the king's dream to him:

For wisdom and power belong to Him. ²¹ It is He who changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings. Daniel 2:20-21

The three young men continue: “But if not,” (or, as the NIV and NAS render the phrase, “But even if he does not”) “be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

Note clearly that these men are not thumbing their noses at the king. They are saying: “We are to obey you in many matters. We do. We are loyal to you. But we will worship no one except the one true God.”

In this, Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael sound like Peter and John in Acts 4. The two disciples are arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin – the same Jewish ruling council that condemned Jesus not long before:

⁸ So [the Sanhedrin] called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹ But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, ²⁰ for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” Acts 4:18-20

Peter and John are respectful, but they could not obey the Sanhedrin's command. To do so would be to violate God's explicit command.

When we read today's text earlier in the service, we stopped at this point. Perhaps that seemed strange to you: Why did we not continue reading of their deliverance?

We'll get there. But we stopped with “Even if He does not, we will not bow down . . .” because this is our own situation: We will face challenges and persecutions. Most likely the main danger will be to our reputation, but to stand for God could cost us a job or a friendship. And it is not inconceivable that several in this room at some point could be faced with a threat to our lives. Like these three Jews, we know that God is in control. We know that He is able to save. But we won't know: Will He save us, or will He not?

The Apostle Paul faced such situations continually. He tells how he commends himself as a servant of God:

“in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; . . . ^{v9} as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything. 2 Corinthians 6:4-5, 9-10

Paul never knew if the next beating would be his last. In Lystra, Timothy's home town, he was stoned and left for dead. Presumably with good reason.

You won't stand before Nebuchadnezzar. Probably you will never stand before the most powerful man in the world while he threatens you with death if you don't obey him. But, my friend, you will stand before some earthly power, tempting to you to be

loyal to him and to be disloyal to God. And this earthly power will threaten punishment if you disobey – relational, financial, or physical punishment.

How will you act in that situation? How will God act?

- We stopped at verse 18 becomes sometimes God will act for your good and His glory by miraculously saving you from the threat.
- *And* we stopped at verse 18 becomes sometimes God will act for your good and His glory by having you suffer the penalty, and by enabling you to love Him throughout.

We see both such outcomes in the last paragraph of Hebrews 11:

³² **And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets--** ³³ **who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions,** ³⁴ **quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.** ³⁵ **Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.** ³⁶ **Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.** ³⁷ **They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated--** ³⁸ **of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.** Hebrews 11:32-38

Do you see the two groups in this passage?

- Verses 33-35a report how God works for these faithful men and women, protecting them with His mighty hand. The author includes a direct reference to Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael, who “quenched the power of fire.”
- Verses 35b-38 report how God works for these faithful men and women by *not* protecting them from earthly harm, from earthly suffering. They are stoned. They are sawn in two. They are killed. They lose all earthly possessions.

The difference between the two groups is *not* their degree of faith. Verse 39 tells us they were *all* “commended through their faith.”

The point is this: When the test of loyalties comes, and you make the right choice – you remain loyal to God – there is no guarantee that you will come out on top in any earthly sense.

These three men knew that. They knew God was able to save. And they knew He might not. They were still loyal. They were still faithful. They still relied on God’s wisdom and might, not their own, not the king’s.

Why? They were confident of three things:

1) *They were citizens of a different kingdom.*

Although they were in exile, they were God’s chosen people. Babylon was not their home. They were resident there, working hard, building up Babylon, as God had instructed. But their ultimate loyalty was elsewhere.

Just so with us. Peter tells us that we are “sojourners and exiles,” “strangers and aliens” in this world (1 Peter 2:11). Ultimately we are not citizens of any earthly kingdom. We must remember that.

2) *Eternity matters most.*

Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael knew what Job knew:

For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. 26 And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God. Job 19:25-26

They were aware of the truth that God will speak to Daniel later:

At that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. 2 And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Daniel 12:1-2

Eternity is coming. This life is real and important. But another life is ahead. And that one will last forever.

So, like these three men, we too must remember: Eternity matters most. Another life is ahead.

3) *God is working all things together for our good and His glory.*

These men knew the stories of Joseph and his brothers: How Joseph remained faithful to God, even though he was sold into slavery, even though he was imprisoned unjustly when he rejected the advances of Potiphar’s wife. God used those very sins against Joseph for His glory, and for the good of Joseph and his family.

These men also knew Isaiah’s and Jeremiah’s prophecies of God’s judgment on His people, and their yet coming restoration. They knew the prophets’ call to faithfulness, to loyalty to God, to trust God with the outcome. They knew of God’s wisdom and might.

My friends, we have all the evidence they had – and much more. We see the ultimate picture of Jesus suffering, losing all in this world – yet having a great joy set before Him. We have the explicit promise of Romans 8:28 –

God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

We are citizens of a different kingdom. Eternity matters most. God is working all things together for His glory and our good. Do you know this? Do you believe it? Do you act on this belief?

The Result of Loyalty

I’ll read much of the rest of the story:

¹⁹ **Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury, and the expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.**

The phrase “The expression of his face was changed” reads literally, “the image of his face was changed.” This is the same word for image used in verse 1 of the statue Nebuchadnezzar made.

^{19b} **He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated.** ²⁰ **And he ordered some of the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace.** ²¹ **Then these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the burning fiery furnace.** ²² **Because the king’s order was urgent and the furnace overheated, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.** ²³ **And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace.**

Note that the men were bound and thrown into the fire. They are saved, eventually. But salvation came from the midst of the fire, They were not saved from experiencing fire.

²⁴ **Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, “Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?” They answered and said to the king, “True, O king.”** ²⁵ **He answered and said, “But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.”**

There is considerable speculation about the identity of this fourth “son of the gods” in the furnace. Some argue that this is Jesus Himself, making an appearance before His incarnation. Others contend this is a mighty angel of God. This verse and Nebuchadnezzar reference in verse 28 to the angel are all we

have to go on in making a decision. But in the end the identification is not particularly important. Clearly God rescued the three men.

²⁶ Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning fiery furnace; he declared, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here!" Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. ²⁷ And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king's counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men. The hair of their heads was not singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them. ²⁸ Nebuchadnezzar answered and said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. ²⁹ Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way." ³⁰ Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

For the three men, salvation is complete. The fire burns their bonds – and nothing else. They do not have even a trace of the smell of smoke on their clothes.

Note also: Not only are they saved from Nebuchadnezzar's wrath, but they gain Nebuchadnezzar's favor. They disobeyed him. But he trusts their loyalty. He never had any reason to distrust them. Now, he is humbled – somewhat.

But only somewhat. He is still trying to enforce his ideas with brute force. He does not come away saying, "Wow, I will worship this great god alone!" Instead, he continues to try to earn God's favor by threatening those who won't acknowledge Him.

Do you see the irony here? Some interpret this chapter as if Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael earn God's favor through their loyalty. But they earned nothing. God was under no obligation to save them. They knew that. God's salvation was all of grace. Nebuchadnezzar, on the other hand, tries to earn God's favor through his threats, and he looks ridiculous.

So the lesson is not: Be faithful, and God will protect you. The lesson is: Be faithful, and leave the results to Him. You are citizens of another kingdom. You are eternal. God is working all things for your good and His glory.

Conclusion

So where does that leave you and me?

If you are Christian:

You are in the world but not of the world. You are citizens of another, eternal kingdom. You know that God is sovereign, even over the evil acts of evil men.

Consider three implications of the truths we have seen in this chapter:

1) *Live out your earthly loyalties faithfully.*

Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael are not rebels at heart. They are loyal to the king. Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael do not remove themselves from the world. They labor in the civil service, working diligently for the good of the empire.

Yes, we are citizens elsewhere. Yes, we must live in light of eternity. But we *are* in the world. We are to work diligently in our jobs, in our society. Indeed, our work in this world is to be "as to the Lord" (Ephesians 6:7), even when commanded by an earthly boss.

2) *You will experience conflict of loyalties, so prepare for it.*

Don't be surprised. You do not know when the time will come – but it will come. The conflict may be between your family and God, or your friends and God, or your employer and God, or the government and God. Anticipate the conflict. Prepare yourself. Pray about the coming conflict. Consider how to express respect to earthly authorities even when disobeying them in order to obey God.

3) *Expect persecution when you live out loyalty to God, so prepare for it.*

Don't expect God's supernatural deliverance – He may give it, but expect the threatened consequences. Memorize Bible verses that will help you endure the persecution. Indeed, many of our Fighter Verses are chosen to help in just such situations. Verses like Psalm 73:25-26:

Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. ²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Remind yourself daily of the truths above: You are a stranger and alien on earth; eternity matters most; God is sovereign, working all to my good and His glory. Pray – for those persecuted, for those who will face persecution in the future, including yourself.

For those here this morning who are *not* believers, not Christians: What is the message of this chapter?

We already said that the message is not: "Believe in Jesus and you will never suffer." As we saw in Hebrews 11, some great men and women of faith were sawn in two. Some were killed with the sword.

The message is this: There is an ultimate king to whom you owe loyalty. He created you. He has all rights to you. He is almighty. He is all wise. And He is good beyond imagining. You have offended him – by giving your loyalty to others. All His might and power will be opposed to you for eternity if you persist. But He has provided an opportunity for you. He sent His own son Jesus to die on the cross, to pay the penalty for your rejection of Him. If you repent, if you turn, if you trust in Him – He will welcome you with open arms. All His might and wisdom will work for your good and His glory, even in the midst of earthly sorrows and persecution. In His presence is fullness of joy. At His right hand are pleasures forevermore.

So will you believe? Will you repent? Will you trust Him? Will you be loyal to Him – by His grace?

This sermon was preached on 3/18/2007 at Desiring God Community Church in Charlotte, NC. Sinclair Ferguson's *Daniel*, (Word, Mastering the Old Testament, 1988) and Tremper Longman's *Daniel*, (Zondervan, The NIV Application Commentary, 1999) were helpful.

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