

Obstinacy of Obedience

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Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[0 : 01] Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening, in Christ's name, Amen. Hello everybody, really nice to see you all.

My name is Aaron, if you don't know me, so I look after this service, and I'd love to meet you if you are new. So Daniel 3, I really, this is just a fabulous story, isn't it?

This is a fantastic story. Let's start with a bit of an overview, just to remind you of the sequence of events. I'll go back to chapter 2 first. So the end of chapter 2, you remember, Nebuchadnezzar is warned through a dream, and you remember the dream from last week, that there's this statue, it's made out of lots of different materials, bronze, gold, clay, gold, iron, and it's going to crumble, and it was a dream Nebuchadnezzar had, predicting the falling of his own empire, and it was a warning, right?

And then at the end of the chapter, Nebuchadnezzar says, Daniel, your God is really great. So that was positive. Now, at the beginning of chapter 3, we see that all he got out of that whole thing, it seems, was, I was the head of gold.

Gold. So let's build a statue just out of gold. I think he was trying to, like, kind of outsmart the dream, perhaps. He's kind of like people today that have kind of like a religious experience.

[1 : 26] They go on a camp or a church or something, and then it sort of stirs them a bit, but then, you know, they kind of shrug it off and not much changes. This is the king.

So he builds a statue. It's about 100 feet tall. It's all gold. Very impressive looking thing, and probably dominated the whole landscape. But the way the story describes the dedication of the idol is very interesting.

There are these long descriptions of all the important people who had to turn up, all the instruments that had to be played, and the writer of Daniel is not sloppy. It's written very carefully.

You would have heard a lot of repetition. You're probably thinking, was he just trying to fill in the story a little bit? No, it's very carefully written. What's going on here, I believe, is satire.

Daniel is mocking the whole thing. I'll just read a tiny little chunk of it again, and just with that in your mind, hear it. The satraps, the prefects, the governors, the counsellors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces came to the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

[2 : 38] Then the satraps and prefects and governors, the counsellors, treasurers, justices, magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces gathered for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. And they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

I love that last bit. And they stood before it. They're kind of just like standing there. It makes the whole thing sound a bit pathetic, doesn't it? It's like you can imagine them all sort of standing there. Okay, so what are we supposed to do now?

Is something going to happen? Apparently when Hitler visited Italy to sure up support in 1938, the people weren't very impressed by him.

And so the local authorities set up these giant speakers in the streets. And when Hitler rode through the streets, they'd play cheering and clapping from old Italian movies. It was this, I mean, it's a fiasco, right?

But it's this great sort of example of great power and real emptiness kind of side by side. And I think this is what sort of Daniel's trying to convey here. On the one hand, he's highlighting all the pomp and ceremony of the whole thing by reminding us of all the important people that turned up.

[3 : 56] And on the other hand, he's reminding us repeatedly that this thing, this idol, which we never actually get a description of, is just something the king made.

And I think that's why they don't tell us what it looks like. It's just this thing that was made. Eight times in the passage, it says, when it talks about the idol, it says, Nebuchadnezzar had set it up. But Daniel was repeatedly reminding us, the king just got some dudes to make this thing. Just got some guys, just like, you know, just got some guys to make it and set it up. And everyone's supposed to worship it. I think it's fantastic satis. It's power. And just complete emptiness. But the power is real, though. It is very real, because almost everybody actually did bow down and worship the statue when the music played.

We read next in our story that some Chaldeans saw that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did not bow down, and they dobed them in. It's most likely their motivation for dobbing them in was that they hated seeing foreigners succeed in their country, which would be a very interesting thing to talk about for a little while, but we won't.

[5 : 14] Now, for those of you who have been on holiday and joining us for the first time, let me give you a bit of background to this story here and why perhaps they were dobed in and sort of a bit of a cultural background here.

So Daniel, BC, it was set. Babylon was like the preeminent empire in the world, and their strategy, which was a very clever one for taking over other countries, was this.

And this is what they've done to Israel. They go in, you know, they do the normal takeover stuff that you do in war, but then what they do is they remove the professional class.

So the artisans and politicians and all the scholars, they pull them out. They take them out of the country they've overtaken and bring them back into their country. So they exile them back to Babylon.

They go in, take all the best people back to Babylon. You'd call it subjugation through assimilation. That was the strategy. It's a clever one. Their thinking was, in a couple of generations, these best people who are the culture creators, the culture makers, right?

[6 : 13] These best people, in a generation or two, these folks will lose their distinct values and stop resisting the dominant culture. So it was a great strategy. So Daniel and his friends were some of the best of the best who had been exiled.

They were Jews living in Babylon, and they're doing really well. They were, you know, high and high-ranking government positions. Dr. Carl Ellis, this American theologian, he said this about their situation.

He said there's a difference between being functional in a culture and assimilating into that culture. Being functional in a culture and assimilating into that culture. And by commanding these Jews to bow down, by demanding that they break the fifth commandment, the king was asking Daniel's friends to assimilate.

And they wouldn't have it. They wouldn't do it. The story continues. The king is furious, but I think he quite likes them. He gives them a second chance. Again, they refuse to worship this image, and so they're chucked into the fiery furnace.

But they live, and it's a miraculous thing. And Nebuchadnezzar is very impressed by this, and at the end of it, he says, he makes another decree saying, no one can make fun of the God of Israel or these lads.

[7 : 26] So that's the big story. Now, big themes. Three big themes. Three big themes in the story. One, pressure. Two, obedience.

Three, presence. I think those are the three major themes. Pressure, obedience, and presence. Let's talk about them. We'll spend a bit of time on pressure. Let's talk pressure.

In the 1930s, in the heyday of Stalin, adulation in the Soviet Union, I read about this. There was this big civic meeting, and Stalin's name was mentioned by one of the officials during a speech.

And this triggered a standing ovation. Everyone stood to their feet. But it created a bit of a dilemma as well, because no one wanted to be the first person to sit down. Eventually, there was this elderly gentleman who couldn't remain standing, and he sat down.

An official noted this person, and he was arrested the next day. He had basically failed to worship the idol long enough. I want you to imagine for a moment the pressure on these young men.

[8 : 33] And they would have been young men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Benigot. Imagine the pressure on them to bow down. Everybody's doing it. Specifically, all the really important people are doing it.

And these guys, they have really good jobs. And they know the king likes them. And the praise band is playing. Over and over again, the praise band.

These bagpipes. It's all happening. And all of a sudden, they all bow down. You're all doing it. Imagine the pressure. There was an Oxford study a while ago.

Actually, not that long ago. In the last 10 years. Focusing on premarital sex in America. And I'm going somewhere with this. The results were published in a book called, which you may have heard of in 2011, called Premarital Sex in America.

How Young Americans Meet Mate and Think About Marrying. Apparently, it's one of the largest and best studies of this topic. And one of the findings was very interesting.

[9 : 41] So, men of a certain age group. They got men of a certain age group, say 18 to 35, I think it was. And they split them into two categories. Religious men.

Non-religious men. And they found that they both have the same percentage of virgins in these two groups. How do we interpret this?

I think it's obvious. When immersed in it, dominant cultural values usually win. So, culture tells you one thing about sex.

Your faith tells you one thing about sex. You believe culture. You bow to the idol. Why? Because society is so powerful.

The pressure is immense. It's so coercive. The cultural narrative is just, it is hard to resist. These three friends.

[10 : 45] The pressure on them to conform. Man. But they didn't, did they? They didn't bow down. And here's the thing. Not only was there social pressure to conform, there was the pressure of the threat of violence.

I've told you about my old school a couple of times, I think. I went to this grammar school and you were ranked smartest to dumbest in the school at the end of every year. Like there was this ranking according to all these exams.

Published, right? So the social pressure to do well academically was quite full on. Because you could go up or down this list. And, but also they would can you.

If you did badly or you misbehaved, they would hit you with sticks. The teachers would. So this is like, by a factor of a million more, this is the same situation here.

There's a social pressure to conform and there's the threat of violence. The king said, do this or you will be killed a horrible death. That's quite an acute motivator.

[11 : 48] Now we're not being killed in North America for our faith. But we can be punished socially. We live in interesting times in Vancouver, right?

Christianity is not just, for some people it's not just a worldview to be tolerated or an interesting worldview. It's a dangerous belief system that people want squashed.

So outing yourself as a Christian, well many people just keep it quiet. Because you can be punished for that. It's like saying you're a Christian to some people like at your work. It's like saying you're an earth-hating, you know, anti-science homophobe.

So who would, why would you want to do that? You'd be punished immediately, wouldn't you? C.S. Lewis wrote an essay called The Inner Ring. And The Inner Ring was this place where all the cool kids were in The Inner Ring. All the essential, important people existed in this inner ring.

And he said, I believe that in all people's lives, one of the most dominant elements is the desire to be inside the local ring. And the terror of being left outside of it.

[12 : 51] So he's talking about our great desire to be on the right side of this kind of, there's this invisible line that separates the inside, the cool people, the right-thinking people, with the crazy people, the wacky people.

And we want to be on the inside of that. Christians in Vancouver, we put ourselves on the outside. Almost immediately. We can become objects of ridicule and misunderstanding. Not always, but sometimes. Sometimes that can happen. And it's why Christians stay quiet. And they bow to the idols.

Back of the story. So we've got these three friends. They're pressured to bow down. Their social pressure was enormous. And they're threatened with death. So that's the first word, pressure. Pressure. Second word, obedience. More quick this time. Despite the pressure, the boys didn't acquiesce. This is the miracle.

[13:51] I think this is the great miracle of the passage. They didn't acquiesce. And this is incredible, considering the force on them. And they had many reasons to compromise. It would have been so easy to justify it.

Just a little bit of, I mean, I don't really mean it. I'm just going to bow and do what the other folks do. I mean, I'm a Jew in a pagan court. It's taken me so long to get into this group, this friendship circle, this job, this whatever.

This is what these guys could think. I could do so much good. If I just compromise a bit, I won't lose my job. I could do so much good here. I'm just going to compromise a bit. Humans are excellent justifiers.

I do it all the time. Maybe you do it. Maybe you've said this. This is just what everyone does at university. This is just how business gets done in Vancouver.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did not justify themselves. Did not compromise.

[14:54] They remained standing. And then when they are brought before Nebuchadnezzar, do you see what they say? It's such inspiring words. This is verses 16, 17 and 18.

Oh, Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, 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. But if not, I love this. But if not, be it known to you, O king, we will not serve your gods. We will not bow down to the golden image you have set up.

Just amazing stuff. God, we know you can save us. But even if you don't, let it be known. We will not bow down to your gods, Nebuchadnezzar.

It's not just inspiring. It's actually quite a nuanced response. Do you see what the, think about what's the focus of their response here? The focus is obedience.

[15:59] The focus is not deliverance. I mean, I'm sure they want deliverance. But it's not actually the focus. The focus is obedience. Even if we die, we won't bow down. These young men, they served God not because of what they could get out of God, but because of who God is.

That's the only way you can make a stand like that. They're saying, we obey you, God. We obey God because he's God, not because he's useful to us. To them, God was more beautiful than useful.

God was more beautiful than he was useful. And that is a place that we need to come to as we mature as Christians. Their desire for deliverance was secondary to their desire just to honor God. You know, I want my kids to love me, not because I do things for them. I want them to love me because I'm their dad. See, Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego, they make this defiance stand because of who God is, not because they thought God had to deliver them out of that situation. They believed he could, but they didn't think he had to. They didn't presume on God to do this. And this is very helpful for us because I think many modern evangelicals, what happens is they get their faith and they get their own agenda and they kind of mush it together.

[17:14] In the same situation, some modern evangelicals might pray something like this, God, we bind this fire.

You will deliver us. Amen. Faith is this tool. It becomes like this tool to manipulate God towards your own desired end.

That's not faith. God is more beautiful than useful. That's the place we need to come to. We obey. We don't compromise because God is worth it, even when it is a pain to us, even when it causes us pain, even when it puts us on the outside of that invisible line.

So we've talked about pressure. We've talked about obedience. Now let's talk about suffering just for a minute. Suffering. Very quickly. In the story we hear these three friends are thrown into a furnace, but they live.

And it's just as an aside here, and this could be a whole thing to talk about, what we won't is that it's fascinating that the soldiers who delivered the prisoners died.

[18:25] The ones who lived were the ones who obeyed God. So Nebuchadnezzar looks him to this fiery furnace, and he sees four people in there.

Now what do we make? Who's this fourth person? I mean, we just don't know. Was it a pre-incarnate Christ? Maybe. Possibly. Yes. I don't know. Nebuchadnezzar says it was an angel, but I don't trust Nebuchadnezzar's theological savviness.

So we really just don't know here. But I think the big point is this. Whilst in the furnace, they are protected and joined by a divine presence.

Whilst in the furnace. And I think the point is this. Very simple. God doesn't always take us out of our painful situations. But he does promise that he'll be with us in the midst of these awful, painful situations.

I think that's the message. Now, I'm going to finish up. The main message to use sort of Bible talk here, I think, is this.

[19 : 30] Flee from idolatry. Flee idolatry. Do not bow down to the gods of the age. And the modern gods are different from the Babylonian gods, but they have the same allure and the pressure to conform is just the same.

But let us be people of conviction. Because of who God is. And he is the God who became one of us in Christ.

Who entered our furnace. Who came to experience our suffering and save us from this idolatry.

This is a God who deserves our loyalty.

What I'm going to do now is I just want to invite Emma to come up. And I want us to take a moment to ask the Holy Spirit just to speak to us. I want us to spend a couple of minutes asking the Holy Spirit to highlight areas in our life where we have bowed to the idols of our age.

Ask the Holy Spirit to highlight areas of our life where we need to repent and know forgiveness. We have compromised ourselves. Ask the Holy Spirit to change how we think about him.

[20 : 52] We want God to be more beautiful to us than he is useful to us. And ask the Holy Spirit to strengthen us ahead. As we face these situations, we're at as tempting to bow.

But we shouldn't. For the glory of God. So let's spend two or three minutes doing that. Let's pray.

Let's pray. Pray to yourselves. If you feel like you would like somebody to pray with you, you could ask the person sitting beside you to pray with you.

Towards the end of the service, Brie will let you know. There will be a couple of folks over here also who can pray with you as well. Thank you.