

Nebuchadnezzar, at least in his own mind, considered himself to be the king of the world. Because, after all, he now ruled over everything from Babylon all the way to Egypt and everything in between. He had brought peace. He had brought stability. He had brought unity to what he knew of the world. And more than this, Nebuchadnezzar also thought that his gods had given all of this to him. That they had chosen him specifically to be their divine agent to bring all of this peace and stability and order and unity into the world. So he saw his kingdom as something that just had to exist, as something that was inevitable. And he saw himself as the one who had brought all of these things about.

And so Nebuchadnezzar wanted to celebrate his victory. He wanted to symbolize that unity which he had achieved. And so he set up a great golden image in the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon, something like a great stone pillar covered over with gold on every side, some 90 feet tall and 9 feet wide. And based on what we know from Babylonian art, it's very likely that he covered that gold with all kinds of writing talking about the glory of his kingdom, talking about how wonderful his accomplishments were, probably also talking about the glory of his gods. And I'm sure there were also pictures everywhere on this image too of Nebuchadnezzar standing victorious, standing on top of lions and standing on top of men. This was a testament to his power, a testament to what he had done for the world.

And so he really wants to drive home his point here, to make this unity as real as he can make it. And so he commands all of the nations which he is ruling over that time, "Send at least your leaders. Come to the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon, and worship this golden image." They would not only be united politically. They would also be united religiously as well. But don't misunderstand me here, though. Nebuchadnezzar was not saying they all had to have the same religion. That's not how he thought. No, what he wanted was that they all be united in one thing, in this religion that was his, to worship his gods, to worship his power, to worship the empire which he had set up. Once they had done that, it didn't matter what you believed. Go home. Believe what you want to believe. Do what you want to do, as long as you bend the knee first in Babylon. Once that was done, we would have true unity. And we're told in the book of Daniel that all of those nations that he was ruling over, they all came to Dura in the province of Babylon, and they fell down to worship that golden image.

All except one and three men in particular: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, sons of Israel. They did not listen to what the king had to say. They would not worship his gods or fall down before his images. And you can imagine why Nebuchadnezzar was so angry. Because on the one hand, he thought it was literally insane, literally impossible that anyone would oppose him! His gods put him there. He was the one chosen to do these things. To resist him was to resist the will of the gods. And more than that, Nebuchadnezzar probably saw these three men as a threat, a threat to the unity that he so desperately wanted to show. Because if there was any division in his kingdom especially on this point, then the whole thing would just come unraveled. The whole thing would come crashing down. So is it any wonder then that Nebuchadnezzar says to them, "You will bow down before this image or else you will suffer a terrible, terrible price!"

And Christians, just because these things happened 3000 some years ago doesn't mean that the world has changed all that much in that time. The world still demands our allegiance. The world still wants us to bend the knee to what it has to say before we bend the knee to God. The only

difference between then and now is that now we don't usually hear it cloaked in religion. They're not usually talking about gods or what God wants us to do, but simply a declaration to listen to the dictates of men, what men have done, what men have accomplished. And so you might hear something like the government coming to us and telling us this is what we're supposed to think about things like marriage, about things like sexuality, about things like the family, whatever the case may be. We should bend the knee, it demands, and listen to what they have to say. Then you can go home and believe what you want to believe, so long as it doesn't conflict with anything that they said. Or we might hear the media around us trying to give us a picture of how they think the world should be. We see in movies. We hear it in songs. Whatever it might be, often contrary to what God has established. And they want us to conform to that, to think that that is completely normal. And if you think opposite of what all of this is saying, well, keep that to yourself. That's something for at home and not anywhere out in public. Yes, the world still wants us to bend the knee, Christians, to give our allegiance first of all to itself. And when we have done that, the world says, then you can do whatever you want. But go against that, and we will suffer the consequences. The world will not take that lying down. They will call us outcasts, call us all kinds of nasty things trying to get us to conform to the ways of its thinking. But we are not called to bend the knee to the world. We are called to follow after God.

And that's exactly what the three young men did. They did not listen to what Nebuchadnezzar had to say. Because listen to what they said to him: "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter." These things that you've heard about us are absolutely true. We did not worship your golden image, and we will not worship your gods. "But if this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us from your hand, O king." He has the power to take us out of this situation, because he is the one who is the king and not you, Nebuchadnezzar. God is the one who rules over all things and not Babylon. But even if God doesn't choose to deliver us at this time--and he might not. It's his choice--"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 will not listen to Nebuchadnezzar, because their allegiance is to God. Their full and undivided loyalty is to the Lord of Lords.

And Christians, we are also called to have an undivided loyalty to God. We are not called to be divided, as if we have one foot in the world and one foot with God, always going back and forth trying to figure out what we should do. To put it very bluntly, we are not called to be Americans first and Christians second. We're not even called to be Christians first and Americans second. We are called to be Christians above all, because God is our king, because God is the one who rules over all things. And no matter what the world tries to say to us, our allegiance is with him. So whenever the government tries to tell us what we can or can't think, our allegiance is with God. Whenever the media tries to paint us as outcasts, that we should just conform to what is normal, our allegiance is with God. And we are called to follow after him in all things, because he is the one who rules over all things.

But Christians, that loyalty is going to cost us something in this life. It has to. The world is not going to take it lying down. And that's certainly what happened to the three young men in our reading. Because when Nebuchadnezzar heard what those three men had to say, he was angry, absolutely furious. How dare they go against his will! And so he ordered that furnace to be heated seven times hotter than it usually was, because he was going to make an example of them,

to show all these other nations that they should stay in line. And he was so angry that he carried out this order far too quickly. They heated up the furnace too quickly and that caused it to overheat, and it killed the soldiers sent to throw the three men into the fire. They also bound them in their clothes, probably so that they would catch fire all that much more quickly. Who would be able to escape from such a terrible fate? Who was the God who could deliver them out of Nebuchadnezzar's hand?

And Christians, being loyal to God will cost us something, too. The world may ridicule us, to call us all kinds of names. The world may reject us, sometimes even in our own families. The world may accuse us falsely, saying we did things or thought things that we never did. We may even suffer legal penalties, being slapped with fines or even being thrown into jail, all because we are loyal to our Lord. And though it's not true in this part of the world, in many parts of the world, being loyal to God may very well mean physical suffering, even death. Because there have been more martyrs in the world in the past hundred years than all of the previous centuries of the church combined. It is a time of great persecution. And may the Lord keep us safe in these times!

But those three men went into that fire anyway. They were not afraid. Because even if they died that day--and they knew they might--yet they were serving the Lord their God. They would serve him no matter what. But God did a great miracle for them that day by delivering them out of the fiery furnace. Because when he brought them out, they weren't even singed in their hair. Their clothes had not burned. They didn't even smell like fire. God delivered his people, because he is the God who can deliver in this way.

And the thing that we should take away from that, Christians, is this. Even if we suffer in this life, God will still be with us. He may bring our suffering to an end quickly, and thanks be to God if he does that. But even if he doesn't, that does not mean that he has abandoned us, because we will go to be with him forever. It's a win-win situation however you look at it. You win either because the persecution comes to an end. Or you win because after a short time of suffering, you get to be with the Lord forever. And God does not go back on his promises. God will be with us always.

So follow after him, Christians. Listen to the Lord your God. He is the one who will take care of you. And even if our loyalty to him costs us everything in this life, yet we still have the Lord, and that is a far greater thing than anything this world can provide.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you are the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, who commands the morning and also causes the sea to know its place. You have the destinies of the nations in your hand, and you also direct our steps. Cause us always to trust in you so that we may be loyal to you all our days, knowing that you will not fail us in the day of trial; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.