

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 11, 2009**

RESOLUTIONS, PART 2

Proverbs 3:1-10

If you made any New Year's resolutions this year, how is it going, now that we're 11 days into the new year? Are you pressing on with the Lord's help? Or have you been tempted to throw in the towel and give up?

Last Sunday I suggested that Proverbs 3 provides a series of resolutions to live by. With each one, though, we have to understand and remember that it is possible to live by these resolutions only in the power of God's Spirit at work in us. We cannot do it in our own power. No matter how hard we try, we will inevitably fail. You cannot live God's way without God's power. But His power is available to all who come to Him in faith and humility, seeking His help to live a God-pleasing, God-blessed life. We receive the help – the power – we need as we allow the Lord Jesus to reside on the throne of our hearts and to live His life in us. These are not “do it yourself” resolutions any more than following Christ is a “do it yourself” life.

Here are the resolutions to live by we noted last Sunday:

1. I will trust in the Lord with all my heart (3:5a).
2. I will not lean on my own understanding (3:5b).
3. I will acknowledge the Lord in all my ways (3:6a).
4. I will not be wise in my own eyes (3:7a).
5. I will fear the Lord and turn away from evil (3:7b).

Last Sunday we focused mostly on the first two, which are found in Proverbs 3:5. But we touched on each one of them, at least briefly. Today I want to continue to examine these resolutions with you in the hope of helping us all see their real-life application and implications.

Last fall, three years after the terrible devastation of Hurricane Katrina, another hurricane, this one named Gustav, was bearing down on Louisiana. State and local officials in Louisiana organized the largest evacuation effort in U. S. history, with more than 3 million people fleeing the storm. But not everyone left. Some residents of New Orleans refused to evacuate. One woman said she had what she needed to ride out the storm. What was she relying on to make it through the storm? She said: “I've got liquor, cash, food, ammo and weed.”

Whew! Is that what you rely on when one of life's storms hits and your very survival may be at stake? Instead of a hurricane, it could be an illness you never saw coming. It could be a financial meltdown. Or a crisis on the job front. Or trouble in a relationship. Or a situation that tests the integrity of your character or your faith. In times (or storms) like these, where do you turn? In what do you put your trust? If you have liquor, cash, food, ammo and weed, is that all you need? What would God say about that?

There are no circumstances in life in which these resolutions from Proverbs 3 do not apply. There are no circumstances in which they are not relevant. There is no time when it is not the

right time to trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on our own understanding. There is no circumstance in life when it is not right to acknowledge the Lord in His sovereign power and gracious rule. If we are wise, we will acknowledge Him as Lord in all our ways, in every area of our lives, for there is not a single inch of the universe where Jesus is not Lord. And there is not a single atom anywhere that is not subject to His sovereign authority.

Let me try to put some flesh and bones on these resolutions by telling you a story. I'm sure the story will be familiar to most of you. It is a story about three young men, three amigos named Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, who were taken as exiles from their home in Judah to Babylon along with Daniel and others, when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. If their names are not familiar, they are better known by the Chaldean (or Babylonian) names they were given: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. You can read this story yourself in chapter 3 of the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament. And I encourage you to do so – even if you've read it dozens of times before.

The events described in Daniel 3 took place when Nebuchadnezzar was king of Babylon. The king built this mammoth golden statue which was 90 feet high. At the dedication of the statue, the king commanded all the officials and all the people of his kingdom to bow down and worship the golden image. The statue may have represented one of the many gods already recognized and worshiped in Babylon. Or Nebuchadnezzar may have been introducing a new god. To bow down before it in worship was no problem for most people in Babylon, since they were polytheists (meaning they worshiped many different gods). Most likely they had no trouble adding one more god to their pantheon, especially under the threat of death if they refused.

But to bow down before this statue, however innocuous it may have seemed, was out of the question for Jews like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who worshiped one God and one God only. When the signal was given and people from all over the kingdom fell down and worshiped the golden statue, these three silently refused, an act of defiance the king would not tolerate. Nebuchadnezzar had already decreed that anyone who refused to bow down in worship would be thrown into a fiery furnace and burned to death.

When the king was told of their act of insubordination by some informants, he exploded in rage. He had the three friends brought before him, where he gave them another chance to obey his decree. He gave them this ultimatum: Bow down in worship, or burn in the furnace.

Life and death hung in the balance for these three men. All they had to do was humor the king by bowing their heads to the golden statue he had made. It wasn't a big deal, was it? Wasn't there some way they could get around the conflict? Here are eight different excuses or rationalizations they could have used to satisfy the king and save their lives. They could have said:

1. We will bow down but not actually *worship* the idol.
2. We won't become idol worshipers, but we will do it just this one time, and then ask God for forgiveness.
3. The king has absolute power, and we must obey him. God will understand.
4. The king appointed us to our high positions. We owe this to him.
5. This is a foreign land, so God will excuse us for following the customs of the land. (You know, when in Rome....)

6. Our ancestors set up idols in God's temple. This isn't half as bad as that!
7. We're not hurting anybody.
8. If we get ourselves killed and some pagans take our high positions in the government, they won't help our people in exile.

(From the NIV *Life Application Bible*, p. 1481)

They could have used any of these excuses to justify going along with the king's demand. But they didn't.

Their circumstances were certainly extreme, but the conflict experienced by Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego between their allegiance to God and their responsibility to the state is not unique. It is a conflict every one of us may face, if our governing authorities should ever require us to do something contrary to the teachings of God's Word, or, if the government should pressure or prohibit us from doing what we know God wants us to do (as was the case for Daniel himself in Daniel 6, when King Darius issued an edict forbidding prayers to any god except to the king himself, for a period of 30 days).

It is true that the Bible instructs us to obey the government. The classic biblical statement is in Romans 13, where Paul says that every person is to be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established, and those which exist have been instituted by God (13:1-2). That is not an easy thing for some believers to digest, particularly those who live under oppressive or repressive regimes. But the biblical injunction to obey the government is not an absolute one, which Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, as well as Daniel, understood.

Yes, we are to obey the government – in all areas of its legitimate authority. Listen to Paul again: “Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor” (Romans 13:7). Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego knew that God had established Nebuchadnezzar. God had placed him on the throne. But notice this: As James Montgomery Boice put it so well, the fact that Nebuchadnezzar had been established by God did not make Nebuchadnezzar God. The fact that God raises up rulers to govern the nations does not make rulers autonomous. It does not give them absolute, unlimited power. It does not make them omnipotent. On the contrary, it limits their power, for they are accountable to the one true God who has put them in power, whether they acknowledge Him as God or not.

So, what were these three men to do? Were they to go along in order to get along with the king? Were they to compromise in order to preserve their positions, not to mention their lives? Without a moment's hesitation they knew how they must respond. They understood it *was* a big deal. They knew that remaining true to God was more important than life itself. They were determined to trust in the Lord with all their heart, even when it seemed certain – at least from a human point of view – that it would result in their deaths.

Do you know what they said to the king when he demanded that they bow down before his golden statue? They said: “If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and He will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if He does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up” (Daniel 3:17-18).

Do you hear that? “Our God is able.” Our God *is* able, because our God is sovereign. They were confident that God would deliver them from death, or He would deliver them through death. Not only had they resolved to trust in the Lord with all their heart. They had resolved as well to acknowledge Him as Lord in all their ways. In *all* their ways. Even when their lives were hanging in the balance.

There is another principle from Proverbs 3 that they took to heart. Verse three says:

Let love and faithfulness never leave you;
Bind them around your neck,
Write them on the tablet of your heart.

Love and faithfulness. In *The Message* it read this way:

Don't lose your grip on Love and Loyalty.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had been loyal servants of Nebuchadnezzar. They had served the king with distinction. It was their intention to serve the king faithfully. But they had their priorities in order. They refused to allow the king to take the place of God in their lives. They refused to let their service to the king take precedence over their allegiance to God. And they have given us an example to follow, even if we never encounter such dramatic circumstances in our lives.

They had their loyalties in the proper order: First, to God. And then to the king *under God*. They remained true to their ultimate loyalty, even when it caused them to be thrown into the fire. Literally.

Nebuchadnezzar was furious with the three, and ordered that they be bound and thrown into the fiery furnace, which had been fired up as hot as they could make it. If you know the story, you know that after they were thrown into the blazing furnace, Nebuchadnezzar was astonished by what he saw. Instead of three men, he saw four in the furnace, walking around in the furnace, unbound and completely unharmed. And the fourth man, the king said, looks like “a son of the gods” (Daniel 3:25).

The Bible does not reveal the identity of this fourth man in the furnace, but it seems certain that it was either an angel sent from the Lord, or what theologians refer to as a “Christophany,” a physical appearance of the Son of God before His incarnation. Whichever it was, it was a dramatic, visible demonstration of God’s presence with His people in times of distress. Whether a physical manifestation of the Lord Jesus Christ or an angel sent from God, it was a fulfillment of the Lord’s promise in Isaiah 43, where the Lord said to His people:

Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you.
And when you pass through the rivers,
They will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,

You will not be burned;
The flames will not set you ablaze.
For I am the Lord, your God,
The Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
(Isaiah 43:1b-3a).

Does God always rescue His servants the way He rescued Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego? No. In Hebrews 11, beginning in verse 33, we read of heroes of faith “who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again” (11:33-35a).

Praise the Lord! But that isn’t the whole story. It didn’t (and doesn’t) always turn out that way. Hebrews 11 continues: “Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated – the world was not worthy of them” (11:35b-38a).

Whether God chooses to deliver His servants from suffering and mistreatment and even death for the sake of His name, or chooses to deliver them *through* death, the bottom line truth remains the same. In life and in death, we belong to God. And our God rules. In life and in death, our God is sovereign.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego knew that. They knew and believed God’s Word. They trusted in the Lord with all their heart and did not lean on their own understanding. In all their ways – most especially when their lives hung in the balance – they acknowledged Him as Lord of all. They did not lose their grip on love and loyalty to the Lord. Not even for a moment.

And God *did* deliver them. They came out of the fire, and when they did, the king and all his officials were amazed by what they saw. The fire had not harmed their bodies. Not a hair on their heads had been singed. There was not a single scorch mark on their clothing. They didn’t smell of fire at all.

Nebuchadnezzar, to his credit, got the message. He recognized it was a God-thing. And he praised the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

Do you have your priorities, your loyalties, in the right order: It is something we need to resolve, each of us, before we find ourselves, or our faith, under fire.

Mike Holmgren just retired from the NFL’s Seattle Seahawks after a successful coaching career with both the Seahawks and the Green Bay Packers. Three years ago, when he led the Seahawks to the Super Bowl against the Pittsburgh Steelers, his wife Kathy missed the game. She was in Africa, along with one of their daughters, Calla, on a mission trip to the Congo. As exciting as it was to make it to the Super Bowl, the Holmgrens agreed that the mission trip to Africa was more important for Kathy and Calla. How is that for having your priorities in order?

Holmgren himself had experienced a defining moment in his life years earlier, when as a young football player he was cut from the New York Jets as a backup to Hall of Fame quarterback Joe Namath. Holmgren said: “I had committed my life to Jesus Christ when I was 11, but in my pursuit to make a name for myself in football, I left God next to my dust-covered Bible. But after getting cut from the Jets, I pulled out my Bible and found comfort in a verse I had memorized in Sunday school:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
And lean not on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He will direct your paths.

“I asked Jesus Christ to take control again. My priorities in life are faith, family, and football – in that order.”

How about you? Have you resolved to trust in the Lord with all your heart and to lean not on your own understanding?

Have you resolved to acknowledge Him as Lord in all your ways?

Have you resolved not to be wise in your own eyes? Not to think you can figure out everything on your own?

Have you resolved to fear the Lord and turn away from evil?

Have you resolved never to lose your grip on love and loyalty – to God, to His church, to your family, to your calling, to your country – in the right order?

With God’s help, in His grace and power, let’s make these our resolutions to live by.

May it be so in us, as it was in Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, to the glory and praise of God. Amen.