

Standalone “Resolved”

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Digging Deeper

Standalone: “Resolved”

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Text(s): Daniel 1:8

Introduction

He was probably the most gifted speaker of his time even if, at the time, others couldn't appreciate what and how he spoke. He spoke into turbulent times of an embattled nation, torn apart by civil war and divided over the wicked institution of slavery. Abraham Lincoln was a tall man both in frame and in speech. From his childhood he read widely and voraciously, having been self-taught in the art of written eloquence. Among the books he kept close was the *King James Version* of the *Bible*, known for its Elizabethan English and innovation in the use of language. Lincoln imitated what he read while putting his own stamp on every word, phrase, and sentence. The rhetoric of his *Gettysburg Address* illustrates best, I think, Lincoln's gift of oratory. It was not a long speech, scarcely off his lips before ending. His closing words have relevance to our study this week, and so we quote them here:

*It is for us the living, rather, to be **dedicated** here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here **dedicated** to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased **devotion** to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of **devotion** -- that we here highly **resolve** that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.*

The work begun by the war was unfinished and that required double *dedication*; the war nobly advanced and that showed double *devotion*. And so the wholly *dedicated* and entirely *devoted* effort of the nation required in the present and the future the high *resolve* of its *people* for a *new birth of freedom* with the hopeful promise that the nation “shall not perish from the earth.” What was needed, said Lincoln, was *resolve*, rooted in *dedication* and growing in *devotion*. Spoken in 1863, with a few more years of war still left to fight, these words embodied what Lincoln imagined to be *the national will and determination*. Far too much blood had been spilled, lives sacrificed, communities disrupted, and unity lost. America was too hip-deep in the struggle for its second independence to surrender now. Gettysburg became the national symbol of massive carnage, brother against brother, on American soil. To quit now would be the great betrayal of every soldier who died and of every principle in the American creed that said, “All men are created equal” — a creed not yet proven but at that moment sorely “tested” (Lincoln's words).

Resolve is a big word, saturated with blood, sweat, and tears, and resting on human hearts that beat with the tread of every soldier who ever gave their life for what they believed about the nations they fought for. It's a big word because *resolve* recruits every ounce of human energy that moves a person to say, “This is worth dying for.” Or, to move away from the language of war to the labor of peace, *resolve* energizes a people to rebuild a world in shambles, from rubble, and for the future because in its heart *resolve* believes there is still a future worth receiving. *Resolve* is willing to start from nothing and imagine everything that is possible after “the war's desolation.” *Resolve* believes that something can come from nothing, even when the laws of nation seem to say otherwise.

Resolve acts with *purpose* for *resolve* thinks that the unresolved can be resolved; that the incomplete can be finished; that, in place of shattered hopes and dreams, ahead there is a better world and a better way to build that world. In this sense, to *resolve* is to imagine the *resolution* of troubles, problems, perplexities, contradictions, conflicts, divisions, losses, anxieties, and paralyzing fears. And so the act of showing *resolve* and the result of *resolve* in a *resolution* merge into each other, such that we cannot easily separate what we *resolve* from what is being *resolved*; both of these things live together and work together toward the same end, the same purpose, the same future.

“There are some things we need to *resolve*. Not as many as you think. There will be times you think something is *resolved*, but it isn't. But there are things we can *resolve*. Our commitment to follow Jesus is one of them.”¹ Those sentences come from the planning notes for our study, and they shift our attention from ordinary forms of human *resolve* to the quintessential form. There appears in the gospels a moment, particularly noted in Luke's account, where Jesus distinctly *resolves* to face his own future:

⁵¹ When the days drew near for him to be taken up, *he set his face* to go to Jerusalem. ⁵² And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³ but they did not receive him, because *his face was set* toward Jerusalem. (Luke 9:51-53).

Twice in this passage Jesus is said to “set his face to go to Jerusalem,” since in Jerusalem awaited the destiny for which Jesus had come into this world. Nothing else mattered to him from that moment on. Nothing would stop him, distract him, dissuade him, or interrupt him. In the present passage, the resolve of Jesus is nearly interrupted by the actions of a few detractors who had age-old quarrels with Israelites, namely, the Samaritans. The text continues on that theme:

⁵⁴ When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" ⁵⁵ But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶ Then they went on to another village. ⁵⁷ As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." ⁵⁸ And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." ⁵⁹ To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." ⁶⁰ But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." ⁶¹ Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." ⁶² Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:54-62).

The disciples would interrupt the *resolve* of Jesus with bitter hatred between Jews and Samaritans, but his *resolve* turned his face away from hate and toward Jerusalem. Then as the travelogue continues, Jesus encounters apparent *resolve* from someone who swore he would follow Jesus wherever he went, but Jesus tests that *resolve* by telling him there would be no comfortable accommodations along the journey! Others pushed back with caveats, exceptions, and excuses when Jesus asked them to follow him. That had the words, but no *resolve*: “First let me go and...” Would-be followers of Jesus cannot speak the language of *resolve* and also the language of “first let me go.” “First let me go” chooses another purpose, a different end, and does not set one's face toward Jerusalem.

“Resolve” is about “putting the hand to the plow and *not* looking back.” My grandfather Jones explained very simply to my dad how he could plow such straight furrows across a very long field. “You can't look at the ground below you or the ground immediately ahead of you, but you must look far ahead to the opposite side of the field, pick an object (tree, boulder) and don't take your eyes off the object until you reach it.” That's what Jesus means: no looking back, no turning back, no quitting, no excuses, no giving up, and no procrastination. Elsewhere, one writer gets inside the resolve of Jesus when he counsels his audience to follow Jesus' example:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. (Hebrews 12:1-3).

The “cloud of witnesses” refers to Hebrews 11 and the list of ancient worthies who showed resolve through their abiding trust in the God of Israel and did so by acts of long obedience in the same direction. Their

¹ Pastor Brian Wangler, *Planning Graphs* for 10/5/2020.

inclusion in the Bible serves *to strengthen our resolve*. Hebrews 12 picks up that theme by urging that *we*, the new cloud of witnesses, practice the *resolve* of our spiritual forebears — those who “bear before” we ever arrived on the scene! We, like they, should be persons of *resolve*, “laying aside every weight” like a committed runner which includes “the sin that clings to closely.” *Resolve*, described in this text, shows “perseverance,” the willingness to accept the hardship in the long run for the sake of the race “set before us.” This last phrase echoes the words from Luke 9 (above) about looking ahead and not back, about “setting our face toward Jerusalem” even as Jesus did, knowing that the purpose and the goal would be found there. So the writer of Hebrews 12 picks up similar language, “looking to Jesus — pioneer, perfecter of our faith — who endures the cross...Consider him ... [do] not lose heart.” *Resolve* involves Jesus and the cross, both for him and for us. *Resolve* looks at Jesus as he is portrayed in the gospels and then determines to take that road, that way, and that journey into the future. *Resolve* involves the “heart” and refuses to collapse into heart failure out of fear or discouragement, or weariness. Israel’s great Sage reminds us of this when he wrote centuries before:

²³ Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life. (Proverbs 4:23).

Hebrews warns “runners toward the joy” about “enemies along the track,” who were hostile toward Jesus and harassing us now. The Sage urges protection of the heart with the urgency of watchmen whose great virtue is “vigilance.” Those who stand watch do so during periods called “vigils,” marked out and distributed among several guards of a military encampment or in watchtowers atop city walls. Together they stand watch in sequence, seriatim, sharing and bearing this critical task. The community of Jesus lives within the cloud of witnesses among the communion of saints where they benefit from “heart vigils.” The brothers and the sisters stand watch for each other and not only for themselves alone. Thereby, the *resolve*, not only of individuals, but also of whole communities grows stronger.

Our text above also says that our *resolve* consists in “our faith,” the steadfast trust in the reliability of God and the faithfulness of Jesus. To believe *on* Jesus as Savior and Lord is to exercise Christian *resolve* come what may. Jesus, Savior and Lord, is the good news, the gospel, wherein there is saving power and power to save. *Resolve* does not mean, in the biblical sense, mere willpower or bootstrap effort or the old college try. *Resolve* which flows from Jesus, dying and rising, bristles with power and energizes with strength. “You shall receive power...” (Acts 1:8) is not a mere prediction but a momentous promise. “The Holy Spirit coming upon you” is the fulfillment of that promise realized in the present and propelling us into the future. Through that Spirit the whole mission of the church among the nations has already been decided and awaits the obedience of the church — our obedience — to reach completion. Jesus is, then, “the pioneer,” but also “the perfecter of our faith” — the one who, through the power of the Spirit, *brings our resolve to completion*. We *resolve together* in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. We *resolve* in the community of the witnesses, watching over each other’s hearts, and running *together* the race of Jesus.

What Resolve Looks Like (Daniel 1)

In the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ² The Lord let King Jehoiakim of Judah fall into his power, as well as some of the vessels of the house of God. These he brought to the land of Shinar, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his gods.

³ Then the king commanded his palace master Ashpenaz to bring some of the Israelites of the royal family and of the nobility, ⁴ young men without physical defect and handsome, versed in every branch of wisdom, endowed with knowledge and insight, and competent to serve in the king's palace; they were to be taught the literature and language of the Chaldeans. ⁵ The king assigned them a daily portion of the royal rations of food and wine. They were to be educated for three years, so that at the end of that time they could be stationed in the king's court.

⁶ Among them were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, from the tribe of Judah. ⁷ The palace master gave them other names: Daniel he called Beltshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.

⁸ But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine; so he asked the palace master to allow him not to defile himself.

⁹ Now God allowed Daniel to receive favor and compassion from the palace master. ¹⁰ The palace master said to Daniel, “I am afraid of my lord the king; he has appointed your food and your drink. If he should see you in poorer condition than the other young men of your own age, you would endanger my head with the king.”

¹¹ Then Daniel asked the guard whom the palace master had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: ¹² “Please test your servants for ten days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³ You can then compare our appearance with the appearance of the young men who eat the royal rations, and deal with your servants

according to what you observe." ¹⁴ So he agreed to this proposal and tested them for ten days. ¹⁵ At the end of ten days it was observed that they appeared better and fatter than all the young men who had been eating the royal rations. ¹⁶ So the guard continued to withdraw their royal rations and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables. ¹⁷ To these four young men God gave knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom; Daniel also had insight into all visions and dreams.

¹⁸ At the end of the time that the king had set for them to be brought in, the palace master brought them into the presence of Nebuchadnezzar, ¹⁹ and the king spoke with them. And among them all, no one was found to compare with Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; therefore they were stationed in the king's court. ²⁰ In every matter of wisdom and understanding concerning which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom. ²¹ And Daniel continued there until the first year of King Cyrus. (Daniel 1:1-21).

Telling stories about Israel's shared history was more than a pastime. Jews living a few hundred years before the birth of Jesus had by then endured a torrent of adverse circumstances, beginning with the invasion of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians who deported most of their nobility in 722 BCE. Then came the Babylonians in 587 BCE who copied their predecessors by finishing the invasion in the south, including the fall and destruction of Jerusalem. Foreign powers virtually *broke the resolve* of God's chosen people. With the upper classes gone into exile and impressed into civil service by their captors, the rest of Israel languished as a remnant of disheartened and dispirited residents. They were sheep without a shepherd — without king or temple, without hope in the land once promised to them, no longer flowing with milk and honey.

Meanwhile, the nobility now settled in Assyria-Babylon resigned themselves to residence among the nations, performing professions where their skills could be of service to the rulers of the Empire. Later generations of Jews who eventually returned to their sacred homeland, told the stories their ancestors lived during the Assyrian-Babylonian period. They told them over and over again because they needed to be reminded that they were true stories about survival, suffering, and then salvation. They told them to each other in order *to increase their resolve* as a people for whom life was hard, at times hopeless, yet always looking for promise, deliverance, and sustenance. Stories written in the 2nd century BCE, a few centuries after the events recorded by them, served to bolster Israel's delicate faith during new times of adversity under different foreign powers. *God's people went to the past in search of a new future.* And so we have in our hands the book of *Daniel* artistically and imaginatively written for a new generation of Jews who would find inspiration in the stories found there. 2nd century Jews learned how to resolve again from people like Daniel and his three friends. We can thank that writer for giving the old, old stories to us also.

From Daniel 1:1-2 we have a thumbnail sketch of the history described above, culminating with a snapshot of the kind of life noble Jews experienced in the first few decades of the 6th century BCE, after exile and after Jerusalem's fall (Thus the reference to temple vessels). The rulers of Babylon, both royalty and their courtiers, looked over the Jewish noble exiles and, to coin a phrase, "took the pick of the litter" for special service to the Empire. Babylonians were not stupid; they knew that skill, competence, and intelligence were invaluable to their growing kingdom. They would not waste good labor. And so we meet four Jewish young adults with natural virtues, both of physique and understanding. They were brainy and they were brawny. They were under the duress of Empire and would do what they were told, learn what Babylonians knew and believed, leading to an ample place at the king's table with rich rations of food and drink. Three years of imperial education would shape their minds and ensure loyalty to imperial purposes, imperial *resolves*. Their wills would be molded to the Babylonian culture where their identities as Jews would eventually evaporate into the air of Babylonian civil religion.

From among the noble youths, our storyteller chooses to write about four of them, beginning by telling us their *Jewish* names: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Their names all bear the fingerprint of the God they served: El is Elohim; (Y)ah is Yahweh — each suffix embedded in their Jewish names. But now comes the first act of cultural sanitation, of cultural abortion and forced conversion to Babylonian ways. Their court master, who was responsible for their training, gave each of them new names — Babylonian names — and names that removed the vestiges of their original faith and identity as servants of God Yahweh, their true Lord and King. If you want to break the resolve of a conquered people and assimilate them into your culture, just give them new

names. From then on, all the rest are mere footnotes to cultural conquest! Just ask African Americans what their masters did to their ancestors upon arrival to the new world: change their names through stamping the ownership of their masters on the identities by which they would be known. If slaves were to keep good faith with their remembered past, they must remember their original names. In the case of the four newly christened imperial novices, the Babylonian names imposed the identities of the imperial gods on the Hebrew captives. Clearly, none of the four could stop the name change nor forbid the use of new names by their superiors. But the four could resolve to never forget their Hebrew names, and that is why throughout the book which bears his name, Daniel consistently goes by his Hebrew name — which brings us to Daniel 1:8, the focus of our thoughts for this study:

⁸ But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine; so he asked the palace master to allow him not to defile himself.

The word “resolved” is germane to our weekly theme. In the Hebrew, the text says, “Daniel *put on his heart* that he not be defiled...” Something happened in Daniel’s heart before he made any further moves within the royal court. As the rest of this text reveals, what Daniel chose was to be a faithful Jew, keeping *kosher* by refusing the questionable delicacies from the king’s royal stores. He chose quite openly by conversing with the palace master who had become anxious for the health of these Jewish exiles lest they fail to perform well for his “lord the king.” Daniel proposed a ten day test during which time they would be allowed to keep *kosher*, promising to accept royal food if the young trainees failed the test. Remarkably, the master accepted the agreement which turned out to favor the Jewish diet since “they appeared better and fatter than all the young men who had been eating the royal rations.” Daniel *resolved*—put on his heart—to remain an observant Jew even though he and his friends were in the royal court of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.

According to the text, they also continued to embrace their Jewish names, even though foreign ones had been given to them (see 1:11). Moreover, God honored their commitments by enhancing their knowledge and skill in the whole Babylonian curriculum which included literature and wisdom. That is, they learned everything there was to learn about Babylonian culture. Daniel, says the text, also had special insight into the human subconscious, interpreting visions and dreams, a competence held in high regard by the ancient world. In this respect he reminds the reader of another court sage named Joseph who counseling the Pharaoh of Egypt. When the day for their royal examination came, they passed with flying colors, “ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.” What Daniel and his friends *resolved* paid significant spiritual dividends, both within the king’s court and for the benefit of Jews exiled with them. Our knowledge of Jewish history during the Babylonian exile (about 70 years) uncovers a creative and fruitful period of scholarship which included standardizing the Biblical text, commenting on it, and educating the exiled community. What Jews learned from Babylonian folk traditions helped shape the final form of Torah as well as the court history, wisdom, poetry, and prophetic literature of Israel. Jews developed and honed their craft as scribes and scholars, having been given access to the literary resources of Babylon.

Because Daniel acted with resolve, our text tells us that he “continued there until the first year of King Cyrus,” the Persian king who succeeded Nebuchadnezzar’s dynasty when Babylon was conquered by the Persian Empire.

Since Daniel resolved, Daniel continued!

Having “put on his heart” fidelity to his covenant Lord, Yahweh, Daniel received access, acumen, and advancement within the empire which held him captive. God honors those with resolve. Covenant loyalty had been, since the time of Abraham, the mark of Yahweh’s chosen people. Although Daniel and his three friends were torn from their beloved homeland and forced into imperial service to a foreign power, yet they resolved to remain, to continue faithful, to their covenant Lord. In response, God blessed them with opportunity and acknowledgment in the royal court.

When Resolve is Stress-Tested (Daniel 3 and 6)

However, not everything remained bright and happy. After all, in spite of their outstanding achievements, Daniel and his three friends were still foreign subjects under the absolute rule of the King in Babylon. He

needed their service and skill for the aggrandizement of royal power, not because he simply liked them. And so, one day, a royal decree brought the three young associates into the spotlight again, but for dire and deadly reasons. Let's set up the story from Daniel 3.

King Nebuchadnezzar made a golden statue whose height was sixty cubits and whose width was six cubits; he set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. ² Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent for the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces, to assemble and come to the dedication of the statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

³ So the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces, assembled for the dedication of the statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

When they were standing before the statue that Nebuchadnezzar had set up, ⁴ the herald proclaimed aloud, "You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, ⁵ that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, you are to fall down and worship the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. ⁶ Whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire."

⁷ Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. (Daniel 3:1-7).

The writer of this brilliant text describes in mocking terms through the artful use of repetition how it was that Nebuchadnezzar ordered and then received worship from everyone in his kingdom. You've got to appreciate the long lists of royal officials, of musical instruments, and of social groups from the writer's perspective: Babylonian social structure was a comedy of bureaucracy, a gaudy display of layered officialdom, and also a harsh exercise of autocratic power in deference to King Nebuchadnezzar. The whole kingdom becomes a court of jesters to satisfy the narcissistic desires of one man, the king: all of *these* and all of *this*—for one man. The kingdom was commanded to fall over itself to pay homage.

Any Jews hearing or reading this portion of Daniel 3 would immediately realize the trip wires that lay ahead for Daniel and his three friends. Those who refused to participate in this charade, those who refused to bow down to this king as to a god, would be consigned to the ovens of Babylon, to the *Shoah*, to a modern day Auschwitz. Jews lip reading these words would recognize the possibility of genocide if Jews were to remain faithful to the covenant. "You shall have no other gods before me ... you shall make no graven images ... you shall not bow down to them or serve them" (Exodus 20). This is the heart of Jewish faith, to be even more fully empowered by these further words from the Jewish *Shema*':

⁴ Hear [=*Shema*], O Israel: The LORD [=Yahweh] is our God [=Elohim], the LORD alone. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God *with all your heart*, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today *in your heart*. (Deuteronomy 6:4-6).

Nebuchadnezzar is *not* Yahweh our God, or Yahweh alone, or your God to any of the Jews in Babylon. But Yahweh *is* all of those things: He has no equal and only Yahweh deserves love "with all your heart" and His words must remain "in your heart." The language "with all your heart" and "in your heart" is synonymous with the word of *resolve* in Daniel 1:8, the guiding verse for our study.

What Daniel resolved in 1:8 and what he and his three did by keeping *kosher* to prove it, now faces a harder test in Daniel 3. *Kosher* is about *diet*, whereas worship is a matter of life or *death*. Who these Jews embrace when asked to bow down matters to the depths of their heart, to the end of their life. What will they do? The story continues:

⁸ At this time some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. ⁹ They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, live forever! ¹⁰ You have issued a decree, O king, that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, ¹¹ and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. ¹² But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon-- Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego-- who pay no attention to you, O king. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up." ¹³ Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, ¹⁴ and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of

gold I have set up? ¹⁵ Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" ¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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 3:8-18).

Informants of the king, members of his intelligence community who belong to the same class of people who failed to interpret his dream, tell their sovereign about the subversives in their midst who refuse to do homage to his statue. They spin their report and incorporate a veiled threat. It was the king, after all, who appointed these non-conformists to their government positions (3:12): "...Jews *whom you have set over* the affairs..." They remind the king that he had issued a *decree*, not made a *suggestion*. The text refers to these informants as "some astrologers" (3:8). They no doubt belonged to the same guilds as the wise men who failed to recover and interpret dreams in chapters 1 & 2 (which see). The manner in which they verbally attack the three Jews before the king is vivid. The underlying Aramaic word means "eat the pieces of flesh torn off another's body," the real meaning behind the idea of "slander" in the ancient world.² No doubt a strand of professional jealousy seethes in their words.³ Are these Babylonian wise men trying to recover their lost honor by undermining the loyalty of the Hebrews? It is likely. They see an opportunity to use the occasion of the king's megalomania to further their own cause. Their power play is formidable. How will the Hebrews overturn this counsel to the king?

The answer is: only by their *resolve*!

At first the king seems to think the Hebrews misunderstood him, and he tries to clarify his intent and give them a second chance to comply with the decree to worship the image. He puts teeth into his remarks, however, when he adds, "What god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" (3:15). The focus of the text is on *rescue*, the equivalent of the idea of *salvation*. Anybody familiar with the ancient stories of Israel would recognize Exodus themes, and persons of faith would readily reply to the king, "God did this before He can do it again!" King Nebuchadnezzar is simply another Pharaoh by demanding that others treat him as a god. He does not say, "Deliver you from the gods hands..." but rather, "from *my* hand." The whole apparatus for worship is the king's invention, and he intends to enforce it on everybody throughout his realm. The king presumptuously adds, "So if you are now ready to fall down and worship when you hear the music, *very good!*" followed by his threat to throw the Hebrews into the fiery furnace (3:15).

In their reply, the three Hebrews (now identified by their Babylonian names because that's who the king wants them to be, loyal "Babylonians") tell the king that they do not need to defend themselves before him in this matter (3:16). What they are telling him is that his court is the wrong jurisdiction for hearing any case about *which God* they are to serve. Further, they reaffirm their allegiance to God, and that he is able to save them from the hand of the king (3:17). That is, God is stronger than the king, and He is able to deliver them from the king's hand! The king may think of himself as a god, but only God is God. Recall that the king had once acknowledged that the Hebrew God is God of gods and Lord of kings in chapter 2? Nebuchadnezzar may try to make himself an exception to that chain of authority, but the Hebrews refuse his claim. They have willingly served the king and his interests throughout Babylon, but when it comes to the question of worship, their covenant with God draws the line.

They *resolve*, even under threat of death, to worship God Yahweh alone.

² Baldwin, 103.

³ Louis F. Hartman, *The Book of Daniel*. The Anchor Bible. Ed. W.F. Albright and D.N. Freedman (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1978), 161.

Then, in a strikingly ironic move, the three Hebrews allow that God may choose not to deliver them from the fiery furnace, but they will serve Him nonetheless. God will deliver them from the king's hand, because they are God's covenant servants, but the fiery furnace is no concern of theirs.

We turn now to the third and final section of this story. In it the writer gathers together all his main themes, like threads in his fabric, and brings the readers to an unexpected climax.

¹⁹ Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual ²⁰ and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. ²¹ So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. ²² The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, ²³ and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.

²⁴ Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?" They replied, "Certainly, O king." ²⁵ He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods." ²⁶ Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!" So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, ²⁷ and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.

²⁸ Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. ²⁹ Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way." ³⁰ Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon (Daniel 3:19-30).

The attitude of the three observant Jews prompts a furious reaction from the king, who will not be denied. Shamed in the presence of his retinue by foreigners whom he has placed over the province of Babylon, he determines to immediately commit them to the flames. He does several things to intensify their suffering. 1) He orders the furnace to be made seven times hotter. 2) He has them bound. 3) He leaves their clothing on as additional fuel. His impetuous actions result in the deaths of those who throw them in the fire. The text keeps reminding the reading that the place of judgment was a "blazing (or fiery) furnace." No one who witnessed the deaths of the strongmen and the temperature of the furnace could doubt that the three Hebrews should have died without delay. That did not happen, and so we have the beginning of the miracles, wonders, and signs.

Moreover, the occupants of the fiery furnace — an odd way to talk about them! — had a guest. They do not report the presence of another being who is with them, rather the king himself *sees with amazement* "four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed" (3:25). Curiously, the men are all unbound, suggesting the fire burned off their restraints, while leaving them untouched. We have a similar phenomenon in the story leading up to the Exodus, when Moses saw a bush in the desert which burned but *was not consumed* (see Exodus 3:2-23). From the king's perspective, the fire meant certain death to those who refused to obey him. That was his intention, and he meant to have it carried out without exception. However, the fire took on a different meaning — here's part of the *sign* aspect of the miracle — in that the fire became the place where they experienced the presence of God in the form of his messenger, his angel.

Fire in the Bible is not always a source of destruction, but is instead a symbol for God as the source of being and of life. To be consumed by God does not always mean evaporating in His presence, but rather being surrendered to His purpose and will. The Bible says, "Our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29; Deuteronomy 4:24, 33; 5:24-26). The same pillar of fire which led Israel at night through the wilderness was also the judging fire which kept Israel's enemies at bay. The three Hebrews had God as their ever-present help in trouble, the One who became for them the fire of protection, of life, and of power.

Much has been written about “the fourth man” in the fire. Some scholars suggest this is a Christophany — an early appearance of the pre-incarnate Son of God. The king of Babylon calls the fourth man God’s angel who came to rescue his servants from the fire (3:28). In a loss for words, the king says “he looks like a son of the gods” (3:25). Among the ancients, “a son of the gods” sometimes referred to a member of the divine council. When the Old Testament speaks of them, angels are often in view, as in Job 1:6 and 2:1.

Goldingay comments on the fourth man:

The deliverance comes about through the presence of a fourth person in their midst. The divine aid who camps round those who honor God and extricates them from peril (Ps 34:8[7]) enters the fire himself to neutralize its capacity for harm by the presence of his superior energy. God’s promise “I will be with you” characteristically belongs to contexts of affliction and pressure (Exod 3:12; Isa 7:14; 43:1-3; Matt 28:20; see also Ps 23:4-5). The experience of God’s being with his people not only follows on their commitment to him, rather than preceding it; it comes only in the furnace, not in being preserved from it (Kennedy).⁴

When Nebuchadnezzar assesses the faithful and courageous *resolve* of the three Hebrews, he speaks about:

1. Their trust in God.
2. Their defiance of the king’s command.
3. Their willingness to give up their lives.
4. Their refusal to serve or worship any god except their own God.

From these qualities he no doubt concludes, even if it means accepting a lowering of his own rank in the world, that these are the sort of people he can count on as well. They may have defied one of the king’s commands, but they did so because of a firmer *resolve* — not to themselves — but to their God. Such persons can be trusted with other affairs to govern reliably and resolutely. In making this assessment, did the king recognize his own fallibility in issuing such an impulsive and far-ranging decree? We don’t know for sure. Nebuchadnezzar exhibited a quiver of contradictory attitudes and actions, making it difficult to judge his motives in each case. He was a man well-aware of his vast dominion with its various levels of rule and its diversity of language and culture. Such kings have difficulty shedding their pride and fending off their grasping for more power. For such persons it takes a bit more than a single correct dream interpretation to move them. Judging from the next narrative in chapter 4, it would also take more than delivering three men from the blazing furnace.

Still, examined from Israel’s perspective, both in the exile as well as back in the land, such stories as this one confirmed the reliability of the God who kept covenant with his people. God did not perform miracles, wonders, and signs simply to get attention. He did so at carefully selected crossroads when human beings most needed to see and hear and believe afresh His character which is at work in their lives. Just as the king witnessed that day, “no other god can save in this way” (3:29). What “way” is that? Perhaps he means not only under the severest of circumstances — a furnace seven times hotter than normal — but with such clear purpose and with such personal presence. The king had not seen any of his own gods walking in the fire like the God of the Hebrews did.

Daniel does not appear alongside his three companions in this story. His destiny would not place him in the fiery furnace. However, years after this event, a new king would rule the land between the rivers, a man named Darius whose identity in the biblical narrative of Daniel 6 is clouded in mystery. Like Nebuchadnezzar, Darius required homage from his subjects, among whom remained the exiled Jews. Darius’ officials promulgated a decree on his behalf, requiring everyone to pray to Darius their king as if to a god. Daniel was not party to this decree, and yet he had risen in great prominence within Darius’ kingdom:

³ Soon Daniel distinguished himself above all the other presidents and satraps because an excellent spirit was in him, and the king planned to appoint him over the whole kingdom. (Daniel 6:3).

⁴ John E. Goldingay, *Daniel*. Word Biblical Commentary. Ed. John D.W. Watts (OT) (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1989), 74-75.

Jealousy drove the native Babylonians to plot against him, using the decree as an excuse to execute him.

¹⁰ Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open toward Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously. ¹¹ The conspirators came and found Daniel praying and seeking mercy before his God. ¹² Then they approached the king and said concerning the interdict, "O king! Did you not sign an interdict, that anyone who prays to anyone, divine or human, within thirty days except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions?" The king answered, "The thing stands fast, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be revoked." ¹³ Then they responded to the king, "Daniel, one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or to the interdict you have signed, but he is saying his prayers three times a day." (Daniel 6:10-13).

Because of Daniel's *resolve* he chose regular prayer to the God of heaven over homage to the law of the Medes and the Persians. His life was on the line, but he cared more about his relationship with God than he did about his political prospects or even his own life. Although Jerusalem was in ruins, Daniel *resolved* to pray toward the beloved city which for him would one day stand again, where delivered exiles would one day return. Later in the book of Daniel, in chapter 9, he would offer a moving prayer that asked God to reveal His plan for the restoration of the holy city. Daniel never gave up, nor did he give in; that is the nature of true *resolve* which *holds fast and holds out until God resolves what needs to be made right again*. Faced with a binding decree, Daniel no doubt knew his day of reckoning with the empire was close at hand. And that day came, and in what follows below we witness God's reward of Daniel's resolve:

¹¹ The conspirators came and found Daniel praying and seeking mercy before his God. ¹² Then they approached the king and said concerning the interdict, "O king! Did you not sign an interdict, that anyone who prays to anyone, divine or human, within thirty days except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions?" The king answered, "The thing stands fast, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be revoked." ¹³ Then they responded to the king, "Daniel, one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or to the interdict you have signed, but he is saying his prayers three times a day."

¹⁴ When the king heard the charge, he was very much distressed. He was determined to save Daniel, and until the sun went down he made every effort to rescue him. ¹⁵ Then the conspirators came to the king and said to him, "Know, O king, that it is a law of the Medes and Persians that no interdict or ordinance that the king establishes can be changed." ¹⁶ Then the king gave the command, and Daniel was brought and thrown into the den of lions. The king said to Daniel, "May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!" ¹⁷ A stone was brought and laid on the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet and with the signet of his lords, so that nothing might be changed concerning Daniel.

¹⁸ Then the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; no food was brought to him, and sleep fled from him. ¹⁹ Then, at break of day, the king got up and hurried to the den of lions. ²⁰ When he came near the den where Daniel was, he cried out anxiously to Daniel, "O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God whom you faithfully serve been able to deliver you from the lions?" ²¹ Daniel then said to the king, "O king, live forever! ²² My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths so that they would not hurt me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no wrong."

²³ Then the king was exceedingly glad and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God. (Daniel 6:11-23).

The den of lions becomes a fitting symbol for the intrigue of the Persian court, a place where human beings behave like ravenous lions competing for power and vying for places of honor in the eyes of the king. Daniel, in their eyes, was prey — a foreign interloper, an outsider, seen as a threat to native interests. What they did to him embodied what would happen to Jews throughout history beyond the exile. To be in the den of lions was to be threatened by all the nations hostile to Israel and their God. Daniel represents Jews in distress, under foreign rule, and vulnerable to the ravages of war and occupation. But Daniel began his life in Babylon with the *resolve* of an observant Jew, committed to Torah, in relationship with God Yahweh, and hopeful about the future of his people. In his lifetime, Daniel would *not* see all of the Jewish problems *resolved*, but those who came after him were inspired by his courage. They would also have their den of lions, their fiery furnaces, and they would face the danger of genocide. We also will not see present problems instantly solved or easily resolved: they are the lions' den and fiery furnaces of our own time. "Our God will deliver us" in His own time. Meanwhile we resolve to trust and obey.

Delivered from the den of lions, Daniel bore witness to the keeping power of his God in whom he trusted. His steady confidence kept eyes focused on what God promised to do when His people were faithful to Him under the worst of circumstances. Even the king marveled about the God of Daniel and said,

For he is the living God, enduring forever. His kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion has no end. ²⁷ He delivers and rescues, he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth; for he has saved Daniel from the power of the lions." ²⁸ So this Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian. (Daniel 6:26-28).

The *resolute* person who makes up his mind to trust the Lord thereby learns to wait on the Lord, witness to the Lord, and work for the Lord. The *resolute* person relies on the God of an enduring kingdom which has no end, who delivers and rescues, works miracles in heaven and on earth, and saves His people from their enemies. These were the great discoveries of King Darius, seen in the resolute character of the man Daniel.

Generations after the events recorded in the book of Daniel, a faithful scribe wrote down the story of Daniel so that his own generation might benefit from the influence of Daniel's resolution to remain a faithful, observant Jew in hard times. During the 2nd century, a band of brothers known as the *Maccabees* found themselves pitted against the evil Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes who determined to annihilate all the Jews in Israel. Inspired by their faithful father Matathias and encouraged by the story of Daniel from centuries before, they successfully defeated the Syrian threat and secured 100 years of Jewish independence in their own land. Like Daniel, these men were persons with firm resolution, rooted in their ancient faith. One can only imagine how the stories of Daniel and the Maccabees lifted the spirits of likeminded souls whose lives faced the threats of fiery trials and deadly predators.

The writer of *Hebrews* also offers readers a panorama of resolute people who remained faithful to God. In place of resolute, he uses the language of *faith* to describe the commitment they demonstrated under dire conditions. They refused to let go when the pressures to do so were intense. In one passage, the writer offers the following tribute to the virtues of resolute followers of the Lord:

³² And what more should 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, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵ Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented-- ³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. ³⁹ Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect. (Hebrews 11:32-40).

That text is the preface for the material we discussed at the beginning of our study this week, taken from Hebrews 12:1-3 (see page 2 above). Stories of *resolute* people in the Bible reach their climax in the story of Jesus, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." They live by the promises and in the person of Jesus they lay claim to the future. That is precisely what hope means — to hold firmly and *resolutely* to the promises of God where faithful persons meet the Lord God coming back to meet them from the future. Through the risen Jesus, they look beyond the fiery furnace and the den of lions to the God who rescues the *resolute* whose faith and hope are in Him. For Jews and Christians alike, love for God and neighbor cements the heart with resolute trust to wholly reliable God of the covenant. "In Him we live and move and have our being..." And this God, and no other, is our Father, who comes to us through the person of His Son and in the power of His Spirit. In fellowship with this God, we discover our "refuge and fortress, the God in whom we trust." The new life given us by this God, and no other, renews our resolve toward a future where all things are finally made new.

Conclusion

Looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame ... (Hebrews 12:2)

Suffering in the present, Jesus looked at the future — “the joy that was set before him,” and so *resolved* to “endure the cross,” along with its shame. What does this mean for us? “Consider him who endured...” we are told. Look at the one for whom life was lived as a pioneer and perfecter, and not merely as an instant gratifier. Learning to live like this—to resolve like this—the text says, helps us “not to grow weary or lose heart.” Instant gratifiers discover that life is uneven, and not everything gets *resolved* in the moment. Believing otherwise, they become frustrated and disappointed. Followers of Jesus pay attention to the cross and receive grace to live differently and to see time differently—and to *resolve* differently.

Instant gratification is a lie, a deception, for it does not make us happier or live longer or do better. Psalm 120:2 says about such lies, “Deliver me, O Yahweh, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue” — the promise that quicker is better. If we believe the lie, we may very well *quit* too soon. When Eugene Peterson titled his book, *Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, he borrowed the language from Frederick Nietzsche whose lengthier statement was this:

The essential thing 'in heaven and earth' is...that there should be long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living.⁵

The key words here are “long run” and “worth living.” A great deal in our culture is throw-away experience that is quickly and easily obtained, and then instantly discarded. It’s about the *package*, and our ability to bundle up things in bite-sized form, so that we might pay proper homage to efficiency. But is the package worth much? How long will it last?

We are in a hurry it seems, without the *resolve* to take time to be holy. Maybe we pray that way. Maybe we worship that way. Maybe we take the sacrament that way. Faced with a seriousness that cares about “the long-run” and the “worthwhile,” we draw back in discomfort, afraid of the silence, the delay, and the boredom. Ours is a religion on the run, as we mutter to ourselves, “Got to have this one *to go*.” But where’s the resolve?

But God is not mocked, and in our haste, he blocks our exit and calls to us, “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 16:10). Slow down. Wait on the Lord. Take time to be holy. What’s the rush? Do you have a more important place to be? Quite counter-cultural, actually, are these invitations away from the tyranny of the *now*. So when we come to church, and take our seats in the *sanctuary*, does the holy One wash over us, and does our soul want to stay here awhile? Is the experience markedly different than the rat race, or has the rat hustled the church mouse? Better, the voice we hear asks us, “Where are you going in such a hurry? Come apart, and Sabbath with me. Find in the moment, in the new *now*, a glimpse of eternity—and right now make your *resolve* that it might be so.

In the early decades of the 20th century, the poet-hymn writer Palmer Hartsough penned the words to a gospel song which echoes the pathos and ethos of our study this week. Consider the heartbeat of this hymn as you meditate on ways your own life might *resolve* to do important things for the Lord Jesus.

*1 I am resolved no longer to linger,
charmed by the world's delight;
things that are higher, things that are nobler,
these have allured my sight.*

Refrain:

*I will hasten to Him,
hasten so glad and free;
Jesus, greatest, highest,
I will come to Thee.*

*2 I am resolved to go to the Savior,
leaving my sin and strife;
He is the true one, He is the just one,
He has the words of life. [Refrain]*

*3 I am resolved, and who will go with me?
Come, friends, without delay;
taught by the Bible, led by the Spirit,
we'll walk the heavenly way. [Refrain]*

Glory to God! Amen.

⁵ From *Beyond Good and Evil*.