

Daniel and the Lions

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[0 : 00] This is the AM service on January the 11th, 1998. The preacher is Dr. Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Daniel and the Lions and is from Daniel chapter 6 verses 10 to 28.

Indeed you do reign in heaven and over earth. We thank you that you are a sovereign God and we pray that as we turn to your word now we will understand more of your great power and love.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. Well last week it was David and Goliath. This week Daniel in the Lion's Den and you may like to have open the passage from Daniel 6, page 723 in front of you.

People love great rescue stories. My favourite as a child was Batman and Robin and I used to love watching the cartoon variety of, oh no it wasn't quite a cartoon variety of Batman and Robin day by day after school and see what incredible fixes that they would get into and the incredible devices that they would need to rescue themselves and indeed to rescue other people.

But whether it's Batman and Robin or Superman or the slightly more adult versions of Harrison Ford movies or even the latest version of Titanic, we love rescue stories.

[1 : 23] We like true life rescue stories. Stuart Diver being rescued from Threadbow was the great story from Australia last year. Tony Bullimore being rescued at sea about 12 months ago as well.

Daniel in the Lion's Den has great appeal over the centuries because it is a great rescue story.

Though we have to stop and think, who is the rescuer? 530s BC is when this event occurred.

Jerusalem had been destroyed 50 years before that and the people of God, at least the leaders and the wealthy of them, had been taken off into exile, deported from their homeland and relocated in Babylon and in the environs of that capital city of the Babylonian Empire.

But the Babylonian Empire, though great at that time, soon crumbled and 50 years after Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonians, the Babylonians themselves were overrun by the Medes and Persians and so began the, to that point, greatest empire in world history.

The story of Daniel in the Lion's Den is said at the very beginning of that empire, soon after the Persians had conquered the Babylonians. Daniel was a Jew.

[2 : 42] His parents presumably had been born and lived around Jerusalem and had been deported by the Babylonians and relocated in Babylon. But despite all that, Daniel rose up into public office in the Babylonian Empire.

And when the Persians came and conquered the Babylonians, their policy generally was to keep the Babylonian Empire intact and to see themselves as the legitimate Babylonian rulers.

So many of the leading government officials, Daniel included, remained in office. Chapter 6 begins with this chap, Darius. It seems the first leader of the Persian Empire or perhaps the first Persian governor of Babylon setting up his administration over his kingdom.

We're told that he set up 120 satraps, which are sort of like local government officials or mayors or something like that, stationed throughout the whole kingdom. And over those 120, three presidents, one of whom was Daniel the Jew.

And to these three presidents, the satraps or local mayors or whatever we might want to call them, gave account and reported. Now Daniel was no ordinary person.

[3 : 57] He was a man of exemplary character and integrity as well as piety. He had great ability as well. And so, as verse 3 says, 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. So Daniel, who was in effect the governor of a third of the empire, was now going to be made perhaps second in charge of the whole Persian empire under King Darius himself.

That led to some professional jealousy. It seems that Daniel, his great ability and character, provoked some envy or jealousy from the other presidents, satraps or local mayors around about.

And so they set out to form a trap for Daniel. And it's the first of three traps in this story. The trap that set for Daniel, the president.

The conspiracy, we're told in verses 6 to 9, is that all the presidents and satraps conspired. They came to the king. They said to him, O King Darius, live forever. All the presidents of the kingdom, a lie, because Daniel wasn't included, the prefects and the satraps, the counselors and the governors are agreed that the king should establish an ordinance and enforce an interdict that whoever prays to anyone, divine or human, for 30 days except to you, O King, shall be thrown into a den of lions.

[5 : 30] That's a fairly cunning plan because it's appealing to the ego, the pride of King Darius. It'd be rather nice, wouldn't it, to think that for 30 days the only person who's going to be worshipped or prayed to in the whole of the realm is King Darius himself.

Now remember that the Persians, like most of the ancient cultures, believed in many gods and so it was quite acceptable for people to pray to all sorts of gods and emperors and so on. Here is a restriction for 30 days to honour King Darius.

So it would have been an interdict that would have affected everybody to an extent. But of course for most people who worship many gods, it's not really much of a challenge or a hardship.

They would have been quite happy to go along to worship just King Darius and pray only to him for a month. After a month they'd go back to praying to and worshipping other gods and idols as well. King Darius agrees to the interdict and he signs it, not knowing that he's setting a trap for his best man, Daniel. Daniel, of course, being a Jew, would worship one god and one god only.

[6 : 43] And that's the trap. Daniel is forced now either to disobey the edict or to change his religious allegiance. This story is one illustration of what happens so often in history.

People of unusual godly character and good ability, blessed by God, one would think would attract many people. But so often the opposite is the case.

Daniel's integrity of character and ability actually lead to hostility from others rather than respect.

Why is that the case?

It seems to be an illustration of what Jesus said, that men love darkness more than light. And so often when somebody of noble character and repute comes into high office and acclaim, people shun that person, are hostile to that person because it exposes their own limitations, weaknesses or immoral character.

Daniel was an example, Jesus, of course, another. But there are many others in ancient as well as modern history. So often when Christians act as light in this world, demonstrating God's light through their good character, their piety, devotion and ability, Christians find themselves ridiculed and abused rather than respected.

[8 : 12] It's the offense of the gospel at work. For Daniel, it almost cost him his life. For Jesus, it cost him his. And for us, in our world, we ought to think more carefully of being light in a world which may yet attract abuse and hostility.

But nonetheless, we are called to be light in this world like Daniel. Well, if you were in Daniel's situation, what would you do? The interdict forbids you praying to or worshipping any other god but the king.

Probably for many of us, we would change our prayer habits. We'd close the windows, turn off the lights, we'd pray in silence, not allowed. We'd give up coming to church for a month. Well, that doesn't matter, does it?

We can get by for a month and then we'll come back when the interdict ends. Maybe for some of us, we'd stop praying. Maybe for some of us, we've never started in the first place.

Most of us, I think, when faced with this edict of the king, would probably seek to save our lives.

We'd change our habits. We'd hide our light under the bushel so that we wouldn't be caught praying or worshipping our god.

[9 : 30] We may not pray to the king but we'd at least tone down or stop our own Christian praying practices. Daniel, on the other hand, is unperturbed.

He carries on exactly his pattern of piety. He prays. He prays semi-publicly, it seems. He opens his windows. He prays at the window facing Jerusalem.

Jerusalem. Clearly, people knew Daniel's praying practices. Three times a day, he would pray toward Jerusalem. Daniel keeps on praying despite the edict.

Was he foolish? Isn't it better to just give up praying for a month? Does it really matter that much? For Daniel, the edict forced his hand.

He kept on praying publicly because for him it was more important to obey the laws of God than the laws of the emperor or the laws of the land. And even though the laws of the Medes and Persians were extolled in the ancient world as being so good and powerful and irrevocable, Daniel realized that to keep praying was an appropriate act of civil disobedience.

[10 : 42] He recognized there are times for the people of God to disobey civilly. They may be rare times. Thankfully, I think they are in our day and age.

But nonetheless, for Daniel, the priority was clear. Obedience to God takes precedence over obedience to the laws of the land. And Daniel was prepared to risk his life to pray.

What about us? For many of us, are we prepared to risk our life for the sake of prayer? I must say, as I've pondered Daniel's example, it's put my own prayer life to shame.

Sometimes I'm not prepared to risk missing a meal to pray, let alone my life. Daniel's example reminds us that Christian faith may be costly.

It may be very costly. He was prepared to put his life on the line for the sake of his faith in the living God. Daniel's prayers note of prayers toward Jerusalem.

[11 : 49] Not praying probably only about that city, but that was the direction of his prayers. There's not a lot of evidence in the Old Testament that that's how the people of God in the Old Testament ought to pray, but Daniel's prayers are quite remarkable in that he prays to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem at the time was rubble, ruin. He prays toward a ruined city from the midst of the major city of the world. For Daniel's priorities recognized the fact that Jerusalem was God's city and God in the prophets had promised that he would rebuild Jerusalem and make it the center of the world, at least theologically speaking.

And Daniel's prayer toward Jerusalem was an act of faith and trust in an almighty God and the promises that that God had made. That's the first trap, Daniel's trap, trapped by an edict of his jealous co-presidents and satraps and signed by the king.

The second trap, ironically speaking, is the trap that the king is in. His edicts are irrevocable. That was standard legal practice for the Medes and Persians and their empire.

But once a law came into force, nobody, not even the king, could change that law. And Darius was in a trap. His advisors came to him after seeing that Daniel was disobeying this edict and said to the king, now king, you've issued a decree to this effect that nobody can worship anyone else.

[13 : 21] Yes, yes, says the king, acknowledging what he's done. And then comes the punchline, the trap for the king is that Daniel, his best man, has disobeyed the edict.

And the king is bound by his own law to send Daniel to the lion's den. King Darius' words and actions here are very remarkable, really.

His words to Daniel when he takes him to the lion's den are, may your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you. It is almost a prayer to that God.

It is almost breaking his own law by praying to the God of Daniel, the living God. It's an extraordinary prayer, or at least petition, by a pagan king to Daniel's God, the God of the Bible, praying that that God will bring deliverance to Daniel.

And it almost breaks his own law. The lion's den is sealed, a stone is brought and laid on the mouth of the den to stop the friends of Daniel rescuing him, perhaps, to stop people throwing meat to the lions so that Daniel would be spared, to stop Daniel getting his bat rope out and climbing up out of the hole and rescuing himself, perhaps.

[14 : 45] The den is sealed. There is no way that Daniel can be rescued. We're not told much about Daniel. He says nothing in all of this.

We're not told about his mind. We don't want to risk speculation by thinking that he was at peace or not at peace. But we are told about the king. Indeed, the king is perhaps a more important character in this story than Daniel is.

So we're told that the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting. No food was brought to him and sleep fled from him. The king is obviously anxious for his best man and he doesn't sleep and he doesn't eat and fasting often in ancient cultures as in modern goes along with prayer.

We're not told that he prayed or whom he might have prayed to but that he fasted is a sign that he was in effect offering prayers. Darius's trap his best man through his own edict is put to death it seems.

But the third trap is the trap that the other satraps the advisors of the king the counsellors the other two presidents fall into. The next morning Daniel's alive of course.

[16:09] The king Darius rushes to the den of the lions. This is an eager king wanting to know whether his best man has been saved by his mighty God or not.

Daniel's Darius's question on the way to the den is again extraordinary. O Daniel servant of the living God has your God whom you faithfully serve been able to deliver you from the lions? He calls Daniel's God the living God an extraordinary acknowledgement by a pagan mighty king of the world's greatest empire to that point. To call God a living God is not just to say that God's alive but to acknowledge that God is active even powerful for whenever the expression living God occurs in the Bible it stresses the power of almighty God to act and save.

And Daniel calls out from the lions den Daniel O king live forever my God sent his angel and shut the lions mouth 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.

Daniel acknowledges that God has saved him. It's not Daniel's ability he hasn't hypnotized the lions hasn't pulled out a spare rump steak from his pocket to feed them and stop them eating him.

[17:37] He hasn't got out some ancient bat weapon to fend off lions he hasn't got an ancient form of error guard to prevent them approaching him. Daniel acknowledges that very clearly it is God and God alone who has saved him.

Yes he says to king Darius my God was able to save me and in effect here I am alive to show it. The writer of the story goes on in verse 23 to say that the king was glad 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 God.

Not trusted in himself his ingenuity ability or anything else but trusted in God and God's ability. In fact Daniel had every reason to trust himself to think that he was good enough able enough of good moral character enough for God to act but no he trusts God and God's ability to act and it is God who saved him.

The result is that the advisors are thrown into their own trap thrown into the den of lions and eaten up along with their wives and children which might seem to us fairly horrific although in the ancient world was standard practice for people of ill repute when they were punished their families perished along with them and this story could easily end here could easily end here with the bad being punished good Daniel being saved and brought back to public office and the good people living happily ever after isn't that after all how great rescue stories and ancient tales end but no this ends in a very remarkable way we've already seen King Darius say some extraordinary things but this one takes the cake Daniel having been saved the other advisors having been killed King Darius writes to all the peoples and nations of every language throughout the whole world may you have abundant prosperity which is a bit like an ancient greeting you know dear Fred

I make a decree that in all my royal dominion people should tremble and fear before the God of Daniel for he is the living God enduring forever his kingdom shall never be destroyed and his dominion has no end 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 what a great psalm of praise to God but it comes from the lips of a Gentile non-Jewish king from someone we wouldn't expect to say such words of praise to God someone outside the people of God of the Old Testament you see the story of Daniel is not the story about Daniel but about God and it is about which God saves in verse seven the advisors ask the king to issue an edict that people worship only the king for a month in Daniel in verse ten

[20:51] Daniel prays to his living God refusing the edict he chooses one God not the one that the edict suggests should be worshipped and prayed to in verse sixteen the king Dariah says to Daniel may your God save you from the lions and then on that morning when the king rushes to the tomb he cries out Daniel has your God been able to save you and Daniel says yes he has my God has saved me and now at the end of the story the climax of the story what it's all about is king Darius acknowledging that Daniel's God the living God is the one true God and he and he alone should be worshipped and feared for Darius recognises that God Daniel's God the God of the Bible whom we worship he is the real king not Darius but God everyone in this story when they address the king say may the king live forever which is a bit like saying long live the queen but who lives forever

Darius at the end says for God is the living God enduring forever not himself not a human being but God and God alone but more than that Darius kingdom we're told at the beginning of the story is very extensive we're meant to see that this is a vast empire that he rules over 120 satraps under him but what does Darius say at the end of the story God's kingdom shall never be destroyed and

his dominion has no end not Darius kingdom and empire but God's is mighty and endless the irony of the story is that the mighty Persian emperor could not save Daniel sent to death by his own decree but God saves the king can't but God can Darius's laws the laws of the Persians and Medes are wonderful laws that people in the ancient world extolled and thought horrific but God's laws are found to be better God you see is the real king God you see is the one who's sovereign God you see is the one who exercises power and human power is found to be weak and in the end impotent caught in its own trap but more than that more than God being the sovereign king of the world is the fact that God is the real rescuer so Darius's words in verse 27 are God delivers and rescues God works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth for God has saved Daniel from the power of the lions it may not be quite as dramatic as we see in modern films or children's cartoon series or whatever but it is God to the rescue and he's rescued Daniel from the lions mouths now it would be very easy for me to say well therefore we can trust that God will always save us from a lion's mouth so the next time you're in the mouth of a lion remember the story of Daniel and God will save you now that doesn't happen very often so some preachers might say well remember that when you're in a fix and you're facing death God will bring you out of that and save you out of that and save us through some miraculous means or not because if we read the whole of the book of Daniel we find it's more nuanced than that we read the whole of the Bible as well we find that there are plenty of occasions when the people of God are not rescued by God when facing death many of the apostles of Jesus Jesus himself and others die for their faith Daniel was preserved sometimes that happens sometimes it doesn't we cannot say because it happened to Daniel it will happen to us it may do the point of the story is that God is able to save not that he always will in such a way in the first half of the book of Daniel it's very clear that the emphasis is to a persecuted people to enable them to trust that God has power now to act in your situation they're a minority in a pagan world and God has power to act now but the second half of the book of Daniel adds another dimension to that it acknowledges still that God is sovereign and still that God is powerful to save but it calls for a persecuted people to endure with faith even if it means to death but to know that in the end even beyond the grave God will bring about vindication of his people and rescue of them for eternity that is not a weak second best option sometimes we think that God's power is revealed when we might be saved now from a crisis rather than beyond death forever in heaven but the second is actually the best the second lasts forever

[26 : 13] Daniel one day died it is the salvation that is eternal that is the greatest rescue of all for Daniel in the lion's den points to that to another tomb sealed by a stone to another early morning with people running to that tomb to find if there is life or death to another time when people expected to find a dead body to another time when not finding a dead body there was joy and relief and praise and faith but of course the second time there wasn't an alive Daniel standing there shouting out the second time the tomb was empty and it's that latter rescue that's the most important for us for Jesus resurrection from the dead is the guarantee that God will save and save eternally forever it may well be beyond death and the grave but it is a firm promise of God that we can trust he has power to save even power to save now and rescue now from whatever crisis or dilemma we're in but he may not choose to exercise his power in that way but for those who place their faith in the empty tomb he guarantees that there is eternal life and salvation with him forever it is to that empty tomb rather than

Daniel's tomb that we must place our faith and trust let us trust in a living God a powerful God who is able to save and because of Jesus death and resurrection we can trust that he will for he is the living God enduring forever his kingdom shall never be destroyed and his dominion has no end he delivers he rescues he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth for he has saved Daniel from the power of the lions Amen