

DANIEL: PROFILES IN COURAGE

VI. “In the Lion’s Den”

10-26-03

Daniel 6

INTRODUCTION

Certainly the story of Daniel in the lion’s den has to rank near the top of favorite Bible stories for children. But the truth and values set-forth in this story are ones we continue to need throughout our lives. Daniel’s courage and faithfulness can put some steel in our Christian backbones.

Remember, the book of Daniel contains stories of faithfulness in incredibly difficult circum-stances. Israel was invaded by the Babylonians 605 B.C., killing, destroying the nation, and splitting up families by hauling off the best and brightest into captivity 1000 mi. from home. Daniel and his friends were victims of this terrible injustice and suffering, yet he never allowed himself to adopt a “victim mentality” that is so popular today.

Most of the Bible story books that picture Daniel in the lion’s den show a young man in there among those huge, majestic, ferocious lions. Actually, at this time, Daniel is at least 80-years-old. This ought to encourage all 80- year-olds, seeing Daniel can still handle lions with God’s help. But the strength of character we saw in him as a teenager in chapter one, deported to this foreign land, is still there. And, Daniel’s never been pushy in his beliefs, yet quietly, powerfully he continues giving witness— demonstrating the power of God. At the same time, he affirms God’s love, patience and concern for his captors. Gentle in his approach, lacking in vindictiveness, yet Daniel never allows himself to be pushed into their mold.

Last week, we noted that the great Babylonian kingdom fell to an invasion of the Medes and Persians. Now, as a new government is in control under Darius, Daniel has to handle another major government transition.

READ Daniel 6

INTEGRITY

We notice that again, the quality of Daniel’s work, character become immediately obvious to this new king. The cream rises to the top. This causes jealousy among the other 120 satraps, hence the plot to discredit him. Yet, when they could find nothing wrong in how he handled things, or his loyalty, they decided to entrap him regarding his worship of Jehovah God. They lie to the king in saying, “All the administrators, prefects, satraps, and advisors have agreed...” to outlaw all prayer to anyone but the king for 30 days. Daniel of course had not even been consulted.

I’m impressed by Daniel’s integrity and careful, quality work. If your enemies wanted to discredit you, could they find any weakness, anything at which you were negligent? They could find absolutely no ground for any charge against Daniel regarding his

performance.

And, on the other side of the ledger, could your enemies discern that your faith, your walk with God was the source of your quality living? In fact, Daniel's faith and trust in God were so clear to these administrators and satraps, they knew this plot would get him killed. They weren't interested in getting him to compromise his faith. They wanted him dead. And they knew he wouldn't bend in his practice and commitment to God.

DANIEL AT PRAYER

Prayer shaped and defined Daniel's life. Even his enemies realized that. You might wonder how they knew about his prayer life. My guess is that it would be through his servants. After all, Daniel was a *very high* official— one of three officials administering the entire kingdom. I would expect he had a big house and plenty of servants. Dan 6:10-11

*Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, **just as he had done before**. Then these men went as a group and found Daniel praying and asking God for help.*

I like Daniel's quiet courage. He knows what's going on, yet he does what he always does in practicing his faith. There is a "let the chips fall where they may" attitude. There is no pleading his case before the king or talking about the lies and the injustice.

Remember, this is only a temporary law to be in effect for one month. It probably sounded to the king like it would be good to build loyalty and make it a "king appreciation month." Couldn't Daniel have just omitted the overt practice of his faith for that month? Do you have to kneel to pray? Do you have to do it in front of a window facing Jerusalem? Does it have to be three times a day (probably morning, noon, and evening)? What's wrong with praying in secret? Can't we pray in the dark and silently? Besides, the edict didn't require that people worship or pray to the king or to any other gods. It only said not to pray to anyone else for 30 days. So, this didn't really constitute a violation of a the commandment against idolatry. Would a 30 day hiatus in his normal practice be such a big deal? I imagine there are those here who have skipped devotional practice for at least that long while on vacation or other times. Daniel can still pray privately as much as he wants as long as no one knows. AND, can't he do a lot more for God by maintaining this position of power and influence than being dead? Certainly he could save the lives of Jewish people and help them in this time of exile. He had an unprecedented opportunity to influence government for good.

But, Daniel is not ashamed of who he is or what he does. No edict of the king is going to change his practice. It reminds us of Paul in Romans 1:16

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes....

There is a rhythm to Daniel's life. Prayer takes place at regular, appointed hours—morning, noon, evening, as regular as eating. Don't underestimate the power of rhythm in your spiritual life. If each week you have to decide whether you'll come to church or not, you'll miss a lot because you don't feel like it, something comes up, you've been out late the night before, etc. Those who are regular in worship are those who've made the big decision, beyond the weekly one, to be at worship on the Lord's Day. Then, you don't have to decide each week whether to come or not. It is more like your going to work or school daily. You just do it because of the bigger picture. It is the right thing to do. Exceptions are rare. Likewise, it applies for your devotional time of daily reading God's Word and prayer. If you just do it when you have time or feel like it, it won't happen too often. Other things get in the way. But, if you have a certain time of getting up every day, and a place where you meet with God for your devotions, a routine, a plan you follow, it will happen most of the time. Some who are on their computers every day have devotions sent to them daily through e-mail. "The Upper Room" and other Christian groups will do this. Grace before meals forms another helpful rhythm. All these are little ways in which the rhythm of our lives helps us and provides a level of witness to who we are.

Never underestimate the witness that provides to our children, grandchildren, neighbors, and friends. Faithful church attendance, giving thanks to God for our food before we eat not just at home but when we are out in a restaurant, and other ways we define our priorities all add up to a silent witness people notice. These are all small refusals to let the world around us define who we are.

As we've looked at Daniel's life, the power of his life and witness is clearly from the strength of his principled living and spiritual practice. He never seems to be pushy, trying to impose his beliefs on others, or arguing for them. He simply lives passionately for God. He practices what he believes. His faith is unswerving when threatened. That makes an impact.

When Hitler came to power in Germany, he made a strong effort to court the church, and for the most part, the church went along with his Nazism. Martin Niemoeller a respected leader of the church however saw the incompatibility of Nazism with the church and saw through the smooth talk and the lies of Hitler. He became a leader of what was known as "The Confessing Church," churches refusing the overtures of Hitler, who refused to compromise, and tried to expose the evil they saw in Nazism. He was imprisoned along with many other Confessing Church pastors. He spent 8 years in prisons and concentration camps, including Dachau. Hitler, realized that if he could persuade Niemoeller to join his cause, much of the opposition of The Confessing Church would collapse. So, he sent a former close friend of Niemoeller's to visit him, a friend who felt it best to cooperate with the Nazis. Seeing Niemoeller in his prison cell, this friend began, "Martin, Martin! Why are you here?" Martin Niemoeller replied, "My friend! Why are you not here?"

IN THE LION'S DEN

Of course, it is clear from our reading that the laws of the Medes and Persians cannot be changed. So, though the king wants to find a loophole and save Daniel, it is impossible. The king's love and concern for Daniel is obvious. This says something of Daniel's character and personality. It indicates he must have been accepting of this pagan king, for we generally don't like people unless we feel accepted by them. It all speaks of non-judgmental love. But the king can find no way out and Daniel is thrown into a den of lions. This was probably a large cave with a stone in front and an air hole in top through which the victim was dropped in.

Being eaten alive is a pretty gruesome thought. Polly and I have lived with many stories of grizzly bear encounters in Glacier Park near where we lived in Montana. Usually it seemed there was at least one death a year by grizzly attack. The gruesome details were sometimes in the newspaper. If a grizzly charges you, and there isn't a tall enough tree you can get up fast enough, authorities say the best thing to do is to fall to the ground and roll up in a fetal position and play dead.. For some this has worked. But, can you imagine laying there, having that grizzly bear sniff you, smelling that terrible breath? (People who've had the experience always describe grizzly's as having bad breath). And then those teeth tearing into your flesh, a shoulder or arm, crushing the bones before you lose consciousness. Remember, you're supposed to play dead. This is not something any of us want to experience. Most of those who've survived a grizzly attack are those who've done a good job of playing dead, even after the bear takes a bite or two.

So, certainly being thrown to hungry lions is enough to make you rethink your commitment to God. But Daniel is unbending. God did not forsake Daniel in the lion's den. He was there in the presence of an angel, taming those wild beasts. The story makes it clear Daniel's salvation is not because the lions are so well-fed they couldn't eat another bite. For, when the ring-leaders of the conspiracy were thrown in the next morning through the air hole in the top of the den, the lions caught them while still in the air, beginning their destruction. The promise of Ps. 34:7 is seen here, literally fulfilled:

*The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him,
And he delivers him.*

Anytime we take a courageous stand for God and His kingdom, we can be assured God will stand with us. While we thrill at this miraculous deliverance, sometimes God chooses that we glorify Him through death or through other suffering. Nevertheless, we'll know His grace, presence, and the "peace that passes all understanding." Heb. 11, the great faith chapter concludes with remarkable listing of faithful saints who've gone before us:

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, 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.

***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. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.*

*These were **all** commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. (Heb 11:32-40)*

A chronicle of great deliverances and great martyrdoms, whichever God chooses.

In the first three centuries of the church there came ten great waves of Roman persecution. The Roman Emperor Nero in A.D. 60 took bright-eyed Christian teenagers and impaled them on sticks of wood, covering their bodies with pitch, placing them on the walls of his Roman villa and lighting them afire to light his debauched parties. Wave after wave continued through Diocletian, the last persecuting emperor. Eusebius in his church history tells us they took Christians in Alexandria, N. Africa and cut their tongues out, then boiled them in oil and threw them into the sea. In the Roman Coliseum they threw Christians to the lions for entertainment. Diocletian took every Christian book he could find and burned it. And he erected a column in the city of Rome on which he had inscribed:

Extincta Nomina Christianorum [the name of Christ is extinct].

BUT, the very next emperor was Constantine who, at Milvian bridge, looked into the sky and saw the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ and next to it the words, “Under this sign conquer.” And, whatever you make of Constantine’s conversion to Christianity, there is no question that the faithful witness of Daniels throughout history have lifted high the name of Christ and advanced His kingdom. The Kingdom of God is anything but extinct.

Today persecution continues in places like the Sudan. Two years ago, in testimony before the U.S. House subcommittee on Africa the unimaginable suffering of Christians in South Sudan was detailed. They were, and are still being raped, tortured, enslaved or burned to death by their Islamic Arab countrymen. They crucify infant children, nailing them to trees with steel spikes. And after the torture, they sometimes pierce the lips of their victims and insert padlocks to keep them from telling their ordeals. Secretary of State Colin Powell says, “There is perhaps no greater tragedy on the face of the earth today.” Yet, where in all the world is the Christian church showing the fastest rate of growth? Yes, it is in the Sudan. How can that be? It can only be the power of God in

these suffering Christians as they live with integrity, love, and forgiveness— not fearing death, but knowing death cannot hurt them because they have eternal life in Christ Jesus.

Usually for us, the pressure and threats are not overt and life-threatening. Nevertheless, they can be pretty intimidating. Perhaps you remember the flap over Erica Harold, the 2003 Miss America. Every Miss America chooses a platform of what they will promote in their year as Miss America. Erica is a Christian and chose to include sexual abstinence before marriage as a major part of her platform. The Miss America officials didn't like that. She endured two days of pressure and debate with officials. She refused to backdown. Finally they gave in and allowed her to include abstinence in her platform. Let me read an excerpt from her testimony before the U.S. Congress.

“I was fortunate to have been raised by two loving parents who encouraged me to set high standards, to value myself, and to save myself for marriage.... I saw many of my peers use sex to try to find love and acceptance. But instead of being able to fill that void, many of them became teen parents, contracted diseases, and had their hearts broken.

“I used to feel badly for them and wish they had realized that being abstinent could have spared them from those consequences. However, I came to recognize that it was not enough to feel bad; I knew I had to take action. As Gandhi once said, ‘You must become the change you wish to see in the world.’ So when the time came to select a platform for the Miss Illinois pageant, my conscience compelled me to choose abstinence.

“Now I must admit I was initially very nervous about making abstinence presentations.... When I began, I was a nervous 18-year-old, simply attempting not to embarrass myself. But as I did each presentation, I gained confidence, not only in myself, but also in the idea that people my age truly can make a difference. Therefore, when I speak to young people, I encourage them to stand firmly in defense of their principles....”

This fall, at age 23, Erica has entered Harvard Law school.

CONCLUSION

Maybe you're facing some lions in your life right now, threatening to destroy you or at least intimidate you. May Daniel put some steel in your backbone to stand for Christ. Let's refuse to worry about saying “no” to what would dishonor Christ in our personal lives. The next time you hesitate in your faith practice, such as—

- bowing your head in prayer in a restaurant,
- or refusing to join others in their critical spirit or gossip,
- or hide your true beliefs to just fit in,

remember Daniel and those words of the song we used this morning:

Dare to be a Daniel, dare to stand alone!
Dare to have a purpose firm!
Dare to make it known!

But also remember the gentle, uncritical spirit of Daniel. He is never pushy, always respectful. At the same time he is ever faithful and undeterred in the sincere practice of his faith in the true God. Threats of consequences roll off like water off a duck's back because he knows God is faithful and will be glorified.