

Daniel in the Lions Den

Some of us grew up going to church and, if you're one of those people, you'll remember all the big stories: Noah's ark, David and Goliath, Joshua at Jericho, Jonah and the Big Fish, Joseph and his Coat of Many Colors, Moses parting the Red Sea and several from the Book of Daniel. While we remember the exciting action from those stories, the plot lines, so to speak, we tend to miss some of the key points in the stories because we're caught up in the action. So, over the next few weeks, we're going to take a second look, for some, and a first look, for others, at the big stories of the Old Testament.

I want to start with the story of Daniel in the lions den. The main reason I want to start there is because I got the idea for this series when I was doing devotional reading one day and this story was part of my reading.

So let's get into it:

Darius the Mede decided to divide the kingdom into 120 provinces and he appointed a prince to rule over each province. The king also chose Daniel and two others as administrators to supervise the princes and to watch out for the king's interests. Daniel soon proved himself more capable than all the other administrators and princes. Because of his great ability, the king made plans to place him over the entire empire. Then the other administrators and princes began searching for some fault in the way Daniel was handling his affairs but they couldn't find anything to criticize. He was faithful and honest and always responsible. So they concluded, "Our only chance of finding grounds for accusing Daniel will be in connection with the requirements of his religion." (Daniel 6:1-5)

These first five verses lay out the background for the adventure that is to follow. They show some self-centered and politically motivated rulers -- after all they were princes and administrators, they had power -- deciding to cover their own inadequacies by getting rid of the person who was so gifted and hard-working that he was making them look bad ... and maybe ruining their chances at promotion!

When Solomon said there was nothing new under the sun, I think that's the kind of thing he was talking about.

Notice that Daniel's character traits were obvious to all: he was faithful, honest and always responsible. This is the kind of person you could trust with your kingdom, a man who isn't going to look for some advantage for himself, but is content to do his job in a responsible and trustworthy manner.

Notice also that when the jealous princes were looking for a chink in Daniel's armor, they found only one thing that might be out of sync with the values of the kingdom, only one area in which they could maybe drive a wedge between King Darius and his top administrator - and that was Daniel's faith in Yahweh, the God of his people. That says a lot about Daniel as a person of integrity and it says something important about how the world sees the Christian person today. We don't quite fit in with the values of our culture, although there is intense pressure to squeeze us out of our Scriptural values

and into the mold of this world's thinking. That's why the Law Society of B.C., like its related societies in Ontario and Nova Scotia, is currently in legal actions to prevent Trinity Western University from opening its law school. They think they have a constitutional right to refuse to allow Trinity graduates to join their profession because Trinity graduates will have signed a covenant that says, among other things, that marriage is between a man and a woman. The world doesn't believe that anymore. It says marriage can be between any two people in love. Although I don't know the motivation of the lawyers who are pushing this case, and it looks like it will have to go to the Supreme Court, it seems to indicate, "We don't want your kind in our club and we'll fight to keep you out!" You can probably think of many other examples of situations where the world is pushing against the values of Christian people. Back to the story:

So the administrators and princes went to the king and said, "Long live King Darius! We administrators, prefects, princes, advisors and other officials have unanimously agreed that Your Majesty should make a law that will be strictly enforced. Give orders that for the next thirty days anyone who prays to anyone, divine or human - except to Your Majesty - will be thrown to the lions. And let Your Majesty issue and sign this law so it cannot be changed, a law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be revoked. So King Darius signed the law. (6:6-9)

Why? Why do you think the King would want to receive the prayers of all the people for 30 days. Obviously he hadn't seen Jim Carrey in *Bruce Almighty* and hadn't anticipated the headaches of trying to wisely answer the prayers of thousands of people. I tried to imagine why King Darius would sign a law like that and I concluded a couple of things:

1. He didn't believe in prayer - not really - but liked the attention and devotion that would be coming his way when all his subjects were praying to him. This was an ego boost to an already powerful ruler.
2. He had a sharp political mind and realized that if all of his administrators, prefects, princes, advisors and other officials had agreed on a particular course of action - one that seemed harmless enough - he would do well to go along with their little scheme. He would be making political points instead of political enemies.

But when Daniel learned that the law had been signed, he went home and knelt down as usual in his upstairs room, with its windows open toward Jerusalem. He prayed three times a day, just as he had always done, giving thanks to his God. The officials went together to Daniel's house and found him praying and asking for God's help. So they went back to the king and reminded him about his law. "Did you not sign a law that for the next thirty days anyone who prays to anyone, divine or human -- except to Your Majesty -- will be thrown to the lions?" "Yes," the king replied, "that decision stands; it is a law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be revoked." Then they told the king, "That man Daniel, one of the captives from Judah, is paying no attention to you or your law. He still prays to his God three times a day." (6:10-13)

The plot has been completely successful. Daniel has been caught in the act of defying the king's egotistical law and must now, according to a law of the Medes and Persians, be thrown to the lions. The king is not happy:

Hearing this, the king was very angry with himself for signing the law, and he tried to find a way to save Daniel out of this predicament. In the evening the men went together to the king and said, "Your Majesty knows that according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, no law that the king signs can be changed." So at last the king gave orders for Daniel to be arrested and thrown into the den of lions. The king said to him, "May your God, whom you worship continually, rescue you." A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den. The king sealed the stone with his own royal seal and the seals of his nobles so that no one could rescue Daniel from the lions. Then the king returned to his palace and spent the night fasting. He refused his usual entertainment and couldn't sleep at all that night. Very early the next morning, the king hurried out to the lions' den. When he got there, he called out in anguish, "Daniel, servant of the living God! Was your God, whom you worship continually, able to rescue you from the lions?" (6:14-20)

Rulers can make bad decisions based on bad motives from time to time and Darius recognized that he had made a particularly bad decision. He was about to get rid of the one administrator in his kingdom that he trusted and would be giving over control to a bunch of people he didn't trust. But he had one hope, even after all the attempts to change his unchangeable verdict had failed. His one hope was that the God whom Daniel worshiped continually would be able to save him from the teeth of hungry lions. And that phrase he uses to describe his hope, "the God whom you worship continually", is found twice in this passage, both times from the lips of the king.

*Daniel answered, "Long live the king! My God sent His angel to shut the lions' mouths so that they would not hurt me, for I have been found innocent in His sight. And I have not wronged you Your Majesty."
The king was overjoyed and ordered that Daniel be lifted from the den. Not a scratch was found on him because he had trusted in his God. (21-3)*

There is a progression in Daniel's reply to the king.

1. God has protected me
2. I am innocent in His sight
3. I have not wronged you

It starts with God, not with the human ruler of the most powerful empire in the Middle East at the time. The first two statements are an answer to the question, "What just happened here?" "God has protected me, for I am innocent in His sight." And, as a kind of tag on those two points, "I have not wronged Your Majesty."

The writer makes the same point as he concludes this section: "Not a scratch was found on him BECAUSE he had trusted in his God." That seems the obvious conclusion, and it was the conclusion reached by the king as well. He sent this message to the known world, to people everywhere, to people of all races, all nations, all language groups:

"I decree that everyone throughout my kingdom should tremble with fear before the God of Daniel. For He is the living God, and He will endure forever. His kingdom will never be destroyed, and His rule will never end. He rescues and saves His people; He performs miraculous signs and wonders in the heavens and on earth. He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions."
(Daniel 6:26,27)

Let's look at the conclusions that this powerful man came to as a result of God's protection of Daniel.

1. There is a God who lives, who will endure forever. This is not a god of human invention, that passes away when the people that worship him either pass on or change their minds. There is a being that we call the "living God" and people should be in awe of Him.
2. His Kingdom will never be destroyed and His rule will never end. God is a ruler, a King, and Darius could see that, even though God's people were captives, had been exiled under the previous regime, that God was still ruling, still able to accomplish His purposes through His people.
3. Then Darius makes what we would think of as a "no-brainer" observation: that God is a saving God, that He rescues His people. He had just rescued Daniel from the lions den, but earlier He had rescued the whole nation of the Jews from exile in Babylon through the Persian victory over Belshazzar. And who led that victory? None other than King Darius the Mede. So Darius is a first-hand observer of how God works - and has even been used by God to bring salvation to His people.
4. The next declaration that he makes in this message to the whole known world is that the God of Daniel performs miraculous signs and wonders in the heavens and on earth. Specifically, He had rescued Daniel from the power of the lions, which was amazing - the princes who had plotted against Daniel found out just how amazing it was when they were given their turn at visiting the lions den. Here is the king of the Medes and Persians, the ruler of all the lands and peoples around him, and he acknowledges that it is God who can perform miraculous signs, that God is the one who is truly great.

So, there is a God who lives forever, whose kingdom will never be destroyed, who performs miraculous signs and wonders AND, this God is a saving God.

Now, what should we take hold of from this story, Daniel in the lions den, told in chapter 6 of his book? Let's look at one lesson about ourselves and our faith, one lesson about the world and its rulers and one lesson about the nature and power of our God.

1. First, the lesson about ourselves and our faith. Daniel didn't have to think much about the new law that King Darius had signed. He didn't go to the king and plead for a more just law or for a personal exemption. He just went about his business as he had always done and prayed facing Jerusalem as he had always done and continued in his practice of doing this three times a day - as he had always done. And he did all this after he had learned that this new law had been signed, continuing to give thanks to his God. What does that tell us? It tells us that he was fully reliant on God, fully

trusting everything about his life to God. It tells us that he was living gratefully, that giving thanks was something that came from his heart. This is not something that Daniel had to put on for the occasion. His response to the crisis came from who he was as a person - he was a man who trusted God, who was grateful to God, who was a true worshiper of God. The longer we go in life with that issue being settled in our hearts, the more confident, the more at peace, the more ready for crisis, we will become. When we know who God is, like Daniel did, we can be ready for anything. So that's the application for us - don't base faith on our emotion, on the crisis we're facing at the moment, on the way the world looks to us today - base faith on who God is and has been and has promised to be forever ... then walk in quiet confidence, living thankfully, recalling all the blessings, knowing God is with you in everything.

2. The second lesson is about the world and its rulers and the point I want us to grasp here is that God is bigger than all the show and posturing of political leaders. He will work out His purposes despite the wishes of kings and presidents. And, as the powerful ruler of Babylon who had conquered the Jews and taken them into exile later declared - he is able to humble those who walk in pride. Nebuchadnezzar admits this at the end of Daniel 4 and now, not that many years later, another powerful ruler is saying the same thing: "I can't shut the mouths of lions, but there is a God who can and everyone throughout my kingdom should tremble with fear before this God!" It's a hard thing for a person who is on top of the world, the most powerful ruler, the king of all he sees, it's hard for someone in that position to admit that they aren't the greatest, that they don't have all the power. But here in Daniel 6 and earlier in Daniel 4 we have two of the greatest of the ancient world boldly declaring, "God is the great one; He can do miracles and wonders; He is worthy of awe and reverence!" What we do with that is tell ourselves the very same thing. There are no rulers in the world today, no bankers, no actors, no professors, no judges, nobody who can claim to have God's power or God's wisdom or God's love. We don't need to be afraid of what the world thinks or says because we know a God who has done great and mighty things, not just in our lives, but in every part of the world. And, He is able to work in the lives of the most powerful on earth and teach any of them to fear His Name and to obey His commands.
3. What do we learn about the nature and power of God? Beyond the powerful message throughout the book of Daniel that God is sovereign, that He is King above all kings, is this message: that He is a saving God, that He rescues those who love Him. Darius said it simply: "He rescues and saves His people." We can respond to that in a couple of ways - one good and one that's not helpful. We can say, "It's great that God was there for Daniel, but what about the Christians in Southern Sudan or the students in northern Kenya who were attacked by Muslim extremists? What about this person or that group of people who weren't saved from their version of the lions?" To ask that question is to ignore all the miracles, all the salvation, all the rescues that God has performed and place our focus on the destructive work of the evil one. Our world has been subject to the invasion of Satan and we feel the effects of that invasion every day, but that's not where our focus should be. In the context of a world that God created to be good and that humans gave over to the knowledge of evil, we will be buffeted by that evil over and over again. And in that context, the knowledge that God is good and that He is, gradually but relentlessly, overcoming the

evil in the world with the goodness of His salvation, should be both the focus and the motivation for how we live. Darius saw a miracle and recognized it as a miracle and concluded that God is a God who saves. We have seen many miracles and have heard of many more and we should easily conclude that God is a Savior, and that His approach to a world tarnished by evil is to bring His presence to it -- light into the darkness, truth into the lies, healing into our brokenness and purpose into the chaos of modern living.

Those are the calls on our lives that we can reflect on today: to continue living by faith, trusting that God is greater than all the powers in this world in the assurance that He is a saving God, that in love He cares about us and works towards our good. And even King Darius, from over 2500 years ago, says that's the way forward.