

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Daniel: He Continued”

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Daniel 6:10-28

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We continue our series in the Book of Daniel this week, this prophetic book shares about Israelites living in exile in ancient Babylon. I’m grateful to Pastor Ben two weeks ago for kicking this off, looking at Daniel’s interpretation of the king’s dream, and then to Rev. Tim Reynolds’ preaching last week on Daniel 3, which you’ll remember was the story of three Israelites—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—who refused to bow down to the king’s statue and, as punishment, were thrown into a fiery furnace, and how it calls us to live faithfully to God in a culture that pressures you otherwise, even pressure to take something good, such as public service or patriotism, and turning it into an idol. And this week, we’ll look at a story that has a number of similarities to that one and is perhaps the most well-known of all the stories in the Book of Daniel: Daniel and the Lions’ Den.

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 towards 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.’

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 for ever!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.²⁴ The king gave a command, and those who had accused Daniel were brought and thrown into the den of lions—they, their children, and their wives. Before they reached the bottom of the den the lions overpowered them and broke all their bones in pieces.

²⁵ Then King Darius wrote to all peoples and nations of every language throughout the whole world: ‘May you have abundant prosperity!’²⁶ 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.
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.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Loving, Sovereign Lord, we praise you this day for the gift of your Word, and for your faithfulness. Help us to be faithful in our following you, no matter the turns and twists of culture or worldly power. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours?

Daniel, as you’ll remember from a couple of weeks ago, emerges as something of a golden boy in the Babylonian royal courts. But he gets himself into a bit of trouble this time around, and did so just by kneeling at a window, but a lot has happened since that fiery furnace, and it shapes

how we can and I think should understand this well-known account of Daniel and the Lion's Den, so let's get back up to speed.

So, sometime after the fiery furnace, King Nebuchadnezzar has another troubling dream, and again Daniel interprets that dream, which ultimately comes true, with the king being driven to madness, going into the wild, living among the animals of the field, but then being restored to his kingdom and coming himself to praise the Most High God. And Daniel is there. He continued to serve the king ably and to follow the Lord faithfully.

Some years later, after Nebuchadnezzar dies, he is succeeded by his son Belshazzar. In the middle of a royal festival, after a bit too much wine, he and his guests see a human hand writing on a wall, writing words that no one can interpret. The words were "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin," and incidentally our boys were just watching a Bible cartoon about this very thing the other day, and they started cackling because some of the court advisors start arguing over whether it said "Mini, Mini, Tickle Person." But no one can interpret the writing on the wall—this is where that saying comes from by the way—so they send for Daniel to do so. He arrives, interprets the writing, and tells the king that it means that his days of rule are over. Not exactly the sort of thing one would be eager to tell a king who could have you killed right on the spot. But Belshazzar, like his father, rewards Daniel for his skill and honesty and promotes him, but that very night, Belshazzar is killed, and his kingdom is overtaken by the Medes, ruled by the man Darius. And Daniel is there. He continued to serve the king ably and to follow the Lord faithfully.

So even though there's new management, Daniel's qualities are quickly recognized by the new king, bringing us to the series of events that got Daniel into a pretty serious pickle. Darius elevates Daniel even further, eventually about to put him in charge of his entire kingdom. Well, the other officials didn't really like that, this foreign-born goody-two-shoes. So, they seek to craft a way to bring Daniel down. They look for some kind of corruption or negligence, but they couldn't find one. For Daniel, he was just continuing to serve the king ably and follow the Lord faithfully.

Then they realized it: to catch Daniel in something illegal, they would need to pit his service to the king against his faithfulness to his God. And that's just what they do.

In the verses just before the passage we read a moment ago, these officials go to the king and propose the following: for a period of thirty days, anyone who prays to anyone or anything, divine or human, except to the king himself, shall be thrown into a den of lions. Now what king would say this was a bad idea? So the king agrees, and those officials—and this is where the tricky part comes in—those officials then get Darius to sign a certain document, making this decree, this worship requirement, irrevocable, even by the king. (Kind of begs the question of

what good is unquestioned executive power if you can't break and reverse your own laws, but in any case the decree is law, and it cannot be rescinded.)

And that brings us to the passage we read today. Darius is king, and a new law had emerged banning all prayer to anyone except to him for thirty days. Daniel, then, is in a bind. On one hand, he is a faithful servant of the king. On the other, he is an Israelite and a faithful servant to God. And what does he do? He doesn't change a thing. He continued to serve the king ably and follow the Lord faithfully.

V. 10 describes what he does. "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." It had been Daniel's practice to face Jerusalem, kneel, and pray three times a day, but now that practice could potentially get him killed, and it nearly does.

Those same officials who had tricked the king and laid a trap for Daniel indeed caught him in that trap. They came and found him praying—which kind of strikes me as a darkly amusing scene: these scheming conspirators burst into a room, see a humble man on his knees praying quietly, and loudly exclaim, "Traitor! Criminal!"

But, they got what they were looking for. They went and told the king what they had seen Daniel doing—wasn't exactly a secret, but it was against the law. Nevertheless, Darius is greatly distressed. He has no desire to execute his most gifted and steadfast servant. But the officials reminded him that he had made his decree applicable to everyone and irrevocable. So he's in a bind. Does he reverse his decree and risk undermining his authority throughout his newly expanded empire, or does he execute his most capable servant? One way or another, the king felt cornered; he felt his hands were tied.

So the king orders that Daniel pay the stated consequences for breaking the law, and Daniel is thrown in the lion's den, with the king adding, "May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!" which seems an awfully odd thing for the king to say at this point. The king invokes the God, whom his most faithful servant in fact serves, to save his servant, when the reason his servant needs saving in the first place is because the act of praying to that very God was made to be treasonous by an edict you yourself signed. Nevertheless, Darius is concerned for Daniel and fasts through a sleepless night.

Some of you already know how the story ends. Daniel is not eaten by lions. An angel of God had shut the lions' mouths. Darius is overjoyed and in response throws the conspirators and their families (for good measure) to the lions, and Daniel is delivered because of his trust in God.

And that's where most of the focus usually goes when we think about this story. If you know this story already, you might remember illustrations of a peaceful Daniel surrounded by hungry lions in something like a dark, stony pit. Some of them even take the liberty of showing Daniel actually petting the lions. That's usually where our attention goes. But I think the point of the story, and at least the point of this sermon, has less to do with Daniel making it out of the lion's den alive, and more to do with what Daniel did to get himself thrown into the lion's den in the first place.

V. 10 again reads, "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." Now the way we read this verse is going to impact a lot about what we can tell about what was behind Daniel's actions, and then what we're to take from it when it comes to living faithfully in the face of laws of powers that would seek to deter you from living your life solely devoted to the Lord? Does he go home, and then act openly defiant, flinging open the windows to pray publicly in a strong form of protest? And by extension, are we to be defiantly open and public about our dissent, desiring to overthrow whatever oppressive law is in place? Or are we to be quiet but resolute resisters to laws contrary to following the Lord?

Hard to say, sometimes. On one hand, there's definitely a place in Scripture calling the faithful to be defiant against tyranny and injustice: just look at some of the prophet Elijah's interactions with King Ahab, or the prophet Nathan with King David. And there's definitely been a place within the life of the church over the centuries. I mean my goodness, some of the most indicting seasons for parts of the church have been seasons of silence: think the church in Germany during the rise of the Third Reich, the church in South Africa during Apartheid, or in our own country's history, the church in the United States—parts of it anyway—during the Civil Rights Movement.

But in the tone of the Book of Daniel, it would seem the message from Daniel's actions is more the latter: that he continues to act, not in a way that seeks to draw attention to itself or seeking to be openly defiant, just doing as he had done previously, knowing the consequences of his actions, but doing so anyway. You see, the story of Daniel and the lion's den is less about the assured deliverance that comes to those who remain faithful to God, for surely not all presented in Scripture who are faithful are delivered from horrible deaths, and that's surely not what we see in world history either. The story of Daniel and the lion's den is more about the steady faith and practice of a man devoted to God first, even as the world of imperial power and politics swirls around him. So much of the Book of Daniel is set in the midst of regime changes, with one king exchanged for another king, one empire displacing another empire, and throughout all of them,

Daniel continues serving ably and following the Lord faithfully. And while the empires ebb and flow, the sovereignty of God remains.

Some of us have seen glimpses of this, perhaps in another context. How many of us have parents, especially with today as Father's Day, how many of us have fathers, grandfathers, or father figures who didn't seek to draw attention to themselves, they just served and loved faithfully. No matter what chaos or uncertainty or anxiety might have been swirling around, you knew that they'd be there serving and loving faithfully.

The message is, whether the king is in your favor or not, whether the law is in your favor or not, the people of God follow him first, not when it is politically convenient, because ultimately he is in control, and the people of God do so in a way that states that yes our faith leads us to seek the betterment of our society and our world, to seek to lawfully abide in whatever land we are placed, but that is not the first motivation. The first motivation is to follow the Lord, and whatever the consequences of that may be, so be it.

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Almost seven years ago, another man was elected president. And at the same time, there were people crying out that it would usher in the collapse of Christian values. Pastors decried certain policies. The nation was divided. People said, now it's all going to come tumbling down.

Then almost three years ago, still another man was elected president. And at the same time, there were people crying out that it would usher in the collapse of Christian values. Pastors decried certain policies. That nation was/is divided. People said, now it's all going to come tumbling down.

And if any of us remember, whether it was fifteen years ago, or seven, or three, thinking something along those lines, that, yeah, now it's all going to come tumbling down, the message of the Book of Daniel, with all its swirling politics and regime changes, is this: we're wrong. Doesn't mean that elections aren't important. Doesn't mean that countries do indeed rise and fall and always have. But if Daniel is any indication, the endurance of faith has little to do with whoever happens to be ruling or whoever happens to be elected. But it has more to do with the willingness of the faithful to continue on in faith whether it is in or out of favor. And it has the most to do with the fact that ultimately it is not the empires or the rulers or the presidents who reign, but the Lord Almighty, to whom we rightly pray and seek mercy, whatever the cost.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.