

Daniel 6:1-28, No. 10
“Daniel in the Lions’ Den”
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Chapter 6 and the story of Daniel in the lions’ den is the part of the book of Daniel that everyone best remembers from Sunday School. It is one of the most beloved stories in the entire Bible. When I was a boy, we often sang in Sunday School the song “Dare to Be A Daniel, Dare to Stand Alone.” What you sing you remember! The odd thing in my recollection is that Sunday School books in those days usually pictured Daniel as a young man, if not a boy, facing the lions rather than the old man that he was.

In any case, in the term of art now in use, there was between chapter five and chapter six a *regime change*. The Babylonians had been conquered and the Persians had assumed control. But, as before with the Babylonians in their conquests of foreign peoples, so now the Persians enlisted able and willing local officials to continue the functions of the government. It would have been no advantage to the Persians to have everything fall apart in Babylon and for political chaos to prevent the Babylonian economy from contributing to the Persian coffers. They needed men who spoke the language, who understood Babylonian customs, and who could keep the wheels of commerce and government turning smoothly.

Text Comment

v.1 Now, as I said last time, this Darius poses a problem. Who is this man? He does not appear in the Babylonian or Persian sources so far discovered and so, in liberal biblical scholarship, it is widely thought that this is an example of a clear historical blunder in the biblical text. The sources indicate that Cyrus was the king of Persia when Babylon fell and that the Babylonians fell to Cyrus the Persian not to Darius the Mede. The historical arguments are complicated and beyond my power to evaluate. But let me make these observations.

1. The author of Daniel knew about Belshazzar when, for a long time, biblical scholarship didn’t. He was right; they were wrong. We ought to remember that before concluding too quickly that the author of Daniel was ignorant of the name of the true conqueror of Babylon.
2. Biblical authors knew very well that Cyrus was the conqueror of Babylon and the head of the Persian Empire at the time. He appears, for example, in the prophecies of Babylon’s downfall made by Isaiah. He is mentioned in the first verse of Ezra, and so on.
3. Darius is a well-known Persian name, even royal name, though the sources don’t mention any Darius until after the death of Cyrus. The man known as Darius I (522-486) is known as the king who instituted an administrative system in which the Persian Empire was ruled by twenty satraps. But that Darius, obviously, is far too late to be this Darius in 6:1, who was ruling conquered Babylon some 17 years earlier. The fact that the name is

as common as it is at least suggests that it is not improbable that there might be another man using the same name at an earlier date.

4. Daniel 9:1 again refers to this Darius and says that he had been made king over the Babylonians. This could very well mean that this Darius was a general or other official of Cyrus' government appointed to oversee the newly conquered empire of Babylon. There are various permutations of this theory.

5. In 1 Chronicles 5:26 we read: "So the God of Israel stirred up the spirit of Pul king of Assyria, the spirit of Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, and he took them into exile." In other words, the king of Assyria *had two names*. So here in Daniel, in 6:28, we read: "And so Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius *and* the reign of Cyrus the Persian." But the "and" could be read, "even," that is: during the reign of Darius, *even* Cyrus the Persian, or during the reign of Darius, *that is*, Cyrus the Persian. The grammatical possibility is accepted by everyone. There is evidence from the ancient world that an emperor might use one name for one group of subjects, another name for another. In this case, Darius would have been the name Cyrus used for his Babylonian subjects. The conclusion is contested by many – especially among the liberal caste – largely because it is only a possibility. But, then, every conclusion is only a possibility. And every proposal has its difficulties.

6. Cyrus was, in fact, about 62 years of age when he conquered Babylon and he was of Median descent on his mother's side. [Lucas, 136] That is enough for now, but it is enough to show that it has hardly been proved that the Bible is in error with this reference to Darius the Mede. It should not surprise us that an ancient record, such as the book of Daniel, contains information we are not yet able to confirm from contemporary sources. [Cf. Dillard and Longman, *Intro to the OT*, 334-337]

- v.2 Governments have always been cesspools of waste and corruption. The impression is that Daniel was so scrupulously honest that the new government could count on him to ensure that no money was diverted from its proper destination. This may also be part of the explanation for the hatred of some of these men for Daniel. He wouldn't let them skim some off the top. [Davis, 84]
- v.3 The narrator does not tell us why Daniel was chosen as one of the presidents, a position of great authority in the new government. But we already know that Daniel had distinguished himself through his long years in positions of leadership in the Babylonian government. And very soon he had separated himself from the others in the new administration. The king realized he could do no better than to make Daniel the administrative ruler of the Babylonian part of the Persian Empire. To occupy such a position as a Jewish exile would certainly be noteworthy and a huge encouragement to the Jews themselves. In any case, as so often in government, the king's intention was leaked and Daniel's rivals realized they needed to take action while they still could.

- v.5 A remarkable statement to be made by Daniel's jealous competitors. Daniel was such an honest politician, such a fair judge, that even men who despised him for his influence and position knew they were never going to find a flaw they could expose in his public life.
- v.7 The obvious appeal to the king's pride is buttressed by a lie. Had they admitted that there was at least one president who was not an advocate of their plan, the king might well have asked who and why and the whole plot would have come undone. But they suggested that the entire bureaucracy was enthusiastically behind the idea. And what better way to ensure a smooth transition to the new government than with a public act of solidarity with the new regime?
- v.9 The proposal was bizarre on its face and so raises the question why the king would have been willing to agree to it. He was, in effect, being asked to function as the sole deity of Babylon for a month! If he thought himself a god, why on earth would he agree to his divine prestige coming to an end in just thirty days? And if, as a wise ruler, he realized that the last thing he should do was to forbid a conquered people to pray to their own gods, why would he agree to poke his subjects in the eye with a stick? This has led to the proposal that what was actually being suggested was only that the king would be the sole representative of the gods for a month, not that he was to be worshipped as god himself. [Walton in Longman, 160] Obviously these men did not think carefully about the possible backlash when their true purpose was discovered! People with nefarious plans rarely take time to calculate either their odds of success or the likely outcome should they fail!
- v.10 The picture is that of a faithful man who is undeterred either by the king's command or the possible consequences to himself. Daniel is a man who obeys God rather than men, *precisely what the plotters knew him to be.*

The fact that he prayed *toward Jerusalem* has sometimes bothered Christians. After all, wasn't God present in Babylon as surely as he was in Jerusalem? We're not Muslims, after all, who pray toward a particular place. But the presence of God *was* concentrated in a special way at the temple and, as you may remember, for that reason King Solomon, in his prayer of dedication, had spoken of people praying *toward* the temple. When Daniel prayed the temple was already in ruins, so it wasn't as if Daniel thought his prayers couldn't be heard unless he prayed toward Jerusalem. But by doing so he embodied his conviction that the Jews were still the chosen people of the God of heaven and earth and that Jerusalem was still God's city in a special way and Daniel's spiritual home.

Like many godly men and women, Daniel had established set times of prayer and followed the same course of devotion over many years. What this means, of course, is that Daniel didn't go home to pray only when the king's decree had been published. Quite the contrary. He did only what he always did. He neither hid his praying from possible onlookers nor went looking for an opportunity to make a demonstration of his disobedience to the king's decree.

By the way, this is one of many places in the Bible, OT and NT alike, in which kneeling is mentioned as a posture for prayer. Standing is the other biblically recommended posture for prayer.

- v.11 No doubt Daniel's petition and plea included the request that the Lord would deliver him from the punishment promised in the king's decree. On the other hand, you can find a specimen of Daniel's prayer in chapter 9. He must often have prayed for the repentance and spiritual renewal of the Jews as well as their return to the Promised Land.
- v.13 These men know the king's admiration for Daniel, so before they mention his name they remind the king of the decree that he signed. They must have known that they were playing with fire, risking the king's wrath when he found out that it was Daniel who had run afoul of the decree. But such is the power of jealousy and personal spite. The fact that they refer to Daniel, after these 60 years of his service in Babylon, as "one of the exiles from Judah" gives them away. They don't like him in part because he is not one of them! [Lucas, 151]
- v.15 The immutability of the "law of the Medes and the Persians" is also mentioned in Esther (1:19; 8:8).
- v.18 It is possible to see the lions' den as an *ordeal* rather than as a simple execution. In an ordeal, well known in the ancient near east, a man accused of a crime, but whose guilt is unproved, is tested in some way. Most commonly the man or woman was thrown into a river, usually a deep river and often in a defile or a canyon. If they died it was assumed that they were guilty; if they survived that they were innocent. An ordeal appears in the Bible, if you remember, in the case of the woman suspected of adultery (Num. 5:11-31). The theology behind ordeals was that the gods would punish the guilty and vindicate the innocent. In the biblical case, the difference is striking. In most ancient near eastern ordeals, the greater likelihood was that the person would die. It would be unusual for him or her to survive and therefore easier to believe that God had rescued the innocent. Guilt was presumed rather than innocence. But in the biblical case, the potion that was to be drunk would kill no one. It really did leave the matter to God who might or might not expose the guilt of even a guilty man.
- The reasons to think of the lions' den as an ordeal rather than an execution are these: 1) the king's actions during the night seem to suggest he hoped that Daniel might survive; 2) an execution would not have a time limit. Daniel would have stayed in the den until he was eaten; 3) he was released after surviving the night with the lions; and 4) Daniel himself declares that he was spared because he was innocent. [Longman, 163]
- v.22 The irony is thick here. Daniel spent a more comfortable night than the king did! Whether Daniel saw an angel or whether he is simply assuming that God used an angel to shut the mouths of the lions isn't said. But in the apocryphal version of this same event, "Daniel, Bel, and the Snake," written in the 2nd or 1st century B.C. the prophet Habakkuk was sent to Daniel with food for him to eat. The Bible, as always, is not sensational as are the

apocryphal texts. No details are provided about this angel or what he might have said or done or whether he was visible to Daniel. [Davis, 83]

- v.24 Presumably, only the ringleaders of the plot, those who hatched it, were punished in this way, not all 120 satraps and the two presidents. Many of those would simply have gone along with an idea presented by others and perhaps would have had no idea what was actually going on. In a conspiracy the fewer in on the plot the better.

That the lions so quickly consumed their prey proves that Daniel's safety had not been secured, for example, by the king having fed them before Daniel was placed in the den or that he had simply been fortunate to have been placed in the den when the lions weren't hungry. [Longman, 163]

- v.25 An example of typical ancient near eastern hyperbole.
- v.28 What a thing to be said about Daniel's God and about Daniel himself. And try to imagine how the Jewish readers of Daniel would hear what Darius had said about Yahweh and how he had honored one of their own. Yahweh really did rule the world and he could make even Persian emperors acknowledge the fact as he had the Babylonian emperor before. In spite of all appearances God actually, really is in control.

Recent years have witnessed a major protest in evangelical and Reformed preaching and teaching against the way a passage like Daniel 6 was long taught to children and preached to adults for generations, if not for centuries. "Dare to be a Daniel, Dare to Stand Alone," as the old song has it, came to be considered the perfect example of the problem. Instead of focusing our attention on God, who rescued Daniel from the lions, we were taught to treat the story as a lesson in spiritual faithfulness and courage. The accusation was that all this attention on Daniel's faithfulness and all of this teaching to the effect that *we ought to be like Daniel* amounted to moralism, an undue attention on our behavior at the expense of a proper attention to God's power and faithfulness.

Now, to be sure, the better representatives of this school of biblical interpretation and preaching, now known as the *redemptive/historical school* because it lays primary stress on the Bible's stories or narratives as a history of God's work of redemption, do not deny that we ought to learn from Daniel to be faithful and courageous; they do not deny that he is an example that we should aspire to imitate; but the emphasis should fall here and everywhere on what God does, not what Daniel did or what we ought to do.

And there is much to be said for this approach, of course. Obviously even here, with all the attention paid to Daniel, it is perfectly clear that Daniel survived because *God delivered him* from the mouths of the lions. That is, in fact, precisely what Daniel himself says in v. 22 and what Darius says – did Daniel write the proclamation for him? – in vv. 26-27, clearly the climax of the chapter.

How great the power of empires and kings can seem to be! How could Daniel, an old man now, possibly escape the reach of the imperial edict? Well, as in chapter 3, the answer is that God's

power is infinitely greater than even the greatest human power and no mere king or empire can shorten the Almighty's hand. Indeed, commentators point out that the contrast between the king and God himself is emphasized in certain ways in the text. For example, the edict said that no one was to pray to anyone but the king, as if the king could answer prayer or even speak for the gods or persuade them to act in a certain way. But when the king discovered that he had unwittingly put his favorite bureaucrat in danger of his life, he was powerless to extricate Daniel or himself from the mess his vanity and stupidity had created. He spent the day, we read in v. 14, looking for some loophole, some way to violate the edict without losing face, but all to no avail. He could have simply countermanded the order as was done in the days of Esther – the laws of the Medes and Persians weren't *that* inviolable – but not without losing face! He is revealed in the chapter – this supposedly godlike figure – as a dupe and as unable to get his way. Yahweh, however, does whatever he pleases in heaven and on earth. Lions? No problem. Send an angel so that Daniel can pick out a nice soft one for a pillow.

Throughout the book and certainly here, Yahweh is revealed as the deliverer of his people and as one who can deliver them in any and every circumstance, no matter how seemingly impossible. Even Darius must acknowledge this; indeed, he was quite ready to do so, seeing what he had seen, even as Nebuchadnezzar had been before him. The burden of the history recorded in Daniel is that God's rule is so absolute that he can, if he wishes, make even pagan monarchs willing to confess and proclaim his sovereignty.

On the other hand, there can be little doubt that *the chapter is very much about Daniel* and about his faithfulness and about its reward. It begins with Daniel being given authority in the new government of Babylon as he had been given authority in the old precisely because he was such an able and faithful man. Indeed, so competent was he and so obvious was this to Darius that he was about to be promoted to an even higher office than he had occupied at the height of his influence in Nebuchadnezzar's court. He was about to be made second in the kingdom after the Persian king – either Cyrus or his designee – with all the other satraps and presidents working for him! And there is no question at all as to why this should be. Then we are treated to Daniel's courage and faithfulness when the cords begin to tighten around him. And the chapter ends with the concluding statement that Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius. *This chapter is clearly about Daniel!* He was an extraordinary man: so faithful, so scrupulously honest, that even his enemies knew that they were never going to find some skeleton in this man's closet.

What is more, it is very obvious in the narrative that Daniel's religious convictions were hardly a secret. Everyone knew that Daniel worshipped Yahweh; always had and always would. It was this constancy of religious conviction that provided his enemies with their opportunity. In a country where politicians were also servants of the state religion, Daniel had charted a course of spiritual independence. He wasn't obnoxious about it, obviously, but he wasn't timid about it either. Obadiah, that faithful man who served in the corrupt court of King Ahab, remained loyal to Yahweh, but he had had to keep a low profile. In polytheistic Babylon Daniel was free to make no bones about his religious loyalties.

Still further, his spiritual life was habitual in the best sense of the word. He practiced the discipline of daily prayer, so much so that his enemies knew exactly where to find him when they wanted to prove that he had violated the edict. Here was man who knew the inner workings

of the government. He was hardly fooled by what was going on around him. He knew that by continuing to pray as he always had, he was taking his life in his hands. I'm quite sure he was not surprised to learn that he was being watched. But it didn't matter. His life was a life of prayer. To be sure, he might have told himself that he could continue to pray to Yahweh without kneeling toward Jerusalem and without praying aloud. Who would know? But that was not Daniel any more than it had been Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in chapter 3. As many have pointed out, the real victory of Daniel 6 was won in his bedroom, not in the lions' den, when Daniel – if he felt any temptation at all – resisted it, fell to his knees, and prayed as he always had before. Most everyone prayed aloud in those days, so it may well have been possible for his enemies actually to hear what he was saying to God.

At the inauguration of President Trump we were treated to a number of those prayers that are so often prayed at political gatherings. No one risked his or her life to offer such prayers. They were pious demonstrations, in some cases almost political speeches, made by people of very different religious conviction, but none was the sort of prayer that would make someone an enemy of the state! But Daniel's prayer was nothing like those formalities. When prayer is fashionable, when prayer is offered in such a way as to offend no one and has nothing of the weight and seriousness that attaches to life and death, it is time to pray in secret. That was the Lord's admonition in the Sermon on the Mount, important in a day when far too much prayer in Judaism was more for show than it was earnest and familiar talking with God. But when prayer is controversial, when it offends people, when it is put under pressure, when one is likely to be punished for offering it, then not to pray openly is an act of cowardice not prudence. [Goldingay, 141] Daniel understood that. As Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had *refused to pray falsely*, Daniel *refused not to pray faithfully*. He wasn't about to alter his routine. It would have been a public betrayal of the Lord upon whose grace and help he was relying. A godly man does not refuse to identify himself with the one upon whose help he knows he absolutely depends!

There is an immensely important lesson for us here. Suppose, for example that Daniel had died in the lions' den; had died a violent and painful death. He was, after all, an old man; he was coming to the end of his life in any case. Don't say it couldn't have happened. It has happened to faithful Christians many times. It is still happening today. Daniel is the exception, not the rule! We would not, of course suppose that God had failed Daniel. We might have supposed that the lesson of the chapter was that even the finest Christians must die sometime and what better way to die than while standing up for the Lord. Daniel was spared in this case. Remarkably, so remarkably that a great point was being made, a point that even a pagan king could hardly miss.

But, should Daniel have died, the one thing that would still be perfectly clear in this chapter is that Daniel had proved himself a faithful man, a godly man. If his reward for his faithfulness in this case had only been his welcome into heaven upon his death, we still would have no doubt that Daniel had left us an example that we should imitate. The fact that he *was* spared – when Stephen was not and Peter was not and Paul was not – only lays the greater stress on that example. And what was that example? Well, surely, it was his faithfulness under pressure, his refusing to alter his life of prayer when danger threatened. But there is more than that to admire in Daniel and to learn from his example.

Let me put it this way. When I was a younger man and a younger minister, various “methods” of sharing the Christian faith were all the rage. Campus Crusade had developed the *Four Spiritual Laws*. Hardly a young Christian in those days had not seen or received his own copy of the little pamphlet with that title. But we Reformed people had some quibbles with the theology expressed in the *Four Spiritual Laws* and so D. James Kennedy developed another evangelistic method which he came to call *Evangelism Explosion*. Some of us in this church learned the so-called EE approach to evangelism. It provided an outline of a gospel presentation from beginning to end. You were to memorize that outline: the two questions that you started with, the step by step explanation, and the Bible verses that went with each part of the explanation. You explained the problem of sin, God’s remedy in the cross, the requirement of faith in Christ, and so on. There were other evangelistic presentations or outlines as well as those two. If you hadn’t been given your own copy, you could buy one from a Christian publisher or order it from companies that got very large doing nothing but publishing the *Four Spiritual Laws* or *Evangelism Explosion*.

Now, I am far from believing that such methods or outlines are not helpful. Many Christians have found it very helpful to learn how to explain the gospel to someone, what verses would be helpful to have memorized, and so on. It is also a great help to have an idea how to start such a conversation about Christ and the gospel. Many of us are intimidated by the prospect and having learned a method is helpful.

However, it is now admitted by almost everyone that the heyday of those packaged gospel presentations is over. They have been found to be increasingly less effective and in many cases actually annoying to people who think themselves the victims of these approaches. Part of that is due to the fact that the authority of the Bible has been greatly diminished in modern Western culture. Not so long ago, one could appeal to the Bible and expect at least a general respect for its teaching. I remember doing the EE presentation in many rooms of people I’d never met before, and they seemed to have at least some general respect for the Bible. Not so any longer. These approaches are less effective also because of profound changes in our culture’s understanding of truth itself, as well as its now knee-jerk tolerance for any and every religious opinion. It is now widely believed that there is no need to choose between one or the other; nothing fundamental is at stake. There are other reasons, but all of them in their own way, combine to prove that we are living in a world much more like Daniel’s in Babylon than in the world Americans lived in only a generation ago. And so what does that require of us? How are we to bear witness to our God in a culture like ours? Well, it seems to me, Daniel gives us a perfect example.

He was a man *whose life was a recommendation of his God*. So much so that Darius, even as he was putting Daniel in the lions’ den, seemed to believe it a real possibility that Daniel would survive the ordeal, that his God would rescue him. He was honest, he was faithful, he did his work so well that even those who hated the man because they were jealous of his position, knew they would never succeed in discovering some moral defect in his public life. The whole crisis of chapter 6 was provoked by the fact that Daniel was such a good man and lived such an admirable life and was being rewarded for having done so!

And isn’t that our calling and isn’t that, in our Babylonian culture, the need of the hour. Paul said that we were to live in every way *so as to adorn the doctrine of God our Savior*, or, as the NIV

has it, so as to make the teaching about God our Savior attractive. [Titus 2:10] And Peter says that we are to live so that when we are slandered – Christians must always be ready to be slandered in this the Devil’s world – those who revile our good behavior may be put to shame. [1 Pet. 3:16] That is, leave them nothing to complain about except our faithfulness, our honesty, our kindness, and so on. Make them hate us for our goodness and for our faithfulness to God. That is what Daniel did. He came to Darius’ attention simply because he lived his life on a higher plane and everyone could see that he did.

I know people, you probably know people, who came to faith in Christ – or at least they were first strongly attracted to the gospel – in large part because the Christians they knew so impressed them. Darius came to worship the living God, to the extent that he understood what he was doing, because Daniel so impressed him and through Daniel he was given a sight of God himself.

So here are our marching orders, taken from Daniel’s example and from God’s reward for that sterling example. Whatever part of your life or mind we may be thinking about, whether it is our work and the people we know at work who observe us there, whether it is our marriage, or our family, or our management of our home or our money, or our entertainments; whatever it is, we ought to conduct ourselves with a view to what the unbelievers around us will think and say. We ought to manage our lives, in all these various dimensions, in a manner that brings credit to our God, that excites the admiration of the unbelievers who observe us or who do business with us or who see us living our life at home. I think this can clarify matters for us in a way that almost nothing else will. We know, we know very well what kind of behavior, what kind of speech – pure, kind, honest, gentle, humble, self-deprecating – and what kind of attitude would set us apart from the run of people in our day and so would be impressive, attractive, and desirable if our non-Christian friends were to observe it in us. If you won’t change for your wife, or your husband, or your workmates, or your banker, do it for your witness for God and for Christ. Live to honor the Lord in your heart, your speech, and your behavior in that way that you know would obviously honor him before others, and, in the nature of the case, everyone around you will take notice!