

Series Daniel

Scripture Daniel 6

The book of Daniel is divided into two parts. Chapters 1-6 describe miracles which demonstrate God's sovereignty on behalf of His people, the Jews. In chapter 1 we learned how God qualified Daniel and his three friends for high level positions in the government of Babylonia. In chapter 2, Daniel provided both the content and the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's remarkable dream. In chapter 3 there was the amazing deliverance of Daniel's three friends from the blazing furnace. In chapter 4, Nebuchadnezzar was warned about, and then experienced, seven years of dehumanizing insanity because he continued in his attitude of pride. In chapter 5 we learned about the terrifying prediction which was inscribed on the wall of Belshazzar's banquet hall, and the immediate fulfillment when, during the same night, the Medo-Persian army brought an end to the Babylonian empire.

In the message previous to this one, we thought about some prophecies from the book of Isaiah which were fulfilled in the time of Daniel. The books of Isaiah and Daniel both emphasize God's concern for, and care of, the Jews. Isaiah predicted the release of the Babylonian exiles long before they were taken captive. From Daniel, the Jewish exiles learned that God had not forgotten them and, in fact, was attentively watching over them.

Today we will read and think about the deliverance of Daniel from death in the lions' den. This episode is another example of God's sovereignty and protection — of how the Lord God of Israel was able to deliver his people from the schemes of evil people.

Read Daniel 6: 1-28

The protection of Daniel while he was in the lion's den is one of the best known stories of the Bible. A period of time had elapsed since the fall of Babylon, perhaps as much as two years. A Persian form of government had been established, and enough time had gone by so that attitudes of jealousy had developed among top level leaders.

Before we get into the main part of the story, I want to clarify the identity of Darius. He was not the king of the entire Medo-Persian empire. That was Cyrus. Darius became the vice-regent who ruled over the territories previously held by Babylon. His position can be compared to that of Belshazzar, who, if you remember, was co-regent under his father Nabonidus. Cyrus was primarily a military leader and he frequently traveled to far-away frontiers. Darius was in charge when Cyrus was absent. Darius had extensive administrative powers, but he was sub-ordinate to Cyrus. Most commentators think that the term “Darius” was a title of honor, and that the man referred to as “Darius” had previously been a very high ranking general in the Medo-Persian army.

The man identified as Darius in Daniel chapter 6 served as the ruler/governor over Babylon for 14 years. He actually outlived Cyrus himself, and continued to serve under Cyrus’ son, who became the next king over the entire Medo-Persian empire.

The Persians utilized a decentralized form of government. This was opposite the system of the Babylonians, in which all power and authority was held by the king. Darius appointed 120 officials to provide administrative leadership over the various regions formerly under the authority of Babylon. Over these 120 district officials were three administrators, one of whom was Daniel.

Daniel at this point in his life would have been 82 or 83 years old. He would have been involved in government service in Babylon for almost 70 years. His wide-ranging experience and intimate acquaintance with the Babylonian customs and systems, combined with his unique relationship with God, made him an exceptionally qualified leader. It was most unusual to keep a man in office who had served in a previous, now deposed regime, but, according to verse 3, Daniel so “distinguished himself among the administrators that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom” in what would be a “prime minister” type of role.

God kept Daniel in a position where he could influence the Persian leaders on behalf of the Jewish exiles. The text does not say that Daniel had anything to do with securing the release of the Jews from their captivity, but it is almost certain that he did. The decree authorizing the return of the Jewish exiles to Jerusalem was issued in the first year of Cyrus’ reign (*see Ezra 1:1*), which meant that it was probably issued a few months before Daniel’s episode in the den of lions.

The plot of the story begins to unfold in verse 4. The exact reasons for the hostility against Daniel are not spelled out, but his jealous enemies tried to “find grounds for charges against him” in order to prevent his promotion to prime minister. The promotion of a Jewish captive to a position which was second only to that of Darius was, in the minds of various officials, unacceptable. Prejudice against Daniel’s ethnicity was undoubtedly a factor.

In their efforts to discredit Daniel, the enemies made a thorough investigation of Daniel’s management of public affairs but they could not find any sort of fault in his service because he was a man of integrity and trustworthy in every way. Consequently, the enemies then formulated a plan whereby they would make Daniel’s religious habits work against him. The implication here is that Daniel’s enemies were very familiar with his religious commitment and habits. Daniel had not been a secret worshiper of Yahweh. The enemies also assumed that Daniel would not compromise his behavior even if a law would be enacted which would impose restrictions on his worship pattern.

Verse 6 states that Daniel’s enemies “went as a group to the king” to inform him that “the royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisors, and governors had all agreed that the king should issue” a special kind of religious law. The claim that all the leaders were unanimous in this decision was obviously incorrect. Daniel, for one, did not know about the request.

Darius apparently had no reason to suspect that the request was misrepresented. From his standpoint, the proposal had a certain appeal. Persian kings generally took an interest in the well-being of their subjects, and the proposal would be an appropriate way to get his subjects to focus on his benevolence. Perhaps the proposal simply appealed to his vanity. Without giving the matter adequate thought, Darius approved the decree, which according to Persian law, could not then be altered.

When Daniel learned of the king’s decision, he undoubtedly understood the impact it would have on his life, but he did not change his daily pattern of prayer. He could have ceased to pray for one month, or done so in secrecy, but he did not change his routine. He was willing to risk his life in order to be loyal to his God.

Daniel's dilemma was, in many ways, similar to the experience of his friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who, when faced with the choice of bowing before human gods or being thrown into the blazing furnace, refused to dishonor God. Like them, Daniel's priority was his relationship with God, and he did not worry about the outcome of his actions or agonize about what to do. In following his normal routine, he was not deliberately disobeying the king; rather he was continuing to honor Yahweh, the Most High God, the One he knew was sovereign over the activities of humans. He did not put himself on public display, but neither did he try to hide from those who might be spying on him.

And yes, a group of the hostile officials did spy on him. They "found Daniel praying and asking God (and not the king!) for help." This group of conspirators then lost no time in reporting to Darius what they had seen and heard. They first reminded the king of the royal decree, which could not be repealed, and then they pressed their charge against Daniel, "He pays no attention to you, O king, or to the decree you put in writing." These were inflammatory words, implying that Daniel's offense was personally directed to the king. Actually, the only honest charge they could make was that Daniel prayed three times a day to his God.

The reaction of the king was probably not what the accusers anticipated. The king, according to verse 14, "was greatly distressed." Perhaps this was the moment when he realized the reason he had been persuaded to establish the decree; when he realized that he had been manipulated and was now trapped by the law he himself had put in place. The king undoubtedly knew Daniel well enough to know that the accusers were being dishonest about their description of Daniel.

Verse 14 states that "he was determined to rescue Daniel" and that he "made every effort until sundown to save him." Unfortunately, Darius had no options but to follow the stipulations of the law. At sundown he reluctantly gave the order for Daniel to be cast into the den of lions.

Commentators have two opinions about the words spoken by the king to Daniel. One opinion points to the fact that Darius was from a religious background in which there was the worship of a variety of gods, and, therefore, he had no expectation that Daniel's God had the power to deliver Daniel from execution. He, of course, knew that Daniel, as a Jew, practiced a unique monotheistic religion, but the Medes and Persians were unfamiliar with Jewish beliefs. The words he voiced to Daniel, "May your God (the One you are familiar with), (the One) whom you serve continually, rescue you," were most likely in the form of a wish, rather than a confident expectation of supernatural deliverance.

On the other hand, some commentators think that it was likely that Darius had heard about the previous episodes in which the God of the Jews had acted supernaturally, such as in the episode of the blazing furnace, and the period of Nebuchadnezzar's insanity, and, in what would be still fresh in his mind, the fulfillment of prophecies which enabled the soldiers to enter Babylon without a battle. If this opinion is true, then Darius would have hope, not a wish, that Daniel would be safe.

Whatever the king's attitude might have been, after Daniel was pushed into the lion's den and the opening was closed and sealed, the king returned to his palace where he spent a fitful night without food, entertainment, or sleep. At his earliest opportunity, at the crack of dawn, he hurried back to the lion's den, anxious to know what had happened to Daniel. His words in verse 20 indicate that he half expected Daniel to have survived the night with the lions, "Daniel, ... has your God, ... been able to rescue you from the lions?"

Notice that Darius referred to Daniel's God as "the living God." Did Darius have faith that Daniel's God would really save Daniel from certain death? Pagans did not have this kind of confidence in their own gods. Had he expected a miracle? Verse 23 states that the king was "overjoyed" at hearing Daniel's voice. He wasn't dumbfounded as was Nebuchadnezzar when he saw the three men walking around in the blazing furnace. Was he surprised that Daniel was still alive? We don't know. We only know that he was filled with joy.

Daniel affirmed that his God had indeed been able to protect him, saying, "My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions." Just as Yahweh had sent His special emissary to accompany and protect the three men in the furnace, He had sent the angel to protect Daniel in his dangerous situation. Ironically, because of the company of the angel, it is possible that Daniel had a better night of rest than the king.

It is interesting how, in both episodes, God did not keep His servants from their extraordinary trying experiences. Daniel and the three men had to actually enter into an experience in which pain and death was the reasonable expectation. This is the normal way for God to treat His people. He seldom turns His people away from danger and difficult situations. Rather He promises to be present with them through such circumstances.

In the book of Daniel, the witness to non-believers was especially dramatic and effective because God's people came through their experiences without any physical harm. God had His purposes in their supernatural survival.

However, supernatural rescue has not been a common experience in the history of Christianity. Painful persecution and martyrdom is far-and-away more typical. It is difficult for us, in this country, to understand what agonies those who are physically persecuted for their faith endure, but for individuals who are genuinely committed to God, it seems that fear of pain and death is not a deterrent to their faithfulness. Back in chapter 3, the three young men declared to King Nebuchadnezzar, "the God we serve is able to save us, ... but even if he does not, we want you to know ...that we will not serve your gods" (*Daniel 3:17-18*).

Daniel's attitude was undoubtedly the same when he was cast into the den of lions. It is the attitude that believers everywhere must have. Our faith must be strong enough to withstand any insults, threats, and pressures which might come upon us. Jesus warned His disciples: "If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you" (*John 16:2*).

After Daniel was lifted out of the den of lions, the king ordered that the men who had falsely accused (*literally "slandered"*) Daniel be thrown to the lions along with their family members. There was no godly protection for them, and the lions quickly "overpowered them and crushed their bones."

There were two significant positive outcomes from Daniel's experience. First, Darius wrote to "all the peoples, nations, and men of every language" that they "must fear and reverence the God of Daniel." The style and character of the proclamation was very similar to the one circulated by Nebuchadnezzar several years previously. God used two powerful Gentile kings to give witness to Himself.

Darius emphasized three truths in his proclamation. Truth number one: Daniel's God is the ever-living God who rules over a never-ending kingdom. He is God of gods. Truth number two: The God of Daniel "rescues and saves," and "performs his signs and wonders both in heaven and on earth." God has supernatural power. Truth number three: God "rescued Daniel from the power of lions." Darius wanted everyone in his realm of influence to know how God had provided objective proof of His eternal power.

The second significant outcome is that "Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus." The wording of verse 28 does not suggest that Cyrus followed Darius. The fact is that they were contemporaries and reigned simultaneously. Darius, as mentioned earlier, was sub-ordinate to Cyrus.

Once again, in chapter 6, we have an illustration of how God accomplishes His purposes. Powerful political forces moved against Daniel, but God preserved him from their clutches. In spite of the fact that the irrevocable law of the Medes and Persians condemned him to death, God preserved Daniel's life. In spite of the fact that the lions were hungry, God did not allow them to even scratch Daniel's skin. God was in sovereign control throughout.

Once again, during this time of Israel's captivity, Yahweh provided encouragement to His people and strengthened their faith in Him. That encouragement extends to us today. Just as Daniel had the courage to face death because of his faith in "the living God," we can take hope that God will ultimately overrule the evil intentions of those who are the enemies of the followers of Jesus Christ.