

## Chapter 51 Daniel 6

### The God of Daniel

*“Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?” Daniel 6:20*

Six hundred years before the Incarnation, the prophet Daniel lived in a world that was not conducive or responsive to honoring God. He embodied the meekness strategy taught by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. He modeled what it meant to be in the world but not of the world and illustrated the apostle Paul’s imperative, “be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Daniel exhibited the sojourner’s mind-set and the prophet’s resilience. His crisis encounters with Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar and Darius punctuate years of unspectacular faithfulness—decades of perseverance, patience and prayer. By the time Darius the Mede assumed control of the Babylonian empire, Daniel was 85 years old and proving that faithfulness to the end authenticates faith from the beginning.

The Book of Daniel is divided into stories and visions. Chapters 1-6 are stories and chapters 7-12 are visions. However, the narrator is careful to let the reader know that Daniel’s dream of four beasts and his vision of a ram and goat took place before Belshazzar’s banquet. And Daniel’s penitential prayer of repentance and his vision of a man standing by the Tigris river probably occurred prior to his experience in the lions’ pit. This underscores the fact that the stories and visions inform each other. In spite of how the situation may look, God is in control of both the immediate personal crisis as well as the destiny of the nations. The stories of God’s victory over Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar and Darius, illustrate in Daniel’s experience, the ultimate victory of God over the nations. Daniel’s courage before Belshazzar and Darius was informed by an eschatological vision of the end that declares the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our God in Christ. The combination of stories and visions proves that God is in control of both the present and the future, the personal and the political, and the sacred and the secular. There is no realm or sphere of influence or domain of power that escapes God’s sovereign control. Daniel lived and served at the center of worldly power in the full confidence that his God was the King of kings and Lord of lords.

#### **Servant Leadership**

Some scholars believe that Darius the Mede and Cyrus the Persian were one in the same. They translate 6:28, to read, “So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius, that is, the reign of Cyrus the Persian.” Others believe that Darius governed Babylon under the umbrella of Cyrus’ leadership. In any case, Daniel was well-versed in Jeremiah’s spiritual direction and he did his part to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city” (Jeremiah 29:7). Implicit in the narrator’s description of Daniel’s success, because of his exceptional qualities, trustworthiness, integrity and diligence, is an important lesson on spirituality. Those who excel in politics and business can be deeply committed to the spiritual disciplines of prayer and fasting. The pressures of the political arena or the marketplace may not be conducive to true spirituality but neither are they an excuse for a professing believer to ignore or neglect or conceal devotion to God. Instead of

being driven by the competitive forces of envy and jealousy, Daniel was led by the rhythms of grace. Daniel's decades of unspectacular faithfulness made him into the man of the hour. If Daniel were alive today we could picture him outlining his philosophy of public policy and servant leadership at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. He might describe his abiding commitment to advancing the public interest through integrity, accountability, wise stewardship and fair and sustainable economic initiatives.

Daniel's career exemplifies the inseparable relationship between true spirituality and character formation. His maturity was a compound of wisdom, goodwill, resilience, and creativity (Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 22). His life was holistic. His devotion to God was all-embracing. Everything he did was designed to honor his God. There was no disjunction between sacred and secular. Daniel integrated heavenly-minded ardor with matter-of-fact, down-to-earth order. He was prayerful, purposeful and practical. He integrated contemplation with action, worship with work, and labor with rest. "We today, who tend to live unplanned lives at random in a series of non-communicating compartments and who hence feel swamped and distracted most of the time," could learn much from Daniel (Packer, 24).

This combination of politics and spirituality, administrative expertise and prayer, is in contrast to the ethos "which encloses personal piety in a pietistic cocoon" and leaves public affairs to others (Packer, 25). Daniel was so radically God-centered that everything in his life revolved around God's perspective. This was the secret to his discipline of self-denial, his insistence on the primacy of the mind, his humility, patience and steadfastness. He refused to fall into self-pitying resentment and disappointment with God.

### **Group Evil**

Because of his exceptional qualities, his commitment to excellence, his trustworthiness, integrity, and diligence, Daniel became a marked man. As we all know, goodness can breed resentment. Excellence can produce envy. This story illustrates well the conspiratorial nature of the pagan world which is designed to bring down the follower of God. In contrast to the picture of Daniel's character, the story illustrates the complexity of evil. This is a case study in group evil. First, the satraps and administrators tried to find legitimate grounds for charging Daniel with some form of maleficence, negligence, or corruption. But failing to find anything they could charge him with, they concluded, "We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God." What was it about Daniel that made him so offensive to the other administrators? Was it his race that offended their prejudices? Was it his integrity that checked their corruption? Was it his humility that revealed their egos? Was it his competence that showed up their incompetence? We don't know what caused them to zero in on Daniel except that he was in line for a promotion and they were not.

Outright evil can assume a legitimacy in a group that it might not otherwise have, if left to the individual. There is power in numbers and "group think" can generate its own energy and momentum. "So these administrators and satraps went as a group to the king and said: "May King Darius live forever! The royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisers and governors have all agreed. . . ." In this instance, the politics of deception used the cloak of consensus, the

will of the majority, the “everybody-is-doing-it” rationale. We see this method of reasoning worked out today when it comes to abortion upon request, gay marriage and teaching the theory of evolution exclusively in the public schools. With every enlightened, educated, and modern person in agreement, an edict is issued, which says in effect, “This is how it is going to be.” The majority rules, or, at least that is the claim.

“All” the administrators agreed “that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or human being during the next thirty days, except to you, Your Majesty, shall be thrown into the lions’ den.” The leaders devised a loyalty test that pretended to enhance the unity and solidarity of the empire, while appealing to the ego and vanity of the emperor. Unlike the earlier situation that confronted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, there was no requirement to show devotion to an idol (chp 3). The beauty of this plan was that it was easy to implement, no one had to do anything, and the loyalty test was only in effect for thirty days. Besides, it didn’t cost anything. The requirement was purely in the realm of spirituality. “Prayer” was reduced to publicity and propaganda. The plan was clever, convenient, cheap and relatively innocuous. The perfect set-up for killing Daniel.

But one more thing needed to be done to assure the plot’s success. King Darius had to be locked in. They knew that if Daniel was caught in violation, Darius would make him the exception. They needed absolute legal authority to pull off this deception. “Now, Your Majesty, issue the decree and put it in writing so that it cannot be altered—in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed.” This was a bad law and only goes to show that “the devil can flourish and work as effectively under the guise of law and order as he does under the guise of permissiveness” (Wallace, 115).

### **Open Windows**

Put yourself in Daniel’s shoes. What would you have done? Some Christians believe that Daniel’s situation applies to present law that prohibits a teacher from offering a prayer in our state run schools. But Daniel was not prohibited from praying publicly in the Babylonian courts, councils and classrooms; he was prohibited from praying in the privacy of his own home. Tremper Longman comments, “Indeed, it is preposterous to even imagine Daniel during his early years in Babylon insisting on prayer before the opening of his Akkadian class or the class on divination” (Longman, 170). The issue here is not Daniel’s freedom to “practice public prayer in a state-run institution” but his freedom to pray to the Lord in the privacy of his own home (Longman, 171).

Ironically the manner in which some professing Christians fight for prayer in the public schools or fight for the display of the Ten Commandments on state property indicates a strategy devoid of personal prayer. Their vindictive and vitriolic rhetoric is hardly in keeping with a life of prayer, nor modeled after the example of Daniel or the Lord Jesus. Sinclair Ferguson observes, “In recent years a debate has raged across the United States concerning prayer in the public schools and an interpretation of the U.S. Constitution that forbids involuntary prayer in these schools. . . .Is it not strange that there appears to have been more vociferous protest about this denial of our ‘right’ than there has been prophetic protest about the deadly prayerlessness in our

churches?” (Ferguson, 134).

Tremper Longman writes, “The modern parallels to Daniel 6 in Western democracies take place not in the arena of culture wars, but rather in more local situations. A librarian is fired because she refuses to work on a Sunday morning during worship services. A young teenager is told by his parents that he may not meet with the neighborhood church’s youth group for prayer because they do not want him involved in ‘all that superstition.’ A wife is told that she can be Christian, but must not act like it around the house. Where we today most often encounter conflict analogous to Daniel 6 is the law of God versus the law of an employer, a parent, spouse” (Longman, 171).

We might have thought that Daniel’s first reaction would have been to ask for an audience with King Darius to protest the new law, but such action may have been seen as entirely futile. In the visions that follow in chapters 7-12, Daniel’s emotional state is described as “troubled” and “disturbed”(7:15). Daniel characterizes himself as “deeply troubled by my thoughts, and my face turned pale” (7:28). The visions leave him “exhausted” and “appalled” (8:27) and when he prayed he fasted, put on sackcloth and ashes and pleaded with God (9:3). In the context of the visions, Daniel is portrayed as a very emotional person who is struggling to understand and cope with his experience of God’s revelation. This is in contrast to his cool, calm and collected behavior before the secular “principalities and powers.” There is no hint that Daniel ever felt unnerved by anything other than the awesome power and majesty of God and his revelation. Over and against the secular authorities and the human condition with all of its depravity, Daniel remains decisive, courageous, and unintimidated, but before the God who reveals the destiny of the nations, he appears helpless, troubled, weak and trembling (10:10). Daniel got it right. He was overwhelmed by God and unimpressed by human authority. He set a good precedent for the apostles who declared, “We must obey God rather than human beings!” (Acts 5:19).

We are impressed by Daniel’s quiet faithfulness, his uncomplicated obedience, his consistent devotion in what had become a life and death situation. “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” (6:10). There is nothing that would indicate that Daniel was anything other than as cool and calm as the narrative implies. This is where I find the real drama of the story, long before we get to the lion’s den.

Daniel’s windows were opened toward Jerusalem. He knelt down and prayed a prayer of thanksgiving to his God, just like he always did. Remarkable, isn’t it? No hand wringing. No disappointment with God. No lament. No “why did you let me down?” —Nothing like that at all. Just his regular devotional time, his daily worship. Not only were his windows open but his life was open. From day one in the Babylonian court he had never hid the fact that he was Yahweh’s person thru and thru. By contrast we may have worried too much about how open society is to Christianity. Instead of living for Christ openly and freely, we have tended to be reticent and reserve. We have hidden our light under a bushel and then wondered why the world is so dark. Daniel’s life was this open book, accessible to anyone who cared to read. Do your good friends

know when we worship and where we pray? Daniel's enemies did. Does your boss know what makes you who you are? Daniel's enemies knew. Why worry about prayer in the public schools or before sporting events, if you are embarrassed to pray with a friend or too lazy to pray in your own home?

Daniel's freedom to pray was not a gift from the world, but a gift from God that no one could take away from him. True freedom is not granted to us by the US Constitution, but by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. On a visit to America, Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed in 1939 that freedom is not the "the possibility of unhindered activity given by the world to the church" (Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 100). At a time when it became absolutely crucial for believers in Germany to exercise their freedom and stand up for Christ and his truth, Bonhoeffer wanted Americans to realize that freedom is not a gift from the state, but a responsibility from the Lord.

"The freedom of the church is not where it has possibilities, but only where the Gospel really and in its own power makes room for itself on earth, even and precisely when no such possibilities are offered to it. The essential freedom of the church is not a gift of the world to the church, but the freedom of the Word of God itself to gain a hearing. Freedom of the church is not an unbounded number of possibilities: it only exists where a 'must', a necessity, on occasion compels it against all possibilities. The praise of freedom as the possibility for existence given by the world to the church can stem precisely from an agreement entered upon with this world in which the true freedom of the Word of God is surrendered" (Bonhoeffer, 100).

As they had so cleverly planned, *the group* exploited a very bad law to further their evil cause. Daniel's violation of the law was never in doubt. Even if the edict had been in effect for only 24 hours, Daniel would have been guilty. The conspiratorial entrapment extended to the king himself. Darius became very distressed; "he was determined to rescue Daniel and made every effort until sundown to save him." But once again the now familiar theme is repeated, the world has nothing to offer. Wise men have no wisdom. Administrators govern without justice and kings are powerless to save. Darius cannot help Daniel. All the king can do is feel badly about the whole thing. He ends up missing a meal, going without his usual evening entertainment and suffering one night of insomnia. The world is inept when it comes to worship, wisdom, justice and salvation.

The only one free in this story is Daniel; not the conspirators who were driven by envy, greed, power, jealous, and who knows what other sins; not the king who was bound by an evil law that never should have been imposed. In a remarkable way, Daniel reminds us of Jesus. He assumes the freedom to lay down his life. Daniel's actions foreshadow the words and deeds of Jesus. God is in control. As Jesus said, "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again" (Jn 10:18).

### **Daniel and Jesus**

The parallels between Daniel and Jesus are striking. Both men made exceptional contributions to society and were known for their wisdom and righteousness. They were framed by law-and-order

conspirators who envied their influence and judged them to be a threat to the status quo. What was true of Daniel was even more true for Jesus. It is scandalous that one who healed the sick, loved the outcast, and transformed the sinner should die a hideously cruel death by Roman crucifixion. What kind of world do we live in that sentences holy and compassionate men and women to die? Jesus exposes the fact that the political and religious authorities are not always on the side of righteousness. Greed, pride, and hate often control the power brokers of society. Jesus became a victim for the sake of righteousness.

Both men were arrested in private while they were praying; Daniel in his home and Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Both were tried by leaders who acknowledged their innocence but who perceived that they were powerless to save them. Darius extended sympathy and Pilate made a show of washing his hands to demonstrate his innocence. Both men were condemned by the world's legal process, Daniel by the law of the Medes and Persians and Jesus by the Jewish law against blasphemy. "We have a law," insisted Jesus' accusers, "and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God" (Jn 19:7). Daniel was thrown into the lions' den and Jesus was nailed to a Roman cross. God stopped the mouths of lions, so that Daniel came through the ordeal without a scratch. Jesus died on the Cross and was raised from the dead.

The message of Daniel is hardly that the faithful will always be spared. The author of Hebrews describes those who through faith, "shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword," and others who through faith were flogged, chained, imprisoned, put to death by stoning, sawed in two and killed by the sword (Hebrews 11:33-37). The message of Daniel is that God is always in control and that the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our God and his Christ. Salvation belongs to the Lord. "God does grant a victory of life over death, of innocence over guilt, of justice over enmity, of hope over fear. He who loses his life will save it" (Goldingay, 133)

The power of the Daniel story is found in God's Salvation. Darius' last words to Daniel before he was thrown to the lions was, "May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!" And in the morning, the seal was broken and the stone rolled away and Darius called out to Daniel in an anguished voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?" For Daniel salvation rested not in his own strength or luck but in the mercy of God. "My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me. . ." The stone that needed to be rolled away reminds us of the empty tomb. Daniel's rescue parallels Jesus' resurrection. "Death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor 15:54).

The covenantal connection between Daniel and Jesus is the story behind the story. This is not just the story of a person of heroic courage who stands against the state. This is the story of a person who lived by faith in the promises of God. Only one story redeems Daniel's story and that is the story of Christ Jesus. Only those who live by faith in the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us can, in the words of the children's song, "Dare to be a Daniel, dare to stand alone, dare to have a purpose firm. Dare to make it known." We don't know if the risen Lord Jesus spoke of Daniel with the two disciples from Emmaus, but he very well could have. Luke

reports, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Lk 24:27). It is not difficult to see Jesus in Daniel.

Judgment and Witness are the postscripts to Daniel’s rescue from the lion’s den. Everyone involved in the plot against Daniel, including their extended families, was thrown to the lions, which was one way to assure that no one could take revenge on Daniel in the future. And King Darius wrote to “all the nations and peoples in every language in all the earth” testifying to the greatness of the God of Daniel. Darius’ decree hints of that coming day when “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10-11).