

Daniel 6:1-28

Introduction

Well, this must be one of the best-known stories in the Bible. Even if you've never been to church before, there are a handful of stories in the Bible that you're likely to know about. Noah's ark. David and Goliath. And this one, Daniel and the lions' den. If you've read a book of Bible stories to a child, this will have been one of them. It really isn't the kind of story we would normally consider to be appropriate for young children. It's the story of a man, probably in his eighties, being fed to lions; hardly your normal kids' story. But it has a happy ending. And it teaches us a wonderful truth about God. It's what King Darius proclaims to all the earth in verse 26: **'...he is the living God and he endures for ever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end. He rescues and he saves; he performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth. He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions.'**

That, really, is the message of the whole book. The God of Daniel is the living God, whose kingdom endures for ever. Earthly kingdoms rise and fall, but the kingdom of God remains. It is an eternal kingdom. And by the time we've re-read the story together, I hope you'll be persuaded that this God, Daniel's God, is worth putting your trust in. And I hope you'll be persuaded to keep trusting him to the very end, come what may. So, let's look at the story again. And the thing we can't help but see is Daniel's persevering faith. And that's our first heading: Daniel's persevering faith.

Daniel's persevering faith

Please look down again at verse 1. **It pleased Darius to appoint 120 satraps to rule throughout the kingdom, with three chief ministers over them, one of whom was Daniel. The satraps were made accountable to them so that the king might not suffer loss.**

Clearly, the king doesn't trust these satraps to act in his best interests. Presumably he feared corruption. So, Daniel is one of three chief ministers who has been given oversight of them. And then we're told. **Now Daniel so distinguished himself among the chief ministers and the satraps by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom.**

One of the recurring themes in this book of Daniel has been that the faithfulness of Daniel and his friends to God has been recognised. We've read several times already that they've been honoured because of their wisdom and godly character and promoted to positions of responsibility. And this is another example. It should encourage us in our own lives. It's a reminder that faithfulness to God doesn't only bring opposition and hostility. If we're those who are honest and hardworking, who refuse to join in with the sniping and the gossip, who show integrity in the office and are reliable as friends, that is likely to be recognised and appreciated. And it's another way we can bear witness to the goodness of following Christ. Nonetheless, faithfulness to God does also bring opposition. And that's what we read of next.

The king's plans for Daniel seem to provoke the other chief ministers and satraps to envy. As we read on, it seems that this envy is motivated by Daniel's ethnicity. He's an exile from Judah and not one of them. And they can't bear to see him gaining prominence over them. They try to find grounds for charges against him, but they can't. If this was happening today, they'd be checking out his social media profile. Raking through his Facebook posts for the last ten years. Scrutinising everything he'd said and done. But there's nothing to be found. He's a man of integrity. There's no corruption in him. He's done nothing wrong. And if there's no dirt to dig up, they're going to need to do something else. So, they gang together to hatch a plan against him.

As we've read this book of Daniel, we've noted that we keep catching glimpses of Jesus. We keep seeing him standing like a figure in the mist. And, once again, this is one of those moments. We're going to get many more as the story goes on. But as we read of the exceptional qualities of Daniel that so distinguished him from others, and the envy of his enemies, we can see Jesus *here*. If you're familiar with the accounts of the life of Jesus, who'll remember how people marvelled at his wisdom. Those who knew him tell how he conducted himself with complete integrity. We might say that he enjoyed success: crowds followed him wherever he went. And the Jewish leaders of his day were so provoked to envy that they came together to scheme against him and bring him down. Once again, we can see him in the life of Daniel.

And a plan is formed. The chief ministers and satraps go to Darius and propose that he passes a new law. It's a simple one. For a period of thirty days, no-one should pray to any god or human being except Darius himself. 'We're all in agreement,' they say, which clearly isn't true because Daniel for one hadn't been consulted. But they present it as a unanimous decision. And Darius seems to like the idea. After all, he's being treated as a god. So, he puts the decree in writing. And the trap is set. Of course, Daniel ignores it. When forced to choose between faithfulness to God and loyalty to the king, he's only ever going to make one decision. So, he goes home to pray.

Someone once told me that reading the Bible and praying should be like brushing our teeth. Sometimes we might take our time over it. Other times we might brush them in a hurry. But it's something we do automatically. We brush our teeth in the morning after breakfast. And we brush our teeth in the evening before going to bed. It's a habit. And it should be the same with reading the Bible and prayer. It something we should make a habit of. Whether we can take our time over it or not, through daily practice, it should be something we do automatically.

That was the case for Daniel. Praying to God was a daily practice. In fact, we're told that he got down on his knees and prayed to God three times a day. So, now, he goes home to do what he's done every day for the whole of his life: he prays. His enemies must have known that's what he would do otherwise they couldn't have relied on it for their plan to work. No doubt, they were accustomed to seeing him praying to his God. And when, as expected, they find him in prayer and asking God for help, they go running straight to the king. It

should make us ask whether our own loyalty to God is as obvious to our friends and colleagues as his was.

As these enemies of Daniel's come to the king, they're ever so careful. They want to be sure their plan works. So first, they ask the king to confirm that he had published a decree that anyone who prayed to any god or human being except himself would be thrown to the lions. And it's only when he *does* confirm it, that they finally deliver the news about Daniel, no doubt trying hard to disguise their glee. And we're told in verse 14: **When the king heard this, he was greatly distressed; he was determined to rescue Daniel and made every effort until sunset to save him.** But he could do nothing. He'd been caught in their trap. There's was no way out. And the group returns to ensure that he follows through with the punishment.

Again, we can see Jesus. He too was unwavering in his faithfulness to God. His was perfect faithfulness. And he too was let down by a weak leader, who was manipulated by his own subjects. If you remember, Pontius Pilate did his best to release Jesus, knowing him to be an innocent man. But the religious leaders of his day outsmarted him too and caught him in a trap of their own. So, as we read this story of Daniel, we keep catching glimpses of Jesus. And that is certainly the case as Daniel, now possibly in his eighties, is thrown into the lions' den. We're told in verse 17: **A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel's situation might not be changed. Then the king returned to his palace and spent the night without eating and without any entertainment being brought to him. And he could not sleep.**

Surely, we must see here the tomb of Jesus, which also had a stone rolled over the entrance, and was also sealed shut at the command of Pontius Pilate. Daniel had been faithful to God his whole life. He had served his God continually, as Jesus would do several hundred years later. And for both it ended the same way. It ended in a tomb. And if we were reading this for the first time, the question we might ask at this stage is, was it worth it? Were those years of faithfulness to God really worth it? We might think the same thing, when we seek to live faithfully to God at home and at work, and find that it's costly and brings us trouble and heartache. Is it worth it? Am I wasting my time?

As we read on, it seems as though God himself is on trial. And borrowing the title of a book by C. S. Lewis, I've called our next heading; God in the dock.

God in the dock

The last words Daniel heard before he was thrown to the lions were those spoken by the king: **'May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!'** And the king asks the same question in the morning. Look at verse 19. **At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions' den. When he came near the den, he called 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?'** It's as though God himself is on trial. 'Was your God up to it?' he's saying. 'Was he able to rescue you?'

And Daniel's reply confirms that he was. Verse 21. **Daniel answered, 'May the king live for ever! My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, Your Majesty.'**

Daniel is lifted out of the den and not a scratch is found on him because he had trusted in his God. He is vindicated of all wrongdoing; declared righteous in God's sight. And not only is Daniel found to be alive; Daniel's God is also shown to be living and powerful. That's what Darius proclaims at the end of the chapter: **...he is the living God.**

And don't we see the resurrection of Jesus here! As he was raised from the tomb, he too was vindicated of all wrongdoing and declared to be righteous in God's sight. And God the Father was shown to be living and powerful.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the tomb is the ultimate answer to the question of whether faithfulness to God is worth it. It proves that God is alive and powerful. There is no one else who can bring us safely through the grave. It is God alone, through faith in Jesus his Son.

The resurrection is the guarantee that all who trust in Jesus and live their lives in faithfulness to him will be brought safely through death and raised to new life with him. Daniel's rescue from the lions' den is a picture of the security that all believers have in the hands of Jesus. It declares that persevering faith is worth it. Those who persevere until the end are those whom God will vindicate and bring through death to new life in heaven.

But the story also contains a warning. It warns us that all who oppose God and his kingdom will be destroyed. Look at verse 24. **At the king's command, the men who had falsely accused Daniel were brought in and thrown into the lions' den, along with their wives and children. And before they reached the floor of the den, the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones.**

We take no pleasure in the thought of God's judgement falling on his enemies. That's why the call of the gospel is to repent and believe in Jesus now, before it's too late. And it's why Darius issues a decree that in every part of his kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel.

He is the living God. He isn't merely a nice idea, or a good thought, let alone a figment of someone's imagination. He is the living God. He endures for ever. His kingdom will not be destroyed. His dominion will never end. He rescues and he saves. He performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth. He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions. And he has rescued Jesus from the power of the grave. We need to know this. Daniel is an example to us of persevering faith that trusted the living God to the very end.

A few years ago, some scholars looked at the biographies of Christian leaders and found that less than a third of them finished well. That's a shocking statistic. It shows the ease with which we can let our guards down in the later years of our lives. But Daniel stands out. Since his days as a teenager, he had learned how to be faithful in Babylon. As a young man,

he had drawn a line at eating food from the king's table. And at the end of his life, he had refused to compromise, even if it meant being fed to lions. What had enabled him to remain faithful was all that had gone before. Through the years, God had been preparing him for this moment.

There's a lesson for all of us here. Don't assume that the greatest trials you'll experience are those you face in your younger years. If you're in later life, don't assume that the biggest tests of your faithfulness are behind you. For Daniel, the greatest trial came at the end of his life, when he was probably in his eighties. And it may be the same for you and me. Later life isn't a time for taking your foot off the pedal and coasting. Old age is no defence against temptation. In fact, some temptations are experienced most strongly in our later years. If you're in your senior years, don't let yourself drift as you see the finish line approaching. Daniel could have told himself it was just thirty days. He'd spent the last 80 years praying to God. What harm would it do to stop praying for just thirty days? But years of past faithfulness are no excuse for present unfaithfulness. Rather, they are preparation for more faithfulness. The devil will never cease from his attacks. And you and I must never cease from our faithfulness. We need to renew our commitment to the Lord in each new stage of life. And that is no less true in later life. A good prayer would be, 'Lord, help me be more faithful to you in this stage of life than in all that have come before.'

And if you are young, set the course of your life now for the years that lie ahead. Resolve to learn faithfulness today, so you might continue to be faithful in the future. And follow the examples of those who are older than you, who have learned faithfulness to God through years of steadfast discipleship. It's those who persevere in faithfulness to God until the very end whom God will vindicate and bring through death and into new life in heaven.

Conclusion

So then, this is a well-known story; Daniel and the lions' den. It's probably a story we were all familiar with before today. But please be clear who the hero of the story is. It isn't Daniel. It's his God. Our God. The God of the Bible. He is the living God, who endures for ever. He rescued Daniel from the power of the lions. And he will rescue his people from the power of the grave, through faith in his Son, Jesus Christ.

If you wouldn't yet call yourself a Christian, please keep coming along and finding out about this God. We would love nothing more than to tell you about him. And if you are a Christian, let this story assure you that there is a God in heaven whose kingdom will never end. Let it assure you that he is a God who rescues and saves. And let it encourage you to remain faithful to him until the very end, no matter the cost.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, please grant us a persevering faith like Daniel's. With each trial and temptation we face, please teach us to be faithful like him, so that we might go on being faithful in the future. Equip us to be faithful to the very end. And as we consider the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave, please give us confidence that such faithfulness is worth it, because of the glory to come. And we ask it in his name. Amen.