

In the Lions' Den

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[0 : 0 0] Well, there's a lot of talk these days about government overreach. The term government overreach generally refers to how a government might overreach its power by interfering far too much in the lives of its people.

And of course, we're well aware of this from totalitarian regimes throughout history. But what happens when a democracy is accused of creating some kind of nanny state whereby it passes all sorts of legislation telling us how we ought to live our lives.

And in recent times, governments have been accused of interfering with the freedom of our speech, with our civil liberties, and even with our human rights.

And so how do you live in such a society, especially if you have faith in God? Well, that's the context of the book of Daniel that we've been looking at in church over these past weeks.

Daniel was a believer, but he was living in a culture that was hostile to his faith in God. And today we see this brought into sharp focus on the story of Daniel and the lion's den.

[1 : 1 1] And it is a classic example, if you like, of government overreach. The plot of Daniel 6 tells us of Daniel being thrown into the lion's den because he refused to compromise his faith.

And spoiler alert, if you don't know the story, he does come out of the lion's den. So Daniel 6 parallels Daniel chapter 3, where Daniel's friends were thrown into a fiery furnace because they refused to compromise their faith.

And they came out alive. And so the question is, what do you do when the heat is on? Or when you're faced with the lions, then how do you cope?

Well, if you have faith in God, this text shows you how to live in a hostile world. But if you wouldn't say that you have faith in God, then this text shows you why you should.

Because it reveals the living God to us, telling us that he is a God who rules and who rescues. And so this morning, I'd like us to look at this passage under three headings.

[2 : 1 4] First of all, we see a relentless rage, verse 1 to 9. Secondly, we see a regular resistance, verse 10 to 18. And thirdly, we see a remarkable rescue, verse 19 to 28.

So first of all, a relentless rage. In verse 1 to 9, we're told of how Daniel's colleagues, who are actually his enemies, plot his downfall. So the Babylonian Empire had fallen, and now King Darius was ruling.

But Daniel continued to be held in high regard. So verse 1 to 3 tells us, 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. 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.

Just notice how Daniel was deeply engaged in the pagan world of his day. In chapter 1, he arrived as an exile to Babylon, and he was probably only a teenager.

[3 : 2 6] And here we see him, and he's much older, probably in his 80s, and he is serving within the government administration. He'd been promoted to different positions within the government structures.

But in this society that was hostile to God, Daniel distinguished himself by his exceptional qualities. And that's why the king planned to give Daniel the top job in the kingdom, probably a bit like the prime minister.

But it didn't go down well with everybody, as we see. Verse 4, At this, the chief ministers and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs.

But they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent. Finally, these men said, We will never find any basis for charges against this man, Daniel, unless it has something to do with the law of his God.

So here's Daniel. He's a politician, but a politician that you could trust. And his promotion meant that he had plenty enemies in government. There were others who were jealous of him.

[4 : 36] And so what they tried to do was dig up some dirt, start a smear campaign, by scrutinizing Daniel's public life as well as his personal life. And so they did a thorough security check and went through all his files.

I guess today's equivalent would be scouring every email, checking every history on every device, or examining every tweet, along with every like and every follow.

But after this intense search, they found nothing, no corruption or negligence, only a trustworthy man of integrity. And it was a great testimony to his faith in God, which was the next plan of attack by his enemies.

They had to find something connected to his faith in God, because they knew Daniel would always put God first, whatever happened. And so they needed to drive a wedge between his loyalty to his king and his loyalty to his God.

And so their tactic was to turn his religious freedom into a crime that was punishable by death. And it's striking how clear Daniel's faith in God was.

[5 : 49] Notice it wasn't just a private thing. It was a public thing because his colleagues, and even the king, knew exactly how important God was in Daniel's life.

They just had to look at the way he lived his life to see who Daniel lived for. And so that's a challenge for anyone who would profess faith in God today.

And it goes in two directions. Firstly, the question is, well, how public is the practice of our faith?

And secondly, what would others make of our faith if our private lives were closely scrutinized?

Would we be found as being people of integrity? Well, back to the plot. Daniel's enemies conspired to force a choice between God and the law of the land by flattering the king and playing on his pride.

So we see in verse 6, so these chief ministers and satraps went as a group to the king and said, making Darius live forever.

[6 : 53] The royal ministers, prefects, satraps, advisors, and governors have all 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 30 days except you, your majesty, shall be thrown into the lion's den.

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. So King Darius put the decree in writing.

So Daniel's enemies relied on the law of the Medes and Persians to get rid of him. Now the law of the Medes and Persians is mentioned three times in the chapter, so it indicates its importance in the plot.

It was significant in seeing Daniel go to the lion's den. So this state-enforced law would prevent Daniel from practicing his faith in God.

It was a direct challenge to his faith. Do not pray to any god or human except the king or you will die. This is the relentless rage of Daniel's colleagues stroke enemies, and it wasn't going to stop until they got rid of Daniel.

[8 : 06] They would not tolerate him, and so they made sure the law would not tolerate Daniel either. And so Daniel was forced to choose between obeying the state or obeying God.

So this is government overreach. The state is using its power to invent a new legislation to discriminate against someone because of their faith. And that's why the book of Daniel has such a contemporary feel to it, because we're beginning to see this happen in our own society, where there's a pressure for everybody to conform to the cultural orthodoxy of the day.

Where it's not just that you shouldn't practice your faith in public life, you're not even supposed to hold certain beliefs or follow certain practices in private.

In George Orwell's 1984 novel, it's called Thought Crime. So here, there is this relentless rage against any who speak or even think in a way that does not fit with the current political agenda.

And that's why we're seeing rules and laws being forced to ensure that religious beliefs are silenced or certain behaviours are enforced. A current example would be the Scottish government's hate

crime and public order bill, where this new law could prevent the sharing of biblical truth, where those who do risk being accused of stirring up hatred.

[9 : 42] Another would be the Scottish government facing judicial review over the closure of churches and the criminalising of public worship during the current lockdown.

And so lawyers are going to argue on behalf of some church leaders that the regulations are in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights and the Scottish Constitution.

Now, of course, people will have different views and opinions. But I think Theresa May made a good point when she warned the House of Commons last November that, and I quote, making it illegal to conduct an act of public worship for the best of intentions sets a precedent that could be misused for a government in the future with the worst of intentions.

It has unintended consequences. And so the point is, whether for Daniel back then in a pagan empire, or whether for people living for God today in our Western secular world, this relentless rage will actually never, ever stop.

And so we shouldn't be surprised if those who profess to follow Jesus Christ or the church is under persecution or threat or faces opposition. It's always been the case.

[11 : 04] And so we need to be alert to see how our society is progressing or even regressing so that we can live faithfully for God.

Because it is becoming increasingly difficult and sometimes dangerous to live in a culture that is hostile to true Christianity. But just remember what Jesus said in John 15.

He said, If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. So there should be no shocks and no surprises if we face and find hostility to the practice of our faith in the world today.

Daniel proved it to be true, and Jesus said it was so. So that's the first point. But that's not all. Well, let's move on to the second point. After a relentless rage, what we see is a regular resistance.

Verse 10 to 18. So how did Daniel, as a servant of God, respond to the relentless rage against him? Well, he responded with a regular resistance.

[12 : 11] What does that mean? Well, it means he carried on doing what he always did, and he resisted the new law. So verse 10 says, Now, I guess it was probably easy for Daniel to rationalize the situation.

After all, he wasn't being asked to bow down and worship an idol like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel chapter 3. So he may have been asking, Well, do I really need to lose my life over a law that only prevents me praying to God for 30 days?

There was a limit on it, verse 7 tells us. So couldn't Daniel just be a bit less public? Couldn't he just tone down his faith a bit? Well, Daniel could still pray, of course, couldn't he?

He didn't need to do it in front of his window. And then, if he kept quiet, prayed privately, he could still have this influence in his pagan government.

And yet Daniel couldn't hide, and Daniel couldn't deny his faith in God. And so he chose to keep practicing his faith, even though it meant breaking the law. But notice that Daniel didn't make a song and dance about his civil disobedience.

[13 : 43] There's no public demonstration here. There's no appeal for justice. But that said, Daniel didn't just do nothing either. What did he do was he continued his regular practice by way of a quiet and yet firm resistance.

And for him, that meant looking out towards Jerusalem and getting down his knees and praying three times a day. And so it's worth breaking this down, verse 10, because Daniel's prayer shows how to have confidence that God rules when you're faced with the lion's den.

And so we see four things here. We see the direction of prayer. So when Daniel prayed, he looked towards Jerusalem.

Now, this is less about geography and more about theology. It's really a statement of faith by Daniel that God rules. God's people, remember, were in exile.

They were taken as captives from Jerusalem into Babylon, where Daniel was. But God had promised that his people would return home after exile back to Jerusalem.

[14 : 58] And so when Daniel prays, his mind and his heart are focused on God's power and on God's promises and on God's purposes for his people. So Daniel may have been an exile in a human kingdom that was hostile to his God.

But he was a citizen of a different kingdom, a kingdom that belonged. To his God. And so Daniel's prayers were kingdom focused. And they went way beyond his current circumstances.

And so shouldn't we pray with this kind of reality in mind? God has plans and purposes for his people that stretch way beyond our lives and way beyond this world.

And so that's the first part of his prayer is the direction of prayer. Secondly, we see the attitude of prayer. Three times a day, he got down on his knees and prayed. So the attitude of Daniel's prayer is seen by the way that he bowed down on his knees.

His outward posture was a sign of his inner submission to God. He was acknowledging that the Most High God is sovereign by humbly bowing down before him.

[16:12] And so shouldn't we pray with the same attitude? By submitting to the sovereign God and his ways. So we see the direction of prayer.

Second, the attitude of prayer. And third, the content of prayer. Giving thanks to his God. So when Daniel prayed, he gave thanks to his God.

And of course, that's not all Daniel prayed. Verse 11, he asked God for help. And we actually get the content of Daniel's prayer at this time in Daniel chapter 9.

But despite the desperate situation that Daniel found himself in, his praying was characterized by giving thanks to God. And so shouldn't we pray with this same thanksgiving?

Yes, pray for help. But only after we have given thanks to God for all that he has done for us. Okay, so the direction of prayer.

[17:09] The attitude of prayer. The content of prayer. And fourthly, finally, the regularity of prayer. We read that Daniel did this just as he had done before. So when Daniel found out about the decree against praying, he didn't stop praying.

But he didn't pray in a panic either. He did what he always did. He prayed. And his prayer was regular and disciplined. It had been his habit to pray three times a day on his knees.

And so Daniel wasn't going to stop doing that, despite what the new law stated. And so shouldn't we pray with the same habit? It's less about the method of prayer and more about the regularity of praying.

In fact, it's because Daniel's prayer life was like clockwork that his enemies managed to catch him out. Their plan only worked because they were 100% certain that Daniel would be found praying.

Verse 11. Then these men went as a group and found Daniel praying and asking God for help. Everybody knew Daniel was faithful to God.

[18:18] And so verse 16. Even the king says, Daniel's prayer life was a reflection of his whole life commitment to God.

His whole life acknowledgement that God rules and God is in control. And that's why it was a no-brainer for Daniel when he had to choose between obeying the state or obeying God.

And just notice how all of this in the passage is recorded in such a matter-of-fact way. There's not even mention of Daniel saying anything. And so the focus in verse 12 through to verse 20 is all about King Darius' response to the situation.

Because while Daniel was a victim of the new law, Darius was also a victim of his own law. He'd been played and he knew it. And that's why he tried to rescue Daniel without losing face.

But the law remained and so Daniel was thrown into the lion's den. So if the first point was that we face hostility or we will face hostility for faith in God, here we're told how to respond to that hostility.

[19:35] But there is no silver bullet. Yet what we see here is that Daniel shows a regular resistance. In other words, Daniel lived out his faith by simply doing what he always did.

He lived out his faith by being faithful to God. And it was this unspectacular nature of a daily disciplined faithfulness that resulted in this automatic resistance to the state-sponsored decree.

So Daniel was not going to be intimidated by a human ruler or by a pagan regime or by an unjust law. By doing what he always did, he was confidently trusting that God would sort it all out.

He knew that King Darius and the law of the Medes and Persians couldn't stop God's work, even if it cost Daniel his life. And so when it comes to God, faithfulness to God doesn't always mean faithfulness in some great, big, spectacular feat, like facing a lion's den.

It often means serving God daily, serving God faithfully, whether others are watching us or not.

Daniel lived out his faith in every area of his life, and that's what made him distinctive.

[20:58] And that's why he made an impact. His faith in God was a public faith. Just think about this. If Daniel was faithful, but only in private, he'd have been ignored.

Or if Daniel had been exceptional in public, but wasn't faithful, he'd have been ignored. But because he was faithful in public life, he just couldn't be ignored by those around him, because he engaged so well with the culture, and yet stood out so distinctively from it, because of his strong faith in God. And so the world around is not used to having to deal with people like this, whose faith in God is so bold, and yet so beautiful at the same time.

And so it's vital that the world sees this from God's people today. And that's the second thing. Daniel showed this regular resistance. So first, a relentless rage.

Second, a regular resistance. And third, a remarkable rescue. The plot of Daniel chapter 6 is resolved by God's remarkable rescue of Daniel from the lion's den.

[22 : 07] So let's look at that, verse 19 and 20. At first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lion's 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 lion's den?

We're actually given the impression that Darius was expecting that Daniel would be rescued. Because twice, Darius refers to Daniel's God as the living God, verse 20, and then again in verse 26.

Because only a living God could rescue his servant from a den of lions. And so Daniel now bears witness to this in verse 21 and 22, which are actually the only recorded words of Daniel in the whole chapter.

So let's read those. 21. Daniel answered, May the king live forever. 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.

So this is the remarkable rescue. That's why Darius wants the whole world to fear the God of Daniel. And so Darius's response is seen at the end of her chapter, verse 25 to 27.

[23 : 31] Then King Darius wrote to all the nations and peoples of every language in all the earth, May you prosper greatly. I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom, people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel.

For he is the living God, and he endures forever. 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.

So here is a pagan king acknowledging that Daniel's God is the living God. And his words really sum up the message of the book of Daniel, because all people, whether then or today, need to know that the living God is the God who rules and rescues.

And that's the message that we need to grasp, whether we call ourselves a Christian or not. The living God rules and rescues, because this is really our only hope in life and in death.

It's what will help us live for God in this world, especially when we're faced with a lion's den. And so here is Daniel, the old man. He went into the lion's den, and he came out alive because he trusted in his God.

[24 : 51] But we're not just meant to look at Daniel's example here. We're meant to see Daniel's God. The text here is really showing us not just what Daniel was like, but what God is like.

In other words, we don't draw a direct line from Daniel to me, where the application is, be like Daniel. No, what we do is, we draw a line from Daniel to Jesus and see how Jesus has fulfilled all of this.

Because we will never manage to be faithful to death just by trying hard in our own strength. Jesus has fulfilled this for us.

And so what we see in Daniel chapter six is really a preview of God's remarkable rescue through Jesus Christ. And there's a hint of this in Daniel's words after the rescue. Notice what he said there in verse 22.

My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. And so the angel points to Jesus, who was also sent by God to rescue us.

[25 : 57] He came into this world centuries later. And Jesus was more innocent than Daniel. Jesus was more faithful than Daniel. Jesus trusted God far more than Daniel did.

And his enemies also hated him and plotted to kill him. And so the enemies of Jesus also hatched a plan and falsely accused him.

They had him arrested on trumped up charges, and they declared him guilty so that they could watch him die. And like Daniel, Jesus made no reply before his accusers. And like King Darius, Pilate, who was in charge when Jesus died, recognized the injustice, and he sought to release Jesus. But Jesus was condemned to death. And so Jesus Christ is the ultimate innocent sufferer who went into the ultimate lion's den. Not just when he was beaten and tortured, but as he died on the cross and faced God's wrath for our sin. [27 : 05] And that's why Jesus cried from the cross, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Jesus was literally quoting Psalm 22 because it points to him.

That's why we sang Psalm 22 earlier. And Psalm 22 speaks of roaring lions surrounding the despised sufferer and declares, Rescue me from the mouth of the lions. And so when Jesus descended into our den on the cross, the roaring lion surrounded him and he got the punishment that we deserve. And so while Daniel went into the lion's den to satisfy the law of the Medes and Persians, and he was spared, Jesus went to the cross to satisfy God's justice, and he was killed.

And so through the suffering and death of Jesus, we are spared and rescued. But there's more because after Jesus was crucified, he was placed in a tomb and a stone was rolled over the entrance.

And just as Darius hurried to the den at first light of dawn to find if Daniel was alive, so to the woman on that first Easter morning, just after sunrise, made their way to the tomb to find that Jesus was alive.

[28 : 19] And so while Daniel was lifted from the lions' den unharmed, Jesus walked out of the tomb. He was raised to life and victorious over death.

So Jesus is the true and better Daniel. Jesus is the truly innocent sufferer who willingly died and was raised to life to rescue us.

And so this is the good news of Christianity. It is the ultimate message of hope for our lives and for our world. Only because Jesus has gone into the ultimate lion's den to rescue us do we have nothing to fear.

Every other lion's den is tame by comparison. Of course, that doesn't mean they won't be difficult or they won't involve suffering. But if Jesus has rescued us from sin and death and hell, then we're safe forever.

That's why we can trust God. Whatever we face in life, even if it means we lose our own life. So only when you see Jesus go into the ultimate lion's den for you, will you be able to go through the mini lion's dens in your own life.

[29 : 37] whether they be hostility, hatred, threats, loneliness, sickness, failure, suffering, or any situation where you feel afraid.

You can walk into every lion's den with confidence. And it won't be easy standing up for God. But what Daniel teaches us is that it is foolish trying to stand against him because he is the living God who rules.

His kingdom will not be destroyed and his dominion will never end. Let's pray. Living God, we thank you for sending Jesus and for his willingness to die on the cross.

Help us to continually remember what he has done to rescue us so that we can face life and death knowing that he is with us. And because he is with us, we have no need to be afraid.

And so we thank you in Jesus' name. Amen.