



PRAYING TO THE INVISIBLE

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Many people, even outside of churches or synagogues, are familiar with the Bible story of Daniel in the lions' den. Most of our focus has been given to his miraculous salvation from the man-eating lions. But the prelude to that extraordinary event may be even more instructive for us today. Here's the backstory...

Daniel 6:1 Darius the Mede decided to divide the kingdom into 120 provinces, and he appointed a high officer to rule over each province. ² The king also chose Daniel and two others as administrators to supervise the high officers and protect the king's interests. ³ Daniel soon proved himself more capable than all the other administrators and high officers. Because of Daniel's great ability, the king made plans to place him over the entire empire.

This extensive administrative organization is in keeping with modern findings concerning the extent of the mighty Persian Empire. In an age of warring tribes, it was necessary to keep a strong hand on governmental affairs.

Although the Jews were captives from a subdued people, they became embedded in the Babylonian culture. Over the years (for Daniel was probably then in his eighties), Daniel had gained significant stature in Babylonian politics for his wisdom and uprightness. People of strong conviction attract the attention of their superiors, but also arouse the jealousy of their peers.

Daniel 6:4 Then the other administrators and high officers began searching for some fault in the way Daniel was handling government affairs, but they couldn't find anything to criticize or condemn. He was faithful, always responsible, and completely trustworthy. ⁵ So they concluded, "Our only chance of finding grounds for accusing Daniel will be in connection with the rules of his religion."

So, Daniel's political enemies appealed to Darius's pride and vanity in order to manipulate legislation that would penalize anyone refusing to worship King Darius, being confident that Daniel and his tribe would refuse.

Daniel 6:6 So the administrators and high officers went to the king and said, "Long live King Darius! ⁷ We are all in agreement—we administrators, officials, high officers, advisers, and governors—that the king should make a law that will be strictly enforced. Give orders that for the

next thirty days any person who prays to anyone, divine or human—except to you, Your Majesty—will be thrown into the den of lions. ⁸ *And now, Your Majesty, issue and sign this law so it cannot be changed, an official law of the Medes and Persians that cannot be revoked.”* ⁹ *So King Darius signed the law.*

As an important cabinet member and worshiper of the Living God, Daniel faced a crisis of faith.

Daniel 6:10 *But when Daniel learned that the law had been signed, he went home and knelt down as usual in his upstairs room, with its windows open toward Jerusalem. He prayed three times a day, just as he had always done, giving thanks to his God.* ¹¹ *Then the officials went together to Daniel’s house and found him praying and asking for God’s help.* ¹² *So they went straight to the king and reminded him about his law. “Did you not sign a law that for the next thirty days any person who prays to anyone, divine or human—except to you, Your Majesty—will be thrown into the den of lions?”*

“Yes,” the king replied, “that decision stands; it is an official law of the Medes and Persians that cannot be revoked.”

¹³ *Then they told the king, “That man Daniel, one of the captives from Judah, is ignoring you and your law. He still prays to his God three times a day.”*

Yet, Daniel found courage, faith and hope. Understanding why may give us something to think about as we navigate our own culture’s current religious crisis.

1. Daniel’s courage was not fueled by a persecution complex.

Unfortunately, the boldness of some believers is only awakened when they perceive they have been deprived of their personal rights. Prior to that, their faith may have lacked focus, volume, passion, and sacrifice for lost souls. Prior to that, their social media may have been silent about subjects central to the Kingdom and salvation. Not so with Daniel.

It is important to note that Daniel’s defiance of his own government was not based upon his experience of persecution alone, but on the threat of forced contradiction to his faith tradition. He was smart enough to choose his battles wisely. The fact that culture, politicians and legislation opposed his faith was not a good enough reason to defy his government. Civil disobedience was only justified when a penalty was enacted for obeying God (in his case, the penalty was execution by wild beasts).

It should also be noted that Daniel carried out his daily habit of prayer “in the upstairs room of his home,” instead of the public square. He did not seek persecution or need to be perceived as an activist to fuel his faith. His faith was fueled by a passion to obey God, not to protest people’s actions.

2. Daniel's faith was not contingent upon visible results.

Daniel continued to pray towards the Temple in Jerusalem even though the Temple was no longer there. As a matter of fact, the Temple that Daniel knew had been destroyed by Babylonian raiders almost 50 years earlier. But the absence of the Temple did not negate God's promise to hear prayers for national repentance when His people prayed toward Jerusalem.

In very much the same way, our own passion, faith, and confidence in prayers for national revival should not be dependent upon visible manifestations of morality, godliness, or spiritual awakening in our nation. May we, like Daniel, stand upon the enduring, unalterable promises of God, instead of needing visible evidence that the culture is propping up our faith.

3. Daniel's theology did not require the villainization of others.

King Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple acknowledged that God's people may sin and God may discipline them for it.

1 Kings 8:33 "If Your people Israel are defeated by their enemies because they have sinned against You, and if they turn to You and acknowledge Your name and pray to You here in this Temple, ³⁴ then hear from Heaven and forgive the sin of Your people Israel and return them to this land You gave their ancestors.

God's people knew to pray in the direction of the Temple whenever they faced God's discipline as a result of national sin. Ever since their captivity by the Babylonians, Daniel prayed "toward the Temple." This habit meant that he viewed their captivity and any subsequent persecution as a consequence of Israel's sin, not just the wickedness of the culture or the corruption of the king.

Even after being abandoned by Darius and caught in the crossfire of political infighting, Daniel was wise enough to know something deeper was going on. Is it possible that all we despise, resent, and abhor in our culture is as much the product of a backslidden, inactive church as it is of godless politicians? As hard as it is to own, I think so.

In times like these, the status quo just won't go. Church people need to step up their game.

4. Daniel's hope was in God, not government.

Daniel's prayer showed that his hope was not in government reform, new legislation, or even like-minded politicians. He offered no petitions, blogs, tweets, or YouTube uploads. As a matter of fact, Daniel 6:11 clearly tells us that his political enemies found him praying to God for help, instead of lobbying Darius for an exception.

There is something pure and powerful about Daniel's recognition of where his help came from. This primal faith seems to be a lost art today and I wonder at times how different our world might be if God's people in churches across this nation were found by our critics to be "praying and asking God for help" a little more often.

A believer is always safe in God's hands. Our path of duty is also the path of safety. The contrast between the misery of the king in his palace and the peace of Daniel while in the lions' den depicts the difference between one who has no internal resources and one whose mind is focused on God.

Isaiah 26:3 You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, all whose thoughts are fixed on you!

Well, surely we can't leave Daniel there. Don't you want to hear the rest of the story?

Daniel 6:14 Hearing this, the king was deeply troubled, and he tried to think of a way to save Daniel. He spent the rest of the day looking for a way to get Daniel out of this predicament.

¹⁵ In the evening the men went together to the king and said, "Your Majesty, you know that according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, no law that the king signs can be changed."

¹⁶ So at last the king gave orders for Daniel to be arrested and thrown into the den of lions. The king said to him, "May your God, whom you serve so faithfully, rescue you."

¹⁷ A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den. The king sealed the stone with his own royal seal and the seals of his nobles, so that no one could rescue Daniel. ¹⁸ Then the king returned to his palace and spent the night fasting. He refused his usual entertainment and couldn't sleep at all that night.

¹⁹ Very early the next morning, the king got up and hurried out to the lions' den. ²⁰ When he got there, he called out in anguish, "Daniel, servant of the living God! Was your God, whom you serve so faithfully, able to rescue you from the lions?"

²¹ Daniel answered, "Long live the king! ²² My God sent his angel to shut the lions' mouths so that they would not hurt me, for I have been found innocent in his sight. And I have not wronged you, Your Majesty."

Christian arrogance—yes, sadly, there is such a thing—would have stopped after declaring his innocence. "Woo hoo! I won! I am innocent. I am righteous. God rescued me!" But not Daniel. Respectfully, he proclaimed, "I have not wronged you, Your Majesty."

James 3:8 No one can tame the tongue. It is restless and evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who have been made in the image of God. ¹⁰ And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right!

Beware the trap! Don't take the bait. If you truly keep the faith, you will also maintain respect for others.

Daniel 6:23 The king was overjoyed and ordered that Daniel be lifted from the den. Not a scratch was found on him, for he had trusted in his God.

²⁴ Then the king gave orders to arrest the men who had maliciously accused Daniel. He had them thrown into the lions' den, along with their wives and children. The lions leaped on them and tore them apart before they even hit the floor of the den.

²⁵ Then King Darius sent this message to the people of every race and nation and language throughout the world:

"Peace and prosperity to you!

²⁶ "I decree that everyone throughout my kingdom should tremble with fear before the God of Daniel.

For He is the living God, and He will endure forever.

His kingdom will never be destroyed, and His rule will never end.

²⁷ He rescues and saves His people; He performs miraculous signs and wonders in the heavens and on earth.

He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions."

²⁸ So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.

[This is an appropriate place to cheer for the winning team!]

We are not the first believers to be scorned and deprived of personal rights. As a matter of fact, when our history is viewed from a perspective longer than 200 years, we will find that Christians have been persecuted more than we have been favored.

Our mistreatment does not give us license to treat others as they have treated us. We are bound by a higher law—the command of Christ. We are called to love and respect even our enemies. Are you motivated to obey more than to protest, as Daniel was?

You may not change everyone you love, but you certainly cannot win those you refuse to love.

May God give us the integrity, boldness, honesty, and genuine faith of Daniel in these most challenging times.