

Into the Lions' Den

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[0 : 00] Good morning. For those of you at home, we're reading from Daniel chapter 6, the whole of the chapter, Daniel chapter 6. In the Church Bibles, page number 891, 891, Daniel chapter 6. Let's read God's Word.

It pleased Darius to appoint 120 satraps to rule through 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. At this, the chief ministers and the satraps tried to find grounds for charging against Daniel and 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 these chief ministers and satraps went to a group to the king and said, may King Darius live forever. 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 to you, your majesty shall be thrown into the lion's den. Now your majesty issued the decree and put it in writing so that it cannot be altered in accordance with the law of the Medes and the

Persians, which cannot be repealed. So King Darius put the decree in writing. Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened towards Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before. Then these men went as a group and found Daniel praying and asking God for help. So they went to the king and spoke to him about his royal decree. Did you not publish a decree that during the next 30 days, anyone who prays to any God or human being except to you, your majesty, would be thrown into the lion's den? The king answered, the decree stands in accordance with the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be repealed. Then they said to the king,

Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, your majesty, or to the decree that you put in writing. He still prays three times a day. When the king heard this, he was greatly distressed. He was determined to rescue Daniel and made every effort until sunset to save him. Then the men went as a group to King Darius and said to him, remember your majesty that according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, no decree or edict that the king issues can be changed.

[4 : 08] So the king gave the order and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lion's den. The king said to Daniel, may your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you.

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 entertainment being brought to him. At the 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 lions. 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 done anything wrong before you, your majesty. The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him because he had trusted in his God. At the king's command, the men who had falsely accused Daniel were brought in and thrown into the lion's 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. [6 : 02] Then King Darius wrote to all the nations and the people of every language in 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 Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus, the Persian. This is the word of the Lord. Well, good morning, St. Silas. My name is Martin Ayres. If you've not met, I'm the senior pastor of the church here. It's great to have you here. And if you could keep your Bibles open at Daniel chapter 6, that would be a great help to me. It's on page 891 in the church Bibles if they've fallen closed for you. And if you'd find it helpful, there's an outline inside the notice sheet just to see where we're going as we look at this together. But let's pray. Let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we praise you that despite appearances all around us, you reveal to us in your word that you reign today as God and King.

that you are the living God, that you endure forever, that your kingdom will never end. And so we ask that you graciously enable us to hear your voice this morning and to have heads and hearts willing to trust your word and respond rightly to it. May you meet with us as we hear you speak. We ask for Jesus' name's sake. Amen. Joy. Well, we've heard maybe before the phrase, your money or your life. You might have heard the story of the rich man who was held up at gunpoint by a robber who wants his wallet and says, your money or your life? And he pauses. And the robber reiterates, come on, your money or your life? And he says, I'm thinking, I'm thinking, would you hand over your money to save your life? Of course, of course we would.

[8 : 40] The threat to Daniel this morning is your quiet time or your life. Hand over your relationship with God, give up your prayer life or we'll kill you. And we might feel that's quite far removed from the pressure we feel today for being a Christian in Scotland. But there is pressure. There is pressure not to be a Christian or not to live wholeheartedly as a Christian. I think of a friend who was explaining a decision to his parents that expressed sacrificial commitment to Jesus and them saying, you've got too into this. You've got too into it. So it could be the pressure of regulation in the workplace on our Christian faith. More often, it's likely to be the social pressure, the sense that if we're going to commit to being a Christian in the way that we feel God's calling us, we're going to get left behind by people around us. We're going to miss out, held back in our ambitions at work because other people can give more time and we feel that to be a Christian would take up time.

Or held back in relationships as friends feel frustrated with us that we live differently as a Christian. Or maybe it's just the feeling, the kind of inexorable sense in Glasgow today that when you say you're a Christian, you're seen as one of the bad guys now.

So we might keep going as a Christian, but often we lack courage. We feel that to put our head above the parapet would be a very dangerous thing and it could only go badly. How should you live when your faith is under fire from people in power over you? Well, we've been in this series in Daniel and him and his friends, they're living around the 6th century BC and they're far from home. They were among God's people in and around Jerusalem, but brought into exile in Babylon, which was a place where God was not known and pagan gods were worshipped. And there was great power in this empire, frightening power. Now one of the reasons Daniel is such an inspiring Bible character for many of us today is that he has a secular vocation in the midst of that. He's a civil servant. He's not an apostle or a prophet or a church leader or a missionary. He's not in full-time paid Christian work.

And so the challenges he faces perhaps resonate very strongly with you if you're looking to follow God and live for him. But you feel pressure on a Monday or a Wednesday in the coming week because your working life is in Babylon, the Babylon of today, in the school you work in or the school you go to or the university or the office or the surgery where you are. Another inspiring reflection about Daniel is that by now, chapter 6 of Daniel, he's elderly. When we first met Daniel and his friends in chapter 1, we were struck by how they were just teenagers as they were enrolled in the University of Babylon as freshers and immersed in pagan culture and how challenging that was or inspiring for perhaps the younger people among us to think, you know, Daniel and his friends were very young when they had to draw a line and stand firm for the Lord, surrounded by pressure.

But now when we come to chapter 6, Daniel is an old man. In the illustrated children's Bibles we've got around at home, when Daniel is pictured in the lion's den, he's a young man, even a boy. He's got these kind of boyish good looks and he's surrounded by these very friendly looking cuddly lions. [12:29] And you think, it would be great to spend an evening with your head on the belly of one of these furry creatures. But the truth is that by now, Daniel is around 80 years old. And there is value in remembering that. Daniel demonstrates that being faithful to God, it's not about a one-off challenge in your life and you kind of get through that and then it's plain sailing. Being a Christian is not about making a commitment when you're a teenager and then you relax. It's not a moment of profession, but a lifetime of trust. Not a moment of profession, a lifetime of trust. And a lot of Daniel's life surely would have been marked by the kind of plodding along that we have to endure. It wasn't all the drama of chapter 1 and chapter 3 and chapter 6 of Daniel. He would have been plodding along.

But when his challenge came in his elderly years, he was ready. He was ready. So if you feel as though you've been a Christian many years or simply that you're old, you feel that you're in winter in the Christian life or just in your human life, your earthly life, Daniel is an especially pertinent chapter, an inspiring chapter, as God powerfully works through an elderly faithful servant. So let's pick up the story as our first point is that jealous ministers set a trap. Jealous ministers set a trap. The king, Darius, has a structure to rule over Babylon, 120 local governors, and above them these three cabinet ministers. But Daniel is exceptional among the three. So the king has made this plan to make Daniel his prime minister. So it looks like jealousy that leads to the plan to take Daniel down. And the way to get him, there's no other way to get him. The only way to get him is to attack his faith. They go and see the king. They use flattery to deceive him. In verse 7, they say they've all agreed. They hadn't all agreed, but they said they've all agreed the king should issue an edict that anyone who prays to any god or human during the next 30 days except to you, your majesty, shall be thrown into the lion's den. And Darius falls for it. Verse 9, So Darius put the decree in writing. You can see why he might be seduced by an idea like that. Why he might think things might function a bit better around here if I had a bit more allegiance, a bit more exclusive power. And this kind of religious freedom we've got dotting around us, maybe that's not so good for me and what I want to do. But what are we seeing here?

That sometimes people will turn against you for following the living God. I take it that some of the qualities that made Daniel so impressive for the king, his exceptional qualities, were the fruit of a life lived following the God of the Bible. We would imagine that Daniel would have been a man of great integrity because he followed the God of the Bible. That's something that we've all been longing for in our times, isn't it? People in power with integrity. And the news has been full this week, hasn't it? The revelations about all these parties that they have at Downing Street.

And it's been all about Boris and his parties. And there's been Novak Djokovic and his visa application. And the Duke of York trying to avoid a trial. And what we see there is our society longs for people of integrity, people whose word can be trusted. And we are called by the Lord to display that integrity. In fact, we have all the more reason to show integrity, even when others could never know, because we live our lives before him. Daniel would have been a man of loyalty, not the kind of man who would be duplicitous, who would say yes to the king, but scheme against him with other people. He would have been a man of wisdom because he depended on the Lord for wisdom.

[16:35] And the Bible is full of wisdom for us on how to navigate life in God's world. So these things made Daniel, in the language of the Sermon on the Mount we looked at last term, he was the salt of the earth. He was light in the world. He was deliciously distinctive in Babylon, just as Jesus calls us to be. But it was striking when we looked at that in Matthew's gospel last term, how just as Jesus says, you're going to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world, and you'll be distinctive and attractive, a city on a hill for the world.

He also says to his followers, blessed are you when people persecute you and insult you and say all kinds of evil things against you because of me. People hated Daniel for being distinctive. And it's as though we're reminded here in Daniel 6 not to expect things will go smoothly for us when we strive to love and serve the people around us. Jesus warns us, doesn't he, if the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. So we get the king's weak decree as the ministers set a trap.

Our second point is how Daniel responds. Faithful Daniel continues to pray. Verse 10 is the turning point in the whole drama of the chapter and it's quite an underwhelming turning point, isn't it?

Daniel prays. It's worth thinking though about what we might have said to Daniel if he was our friend. I don't know what you would have said. I think some of us, I might have thought, oh come on Daniel, it's not forever. It's only 30 days. Just run with it. It's just like dry January, but for your prayer life. It's just going to fly by. Before you know it, it'll be finished.

[18 : 32] But have a look with me at verse 10. Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened towards Jerusalem. So he doesn't even think, I'll keep praying, but I'll do it in my bedroom. I'll keep praying, but in the shower, out of sight. We read on, three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God just as he had done before. So let's think about his praying. His praying is a defiant prayer. There's the defiance of prayer here. Daniel knows he has to draw a line here. The king cannot interfere with Daniel's walk with the living God. To obey the king on this matter would make him unfaithful to God. But why is that? Daniel didn't have to pray three times a day.

It's not commanded in the Bible that he pray three times a day. It's not commanded in the Bible that he pray visibly. But clearly Daniel knows this is a moment where for him it's a red line. To demonstrate that he keeps the first commandment, you shall have no other gods before me, he has to keep praying as he has done before. And I think the challenge for us there is, while not being legalistic with other people and judging them by our red lines, let me ask you to consider for yourself, what are my red lines?

What is there in my own life that demonstrates that I have no other gods before God? That God is on the throne in my life. He comes first. So for us, the pressure could be, could come from an employer, the boss at work, who gives us a work schedule that means we can't get to a worship service on a Sunday.

And for us, that's one of the ways we model that God is on the throne in my life. And so we can't do it. Could it come, could the pressure come from a non-Christian spouse who says they don't mind you being a Christian, but they don't want you behaving like that at home while you're with them? Could it be social pressure that we feel, rather than a law of the land, just social pressure where we feel that we can't say no to things, like extra sports sessions are put in by our sports team, extra training sessions, or our kids are being invited to parties on a Sunday morning, and we feel this thing of, oh, I've just got to do this. But realizing in our heart that by doing that, what are we modeling there? Is God on the throne in our lives? What are our own personal red lines that show, no, I'll say no to that because I put God first and he reigns. So Daniel here faces at 80 years old, perhaps the greatest challenge of his long life. The real lions at this stage in the chapter, they're not the lions in the den, they're his colleagues, the people all around him, they're the lions. They want rid of him and they're on the prowl to catch him. By praying, he's being defiant.

[21 : 52] He's saying, God reigns in my heart. How do we show that? He's loyal to the king everywhere he can be. He's not cantankerous. He's not looking for a fight. He's loyal where he can be. But the king needs to know that the Lord reigns over Daniel's heart. Let's think about the posture of prayer. I just think it's striking, isn't it, verse 10, that he opens the windows towards Jerusalem. Now that is in obedience to commands of the scriptures of, at that time, as the people are away from Jerusalem, praying towards it. But what it shows is that Daniel isn't just praying about his situation and being rescued from it. What he's praying for is the restoration of the people of God.

And an inspiring example for us of the ways we can pray beyond our own personal situation, praying for God's people, praying for the kingdom, your kingdom come. And his posture is that he's on his knees. Daniel didn't have to do that. But posture could help us. And Daniel is on his knees because he knows God's throne of grace that invites him to approach. It's still a throne.

It can be helpful to get on your knees to pray. It reminds you what God is like. I remember a lecturer at college once, in the middle of the lecture, talking about posture in prayer and saying, have you prayed to God like this before? Prostrate. Makes you think differently about God when you lie on the floor and pray to him. He reigns. He's on the throne. He's a great king. And let's learn from Daniel about the habit of prayer. Just look again how verse 10 ends. Three times a day, he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.

Daniel didn't just find himself ready to face this challenge in his 80s. He managed to stand firm because he'd had a lifetime of good habits. How do you still get on your knees and give thanks to God when you realize your colleagues have all betrayed you and your life is on the line? How do you give thanks? You've managed it because it's your habit of a lifetime. How do you still pray when

it could mean you're killed?

It is extraordinary when you think about it, isn't it, what Daniel's willing to do. Imagine if one day this week you were given the choice. The choice for you is read your Bible and pray today or live. We get caught out by the choice, read your Bible and pray today or stay warm in bed for a longer snooze. That catches us out. Daniel is told, read your Bible and pray or live. And he chooses to read his Bible and pray. What could make you do that?

[24 : 56] That it's your habit. You've made it the habit of your life. That's what Daniel had done. And here's the value of good routines, of good habits. When you establish good routines in your life, things stop being a challenge anymore.

I remember when I first became a Christian and I wasn't in the habit of going to church every Sunday. I just didn't get into the habit of that. And because of that, every week that became a decision.

Will I go to church? And because it was a weekly decision, it was a hard decision to make. And, you know, mates would be going to the cinema on a Sunday evening and I would think, oh, I'll go to the cinema this week and I might do church next week.

And then it got to a point when I just thought, well, I'll just go to church for the next eight weeks. I'll just make sure I'm always there for eight weeks. And you find when you put a routine like that into your life, it just, you stop thinking about it.

It just becomes easy. Of course you're at church. It doesn't even feel a burden. And we could think the same about many things in our Christian lives. Midweek groups or commitments to people or our time with God day by day.

[26 : 15] Just making a good habit. Daniel shows us the value of that. As he just carries on doing what he's always done. When the pressure came, it meant he was faithful. So the spies catch him in verse 11.

And then we get our third point. A weak king is powerless to help. A weak king is powerless to help. So the jealous ministers, they're like snakes, aren't they? They go and see the king.

And it's so crafty. They don't even mention Daniel yet. But they say, oh, great king, can we just check something? Did you not publish a decree some time ago?

Was it not? What was it again? Something about not praying to anyone except you? And Darius just wanders into the trap. Oh yeah, that was one of those decrees that you can't repeal. Oh right, it's just verse 13.

Verse 13. And then we see how weak the king is.

[27 : 17] The most powerful man in Babylon has no power at all. Verse 14. He's greatly distressed. He does everything he can to save Daniel, but to no avail. And in verse 16, the order is given.

Throw him into the lion's den. And in his desperation, ironically, Darius now prays. Verse 16. May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you.

And in verse 18, the powerful king, in terms of the power we'd expect him to have, he spends the whole night in a fast and he can't sleep because he was so weak to do the very thing he wanted to do and save Daniel.

Is it just a reminder for us, all this attention in the chapter to the king's weakness, a reminder that we shouldn't be enthralled by human power and human favor?

We spend so much of our lives trying to get approval from people, trying to win the approval of people we feel can make our lives better. But Psalm 146 tells us, don't put your trust in princes because they can't save you.

[28 : 32] Well, Darius was a mighty king who loved Daniel, but his support for Daniel gets Daniel nothing. And the king's weakness emphasizes the Lord's strength.

So let's go to our fourth point. The sovereign Lord rescues his servant. The king heads out as soon as it's light and he hurries to the lion's den. And as he approaches, he calls out to Daniel, servant of the living God.

And then they reply, verse 21. 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 Daniel emerges, lifted from the den, an old man with no wound on him.

Totally vindicated. Rescued by God. And such is the tyranny of the empire that the men who trapped Daniel and their whole families are fed to the lions.
[29 : 39] It's a horrible thing. Emphasizing the danger that Daniel was in. And then we get this new edict, a new decree from the same king, Darius, in verse 26.

That everyone, everywhere in the kingdom must fear and reverence the God Daniel worships, the God of the Bible. Why? Verse 26. Because 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.

And Daniel doesn't just survive. The chapter ends telling us that he prospered greatly during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus. The sovereign God has been at work.

And what a way for him to demonstrate his wisdom and his power in that situation. That in Babylon where no one mentions God, the Lord takes what starts as a scheme at the heart of power to take down one of his people.

[30 : 47] And by the end of the chapter, Babylon itself has issued a decree to all its people that every citizen must revere the Lord. That the Lord reigns, verse 26.

And that the Lord rescues, verse 27. Let me ask you, have you experienced the difference it makes to pray to God knowing he's like that?

When we pray to him about what's going on in our lives, about what's going on in the people around us, what's going on in his church, have you experienced the difference it makes to know he's like this?

That he is a God you can spread your concerns before and even if it seems like everything is against you, God has the wisdom and the power to work through the wicked schemes of wicked people for the good that he seeks.

So he promises in Philippians chapter 4 that when we take our anxieties and we give them to God in prayer, we'll experience his peace guarding our hearts. And that peace comes from knowing what he's like.

[31 : 52] That he is the Lord who reigns and takes care of his people. He reigns, verse 26. He takes care of his people, verse 27. Could you remember that when you pray before him?

Particularly when we feel anxious. So Daniel is a great model believer for us. He's a man of faithfulness under fire who remains faithful to God and is rescued by God.

But maybe we look around us today at the church across the world and we think, you know, often it doesn't seem quite so clear that the Lord takes care of his people.

And maybe we hear about Daniel's faith and we feel a bit crushed by it because we know we haven't kept the first commandment. That we find it hard to demonstrate that God reigns in our lives.

That we couldn't save ourselves. What Daniel could save himself, the Lord saved me because I was found innocent in God's sight. And so as we finish this morning, let's consider how God's rescue of Daniel points us to a greater rescue of a servant greater than Daniel.

[32 : 56] It's remarkable how Jesus' death and resurrection centuries later are foreshadowed by this Daniel story. Both are innocent men, Daniel and Jesus, who couldn't be faulted by the people who had something against them.

Both men are condemned to death because of the wicked schemes of powerful, jealous people who want to catch them out. Both of them have a weak leader in Darius and Pilate who attempt to rescue them, who don't want them put to death, but in the end feel powerless to do anything about it.

Both of them get thrown into a place, a tomb or a den, where a stone is placed at the entrance and then sealed. And then both are visited at the earliest opportunity by people who love them, who want to see if they're okay.

Both are visited by angels and both men emerge alive and unharmed because they've been vindicated by the God who rescues. And if we trust Jesus, he has lived the faithful life for God that we should have lived so that when he went into the tomb, he's gone into the tomb for us.

And ultimately, whatever harm might come our way in our life, God will raise us and vindicate us. We will be saved from our great enemies, the lions of sin and death and the devil.

[34 : 26] And this chapter, this section of Daniel, comes in a section written in the vernacular language of the day, Aramaic, so that it's a message on offer to the whole world.

But everyone could understand this at the time so that we can all hear that the Lord reigns and whoever you are, if you put your trust in him, he will take care of you.

It was in the news this week that Rolls-Royce have announced a massive rise in sales of their luxury cars last year. Why? Because rich people have realized in the pandemic that their days are numbered.

And their response to that is to think, you better spend all your money now on yourself because we don't know how long this life will be. Spend now like there's no tomorrow because your time will soon be gone.

But Daniel chapter 6 says, in its fulfillment as we see Jesus, see the risen Christ emerge from the grave, triumphant, exalted, victorious over death, and run to him.

[35 : 34] And you'll find that he welcomes you and shields you so that the jaws of death will never have any hold on you and you can live forever with him. Let's pray together.

Gracious God, ancient of days and heavenly Father, we praise that you are the God who reigns, that your throne will last forever. We praise you that you are the God who rescues, who takes care of your people when we entrust ourselves to you.

And that in the gospel, you promise us life from the grave, redemption. May you fix our eyes on Jesus this morning, our faithful Savior, so that like Daniel, we can in turn be a faithful people. that we would demonstrate with our lives before you that you are on the throne, that in our hearts and lives, we have no other gods before you.

And we pray especially that like Daniel, where we're under pressure to compromise, you would help us to shine like stars as we hold firmly to your word, the word of life, in obedient trust.

[36 : 51] For Jesus' name's sake. Amen.