

## Daniel & his God

### Daniel 6:1-28

Daniel takes his place alongside Moses, Joshua, and David, as courageous heroes, who bravely stood for God and triumphed in the face of overwhelming odds. Focusing on Daniel as a hero has biblical precedent: though not mentioned by name in Hebrews 11 (all those mentioned by name were from earlier generations), this episode – and the preceding one of his three colleagues in the furnace – appears in the roll call of heroes: “who shut the mouths of lions, who quenched the fury of the flames ...” (Heb 11:32-34). So taking Daniel as an object lesson is a legitimate application of this text: “Look at what a hero Daniel was; live like he did.”

At the same time, Daniel’s heroism is not the only – and perhaps not even the *primary* – point of this text. Generally speaking, Scripture is first and foremost about God, not about us. In this case, while Daniel and his virtues are showcased in the first half of the chapter, God is the focus of the second half. And of the two halves, the first basically sets the scene, while the second is the focus of the action. So, arguably, the main point of the chapter is about God, not about Daniel. Yet, Daniel and his virtues play such a prominent role that this devotional will reflect on that, as well.

#### Day 1: Daniel 6:1-5 Daniel the virtuous

The author spends the first five verses highlighting Daniel’s integrity and competence: of the top 120 bureaucrats in the empire, Daniel was one of the top three; of the top three, Daniel was the best. When the king considered promoting Daniel to be over the entire empire, his jealous colleagues and subordinates looked for any sort of wrong-doing to get him demoted. They could find nothing. He was trustworthy and competent, neither corrupt nor negligent. They conclude, “We will never find any basis for accusation against this man unless it concerns his religion.”

The application of this text is simple and straight-forward. If you were up for promotion at work, and unscrupulous colleagues were competing for the same position, if they looked hard enough, could they find grounds for reporting you to your boss for incompetence, negligence, or corruption? Or, if government regulators started looking into your industry, and can sniffing around your company, would they have grounds to question any of your business practices? Or would they have to concede, as Daniel’s opponents did, “We will never find any basis for accusation against this person.” If you are aware of some incompetence, negligence or impropriety in your life or work, what can you do – what will

you do – to rectify it, for your own sake and for the glory of God, even if no jealous rival or zealous bureaucrat comes looking for dirt?

### **Day 2: Daniel 6:6-11 Daniel the courageous**

Daniel's rivals trick the king into passing an edict that all people must pray only to him, not to their gods, for 30 days. (This is a political – not a religious – maneuver: praying to the emperor would be a sign of political allegiance, not religious conviction. As in many countries even today, politicians seek to use religion for political purposes.) Two features of the edict are notable. For one, the penalty for disobedience is severe: a vicious, painful execution by lions. For the other, the means to avoid the crisis is simple: just stop praying for thirty days. Or pray in secret. It would be tempting to suppose that God would understand. But Daniel will not avail himself of any expedient. Instead, he prays where people can see, as he had always done, even though it puts him in peril.

Once again, the application of this text is simple and straight-forward. Do you hide your faith at work or at school, so that people will not consider you odd, ostracize you, or otherwise penalize you? Nothing in this text calls us to be showy about our spirituality, preachy about our convictions, or obnoxious in our witnessing. But by his courage, Daniel does rebuke us if we are ashamed of our faith or our God, because of what others will think, or how they will treat us.

### **Day 3: Daniel 6:12-19 Daniel the valued**

Two people could hardly be more different than King Darius and the refugee Daniel. The former was the most powerful person of the most powerful empire; the latter was essentially a prisoner of war, an individual of no account from a nation of no account affiliated with a god of no apparent account. Yet when Daniel's welfare was under threat, the king sided not with his own noblemen, countrymen, and co-religionists, but with this Jewish exile. When Daniel's life was in jeopardy, the king could neither eat, nor party, nor sleep; instead, the first light of dawn found him scampering down to check on Daniel's welfare.

Yet again, the application of this text is simple and straightforward. For example, in an economy as unstable as ours, managers are often forced to lay off even dedicated, respected workers. But if this could not be avoided at your company, are your performance and your character such that he would deeply regret having to lay you off? Are your relational skills such that he might later call to see how you are faring? If not – and if the fault actually lies with you rather than with your 'pointy-haired boss' – what

could you do to improve either performance or personal skills?

#### **Day 4: Daniel 6:14-27 God, who rescues and saves**

Were we to stop with the three lessons noted so far, it would be a failed exercise in Bible reading. All three points are true, as far as they go, but they are not particularly Christian. “Be virtuous, be courageous, be valuable”: any secular, self-help, pop-psych manual can teach such moralistic platitudes. Even if we want to associate them with God, that does not make them distinctively Christian: any Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist could uphold similar values. Is this all – or even primarily – what Daniel 6 offers us?

The first half of the chapter, including its description of Daniel’s character, is not the main point but serves to set the scene: Daniel, the foreigner, is wildly successful; jealous national colleagues and subordinates plot against him, trapping the king into throwing his protégé to the lions. The action – and the main point of the chapter – come in its second half, and its central theme is highlighted by recurring vocabulary.

King Darius is “determined to *rescue* Daniel and made every effort ... to *save* him” (6:14), but he proves impotent. Obligated to sentence Daniel to die, he invokes, “May your God *rescue* you” (6:16). The next morning, at first light, the king urgently returns to the lions’ den: “Has your God been able to *rescue* you?” (6:20). The chapter ends with his edict for all people everywhere to respect this God who “*rescues and saves*... [who] has *rescued* Daniel” (6:27). Seven times the text asks, “Does God *rescue* and *save*?” Seven times it answers, “Yes!” The primary point of this chapter is not about Daniel’s virtue, courage, or character, but about the God who rescues and saves. So the most important lesson of this chapter is for us to obey this pagan emperor’s command: “All people everywhere must worship this living, wonder-working God who rescues and saves.”

#### **Day 5: The application of Daniel 6 to those who are not in jeopardy**

The most obvious difference between Palestine in the 6<sup>th</sup>-century BC and contemporary America is the absence of State-sanctioned oppression or violence against the Church.

Some Christians might be inclined to equate King Darius’ ancient prohibition against prayer with the 1962 Supreme Court removal of prayer from American public classrooms. But these two incidents are not parallel. Darius’ edict forbade all prayer to any gods, whether public or private, and ordered all to pray to the king alone. No court in the United States has forbidden us to pray in our homes, in our churches, or even informally in

public settings (such as, saying grace at a restaurant meal). Nor has any President required us to pray to him!

So what does this text say to us today? Primarily, it reminds us to lift our eyes off ourselves, and to look beyond our shores. It reminds us of countries today where praying to Christ, or converting to him, can lead to a prison sentence, or even execution. This text invites us to thank God for the freedoms we enjoy, and to pray for our fellow-Christians in countries where oppression exists.

### **Day 6: How do we respond when this God who *can* deliver, does not?**

This is likely the biggest issue for contemporary readers of Daniel 6: God delivered Daniel in a great 'sign and wonder', so obvious and dramatic that the emperor of the world's superpower acknowledged and celebrated it. But how about us? Even in relatively little things – school exams, job layoffs, personal health, family well-being – God regularly declines to intervene in spectacular ways. As one commentator notes, "In Daniel's day ... and in our own, it is often the case that the lions who are set upon the children of God do devour them" (Goldingay 1996: 134). God *can*, but generally *does not* deliver his people. How do we respond to that?

Three quick points come to mind.

First, few – if any – of us will ever face anything approaching the threat of death for our devotion to Christ. Perhaps some mild hostility from coworkers and friends for the latest moronic pronouncement from some crackpot public Christian. Or disrespect for beliefs or moral standards that God endorses, but our culture opposes. God expected Daniel to be loyal at risk of death; all the more he expects our loyalty in easier circumstance.

Secondly, if anyone has legitimate complaint against God not delivering or saving, it is not we, but Christians in such places as Haiti or South Sudan, in Saudi Arabia or China, where suffering or persecution are daily realities. We rightly hold our tongues in their presence.

Thirdly, and most important, while God may not intervene to *rescue* and *save* us from earthly struggles, he has intervened far more effectively and forcefully than King Darius – or even Daniel – ever expected or knew. For these are two of the most common words that Scripture uses to describe the work of Christ on our behalf: he 'rescued' (Gal 1:4; Col 1:13) and 'saved' (1 Tim 1:15; Heb 7:25) us. And he did so by *not* rescuing or saving his own Son (Rom 4:25; Gal 1:4). So if anyone has a right to challenge God on this score, it is surely not us, but Christ. For our part, it is undying gratitude, which God's deliverance and salvation properly deserves.