

Epic Tales – 1. Daniel and the Lion’s Den

Daniel 6:16-23

June 4, 2023

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For the next four weeks we’re going to be taking a new look at some of the biggest Old Testament stories. These epic tales are the stories that we learn in Sunday School as children and are most often illustrated in Children’s Bibles. And yet, as adults we don’t typically spend much time learning from them or coloring in between the lines to see what God wants us to know about who God is and who God wants us to be. And so for the next four weeks, we’re going to do just that. We’re going to color in between the lines of these epic tales. For this series, we’re going to introduce our scripture passages using some more kid-friendly materials, like you saw today, as a way of helping us reconnect with our inner child as well as the youngest among us. And so today, we begin with the story of Daniel and the den of lions.

But before we get to our story, let’s start with a quick overview of the Book of Daniel. Daniel was written for an exiled group of Israelites who were living under the terrorizing reign of foreign kings and their kingdoms. It is written for people who are oppressed and distressed, walking in exile and isolation. They are facing some hard stuff.

Daniel is divided into 2 halves. The first half is a collection of stories that take place largely in the king’s courts that read like storybook tales that would have been shared from one generation to the next around the dinner table or campfires. Each one of these stories gives us a spiritual roadmap that can lead us through tough times. The second half of the Daniel, gives us three dreams or visions of the future, the coming of God’s kingdom where the God of Israel will one day rule again in glory and splendor. And so when we look at both halves of Daniel together, we see a story of hope intended for people who are walking through darkness.

Another interesting thing to note is that Daniel doesn’t pay much attention to historical details or time tables. He moves freely in and out of periods with different kings and different kingdoms. By not paying attention to historical accuracy, it allows this book to be timeless. It can be applied to anybody at any point in time no matter what hard stuff you are walking through. It is hope filled with the central message is that **God’s power will always overcome the ruling powers of the day**. So that’s the overview, let’s dig into the story.

The story begins as we learn about Daniel and his three friends. They are faithful Jews living in exile under the terrifying reign of King Nebuchadnezzar. Pretty quickly these four guys are hand selected to become the king’s servants. And this is what we read. Daniel 1:3-7.

Nebuchadnezzar instructed his highest official Ashpenaz to choose royal descendants and members of the ruling class from the Israelites— good-looking young men without defects, skilled in all wisdom, possessing knowledge, conversant with learning, and capable of serving in the king’s palace. Ashpenaz was to teach them the Chaldean language and its literature. The king assigned these young men daily allotments from his own food and from the royal wine. Ashpenaz was to teach them for three years so that at the end of that time they could serve before the king. Among these young men from the Judeans were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. But the chief official gave them new names. He named Daniel “Belteshazzar,” Hananiah “Shadrach,” Mishael “Meshach,” and Azariah “Abednego.”

After Daniel and his friends are handpicked to serve the king, they are thrust into three years of training where they slowly but surely lose everything that they have come to know. They’re

forced to study new literature, to learn new languages. They lose their faith, their friends and their families. They are even stripped of their birth names and given new names. Their entire identities were being stripped away. The final straw is that they are forced to eat what the king deems appropriate for them to eat and drink. When Daniel learns about that, he says enough is enough. And this is where things get interesting.

When he heard that he was being forced to eat and drink whatever the king deemed appropriate, *Daniel decided that he wouldn't pollute himself with the king's rations or the royal wine, and he appealed to the chief official in hopes that he wouldn't have to do so.* Daniel 1:8. He only wanted to eat what was kosher, what was pure and undefiled according to his faith. He wanted to remember who he was since he was forced to give up everything else.

The book of Daniel is speaking to a group of people who are just like us. When these things happen to us, when we are faced with difficult times and circumstances that are out of our control, we are inclined to lose sight of who we are, to forget our value and worth; to forget those things that give us our identity. And we beat ourselves up. We wonder if we were ever any good to begin with. And we find ourselves in hopeless places when we can't see and can't remember the goodness of who we are.

Our six-year-old grandson is a very tender-hearted kid and a rule follower, most of the time. But he's 6 and sometimes, he just can't help but test the boundaries. And if he's at our house, cause Nana and Bapa's house is a safe place to test the boundaries, we ask him about it. And when we do, his emotions overwhelm him and he runs over to our sectional couch and hides behind the ottoman and buries his face in the floor. He is so overcome with emotion and so disappointed in himself that he forgets how much he is loved and instead just focuses on his mistake. So we scoop him up and remind him how much he is loved by us and by his family and that nothing he does can make us love him any less.

And Daniel remembers Who he is and is unwilling to do give up everything, even when King Nebuchadnezzar tries to strip everything away. So Daniel demands to eat only what is kosher, so not to further separate him from the God who loves him. By making this request, Daniel is taking his life into his hands. And his friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are right there with him. So what happens next? They are granted permission to eat what they want to eat. And for three years, they stay true and disciplined.

The story continues, Daniel 1:18-21

When the time came to review the young men as the king had ordered, the chief official brought them before Nebuchadnezzar. When the king spoke with them, he found no one as good as Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. So they took their place in the king's service. Whenever the king consulted them about any aspect of wisdom and understanding, he found them head and shoulders above all the dream interpreters and enchanters in his entire kingdom.

After three years of faithful living, the king declares them better than the rest. Even though they had been given new names, the king refers to them by their birth names. So this is our first take away from Daniel today. Whenever you are facing tough times, it's important to remember who you are, no matter what the cost and know that **God's power will always overcome the ruling powers of the day.** So if you're facing adversity right now, if you're walking through exile, if you're in the middle of some really hard stuff, don't forget who you are. Daniel says, remember. God sees you and you are good and worthy to be loved.

As Daniel continues, we see the foursome increasing in their power and prominence in Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar is doing the same thing. In fact, he becomes so big headed, so power hungry that he builds a 90 foot gold statue of himself that stands 9 feet wide. And he sets a decree that whenever anyone in the kingdom hears music, they are to bow down and worship the idol. And anyone who refuses to do so, will be sentenced to death and thrown into a fiery furnace.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are also increasing in their prominence and power, their colleagues and friends are growing quite jealous and are just chomping at the bit to incriminate them. Everyone knows that they are not going to be willing to bow down and worship the statue. So they wait and they watch. The music starts to play and these three refuses to bow down. The news of this gets back to the king rather quickly. The king is enraged and immediately sends them to a fiery furnace death. He cranks up the heat so it is hotter than ever before and has his men throw them into the fire. In fact, the fire is so hot, the king's men are killed right on the spot. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego bound together, and seem quite comfortable in the fire. And when the king sees this, here's what it says, Daniel 3:24-26

Then King Nebuchadnezzar jumped up in shock and said to his associates, "Didn't we throw three men, bound, into the fire?"

They answered the king, "Certainly, Your Majesty."

He replied, "Look! I see four men, unbound, walking around inside the fire, and they aren't hurt! And the fourth one looks like one of the gods." Nebuchadnezzar went near the opening of the furnace of flaming fire and said, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!" Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out of the fire.

The fire had no power over their bodies or the clothes they were wearing. *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego* simply stood up when everybody else bowed down. They stood up with courage and faced the future without fear. They faced the fire unafraid and they recognized that they were not alone. God was with them.

And every time we stand up for what is right, God is with us. We are not alone. God never leaves us. God proves God's faithfulness is proven once again as the story unfolds with a surprising twist. As *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego* emerge from the fire, it's King Neb (of all people) who falls down to his knees and worships God. Daniel 3:28-30.

*Nebuchadnezzar declared: "May the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be praised! He sent his messenger to rescue his servants who trusted him. They ignored the king's order, sacrificing their bodies, because they wouldn't serve or worship any god but their God. I now issue a decree to every people, nation, and language: whoever speaks disrespectfully about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's God will be torn limb from limb and their house made a trash heap, because there is no other god who can rescue like this. "Then the king made Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego prosperous in the province of Babylon. And we are reminded once again that **God's power will always overcome the ruling powers of the day.***

This reminds me of these words from the prophet Isaiah, *But now, says the LORD—the one who created you, Jacob, the one who formed you, Israel: Don't fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when through the rivers, they won't sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you won't be scorched and flame won't burn you. I am the Lord your God.* Isa 43:1-2. Isaiah is encouraging the Israelites through their adversity, reminding them of the exodus and how God used Moses to deliver them from captivity so that they can remain faithful and persevere in hope. And what

Daniel is telling us through Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is that God is faithful, always has been and always will be. **My second point today is this.** When God is leading us through darkness, we are called to stand up. When the rest of the world is bowing down, stand up and know that God is standing with you.

Which brings us to our closing story. It's actually the lead line of the story but we had to lay the ground work to get to it. At this point, King Nebuchadnezzar is no longer in charge, King Darius is now king. Even though there's been a change in power, Daniel is still considered one of the most powerful in the kingdom. In fact, King Darius is making plans to promote Daniel as administrator over the entire empire and this causes all of **his** colleagues and companions to bubble up with jealousy. So they conspire and set up a private meeting with King Darius and convince him to make an unchangeable decree that says that anybody who prays to a god or a man other than King Darius, will be thrown into a den of lions. Here's what happens next.

When Daniel learned that the document had been signed, he went to his house. Now his upper room had open windows that faced Jerusalem. Daniel knelt down, prayed, and praised his God three times that day, just like he always did. Daniel 6:10

Daniel doesn't change a thing about who he is, how he lives his life or who he worships. He doesn't run away and hide. Instead, he goes back to his house, flings open the windows in the upper room, faces east and prays to God, just like he had always done. He remains steadfast in prayer.

We read that Daniel goes to a very specific place, an upper room that faces Jerusalem and prays. I love this because this is exactly what Jesus did on Maundy Thursday. On the day he was betrayed, conspired against, the day he would for sure face certain death, he didn't run away and hide. He went to an upper room with his disciples, gathered around a table to pray and celebrate the Passover. **What we see here my third point for today.** When we're facing betrayal, the threat of death, we are called to be faithful in prayer.

Even when the laws prohibit us from doing so, we're called to pray. Even when all hope seems lost, we're called to pray. And so Daniel prays. It's a story that has inspired many catalytic movements throughout history. Daniel is one of the first examples of civil disobedience that gave rise to many resistant movements in history.

The book of Daniel inspired Mahatma Gandhi and informed his work in South Africa and throughout India. It also served as an inspiration to the civil rights movement here in the United States and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Gandhi talked about Daniel's willingness to remain faithful to God despite the prevailing laws against it. He said that Daniel was one of the greatest passive resisters that ever lived. He encouraged all to where suffering at the hands of the prevailing powers to *"sit with their doors flung wide open and tell the gentlemen that whatever laws they passed were not from them unless they were from God."*

Daniel prays with unwavering devotion but as his colleagues saw him praying, instead of encouraging him, they charges him and hands him over to King Darius and reminded him of his unchangeable decree. And even though he can, he is king after all and can change any law he wants to, Darius refuses to do so. Why? Because his ego and status will not allow him to do so.

I was reading a commentary on this that said we should never believe people who say that our human decisions can't be changed. If we are hurting people, if the laws we made are causing innocent people to suffer, we should change them. Unjust laws or human practices can always

be changed even when it may seem more dangerous to do so than suffer the consequences of resisting change.

So I have a question for you. What positions or world views, might you need to reconsider? What decisions have you made, what laws have you voted for or not supported? What are you doing, or what have you done that has caused harm? Are you stuck? And what makes you unwilling to change? This is part of what we learn from Daniel. King Darius was unwilling to change, to be humble, to give what he could in order to save an innocent person's life. So he sent Daniel to the lion's den. Daniel spent the night in what should have been his burial tomb but he emerged unscathed. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Our God is a God who rescues and saves us even when we are facing death. And we see again that **God's power will always overcome the ruling powers of the day.**

There is redemption even for King Darius. The story ends with yet another twist. Then King Darius wrote the following decree: Daniel 6:25-27 *To all the peoples, nations, and languages inhabiting the entire earth: I wish you much peace. I now issue this command: In every region of my kingdom, all people must fear and revere Daniel's God because: He is the living God. God stands firm forever. His kingship is indestructible. God's rule will last until the end of time. He is rescuer and savior; God performs signs and miracles in heaven and on earth. Here's the proof: He rescued Daniel from the lions' power.*

And let me assure you that God will surely save you too. I don't know what you are facing today, what fires you are walking through, what den of lions you find yourself in the middle of, but what I want you to know is this. The story of Daniel is written for you. It's a story that speaks to us when we are walking through some of the hardest, most difficult seasons of life. It reminds us that there is always hope, trusting that God's love will remain steadfast and faithful.

A word to the graduates. I bet you think I forgot about you, didn't you? Graduation marks a significant transition in your lives, a time that is filled with anticipation and excitement for what lies ahead. It's a time when you step into the unknown just like Daniel did, as you leave familiar environments, pursue higher education or careers, and forge new relationships. I encourage you to remember this story of Daniel and seek wisdom from the Scriptures, lean on prayer, and rely on the support of your Messiah Church family.

So three take aways today for everyone:

Remember who you are, that you are good and worthy to be loved.

When the whole world is falling down around you, you are called to stand up and recognize that God stands with you.

When you're walking through hard stuff, remember the importance and the power of prayer.

And remember, God's power will always overcome the ruling powers of the day.

Let's pray: God, help us to believe this. Help us to claim this as we walk through all sorts of hard stuff in our lives, the flood waters, the fires, and the den of lions. Remind us that we are good and we are yours and that you will never leave us. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of June 5, 2023

Weekly Prayer

Faithful God, I thank you that you have given me your promise to always be with me. I know that you will never go back on that promise. I can count on you to be there for me in any difficult or

scary situation, even when the pits of life are deep and dark. You have brought me through storms of adversity in the past and will do so again. Amen.

Monday, June 5

Scripture: Daniel 1:8-15, 3:4-5, 8-27

Daniel decided that he wouldn't pollute himself with the king's rations or the royal wine, and he appealed to the chief official in hopes that he wouldn't have to do so. Now God had established faithful loyalty between Daniel and the chief official; but the chief official said to Daniel, "I'm afraid of my master, the king, who has mandated what you are to eat and drink. What will happen if he sees your faces looking thinner than the other young men in your group? The king will have my head because of you!" So Daniel spoke to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: "Why not test your servants for ten days? You could give us a diet of vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance to the appearance of the young men who eat the king's food. Then deal with your servants according to what you see." The guard decided to go along with their plan and tested them for ten days. ¹⁵ At the end of ten days they looked better and healthier than all the young men who were eating the king's food.

The herald proclaimed loudly: "Peoples, nations, and languages! This is what you must do: When you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, zither, lyre, harp, flute, and every kind of instrument, you must bow down and worship the gold statue that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up.

At that moment some Chaldeans came forward, seizing a chance to attack the Jews. They said to King Nebuchadnezzar: "Long live the king! Your Majesty, you gave a command that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, zither, lyre, harp, flute, and every kind of instrument should bow down and worship the gold statue. Anyone who wouldn't bow and worship would be thrown into a furnace of flaming fire. Now there are some Jews, ones you appointed to administer the province of Babylon—specifically, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—who have ignored your command. They don't serve your gods, and they don't worship the gold statue you've set up." In a violent rage Nebuchadnezzar ordered them to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They were brought before the king. Nebuchadnezzar said to them: "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: Is it true that you don't serve my gods or worship the gold statue I've set up? If you are now ready to do so, bow down and worship the gold statue I've made when you hear the sound of horn, pipe, zither, lyre, harp, flute, and every kind of instrument. But if you won't worship it, you will be thrown straight into the furnace of flaming fire. Then what god will rescue you from my power?" Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered King Nebuchadnezzar: "We don't need to answer your question. If our God—the one we serve—is able to rescue us from the furnace of flaming fire and from your power, Your Majesty, then let him rescue us. But if he doesn't, know this for certain, Your Majesty: we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you've set up."

Nebuchadnezzar was filled with rage, and his face twisted beyond recognition because of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. In response he commanded that the furnace be heated to seven times its normal heat. He told some of the strongest men in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and throw them into the furnace of flaming fire. So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were bound, still dressed in all their clothes, and thrown into the furnace of flaming fire. (Now the king's command had been rash, and the furnace was heated to such an extreme that the fire's flame killed the very men who carried Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to it.) So these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell, bound, into the furnace of flaming fire. Then King Nebuchadnezzar jumped up in shock and said to his associates, "Didn't we throw three men, bound, into the fire?" They answered the king,

“Certainly, Your Majesty.” He replied, “Look! I see four men, unbound, walking around inside the fire, and they aren’t hurt! And the fourth one looks like one of the gods.” Nebuchadnezzar went near the opening of the furnace of flaming fire and said, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!” Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out of the fire. The chief administrators, ministers, governors, and the king’s associates crowded around to look at them. The fire hadn’t done anything to them: their hair wasn’t singed; their garments looked the same as before; they didn’t even smell like fire!

Observation

Some folks have never read the epic tale of Daniel and the lions’ den. Even if they’ve heard the story, they don’t always know the backstory. Daniel and his three friends (Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, renamed by the chief official as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego) arrived in Babylon as prisoners, exiles from Jerusalem. Though chosen for training to serve the Babylonian court, they decided early to be faithful to Israel’s God. Sometimes that was relatively easy, like keeping the Hebrew food laws. But it also got dangerous, like publicly refusing to worship a gold statue the king created.

Application

We don’t know why the golden image story didn’t name Daniel. The rest of the book made it clear he didn’t worship the image either. Making the furnace seven times hotter “is hyperbole.” With the technology available it would not have been possible even to double this temperature, about 1650 ° F. The story’s point wasn’t in the details, but in God saving his faithful servants from the king’s rage. How can that story speak to you about spiritual (not just physical) protection today?

Prayer

Lord God, I’m not an exile in a hostile land (thank you!). But help my loyalty to you to show, in loving ways, when I feel pressure to “go along” and obscure my identity as your servant. Amen.

Tuesday, June 6

Scripture: Daniel 6:5-23

So these men said, “We won’t find any fault in Daniel, unless we can find something to use against him from his religious practice.” So these officers and chief administrators ganged together and went to the king. They said to him, “Long live King Darius! All the officers of the kingdom, the ministers, the chief administrators, the royal associates, and the governors advise the king to issue an edict and enforce a law, that for thirty days anyone who says prayers to any god or human being except you, Your Majesty, will be thrown into a pit of lions. Now, Your Majesty, issue the law and sign the document so that it cannot be changed, as per the law of Media and Persia, which cannot be annulled.” Because of this, King Darius signed the document containing the law.

When Daniel learned that the document had been signed, he went to his house. Now his upper room had open windows that faced Jerusalem. Daniel knelt down, prayed, and praised his God three times that day, just like he always did. Just then these men, all ganged together, came upon Daniel praying and seeking mercy from his God. They then went and talked to the king about the law: “Your Majesty! Didn’t you sign a law, that for thirty days any person who prays to any god or human being besides you, Your Majesty, would be thrown into a pit of lions?” The king replied, “The decision is absolutely firm in accordance with the law of Media and Persia, which cannot be annulled.” So they said to the king, “One of the Judean exiles, Daniel, has ignored you, Your Majesty, as well as the law you signed. He says his prayers three times a day!” When the king heard this report, he was very unhappy. He decided to rescue Daniel and

did everything he could do to save Daniel before the sun went down. But these men, all ganged together, came and said to the king, “You must realize, Your Majesty, that the law of Media and Persia, including every law and edict the king has issued, cannot be changed.”

So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and hurled him into the pit of lions. The king said to Daniel: “Your God—the one you serve so consistently—will rescue you.” A single stone was brought and placed over the entrance to the pit. The king sealed it with his own ring and with those of his princes so that Daniel’s situation couldn’t be changed. The king then went home to his palace and fasted through the night. No pleasures were brought to him, and he couldn’t sleep. At dawn, at the first sign of light, the king rose and rushed to the lions’ pit. As he approached it, he called out to Daniel, worried: “Daniel, servant of the living God! Was your God—the one you serve so consistently—able to rescue you from the lions?” Then Daniel answered the king: “Long live the king! My God sent his messenger, who shut the lions’ mouths. They haven’t touched me because I was judged innocent before my God. I haven’t done anything wrong to you either, Your Majesty.” The king was thrilled. He commanded that Daniel be brought up out of the pit, and Daniel was lifted out. Not a scratch was found on him, because he trusted in his God.

Observation

Chapter 6 of Daniel was set after Babylon fell to the Medes and the Persians. (Daniel 5 described that, though not in ways that totally match the non-Biblical records historians know.) Again, the story’s main point was not to document details of Persian governance. It showed Daniel’s refusal to give up his loyalty to God even as he worked with (and faced harassment from) those who didn’t share his faith.

Application

“A pit of lions”? “The Aramaic word used means ‘pit.’ The pit envisaged in this story seems to be an underground cavity with a relatively small hole at the top that could be covered by a large stone.... the Persian kings used some horrible forms of execution.” The king valued Daniel, yet foolishly signed the law his aides offered. What are some forms of pressure today that might feel at least a bit like someone throwing you into a pit of lions for sticking to your faith commitments?

Prayer

Dear God, the memory of Daniel’s unflinching allegiance to you has sustained your people through many hard times over the centuries. Help it to strengthen me to be faithful, whatever kind of “lions” I may face. Amen.

Wednesday, June 7

Scripture: Daniel 3:25, 6:21-22; Acts 12:1-2, 5-16

He replied, “Look! I see four men, unbound, walking around inside the fire, and they aren’t hurt! And the fourth one looks like one of the gods.”

Then Daniel answered the king: “Long live the king! My God sent his messenger, who shut the lions’ mouths. They haven’t touched me because I was judged innocent before my God. I haven’t done anything wrong to you either, Your Majesty.”

About that time King Herod began to harass some who belonged to the church. He had James, John’s brother, killed with a sword.

While Peter was held in prison, the church offered earnest prayer to God for him. The night before Herod was going to bring Peter's case forward, Peter was asleep between two soldiers and bound with two chains, with soldiers guarding the prison entrance. Suddenly an angel from the Lord appeared and a light shone in the prison cell. After nudging Peter on his side to awaken him, the angel raised him up and said, "Quick! Get up!" The chains fell from his wrists. The angel continued, "Get dressed. Put on your sandals." Peter did as he was told. The angel said, "Put on your coat and follow me." Following the angel, Peter left the prison. However, he didn't realize the angel had actually done all this. He thought he was seeing a vision. They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself. After leaving the prison, they proceeded the length of one street, when abruptly the angel was gone. At that, Peter came to his senses and remarked, "Now I'm certain that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod and from everything the Jewish people expected." Realizing this, he made his way to Mary's house. (Mary was John's mother; he was also known as Mark.) Many believers had gathered there and were praying. When Peter knocked at the outer gate, a female servant named Rhoda went to answer. She was so overcome with joy when she recognized Peter's voice that she didn't open the gate. Instead, she ran back in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate. "You've lost your mind!" they responded. She stuck by her story with such determination that they began to say, "It must be his guardian angel." Meanwhile, Peter remained outside, knocking at the gate. They finally opened the gate and saw him there, and they were astounded.

Observation

The stories from the book of Daniel echoed through God's people's history in later times. Acts 12 recorded an effort by Herod Agrippa 1 (the grandson of Herod the Great, who tried to have the infant Jesus killed - Matthew 2:16) to suppress early Christian preaching. Luke's record made it plain that Christians didn't take the Daniel stories as assuring God's earthly deliverance. James died; Peter was miraculously set free to continue his ministry. Luke didn't try to explain away the different outcomes.

Application

Scholar N. T. Wright noted, "Luke is allowing us to see the early church for a moment not as a bunch of great heroes and heroines of the faith, but as the same kind of muddled, half-believing, faith-one-minute-and-doubt-the-next sort of people as most Christians we all know." The people in Acts or Daniel were like us, not superhuman. How can that encourage you when someone at the church (or you yourself) aren't as above-the-crowd faithful as you think they should be?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, give me eyes to see the signs (big or small) of your presence that point me to the eternal realities of your kingdom. And then give me a heart to move in the direction the signs point. Amen.

Thursday, June 8

Scripture: Daniel 6:20; 1 Thessalonians 1:4-10

As he approached it, he called out to Daniel, worried: "Daniel, servant of the living God! Was your God—the one you serve so consistently—able to rescue you from the lions?"

Brothers and sisters, you are loved by God, and we know that he has chosen you. We know this because our good news didn't come to you just in speech but also with power and the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know as well as we do what kind of people we were when we were with you, which was for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord when

you accepted the message that came from the Holy Spirit with joy in spite of great suffering. As a result you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The message about the Lord rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia but in every place. The news about your faithfulness to God has spread so that we don't even need to mention it. People tell us about what sort of welcome we had from you and how you turned to God from idols. As a result, you are serving the living and true God, and you are waiting for his Son from heaven. His Son is Jesus, who is the one he raised from the dead and who is the one who will rescue us from the coming wrath.

Observation

Calling God "living" may seem standard to us. In a pagan world, full of believers in a pantheon of "gods" known only as images of wood and stone, it truly was a turn "from idols" to the living God. The apostle Paul echoed to the Christians in Thessalonica what the Persian king said to Daniel. It was what the Israelites saw after Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:39), and what the prophet wrote about how absurd it was to worship a block of wood (Isaiah 44:9-17).

Application

Scholar N. T. Wright summed up Paul's message: "telling pagans that there was one true God... that this God had a true son and had demonstrated this fact by raising him from the dead (nobody had ever said that before). And people in Thessalonica, knowing from the start the risk they would be taking, turned away from their idols to this living God, and discovered, at the same moment, suffering and joy (verse 6)." What drew you to start or continue serving "the living God"?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, it doesn't always fit my human expectations, but you are alive and active even in this broken, troubled world. Let my life reflect yours in words, but even more importantly in actions. Amen.

Friday, June 9

Scripture: Daniel 6:22-23, 2 Timothy 4:16-18

My God sent his messenger, who shut the lions' mouths. They haven't touched me because I was judged innocent before my God. I haven't done anything wrong to you either, Your Majesty." The king was thrilled. He commanded that Daniel be brought up out of the pit, and Daniel was lifted out. Not a scratch was found on him, because he trusted in his God.

No one took my side at my first court hearing. Everyone deserted me. I hope that God doesn't hold it against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that the entire message would be preached through me and so all the nations could hear it. I was also rescued from the lion's mouth! The Lord will rescue me from every evil action and will save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and always. Amen.

Observation

The apostle Paul spent most of his life fearlessly preaching the message of the living God even though the emperor-worshiping Roman Empire tried to legally ban it. He drew strength from the story of Daniel in the lions' den, and from passages like Psalm 22:20-22 (a part of the psalm Jesus quoted on the cross). He wrote 2 Timothy from a Roman prison, knowing his execution was near (2 Timothy 4:6-7). But he was still grateful for the times God rescued him "from the lion's mouth."

Application

Imagine the great apostle, whose message had made so many lives better, standing on trial for his life all alone. It clearly caused Paul some pain. Yet he trusted that Jesus' promise to be with him "every day until the end of this present age" (Matthew 28:20) was true (verse 17). Scholar William Barclay quoted Joan of Arc: "If to do the right means to be alone, as Joan of Arc said, 'It is better to be alone with God.'" How have you learned to trust that God never abandons you?

Prayer

Loving Lord, on the good days, it's easy to visualize my life as a parade. Remind me on the bad days that, if you are with me, I'm still a part of a victorious march through life. Amen.

Saturday, June 10

Scripture: Hebrews 11:32-40, 2:9, 14-15

What more can I say? I would run out of time if I told you about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets. Through faith they conquered kingdoms, brought about justice, realized promises, shut the mouths of lions, put out raging fires, escaped from the edge of the sword, found strength in weakness, were mighty in war, and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured and refused to be released so they could gain a better resurrection. But others experienced public shame by being taunted and whipped; they were even put in chains and in prison. They were stoned to death, they were cut in two, and they died by being murdered with swords. They went around wearing the skins of sheep and goats, needy, oppressed, and mistreated. The world didn't deserve them. They wandered around in deserts, mountains, caves, and holes in the ground. All these people didn't receive what was promised, though they were given approval for their faith. God provided something better for us so they wouldn't be made perfect without us.

However, we do see the one who was made lower in order than the angels for a little while—it's Jesus! He's the one who is now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of his death. He suffered death so that he could taste death for everyone through God's grace.

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, he also shared the same things in the same way. He did this to destroy the one who holds the power over death—the devil—by dying. He set free those who were held in slavery their entire lives by their fear of death.

Observation

Daniel was the only Old Testament book that specifically spoke of something much like the New Testament hope of the resurrection (Daniel 12:1-3). The (unidentified) writer of the New Testament letter to the Hebrews clearly had Daniel in mind when writing about those who through faith "shut the mouths of lions." But in the violent Roman Empire, the writer realistically noted that not every story of a person loyal to God had a happy earthly ending, that God didn't always shut "lions' mouths" in this life. Which was why, earlier in the letter, the writer said Jesus had "set free those who were held in slavery their entire lives by their fear of death" (Hebrews 2:15). That willingness to face death rather than give up their loyalty to God puzzled and frustrated the Romans who tried to stamp out Christianity as a threat to the Empire. But history tells us it moved and inspired people, so that the faith grew rather than shriveling under Roman persecution.

Application

Christian thinker Dallas Willard wrote, "With this magnificent God positioned among us, Jesus brings the assurance that our universe is a perfectly safe place for us to be." That, ultimately, was the message of the story of Daniel in the den of lions. That was the message the apostle Paul crisscrossed the Roman Empire to deliver. And that was the message Jesus lived, died and rose again to give us confidence in. Colossians 3:3 told the Colossian Christians, "Think about the things above and not things on earth. You died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." As you choose to be "in Christ," God puts your life safely out of the reach of any of the bad things that can happen in our world. Have you made, or will you make, the same choice as Daniel and Paul made, to live above and beyond the reach of the brokenness of this world?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I want to live a life of inner quiet and trust, no matter what storms may rage around me. Hold me safely in your arms to and beyond the end of my earthly life's journey. Amen.

