

## 28<sup>th</sup> July 2024 – Daniel 6 ‘The lion’s den’

So we got there eventually! Of all the brilliant stories in the first half of Daniel, we save the best till last – or at least the most popular till last. Daniel and the Lion’s Den is one of the best-known stories in the whole bible – by google searches it is the 13<sup>th</sup> most requested bible story, and the 6<sup>th</sup> most requested in the Old Testament. Only the Creation Story, Noah, Joseph, crossing the Red Sea and David and Goliath are googled more than this one. And it’s got it all, hasn’t it: a vain and easily manipulated king, classic baddies, a lone hero, exotic wildlife, genuine peril and a happy ending. It’s got everything you’ll find in most Hollywood movies, 2,500 years before they existed.

### WHAT DO YOU THINK THE MAIN POINT OF THIS STORY IS? – DISCUSS IN PAIRS/PEWS

And just as it’s the story which has everything, it’s also a brilliant summary of the key themes of the whole book: the challenge of living as a small minority in a hostile culture, the power of integrity, the hand of God at work, and the necessity of active trust in this God. Ultimately, we learn that **God honours faithful obedience**, just as we saw in chapter 1 with the young Daniel and his friends, in chapter 2 with the king’s dream, in chapter 3 with the image of gold and the fiery furnace, in chapter 4 with the king’s fall and restoration and in chapter 5 with the writing on the wall.

So, what to say today that we haven’t already said? On one level, the honest answer is nothing. These are the same lessons we’ve encountered throughout the book – and yet, there is something important in the very fact that we get the same lessons again and again. Because it’s so easy to forget them. Life is about habits, whether good or bad. And **the most important habit we can develop is to trust God.** As someone said to me, and it’s some of the best advice I’ve ever received: **keep saying yes to God.** Yes to surrender, yes to trust, yes to those divine invitations to partner in little things – and sometimes big ones.

Daniel kept saying yes to God – that was the secret of his success. What’s so interesting about the narrative of this story is the contrast between the behaviour of Daniel and everyone else. First the officials and then the king are feverishly active in scheming and planning. By contrast, Daniel’s life exuded regularity and spiritual integrity. Over a lifetime he has cultivated cast-iron spiritual disciplines – or to use the simpler word, habits.

Look at how he responds to the decree. It’s not just that he goes and prays, it’s that he goes and prays as usual, ‘just as he had done before’. He goes to the same place, faces the same way, prays the same number of times – probably at the same time, hence it was so easy to be caught in the act. He also practises the habit of gratitude: the text says ‘*giving thanks to his God,* just as he had done before’ – thankfulness was part of the habit, even now when his life was potentially under threat.

**The story of Daniel’s life is the story of a man who kept saying yes to God, and who made his spiritual life a dedicated and devoted set of habits, in the best sense of the term.** Not mindless rituals but *mindful* practises, the sort that underpins an empowered and fruitful life.

Many years ago I read a book which changed my life: it’s called ‘Ordering your private world’ by Gordon McDonald (here’s my copy, well worn because it’s one I’ve kept going back to). The central point of the book is that it is your inner life which determines the quality of your life, and enables you to face whatever externals life throws at you. Paying attention to our inner world, of which the spiritual life is the central part, is what sustains everything else.

This powerful truth is everywhere in the teaching of Jesus, but in the Old Testament arguably no-one else manifests this ordered private world like Daniel. There are great heroes of faith who demonstrate more obvious passion, bigger spiritual endurance tests and more spectacular gifts – but no-one lives the kind of deep, ordered spiritual life better than Daniel. It's what carries him through from the dietary challenges he faced as a young man, to the lion's den near the end of his life.

It's also what generates such consistent wisdom. **To be wise you have to know God in a deep way.** You can read the books, watch the preachers, listen to the podcasts, but unless you've reflected, internalised and lived it, it's not true wisdom. There are no shortcuts here – if you want that kind of wisdom, then Daniel is our pattern. You need holy habits, cultivated over the years and decades.

And if you'll allow me to be provocative this morning, church on Sundays is absolutely vital but it's not enough to sustain a spiritual life. Notice that it is Daniel's *daily* rhythm of prayer which sustains him. In fact, apart from praying privately with his friends, gatherings of believers are not mentioned anywhere in the Book of Daniel. There were no synagogues or official meeting places in Babylon for the small Jewish community – all worship was confined to homes. And yes, we have the great advantage here in the UK of being to meet publicly for worship every Sunday – indeed the very word church means 'meeting' or 'assembly', it's not the building which is the church, it's the people. And the bible reminds us again and again how important it is to meet together for encouragement and sustenance.

**But it's what we do on the week that really defines whether we thrive or stagnate as followers of Jesus.** You can't manufacture on Sundays what isn't there in the week. You need holy habits during the week, ways of connecting with God, ways to keep opening your life to God. And the good news is that there is a wealth of resources available to us to help us. That's why we have Daily Inspiration on the website, that's why we have a Wednesday prayer meeting (starting again at the beginning of September).

But if you tend to use your phone, then there are apps like Lectio 365 and Pray As You Go to help you connect with God. The Church of England has a Daily Prayer app which allows you pray like Daniel three times a day. Basically, there are many, many ways to practise your faith every day – but of course they're all redundant unless you start with the desire, the realisation that you need it! You need to connect with God every day, to adore, to confess, to give thanks, to pray.

So, if you feel a prod this morning, then take a moment to resolve to check out some of these resources. Don't put it off – make a decision that you're going to do something about this. Try something – and if it doesn't work, try something else. Experiment.

But the key thing to remember is that it pays off – Daniel is still bearing spectacular fruit into his 70s and 80s. In an age when most people lived to be 40 or 50, that would be the equivalent of still being the king's most trusted advisor just past his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday today.

As I draw to a close, I haven't even mentioned the lions! But I don't need to – you know that bit, and in some ways we get so caught up with their sharp teeth that we miss the real point of the story.

**Daniel lived a life of holy habits, he kept saying yes to God, every day, every decision. That is the lesson of the story.**

Keep saying yes to God – and may God continue to empower your faithful obedience. Amen.