

Heroes of the Faith

Daniel and the Lions (Daniel 6:1-28)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on August 29, 2021

Introduction

- ❖ This pandemic has presented the American church with a new set of challenges. They're not new from the standpoint of history, but they're certainly new for us. One of those challenges, that has been a source of intense debate and disagreement, has to do with our allegiance to the Lord as Christians and how that might conflict with our allegiance to the state as citizens.
 - **In other words, how do we maintain ultimate allegiance to Christ as Lord – while at the same time subjecting ourselves to governing authorities, as we're commanded to do in Romans 13?** What does it look like, in our context, to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's (Mt 22:21)?

- ❖ **Over the course of this pandemic, we've seen mandates and injunctions passed down – by various levels of government – that have restricted how churches operate.** Churches have been prohibited from congregating indoors; or limits have been set on the size of their gatherings; or religious activities like singing have been banned. Many churches have complied; some have protested or sued; and some have engaged in civil disobedience – some on more principled grounds than others.
 - Now Christians are going to disagree on the legitimacy of the state's authority to restrict a church's faith and practice. The context of a deadly pandemic is clearly unique and the common good of our fellow neighbors must be factored in. So these are difficult issues for us to tackle during these difficult times.

- ❖ But they do help us put things in proper perspective. **The American church has, for generations, been largely sheltered from the conflict and tensions that's usually found between church and state.** We should be thankful for our founders and the protections they enshrined in our Constitution. That's why the recent experience of government restrictions on how we worship has felt so jarring. It feels strange and unusual.
 - But throughout church history and around the globe today, that's par for the course. That's normal. **So many Christians have had to deal with far greater restrictions hindering them from freely practicing their faith – and yet they've pressed on and continued to flourish.** We have so much to learn from the persecuted church.
 - And to be honest, if the American church doesn't learn how to navigate these pandemic-related restrictions – if we don't know how to flourish in spite of it all – then we will be ill-prepared to handle the more explicit persecution that is coming down the road as society grows more secular and increasingly hostile to the Christian gospel and moral teachings.

- ❖ **So in light of these recent government restrictions – or what some would describe as government intrusions – I think we are primed and ready to consider the story of Daniel and the lion's den.** The authorities in the book of Daniel are far more hostile to biblical faith than any city council or governor today and their laws are far more restrictive and repressive, so Daniel's response to the attempts to restrict his faith and practice is both inspiring and instructive for us today.

- ❖ I'd like for us to consider three key moments in the narrative. **First, we see a test of loyalty.** Daniel falls victim to a plot to test his loyalty to the law of the land versus the law of his Lord. Where does his allegiance truly lie? **Second, we see a refusal to bend.** Daniel refuses to bend to the mounting pressure against him, and the society around him refuses to bend and accommodate his faith. **And third, we see a display of true sovereignty.** The most powerful man on earth at the time was utterly helpless and afraid, while the true Sovereign put his sovereign power on display for all to see and to respond accordingly.

A Test of Loyalty

- ❖ Let's begin by looking at the test of loyalty that Daniel is subjected to by the machinations of his opponents. These events are found in vv1-9. The chapter begins by introducing us to Darius the Mede. We're told that he overthrew the Babylonian king and established the Medo-Persian empire.
 - **Now the exact identity of Darius the Mede is still up for debate.** Outside of Scripture, there is no corroborating evidence of a Darius who reigned prior to Cyrus the Persian. Commentators suggest three possibilities. One explanation is that preserved records for this historical figure – beyond the Old Testament – simply aren't available. Another option is that Darius might be an alias for the general, under Cyrus the Persian, who sacked Babylon and was assigned governorship of the former kingdom. **Or a third alternative is that Darius is an alias for Cyrus himself.** Cyrus was part Mede and part Persian, so perhaps v28 can be best translated as *“during the reign of Darius, that is, the reign of Cyrus the Persian.”*
- ❖ **Now as for the identity of Daniel, we're introduced to him back in chapter one.** He was a young man living in Jerusalem, taken captive during the exile to Babylon. He rose in the ranks, proving himself faithful in service to Nebuchadnezzar and subsequent Babylonian kings. He outlasted those kings and witnessed firsthand the decline of Babylon and the rise of the Medo-Persian empire.
 - Under these new rulers, he continued to gain favor and was eventually appointed to serve as one of three chief officials who ruled over 120 satraps (governors). And **Daniel distinguished himself among his peers to the degree that the king considered giving him even greater responsibility, making him a prime minister.** He was going to serve as the king's right hand.
- ❖ That triggered the events of our story. Because it incited the jealousy of other officials. They tried their hardest to dig up dirt on Daniel, but *“they could find no ground for complaint or any fault, because he was faithful, and no error or fault was found in him.”* (v4) **They realized there is no way they're going to find any ground for complaint against Daniel unless they find it in connection with his faith – with the law of his God.** So they manufactured a conflict of interest – pitting the laws of the land against the law of the LORD.

- ❖ **Now before we consider the details of the injunction they secure, it's important to note that, by this point in life, Daniel was in his seventies or more likely his eighties.** He's had a long and successful career. He's faced more hardship and been through more challenges than most of us. You would think that, by his age, all the big trials and tests would be in the rear view. A memory of the past. **But it turns out that Daniel's biggest trial was still ahead of him.** His greatest test of faith came not at the beginning of his story but near the end.
 - I think this is a warning for the older believers among us – to not lose your vigilance and assume that the biggest trials and tests in life are behind you. Don't assume the years ahead of you will be smooth and predictable. **Daniel's story is a good reminder to not let your guard down in the twilight years of life.** But to keep fighting the good fight to keep the faith until you cross that line and finish the race.
 - **But this is also a strong encouragement, for the more seasoned saints among us, to realize that God still has plans to use you in the latter years of life.** Just as he used Daniel. To bring himself glory and to impact the faith of others through your faithful witness and steadfast commitment to the Lord. Be encouraged and be prepared for that trial that has yet to come.

- ❖ Now let's look back at the text in v7. Daniel's opponents come together to conspire against him. **They convince King Darius to establish an ordinance and enforce an injunction that requires all prayers and petitions to be directed towards the king or else you'll be cast into a den of lions.** This was only a temporary injunction for the next thirty days, so it's not clear what the long-term value was for such a law. But Daniel's opponents weren't thinking long-term. **They knew that regardless if the time period was thirty years, thirty days, or just thirty minutes – there was no way Daniel would comply.** He was too loyal to his God to pray to anyone or anything else.
 - This was a perfect test of loyalty to serve their purposes because Daniel's opponents knew exactly how he would respond. They had no doubt that Daniel would remain loyal to his Lord and would violate the king's injunction.
 - It makes you wonder: **If I was in a similar situation with similar opponents, could they so easily manufacture my downfall because they could so easily predict what I would do?** That I would beyond a shadow of a doubt remain loyal to the Lord? Am I even certain what I would do if ever faced with such a test?

- ❖ Friends, I don't think we'll have the luxury much longer of only speaking in hypotheticals. **Considering the secularizing direction of our society, in short order (if not already), Christians will be faced with difficult choices and our own tests of loyalty.**
 - Now these tests may come in one of two forms. Like with Daniel's three friends back in chapter 3, your loyalty to the Lord may be tested by those who will use legal means or societal pressure to compel you to **compromise the faith.** They'll try to pressure you to practice the wrong thing – in that case, worshipping an idol. Or like in our chapter, your loyalty may be tested by those who want you to **capitulate the faith.** They'll try to prevent you from practicing the right thing – like praying to the Lord.

- ❖ Daniel’s three friends passed the test. They refused to compromise. They refused to participate in the false worship of false gods. And Daniel passed as well. He refused to capitulate. He refused to abandon the right worship of the one true God. So now the question is: **What will you do when the time comes to face your own test of loyalty?**
 - Every generation of God's people face these tests. **In early church history, believers were compelled by force of law and by threats to their lives – to sacrifice to Caesar.** To confess him as Lord. They were pressured to practice the wrong thing. Or sometimes Christians were prevented from practicing the right thing. Prevented from owning their own Bible or translating it or reading it in the own vernacular. There are plenty more examples in the annals of history of either form of persecution.

- ❖ And it continues on into our contemporary context. **Today, believers find themselves compelled by force of law and by threats their livelihood – to bow to the spirit of this age.** To affirm or to celebrate that which Scripture teaches to be sinful. There will be pressure to practice the wrong thing – to worship a false ideal, a false god.
 - **Or, on the horizon, there may be more explicit efforts to prevent churches from freely gathering to worship or to restrict pulpits from freely preaching the gospel.** That’s happening right now to the persecuted church around the globe. Who is to say that the American church will be exempt from that form of persecution?

- ❖ I’m not trying to be an alarmist. By the end of this message, I hope you’ll see that I’m fairly hopeful. But I want to at least acknowledge the biblical promise that tests of our faith will come (Jas 1:2-3). That all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2 Tim 3:12). That by many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22).
 - Now when it comes to the recent restrictions that have tried to limit the size of worship gatherings or to ban practices like singing – we can debate the legitimacy and intent and whether it's fair to compare them to the prayer restriction found here in Daniel 6. There are some principles we ought to consider, which I'll discuss in a minute. **But the point I'm making here is that sooner or later every Christian will face a test of loyalty.** Where does your ultimate allegiance lie – in the Lord and his Law? Or in earthly authorities and the opinion of man?

A Refusal to Bend

- ❖ Now if we pick back up in the story, we see Daniel respond to his test of loyalty with an unwavering refusal to bend and change his daily practice of prayer. **This refusal to bend is exhibited – not only by Daniel – but by his opponents, by the law of the land, and even by his friend the king.**
 - Notice in v10, how the text leaves no doubt that Daniel knew what he was doing and was fully aware of the consequences of his actions. *“When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously.”*

- ❖ **What I find inspiring about Daniel's prayer life is that remarkable consistency.** He had the discipline to pray three times a day every day. With such predictability that the conspirators could form their plot around the pattern he kept. I'm humbled and impressed by that aspect of his prayer life. Especially when I consider how sporadic my prayer life can be and how easily distracted I am from any kind of consistent rhythm.
 - **But what I think is most impressive and most instructive is to consider how Daniel prayed prayers of thanksgiving in spite of the circumstances.** Let's be honest, if you and I were victims of an unjust plot by conspirators hell bent on taking us down, I'm not sure if we'd have the sense to pray. And if we did, I highly doubt prayers of thanksgiving would be the focus.
 - **How much of our time in prayer would be focused on complaining about the difficult circumstances or the unfair situation we find ourselves in?** How much time would be spent praying for things to be different? Versus taking the time to identify the evidence of God's grace even in your difficult circumstances and to give thanks for his goodness and faithfulness to you? That's a clear sign of a spiritually mature prayer life.

- ❖ **Now if you go back to that injunction that Daniel's opponents secured, you'll notice a huge loophole that Daniel could have taken advantage of.** The new law said that, for the next thirty days, anyone who prays has to direct that prayer towards the king. So it's not like they're requiring you to participate in a prayer ceremony directed at the king. **The law is just saying *if you do pray it better be towards the king.***
 - Well the solution is pretty simple. For the next thirty days, just pray silently in your head. Just avoid any outward gestures that give off the appearance of prayer. It's only a month. It'll be over soon.
 - But that won't work for Daniel. **Since he had established a consistent pattern in his prayer life, observable enough by his peers, he knows breaking that pattern now in these next thirty days – and reverting to silent prayers in his head – would be interpreted by others as a capitulation of his faith.** As an abandonment of his devotion to the LORD.

- ❖ Daniel's love for the LORD and zeal for his honor and glory means that he will refuse to bend and change his prayer life. Because he refuses to do anything that might dishonor God or cheapen his glory. So he presses on with his daily routine and doesn't change a thing.
 - **Now notice how Daniel was not flaunting his opposition to the king's injunction.** If he really wanted people to see him pray, then he would've moved his prayers from in front of the upper chamber windows to the downstairs windows in full view of anyone passing by. But he wasn't flaunting his opposition.
 - And yet he wasn't hiding it either. He wasn't looking for trouble, but at the same time he wasn't going to let anything detract from his devotion to the LORD. **So he just quietly took part in an act of civil disobedience.**

- ❖ Now Christians need to be careful when appealing to the concept of civil disobedience as a reason for our violations of the law. **Because we can't ignore the biblical commands to be subject to the governing authorities God has sovereignly placed us under** (cf. Rom 13:1; Tit 3:1; 1 Pet 2:13). Considering how those commands were issued while under the oppressive rule of tyrants like Nero, then we mustn't be quick to invoke civil disobedience.
 - But having said that, there are biblical examples of civil disobedience that serve as examples. We mentioned how **Daniel's three friends** refused to worship a graven image (3:16-17). Last week, we saw how **Esther** was willing to approach the king without being summoned, knowing it was a violation of the law and would result in death (Esth 3:16). And in Acts 5, **the apostles** were prohibited from teaching the gospel, but they famously replied, "*We must obey God rather than men.*" (Acts 5:29)

- ❖ So every generation of the church has to navigate this dilemma. **We clearly ought to be subject to governing authorities as we're commanded – but at what point have governing authorities overstepped their authority and manufactured a genuine test of loyalty?** Where Christians have no other option but to obey God rather than men?
 - Let's return to the recent examples of government restrictions on churches that were issued during the peak of the pandemic. We ought to acknowledge up front that there are no simple answers. There are no direct correlations in Scripture, so we can't just point to a passage. We'll need to apply wisdom and discernment.

- ❖ **Here are some wisdom principles to help you discern whether civil disobedience is justified in a given situation.** First, you have to ask: **Are the governing authorities restricting you from fulfilling a biblical command?** In Daniel's case, he was restricted from praying to God. In our case, some churches were restricted from gathering or singing – which are both biblical commands in regards to our corporate worship.
 - But here's a second question to ask: **Is the restriction temporary or indefinite?** In both Daniel's case and in ours, the restriction on an individual's religious practice had a time stamp. It was not meant to curtail your freedoms forever. Patiently waiting for the injunction to expire could be an option.

- ❖ But there's a crucial third question to ask: **Is the temporary restriction being made in good faith with the common good in mind?** In Daniel's situation, that's clearly not the case. It was part of a larger plot against him. But in our situation, I think there is a case to be made, in a pandemic caused by a highly-contagious air-borne virus, for temporary restrictions on large assemblies or particular activities – all in a good faith effort to contain the spread.
 - But then that raises a fourth question: **Is the temporary restriction being uniformly applied or specifically targeted?** If sports arenas and casinos are given a pass and allowed to operate at a high capacity while churches and other houses of worship are banned, then you have a stronger case to protest, to appeal, and if necessary to exercise civil disobedience. **So these are some wisdom principles to consider in the days, months, and years to come when greater pressure and greater restrictions on Christian faith and practice become a more felt reality in our context.**

A Display of True Sovereignty

- ❖ Now if we return to our text, to v14, we come to a third key moment in the narrative. **We see a display of true sovereignty.** King Darius, the sovereign over the land, found himself helpless and distressed, and the One True King who rules over all went on to display true sovereignty and power in the pit of a lion's den.
 - Starting in v14, we see that Darius did care for Daniel and spent the rest of the day trying to find a loophole for his friend. **But as much as Daniel refused to bend, the laws of the Medes and Persians were equally inflexible.** Darius knew his hands were tied. He had no choice but to comply with the law and hope that Daniel's God was more sovereign than him. After Daniel is cast in the lion's den, the king cried to Daniel, "*May your God, whom you serve continually, deliver you!*" (v16) **Darius recognized his limits and inability to deliver those destined for destruction.**

- ❖ We're told in v18 that Darius had the worst night of his life. He couldn't sleep. He lost his appetite. He was distressed and worried about his friend. But ironically, his friend spent a peaceful night at the bottom of a lion's den. **That contrast just goes to show where true peace and refuge can be found – not in the might or resources of earthly powers – but in the presence of the Lord, the One True King and Sovereign over all.**
 - We spend so much of our lives trying to achieve greater degrees of power and success, but Darius proves that, *without the Lord*, you'll still be gripped with fear and sleep will still escape you. **Daniel, on the other hand, proves that *with the Lord* – even in circumstances as difficult as a lion's den – you can always rest your head in peace.** That's the difference that the Lord makes.

- ❖ In v19, we're told that at daybreak the king ran to the lion's den, and he cried out in a tone of anguish, "*O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?*" The entire narrative is leading us to that question: **Does the LORD have the ability to deliver his servants from certain death?**
 - And in v21, we see the resounding answer is yes. The LORD sent an angel to shut the mouths of the lions and Daniel emerged from the den unscathed. Without a scratch on him. He goes on to explain to the king that he was delivered by God because he was found blameless before God (v22). And because he trusted in his God (v23).
 - The lion's den was an ultimate test of loyalty for Daniel, and he passed. His opponents, on the other hand, were judged and found guilty. They were thrown in the den, with their entire household, and overpowered by the lions.

- ❖ **Now by shutting the mouths of the lions and delivering Daniel, the LORD displayed his true sovereignty over and against all earthly powers.** But if God is so powerful and so in control of the situation, then it makes you wonder why didn't he just shut the eyes of Daniel's opponents – as easily as he shut the mouths of lions – and they never would've caught him praying in the first place. And he never would've had to face such a terrifying ordeal.

- But that apparently was never God's plan. **He never planned on delivering Daniel from that ordeal but to deliver him through it.** We wish the Lord would deliver us from all our trials. While his plan is to deliver us *through* them.

- ❖ **What that tells us is that God is more committed to our spiritual growth than he is to our safety and security.** He very well may lead us into circumstances that are far from safe and secure. We spend so much time and effort trying to avoid those circumstances, to surround ourselves with comfort and convenience. But all the while, it's in those difficult circumstances – in the fiery furnace, in the lion's den – where we experience God's presence. There is where we grow in our faith.

- ❖ **Friends, this confidence – this blessed assurance that God will be with us and will deliver us through our trials – is rooted in the good news that, after Daniel, God sent another prophet who also fell victim to a plot against his life.**
 - If you were to compare Daniel's ordeal to Jesus's, you'll find that the similarities are quite striking. Both were framed and accused of breaking the law by those jealous of their growing influence. Both were arrested while at their customary place of prayer. Both had a ruler make futile attempt to secure their release. And both had to utterly rely on God to deliver them as their tombs were sealed.
 - But, of course, the biggest difference between the two men is that Daniel emerged from the lion's den without a scratch. While Jesus was pierced by a crown of thorns on his brow, by nails in his hands and feet, and by a spear in his side. And when he did emerge from the tomb, his scars continued to show.

- ❖ But, friends, that's what makes his emergence all the more glorious and a greater miracle than the one that delivered Daniel. **Daniel's deliverance had no impact on anyone besides himself.** It won't help the next person who finds himself in the lion's den.
 - **But when Jesus emerged from the tomb, he secured a pardon for all who would trust in him.** His deliverance is a help to all who will one day find themselves in a tomb. Because of Christ, there is hope beyond the grave.

- ❖ And it's the Resurrection – that divine display of true sovereignty – that enables us to press on and practice our faith in spite of mounting opposition. **No matter what challenges come our way, we too can refuse to bend and risk our lives or livelihood.** Because our Savior lives. Because he will be with us in our trials and deliver us through them.