

“He Is the Living God”

The Twelfth in a Series of Sermons on the Book of Daniel

Texts: Daniel 6:1–28; 1 Peter 2:13–25

The sign on the door of the royal palace read “under new management.” The Persians (Medes) have displaced the Babylonians (Chaldeans) as the occupiers and rulers of Babylon. The Babylonian king, Belshazzar, is dead. Darius the Mede (Cyrus) is now in charge, ruling as Persian king over the former Babylonian empire. The Hebrew prophet, Daniel, now an old man, is immediately recognized by Darius as a wise and gifted man and an effective supervisor. Daniel is given great authority as one of three “presidents” (counselors) to supervise the satraps (or regional governors), who handled the day to day affairs of local government. It is a position of great honor, respect, and influence. But Daniel’s appointment to such high office creates much jealousy among the Persians, and even perhaps among former Babylonian officials who were passed over for the prestigious job which instead went to a despised Hebrew. A plot is soon hatched to remove Daniel from his new office, and it will not be long before Daniel finds himself forced to deny his faith in YHWH, or face being thrown to lions. But God preserves his people in such a way as to unmistakably reveal himself to be the sovereign Lord of all—even to the Persian king Darius.

The story of “Daniel in the lion’s den” is one of the best known and most loved of all the so-called “Bible stories.” This is a great story in its own right. But to make full sense as to why this incident is included in Daniel’s prophecy, it must be considered in light of the larger redemptive-historical context, which is the victory of YHWH, his prophets, and his exiled people over the false “gods” of Babylon, and now Persia. YHWH is sovereign over all kings and nations and is directing the events of which we have read throughout Daniel’s prophecy to his own ends. Daniel’s trial and ordeal in the lion’s den in chapter 6 are part of YHWH’s larger sovereign plan to ensure that the Jewish exiles in Babylon will be allowed to return home to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and YHWH’s temple. This comes about because YHWH moves Darius (Cyrus) to issue a decree to bring this to pass (recounted in the books of Ezra-Nehemiah). But the one incident which seems to truly motivate Darius to release the exile Jews is when the Persian king sees first hand the power of God in rescuing his prophet Daniel from a pride of hungry lions.

There are obvious similarities between this chapter and Daniel 3, when Daniel’s three Hebrew friends (exiles just as he was, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) were cast into Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery furnace, only to be delivered by a mysterious fourth man—the angel of the Lord. God’s exile people often find themselves being persecuted by pagan officials because of their faith in YHWH. Faith in YHWH is seen as an offence against the pagan deities and those who worship them. In Daniel 3, it was the demand to worship Nebuchadnezzar’s gold statue, while in chapter 6 is it a demand to stop worshipping YHWH according to his word—and instead devote all prayers to the emperor Darius. Throughout most of church history these are pressures God’s people have faced—sometimes these pressures are subtle and easily avoided, while other times they are acute and a direct threat to liberty and even life. The latter is the case in both Daniel 3 and 6. Once again, there are loud echoes from the Joseph story who was likewise thrown into a pit, rescued in an unexpected way, and yet prospered under the hand of God (Gen. 37:24; 39:23; 41:40).¹

¹ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Daniel*, 176.

Witnessing the three young Jews walk out of the superheated furnace unharmed and unsinged, Nebuchadnezzar proclaimed in Daniel 3:28–29, “*Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king’s command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way.*” As we will see, after witnessing a similar miraculous act of divine intervention, Darius will make a confession similar to that of Nebuchadnezzar’s.

As we turn to our text (all of Daniel 6), even though the location is the same (Babylon), the scene changes dramatically from a Babylonian context to a Persian one. We learn in the first three verses, “*it pleased Darius to set over the kingdom 120 satraps, to be throughout the whole kingdom; and over them three high officials, of whom Daniel was one, to whom these satraps should give account, so that the king might suffer no loss. Then this Daniel became distinguished above all the other high officials and satraps, because an excellent spirit was in him. And the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom.*” A change in government requires a new set of officials to be put in place who were known to be men of honor—especially in an age when it was common for officials who served long terms to take bribes, conduct shady business deals, and personally prosper by misusing their power. A change in government was an ideal time to root out corruption by appointing new officials known to the king as honest men, who would serve him loyally, and who would not conspire against the king or his allies.

The Persians used a system of local governors known as “satraps” (some 120 of them) to rule over specific geographical and cultural areas (like Zerubbabel over Judah). The Satraps were in turn, at this transitional point in the Persian empire, “supervised” by three “high officials” (ESV “presidents”) who likely served in this capacity until the emperor took back this authority once he had a chance to consolidate his power after all his hand-picked satraps were in place. It was an early form of “checks and balances” as each of these three officials would keep an eye on the satraps and the presumably upon each other. Daniel’s faithful service was known to Darius—because God had given his prophet great gifts so as to serve pagan kings, as well as to protect Daniel while in the midst of a pagan land as a worshiper and prophet of YHWH. Daniel was simply too valuable to harm, and was even considered by Darius as someone who might be able to oversee the entirety of the former Babylonian kingdom (the western half of the Persian empire).²

But the appointment of Daniel by Darius was not well received in the royal court. Daniel’s skill in serving the court and supervising others was well-known. So too was his faith in YHWH, the God of Israel. No doubt, there were many who asked themselves “why would Darius choose this old Hebrew wise man for such a powerful position, especially when everybody knows that he worships YHWH, not Bel or Marduk?” Daniel’s practice of praying toward Jerusalem three times daily was well-known and accepted by the Babylonians, and as well as by Darius. But for those who resented Daniel being given such a high position, this was the perfect opportunity to trap Daniel and eliminate him as an threat-obstacle to those seeking his position, power, and prestige.

With the change in government, palace intrigue began in earnest. We read in verses 4-5, “*then the high officials and the satraps sought to find a ground for complaint against Daniel with regard to the kingdom, but they could find no ground for complaint or any fault, because he was faithful, and no error*

² Steinmann, Daniel, 313-314.

or fault was found in him. Then these men said, 'We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God.'" Daniel was a righteous man both in terms of his relationship to YHWH (he was reckoned righteous through his faith in YHWH's promise) and in the fact that he was a man against whom no accusations could be brought. In other words, he was a good man, obeyed the laws, and performed his duties admirably. He is very much a man later described by Peter (in our New Testament lesson) as someone who was subject to emperors and governors and human institutions, "for the Lord's sake." Live out your faith as exiles, Peter says, being willingly subject to those in authority. This is the example set for us by Jesus, and it brings God glory and honor. In Daniel's case, the only plot against him which might work was to use his faith in YHWH against him. Which, of course, is exactly what happens when other local officials conspire to remove him from office.

So, we read in verses 7-9 of the plot hatched by those who seek to have Daniel brought down. *"Then these high officials and satraps came by agreement to the king and said to him, 'O King Darius, live forever! All the high officials of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the counselors and the governors are agreed that the king should establish an ordinance and enforce an injunction, that whoever makes petition to any god or man for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions. Now, O king, establish the injunction and sign the document, so that it cannot be changed, according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be revoked.' Therefore King Darius signed the document and injunction."*

Those who made this "agreement" are those with access to the king in the royal court. Many commentators see in this the deification of the king, such as was the case with the Egyptian Pharaoh, or the king of Tyre (as mentioned in Ezekiel 28:2, 9). But that might not be the case. The point of the plotters is to flatter the king by having him recognize a thirty day period in which he alone would be the recipient of prayer. That would prevent others, like Daniel, from praying. Perhaps the best way to understand this is that for the thirty day time frame Darius is to function as the sole priest of the "gods." The priests cannot pray in their temples to the "gods," but instead must direct their prayers to Darius, who in turn, now acts as priest on their behalf. Darius is obviously flattered by this role and accepts.³

Since what happens in the palace does not stay in the palace, it was not long before news of this thirty day decree reached Daniel. We learn in verse 10, *"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."* Despite knowing that this might cause him great trouble, Daniel continued his practice of prayer, refusing to change or alter how and when he prayed to YHWH.

As an exile from Judah (the land of his birth, the place from where he had been kidnaped) Daniel demonstrates his faith in YHWH's promise by praying in the direction of Jerusalem. This practice goes back to Solomon's dedication of the temple when Solomon asked God to hear the prayers of those directed toward YHWH's city and temple (1 Kings 8:27-53; 2 Chronicles 7:12, 15). Daniel's practice of prayer was not grounded in superstition, but trust in YHWH's promise to bring his people back to the promised land. The reason why Christians do not (or should not pray toward Jerusalem) is that Jesus is now the true temple of YHWH, so when we pray in the name of Jesus (who is at the right hand of the

³ Steinmann, Daniel, 315.

Father) we see the fulfillment of Solomon's exhortation and Daniel's practice of praying to the east.⁴ We pray to our Father in heaven in the name of Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Those plotting against Daniel now saw their chance. Daniel's failure to comply with Darius's decree was quickly brought to the king's attention. *"Then these men came by agreement and found Daniel making petition and plea before his God. Then they came near and said before the king, concerning the injunction, 'O king! Did you not sign an injunction, that anyone who makes petition to any god or man within thirty days except to you, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions?' The king answered and said, 'The thing stands fast, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be revoked.'"* Persian kings do not revoke such decrees on a whim—it would make Darius look weak and double-minded. So the king is clear he will not revoke his decree. But he has also painted himself into a corner.

Darius soon realizes that the flattery put to him by the court officials has caused him to do something rash and from which there is no retreat. According to verse 13, *"then they answered and said before the king, 'Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or the injunction you have signed, but makes his petition three times a day.'"* Darius obviously had great respect for Daniel (perhaps even friendship and admiration), but the king also knew he could not revoke his decree. We are told in verse 14, *"then the king, when he heard these words, was much distressed and set his mind to deliver Daniel. And he labored till the sun went down to rescue him."* The implication is that Darius consulted experts in royal law to see if there was some way out of the dilemma in which he now found himself—lose one of his most valuable officials or go back on his word, neither of which was acceptable, especially when it became clear to the plotters that the king was trying to find a way to avoid putting Daniel to death. As we are told in verse 15, *"then these men came by agreement [the plotters scheming together] to the king and said to the king, 'Know, O king, that it is a law of the Medes and Persians that no injunction or ordinance that the king establishes can be changed.'"* There is no way out.

Darius must make good on his decree. According to verse 16, *"then the king commanded, and Daniel was brought and cast into the den of lions."* Daniel's crime was to pray to YHWH during a thirty ban on doing so. In effect, Daniel is doing what Peter exhorts all of God's people to do in Acts 5:29, *"we must obey God rather than men."* Throwing those convicted of treason, sedition, and other serious crimes to hungry lions was a common method of capitol punishment by the Persians, combining a painful death with sport—those present could watch the lions do their work (a kind of foreshadowing of gladiatorial combat). The reliance on this form of punishment can be seen in the fact that a lion pit was already available for such occasions. Before the death sentence is carried out, Darius reluctantly addresses Daniel. *"The king declared to Daniel, 'May your God, whom you serve continually, deliver you!'"* Unlike Belshazzar (who openly blasphemed YHWH), Darius realizes that YHWH was not to be blasphemed, and since Daniel served YHWH faithfully, it is Darius's prayer that YHWH would deliver Daniel from a certain fate—being torn to pieces and consumed by hungry lions.

After Daniel was cast into the pit with the lions, where a sure and certain fate awaited him, we learn in verse 17, that *"a stone was brought and laid on the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet and with the signet of his lords, that nothing might be changed concerning Daniel."* The pit was sealed with a stone—a theme which surfaces as an echo in the gospel of accounts of Jesus' burial. In Matthew 27:65–66 we read the following. *"Pilate said to them, 'You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can.' So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a*

⁴ Steinmann, Daniel, 316.

guard.” Matthew is obviously alluding to Daniel 6:17.⁵ That the king’s signet ring along with the other officials was used to seal the lion pit indicates that the king’s decree is an official act, and that no one can intervene to stop the process. The other thing it tells us is that Darius’ placing his seal on the stone is that he does not trust the officials, should the lions not react as expected.

The reality of the situation—Darius has allowed his own ego to put him in a very bad place—causes him a very restless night. “*Then the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; no diversions were brought to him, and sleep fled from him.*” Darius was obviously very troubled by how his carelessness and hubris had cost him one of his best officials—a man whom he probably liked and admired. Darius spent the night fasting, was probably alone (no diversions—i.e., wives or concubines) and got little if any sleep. It was his actions, after all, which brought all this about.

Having spent a very restless night, we read in verse 19, that “*then, at break of day, the king arose and went in haste to the den of lions.*” Darius actions certainly point us in the direction that the king had some degree of expectation that Daniel survived the night. Upon arrival at the lion’s den, he even calls out for Daniel. “*As he came near to the den where Daniel was, he cried out in a tone of anguish. The king declared to Daniel, ‘O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?’*” Troubled by these events, the king (almost echoing Nebuchadnezzar at the end of his life) calls out for Daniel, acknowledging that Daniel is a servant of the living God (YHWH), and that by praying toward Jerusalem three times daily, Daniel is continually serving YHWH. This is the only passage in the Old Testament where a Gentile ascribes such an exalted divine title to YHWH.⁶ Darius truly hopes that YHWH has delivered his faithful servant. Darius knows that his “gods” of gold, silver, bronze, stone, and wood, can do nothing in situations such as this. He truly hopes Daniel’s God will save his prophet and thereby spare both Daniel’s life and the king from a grave error in judgment.

If Darius had spent the night fasting, so had the lions.⁷ Darius spent the night not sleeping, so did Daniel, who witnessed the presence of the Lord in preserving him from a sure and certain death. According to verse 21, “*then Daniel said to the king, ‘O king, live forever! My God sent his angel and shut the lions’ mouths, and they have not harmed me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no harm.’*” Even while honoring the pagan king with the customary greeting “*O king, live forever,*” Daniel goes on to inform the king that YHWH has indeed spared his life, sending an angel to shut the mouths of the lions. Daniel is completely unharmed and God has preserved him from those who could bring no accusation against him except that he was a faithful servant of YHWH. That God sends angels to protect his people is a common theme in both testaments. There is the story of Elijah being ministered to by an angel in 1 Kings 1:19:5-7, and then Mary and Joseph were directed by an angel to take Jesus to Egypt for a time to protect him from Herod’s slaughter of the innocents (Matthew 2:13, 19-20). And then we have the testimony of Nebuchadnezzar, who saw a divine figure present with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3).

Darius does not see the angel, but he sees Daniel and hears Daniel’s testimony that it was an angel who

⁵ Greidanus, Preaching Christ from Daniel, 188.

⁶ Steinmann, Daniel, 320.

⁷ Davis, Daniel, 82.

kept the lions from consuming him. Darius also hears Daniel's testimony that he was a righteous man who had done nothing wrong in worshiping YHWH, even while serving Darius. God can and will protect his people to achieve his sovereign purposes—in this case there is little doubt that this incident (along with Daniel's counsel) leads Darius (Cyrus) to issue a decree to allow the Jews to leave Babylon and return to Judah. God preserved Daniel, provided a powerful witness to Darius that YHWH is the true and living God, and has so ordered things that his people (the Jews) will soon be released from exile to return home.

It will come as no surprise that Darius was greatly relieved. We read in verses 23-24, that Daniel's accusers now face a bit of Persian justice for their plot to have Daniel removed from office. *“Then the king was exceedingly glad, and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God. And the king commanded, and those men who had maliciously accused Daniel were brought and cast into the den of lions—they, their children, and their wives. And before they reached the bottom of the den, the lions overpowered them and broke all their bones in pieces.”* Daniel trusted in God and was delivered. His accusers found themselves attacked by the same hungry lions who fasted while Daniel and the angel were in their midst. Those who do not have God's protection and favor will face God in judgment—so graphically captured in this event. The accusers have become lion food, while Daniel lived to prosper under the reign of Darius (his Median name) and Cyrus the Persian (Darius' royal throne name). The chapter closes with the following declaration in verse 28 which ends the first section of Daniel's prophecy, *“so this Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.”*

As Nebuchadnezzar had done in Daniel 3:28–29, so now Darius issues a similar decree. We read in verses 25-27, *“then King Darius wrote to all the peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth: ‘Peace be multiplied to you. I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion people are to tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, for he is the living God, enduring forever; his kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion shall be to the end. He delivers and rescues; he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth, he who has saved Daniel from the power of the lions.’”*

Although Nebuchadnezzar decreed that no one blaspheme the God of the Jews, Darius' decree goes further, describing YHWH as one to be feared (respected and worshiped by his people). Like Nebuchadnezzar before him, Darius expresses that YHWH is the true and living God, but comes short of acknowledging YHWH as a savior from sin who provides for the redemption and salvation of his people. There is the confession that YHWH is the living God who is to be feared, but there is no demonstrable evidence of repentance from sin or faith in YHWH's promise to save all those who call upon his name.

What then, are we to make of the account of Daniel in the lion's den? Should we all dare to be Daniels? No doubt, Daniel is a faithful man who serves YHWH despite the great cost in doing so. In this Daniel is an example to all believers. But the story of Daniel in the lion's den is not primarily a story about Daniel's faith and prayer life, but rather points us to YHWH's sovereign rule over all men and nations. YHWH rules kings and empires—even when it looks to us like they have run amuck. Yes, Daniel is a type of Christ (in a limited sense as one who faithfully prays to his father, who submits to civil authority, and who faithfully endures unjust verdicts against them trusting in God to vindicate them), but more importantly, Daniel is the man with great gifts placed by God in Darius' palace to witness to the power of YHWH, so that a pagan king acknowledges that YHWH is the living God. More to the point, Daniel's connection to Darius ensures that a pagan king will issue a decree as recounted in the opening verses of Ezra (1:1-4):

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.”

Why would Darius (Cyrus) issue such a decree to allow the Jews to return home to rebuild their temple? Because Darius witnessed YHWH preserve his prophet Daniel from a pride of hungry lions. It is YHWH who stirs up the spirit of Cyrus to act. It is YHWH who directs the affairs of people and nations, so as to bring all things in subjection to Jesus, the true King of kings, and Lord of lords. It is YHWH's son Jesus, who conquered death and the grave through his own death upon the cross and resurrection from the dead, who is now the Lord and giver of life. As Daniel knew and as Darius found out, Jesus is with us in all our trials, whether it be a lion's den, or at the hour of death.