

Daniel and the Lion’s Den. How many times have we seen this story portrayed? It’s been made into animated movies and told by Veggie Tales. It has action figures that you can find to act the story out. Yet, how many times do we gloss over big swaths of the story, in particular what takes place prior to Daniel finding himself in the den.

The book of Daniel is fascinating. It tells the story of this man who sees visions from God over the course of three different kings - Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Darius. What makes Daniel so vital during this time is his deep connection with God. He prays to God constantly. He will not violate the law of God, even when he knows that it would be a lot easier to go with the crowd. He is simply devoted to lifting up the name of the God of Israel. And in return, Daniel is blessed with divine wisdom.

However, that wisdom that he has and shares has gotten him into some hot water by the point of chapter six and some folks want to get Daniel out of the way. So, the presidents and satraps come before Darius, the King during this time, with a plan they have devised. If only the King could make a law that they know that Daniel is bound to break, they could have him punished by death. They come and have a law all ready to hand over to the King - no one can worship anyone or anything for the next 30 days other than King Darius.

We aren’t quite sure why the King agreed to this. Maybe it was to establish his own power in the land. Maybe he just liked having his ego stroked, but he readily agrees. A plan that had been hatched in deceit and jealousy simply used him as a pawn.

But there is a key part of this story that we sometimes overlook. In the law of the Medes and the Persians no one could revoke a law once it is passed. Not even the one who passed it in the first place. Not even the King.

Think back to the story of Esther. There was a similar statement made about edicts in that book as well. Esther 8:8 states, You may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king’s ring; for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king’s ring cannot be revoked.”

If you have it with the King’s seal it is law. And Darius signed this law into effect for the next thirty days.

Daniel knew what had happened. He knew what the new law was. But it did not change his pattern of devotion and prayer in any way, shape, or form. He would still pray daily, facing the city of Jerusalem, and the folks who laid the trap for him with this law just watched and waited. After Daniel had broken the law by praying to God they ran to the King to tell on Daniel. Only even that was done in a sneaky way. They didn’t come right out and excuse Daniel at first. Instead, they asked the King about the law that he had signed, then they said that it was Daniel who had broken it.

And the King was heart-broken. The blindness that came through flattery and power, a dangerous combination, had caused him to sign this law that he was now afraid was going to lead to Daniel’s death. He realized he was wrong, and as Daniel was brought before him to be thrown into the pit or cave with the lions, Darius utters this statement that stands as a confession of sorts - “May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!” He knew that he had done wrong. He knew that he couldn’t change what had passed. But maybe just maybe Daniel’s God could intervene and save him now.

Then we get to the part of the story folks may be more familiar with. Dawn came and with it the stone was rolled away from the mouth of the pit and Daniel was alive! He bore witness to the fact that angels had intervened to save his life. And those who had set Daniel up were thrown into the pit.

Because of this experience Darius wrote a new decree about the God of Israel, who he referred to as the God of Daniel, to proclaim God's greatness.

Whenever we tell this story or act it out, we automatically assume that we would all be Daniel.

If we were faced with an impossible situation, of course we would be as steadfast as Daniel. Of course, we would trust God even in the face of death.

And maybe that's true.

But I think it's equally true that sometimes we are like Darius. We get so swept up in people singing our praises that we get deceived into acting in ways that are contrary to the way of God. We let stocking up our own name and power get the better of us, and before we know it we are swept under by sin.

And other times we are like those who conspired against Daniel. We spend so much time living in the jealousy of our hearts that we find ourselves thinking that if we only we were like that person then our lives would be so much better.

That makes the story a little more uncomfortable, does it not?

For Benedict, the sixth step towards humility is to be content with the most menial treatment. Why? Because life isn't about lifting ourselves up, but about lifting up God, which the entire story of Daniel is about. It's about the freedom that comes from living our lives for God. Freedom from the constraints of this world - for God's future does not depend on our current circumstances of the present. It is about finding our hope in God alone and letting our trust rest in that. It is about finding our value in God alone and not in our circumstances.

However, it is equally a call to examine our hearts. To search out those places where jealous is killing us and our own self-image keeps us from following the way and will of God. Which is akin to the seventh step towards humility - looking only to God. It also asks us some hard questions - like how many of us are so deeply connected to God through our prayer and devotional life that we would never give it up, no matter what? How many of us often let our prayer time go by without a second thought, even if there is no law stopping us from praying?

Friends, I do not ask these questions to make us feel badly about selves. Instead, I ask them as a mirror to hold up our hearts. For that is what the story of Daniel is at its core. It is a mirror that we read and then say, how do I see myself in this story? Right here and right now. And is that who I want to be?

Let us enter into a time of reflection by friends, asking God to reveal to us our hearts. Amen.