

War of the Gods

Messages from the Book of Daniel

Message 7

Lion of God Daniel 6:1-28

Introduction

What would you think if tomorrow you received a letter from President Farrington ordering everyone at Lehigh to worship God? Would you be surprised? Would you be delighted? Would you think he's gone off his rocker? What would it take for President Farrington to publish a university-wide policy that everyone must worship the true God? If such a thing were even conceivable, how could we make it happen?

If it seems preposterous to you that the president of Lehigh University should make a proclamation that everyone should worship God, consider that in tonight's passage a pagan king did just that. King Darius did not live in the United States, where many people worship God and the gospel is prevalent. He was surrounded by people who worshiped a variety of gods, just as he did. Only a few people in his acquaintance knew anything much about the God of the Jews. But it took only one person to convince him to worship that God. One man of outstanding faithfulness changed the course of world history. That man was Daniel.

Darius and Cyrus

Before we look more closely at this chapter, we need to consider briefly some confusion about the names of the king involved. Actually this is not really pertinent to the story, but unbelievers have used the issue of the names to discredit this book and damage the faith of God's people. The problem arises when scholars point out that the name "Darius the Mede", which is used in this book for the king, is not found in any other historical records of the period. Those records indicate it was Cyrus the Persian who ruled the empire that overthrew Babylon. There *was* a Darius – Darius the Great – but he was a Persian, and he came 17 years later. These unbelieving scholars assert that this indicates the book was written hundreds of years after these events – and the author simply got confused about the kings. This theory is very appealing to such people, because they have a prior commitment to dating the book of Daniel much later. That is the only way they can explain how amazingly accurate is story of the succession of empires in this book. They do not believe in God – at least not the God of the Bible – they do not believe the Bible is God's word, and therefore they do not believe that this book was written in the 6th century B.C. to predict the course of history. So in their minds it makes perfect sense that the author, writing three centuries after the events occurred, mixed up the names.

There are many reasons why this logic is flawed. Of course the primary flaw is the premise. There *is* a God who directs the course of history, and the Bible *is* His word. Once we are settled on that point, everything else falls into place. The empire that overthrew Babylon was a combined realm of the kingdoms of Medea and Persia. That is why in verse eight the king's edict is called "the law of the Medes and Persians". So it is natural that the rulers would be called Medes, or Persians. It is somewhat analogous to saying I am from America or from the United States. Those two terms are not exactly the same, but we generally use them interchangeably. It also was common (and there are numerous documented examples of this) for these kings to use more than one name. In addition, there is some evidence that Darius is not a proper name, but a title, like Pharaoh or President. We understand perfectly that the same man is meant whether we call him Mr. President or Mr. Bush. So we conclude that Darius the Mede, who conquered Babylon, and Cyrus the Persian, who ruled Babylon at the same time, were the same man.

One more comment about this. Verse 28 says, "So this Daniel prospered in the reign of Darius and

in the reign of Cyrus the Persian.” The word translated “and” also means “namely” or “which is”. There are many examples of this in the Old Testament, even in the book of Daniel. It is a similar grammatical expression to saying in English, “I talked to Ben Philip, the President of RUF”. We indicate that “Ben Philip” and “president of RUF” are the same person by separating them with a comma. Hebrew has no commas. The word “and” is an all-purpose word to connect a wide many kinds of phrases. Only context can tell how it is to be translated. In this case, all evidence points to a link to another term for the same man.

I did not take this brief excursion from the text to prove that I read some commentaries before tonight’s meeting. My purpose is to warn you not to believe everything you hear or read. Just because someone has a Ph.D. behind his name or wrote a prestigious book does not mean he will evaluate the evidence accurately. There are some scholars who have a deep conviction that the Bible is not a divine book, and they will not consider any interpretation which rests on that belief. Sometimes their prejudice leads them to adopt crazy ideas. Think for yourself. Ask your teacher or the author of a book what beliefs he brings to the text. Do not believe everything you hear or read. Do not allow yourself to be misled by intelligent, educated fools.

The Trap

We explained earlier how vast and powerful the Babylonian Empire was. Up til that time it was the greatest realm that ever existed on earth. But when Babylon was conquered by the Medea-Persian Empire, the result was even vaster. At its greatest extent it stretched from the Indus River to the edge of Greece, from the Black Sea to Egypt. It was an empire of enormous power and wealth. It also incorporated a huge number of languages and ethnic groups. The Persians, unlike the Assyrians, allowed each people to retain their own language and customs. The problem was administrating such a vast enterprise. It required a sophisticated administrative system and extraordinary people capable of operating it. Darius (or his advisors) had a mind for organization, and they carefully laid out a plan for administrating the empire. Among those they sought to run it, Daniel was one of the top choices. Now you must know that Daniel was an old man by now. He was in his eighty’s. Apparently he was still energetic and competent. And apparently the expertise he gained through a life of service was prized by this king who desperately needed competent administrators.

You know, a lot of people are convinced there are no good people in politics. I was talking to the owner of the hotel where we stayed in Belize. One of the problems in Belize is corruption. It is rampant and open. But the U.S. is the same, this man said. The only difference is that the corruption here is hidden. Well we all know there is corruption in our government. Last month Congressman Cunningham was convicted of a crime and sent to jail for seven years. But let’s not let such stories make us cynical. Not everyone is corrupt. It may be very tempting to use political power for personal gain, but just because many do it does not prove that all do. Even so, a pure politician really stands out. One of the reasons we so admire George Washington and Abraham Lincoln is that they appeared to avoid the corrupting influence of politics. And so it was with Daniel. Think of it – for 60 years he had been in public service. He had six decades to give in to temptation, to take a little cut here and there, to do an occasional favor for his friends. But he did not. I am sure Daniel sinned – we all do. But in the course of his public service, he was so honest, his worst enemies despaired of finding any way to trap or convict him of some wrongdoing. Daniel not only excelled in his work, he also excelled in his morals. He was so much above reproach, he provoked the jealousy of his co-workers.

Can men say the same thing of you? Is it impossible for your classmates and teachers to find fault with you? Are you diligent in your class work, and scrupulous in righteousness? Do you do whatever it takes to excel in your studies and excel in virtue? No one is perfect. I am not suggesting Daniel was or you should be. But when you fail, do you immediately repair the damage? Or do you try to excuse yourself and cover up your sins? In essence, do you aspire to be the best you can be – or do you seek the least you can get away

with? Do you go through life looking for the most good you can do, or the most sin you can get away with? Are you going for maximum Christianity, or minimum Christianity?

You have to feel sorry for Daniel's poor colleagues. They hated him. Here he was, this 80-year-old Jew – the king's favorite. They simmered with anger, but with no outlet for it. They must have despaired of disposing of him – until someone had a brainstorm. Daniel's virtue would be his undoing. Since he worshiped a foreign God, there must be some way of trapping him into a punishable offense. So they hatched a plan to kill him and make it look like his own fault.

Since Daniel was one of the top three officials in the realm, only the king could get rid of him. And since he was the king's favorite, the king would also have to be tricked into killing Daniel. The trap hinged upon a special provision of Persian law and the pride of the king. According to Persian law, an edict of the king could never be repealed. This feature also plays a role in the story of Esther. When king Ahasuerus was tricked into issuing a law for the destruction of the Jews, the only way to protect them was to issue another law ordering the Jews to arm themselves for defense. So if Daniel's enemies could trick Darius into passing a law that would convict Daniel, the king would be powerless to protect him.

Success was found in a trait as old as mankind and universal to all people – pride. Daniel's enemies flattered the king into requiring that no one ask any man or god except Darius for anything. For thirty days, no one would be able to get help from anywhere except the king. All people would look to him as their benefactor and protector. King Darius would be the focal point of the whole world. All men, women, and children would look to him for their daily needs. That is an attitude befitting the subjects of so great a sovereign as he!

It should be evident to you that this is blatant idolatry. Only God gives universal blessings. God is the only person that all men should look to for their daily bread. There are many people we ask for help in many circumstances, but above all stands God who gives the ultimate blessing. Furthermore, only God is unchangeable in His laws. Now of course men *should* imitate God, and we should be consistent in our word. People should be able to rely on us to mean what we say long after we have said it. But men make mistakes. At times we have to correct ourselves. And circumstances change. A policy you adopted years ago may not work now. God has infinite knowledge and can make laws which have eternal validity. Man cannot. So this whole scheme was provoked by wicked jealousy and propelled by blasphemous flattery.

Daniel's Faithfulness

As we have seen before in this book, there were many possible ways for Daniel to respond to this threat which would not endanger him. He could decide to take 30 day break from his prayers. There is nothing in the Bible that says you cannot skip prayers for 30 days. In fact, I am sure that many professing Christians go for 30 or more days without praying in any meaningful way. Or Daniel could have decided to pray under cover. Rather than pray at his window in full view of everyone, he could pray in a closed room. Or perhaps he could pretend to be napping and say his prayers silently. You see, there were many ways for Daniel to protect himself from the threat of this law. The problem with all these proposals is that they are all cowardly. Daniel was a man who lived his whole life seeking to serve God to the fullest. He did not subscribe to minimum religion. Daniel's religion was an active part of his whole life, and he had no intention of changing now.

There are two aspects to Daniel's faithfulness. First is his discipline in prayer. Perhaps you are not happy at the thought of prayer as a discipline. You may prefer to think of prayer as a relationship. It is true that prayer is one aspect of our relationship with God. If prayer is nothing more than a rote ritual, it is indeed a dismal practice. But just because prayer is a way of talking to a real, live person – God – that does not mean it is enhanced by being random and haphazard. The best relationships – those that are deepest and

stand the test of many years – are those which are built around rituals. This is why family gatherings are so important, and those families which gather every year at holidays are generally stronger and happier together than those which do not. This is what makes family meals so important. The daily ritual of eating together binds the relationships more tightly. Strong relationships have two core elements: deep affection, and solid traditions.

At its simplest prayer is talking to God. This is something anyone can do. The youngest child and the most ignorant sinner can tell God what is on his mind. But as your relationship with God grows – *if* it grows – your prayers should mature, too. Just as you no longer speak to your earthly father the way you did when you were a baby, so you should no longer speak to God as you did when you first believed in Him and called to Him. One aspect of a maturing prayer life is the discipline of a regular habit. This is not just the idea of a structure-oriented minister. This is God's idea. In fact, it seems likely that Daniel got the idea of praying three times a day from Psalm 55. Let's read verses 16-18.

As for me, I will call upon God,
And the LORD shall save me.
Evening and morning and at noon I will pray, and cry aloud,
And He shall hear my voice.
He has redeemed my soul in peace from the battle that was against me,
For there were many against me.

Not only does this psalm indicate prayer three times each day, it does so in the context of great struggle and the desperate need for God to deliver His servant from danger. How appropriate to Daniel's situation! This principle of daily prayer is expressed in the liturgical tradition of the Roman, Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran churches. Their worship books contain services for prayers during the day – and all at least prescribe morning, noon, and evening prayers. This rich tradition of the church is built on solid biblical principles.

The obvious application of this passage is to develop a discipline of prayer. If you pray when you need God's help, that is good. If you pray somehow each day, that is better. But we are not interested in minimum Christianity, we want maximum Christlikeness. Examine your life and ask God to lead you to establish a regular habit of daily prayer. Do not begin by trying to pray for a half hour three times each day. Begin by establishing a small habit once a day. Then expand that as your strength grows. Perhaps make it a point to pray for ten minutes every day before classes – or after dinner. Work at it. Train yourself into making this a habit. Make a list of things to pray for each day. For some of you, I recommend praying every day at noon. Perhaps some days you should join us upstairs and other days pray at the same time on your own. You might even benefit from praying together at other times in the day. It does not have to be long. Daniel was a busy man. His position was analogous to someone like Karl Rove, President Bush's chief advisor. Mr. Rove does not have several hours each day for prayer. But that should not mean he never prays. Perhaps one way to develop a discipline of prayer would be to gather with others in your dorm for 10 minutes before dinner. Or before class in the morning. If you keep it brief, that could be a doable exercise which may significantly advance your relationship with God. These are just a few ideas to get you thinking. Now you take them and figure out what works best for you.

The second aspect of Daniel's faithfulness is his public testimony. By this I do not mean he went door to door telling people about God. There is a legitimate time for that, but it is not what we see in Daniel's life. I mean that Daniel's worship of God affected everything he did in a visible way. Do Christians pray? Daniel prayed out in the open. Do Christians get help from God? Daniel gave God public credit for His help. Do Christians believe that God rules all people and nations? Daniel told cruel tyrants that God controlled them. Daniel did nothing in secret. His faith was completely in the open.

This also is a lesson for us. Do you pray before meals? It is a Christian tradition to do so. Paul seems to think it is the ordinary practice. In Romans 14:6a Paul says, “He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks...” Now, if you pray before meals, do you do it in a sneaky manner? Or do you pray unashamed of what you are doing? And do you invite the others at your table to join you in prayer? Some are not believers, you say? So? Daniel dealt with unbelievers all his life, but he never shied away from basing his advice on God’s word. Do you mention the Bible when you discuss issues in class or with your friends? So what if they do not believe it? Maybe they do not believe the Bible because they see it is useful only for private religion. Now I must emphasize that I am not advocating pushiness. Some people learn that they should be a public witness for Jesus, and they become a general disruption. Notice that Daniel was not an annoyance to people. The opposite was true. He was such a good employee his boss promoted him and his colleagues were jealous of him. Daniel is an example of openly serving God while also serving with courtesy and diligence.

Daniel’s faithfulness to God did not consist merely in praying under pressure. There would be no story if that were Daniel’s practice. What provoked the conflict here was Daniel’s *public* obedience to God. It was the public nature of his obedience which sent him to the lion’s den, and it was the public nature of his obedience which led to the empire-wide praise of the true God. We live in a day when you are allowed perfect freedom to worship God in private. The catch comes when you attempt to worship God in public. You can pray in private, but if you pray in public, you will be denounced as an intolerant fanatic. You may be faced with a lawsuit. You may be despised. You probably will not be thrown to the lions. So will you serve God in public, or will you allow wicked people to dictate the terms of public behavior?

Darius’ Faith

This chapter concludes with king Darius showing some measure of belief in God. What I find more surprising is the faith we see in Darius *before* Daniel is thrown to the lions. In verse 16 we read, “The king spoke, saying to Daniel, ‘Your God, whom you serve continually, He will deliver you.’” At this point Darius does not claim Daniel’s God as his own. And his confidence is very tenuous, as we can see by the sleepless night which followed. Even so, how could such a man have *any* faith in some foreign God? I can only conclude that Daniel’s life was such a powerful witness, already the king had seen some evidence of the reality, power and goodness of Daniel’s God. And he was not disappointed. God was merciful yet again. Not only to Daniel. Daniel was at the end of his life anyway. But once again God was merciful to a pagan, blasphemous king – a man who deserved no mercy, but needed Daniel to help rule his vast empire. So God exercised His power for Daniel and also for king Darius.

The key ingredient in Daniel’s deliverance is his own faith, as you see in verse 23. Daniel’s faith saved him from the lions, it preserved the king’s best servant, and provided the occasion for a worldwide witness. Faith does not always lead to safety here on earth, but it is the prerequisite to serving God.

Ultimately Daniel’s faith made the faith of Darius grow stronger. The decree he published shows an amazing knowledge of God and commitment to Him. This pagan polytheist commanded that one God be worshiped. And not just any old god – one specific God – the God of Daniel. This God is different from other gods. This God is living and powerful. This God has eternal sovereignty. Kings and other gods may exercise rule for a limited time, but this God rules forever. He also rules everywhere. Kings and other gods rule in certain places, but this God controls all things everywhere. No one is outside of His reach. It was not enough for Darius to hold these convictions on his own. He wrote a decree and published it throughout the whole empire. Think of it. Everyone from India to Egypt to Greece was ordered to worship the God of Israel! They were not given a choice. This was not religious tolerance. This was recognition that there is only one God worthy of worship. And do you remember the nature of royal decrees in Persian law? They were unchangeable. This order to worship the true God would stand for three hundred years until Alexander’s armies conquered the Persian Empire. I am sure that many people responded insincerely to this decree.

They gave lip service to Daniel's God so *they* did not get thrown to the lions. But I am also sure that thousands of people wondered about this amazing God. No doubt many found a local Jew and asked him to teach them about this God so they could worship Him better. I am sure we will meet many of them in heaven, the fruit of Daniel's faithfulness.

Conclusion

This story not mainly about the importance of prayer, devotion to God, or protection by God. It is about the importance of a life of faithfulness, public faithfulness, and the universal rule of God. Daniel was a single individual, but he changed the course of a whole empire and laid the foundation for the rebuilding of Jerusalem. This chapter teaches us that culture change occurs not only by evangelism programs or political action, but by the constant public faithfulness of God's people. When God's people openly serve God, and are excellent in our morals and our vocations, we inevitably shift the direction of the culture in which we live.

Many people today claim to believe in God, but that belief does not amount to much. When Christians begin to practice radical obedience, then society begins to change. This means such behavior as faithful attendance at church, daily personal devotions, prayers at meals and before studies, serving the poor and needy, hospitality, generosity, observing the Lord's Day (including refusing to take exams on Sunday, obeying the drinking laws, godly sexuality, doing good work on time, attendance at class on time, keeping a sensible schedule, and practicing courtesy and cheerfulness. If you begin to shape your life by such a pattern, though you be one person, you will have a massive impact for God's Kingdom. And who knows? Perhaps you will help to bring a day when everyone who comes to Lehigh will worship the only God that truly lives.

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