

# IN A PIT WITH HUNGRY LIONS

*SERIES: FORTIFIED FOR FAITHFULNESS*

By Steve Zeisler

Bill Rigney, the well-known baseball manager and player died last month. At his memorial service, Bill's son said the cause of death was "complications arising from eighty-three years of good living." In Genesis 25:8 we are told that Abraham also lived to "a good old age" and was buried with loving remembrance by his sons.

We'll all do well to remember that whether we are privileged to live eighty or ninety years or a shorter span, someday at our passing folks will gather in our memory, and someone will summarize the life we've lived. Hopefully they will find good things to say. Of course, the more important summary of our lives is the one that God makes of who we are, how we have lived, and what use we have been to him in our lives.

The events of Daniel 6 take place near the end of Daniel's life story. (The experiences recorded in chapters 7–12 occurred before those in chapter 6.) One of the things that make chapter 6 so wonderful is that we now see Daniel at the end of his accomplishments. You will recall that we met Daniel in his early adolescence. We saw him through his middle years, when he rose to the position of senior adviser to the great King Nebuchadnezzar. We saw him in his old age in chapter 5, set aside by Nebuchadnezzar's successor. At the end of chapter 5 the Babylonian Empire came to an end and the Persian Empire replaced it. Once again in a new regime, Daniel, now probably in his mid-eighties, was given a place of importance. He had seen a lot of the world, served in important places, and followed God at every point of his life. This is the last account of his life preserved for us.

## **A godly old man and a large bureaucracy**

Verses 1-2:

**It pleased Darius to appoint 120 satraps to rule throughout the kingdom, with three administrators over them, one of whom was Daniel. The satraps were made accountable to them so that the king might not suffer loss.**

Babylon had been a smaller and less bureaucratic kingdom than Persia. There was no mention of official administrators who oversaw other administrators in the description of Nebuchadnezzar's reign.

Verses 3-9:

**Now Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and the satraps by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom. At this, the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent. Finally these men said, "We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God."**

**So the administrators and the satraps went as a group to the king and said: “O King Darius, live forever! The royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisers and governors have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or man during the next thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into the lions’ den. Now, O king, issue the decree and put it in writing so that it cannot be altered--in accordance with the laws of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed.” So King Darius put the decree in writing.**

The text of chapter 6 stands in contrast to what we’ve considered so far in a couple of other ways. First, in the other situations where we’ve seen Daniel serve God, he figured primarily as a spokesman who interpreted and proclaimed what God wanted said. In this chapter he speaks in only one verse. More important than his statements are his actions, which demonstrate his character, his godliness, his courage.

Second, and related to the first, the earlier texts started with accounts of God’s stirring among unbelieving people, giving disturbing dreams to Nebuchadnezzar twice, writing on the wall at Belshazzar’s party, suddenly producing fear, quaking, and questions that someone must answer. God was present; what were they to do? And into those situations Daniel would speak for the Lord. But in chapter 6 there is no stirring of God, no sense that events are happening that someone needs to explain.

For this reason, chapter 6 is much like the experience of most of us in spiritual warfare conditions. In this text Daniel does nothing to deserve opposition, and no activity of God is out of the ordinary. Daniel stirs up opposition only because he is a faithful servant of the Lord.

In the background we see some further contrasts. The references to bureaucracy are important. Perhaps you’ve seen the movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The ark of the covenant has been lost for many centuries, and Indiana Jones and others discover it buried in a cave in the sands of the wilderness. High adventure ensues in a struggle to retrieve it. At the end of the story in a wonderful ironic twist, we watch the ark being borne in a crate by forklift deep into some vast warehouse full of similar crates, to become more thoroughly lost in the bureaucracy of modern American government than it ever had been in the sands of the desert.

We probably ought to imagine Daniel’s environment in chapter 6 as being something like that kind of bureaucracy, with layer upon layer of people vying for power with one another. The Persian Empire was more than four times as large as its predecessor, the Babylonian Empire. Cyrus the Great, who consolidated the vast Persian Empire, had a much different view of how kingdoms should be run than most rulers in the ancient world. He was the one who, as Isaiah had predicted, would allow the Jews to go back to their homeland after seventy years of captivity (which undoubtedly had been set in motion by the time of the events in chapter 6). Cyrus’ view was that each people group should thrive in its own place and be given a chance to worship its own gods, as long as it agreed to invoke its gods to benefit Cyrus and the empire. Times had changed. The rule of the Persians was made to last a long time, rather than being dependent on one great individual as the Babylonian Empire had been. So we observe layers of administrative personnel in the Persian government.

Even the reference to laws is obviously very different from what we’ve seen before. It was the practice of Persian governance that once a law had been decreed and signed, no one could change it. Now, Nebuchadnezzar would have viewed that as completely ridiculous! Remember what Daniel said of Nebuchadnezzar in 5:19: “All the peoples and nations and men of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled.” When Nebuchadnezzar ruled, the only law was his whim of the moment. But in this new empire a word of governance once decreed could not be changed even by the king himself.

A final background issue to consider is the question of who Darius was. He is mentioned a number of times from chapter 5 on. It is my belief that secular history does not tell us of this man--that he was a senior subordinate of Cyrus otherwise unknown to us. There are two other men named Darius mentioned in Ezra and Nehemiah respectively, but they showed up much later than Daniel's time. History tells of a general named Gubaru who served under Cyrus, and some scholars think Darius is another name for this general. Some say that Darius is actually another name for Cyrus himself.

Whoever Darius was, Daniel's description is informative. He says at the end of chapter 5 that Darius was sixty-two years old when he received the kingdom. We know he was born into the royal family of the Medes (see chapter 9). When Cyrus conquered the kingdom of Babylon, he made Darius the senior official in that part of his much-greater empire. But Darius wasn't used to dealing with political intrigue, and in some ways he was overmatched by the responsibility.

## **A plot born of envy**

The enemies of Daniel opposed him because he was a righteous man who loved God first, who was honest in his work, and who was therefore successful. As other successful men and women have been, he was subject to the displeasure of those who wanted what he had.

Now, if you want an accurate insight into the kind of person you are, it is a good idea to find out what your enemies think of you. What your friends think of you is also helpful, but it is not the whole picture.

The enemies of Daniel said two very important things about him in these verses. In verse 4 they acclaimed the thoroughness of his integrity. They had looked in every corner of his life for mistresses, slush funds, bad dealing, failure, hidden sin, any kind of cover-up that they could expose and use to undermine him. But they could find nothing. He wasn't even lazy. At the end of verse 4 they concluded he was "trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent." He didn't fail in acts of commission or in acts of omission. He was hardworking, bright, dedicated, effective, and honest. He was frustrating! "How in the world can we take this man down?" Daniel's example here should challenge us--what do our co-workers and competitors say of us? What do they conclude about our Master from our behavior?

The second thing Daniel's enemies said about him was that he took his faith seriously. They would put him in a position where being true to his God would ensnare him, because he would never be untrue to his God. His faith was inviolate. He didn't fudge, take time off, or get around the hard requirements of his faith. Therefore he was vulnerable--his unbending commitment to God could be used against him.

Let's consider the rest of the chapter.

## **Ordinary warfare and regular prayer**

Verses 10-28:

**Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before. Then these men went**

as a group and found Daniel praying and asking God for help. So they went to the king and spoke to him about his royal decree: “Did you not publish a decree that during the next thirty days anyone who prays to any god or man except to you, O king, would be thrown into the lions’ den?”

The king answered, “The decree stands--in accordance with the laws of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed.”

Then they said to the king, “Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or to the decree you put in writing. He still prays three times a day.” When the king heard this, he was greatly distressed; he was determined to rescue Daniel and made every effort until sundown to save him.

Then the men went as a group to the king and said to him, “Remember, O king, that according to the law of the Medes and Persians no decree or edict that the king issues can be changed.”

So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions’ den. The king said to Daniel, “May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!”

A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles [implicating them if this didn’t work], so that Daniel’s situation might not be changed. Then the king returned to his palace and spent the night without eating and without any entertainment being brought to him. And he could not sleep.

At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions’ den. When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, “Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?”

Daniel answered, “O king, live forever! My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, O king.”

The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.

At the king’s command, the men who had falsely accused Daniel were brought in and thrown into the lions’ den, along with their wives and children. And before they reached the floor of the den, the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones.

Then King Darius wrote to all the peoples, nations and men of every language throughout the land:

“May you prosper greatly!

“I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel.

**“For he is the living God  
and he endures forever;  
his kingdom will not be destroyed,  
his dominion will never end.  
He rescues and he saves;  
he performs signs and wonders  
in the heavens and on the earth.  
He has rescued Daniel  
from the power of the lions.”**

**So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.**

(The implication here is that Cyrus and Darius were contemporaries, Cyrus ruling the entire empire and Darius ruling in the region where Daniel was, as opposed to being one and the same person.)

I want to make a couple of observations about this well-known and dramatic story. The first has to do with spiritual warfare. As we have considered already, there is opposition that comes our way for no reason except that we are faithful to Christ, that we are honest in the way we treat people, that there is character in us that gives glory to God.

Darius made the decree that led to Daniel’s endangerment because he had been tricked into making a deal saying that he would rival God for a month. It was positioned as good politics and good leadership.

Daniel, because of his high position, obviously had access to the king. He might have found a way to avoid the predicament this decree put him in. But he knew that avoidance of one test would surely lead to others. His enemies were determined, and so he chose to rely on God, not strategy, to save him.

Daniel also knew that the king would be of no lasting help. In the long run, appealing to worldly authority for justice--the courts, or the good judgment of those who hold sway in public opinion--is not our best hope for protection when we are being attacked for righteousness. Darius’ petition is succinct and insightful: “May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!”

Perhaps the most important observation about this story regards the prayer of Daniel. We read in verse 10 that Daniel did as he had been in the habit of doing, and prayed in front of his open window, facing Jerusalem, three times a day. He wasn’t going to back away from the previously determined priority in his life. This octogenarian had learned over a lifetime that he needed the discipline of regular times of prayer that he assigned to himself, and he allowed nothing to get in the way.

Many of us wait for the moving of the Spirit or some emotional call to prayer before we pray. These are good occasions for prayer, of course, but in addition, Daniel made prayer a habit. It was this regular experience of prayer that shaped his life. A friend told me recently how much he wished for more passion in his prayer life. He said, “I pray every day, but I wish there were more times of apparent response on God’s part.” I often have the same thoughts.

Prayers that begin with God’s personal call to us or end with clear answers to our requests are wonderful. However, disciplined, regular prayer that proceeds from gratitude and a determination to obey is what changes our character. Daniel entered God’s presence in prayer three times a day for decades of his life. Like ours, his emotions sometimes supported his prayers and sometimes did not. He saw clear changes in circumstance brought

about by prayer and, as we do, realized that many of God's answers to prayer are inscrutable. But the deep well of courage and faith that sustained him in the lions' den was dug in the daily sessions of prayer that were his lifetime habit.

## **Dramatic rescue--and a greater miracle**

The outcome of this story is important and is of course the most famous part of the chapter. Children and adults, artists and ordinary folks have used their imagination to see Daniel in the lions' den ever since the text was given to believing people. An eighty-five- or ninety-year-old man was lowered into a pit to spend the night with ravenous lions that roared for the prey when the pit was opened. But by the dawn we picture him sleeping with a lion's mane for his pillow. In Hebrews 11, the great listing of believing men and women of old, we hear of those who conquered kingdoms, acted in righteousness, obtained promises, quenched fire. And in the midst of that list is one who "shut the mouths of lions" by faith. It is a dramatic miracle.

And finally we observe that the enemies who would destroy Daniel were themselves destroyed. That's another consistent lesson of Scripture: the very snare the unrighteous set for us becomes the snare that traps them. We are not always the victims of other people's hatred of God. There are times when God gloriously and encouragingly sets us above the power of our enemies to hurt us.

Suppose you had never heard this story before, but had a general theology of God and his glory. Suppose you were reading this book but were interrupted in the middle of chapter 6 and missed the end of the story. If someone were to ask you, "How do you think the story ends? Did Daniel get eaten or not?" I think very likely you would say, "Well, Daniel dealt with crazy, violent, powerful people. His friends got tossed into a fiery furnace and nothing happened to them.... I don't think Daniel got eaten. I think God saved him. That seems to be the pattern in this book. In extremity God saves his own." Further, if you were asked what response Darius would have made to this miraculous rescue, you could probably supply that too, because powerful figures, confronted with a miracle of God, end up speaking words of praise. That's very familiar from earlier chapters.

What stands out about this particular text as compelling or new, if you will, is that here we are seeing the man at the end of his life, and he is the same as he's been at every earlier stage. His faith never wavered. He didn't diminish with age. What Paul wrote of himself was true of Daniel: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7).

Most people I know, certainly those my age or near it, have been concerned about issues of retirement lately. There's anxiety among people who've trusted in technology. "What will happen now? Is my future secure or not?" You've probably had these discussions in the workplace or with your friends. But if you are going to plan for the future, the better plan to make is this: to be the kind of person who can face the future because you know the God of the future.

One final observation is that Daniel cut a window in an upper room of his house so that it faced Jerusalem. If we assume he was in Babylon, then the capital of the Persian Empire was 180 degrees in the other direction. But his view as he prayed was toward Jerusalem, because he knew that Jerusalem was the future. He knew that the God of the Jews made promises, spoke of empires succeeding others and ending, and promised that the day would come when there would be a righteous rule on earth, when God himself would come in the person of his Messiah. At the end of his life, looking to the future, Daniel said, "I know where the future lies. It lies with the promises of God and the character of God, and I'm much more interested in them than in the power of Persia."

In summary, what do our enemies think of us? Do they see us as people who are neither corrupt nor negligent? What about our prayer life? Are we people who pray from a heart of gratitude and obedience? What do we believe about the future? Is the future in God's hands, or are we more worried about the authority of the kingdoms of this world to sway the future? Such are the questions raised here. Our God is a miracle worker, that is true--and the great miracle is making men and women who are like Daniel. May he make us so.

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