

## LIVING IN THE LION'S DEN Daniel 6

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Darius tossing Daniel into the lions' den may be the most well-known story in all the Old Testament. Even a toddler is able to tell the exciting story of the ferocious felines, lions, who were unable to devour Daniel because he was delivered by his God. Let's take a closer look at this well-loved narrative.

### **Daniel's Success (6:1-3)**

The new king, Darius, was efficient, quickly incorporating the newly acquired territory of Babylon. He appointed 120 "satraps" throughout the kingdom. "Satrap" is a word that means "protector of the kingdom." This term is often applied to numerous officials. Completing the hierarchy of governance, these 120 satraps were to report to three commissioners—Daniel was distinguished among these three. The purpose of this re-structuring was to make sure that all the tax monies were properly collected and that no other officials would steal from the king's treasury.

Apparently, the new ruler was acquainted with Daniel. This is not surprising given that Daniel had been an important government official during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, one of the greatest kings in history. Daniel's demonstration of exceptional wisdom further enhanced his reputation. This recognition from the king marks the third and final time a pagan king recognizes Daniel's giftedness and causes him to prosper (1:17-20; 2:46-49).

Once again, however, jealousy over the success of a Judean creates a life-threatening circumstance. The reader is reminded of the previous hardships placed upon Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego when Nebuchadnezzar gave them an important appointment (3:12ff.).

### **The King Signs His First Decree (6:4-9)**

Our hero's character is above reproach, and the jealous manipulators look to Daniel's daily prayers as the only possible area of accusation. Knowing of Daniel's devotion, the other leaders correctly conclude that Daniel will deny the king's decrees before he ceases to worship his God.

The envious entourage approaches the king "as a group." An actual translation is "These commissioners and satraps came thronging to the king and spoke to him as follows..." (v. 6). The term translated "thronging" denotes more of a mob scene rather than an orderly gathering coming before the king. The new statute held that anyone who "makes a petition to any god or man besides you [Darius]...shall be cast into the lions' den." The word often translated "anyone who prays" or "anyone who makes a petition" is literally translated "anyone who requests a request." Being a request of a religious nature, it is, in fact, a petition and prayer.

During this thirty-day period, one could pray to neither gods nor man, but only to the king himself. The odd expression concerning “praying to a man” is a reflection that certain priests were seen as mediators who received the prayers of the people and placed them before the gods. During this particular period, Darius was to be the only mediator, with all prayers directed either through or to the king himself.

Both the Assyrians and the Persians captured lions and placed them in cages, to be later released for royal hunting events to entertain the ruling class. The word used for “pit” or “den” could indicate either a natural or man-made cavern into which the victims would be cast. Concerning the claim that the law of the Medes and Persians cannot be revoked, the account of Esther and Mordecai also indicates that the Persian kings were obligated to obey their own laws (see Esther 1:19; 8:8). By hiding their true agenda to remove Daniel from his place of prominence, Daniel’s adversaries have actually set a trap for both him and their king.

### **Daniel’s Accusers Plan His Death (6:10-15)**

The narrative now shifts away from the king’s court to Daniel’s house. Despite knowing the consequences awaiting anyone who might disregard the royal decree, Daniel, without hesitation, continues with his prayer and praise. Daniel could have easily equivocated between obeying or disobeying the king’s command. After all, all he needed to do was either hide his acts of devotion or simply rationalize a thirty-day respite from his religious activity until the king’s law had, at last, lapsed. Simply taking a pause from his prayers surely wasn’t the same as being asked to bow down before an idol (cf. 3:10). In keeping with his character, however, Daniel did not lose heart and continued to “sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land” (Psalm 137:4). Without any inner turmoil, Daniel continued in his prayers of devotion.

Two immediate questions arise from the text: (1) Why did Daniel turn toward Jerusalem to pray? and (2) Why did he pray three times a day? During Solomon’s prayer of dedication to the temple in Jerusalem, we read these words:

When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain, because they have sinned against Thee, and they pray toward this place and confess Thy name and turn from their sin when Thou does afflict them...(1 Kings 8:35).

By the time of Daniel’s prayer, the temple, of course, was already in ruins, having been torn down by the Babylonians. Daniel still turned toward the holy city, however, because of longing in his heart and hope for the future.

Concerning the custom of praying three times a day, we are reminded of the words of the Psalmist, “Evening, morning, and noon, I cry out in distress, and He hears my voice” (Psalm 55:17). Clearly there were no specific Jewish laws that mandated the number of times per day that one should pray. Some scholars, nonetheless, speculate that the custom of praying three times a day was established during this time of exile. Daniel’s daily prayer was not in rebellion against the royal decree; it was simply his daily discipline of devotion.

Knowing Daniel to be a faithful monotheist (worshiper of only one God), the conniving commissioners and satraps found Daniel as they expected—continuing the prayerful worship of his God regardless of the threat of the lions’ den. Well aware of the king’s fondness for their Judean

colleague, they began the conversation with the king by reminding Darius of his own irrevocable decree. Only after the king had confessed that violators would, indeed, receive a violent death from the lions did they declare that Daniel had been unfaithful, disregarding the king's injunctions as he kept praying three times a day.

Darius found himself deeply distressed at the news (v. 14). This distress probably came from a complex combination of inner emotions. He was distressed because he was about to lose the wisest man in the land—Daniel. And, perhaps, he was distressed because his own ego had placed both him and Daniel in an irrevocable dilemma from which there was no apparent escape. Finally, he must have been greatly angered at the conniving commissioners who had manipulated him into doing harm to his choice administrator.

### **The King's Sleepless Night (6:16-21)**

Having been trapped by his own foolish decree, Darius had no alternative but to deliver Daniel to the pit of the hungry lions. Our writer presents the king as quite human: (1) he searched feverishly, late into the evening, trying to find an escape clause by which to save Daniel (v. 14); (2) he confessed that his greatest desire was that Daniel's God, whom Daniel served faithfully and constantly, would be able to deliver Daniel from the lions' den (v. 16); (3) he spent the entirety of the sleepless evening fasting, refusing every form of entertainment because he was distressed over Daniel's likely death (v. 18); and (4) he arose with the sun, rushed to the lions' den, and declared anxiously, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you constantly serve, been able to deliver you from the lions?" (v. 20). Perhaps the real apex of the narrative occurs when, almost like an echo, Daniel delivered the good news, "O king, live forever!", meaning "My God is able!"

Interestingly enough, Darius identified Daniel's God as the "living God." This description separates Daniel's deity from the pagan deities who could neither see, hear, nor understand (5:23). In contrast, Yahweh saw his servant's problem, heard his prayers, and acted with awesome power to rescue the faithful and judge the wicked. God, in fact, is often described as the "living God" (Deuteronomy 5:26; Joshua 3:10; 1 Samuel 17:26, 36; 2 Kings 19:14, 16; Isaiah 37:4, 17; Jeremiah 10:10; 23:36).

### **Daniel's Deliverance (6:22-23)**

Daniel described his rescue as an angelic encounter. Like the fourth man in the furnace (3:28), a divine messenger once again played an active role in rescuing God's servant(s). In Hebrews 11:33-34, we read about the mighty acts of God's great heroes who "by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire...." The author of Hebrews placed in juxtaposition the shutting of lions' mouths with quenching of flames—an apparent connection between Daniel 6 and Daniel 3:25-27. In both the story of the fiery furnace and of the lions' den, an angelic intervention occurred, causing the delivery of God's faithful few.

Perhaps most striking is the continual description of the character of our hero. Daniel is described as faithful (v. 4), beyond negligence or corruption (v. 4), a faithful devotee to Yahweh in both his prayers and praise (v. 10), innocent in God's sight (v. 22), and trusting in his God (v. 23).

### **The Accusers' Demise (6:24)**

Those who had worked so hard to cause the demise of Daniel by casting him in the lions' den were themselves devoured by the hungry beasts. As Western readers, we discover that community and family identity were highly valued in the ancient Near East. Often in biblical stories, entire families were punished for the crimes of individuals (Numbers 16:25-33; Joshua 7:20-26; 2 Samuel 21:1-9; Esther 9:13-14). The prophets themselves, however, speak against this practice (Jeremiah 31:29-30; Ezekiel 18). Remember, moreover, this command comes from a pagan king—not Daniel.

The haste with which the lions devour the manipulators gives us a marked contrast to Daniel's emergence from the den without a scratch or wound. The reader, therefore, cannot conclude that the lions were simply tamed or well-fed, resulting in Daniel's escape from harm. In contrast to Daniel's deliverance, the wicked men and their families were devoured.

### **The King's Praises (6:25-28)**

Verse 26 reminds the reader of Nebuchadnezzar's pronouncements (3:28-29; 4:37) which lift high the living and true God. Even a pagan king could see that Daniel's God is living, enduring forever, beyond destruction, and able to rescue and deliver! As a result of his faithfulness to God, Daniel, by now an old man around 80 years of age, continued to prosper during the reign of Darius, that is, the reign of Cyrus the Persian.

### **Conclusion**

The jealous manipulators (commissioners and satraps) despised Daniel. Nevertheless, even his enemies knew that he was a good and righteous man. Pondering all the ways to point out Daniel's flaws, they simply concluded that his character was beyond criticism. Also, his worship was so habitual and rhythmic that they knew his prayer times were predictable. Our hero, Daniel, causes us to question our own spiritual maturity: (1) Would even our enemies testify that we are above reproach? (2) Is our religious devotion part of our DNA, like Daniel's was? Put another way, is our gathering together with God's people for worship part of the regular rhythm of our week? Or are we "hit and miss" when it comes to our devotion and worship?