

The Pattern for Potential Persecution

3-Year Bible Reading Plan

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Today is also a day where we think about the sacrifice that we, if necessary, would be willing to endure on his behalf. Today I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to the book of Daniel 6. As you turn in your Old Testament to the book of Daniel 6, you're going to discover one of the most familiar stories in all of the Bible. It's the story of Daniel in the lions' den. This is one of those stories that makes every children's Bible book, vacation Bible school, and children's sermon known to man. It is one of those staple stories. But before we go into Daniel 6, let me remind you of a couple of things. The first one is this, one of the dangers of a passage such as this, this morning, is that we know the story so well, oftentimes we forget what the details actually imply and mean. In just a moment, we're going to read through the story of Daniel being commissioned to that lions' den, the story of him being released from that lions' den but we're going to focus not so much on his release as we are of what led him to the lions' den to begin with.

You know, this is one of those stories and rightfully so, we celebrate God's supernatural provision in Daniel's life, but if you think about it from our perspective, the real miracle isn't that he was released from the lions' den, but that he was actually willing to go to the lions' den. And so today I want to look at the story of Daniel in light of a pattern of possible persecution. Over the last 2,000 years, persecution has actually been the norm in Christianity, in fact, where we live in our culture today over the last couple of centuries, we have actually had a sigh or a breath or a release from what most of our brothers and sisters in Christ experience on a daily basis. And so today as we go to Daniel in the lions' den, I want to address the issue that if what happened in his life were to happen in your life, would we respond in like manner.

Beginning in verse 1 of chapter 6, it says,

1 It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom an hundred and twenty princes, which should be over the whole kingdom; 2 And over these three presidents; of whom Daniel was first: that the princes might give accounts unto them, and the king should have no damage. 3 Then this Daniel was preferred above the presidents and princes, because an excellent spirit was in him; and the king thought to set him over the whole realm. 4 Then the presidents and princes sought to find occasion against Daniel concerning

the kingdom; but they could find none occasion nor fault; forasmuch as he was faithful, neither was there any error or fault found in him. 5 Then said these men, We shall not find any occasion against this Daniel, except we find it against him concerning the law of his God. 6 Then these presidents and princes assembled together to the king, and said thus unto him, King Darius, live for ever. 7 All the presidents of the kingdom, the governors, and the princes, the counsellors, and the captains, have consulted together to establish a royal statute, and to make a firm decree, that whosoever shall ask a petition of any God or man for thirty days, save of thee, O king, he shall be cast into the den of lions. 8 Now, O king, establish the decree, and sign the writing, that it be not changed, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which altereth not. 9 Wherefore king Darius signed the writing and the decree. 10 Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime. 11 Then these men assembled, and found Daniel praying and making supplication before his God.

Now you and I know the rest of the story, that Daniel would be charged with a crime against this statute of 30 days of only worshiping whom we know as King Darius. I want to encourage you to fast forward to verse 21, to the "end of the story."

21 Then said Daniel unto the king, O king, live for ever. 22 My God hath sent his angel, and hath shut the lions' mouths, that they have not hurt me: forasmuch as before him innocency was found in me; and also before thee, O king, have I done no hurt. 23 Then was the king exceeding glad for him, and commanded that they should take Daniel up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no manner of hurt was found upon him, because he believed in his God. 24 And the king commanded, and they brought those men which had accused Daniel, and they cast them into the den of lions, them, their children, and their wives; and the lions had the mastery of them, and brake all their bones in pieces or ever they came at the bottom of the den.

In fact, I would be willing to say today that for those of you particularly who are parents and grandparents, you probably lost count of how many times you've either told, shared or read this story in some form to those who you were leading, those that were coming behind. But today, I want you to see it from slightly a different perspective and I want to walk through what happened in Daniel's life, then I want to parallel how it could potentially happen in our life, and then as we think about our potential sacrifice, we're going to remember Jesus Christ's ultimate sacrifice.

So let's walk through what led Daniel to this lions' den, the first thing we discover is there was a very long-term preference. Notice when we began the story that it's no longer the Babylonians, those who would come into Jerusalem 70 years earlier, that famous event

known as the Babylonian captivity has come to a close. Now the Medes and the Persians are in charge and Daniel still finds himself – this is important to the story – in a critical and key position. I want you to think about this. Daniel had been serving faithfully those who had mastery over him for 70 years. He was one of those in chapter 1 who was brought out of Jerusalem and he was given into the king's court. They asked him to eat of his meat and drink of his wine and he said, "Oh no, I cannot defile my God. Try me, just give me pulse and test me 10 days later." Not only did he pass the test but three years after the fact when he and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego went before Nebuchadnezzar, the Bible says they were 10 times better than all of the rest.

It wouldn't take long, in fact, one more chapter where he would find incredible preference with Nebuchadnezzar. He had had a dream that disturbed him so much he couldn't remember it and all of the counselors, the Chaldeans, all those sorcerers, they could not not only give an interpretation, they didn't even know what he had dreamed. And upon the declaration to have them all removed of their life, remember what Daniel did, he sought the Lord all night in prayer, he came, he gave the dream and the interpretation thereof and he was promoted within the kingdom.

Well, kings come and kings go, and in chapter 5 a man by the name of Belshazzar becomes the king but just as wicked if not worse than Nebuchadnezzar, that famous story of the writing on the wall, the judgment of God that was coming and nobody could discover what it meant, so who did they call? You guessed it, they called Daniel, and again he was able to "answer the issue at hand."

The Babylonians have come and gone after 70 years, the Medes and the Persians, and all of a sudden where do we find Daniel? In the exact same place he had been for a long time. He found himself promoted to a position of preference and because he was in that place, the plot began. Beginning in verse 3 and 4, these men decide that Daniel must be eradicated. "We can no longer allow him to be in the position that he is, experiencing the preference that he has." And so their plot was really threefold here in verses 4 and 5. The first thing they did, if you'll notice, it says in verse 4, it says, "Can we find something against Daniel concerning the kingdom? Can we catch him exceeding the speed limit? Can we catch him maybe fudging a little bit on his taxes? Can we catch him maybe in a little white lie? Can we catch him doing something he's not supposed to do because he's been in Babylon for 70 years. These are new laws now, maybe we can catch him here." But guess what? They could not find anything from a secular perspective, so they decided to get personal. "What if we can discover a fault in his faith? What if we can discover that he's a hypocrite? That he claims to be a believer in the one true God but he's really not, or he claims to be passionate about the things of his God but he skips this and he bypasses that and maybe contradicts himself on this one?" But notice, they could not. You get to the very last statement of verse 5, it says, "except we find it against him concerning the law of his God." This is going to be critical when we look at it from our perspective in just a moment. I want you to notice that Daniel lived such a life that they could not catch him breaking the laws of the land, they could not get him violating the principles of his own faith, so what did they resort to? Make his faith illegal. Make the practicing of his

faith illegal. Not just the principles of his faith, not just the positions of his faith, but make the expression of his faith illegal.

So the ploy commenced. I don't know about you but I find it intriguing that here is this man that's been in service for 70 years, all those who have come to power are mesmerized at his ability to know what truth is, and you get to verse 7 and it's like everybody who knows anybody and everybody says, "We've got to get rid of this guy." It talks about those from a military background, political background, socioeconomic background, they get everybody together because they cannot stand the fact that Daniel has the preference that he does. So in the midst of this, there's a conspiracy. Now we joke all the time in our culture about conspiracy theories and such, but really by definition a conspiracy is just really the collective effort of many people for the same common goal. That's what it is. If there was ever a conspiracy in Scripture, it's right here. I mean, they got everybody on board and yet the one who was technically their supervisor is the one obviously who is not in the know.

But I want you to see how they did it. Look at when you get to verse 10, it says not only did they get the king to sign this document and, by the way, this is just an aside, what kind of person must Darius have been if he was willing to allow himself to be called a god for 30 days? Now it's one thing if you think that much of yourself but if you think that much of yourself, don't you think you'd want it to last more than 30 days? I mean, just for 30 days claim that you're a god. Oh, all right. I mean, this can't go bad, can it? I mean, think about it.

So he signs it and goes about his business but you get to verse 10, it says he signed it, he went to his house, Daniel, the windows being opened in his chamber toward Jerusalem, and he kneeled on his knees three times a day, praying, and he gave thanks before his God as he did before time. Here's the thing that's frightening about their ploy, not only that they would conspire with each other, not only that they would propose this preposterous legislation to Darius, but they would actually not go into the cross streets of society, not even go to his public place of worship but into his very home. They literally were looking into his private residence. They were so determined to take him down that they would be willing to invade his personal privacy.

Oh, but God provided. This is the part of the story that we love to focus on. We get to verse 21, Daniel has been committed to the lions' den and there it says that an angel comes and shuts the mouth of the lion. Now I'm one of those who likes to ask questions. Some of you who know me understand that's just kind of who I am by nature and I've got a lot of questions about this passage. We're not going to answer them today but it says an angel comes but it doesn't say how long the angel stays. I mean, did Daniel and the angel have a nice conversation all night? Did he go to sleep? I mean, I don't know what happened. All I know is early in the morning Darius is upset that this happened to begin with, by the way, he's probably more mad at himself than he is at what has occurred because he allowed it to occur under his watch. He's there early in the morning, cries out, "Daniel!" and of course, we know he is safe and sound. We discover that the same God that was able to part the Red Sea is the same God who could shut the mouth of the lions.

But then there's the judgment of God. You know, much like the book of Esther, remember Haman in the book of Esther? He despised Mordechai and the Jews and Esther herself, and his whole desire was to eliminate all of them, so he created a gallows that was higher than any that had ever been established and it was those same gallows that he himself would be hung upon, the same den of lions that these individuals wanted Daniel to be consumed by. Now remember back to the conspiracy, remember all these guys. You've got kings and you've got generals, you've got a whole lot of folks, not just them but their wives, their children, all of them face the judgment of God.

Again, it's a story that we're very familiar with. It's a story that maybe today was shown in a little different light than the children's books that we grew up with, but let's parallel it to our lives today. You and I whether we know it or not, have lived a life of long-standing preference. Now I'm not about to stand before you and say that the culture that we live in, and the country that we reside in was established by a bunch of Bible-thumping Baptists, but I will say this, I've been to the rotunda and I've seen the paintings of prayer meetings and baptisms, I've seen the buildings that were built hundreds of years ago that are etched in stone with Scripture, but more than that, I've been across this great land from coast to coast and do you know what I've noticed in the cities and in the towns and the communities? It doesn't matter where you go, almost every community, if you go to the proverbial crossroads, that centerpiece of town, what will you discover there? A Baptist Church. A Methodist Church. And another church. Somebody is going to be there. In fact, there is going to be a conglomerate of places of worship not on the edge of town but where? In the center of town. As this land was established, what did we put at the center of our civilization? We put faith. And those same churches that sat at the crosshairs of our culture usually had a bell system of some kind to not only warn us of danger but to call us to attention if there's a special announcement to be made. Those churches were pastored by men who, by the way, had an opportunity that doesn't exist like it used to, those pastors who were ordained, they had been commissioned by their respective bodies of faith, they had two very important jobs other than "preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ": sign death certificates and sign marriage licenses. Now they weren't an agent of the state but they were the person that the government could trust to say that it was a lawful union or the person was technically expired.

Isn't it interesting that all across our country, incredible preference not only the "writing on the walls" but the way that we laid out our cities and the roles that we gave our pastors. Ah, but lately there's been a plot, has there not? You see, that culture, that secular culture doesn't like the fact that faith is at the center, does it? It doesn't. So what did they try to do? About 50 or 60 years ago they tried to get us to be so enthralled with the world that we'd do it the world's way and we would violate the world's standards. You know, it's interesting and, by the way, let me go ahead and say this, there's all kinds of outliers, there's all kinds of individuals who would say, "Well, what about this guy?" I'm not talking about the .1%, I'm talking about the rest of us who no matter what law was thrown at us, generally speaking, we went with it even if we had to hold our nose while doing so. So then a couple decades ago they said, "Nah, we're gonna ramp it up. We're going to find fault in their faith," just like Daniel. And so what did they do? They started

taking positions and philosophies that we hold near and dear such as what we know of marriage and personal identity and life, and they said, "I bet they'll buckle at these." Isn't it interesting that the more that they push against that, the more the people of faith stand strong in what they actually believe. We've seen time and time again where people who own businesses were willing to pay incredible fines or even serve jail time because they said, "We cannot violate the law of our God. We can't do it."

I've got news for you, that's where you and I are today and that's where Daniel was for a while, but I want you to go back to verse 5 at the end, "except we find it concerning the law of his God." Ladies and gentlemen, if the story of Daniel is repeated in our lives, then the next stage will be making what you believe illegal to even practice. To gather in a place such as this. To corporately sing like we've done so beautifully this morning. To be in an environment where we publicly can say, "This is who I am and this is what I believe." And before you say it will never go there, read history, read the story of Daniel.

The ploy, the conspiracy. I don't know if it's just me but can you see the water trembling? You can see people from these backgrounds and these institutions and these places, it's like the wagons are circling and the Christians are in the middle. Do you find it intriguing that nobody struggles with any expression of any religion in this culture except biblical Christianity? Let all the rest have anything they need but don't even give the Christians a seat at the table.

It's a conspiracy but I want you to notice the ploy. What did they do with Daniel? They went into his home. It wasn't about the fact in our context that he went to church but it's the fact that he possessed a Bible. It's the fact that he was willing to get on his knees and pray. You say, "They'll never make the Bible illegal here." It's illegal in a lot of countries and I've read Ray Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451" where in that story it became illegal in this culture. You say, "Well, if they get close to my house," you see, y'all are from the South, you say, "That ain't gonna happen at my house." Guess what? It might already be happening. You know those little devices you can't break yourself away from, those phones? They have the capacity to listen to everything and to watch everything.

So let me ask you a question: if it gets to the point where even the expression of your faith in your bedroom is against the law, will you still hit your knees? Will you still open your Bible even if you know they're watching or they're listening? Ladies and gentlemen, this isn't a story, a fantasy, it's as real as the story of Daniel. Who would have thought that a man who was over the entire kingdom would go to the lions' den not because of what he did in public but because of what he expressed in private?

The provision of God. I don't know if actual lions' dens would be potentially utilized in days ahead. I don't know but I do know this, that the same God who crossed the Red Sea, and the same God who allowed the lions to be shut is the same God that can take care of us whatever may befall us. But here's the part that's important for today. In a moment, we are going to celebrate the Lord's Supper, we're going to remember that Jesus Christ endured the mockings, the beatings, the harassment both public and private. He never wavered. His purpose for our redemption and our salvation was so critical, he never

wavered, and we love to sing about the cross and talk about the cross and gather about the cross, but this same Jesus said, "If any man follow me, let him take up his cross and follow me daily." In just a moment, we're going to celebrate a remembrance of the body and the blood of Jesus Christ but today it also serves as a twofold function, it serves as a potential reminder of what would we be willing to do on his behalf. History over 2,000 years is chocked with stories of men and women who were willing to die for the faith than to live without it because Jesus Christ was willing to die on your behalf so as not to live without you.