Westlake Church Lausanne

Flattery, Fear and Faithfulness
Daniel 6

Perhaps *the* major theme of Daniel is that of kingdoms and empires. And in Daniel 6 we enter a new empire, a new world. And Babylon has fallen, and now the Medo-Persian Empire rules over the largest geographic area the world had yet seen. So, if you remember King Nebuchadnezzar's dream from chapter 2, we have moved from the head of gold to the upper body of silver. And Nebuchadnezzar has gone; and Belshazzar has gone, and there's a new king on the throne – Darius the Mede. But Daniel is still there, and the fact that he is is a reminder that kings and emperors, and presidents and prime ministers come and go, but it's God's kingdom that endures.

But as a result, Daniel finds himself serving a new political master. But just because the politics change, then or now, just because the man in charge changes, does not necessarily mean that it will be any easier, or more comfortable, to stay faithful to God.

And this morning we get a taste of what happens when the law becomes hostile to true faith.

A Public Faith

Daniel is now an old man. It's been 70 years since he was led away into exile as a young man. And as he was forced marched through the gates of Babylon all those years ago do you think he ever dreamt that one-day he would become prime minister of this city and the empire that would conquer it? And yet he's on the verge of becoming just that, and for good reason. Verse 3: 'This Daniel became distinguished above all the other high officials and satraps, because an excellent spirit was in him.' So, in the employment of a deeply pagan government this man has distinguished himself. He's known as a man of integrity, as a faithful servant. And because this empire is vast, the king needs men in positions of leadership who he can trust, verse 2, 'so that the king might suffer no loss.' And Daniel is just such a man.

And even his enemies recognised that. Verse 5: "We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel." So he has been wire-tapped. His emails have been hacked. His tax returns have been gone over. And there's nothing on him. The only chink in his armour, is his faith. Verse 5 again, "We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God."

Let me ask you, could people say the same about you – at work, or at home? Putting your faith aside, are there areas where your example is less than attractive? Maybe the way you speak of or treat others, like your colleagues, wife, husband, or your kids. Maybe your anger, or your passive-aggressive tendencies. Maybe your work ethic. Is your conduct exemplary before a watching world?

Now, one of the joys of having teenage children is that they are amazing hypocrisy detectors. They can sniff out hypocrisy at 100feet! But so too are our

colleagues – and so if we want to talk the talk, we also have to walk the walk. But how can you do that when you know you're not perfect, when you know you're not like Daniel, when your kids or your wife or your husband, are under no illusions?

Well, think about one of the most effective evangelists in the New Testament. And you're thinking of Paul or Peter, but I'm thinking of the woman at the well in John 4. You see, here is a woman who knew virtually no theology and whose life was a mess, whose sexual history was anything but 'godly' – but who tells her neighbours, "come, see a man who told me all that I ever did" (John 4:29). And they came. But what does she do with that one sentence? Two things: she's honest and authentic about the mess of her life – all that I ever did; but she also points them to Jesus – come see a man.

And if one of the things people value highly today is authenticity, then be authentic, don't pretend to yourself or others that you're perfect, be honest about how your faith helps you in the mess of your life, or in dealing with stress, or in the struggles you face, and by doing that point them to Jesus.

But the hard truth is that the higher you go at work, or the older your kids get, the more you will come under scrutiny, and the more your character flaws will get exposed, and unresolved areas of sin will be magnified. So alongside authenticity, cultivate humility. Because, as someone once said, we have much to be humble about!

And yet, Daniel's experience here tells us, that even as you grow as a person of integrity, even as you allow the Holy Spirit to change you and transform you, that will not exempt you from being stabbed in the back, or being smeared, or even having the truth used against you.

And here, the truth they use against Daniel is his faith. Which tells you something, doesn't it? You see, if the knowledge that we're far from perfect is one wrong reason to stay quiet about your faith, a second is this growing pressure from society to privatize faith. But Daniel's colleagues knew about his faith. So faith was not a merely private matter for him, was it? Now, can you be known as being religious for wrong reasons? Sure you can. You can be obnoxious, or be a moralizer, or a criticizer, or a finger pointer or a score-keeper. You can confuse politics with Christ. But you can also be known as a Christian because you serve others, and promote others, and speak well of others and you show them grace and kindness; or, like Daniel, your faith can shine by the quality and spirit of your work. And if there was something deeply attractive about the Lord Jesus, then there is always going to be something winsome about true Christian faith lived out.

And yet, they still wanted to take Daniel out, and did you see why? Verse 3: 'And the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom.' So this is the green-eyed

monster of jealousy. And because they describe him in v13 as 'one of the exiles from Judah' that jealousy is probably tinged with dislike of the foreigner – he's not one of us.

The problem with jealousy, however, is that it's not just Medo-Persian bureaucrats who are susceptible to it, is it? When you're ambitious, and that ambition is rooted in a desire for self-glory or personal advancement, it will leave you open to jealousy when others appear to be out-achieving you. And because jealousy magnifies your insecurities, it will eat away at your inner well-being. But it also lays the ground for morally questionable decisions, which is exactly what happens here.

Two Tactics of Evil

So these men need to persuade the king that Daniel's faithfulness to God is directly opposed to his faithfulness to the king. And did you notice the tactic they use to do that, and bring Daniel down? They build Darius up. They flatter him. In v7 they tell Darius that no one should be allowed to pray to anyone but him. So effectively they're saying, 'Darius, you're the one true god. You're our God-king, the only mediator between us and the gods. And we all know that, and we welcome that, so why not get everyone else to acknowledge it. And Darius, you can even be humble about it, you only have to do it for thirty days.'

In the hands of temptation, isn't flattery a powerful key to get access to your heart? And it's powerful because it draws you in. It cloaks sin in ways that make you feel good. You're offered a position that involves taking on more than you should, at risk to your marriage and family or friendships or church, and you take it – because you're flattered. You're alone with a colleague and he or she says – 'I wish my husband listened to me like you do', and the hook goes in. And flattery whispers in your ear: 'you deserve this'. It's been evil's tactic right from the beginning, as the serpent enticed Adam and Eve: 'I see great potential in you, you can be like God!'

Of course Darius came to regret listening to flattery. But that's its nature isn't it – it leads you somewhere, promising 'this is going to be so good', and you discover it's led you onto the rocks and you're shipwrecked. And you look back and you think, why did I ever fall for that? Sometime back I was chatting to a friend, whose marriage and family were collapsing around him after he had been caught in adultery, and I asked him, 'Why did you do it?' His reply, 'I think I was flattered.'

But with Darius, it wasn't just flattery was it? This plot was also built on half-truth. They tell Darius in v7 that 'All the high officials of the kingdom' are in agreement. All of them? Really? What about Daniel? What about the man the king most trusts? But that's the way temptation works isn't it – on half truths. You see, if the promises temptation makes were outlandish you'd never believe them. But by making you promises about happiness or popularity or security that *are*

believable, it get's you interested. The problem is, temptation's truth is only ever half-truth. It never tells you the real cost.

An Unflinching Faith

So Darius signs into law an order whose result is to discredit a person of faith who, in reality, has done nothing wrong. And today, in some of our Western nations, we see the same things beginning to happen. With Daniel, it was the Law of the Medes and Persians, today it might be through human rights law, or equal opportunities law, or law governing hate speech, or medics facing laws approving assisted suicides. And because it's responding to a certain agenda, the law becomes repressive.

But how does Daniel respond? And how would you have responded if you were in his shoes? It's remarkable, isn't it? He doesn't say, 'well this is the law, so I really don't have a choice.' Nor does he argue, 'look, it's just for 30 days, God will understand. And I can always pray without seeming to. After all, what's one month out of an entire lifetime.'[1]

No. As soon as he hears about it he goes home and prays: verse 10, 'When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house… he got down on his knees… and prayed.' And he bows towards Jerusalem, not before Darius. Now, what is that? Well, this is about where his highest loyalty lies. Is it to the city whose welfare he's sought for the last 70 years, or to God who put him there. And Daniel chooses God.

So, it's here, as he heads home, as he chooses to get down on his knees, rather than in the lion's den, that the battle is fought and won. It's here, as he refuses to take the safe and comfortable option, that the real test happens. Because the battle for what will have our ultimate loyalty always takes place in our hearts.

But why does it seem like there was never any debate in his mind about what to do? Why does it look like faithfulness to God was second nature to Daniel? Because it was, wasn't it? Verse 10 again, 'He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, *as he had done previously*.' I mean, ask yourself, how does anything become second nature? Through repeated practice. And as a young man, enrolled in the University of Babylon, he had nailed his colours to the Lord's mast, and he wasn't about to take them down in his old age. And a ban on prayer comes into force, on pain of death, and he responds with… prayer. Because prayer was his settled habit.

But if you and I want to respond to challenging times we might experience with hearts full of peace, and with a sense of poise, and an attitude of prayer as Daniel does here, then, like him, we too need to cultivate our faith and dependence on God in the good days. Because when you're under pressure, and you're being

[1] Ferguson 123

squeezed, it's like being an orange, isn't it – it's what's already in you that comes out.

So how can you cultivate that kind of resilient faith and dependency? Well, look what Daniel does as he prays. Verse 10 again, he 'gave thanks before his God'. So he doesn't retreat to his room full of morbid worry or depressed resignation at the way society is going, or what might be coming his way. He goes there with an attitude of gratitude. He knows that whatever happens, God is the great giver, he's my protector, I'm secure in him. And whilst the legal landscape might have been shifting around him, he knew that God never changes. So, rather than keep his head down, and keep himself safe, Daniel lifts his eyes up.

And you and I can do the same, when we know we're secure in God; when we know he loves us so much that Jesus did not keep himself safe, but gave up everything for us; that when Jesus faced imminent arrest, like Daniel, he didn't run, but went to the Garden of Gethsemane and *prayed*, and bowed to the father's will, and went to the cross to win our ultimate protection; then - like Daniel - we can grow in our love for and dependence on Christ, so that when the challenges come we too can find the resolve to stand and to pray, and to do that with peace and poise.

And look how Daniel prays – v10, 'He had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem.' You see whilst Daniel lived in Babylon and served Babylon and sought the welfare of Babylon, he never lived *for* Babylon: he was living for another city and another King and another kingdom. And it's that King who had his supreme allegiance. As the writer of Hebrews puts it – he was looking to the 'City… whose designer and builder is God' Heb 11:10.

But in being clear where his ultimate loyalty lies, in knowing that there is a greater law and a greater lawgiver to whom he must answer, Daniel found himself on the wrong side of the law. And that's a situation Christians have repeatedly found themselves in over the course of history. Verse 13, "Daniel… pays no attention to you O king, or the injunction you have signed."

But whilst Daniel seems totally unfazed by all this, Darius is devastated. Verse 14, 'Then the king, when he heard these words, was much distressed and set his mind to deliver Daniel.' The problem is that he too is under the law. But why does Daniel seem to go out of his way to tell us about the king's failed attempts to save him? Probably to remind us where our hope should lie. That when law or society becomes hostile to true faith, even a ruler who is sympathetic to you cannot ultimately save you – your faith needs to be somewhere more enduring, somewhere much better, than on a king or a president or a prime minister.

But today, to do what Daniel effectively does here, and say that there is an ultimate source of law, an ultimate source of values that law is based on, and that ultimately only God gets to decide what is morally right or wrong, lays you open

to the charge of arrogance and intolerance. Because how can you think you're right and everyone else is wrong? And yet true, authentic, biblical Christianity makes just these exclusive truth claims. Jesus said, John 14:6, 'I am the way, the truth, the life, no one comes to the Father except through me.' In other words, I am the standard of truth. All your views, all your opinions, the way you think things are, or should be, is all judged against me. And that is about as exclusive as it gets.

But to our post-modern ears, where there are no absolutes, this all sounds unacceptably intolerant, doesn't it? And yet, can you see the irony of that? You see, our modern tolerance agenda seeks to shut down dissenting voices that challenge the accepted narrative, or the prevailing view. And people are labeled as narrow-minded, or worse, bigots if they say otherwise. And so like this anti-Daniel law, modern tolerance is remarkably intolerant!

But as Daniel, and the history of Christianity tells us, this is nothing new. And the very first Christians demonstrated that there's a kind of counter-cultural faith, that, when it's combined with a deep love for others, can turn the world upside down. But sometimes that faith requires us to swim against the tide, even the tide of legislation.

From the Mouths of Lions

And so this story is more than a story of faith and courage. In reality, this is about a battle of powers. You see, in these ancient empires, the lion was the symbol of imperial, kingly power. And today horse racing is called the sport of kings, but in Daniel's day it was lion hunting. In fact, the mythological Babylonian hero – Gilgamesh – proved his strength by killing a pride of lions, so to emulate him kings went on the hunt and to kill a lion was to prove your metal, your power as king.

So as Daniel is cast into this den of lions, there's no doubt what's going to happen to him. He's going to be eaten alive by these lions. He's going to be crushed by this symbol of the empire's ultimate power. Except, that isn't quite what happens is it? First thing in the morning, the king rushes to the den, and v20, 'Cried out in a tone of anguish… "Has your God… been able to deliver you from the lions?" And Daniel replies, v22, "My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths." Because this is about where ultimate power really lies. And as Daniel walks out unscathed, Darius learns what Daniel knew all along, that it's God who rules. And Darius responds in v26-27 by issuing another decree, praising God as the living God, whose "kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion shall be to the end. He delivers and rescues."

And if you and I are to live with steadfast faith in a changing world, we need to know that too. We need to know who it is who has the power to rescue from the lions: the lions of law, or culture; the lions of temptation and jealousy and

flattery; the lions of our own personal circumstances and tragedies that threaten to break us.

And you can know that. You see, this same battle of powers took place in the life of Jesus. And he came and did battle with satan, that roaring lion, who wanders around seeking whom he may devour, and Jesus vanquished him and silenced the lion's roar.

But to do that, he too had to enter the lion's den. And like Daniel, Jesus was conspired against by leaders and authorities, and the law was misused to see him condemned. And like Daniel, a 'king' – Pilate, tried to save him, but failed. And as Daniel's enemies told the king they had no god but him, so Jesus' accusers told Pilate, 'we have no king but Caesar'. And as Daniel was thrown into the pit, so Jesus was nailed to the cross. And as he hung there he quoted from Psalm 22, 'My God my God, why have you forsaken me'; a psalm that includes the line: 'save me from the mouth of the lion' (Ps 22:21).

But God didn't save him. And he didn't save him, so that he might save us. Because whereas Daniel escaped without a scratch, Christ's body was broken and his flesh was torn, as he died the death you and I deserve. And as the lion's den was sealed with the king's signet ring, so Jesus' tomb was sealed with the seal of Rome. But then, just as Darius comes, v19, 'at break of day' and discovers Daniel alive, so, very early, on the first day of the week, Christ rose and walked triumphant from the tomb.

And he hadn't just escaped death for himself, in dying and rising he has obtained rescue and deliverance from death for all of us who put our trust in him. And when you know that, what do you need to fear?

If Christ is the living God, the true king, the Resurrection and the life, you don't need to fear any lions, whatever form they take. You can endure, your faith can remain steadfast, however much society or the law changes, whatever the circumstances of your life are doing, because your faith isn't in you, it's in him. And in v28 we're told 'This Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.' In other words, put your trust in God, and he will take care of the rest.