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“Marvel: Daniel”

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Daniel 6:13-23 (CEB)

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¹³ So they said to the king, “One of the Judean exiles, Daniel, has ignored you, Your Majesty, as well as the law you signed. He says his prayers three times a day!”

¹⁴ When the king heard this report, he was very unhappy. He decided to rescue Daniel and did everything he could do to save Daniel before the sun went down. ¹⁵ But these men, all ganged together, came and said to the king, “You must realize, Your Majesty, that the law of Media and Persia, including every law and edict the king has issued, cannot be changed.”

¹⁶ So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and hurled him into the pit of lions.

The king said to Daniel: “Your God—the one you serve so consistently—will rescue you.”

¹⁷ A single stone was brought and placed over the entrance to the pit. The king sealed it with his own ring and with those of his princes so that Daniel’s situation couldn’t be changed. ¹⁸ The king then went home to his palace and fasted through the night. No pleasures were brought to him, and he couldn’t sleep. ¹⁹ At dawn, at the first sign of light, the king rose and rushed to the lions’ pit.

²⁰ As he approached it, he called out to Daniel, worried: “Daniel, servant of the living God! Was your God—the one you serve so consistently—able to rescue you from the lions?”

²¹ Then Daniel answered the king: “Long live the king! ²² My God sent his messenger, who shut the lions’ mouths. They haven’t touched me because I was judged innocent before my God. I haven’t done anything wrong to you either, Your Majesty.”

²³ The king was thrilled. He commanded that Daniel be brought up out of the pit, and Daniel was lifted out. Not a scratch was found on him, because he trusted in his God.

Daniel isn’t exactly an “unsung hero.” In fact, he would probably make the short list of Bible heroes for most Christian or Jewish people. Those of us who grew up attending Sunday School or Vacation Bible School likely learned not only the story of Daniel in the Lions’ Den, but also a song or two to go with it. But I wonder how many of us have heard this story preached in a Sunday sermon? Daniel is a big hit in illustrated children’s Bibles and storybooks, but his time in the the Lions’ Den gets much less attention in adult circles. That’s too bad, because this story isn’t just for children. In fact, told in its entirety, I’m not sure that it’s even entirely appropriate for children.

The Book of Daniel presents some challenges for students of the Bible. It describes events that took place in the sixth century BCE, but was more likely written in the second century BCE. Some of it was written in Hebrew, other parts of it in Aramaic, with words from Persian and Greek sprinkled throughout. And there seems to be some historical confusion by the writer, because the rulers they identify are jumbled up in order and details.

But we shouldn’t get distracted by historical or linguistic inconsistencies. That’s not the purpose of the story. The Bible isn’t a history book; it’s a book about faith. And the lessons we can learn from Daniel help shape our faith and respond to real life issues we face, even today.

The story we’re exploring this morning takes place during the Babylonian Exile. The southern kingdom of Judah had been defeated, and many of its leading citizens had been taken into captivity in Babylon. When the Persian Empire defeated the Babylonians, the Jewish exiles enjoyed more freedom than they previously had, and some returned to Judah while others remained. But they were still outsiders in a land that was not their own.

Daniel was one of the Jewish people living in Babylon. He had garnered some attention for his ability to interpret dreams, attention that brought him all the way to the royal household. There, he gained credibility as an honest and prudent manager of resources. In fact, he had proven so trustworthy that King Darius made him one of three chief administrators for the kingdom. And because he had earned the favor of the king, it was expected that he would soon be elevated to administrator over the entire kingdom.

Daniel had a few rivals. Others in the administration resented Daniel's success. They were particularly galled because he was a Jew who had a higher rank than many of the Persians. They wanted to discredit him so they could be rid of him and gain more power for themselves. But they knew his ability and integrity were too high for him likely to fail on his own, so they devised a scheme that would set him up for a fall.

They carefully studied the law and found a provision they could exploit. Knowing the egos of kings and how they like to be worshiped, they proposed a new law to King Darius: for 30 days, it would be illegal to pray to anyone other than the king. Anyone found violating the law would be thrown to the lions. Darius took the bait. He craved loyalty, so he agreed. He signed the order into law without fully considering the consequences.

Now, because Daniel was a faithful follower of God, he prayed regularly. Though he learned about the new law, he continued to pray to God three times a day, even with the windows of his residence open to anyone watching. The conspirators had eyewitnesses, and took their complaint to the king. "Didn't you order that anyone who prayed to someone other than you would be thrown to the lions? Daniel prays to the Jewish God three times a day!"

The king was devastated. Too late, he realized the terrible thing he had done. He had never intended to bring any harm to Daniel. He knew Daniel was faithful to his God, and yet he was his most trusted advisor. The king tried everything he could to find a loophole, to save Daniel from his sentence or to change the law. But, as the conspirators pointed out, by the law of the land, the king's orders could not be revoked, even by the king himself. As Daniel was thrown into the den of lions, King Darius assured him that his God would save him.

But Darius wasn't convinced himself. He refused to eat or drink, and spent the night pacing up and down, worried about Daniel's safety and fearing the worst. When morning came, Darius rushed to the pit and called out, "Daniel, are you alive? Did your God save you?"

Daniel answered, assuring the king that he wasn't hurt. "God sent an angel to shut the lions' jaws. God knew I was innocent, and so should you."

The king was ecstatic. This proved Daniel was in the right and his conspirators were wrong. He couldn't change the law, but he could punish those who had perpetrated the scheme. He released Daniel and threw his accusers into the lions' den instead. They were overtaken before they even reached the bottom.

It's a great story, but it's also disturbing in many aspects. What kind of a king could be so easily manipulated by his advisors over petty jealousy? Not being eaten by hungry lions is no way to determine the guilt or innocence of a person unjustly accused. And no matter whose side you were on, innocent lives were taken – not only were the accusers thrown to the lions, but their wives and children were, too. Not such a great bedtime story for the kiddos, after all.

Daniel was a *hero*, but he didn't do anything particularly *heroic*, at least not in the way we typically think of heroism. He was *faithful*, in spite of the threat to his life. The hero is actually *God*, a fact Daniel was careful to point out, and one that those of us who read his tale need to remember.

What can we learn from this story beyond flannel board memories and VBS songs?

First, *those who lust for power and control will resort to any means necessary to achieve it*. The world is not safe. Daniel's opponents manipulated the king and used the law to entrap him. Laws are unjust when they punish the very people they should be helping. Daniel responded with an act of civil disobedience, continuing to pray even in the face of the threat to his life. *He resisted injustice with nonviolence*. Gandhi loved the story of Daniel in the Lions' Den, calling Daniel "one of the greatest passive resisters that ever lived."¹ Nonviolence works because it ultimately exposes the powerlessness of the oppressors. They cannot win without violence, and violence can never make right what is wrong. We can learn from Daniel's example and use nonviolent means to expose injustice and stand with those who are being harmed. Somehow, Christians have become more likely to be aligned with those who want to force compliance with restrictive laws or to stand with those whose comfort and feelings are being disrupted, rather than standing with those who are actually being oppressed and harmed. We need to recapture our concern for those who need help and hope.

Second, *we are never far from God, even in danger or death*. Daniel was in a terrible predicament. We aren't told what Daniel said or did between the time of his arrest and when he was thrown to the lions, though we imagine it had to be a terrifying experience. But Daniel wasn't alone in that pit. God was with him – in his case, keeping the lions from attacking and devouring him. But even if things had turned out differently and Daniel hadn't survived, God would have been with him in that terrible place. Having faith in God doesn't exempt us from suffering or injustice. Innocent

¹ Mohandas Gandhi. *Writings of Gandhi*, Volume XVII, "Congress Report on the Punjab Disorders" (March 25, 1920), 152.

people suffer and are mistreated all the time. But having faith in God means we will not face adversity alone. Those who have faith know God will be there to guide us, to walk with us, to provide the strength we need when our strength fails.

Third, *Daniel's restoration from the lions' den is a message of hope*. God is a God of restoration and resurrection. Reflect for a moment: who ultimately has power in this story? Daniel's opponents wanted it, and they manipulated the situation to get it. They wanted to make sure Daniel didn't get it, so they conspired against him. But their schemes didn't work. It first appears that King Darius has power, as the one who makes laws and holds life and death in his hands. But he couldn't even change his own order. In the end, it was revealed that the only one who really had power was God. The rulers in this world only have the power to kill or refrain from killing. *God delivers. God rescues. God restores.*

We may never face a den of hungry lions, but we will all face adversity. It matters where we put our trust. God is always working for our good, from the lions' den in Babylon to an empty tomb outside Jerusalem. We are not guaranteed safety – the world is a dangerous place. But we serve a God who transcends the powers of this world, a God who will never leave us nor forsake us, a God who calls us to stand together against injustice. Cultivate your relationship with God. Stand in solidarity with the hurt and oppressed. Put your trust in the One who brings life and restores hope. Amen.