

## Daniel 6: Trusting Wholeheartedly

Daniel chapter 6 is perhaps one of the best-known stories in the Old Testament. Although it's very much a true story, it's the stuff of comic book action heroes: a brave man, standing up for truth against the odds, being falsely accused by evil scheming villains and thrown into a den of lions before being rescued by the mighty saving act of God. Then, just for good measure, there's the bloody retribution as the baddies get what is coming to them. It's great, isn't it! I'm sure you enjoyed it as a child and I hope you've enjoyed hearing it again today.

But this is no fairy story. This actually happened. What's more, events like this, some more violent, but many far less dramatic, continue to shape the lives of Christians in this country and around the world even today. So it's vital that we take on board the lessons that this part of the Scripture is there to teach us. We will get to those lessons in a few moments, but let's recap the story because as we do so I want to point out one or two things which probably went under the radar when you first heard this story as a child.

If you remember at the end of chapter 5 the Babylonian regime had fallen, but Daniel, because of his many talents and excellent CV, was kept on by the new ruler - a man named Darius the Mede. Darius came in, reorganised the government and appointed 3 chief ministers over all the local rulers, one of whom was Daniel. Daniel, as he had done all along, excelled. Verse 3 talks about his exceptional qualities, qualities which Darius noticed, and which were well on the way to making him Chief Minister over the whole kingdom.

But politics is sometimes a dirty business and there were plenty who were jealous of this outsider climbing the ladder faster than them. So they began to plot against Daniel. The trouble was they could find nothing against him. Daniel was honest, hard-working and incorruptible; all in all an exemplary employee. Did they give up? Of course not! Scheming scoundrels never give up they just change the rules or fabricate evidence.

I wonder if that reminds you of anyone. Isn't there a foreshadowing here of the way that Jesus was treated by the Pharisees and teachers of the law? Just like Daniel's accusers, they had no evidence against Jesus, so they took his words out of context and encouraged people to lie on oath so he would be found guilty and could be convicted, killed and moved out of the way.

Now of course however good he appeared Daniel wasn't perfect, but since his enemies couldn't find evidence of him doing anything wrong they had to change the rules of the game. And somehow they managed to convince this new ruler to issue this law, a law which could not be repealed or altered, so that for a period of 30 days anyone found to be praying to anyone except Darius the Mede would be thrown into a pit of lions.

These scheming accusers had found a weakness in Daniel, something to exploit. You see, however Babylonian he appeared in dress, in speech, or in cultural tastes, Daniel's heart belonged to God. Whatever privileges Daniel enjoyed were nothing compared to the sadness he felt being away from Jerusalem. And however reliable and trustworthy Daniel was, and he was, to the Kings and rulers of both Babylon and the Medeo-Persian Empire, Daniel's first loyalty was to Almighty God. That's why his prayer life, praying 3 times a day in his room with the windows open towards Jerusalem, was such a crucial part of his life. But to his enemies his loyalty to God was also an opportunity. And so this loyal, hard-working, honourable, godly man suddenly found himself on the wrong side of the law.

In chapter 3 when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to obey Nebuchadnezzar's decree to bow before his golden idol, the King had been furious. But here, Darius is mortified. He suddenly realised that he had been trapped and duped. But despite his best efforts there was no way out. The permanent nature of the laws of the Medes and Persians, something that usually helped to ensure that justice was fair to all, becomes a block to justice. It's a reminder that laws are only ever as perfect as the one who creates them.

Even as Daniel is thrown into the lion's den the King is trying to find some hope and says to Daniel in verse 16 "may your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!" The chapter goes on to say that the King spent a miserable evening without eating or entertainment and could not sleep. He knew he had been tricked and that despite all his power and authority he was helpless to save Daniel,

But Daniel's God was not helpless. One of the repeated lessons of these early chapters of Daniel is that despite how things look on the surface, God is always in charge. And we see that here, don't we. The King may have had a miserable sleepless night but Daniel got plenty of rest. The King may have been powerless to save Daniel but Daniel's God was not. And when the King returned at dawn to open the seal over the lion's den he found that Daniel was well rested and unharmed because God had sent his angel to shut the mouths of the lions and protect the one who had continued to trust God wholeheartedly, even when his life was at stake.

The story ends with Daniel's accusers facing the end they had plotted for him, with Daniel prospering further, and with the King issuing a decree that all people everywhere should fear and reference the God of Daniel: a God who rescues and saves, who perform signs and wonders in the heavens and on the Earth and whose kingdom will not be destroyed and whose dominion will never end.

It's quite a turnaround isn't it; quite a story. But as I said at the beginning God has not just ordained that these stories are in the Scriptures for our entertainment: they are there to challenge us and to encourage us to stand as strong and wholeheartedly as Daniel.

So let me give you 3 challenges from this passage today. Here they are: we need to be those who are trusting wholeheartedly every day; trusting wholeheartedly when it's hard; and trusting wholeheartedly to the very end. Here's the 1<sup>st</sup> one.

### **1: Trusting wholeheartedly every day.**

I quite enjoy watching the Bear Gryll's *Ultimate Survivor* programs. Perhaps you've seen them. A group of celebrities are taken out into a wilderness and given some challenges to see who will be the ultimate survivor. One of the challenges is always building a shelter to protect them from the storms that undoubtedly arrive. The contestants are given plenty of time, some tips on how to do it and shown where to find the materials. And then they are told to hurry, because building a shelter is much easier when the weather is good than when the rain is pouring and the winds are roaring.

And what is true with a physical shelter is, of course, also true with our spiritual lives. If we are to survive and even thrive in times when our faith is challenged (whether by financial problems, health problems, family problems or even persecution), then during the times when life is easy, we need to make sure that our faith is grounded, our foundations dug deep and that our trust in the Lord, the roof over our heads if you like, is well built and strongly attached.

I think Daniel knew that; that's why, even when he was at the top of his profession, he went to his room and prayed 3 times a day. And by praying facing towards Jerusalem Daniel was showing that his trust was in the God of Israel and that his hope was in the Lord's mercy and grace to rescue his people once again. I'm sure Daniel enjoyed the trappings of privilege, wealth and position that he had in Babylon, but his heart longed for God and his greatest desire was to see God's kingdom restored to God's people again. And so Daniel prayed, 3 times every day.

Now there is nothing in the Bible which commands us to pray 3 times a day, but it's a sign of Daniel's devotion to the Lord. That was his practice in good times and in bad times; when he felt like it and when he didn't; when he was busy and when he was relaxed. And Daniel kept going when those times in prayer felt like intimate fellowship with God, and when they felt like he was going through the motions. Daniel prayed 3 times

every day whatever the season and as he did so he showed that he was trusting God wholeheartedly every day and in the everyday.

I wonder if we can say the same. I wonder if there are times when we get distracted and when life is going so well that we feel we don't need to pray quite as much? I wonder if there are times when it feels so much like a struggle that we don't persevere? I wonder if there are times when the things of the world, the joys of family, of friends, of hobbies or whatever pull us away from a whole hearted trust in God.

If so, when the storms come in and the rain beats down we will not be ready. And whilst we can cry out to God in the midst of the storm for help and rescue, if we haven't nurtured our relationship with the Lord, if we haven't developed an intimate trust in him as our Father, if we don't know his word and his promises, then the battle will be so much harder.

Daniel was able to stand firm in his time of trial because he trusted wholeheartedly in the everyday. Will we do that too? Will we commit ourselves to pray every day and develop what one commentator called an 'uninterruptable habit of prayer'? Will we strive to read the Scriptures every day? Will we fill our minds with the things of God, read Christian books, and make sure that church is a weekly priority? If we do, if we trust God in the everyday, then like Daniel we will be able to stand firm and trust wholeheartedly when it's hard.

## **So, 2: Trusting wholeheartedly when it's hard.**

I feel a bit sorry for Daniel. There he was, serving the king with all he had, showing great wisdom and integrity when all of a sudden he finds that people hating and despising him for being godly, and that overnight the laws of the land had changed so he suddenly became an enemy of the state.

We will get to the second change in a moment but we shouldn't be surprised that people can be hated for doing what is right and for acting like Jesus. Jesus himself said that if we are his then people will reject us just as they rejected him. We might like to think that growing more like Jesus will have a positive effect on our friends and communities, and it does, but it's also something which can make some people uncomfortably aware of their own sinfulness or reveals the depths of their antipathy to God. Either way, when people feel spiritually uncomfortable they can lash out in surprising ways. That happens here and we may face that too.

The other issue here is the new law that leaves Daniel out on a limb. His faith or behaviour hasn't changed, but suddenly the ground has shifted under his feet.

I wonder if you feel the same about life in the UK today. The world I grew up in is vastly different to the one we live in now. 50 years ago there was freedom of religion for everyone in the UK but Christianity was the dominant faith and Biblical values underpinned our society. That isn't the case anymore.

Today, for fear of offending people of other faiths, much Christian proclamation has been sidelined or silenced in the public sphere. Biblical beliefs about absolute truth or the uniqueness of Jesus and patterns of behaviour, particularly around life and death, or sex and marriage, beliefs that were once foundations of a society based on Christian morality, have now been rejected. So now like Daniel, Christians, who have not moved from the teachings of the Bible, suddenly find that their views are now no longer respected or wanted or even allowed. So nurses have been disciplined for praying with patients: Registrars have been sacked for refusing to conduct same-sex civil ceremonies: And street preachers have been arrested for proclaiming the same gospel the church has been proclaiming for nigh on 2000 years.

And what we see here is mirrored in societies around the world.

And when that happens, when society changes around us, it is incredibly hard to keep trusting. When your friends and family and colleagues and neighbours hold views which are opposite to yours; it is incredibly

difficult to stand firm. When you are accused of bigotry, of intolerance, of holding anti-British values, for believing the same things you believed all along you can feel very alone. And when the government starts to pass laws which make you feel unwanted or that you are an enemy of the state, it is hard to keep trusting wholeheartedly.

But that's what Daniel does, and that is what we must do also. And we mustn't think that this is the first time it's happened. Since the time of the apostles Christians have always faced this pressure to accommodate new ideas, to adapt the teachings of the Scriptures, to fit in and not to make a fuss.

But in those times true Christians, have stood firm. They have gone again to the Scriptures to make sure that what they believe is what God's Word teaches and they have stood firm on it. Sometimes through history the church has got it wrong and if that's true we do need to repent. But we should never, ever say, as I've heard many people do, that "I know the Bible teaches this but I think that..." Friends, it is incredibly arrogant to think that we know better than God. God's word never goes out of date and his truth remains true for every generation. The commands of God will clash with each and every society in one way or another, because we don't like bowing to God's commands, but that should never mean that we reject them.

When the world shifted under the Daniel's feet what did he do? He didn't make a fuss; he didn't rant and rave and he didn't try to overthrow the government because he didn't expect a pagan society to mirror godly values. Instead he went to his room and continued to pray and kept on trusting wholeheartedly even when it was hard. We need to do the same.

But Daniel took it one step further: He kept...

### **3: Trusting wholeheartedly to the very end.**

Just like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego Daniel faced the ultimate challenge: deny God and live, or stand firm and die.

For Daniel facing death was the result of simply continuing to pray. Prayer is hardly an act of violent resistance – but the law was clear that to do so was an act of defiance against the king's authority. He could have prayed secretly and closed his curtains, but to do so would have felt like denying the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. And Daniel wouldn't ever do that, whatever the consequences.

Perhaps you think he was taking his faith just a little too seriously but Daniel knew, as Christians have known across the centuries, that this life is not all there is and that for those who stand firm there is an eternal inheritance which nothing can take away. That's what Jesus was talking about in Mark chapter 8 when after reminding his listeners about the cost of being his disciple he then asked this question: *"What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?"*

I'm certain that Daniel stood firm to the very end because he knew that this life is but a moment compared to eternity; that the glory of this life is just a mirage compared to the perfection of God's beauty; and that the struggles, even the pain, the persecution or the death of a martyr which might come the way of a Christian in this life will be repaid 10,000 fold in the next when we see Christ face to face and share enjoy his presence for ever.

Without that hope we will always fail the test. Without that hope we will always stumble at the final hurdle. But with that hope, with the promises of God ringing in our ears and the hope of glory settled in our hearts, we will be able to keep trusting wholeheartedly to the very end, like Daniel, like the early apostles, and like hundreds of thousands of Christians since.

Let me close with a true story.

During the communist takeover of Cambodia Christians became known as enemies of the revolution and were rounded up and killed. A man called Haim, and his family, were arrested and, having been tied up together all night, they were told to dig their own graves.

The killers were generous. They allowed their victims a moment of prayer to prepare themselves for death and parents knelt with children near the open graves. When they finished praying Haim exhorted the communists and those watching to repent and turn to Jesus as Saviour, when suddenly one of Haim's young sons leapt up and ran into the forest.

Haim was amazingly cool as he persuaded the soldiers not to chase the boy but to allow him to call him back. Whilst the family knelt, the father pleaded with his son to return and die with them.

"Think my son," he shouted. "Can spending a few more days of life, as a fugitive in the forest, compare to joining your family here around a grave, but soon free forever in paradise?"

Weeping the boy walked back.

Haim said to his executioners, "Now we are ready to go."<sup>1</sup>

The chances are you and I will never face that final challenge, but there are many challenges we are more likely to face. What would you do if your boss says that you will lose your job if you discuss your faith with your clients? What would you do if new hate crime legislation prohibits you from saying that Jesus is the only way to God or that marriage should be between one man and one woman for life or that Islam is false? Would you be silenced or risk prison to stay true to Jesus?

But of course one challenge we will all face is the challenge of our own deaths. So let me ask where is your hope today? Is your heart so grounded in the God of the Bible, so warmed by the promises in scripture and so convinced by the death and resurrection of Jesus that even death's final challenge will not shake your faith? I hope so. I hope so because if that's the case then we are also likely to be able to stand firm for Jesus in the every-days, in the hard days and in the extreme days which may come our way.

The example of Daniel is an example we need to follow, but of course the example of Jesus is far more extreme and far more glorious. Daniel was threatened with death and was saved but Jesus was ridiculed and tortured and killed. After a night with the lions Daniel was lifted out of the pit alive and unharmed, but after a night that lasted until the 3<sup>rd</sup> day, Jesus was raised victorious from death and it is his resurrection that guarantees that all those who trust in him will be raised also.

That's why we can stand firm and trust wholeheartedly, no matter what the cost. May we do so, and may we encourage one another to do that also, for the glory of God and the building up of his kingdom. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Story taken from *Jesus Freaks*: DC Talk with The Voice of the Martyrs. Albury Publishing, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1999.