

## Daniel 3: Living Consistently

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### Daniel 6

I wonder if you remember 'Super Saturday' in the middle of the 2012 Olympics in London. Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> August was Team GB's best day at the Olympics in 104 years. Success began early in the day on the water at Eton Dorney. The men's four won gold and then 10 minutes later the women's double sculls pair did the same. The attention then moved to the Velodrome where Team GB easily beat the United States in the women's team pursuit, with the day culminating in a further three stunning gold medals during a magnificent evening at the Olympic Stadium. Firstly, Jessica Ennis crossed the line first in the 800 metres to claim gold in the heptathlon; Greg Rutherford's fourth jump confirmed his status as the long jump champion; and then Mo Farah claimed the first of his four Olympic gold medals in the 10,000m.

I wonder if you remember where you were that evening. Well, we were at the Gielgud Theatre in London's West End watching a stage adaptation of the film Chariots of Fire. The entire theatre had been turned into an Olympic stadium with the audience sitting in the stands and the atmosphere was electric, particularly as news of Team GB's success was relayed at both the interval and after the play had ended. It was a great play and told the story of Eric Liddell's success at the 1924 Paris Olympic Games, a success made all the more prominent because of his refusal to run in his favoured event, the 100 yards, because the heats were on a Sunday. The play's co-producer said at the time that *'Issues of faith, of refusal to compromise, standing up for one's beliefs, are just as vital today as they were then.'*

The same could be said of Daniel's stand in our Bible reading today from chapter 6. It's worth reading through chapter 5 to gain a full understanding of where we are in the story. In short, with the death of King Belshazzar following Daniel's interpretation of the writing on the wall, the Babylonian dynasty falls to the Medo-Persian kingdom under Darius. A new kingdom, a new king, a whole new regime change, and Daniel once more finds himself in a position of authority and influence. He so impresses the king with his exceptional qualities that Darius planned to set him over the whole kingdom as prime minister.

And here is where it starts to go wrong. Like chapters 1 and 3, chapter 6 is regarded as a *'conflict'* chapter. In chapter 1, the focus was on Daniel,

Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah as they refused to eat the king's rich food; in chapter 3, it's all about the three – now called Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, as they refuse to bow down to the golden statue and are thrown into the fiery furnace; and now in chapter 6, the spotlight falls on Daniel.

Darius' plan to appoint Daniel over the other administrators and satraps meets with a hostile reaction from his colleagues. Fuelled by jealousy, they seek to undermine and discredit him. Their first tactic is to find grounds to bring charges against him in respect of his public duties but, after a full investigation, they find that there is no dirt to dish. So they hatch a plan to get him on his faith. Their plan was to trap him, to force him to choose between his loyalty to his king or to his God. They knew where his ultimate allegiance lay so knew that their plan would be a success. With the utmost flattery, they dupe king Darius into issuing a decree, that under the law of the Medes and Persians could not be repealed, that anyone who prays to any god or man during the next thirty days, except to king Darius, shall be thrown into the lions' den.

How does Daniel respond? On learning of the decree, he goes home, climbs the stairs to his upstairs room where the windows opened towards Jerusalem, gets down on his knees and prays. He simply carries on doing what he has always done. His actions are, of course, in breach of the decree issued by Darius. He's well aware of that and of the penalty, but he will *not* compromise. For Daniel, to have ceased to pray to his God, for one day, let alone thirty days, was a line he was not prepared to cross, even if it cost him his life.

The extended dialogue between Darius and Daniel's conspirators describes the king's attempts to save Daniel. He realises his mistake, but there is nothing he can do, since the decree has been put in writing, and stands. His final words to Daniel as he is thrown into the lion's den are: *'May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you.'* Now, this was a trial of 'ordeal' for Daniel. Rather than just being a means of execution, it's likely that the lion's den was used to 'prove' the innocence or guilt of a person. A bit like a medieval ducking stool, if you survived the lion's den, you were deemed innocent.

Unlike the fiery furnace, we don't get to *see* inside the lion's den. What we do see however is the agitation of King Darius. He returns to his palace, spends the night without eating or entertainment, and cannot sleep. At first light of dawn, he rushes to the den and cries out in an anguished voice: *'Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, who you serve continually, been able to*

*rescue you from the lions?’* Wonderfully, the answer is yes, as Daniel answers from the den that he has been protected by an angel sent from God, who shut the mouths of the lions. Darius was the most powerful man on the planet at the time of Daniel, but he was unable to save him. Wonderfully, Daniel had a helper who had and has far greater power. Something then quite remarkable happens when Daniel emerges from the den unscathed. The king supersedes his own unbreakable edict, and issues a new declaration where he not only declares the supreme greatness of God, but writes to every part of his empire, demanding that they recognise Daniel’s God as the true God. And, a short time later, he issues another decree releasing the Jews to return back to Jerusalem, and rebuild the temple. The man who had witnessed a miracle in a lion’s den was the man God used to end the exile. Another example of where, as God’s people live distinctively, God *advances* his kingdom.

When Eric Liddle won gold in the 1924 Olympics, he was asked, in a newspaper interview, the secret of his success in the quarter-mile. His answer was: *‘For the first two hundred yards I run as hard as I can. The next hundred, with God’s help, I run harder. The final stretch, I set my sights on the line, looking neither to the left, nor the right, until I break the tape. One glance sideways on the closing straight and the race is lost.’*

The events in Daniel 6 take place in the year 539BC, nearly 70 years after Daniel and his friends were taken, as teenagers, into exile in Babylon. Daniel is therefore an old man of eighty, not the young lad depicted in so many children’s Bibles sitting down next to the cuddly lions! He’s a mature man, a mature believer, with a lifetime of unbroken testimony behind him. And now he faces perhaps the greatest test of his life. Where does his true allegiance lie? Will his testimony remain intact? Will he finish well?

How he responds to the challenge before him tells us much about Daniel’s consistency, in particular the consistency of his faith. He has a lifetime of faithful witness, like many in our church family of similar years to Daniel. This meant that when the time came for God to use him, he was ready. For Daniel, the greatest test came late in life. Many would argue that it is too much to expect a man of Daniel’s age to make such a costly and courageous stand? But this is a man who has lived a consistent life of faith all of his life. If he’d compromised now, his lifetime of consistent witness would have been discredited. How encouraging this is to older Christians to keep on running the race and to finish well.

In his book *'Singing in Babylon'*, Jeff Lucas reminds us that just as Daniel's God never left him, so Jesus promised his disciples that, whilst they would have trouble in the world, they would never be alone as he would always be with them. That promise is true for us today, particularly as we continue to live through the effects of a pandemic.

At the heart of the entire story of Daniel is the freedom to worship the one true and living God – and an absolute refusal to worship false gods. Whatever else Daniel and his friends were deprived of – family back in Jerusalem, the comforts of home, the familiarity of their own culture – there was one absolute sticking point for them: they would and *must* worship God, and they would not bow down to anything other than God. And that's a challenge for us today living in lockdown with our church buildings closed to worship. The freedom to worship God is not an optional gloss of faith that can easily be negotiated away – to the believer, it is life itself. So, how are each of us worshipping in lockdown? Like Daniel, are we consistent in prayer? Are we consistent in reading our Bibles? Are we prioritising radio, TV or online worship, even though it's not what we'd prefer at the moment? And are we planning to return to church once it's safe to do so?

Eric Liddell said, *'The final stretch, I set my sights on the line, looking neither to the left, nor the right, until I break the tape.'* Know that wherever life takes you, whatever you face, God is with you – present, powerful and worthy of your worship. Like Daniel, let's all make sure we finish well.

Again, three challenges which link with today's teaching:

**LISTEN:** How does chapter 6 encourage and inspire you to live a consistent life and to stand courageously when a tough test comes along?

**LEARN:** What other examples can you find of people who've made a stand late in life? In what ways do they inspire you?

**ACT:** What is God calling on you to do as a result of the teaching today? Are there ways in which your discipleship has 'slipped' during lockdown? What do you need to take up or put down during Lent?