

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who keeps you safe from the lion's dens in your life, Jesus Christ our Savior, amen.

The story of Daniel in the lion's den is a cute little story every child learns in Sunday School. Daniel refuses to follow the bad king's order to stop praying and worshipping God and is thrown into a den of ferocious lions where God keeps him safe and after wards the king changes and becomes a believer in God. Seems pretty straight forward and a good story for Sunday School because there isn't any blood and gore and God wins in the end. This story of Daniel is so much more than just a cute Sunday School lesson. It reveals to us a God who never leaves us or abandons us, even in the face of ferocious lions. There is no better news as we begin the season of Advent and prepare to receive our Lord Jesus Christ once again into our hearts than to know our God has become our Emmanuel.

As I pondered this story I began to wonder if it's really so simple. To find out, let's look at the context of the story. The book of Daniel contains several stories of God protecting Daniel and his friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from various kings who are filled with their own arrogance and power. These four main characters in the book of Daniel seem to represent the remnant of the Israelite people who were taken into captivity after Judah and Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. By this time in Chapter 6 Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego have already survived the fiery furnace without a scratch or burn. Daniel, with the help

of God has interpreted the literal "Writing on the Wal" from King Nebuchadnezzar's dream, now Daniel must decide whether to obey King Darius' edict to worship no one other than the king. Prior to where we pick up the story, Daniel had been reading the scrolls of Jeremiah and discovered the period of exile which Jeremiah had foretold to last 70 years was almost over. He was looking to ride out the remaining time like any prisoner who knows his parole is just around the corner.

Isn't it funny in an ironic sort of way that just when we think things are looking up and a better tomorrow is about to appear, that's when the evil and chaos of this world seem to redouble their efforts to undermine our joy? That must have been how Daniel felt when he discovered King Darius had been duped into declaring this absolute edict against praying or worshipping anyone or anything other than himself. It forced Daniel's hand. He knew the exile was almost over and even if it had more time than he thought, Darius's order was only for 30 days. After that, Daniel would be free to go back to praying and worshipping Yahweh as he had been doing ever since he was taken into exile. What would you do? I'd like to say I would do as Daniel did, but I'm not so sure.

Back in April of 1999 12 students and one teacher were killed in a mass shooting at the Columbine High School in Colorado. There is a story that Cassie Bernall was asked by the shooter if she believed in God. Her answer in the

affirmative was the last thing she said before being shot to death. No one is sure if this actually happened, but let's suppose it's true. Cassie had a decision not too much different than Daniel, say yes and face certain death or no and the shooter let's you go. The choice was even easier for Daniel. He didn't have to denounce his belief, only stop worshipping for 30 short days. He could have maybe even put curtains over his windows and worshipped in the privacy of his bedroom or in his basement, instead of directly in front of the window for all the world, including his enemies in the king's court, to see. Just hide your devotion to God so as to not offend others until the 30 days is over, that's all. Seems like a reasonable thing to do to avoid sure and certain death...

Obviously, I don't know what went through Daniel's mind, but I'll bet he never gave that choice a second thought. I wish it were that easy for me. When I was in Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War, we were not allowed to have open worship services. They couldn't stop us from reading our Bibles, but according to the status of forces agreement, we were prohibited from open Christian Worship. For 8 long months I had to comply. My choice was to comply or face courts martial. I complied, a decision I still question to this day. We read this story of Daniel and see how God protected him, but I know my faith isn't that strong. What about you?

Daniel is one of the heroes of the Bible because his faith never faltered.

Daniel never gave in to those nagging thoughts that God wasn't able or willing to save and protect him. He wasn't willing to compromise his calling from God to please the calling of this king or anyone of this world. Daniel's total and complete allegiance was to his God. As much as I'd like to think I would never deny my faith, I know I already have, not just in Saudi Arabia, but how many times right here in the land of the free, home of the brave. When faced with a choice to worship God or stay home and sleep in, sometimes I have chosen to sleep. Even this past month, when faced with the choice to join my fellow men in the Bible Study on Zoom on Tuesday evening, I chose to watch TV instead. Every day we all face the choice Daniel faced and too many times we fail the test. I know my sin and it's ever before my face. I know I'm a lost and out of control sinner who turns away from God. I suspect I'm not the only one...

So, what hope is there for those of us who don't have the faith of Daniel? What about those who fear the lion's dens of our lives more than we love God? Can we be saved? Why would God even care about someone who hid his faith rather than display it? Christians have faced this same question since, well forever... In the early Church, Christians had to denounce Christ and confess Caesar was God and Lord or face being thrown to the lions. Later on, the early Church had to decide what to do with all those former Christians who did

denounce Christ, but then repented and wanted to return to the Church after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

I don't know what Jesus will say to me or any one of you when we face Judgment day. What I do know is that when I compare myself to Bible heroes like Daniel, I fall miserably short. I try to live up to the demands of the Law, but I know I'm nowhere near where I should be. All I can do is put my best foot forward and totally rely on the grace and mercy of God when I fall. It's not a question of if I fail, but when I fail. So, every day I get up and I thank God for another chance to get it right and for the grace to forgive when I miss the mark. Then I try to apply that same grace and mercy to those in my life who are in the exact same boat with me. It's hard and demanding and I get it wrong as often as I get it right, maybe more often, but I keep trying.

May you have the faith of Daniel to face the lion's dens in your life without doubt and without denying your God. When you do fall short, may God's grace and mercy continue to lift you and give you another day and another chance to try again. May God's love strengthen you in your times of trial and temptation and keep you in his grace. Amen.