

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(May 8, 2016)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Thriving in Babylon

(Studies in the life and times of the prophet Daniel)

At Peace in the Lions' Den

(Daniel 6)

Study #6

Introduction: Epic Journeys...

I will admit to having told this opening story before. If you've heard me tell it - especially if you've heard me tell it more than once - I apologize to you in advance.

But I've never told it on a Sunday morning - and it happens to "fit" with something I want to say that rises from what we'll see in the Bible today. So, here we go...

Last July, my annual summer backpacking trip was taken with my son, Zach, my brother-in-law, Bob, and one of Zach's friends, Joe.

It was going to be epic. I had put together a five-day trek that involved starting out at 8,000ft and climbing to 10,000ft elevation within the first two miles, hiking for about ten more miles to the end of a trail and then going off-trail.

My route then had us navigating by map and compass to some un-named lakes, and continuing on to a 12,000-foot pass over the Continental Divide and going down from there to another lake.

From there, still off-trail, we would descend into a drainage that follows the upper reaches of a wild river.

At a certain point we would leave the river and ascend out of that drainage to another pass above tree line and then go down into another drainage, pick up a trail and make our way back to the car.

The trek would have covered about 40 miles and it would have been great.

However, at the end of the first day my brother-in-law and I were exhausted because we were suffering from acute altitude sickness and age. Plus, the off-trail sections appeared to be barely navigable. And the feet of Zach's friend, Joe, were beginning to form blisters.

So, while sitting around the campfire on the first night we decided to NOT do the planned "epic" route. Instead, we did an "out and back" trek. We saw the same scenery twice and all of our hiking was on a trail.

It was still a great trip and we had a great four days on the trail. But we did not complete what would have been a five day, 40+ mile, off-trail epic journey.

Within twenty-four hours of being back home I regretted not having made more of an attempt to do the whole route. I wrote to Zach to express my regrets and he quickly wrote back to say, "*Yeah, me too.*"

So...my sons, Zach and Ben and I have been planning *this summer's* trek since last August.

It will be the most extreme, most remote trip we've ever taken, consisting of an eighty-mile, point-to-point hike through the Wind River Range in Wyoming.

It will involve lots of off-trail and above tree line travel, most of it above 10,000 feet elevation. There are two glacier crossings, and four crossings of the Continental Divide.

It's going to be epic.

Yes, my knees are feeling a little gimpy. And I'm frankly not quite sure how it's going to turn out. But I've bought the plane tickets. It's happening.

I can be a comfort-loving soul and this trip is going to take me out of my comfort zone. Nobody's making us do this trip. We want to do it as a sort of "shout out" to the mountains, *"You whipped us last year. We're coming after you again."*

Sometimes, it's worth it to get out of a zone of comfort.

Everybody recognizes that staying in a physical comfort zone can lead to health problems. Too much sitting (you may have heard that sitting is the new smoking) can be lethal.

It's also true that getting stuck in a mental comfort zone, where there's no exposure to competing ideas, no challenge to long-held assumptions, can be dangerous. Our thinking can get stuck in ruts wagon-wheel deep that robs us of creativity.

It's also dangerous to live in a spiritual comfort zone where there's no pushing the envelope of faith, no taking on risks for God, no epic journeys for Jesus. Choosing the path of comfort leads to lethargy and risk-free living brings its own risks.

This morning we will see one of the best-known stories in the Bible and will watch Daniel move out of his comfort zone for his God, leading the way for each of us to follow.

Review...

We're nearing the end of our time in Daniel. In fact, next Sunday will be the final installment in this series of studies.

Next week, we'll skim over the entire second half of the book and key in on two themes that allowed him to thrive in Babylon.

One of these was a discipline that he nurtured over the years of his time in exile: prayer; the other was a confidence in God's sovereign control of the world's - and his own life's - destiny.

Today, though, we're finishing up what has been a look at the narrative sections of Daniel's book.

We've seen Daniel and his friends protected against having to eat non-kosher, Babylonian food and we've seen Daniel interpret a king's dreams. We've seen Daniel's friends saved from a furnace of blazing fire and we've seen the repentance of the king of the Empire.

This morning's look into Daniel's story again involves Daniel's dealings with a king. But you should know that the king is no longer Nebuchadnezzar and the kingdom is no longer Babylon.

We find the story of the changeover from the Babylonian to the Medo-Persian empire in Daniel, chapter 5.

Setting the Stage: The handwriting is on the wall... (Daniel, chapter 5)

Several kings have followed Nebuchadnezzar by the time we see King Belshazzar¹ seated on the throne.² Belshazzar is throwing a feast fit for a king and for his nobles.

In fact, this king was putting on a show. He wanted to display the splendor of his kingdom, so he brought out all the gold and silver vessels that had been taken when King Nebuchadnezzar had sacked Jerusalem.

These party-goers were using the holy utensils for idolatry as they **[5:4] praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.**

¹ We know very little about Belshazzar, beyond what we learn in this chapter (except that his name means "[the Babylonian god] Bel has protected the king").

² After the long, stable reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon was ruled by lesser kings, all of whom were on the throne for a very short time, as a result of which the Babylonian Empire began to disintegrate rapidly. His son Evil-Merodach (who released the Jewish King, Jehoiakim, from imprisonment) reigned for only two years (562-560). He was followed by Neri-glissar (560-556), Labishi-Marduk (a few weeks), and finally, by a man not even of the royal family, Nabonidus (556-539), who set up his own son, this Belshazzar, to reign after he died.

The crowd was having the time of their lives until their attention was drawn to a wall in the room where a disembodied hand, appearing out of nowhere, began writing a message in Hebrew (and yes, this is where we got the saying “*the handwriting is on the wall*”).

Not knowing the language, the king had no idea what the words the hand was writing meant. The Bible tells us, **[6]...the king’s face grew pale and his thoughts alarmed him, and his hip joints went slack and his knees began knocking together.**

Nobody present could tell the king what the words meant. So, the queen called in Daniel, the one man she could think of who knew the Jewish language and might be able to help.

Daniel did agree to help. And standing there in front of the king, he rebuked the king for not taking to heart the lessons God had taught his predecessor, Nebuchadnezzar. He had ruled foolishly, arrogantly. Then, he told the king what the handwriting on the wall meant.

[25] “Now this is the inscription that was written out: ‘MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.’ [6] “This is the interpretation of the message: ‘MENE’- God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it. [27] ‘TEKEL’- you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient. [28] ‘PERES’-- your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians.”³

When the king learned the message of the words, he gave Daniel great riches and promoted him to an even higher position in the government than he already had.⁴

But the handwriting was on the wall. The prophecy came true.

³ The interpretation of these words has been the subject of endless debate among scholars who don’t necessarily like Daniel’s interpretation. But, there is no reason to suggest anything beyond what Daniel has written.

⁴ It is not clear if “*authority as the third ruler in the Kingdom*” means (1). third in command; (2). ruler over 1/3 of the Kingdom, (3). one of three key rulers under Belshazzar.

Before that night was over Belshazzar had been assassinated and the kingdom over which the Chaldeans had reigned since the days of Nebuchadnezzar’s father (Nabopolassar) was transferred to the authority of the Medes and the Persians.⁵

The king of the Medes was Darius and Darius’ first task as co-regent (along with the king of the Persians, Cyrus) was to set up his own administration.

The Rewards (and dangers) of Integrity (6:1-9)

Daniel Prospers Under King Darius, the Mede (vv. 1-3)

[1] It seemed good to Darius to appoint 120 satraps over the kingdom, that they would be in charge of the whole kingdom, [2] and over them three commissioners (of whom Daniel was one), that these satraps might be accountable to them, and that the king might not suffer loss.

Darius - an excellent administrator (vv. 1-2)

In every new administration in every nation there is always some carryover from previous administrations. So also in the new regime of the Medo-Persian Empire, some of those who had served under Babylon’s flag would continue to serve Darius.⁶

One of these personnel carryovers was Daniel.

⁵ Secular history confirms the details of Scripture here. We are able to date the fall of the Babylonian Empire to October 11 or 12, 539 BC.

⁶ Critics have challenged the historicity of Daniel on many grounds. One of them has to do with the references to Darius, a name not found in ancient records. However, Darius may have been another name for Cyrus, and 6:28 may be translated, “*so Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius, [that is] the reign of Cyrus the Persian.*” It was common for rulers to use different names in various parts of their realms, so it is reasonable to suggest that “Darius” may have been a localized name for Cyrus. Or, Darius may have been a lesser ruler appointed by Cyrus to rule over Babylon. Daniel 9:1 suggests that he ruled by appointment rather than by conquest, and thus would have been subordinate to Cyrus who appointed him. This might mean Darius was a man otherwise known as *Ugbaru* whom we know did conquer Babylon.

One hundred and twenty satraps (roughly equivalent to our governor) ruled the various geographic and ethnic regions within the Medo-Persian Empire. Three men had charge over these one hundred and twenty, and Daniel was one of them.⁷

Obviously, Daniel had an enormous amount of responsibility and power. And by this time, he had been in government service for some sixty years. (sort of like some of our own public servants...)

He had served the administrations of several kings and now two empires. And when Darius saw how Daniel conducted himself he began to dream bigger things for him.

Darius - an excellent eye for great leaders (v. 3)

[3] Then this Daniel began distinguishing himself among the commissioners and satraps because he possessed an extraordinary spirit, and the king planned to appoint him over the entire kingdom.

He intended to make Daniel pre-eminent among the three. Problems arose, though, as the other government leaders grew jealous of Daniel's success. These green-around-the-gills leaders developed a plot to bring Daniel down.

Envious Leaders Conspire to GET Daniel (vv. 4-9)

No entrapment possible, except... (vv. 4-5)

[4] Then the commissioners and satraps began trying to find a ground of accusation against Daniel in regard to government affairs; but they could find no ground of accusation or evidence of corruption, inasmuch as he was faithful, and no negligence or corruption was to be found in him. [5] Then these men said, "We will not find any ground of accusation against this Daniel unless we find it against him with regard to the law of his God."

Daniel was the true "Teflon man." No accusation stuck - and for all the right reasons.

Try as they might, his political enemies couldn't find anything to pin on Daniel. He'd never been at the center of a scandal. He had never shirked an assignment.

He's probably at least eighty years old and nobody can find a record of one time when he was dishonest or negligent.

Everybody who opposed Daniel knew that the only weirdness about him, the only aspect of his life that might provide a case against him would involve his relationship with his God.

So, they devised a plot to snare him, based on what they knew of his prayer life.

Entrapment on the basis of integrity and faithfulness (vv. 6-9)

The officials approached King Darius with a proposal.

[6]... "King Darius, live forever. [7] "All the commissioners of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the high officials and the governors have consulted together that the king should establish a statute and enforce an injunction that anyone who makes a petition to any god or man besides you, O king, for thirty days, shall be cast into the lions' den. [8] "Now, O king, establish the injunction and sign the document so that it may not be changed, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which may not be revoked."⁸

For one whole month no one in the kingdom was to ask anything of any person or deity, except of Darius.

This didn't mean that a husband couldn't ask his wife to pass the salt. The request in view is a specifically religious request, as in a prayer.

⁷ This idea of having a subordinate triumvirate was not original with Darius, but was behind the words of Belshazzar as he promised him "*authority as a third ruler of the Kingdom*" in 5:7.

⁸ The book of Esther (1:18; 8:8) also emphasize the irrevocability of a royal edict under the Medo-Persian empire.

Darius would have seen this recommendation from his counselors as a golden opportunity for his subjects to show loyalty. It was ego-satisfaction and kingdom-building, all rolled into one great new law.⁹

The options before all those living in the empire were to go a month without praying (no problem - except for God-fearing Jews), to pray in secret (who would know?), to pray only to Darius - the representative of the gods, or to be cast, live, into a den of hungry lions.

The problem with this law, as with so many great ideas, is that it was accompanied by the law of unintended consequences. Darius didn't think through all the possible ramifications of signing the decree. But sign it he did.

[9] Therefore King Darius signed the document, that is, the injunction.

We know what the king meant to accomplish by signing the decree. But his counselors misled him. It wasn't meant to exalt Darius. It was meant to get rid of Daniel.

Shortly after the decree was signed, it was made public. Everybody knew what the law said. And having come to know Daniel so well in recent weeks, we're not at all surprised at what we read next.

Daniel's Fate is Sealed (6:10-15)

Daniel's "Epic Journey" of Public Prayer (v. 10)

[10] Now when Daniel knew that the document was signed, he entered his house (now in his roof chamber he had windows open toward Jerusalem); and he continued kneeling on his knees three times a day, praying and giving thanks before his God, as he had been doing previously.

⁹ Scholars who are familiar with Medo-Persian culture are quick to note that Darius' act, while foolish and wicked, was consistent with those Kings' claims to either be deity or to be the special representative of deity during their reign.

Walking into a trap - on purpose

Daniel didn't just start opening the windows of his roof chamber to pray toward Jerusalem three times every day when the edict was signed. This had been his practice for some time, perhaps for years.

Praying toward Jerusalem reminded him of his Jewish roots in Judea. Opening the windows reminded him that he was praying to the God who ruled the heavens and the earth.

Praying in this way was a wholesome thing to do. But, there is no biblical command that Jews were to pray three times daily facing Jerusalem. There was certainly no command that it be done in the sight of a watching world.¹⁰

So...why did he continue? There was no moral imperative at stake. Obedience to God's Law was not at stake. Why not close the windows and pray privately?

Because when you're living in Babylon, there will come times when risk-free living brings too great a risk to the soul. There will be times when playing it safe isn't.

Over the course of Daniel's years in Babylon he had navigated life with great wisdom. He had made compromises whenever possible. You don't remain in the halls of political power for sixty years without learning to play well with others.

And Daniel had done all of this while remaining a faithful, God-fearing Jew. His compromises never involved cutting corners with his God.

But here he drew a line. He as much as said, *"I'm taking a stand. I'm making a bold move. It is time for an epic journey"* - and he had no idea how this journey would end.

¹⁰ David notes the three times daily seeking of God (Psalm 55:16-17). But it does not come in the form of a command.

He had no command from God to continue praying publicly. He had no promise from God for deliverance from the penalty of praying. But on the day he learned of the decree he threw open his windows, as always, and belted out his prayers for all of Babylon to hear.

He wanted to do this outrageous, epic thing for God, something that would make the Babylonians sit up and take notice. He wanted to let them know that there is a God worth giving your life for.

I'd like for you to keep that thought in mind as we continue. I'll come back to it in just a couple of minutes.

A willing victim of entrapment

Notice that Daniel became the willing victim of entrapment.

Today, when we speak of "entrapment" we refer to an attempt to lure innocent people into a breach of integrity. Daniel's enemies had to count, not on his lack of integrity, but on his integrity to entrap him.

They knew that Daniel would continue to pray and to pray publicly. And we can just seem them shaking their heads, grinning as they think to themselves, *"What an idiot Daniel is."*

Well, he wasn't an idiot. He was a man who decided to take an epic journey into uncharted territory with safety unassured to give voice to the priority of praying to a transcendent God.

As soon as the trappers saw and heard Daniel praying (v. 11), they went running to King Darius.

The King's Tattle-Tale Officials Tell of Daniel's "Crime" (vv. 11-13)

[12] Then they approached and spoke before the king about the king's injunction, "Did you not sign an injunction that any man who makes a petition to any god or man besides you, O king, for thirty days, is to be cast into the lions' den?" The king replied, "The statement is true, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which may not be revoked."

[13] Then they answered and spoke before the king, "Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah,¹¹ pays no attention to you, O king, or to the injunction which you signed, but keeps making his petition three times a day."

You may remember that when Daniel's three friends refused to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's golden image, the king showed no concern for them or compassion at all. In fact, he was enraged at them.

But, when Darius recognized - too late - the trap that had been set for him and for Daniel, he was **[14] deeply distressed**. He never would have signed that decree if he had known that it would have snared his friend and trusted ally, Daniel.¹²

He realized that he had made a horrible mistake and looked for a loophole.

Darius Tries - and Fails - to Rescue Daniel (vv. 14-15)

[14] Then, as soon as the king heard this statement, he was deeply distressed and set his mind on delivering Daniel; and even until sunset he kept exerting himself to rescue him. [15] Then these men came by agreement to the king and said to the king, "Recognize, O king, that it is a law of the Medes and Persians that no injunction or statute which the king establishes may be changed."

So, the king has been victimized by the law of unintended consequences. He's been deceived by his most trusted officials. He's on the verge of losing his most valued counselor. And there is no "out."

As the representative of the gods, he will have to execute the order. There is no backing down.¹³ Having made the decree, Darius had no choice but to throw Daniel into the lions' den.

¹¹ They identified Daniel, not as one of the three chief rulers of the land, but as an exile from the land of Judah. How hard it is for old prejudices to die.

¹² I have long wondered if his officials were uncomfortable, seeing that they had made their king uncomfortable. *"Maybe this wasn't such a great idea..."*

¹³ This is the ages-long debate of "lex rex" (the law is over the king) vs. "rex lex" (the king is over the law) Nebuchadnezzar was above the law. Darius was not.

The Lions' Den, a Scene of Mercy and Justice (6:16-24)

The Decree - Carried Out (6:16-18)

The king's excruciating obedience (v. 16a)

[16a] Then the king gave orders, and Daniel was brought in and cast into the lions' den.

The lions' den is probably about how you would imagine it.

It was a large, square underground cavern. There was a tunnel leading from ground level down to the den and a wall in the middle of the den that divided it into two sections.

The wall had a door in the middle which the keepers could open and close from above, enticing the lions from one side to the other with food thrown down from above.

The cavern was open from above. You could look down into the den to see the lions and to see what the lions were doing.

So the king could see Daniel in the lions' den. He spoke to Daniel, before the door went up allowing the lions to rush over to Daniel's side. He spoke words of hope.

The king's hope (v. 16b)

[16b]...The king spoke and said to Daniel, "Your God whom you constantly serve will Himself deliver you."

And that is quite a statement from King Darius!

We suspect that He had heard the stories of God's power. He had probably heard how God had delivered His people from Egypt, from the Canaanites - even from Nebuchadnezzar's furnace.

The king hoped that this would all turn out well for Daniel. But he also knew that nobody walked away from the lions' den.

And before the door was opened that allowed the lions in to Daniel's half of the den, King Darius walked away. He was used to violence and brutality. But his words were false bravado. He expected the worst and didn't have the stomach to remain at the den.

The king's long night (vv. 17-18)

[17] A stone was brought and laid over the mouth of the den; and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the signet rings of his nobles, so that nothing would be changed in regard to Daniel. [18] Then the king went off to his palace and spent the night fasting, and no entertainment was brought before him; and his sleep fled from him.

At first light, hoping against hope, Darius rushed to the lions' den and called out for Daniel.

Daniel - Delivered. (6:19-23)

[20]... "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you constantly serve, been able to deliver you from the lions?"

And, from the cavern, Daniel replied. He gave glory to God for his safety, **[21]... "O king, live forever. [22] "My God sent His angel and shut the lions' mouths and they have not harmed me, inasmuch as I was found innocent before Him; and also toward you, O king, I have committed no crime."**

The flames didn't even leave the smell of smoke on his friends' clothes. Here, the lions weren't allowed to touch Daniel.¹⁴

Sure enough. Sometimes, when you make a bold move and take an epic journey, God shows up and does what only He can do.

He shuts the mouths of lions. He makes your clothes asbestos in the fire. He opens up the Red Sea and opens prison doors to set the captives free.

¹⁴ Cf. Hebrews 11:33, where faith is said to have been the operative power by which the mouths of lions were shut.

And then sometimes He doesn't rescue in miraculous fashion. We know that. The author of the book of Hebrews tells us of those who...

[35]...were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; [36] and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. [37] They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated [38] (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.

Today there are tens of thousands of people in hard places who have not been delivered at the last minute. We honor their courage and conviction.

If Daniel had not been kept safe in the lions' den, we might not have ever heard his story. But if we had heard it, we would be in awe of his faithfulness.

But what would have been your reaction if he had decided to keep his windows shut and had prayed silently and privately?

No judgment here. There is nothing sinful about praying silently and privately.

But, if Daniel had not opened his windows and belted out his prayers for all to hear, he wouldn't have encouraged God's people to bold living for the last twenty-five hundred years.

Had he not prayed publicly he would not have been an example of faith to all Jews and to all Christians for all time.

But since he did open those windows, you see his faith and you are prompted to your own epic journey of faithfulness.

I wonder what it will be?

- A first step toward boldly, lovingly sharing the love of Jesus with a friend who is far from God?
- An initiative to radically press Jesus into your home life?
- An unusually generous gift to further what God is doing in the world by supporting a missionary friend, our church, the poor?
- A willingness to take off the mask of pretending and tell a friend of your current on-going struggles?
- An expression of your dependence on God through consistent, prevailing prayer that He will do what only He can do in and through you?

Having seen the jump Daniel took into his epic journey, is it time for you to jump into yours?

Obviously, after God spared Daniel, King Darius was thrilled! His friend was safe and sound and the king gave orders that the old prophet be removed from the lions' den.

However, the conspirators who had deceived him and plotted to get rid of the eighty-year-old Daniel didn't fare so well.

The King's Enemies - Destroyed (6:24)

[24] The king then gave orders, and they brought those men who had maliciously accused Daniel, and they cast them, their children and their wives into the lions' den; and they had not reached the bottom of the den before the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones.¹⁵

And the final narrative section in the book of Daniel shows Darius, the pagan king of the Medo-Persian empire, in a posture reminiscent of his predecessor, Nebuchadnezzar - a posture of worship and praise to the one true God.

¹⁵ The destruction of the family members was in accordance with many ancient cultures in the case of treason (Persian, Greek).

Postlude: Darius Blesses the God of Daniel (6:25-28)

[25] Then Darius the king wrote to all the peoples, nations and men of every language who were living in all the land: "May your peace abound. [26] "I make a decree that in all the dominion of my kingdom men are to fear and tremble before the God of Daniel; For He is the living God and enduring forever, And His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed, And His dominion will be forever.

[27] "He delivers and rescues and performs signs and wonders In heaven and on earth, Who has also delivered Daniel from the power of the lions."

So...

Daniel's integrity and faithfulness moved King Darius to make plans to elevate him, politically.

Daniel's love for God expressed through prayer provided an opening for his jealous enemies to entrap him in a violation of the king's decree.

Daniel's epic journey, his bold move to pray publicly, led to a showdown in the lions' den - and to God's miraculous deliverance.

And the whole episode, the epic faith journey, resulted in yet another pagan king giving glory to God.

Who knows what amazing graces God might pour out on you and work through you when you launch your epic journey of faith?