

Christian Virtues Series: Courage Dan. 6 6/2/19

In 1964 during the conflict between Malaysia and Indonesia, a group of Gurkhas from Nepal was asked if they would be willing to jump from transport planes into combat against the Indonesians. Since the Gurkhas had no paratrooper training, it was a huge ask. After long deliberations with his troops, the Gurkha commander returned, saying they would jump under certain conditions.

The officer asked for the conditions. “First, the land must be marshy or reasonably soft with no rocky outcropping.” The officer agreed.

“Second, the planes must fly as slowly as possible, no more than 100 feet high.” The officer stated that planes always fly slowly when dropping troops, but that jumping from 100 feet was impossible, because the parachutes would not open in time from that height.

“Oh,” said the Gurkha commander, “that’s all right, then. We’ll jump with parachutes anywhere. You didn’t mention parachutes before!”

Courage. The Gurkhas really had it. The cowardly lion in “The Wizard of Oz” didn’t. How about you? Are you a courageous person? All of us would like to believe that we have courage. No one wants to think of themselves as a coward. But how do we get courage? Where does it come from? We can begin learning about courage from the many stories about courage in the Bible- stories that give us insights into this important

virtue. One of my favorites since childhood is the story of Daniel and the lions' den.

Daniel was an exile in Babylon. The nation of Judah and its capital of Jerusalem had been utterly destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. Many of Israelites had been taken to Babylon to serve the empire. Like the young man, Daniel, some of the brightest and best of the exiles were chosen to be trained and educated in the ways of the empire. Later in his life, after the Babylonians were defeated by the Medes and Persians, he ended up in a position of power under the Persian king Darius as chapter 6 begins.

It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom one hundred twenty satraps, stationed throughout the whole kingdom,² and over them three presidents, including Daniel; to these the satraps gave account, so that the king might suffer no loss.³ Soon Daniel distinguished himself above all the other presidents and satraps because an excellent spirit was in him, and the king planned to appoint him over the whole kingdom.⁴ So the presidents and the satraps tried to find grounds for complaint against Daniel in connection with the kingdom. But they could find no grounds for complaint or any corruption, because he was faithful, and no negligence or corruption could be found in him.⁵ The men said, "We shall not find any ground for complaint

against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God.”

(Dan. 6:1-5)

Daniel was an able administrator with integrity who was poised to become the prime minister of Persia! But that created envy among other government officials, who tried to find something in his record to bring him down, but there was nothing to find! Unfortunately, that didn't stop their conspiracy.

⁶So the presidents and satraps conspired and came to the king and said to him, “O King Darius, live forever! ⁷All the presidents of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the counselors and the governors are agreed that the king should establish an ordinance and enforce an interdict, that whoever prays to anyone, divine or human, for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions. ⁸Now, O king, establish the interdict and sign the document, so that it cannot be changed, according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be revoked.” ⁹Therefore King Darius signed the document and interdict. (Dan. 6:6-9)

Using flattery, these devious officials persuaded the king to establish a law that no one could pray to anyone except the king for 30 days under penalty of death by lion. It was supposed to show everyone's loyalty to the king, who would also be seen as god-like, since people were allowed to

pray to him. And we're told three times in the story that such a law could not be revoked by anyone. They must have been thrilled when the king signed their trap for Daniel into law. Here's what happened next.

¹⁰Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open toward Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously.

¹¹The conspirators came and found Daniel praying and seeking mercy before his God. ¹²Then they approached the king and said concerning the interdict, "O king! Did you not sign an interdict, that anyone who prays to anyone, divine or human, within thirty days except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions?" The king answered, "The thing stands fast, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be revoked." ¹³Then they responded to the king, "Daniel, one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or to the interdict you have signed, but he is saying his prayers three times a day." ¹⁴When the king heard the charge, he was very much distressed. He was determined to save Daniel, and until the sun went down he made every effort to rescue him. ¹⁵Then the conspirators came to the king and said to him, "Know, O king, that it is a law of the Medes and Persians that no interdict or ordinance that the king establishes can be changed." (Dan. 6:11-15)

So, now they've got him. Daniel continued his practice of thrice-daily prayer, throwing his window open as he prayed toward Jerusalem, the city of God. But his enemies were watching, caught him in the act, and reported it to the king. And now the king is trapped, too, because he admires Daniel and trusts him, but the irrevocable nature of the law restricts his action.

Clearly, we see Daniel's courage in this act, but we might wonder, "Didn't Daniel have other options here?" After all, the decree was just for 30 days. Couldn't he have just skipped prayer for that short period? Or, couldn't he have closed the blinds and prayed privately so no one could see? He could have done either of these things, and ethicists would probably have seen no problem in him doing so. However, Daniel clearly saw this situation as a conflict between God's law and human law, and he didn't want to appear to be someone who treated God's law as subservient to human law. So, he continued his prayer routine openly, knowing the probable outcome. Let's finish the story.

¹⁶Then the king gave the command, and Daniel was brought and thrown into the den of lions. The king said to Daniel, "May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!" ¹⁷A stone was brought and laid on the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet and with the signet of his lords, so that nothing might be changed concerning Daniel.

¹⁸Then the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; no food was brought to him, and sleep fled from him. ¹⁹Then, at break of day, the king got up and hurried to the den of lions. ²⁰When he came near the den where Daniel was, he cried out anxiously to Daniel, "O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God whom you faithfully serve been able to deliver you from the lions?" ²¹Daniel then said to the king, "O king, live forever! ²²My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths so that they would not hurt me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no wrong." ²³Then the king was exceedingly glad and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God. ²⁴The king gave a command, and those who had accused Daniel were brought and thrown into the den of lions—they, their children, and their wives. Before they reached the bottom of the den the lions overpowered them and broke all their bones in pieces. (Dan. 6:16-24)

Well, isn't that a nice bedtime story for your children! I'll bet we leave that part out of our Sunday School lessons! But this outcome for Daniel's enemies and their families is consistent with what we know about Persian justice. At any rate, Daniel's unwavering faith in God is rewarded, and he is spared from the hungry lions. And Daniel's God is shown to be active and powerful even in the heart of the Persian empire!

We learn a couple things about courage from this story. First, notice that Daniel's courage was based on a lifetime of trusting God. In the first chapter of Daniel, his faith was tested when he was commanded to eat food from the king's table that wasn't kosher. He refused, and God honored his obedience. He learned from that experience and others that God can be trusted. And he developed spiritual practices like those prayers each day that nourished that faith in God. He practiced staying close to God when things were going well so that when the tests came he would be ready.

And notice that first test of his faith had lower stakes than this one. He would only have lost his privileged position in the king's court. But God was preparing him step-by-step for the larger challenges that would come later. Poet Maya Angelou said that developing courage is like developing physical strength. Just like you start with lighter weights and gradually work up to heavier ones, if you want to develop courage, you start by showing courage in small ways- in conversations with friends, in your family, at your place of work- and then work up to the opportunities God will bring for your courage to have larger impacts. Or, you if you are a young person, you can start exercising courage now to help prepare yourself for times that will require adult courage later on. Young or old, we are always in training.

I'd like to end this sermon by pointing out that like Daniel, Jesus was also a man of tremendous courage throughout his life in what he said and did. He called out the powerful religious leaders for their hypocrisy, speaking truth to power. He risked healing on the Sabbath to demonstrate that God's priorities were not the same as theirs. He threw the money changers out of the temple and condemned the temple leadership. He hung out with tax collectors, prostitutes, and other notorious sinners and was roundly criticized for it. Jesus knows how hard it can be to have courage, because he faced those situations all the way to the cross. And the Spirit of Jesus resides in each follower of Jesus, giving us courage as we follow him.

As we enter into the Lord's Supper, ask God to show you areas in your life where you need to exercise courage. And ask God to give you courage like Daniel, and like Jesus!