

God's Way Out

"For Us and For Our Little Ones"

"Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance."

Ezra 8:21.

Lesson 18. The Way Through the Lions' Den

If you have some great desire in your heart, and your prayers for this do not seem to be answered, or if by chance some great danger looms up before you, read in this chapter how God worked marvelously for a famous Minister of State in like circumstances.

MOST of us would be highly pleased to be proclaimed third ruler of a great kingdom, as Daniel was. It would seem a pleasant experience to be arrayed in the scarlet robe of state, to have the chain of gold linking around one's neck, and to receive the palace and the salary which went with such an honored position. But if, just as the robing ceremony was closing in those wine-reeking courts, soldiers of the enemy came dashing in, swords all unsheathed to slay the king and all important officials. [1] It would be distinctly embarrassing! Better then to be an ordinary peasant and hope to remain unnoticed.

Yet in all strange places, and at all embarrassing times, the Lord God is able to protect His children. Even when great kingdoms are rising and falling, the weakest believer is safe in the care of the Father in heaven. The most ordinary boy or girl, man or woman, who trusts in God will be safe under His watchful eye.

And so it came to pass that the cruel Persian soldiers did not harm Daniel when they rushed into Babylon's palace hall and killed Belshazzar and his drunken lords. The fierce Medes left him unscathed. It seems that Daniel's fame had gone abroad to the Persians at Shushan and the Medes and Eebatana. In fact, Daniel had been in Shushan a few months before Babylon fell, for in a vision of the night given in Belshazzar's last year, Daniel found himself there. [2] The Persian leaders evidently knew Daniel's worth. Babylon fell, and the kingdom was given to the Medes and Persians. Darius the Median, or Cyaxares, as the Greeks called him, took the throne for two years, and then, at his death, Cyrus, his nephew, the great Persian general who had taken Babylon, became king. [3]

The "New Order" Now Begins

One of the first acts of Darius was to appoint one hundred and twenty princes over the various parts of the kingdom. Over these princes he appointed three presidents, of whom Daniel was one. Soon Darius found him to be a capable and energetic man who could be trusted implicitly. Daniel's long experience of Babylon's organization and of its revenues was of great value. In the new order the one hundred and twenty princes were to give accounts to the three presidents, and it was not long before the king noticed that Daniel's work surpassed that of all the others. After a few months, Darius thought to set him over the whole realm.

But in all his loyal and busy life as minister of state, Daniel's mind was on God. God's cause and people were dear to him. God's ruined temple was ever in his thoughts. The broken walls of Jerusalem grieved his spirit. Thoughts of the green hills and flower-scented valleys of the land of Judah were ever before him. When would the captives be allowed to return across the desert to their native land? [4]

Great Minister of State Studies Bible Prophecy

Today, however, hope was springing up in his heart. He had been reading again in the book of the prophet Jeremiah, and had found once more the inspiring promises which showed that the time was at hand. [5] Was it not almost seventy years since the first band of captives had been brought to Babylon Daniel among them?

Daniel and his companions had been taken from Jerusalem to Babylon in 606 BC And many others followed them and were dispersed throughout Babylonia. The prophetic scriptures of Jeremiah the seer declared that their captivity should end after seventy years. "Then shall you seek Me, and find Me, when you shall search for Me with all your heart and I will bring you again." [6]

And, behold, these sixty-eight years had gone by, Babylon was conquered by the Medes and Persians, and Darius the Mede now sat on the throne. The time for release was drawing near. "The end of the seventy years is at hand," thought Daniel joyfully. "We must turn to God with all our hearts."

"You shall call upon Me, and you shall go and pray unto Me, and I will hearken unto you," he read. God had promised. Would Darius now release the captives whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken? It seemed very unlikely. Why should Darius trouble about the Jews? They were nothing to him. He had many more important things to deal with.

But Daniel believed the voice of prophecy. Had not he himself seen Nebuchadnezzar's dream fulfilled? The power had gone from Babylon, the golden head of the image, as foretold. The lion of Babylon had lost its wings and now had been vanquished by the bear, Medo-Persia. The authority had come to Medo-Persia, "another kingdom inferior to thee," as the prophecy had declared. And had not Isaiah proclaimed that Cyrus would arrange the return of the captives? [7] Had not four score of Jeremiah's prophecies been fulfilled in the fall of Babylon? Then surely, his prophecy of the return home would also be fulfilled.

So, as Daniel knelt and prayed three times a day, with his face toward Jerusalem, he pleaded earnestly that God would work in some way to restore His people to their beloved country. Restore their beautiful city and temple again. Let children's happy voices be heard in those now deserted streets. "Cause Thy face to shine upon Thy sanctuary that is desolate," he prayed. And doubtless he prayed, as of old, for sound judgment, wisdom, and cheerfulness in his work, that he might bring honor to God's name.

So even in his old age (for Daniel was now over eighty) it would seem that this great Hebrew could be genial and pleasant while at the same time being competent and accurate in his work. That cheerfulness and intelligence which in his youth had brought him into favor and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs, now brought him into favor with Darius. His loyalty to God made him attractive above others. As Ellen White has rightly said:-

"The religion of Jesus softens whatever is hard and rough in the temper, and smooths whatever is rugged and sharp in the manners. It makes the words gentle and the demeanor winning. Let us learn from Christ how to combine a high sense of purity and integrity with brightness of disposition, A kind, courteous Christian is the most powerful argument that can be produced in favor of Christianity."

The Path of Honor Is Sometimes Thorny

But when Darius made known his plan to promote Daniel, the green-eyed demon of jealousy appeared. "This old Hebrew--does the king think we will submit to this man?" the other presidents grumbled angrily to themselves. And soon the spirit of jealousy spread to the princes.

"We shall never be able to help ourselves to a share of the taxes now. This Jew will notice if some man gives us a present to influence our judgments. No chance now to pick up a shekel or two for ourselves out of state contracts!" Thus the princes and the two other presidents probably discussed between themselves.

What should they do? "Let us find some fault in his work and then complain about it to Darius," someone suggested. "A gray haired old man of his age must make some mistakes."

But though the presidents and princes sought diligently for errors in the old statesman's work, they found not one. A true servant of God throws his whole heart into his work and makes his employer's interests his own.

And so, when these critical officers met again they had to confess they had failed. "Daniel is loyal to the king," they had to admit. "We cannot find any error or fault in him. Good work is part of his religion!"

"What shall we do?" they asked themselves. "We shall not find any occasion against this Daniel, except concerning the law of his God," they had to admit. But wasn't that the solution? Yes! Forthwith they conceived a diabolical plot to put the old statesman to a death that would seem to us like a haunting nightmare.

But Daniel, oblivious of possible danger, went about his work, and prayed day by day that God would open the way for the captives to return home to Jerusalem. Prayed that he might understand the will of God as revealed by the prophets. And one evening as he prayed there appeared a glorious vision before his astonished eyes. Yet not a vision, but a reality. For the angel Gabriel himself descended in glory into that prayer chamber with a thrilling message from the Most High.

"O Daniel," he said, as he gently touched the aged prophet. "I am now come forth to give thee skill and understanding for thou art greatly beloved." [8]

What courage and comfort came to Daniel's heart as he heard the assurance of God's love and felt the angel's touch! What would we not give to have this blessing as we kneel with our children, or in solitude! Thank God, we may have it! We may have this blessing that will send us forth with smiling, happy faces, with ambitions cleansed of selfishness, and with hands strong to do life's common tasks. As one author has written:-

"We may have no remarkable evidence at the time that the face of our Redeemer is bending over us in compassion and love; but this is even so. We may not feel His visible touch, but His hand is upon us in love and pitying tenderness." [9]

"Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them," the Lord Jesus assures us. So, inspired and blessed by the angel's visit, Daniel worked and prayed, and slept the sleep of peace as the stars shone down. God would take care of His people.

Wicked Men Will Make Persecuting Laws

When the conspirators' plot had been fully worked out, they assembled before the king in the perfumed court with a new law for him to sign. They would pretend they had a plan to unify the empire. Darius would probably fall into the trap as he saw the flattering part he was to be given. Anyway, he had so many laws to sign that they would probably catch him off guard--so they doubtless reasoned. "King Darius, live for ever!" they saluted.

"All the presidents of the kingdom [monstrous lie], the governors, and the princes, the counselors, and the captains, have consulted together to establish a royal statute, and to make a firm decree, that whosoever shall ask a petition of any God or man for thirty days, save of thee, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions."

"Now, O king, establish the decree, and sign the writing, that it be not changed, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which alters not," they concluded. "Oh," says the king, smiling carelessly at such a loyal display of respect for the crown. "And what is the purpose of this decree?"

"It will turn the attention of all the peoples of far provinces to the crown, and will thus promote unity and loyalty," reply the conspirators. So the king unsuspectingly signed the flattering statute. Daniel soon heard of the passing of the new law. He probably guessed at once that it was directed at himself. Shall he cease his prayer-life? It would only be for thirty days. He had been accustomed to pray with his windows open toward Jerusalem, as King Solomon had suggested in his prayer when the lovely temple was finished. **[10]** Should he now seek a secluded spot for prayer? Should he pray in the secret of his heart only?

"No!" His enemies would interpret such a change as disloyalty to God. No--he would go forward boldly--and try not to think of those ferocious beasts in that foul-smelling den. The jealous officials watched his window closely for a whole day. They peered out in the early morning -- "Yes, there he is, kneeling with his hands outstretched toward Jerusalem." They watched when the midday sun was high in the sky "Yes, there he is again!"

They turned their gaze to his window as the sun set over the western desert -- "Yes, yes! There he is once more. Now we have abundant evidence. Did we not hear him petition the God of his fathers three times?" they exulted to one another.

The King Caught Napping

They could scarcely conceal their satisfaction when they appeared at an early hour before Darius next morning. "Has thou not signed a decree, that every man that shall ask a petition of any God or man within thirty days, save of thee, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions?" they asked. "Yes, that is true," responded the king. "According to the law of the Medes and Persians, which alters not."

"It is our duty to bring an unpleasant charge before thee, O Darius." "That Daniel of Judah," they said, endeavoring to appear greatly pained and shocked; "that Daniel regards not thee, O king, nor the decree that thou has signed, but makes his petition three times a day!"

"Daniel! But Daniel has always prayed! The law must not apply to him!" exclaimed the king.

"But, your majesty, the law says 'whosoever' shall ask a petition."

"Yes, yes! But I never thought of Daniel. Why, he is the most valuable man in the realm. Daniel must not die," expostulated Darius angrily. "We regret this greatly, your majesty."

"Daniel must be exempted," declared the king. "We will set aside the law in his case."

"That cannot be done, sire. No law of the Medes and Persians can be changed when the king has signed it. Did not your majesty sign this law?"

"These scoundrels want to kill Daniel, my best counselor," raged the king inwardly. "And I have been trapped. Trapped into the plot." And he labored till sunset to find some way out of the law.

"No, your majesty, it is painful for us to see the prime minister liable to this death. But the law of the Medes and Persians cannot be changed when once the king has signed it. And your majesty did affix the royal signature."

"These villains have caught me!" Said the king to himself. "Me" Cyaxares the Great, son of Astyages, uncle of Cyrus. Greatest king on earth. [11] Caught! If I ever get out of this tangle they shall suffer. An innocent man is to die an awful death. My good, clever, doomed Daniel." Finally, however, the king had to give the word, and the executioners tramped off to Daniel's house to take him to the den of lions.

Daniel's Prayer--Time Interrupted Again

It was evening. Probably Daniel was at prayer as usual--praying that God would open the way for the captives to go back home to Jerusalem. Would he feel the angel's tender touch again tonight, and hear the assurance of God's love once more?

Far from it! What he heard was the tramp of soldiers' feet and then the sentence of a terrible death.

"We are sorry, your Excellency, but by the king's command you are to be thrown into the den of lions. Please come quietly." And so this was all the result of his prayers to God, was it? An old man like Daniel might have died with the shock of it.

Was this the reward for his loyalty to God? Was this the end of his prayers for the captives to return to Jerusalem? The king was at the den, pale and haggard-looking in the light of the soldiers' lanterns. "What a fool I was to sign that law without thinking it might mean this! Now there is only one bare hope for Daniel--a faint, faint hope."

"Thy God whom thou serves continually, He will deliver thee," he quavered to Daniel. Possibly the guards cursed ironically under their breath, and thought that Daniel's God was not likely to do what the king could have done himself. Down into the den, where the ravenous lions were pacing feverishly to and fro--down they lowered Daniel among scores of snarling, quarrelling beasts!

Hastily the great stone was rolled against the mouth of the den, the king sealed it with the royal seal, and mournfully turned his steps to the palace. "My poor Daniel--Daniel! What a fool I was to sign that writing. Horrible death! Poor, poor Daniel. Fool, fool, fool that I was!" And thus he raved and chided himself through the long, long night. Music? Food? Sleep? Who could sleep with the horrific specter of lions licking Daniel's wet and broken bones passing before his eyes?

The scoundrel plotters had a different night. Probably they laughed with satisfaction now. "The old Jew is out of the way. Gone forever. Wonder which of us the king will appoint in his place. Possibly he will name the man tomorrow. That was a cunning plot, wasn't it? The king fell right into it. Ha! Ha!"

But Daniel--as he was lowered down into the foul-smelling den to face those cruel claws, those gleaming eyes and hungry jaws, there descended with him another presence--the angel who had touched him at the time of the evening sacrifice. The lions ceased their roaring; their cruel mouths closed. The peace of the

creatures of Eden fell upon these raging beasts. What a miracle! "A Night with a Hundred Lions!" Yes, it was. But it was also "A Night with an Angel of God!" No harm came to Daniel. He was at peace with God. His was the best night of all.

The sentence had been carried out. Daniel had been duly "cast into the den of lions." The law had been satisfied. With the first gleams of morning light the king hurried to the den. Was there a chance that Daniel's God had intervened, as He did when the loyal Hebrews were cast into the furnace by Nebuchadnezzar? Ah, impossible! Who ever heard of such a thing?

"Daniel! Daniel!" the king half shouted, half lamented down into the den. Daniel! "Is thy God, whom thou serves continually, able to deliver thee from the lions?" He listened with quickening pulse and loud-beating heart. "Was that a voice?" the roots of his hair felt a cold thrill. "It is! It is! Daniel is alive! Alive!" Yes, up from the stench and the murk came Daniel's voice, glad and confident as of old: "O king, live for ever. My God hath sent His angel and hath shut the lions' mouths, that they have not hurt me."

Darius was half transported with joy. Daniel's God had worked a miracle! An astounding miracle!

"Guards, guards! Take Daniel up out of that den. Daniel is alive! Alive! The living God has delivered him." So Daniel was taken up out of the den. What a welcome he received from the king! Not a scratch or bruise was found on Daniel because he believed in his God."

"My loyal Daniel! Innocent of any wrong--yet those fiendish men plotted his death. Diabolical wild beasts they are! They shall go down among the wild beasts, with their kith and kin," exclaimed Darius revengefully.

Fearful sentence! It was carried out at once. Wicked presidents and princes, diabolical plotters and jealous accusers, all were seized by the king's guards, and with their wives and families thrust down as a long-delayed feast to the ravenous beasts in the lions' den. A sanguineous offering to the god of jealousy and lies!

Why Did Daniel Suffer This?

But why did Daniel have to pass through this ordeal? Why do good, loyal men and women have to pass through trying ordeals today? The reason is clear when we see the result of Daniel's terrible experience, a result which even Daniel could scarcely have hoped for. As a result of Daniel's miraculous deliverance, Darius made out a royal decree, "that in every dominion of my kingdom men tremble

and fear before the God of Daniel: for He is the living God, and steadfast for ever and His dominion shall be even unto the end. He delivers and rescues, and He works signs and wonders who hath delivered Daniel from the power of the lions."

And he wrote this to "all people, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth." So they doubtless heard the wondrous tale in Babylon. They heard it in Shushan. It was proclaimed in Tyre. They heard it in Samaria, they heard it by the ruins of Jerusalem and away on the border of Armenia.

Cyrus the Great heard it, too. "Marvelous deliverance!" he thought. "This is something new. What a mighty God is the God of Daniel! He is a living God, indeed." But a greater surprise was in store for Cyrus. When he came to the throne twelve months after, he found that this God had actually called him by name, nigh on a hundred years before he was born. [12] It was written by the Hebrew prophet Isaiah.

"Cyrus" so ran the prophetic scroll of Isaiah "his right hand have I held to subdue nations before him." ("Ah, there is the secret of my victories," Cyrus must have thought.) Cyrus he "shall perform all My pleasure; saying to Jerusalem, Thou shall be built, and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid." Cyrus "He shall build My city, and he shall let go My captives." Cyrus For Israel's sake "I have even called thee by thy name: I have surnamed thee, though thou has not known Me"; said God.

Cyrus Astonished

Great was the astonishment of Cyrus as he read these marvelous words in the prophetic roll of Isaiah. His heart was deeply moved, and he determined to fulfil the divine command. He sent forth a proclamation which made the hearts of the exiles sing for joy. [13]

"The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and He hath charged me to build Him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah." So ran the decree. "Who is there among you of all His people? His God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem."

"Let the men of his place help him with silver, and with and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God." And Cyrus brought out those five thousand sacred vessels of gold and silver which had been used on the night of Belshazzar's last tragic feast, and handed them over to the leaders of the returning exiles.

What a happy time that was! The people laughed and sang for joy. "The Lord hath done great things for us," they cried.

Daniel's prayers had been answered. It seemed like a dream, almost too good to be true. How all the hearers would listen now when Daniel foretold the coming of a great Deliverer! In such a short, short time, God had changed the whole aspect of things, as He will do in our day for those who trust Him. And that was the reason Daniel was allowed to be thrown into the den of those hungry beasts. The way back to Jerusalem was via the lions' den!

REFERENCES:

1. Daniel 5:29-31.
2. Daniel 8:1, 2.
3. Daniel 1:21; 10:1; Farrar's Bible Dictionary, Pages 158, 159.
4. Daniel 9.
5. Daniel 9:2; Jeremiah 29:10.
6. Jeremiah 29:12-14.
7. Isaiah 44: 28.
8. Daniel 9:21-23.
9. Steps To Christ, Page 119.
10. I Kings 8:38, 39, 47.
11. Xenophon's Cyropaedia, Volume 1, Chapters 1-4.
12. Isaiah 44:28; 45:1, 2, 4, 13.
13. Ezra 1:1-4, 7-11.

