



## **FACING UP TO THE FAT CATS**

I came across a video recently, filmed on someone's phone, of their child visiting the local zoo. The child, a little girl, was standing in front of an enclosure, with just a sheet of reinforced glass between herself and the animals inside. Between herself and a pride of lions. I watched as a lioness drew close, her eyes fixed on this child – who was happily chuckling away to herself – and pressed her nose against the glass. And the child continued to chuckle even when the lioness tipped her head to one side, opened her jaws, and attempted to close them over the child's head.

At which point I thought, "Thank goodness for that glass."

Today we come to a story that is all too often regarded as a kid's story (which it isn't). And in this story the hero has his own close encounter with a pride of lions.

Only this time ... there's no glass.

### **Daniel 6**

This chapter of Daniel comes with its controversies:

- **Darius' identity.** Darius is yet to be identified, though 'good possessor' may have been a title. The most likely candidate is a man named Gubaru, the general who took Babylon. Gubaru had once been governor of Gutium, which was often associated with Media.

- **Darius' decree.** Persians were usually accepting of religious diversity (mostly out of political expediency). However, there were times when Persian rulers had to remind the magi that they were supposed to be strict Zoroastrians. That's probably the context here.

So, a group of satraps / officials persuade Darius to issue a decree which makes him a priestly intermediary for *Ahura Mazda*, the God of Zoroastrianism, for 30 days. In reality, the whole thing is a set up, a ruse, to get rid of? Daniel. But what is the *message* in this story?

The message is that, as God's people, we will all, at some point, face persecution. How do we prepare ourselves for such a crisis? Or handle it when it comes?

We need to:

**1) Practice a consistent faith.** Daniel's enemies know they can trap him, because they know something about Daniel that should be true of all of us: he's consistent.

For too many Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century west, we have a tendency to compartmentalise. Now in some contexts this is a good thing – it's important to be able to say, "I've finished work now. Time to go home!" Or, "This is family time" or "This is husband-and-wife time" (!). But when it comes to our faith, if we find ourselves saying, "On Sundays I do the Christian thing; the rest of the time I'm like everybody else," then Houston, we have a problem! Jesus calls us to be His witnesses, and for that to happen He needs to be obvious. At every time; in every place.

You might be thinking, "I'm not sure I signed up for this!" But if Jesus is your king ... you did. And you need Him to be! I need Him to be. And the world needs Him to be.

**2) Practice a conversant faith.** As I said earlier, Daniel's enemies propose a law that would prove every official's loyalty to Zoroastrianism. And the king says, "OK."

So, the law is passed, and everyone seems to go with it. Apart from Daniel. Daniel knows where true power lies. So, irrespective of the Laws of the Medes and Persians, he opens those shutters, faces Jerusalem, and he? Prays. And in the process, he challenges all of us to make prayer a priority. More important than that Netflix show you're bingeing. More important than that book you've been longing to read. More important than that hobby you're into, that club you belong to, that promotion you're working towards or that holiday you're going on.

Daniel's faith doesn't just speak to others (important though that is): it speaks, first and foremost, to God. And God is listening. To his words; his actions; his faith.

**3) Practice a convicting faith.** Daniel is caught in the act and hauled before Darius. Darius knows he's been played – but he's no option but to have Daniel executed.

But it's not just those laws that are irrefutable: it's the evidence. As the saying goes, if Christianity were to be made illegal tomorrow, would there be enough evidence to convict you? There is for Daniel! But because of that, Daniel's faith has convicted others, too. In fact, Darius is feeling convicted before the miracle in the lions' den even occurs. Why? Because of the kind of person Daniel is; the kind of life Daniel lives. Hence the king's distress, his attempts to save him, and what is close to a prayer: "May your God, whom you serve *continually*, rescue you ..."

People are watching. How you live your life; handle the hardships; manage the messes; tackle the temptations. So, make sure your faith is undeniable. *Undeniably so.*

**4) Practice a conflicting faith.** Daniel is thrown into the lions' den, a symbol of power in many cultures (hence all those pictures of kings hunting lions, albeit starved ones).

And it's at this point that a miracle takes place: the next day, Darius heads for the lions' den, finds Daniel alive, and the lions supernaturally sedated. But the bigger statement – and the one that leads to an amendment to those 'unchangeable laws' – is Daniel's courage in the first place. And here's my theory: it is because of that courage that God is able to use him. Daniel's survival is the miraculous icing on the cake. What makes the difference is his willingness to say "No." To disobey one power, out of obedience to another. Out of obedience to God.

I'm not saying we should be intentionally obnoxious (what a T-shirt slogan!). But there comes a time for us all when we have to be faithfully disobedient. And make a stand.

### **For The Win**

So, the story ends on a high: Daniel is saved, and a new law is introduced, one that honours the God of Daniel.

Except ... if truth be known, the majority of people who have been fed to lions, or thrown into furnaces, or burnt at stakes, have *not* lived to tell the tale. Which presents us with this, somewhat daunting, question: what would *we* be willing to lose? Face? Frills? Fortunes? Freedoms? Friends? Family? Life? Some people struggle enough making small sacrifices. How would we cope making the *big* ones?

Hence Jesus' words in Matthew 16:24: "If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me." Of course, there's the promise of ultimate victory in all this. But even so, we have to be willing to face those lions. Whatever they may be.

We *have* to be a Daniel.