

Grace and peace are yours through Jesus. Amen.

Wow. Right away we are just jumping in and there's a bunch of things in this part of God's Word that need more context. Who's Daniel? What's this decree? Why did he pray? Let's start with Daniel. Daniel was a believer in the true God. Early in his life, probably as a teenager, Daniel had been taken captive, by a foreign government, removed from his homeland, forced to live 1000 miles away. And worst of all, Daniel was pressured in this foreign land to break God's law. But Daniel refused to break God's law. God blessed him. People saw his conviction. And Daniel actually was elevated to a high position. In this foreign government. That was ruled by a king who didn't care about the true God. Fast forward seventy years from his teenage days. Daniel is now over 80 years old. A new king is in power. Daniel didn't vote for him, by the way. You don't vote for kings. One thing stayed the same. Daniel served the king with distinction. Well, two things stayed the same. This new king appointed Daniel to one of the top three positions in the government, and was actually planning to appoint Daniel over the whole kingdom. Daniel faithfully served God. Daniel faithfully served a government that didn't believe in the true God.

That lack of faith in the true God slapped the octogenarian Daniel in the face. The other high officials in the government, we'll talk more about them later, they convinced the king to pass a decree, that for 30 days no one was to pray to any god, at all, or any man, at all. Except the king. Wow! The king passed the decree. Wow again! And this was a law of the Medes and Persians, which as we heard, cannot be repealed. Oh, and the punishment for breaking this law? Be thrown into a den of lions.

What's Daniel to do? Well, we don't hear him complaining about the king, or posting on social media. I know there wasn't social media in Daniel's day. We don't hear him railing against this stupid law. And it's hard to imagine a more stupid law than you can only pray to the king! What kind of egotistical maniac passes that kind of law? Daniel got down on his knees. He was humble. Here was a guy second only to the king, as important an official in the government as there was. And Daniel got down. On his knees. Always humble before God.

Always praying to God. Three times a day. Like you could set your clock by watching Daniel pray. Daniel had to be a busy guy, with all his government duties. But just like we eat three times a day, or maybe more, Daniel prayed three times a day. Daniel didn't stop serving God to serve the government.

Daniel prayed with the window open. That was his usual practice. Daniel wasn't showing off. Jesus tells us not to pray just to show off. Daniel gave a clear testimony to his faith. And there are hints that people often prayed, windows open, facing Jerusalem, the special city 1000 miles from Daniel where the LORD has put his name. Given the decree, if Daniel closed the windows, or went underground, he would be giving the impression that he was obeying the decree, that serving his government was more important than serving his God. Daniel was not going to do that, not as a teenager, not ever.

And he was over 80 years old. He could have just said, "I can serve better in my position in one piece, than in many pieces in some lion's stomach. I can help God's people who live in this land better if I just keep quiet and keep my position. But even at 80 plus, that was not an option for Daniel, not now. Not then. Not ever!

And I kept the best part of Daniel's prayer for last. HE GAVE THANKS TO GOD! What? He gave thanks to God? Daniel has served faithfully, for over 70 years, numerous kings. Some new guy comes along, passes just about the stupidest law anyone could imagine. And Daniel gives thanks to God. Reminds me of a verse in the Bible. Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Daniel didn't just give thanks for the good and easy, but when it was hard, difficult, the government was defiant to his faith.

Man, I want to be like Daniel if God gives me 80 years, serving God so faithfully, praying three times a day, giving thanks in difficult circumstances, having such courage of conviction, that if my life is literally on the line, I will not back down, faithfully serving God first and faithful serving the government. But is that what we do? Dreading next Tuesday because there's no good choice? And those who lose power, will rush to change things in a lame duck session. Give thanks to God? For these idiots? Pray three times a day? God, I'm so busy! Get down on my knees? Come on, God. I'm ok on my own. How can a poor, miserable sinner like me be like Daniel?

Only by the grace of the God to whom Daniel prayed. Daniel's God is our God. The God who loved Daniel is the God who sent his Son to die for Daniel, and to die for us. God gave Daniel the eyes of faith to see, "My whole life is serving God. And then I get a better eternity serving him perfectly." God sent Jesus! Jesus gives us eternal perspective. Jesus dying for you means you can give thanks in all circumstances, because all the circumstances of this earth are temporary. Only Jesus is eternal. Only Jesus has an eternal kingdom. Even this king had to admit later on, the kingdom of Daniel's God will not be destroyed. Daniel's God is the God who rescues and saves. He rescued us with the ransom of his own blood, so that even if we have to shed our blood, it won't change our

eternity. Jesus saved us from all our sins, so we can pray to him, every day, more than once. Give thanks to him, all the time. Serve him, and yes, even serve government faithfully.

You know, Daniel's worst enemy here wasn't the king. It was the other government officials. They were so jealous of Daniel, they hunted and plotted for a way to get Daniel in trouble. But after a long time of scheming they realized, "Daniel is so honest and trustworthy, the only way we will get him in trouble is if it has something to do with the law of his God." Wow. I pray people would say that about me. So these jealous officials went in and sucked up to the king. Can I say, "sucked up"? They kind of tricked him into passing this law, knowing Daniel would not obey it. And then picture the scene, of a sneaky mob watching their watches. I know there weren't watches in Daniel's day. Crouching under Daniel's window. Popping up at just the right moment, "Gotcha!" Oh and by the way these guys were racist and xenophobic. When they brought Daniel to the king, they made sure to mention, "He is one of the exiles from Judah." Jealous, racist, xenophobes.

Well, the king tries to release Daniel, but those darn Medes and Persians. The law can't be repealed. This has to be a dramatic movie scene. The king shouts out his farewell to Daniel, "May your god, whom you serve continually, rescue you!" Then the king, with tears in eyes, barely able to roll his ring on the seal, seals Daniel's fate. And the jealous officials smile ear to ear as they double the seal so that Daniel's situation might not be changed.

Longest night of the king's life. Can't eat. No fun. Can't sleep. Daniel on the other hand? He's got an angel with him. The mouths of the lions are closed. Not a wound. Not a scratch. I can't prove this from the Bible, but I like to picture Daniel curling up all night and using one of the lions as a soft, warm pillow. Daniel slept better with the big, bad lions, than the king did, with his big, bad conscience.

Who runs into the Coliseum and expects the gladiator to have killed all the lions, with no weapons? But the king ran to the den, at the first light of dawn, and maybe, just maybe, this god whom Daniel serves, continually, faithfully, with decades of determination, maybe there's a chance, this god was able to rescue him. And not only was he able. He did. He did! God rescued Daniel. God sent his angel. God shut the mouths of the lions. Daniel was found innocent in the eyes of God and also Daniel had never done any wrong before the king.

Even the king had to admit, "Daniel's God is the real deal. People must fear and reverence this god." Now, the king may have just been adding Daniel's god to his list. We don't know and that isn't the point. But it's worth saying again. This king had to admit that the kingdom of Daniel's God will not be destroyed. Daniel's God rescues and saves. Daniel served God faithfully and God took care of him.

Now, I doubt any of us will face a literal den of lions. And we don't have a promise from God that if we did, God would choose to rescue us on earth. Maybe God would use the lions as his tool to send you to heaven. Maybe God will use this virus to take away all your sickness and suffering in heaven. That would definitely be reason to give thanks to God.

But what else do we learn from Daniel in the den of lions? You can serve God and the government. Serve God first. Put him first. God is the only one who rescues eternally and saves from sin. God will take care of you, no matter who wins next Tuesday, no matter what stupid laws are passed or stay in place. God's got this. God will take care of you. God took care of Daniel in the face of a horrible government, with a king who thought he was god, and jealous, racist officials advising him. Please don't think I'm comparing anyone in this account to any current leader at any level of our government. The point is: God has used terrible governments in the past. God will continue to use governments, good and bad, in the future. Maybe you feel like Tuesday gives you only two bad choices. Well, at least we have a choice. Daniel sure didn't. But Daniel served God first and government second.

How do we serve government? Give thanks to God for government. I know it can be hard to believe, but government is one of God's gifts to us. God wants us to respect our leaders, give them honor, because God will use their temporary rule to carry out his eternal plans. Pay taxes. Yes, Christians can be happy to pay their taxes, maybe not because of everything taxes are going toward, but because paying our taxes makes God happy. Even Jesus paid taxes, and the government crucified him. And finally, most importantly, pray for our government. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. Just a few righteous people in a city have saved entire cities. Just one person like Daniel, serving God first and government second, was enough to make an impression on an entire kingdom. Serve God. No matter what the government does. Pray for the government. No matter who wins. Serve God and the government? Yes. You can. Amen.

God, give us strength to serve you and our government. Amen.