

An Unchangeable Law

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: In our Lenten devotions this year we have been following the life and ministry of the Prophet Daniel – and in particular grappling with issues that inform us about how to live as people of Christian faith when immersed in a predominantly unbelieving world. And hopefully you’ve found this series to be helpful. I know I have. But as we continue with Daniel this evening, the thing I’d really like to highlight is what a remarkably Christ-like character Daniel is.

We could start with his name, which means “God is my judge”. And while we might understand its meaning in the sense that one day we will all stand before the Lord in judgment, that’s really not the main idea. No, you have to remember that in the Old Testament the Judges of Israel were leaders who decided cases in dispute according to God’s Word. Many of them, like Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson were also military leaders who delivered the people of Israel from the oppression of their enemies. This is more the idea behind the name Daniel. It means God is my judge in the sense that I look to him to guide me by his word and help me to make the right decisions when faced with difficult and perplexing problems. I also look to the Lord to deliver me from my enemies. And having studied Daniel’s life, we see that his name fits him perfectly – it accurately describes the way he lived; but my point is that it also describes the way Jesus lived during his earthly ministry. He looked to his heavenly Father to lead, to guide, and ultimately to deliver him even from the bonds of death.

Another way to see Daniel Christologically is to consider the broad sweep of his life. He was a member of royal family of King David. He was taken into captivity in Babylon, largely on account of the sin and rebellion of others – the unfaithful people living in the land of Judah. There he suffered terrible humiliations. He was made to be a servant; but in his role as a servant, he was placed in a position to help smooth the way and ease the suffering of the later exiles – God’s people who would be taken into captivity after him. In these things Daniel prefigures the life of Jesus, who was also descended from the line of David. He too suffered and was humiliated because of the sins of others. And by his suffering and death, he made our passage into death a thing no longer to be feared. He made the way safe and secure for us.

And there are other connections between Christ and Daniel: both were filled with godly wisdom, both were able to reveal divine mysteries hidden to others, both had a special outpouring of the Spirit resting upon them, and both were tremendous examples of faith and faithfulness in the midst of trials. So there are a lot of ways in which Daniel prefigures the life and ministry of Jesus. And this evening – and again on Easter morning – I’d like to explore several more of these connections.

In our last midweek evening service, we heard how Daniel read and interpreted for King Belshazzar the mysterious writing on the wall that appeared when he, Belshazzar, was going out of his way to insult the Lord God and mock his prophecy concerning the end of the Babylonian Empire at the hand of the Persians. Seeing the Persian army withdraw from its siege of Babylon, the king foolishly believed the prophecy had failed. And so, to show his triumph over the Lord God and his Word, he ordered that the sacred vessels taken from the Temple in Jerusalem be brought in to his banquet hall in order that he and his guests might drink wine from them in celebration. It was a big mistake, as the king learned too late. When Daniel was brought in to read the writing for him, the king learned of the Lord’s judgment: “God

has numbered your kingdom and finished it. You are weighed in the balances and found lacking. Your kingdom is divided between the Medes and the Persians.” That very night the Persians captured the supposedly invincible city of Babylon. Belshazzar was executed. The Babylonian Empire was through. And Darius the Mede, who is also known as Cyrus of Persia, became the king of a brand-new Persian Empire – just as the Lord had said.

And it certainly speaks well of Daniel that he was retained in a position of high responsibility by Darius. No doubt he replaced the vast majority of the Babylonian leaders and administrators with his own people; and it may be precisely because Daniel wasn't a Babylonian by birth and yet had over sixty years experience in senior leadership positions helping to run the empire that he was retained. Darius, we know, was a good leader. And one of the best attributes of a good leader is to be able to spot, keep, and promote talented subordinates.

It's clear that he recognized Daniel to be a gifted and able administrator. And so it was that Darius appointed him to be one of the three presidents who oversaw the work of the 120 satraps who governed the provinces on the king's behalf. But it wasn't long before the king recognized that even in this exalted position, Daniel's talents were being wasted. Thus the king decided to appoint him as his prime minister – his right-hand man. Unfortunately for Daniel, the same excellent attributes that earn him the respect and admiration of the king also provoke toward him the envy and antagonism of the Persian nobles. They bristle at the idea of having this relatively unknown foreigner placed above their heads. They resolve to eliminate him. The easiest way to do it, they suppose, is to find some incidence of corruption or unfaithfulness in Daniel's record of service. And if you're familiar with the way political matters in the ancient world were conducted (and still are today in most countries – including our own sometimes), then you know it normally would not have been a hard thing to discover. They are surprised to find, however, that Daniel is as clean as a whistle. No bribes taken, no skimming profits or arranging special deals for friends – they come to the conclusion that the only way to accuse Daniel would be to find some discrepancy between his pious observance of his religious faith and the laws of Persia. And when they can't find one, they decide to create one.

But before we get to that, though, I want to highlight here some more parallels to the life of Jesus. We know that in an absolute sense, he is the King's right-hand man. God the Father has placed his approval on his Son and has appointed him to rule over all his creation. And yet when the Son comes to his people Israel and to Jerusalem his capital city, he is treated like an unwelcome outsider by the leadership and religious authorities. They want no part of him. And they too are envious of his ability to perform miracles and his popularity with the people. So they decide to kill him. They try dozens of different ways to accuse him or to trip him up with their sly questions that are designed to make him appear to be guilty of blasphemy or sedition against Rome; but nothing works. They can find no fault in him. In the end, they decide to trump up a case against him. They'll do whatever's necessary to have him condemned.

For the Persians with their sights set on Daniel, it isn't too difficult. They know that Daniel follows a strict routine of religious devotion, praying three times daily to the Lord while facing west toward the ruins of Jerusalem. They also know Darius, the king, has a weakness: namely, his vanity. They put the two together and come up with a perfect solution to their problem. Oozing unctuous charm they slither up to the king with a decree all ready for his signature. “Your majesty, we – that is, all your subordinate leaders across the empire – have been racking our brains to come up with a way to properly honor you for being, well, for being the terrific guy you are. We are so blessed to have you as our commander in chief. And so we thought, as a way to show our undying appreciation for your inspirational leadership and all-surpassing munificence, that you should sign this law we came up with. It decrees that for the

next thirty days, no one in the empire is to direct any petition to anyone – no god or man – but to you alone—for after all, in this empire, you are the fount from which all blessing flows. And we want everyone to know and to recognize it. Oh, and for the ungrateful slob so foolish and inconsiderate as to not obey this very minor concession to your greatness, the only reasonable sentence must be having him thrown to the lions. What do you say, O King? Won't you do this for us?"

For good reason they say it's lonely at the top. A man in Darius' position never knows if his subordinates serve him out of fear or out of love and respect. And no doubt he was flattered, "Gosh, I had no idea they all cared for me so much. I guess it would be wrong to disappoint them and not accept this honor." And so he signs the document, which according to the law of the Medes and Persians, cannot be changed. And that's interesting: that regulation was put into the Persian law code to limit the power of the king and force him to think through his decisions. In Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon, and that of his successors, a law could change a dozen times a day according to the whims and wishes of the king. And while that gave the king unlimited power, it left subordinates always wondering what changes might be in store. It made things uncertain and inefficient. The Persians didn't want that to happen in their empire. They wanted their kings to enact only legislation that had been thoroughly considered and reviewed. If this becomes law, what are the possible unintended consequences? What exceptions should be granted? They knew that even well-intended laws can sometimes cause more damage than they resolve, so they made it impossible even for the king to change a law he signed, thus forcing him and his advisors to move ultra cautiously and circumspectly when making a new law. And while we can all see problems with this system, you have to admit that it's infinitely better than what's proposed by certain US lawmakers who insist that we must first pass laws we haven't read and don't understand in order to find out what's in them. But I digress ...

It's not long before the king discovers he's been duped. Daniel is not going to change his routine of devotion to the Lord. While he's more than happy to serve the king in the affairs of state, he will not allow any man to stand between him and the worship of his God. So Daniel continues to pray to the Lord as before. And it's worth noting that he's not going out of his way to make a public display of his protest; he's merely doing exactly what he's always done. But it provides his enemies with the ammunition they need to get Daniel condemned because now what he's always done has become a capital crime. Specifically, it's considered an act of high treason against the king – the same crime, interestingly enough, for which Jesus was ultimately accused and condemned.

I have to wonder how Darius felt about his subordinate leaders when he realizes that they manipulated him into this unwelcome position. Any illusions he might have had about their genuine loyalty and devotion to him evaporate in a flash. He knows they have only their own interests and not the good of the empire at heart. But now his hands are tied. He can't change his own law – as they insist on reminding him. And though he labors mightily to find some way, some loophole, some legal technicality by which he can bend the law to his favor and get his one faithful servant, Daniel, off the hook, he can find none. It's worth noting too that in all this Daniel himself is silent. We don't hear one word from him at his trial. Even threatened with death by ravenous lions, he's still not making a petition to the king. Instead he's placing his trust and confidence in the Lord alone – again reminding us of Jesus who remained silent at his trial while Pontius Pilate (of all people) worked frantically to get him off the hook.

Darius labors a whole day at it – to no avail. At sunset Daniel's accusers return to remind the king of the law he put into effect which cannot be changed – a law that he feels guilty for allowing himself to be seduced into signing. He knows that Daniel is now going to die

because of his own foolish vanity. He is both heartbroken and racked with guilt; but there is nothing he can do. So Daniel is brought forward – again without uttering a word – and he is cast into the lion’s den. And here the king does something remarkable: no one in his kingdom can petition any god or man except for the king; but the law says nothing about to whom the king himself may make petition. And so he utters a prayer on Daniel’s behalf, “May your God, whom you serve continually, deliver you.” A large stone is rolled over the mouth of the lion’s den, and seals are put in place to ensure that no one disturbs it – again reminding us of the stone that covered the entry to Christ’s tomb and the seal that was placed upon it.

The king then spends a sleepless night fasting and being tortured by his thoughts, which is probably not unlike how the disciples of Jesus spent the night of Good Friday, all of Holy Saturday, and the next night. Darius because of a law that could not be changed – the foolish law he passed and now bitterly regrets. And because of his unchangeable law, his dear friend and loyal servant Daniel is left sealed in a dark den with the hungry jaws of death all around him.

And Jesus too, at sunset on Good Friday, is enclosed in the jaws of death because of an unchangeable law: it’s the perfect law of God that says “the soul that sins must die”. The Persians made their laws unchangeable in order to minimize the possibility of the king making a mistake or passing an unjust law. But God’s Laws are always just and perfect. He is incapable of making any mistakes. And because of our many sins, our innumerable violations of God’s holy Law, each one of us richly deserves to die both in time and eternally in the fires of hell.

But God is also love. And in love he sent his right-hand man, his Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, to bear the burden and guilt of our sin for us. He made him who knew no sin to become sin for us. On the cross he suffered unimaginable agony for us. On the cross he died for us. And then his lifeless body was sealed in a cold, stone tomb – because of us and God’s unchangeable law that rightly condemns us.

And that’s the thought I want to leave you with this evening. When reflecting on the events of Good Friday, it’s easy to point out the villains: Judas who betrayed him, the religious leaders who opposed him, the crowd that turned on him, the disciples who abandoned him, Peter who denied him, Pontius Pilate who washed his hands of him, the soldiers who mocked and crucified him. They all have his innocent blood on their hands. But tonight forget about them. Look at your own hands. See his innocent blood on them. Spend this evening like Darius knowing that your best friend and faithful King suffered, died unjustly, and was sealed in a tomb in order to keep God’s unchangeable Law for you. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!