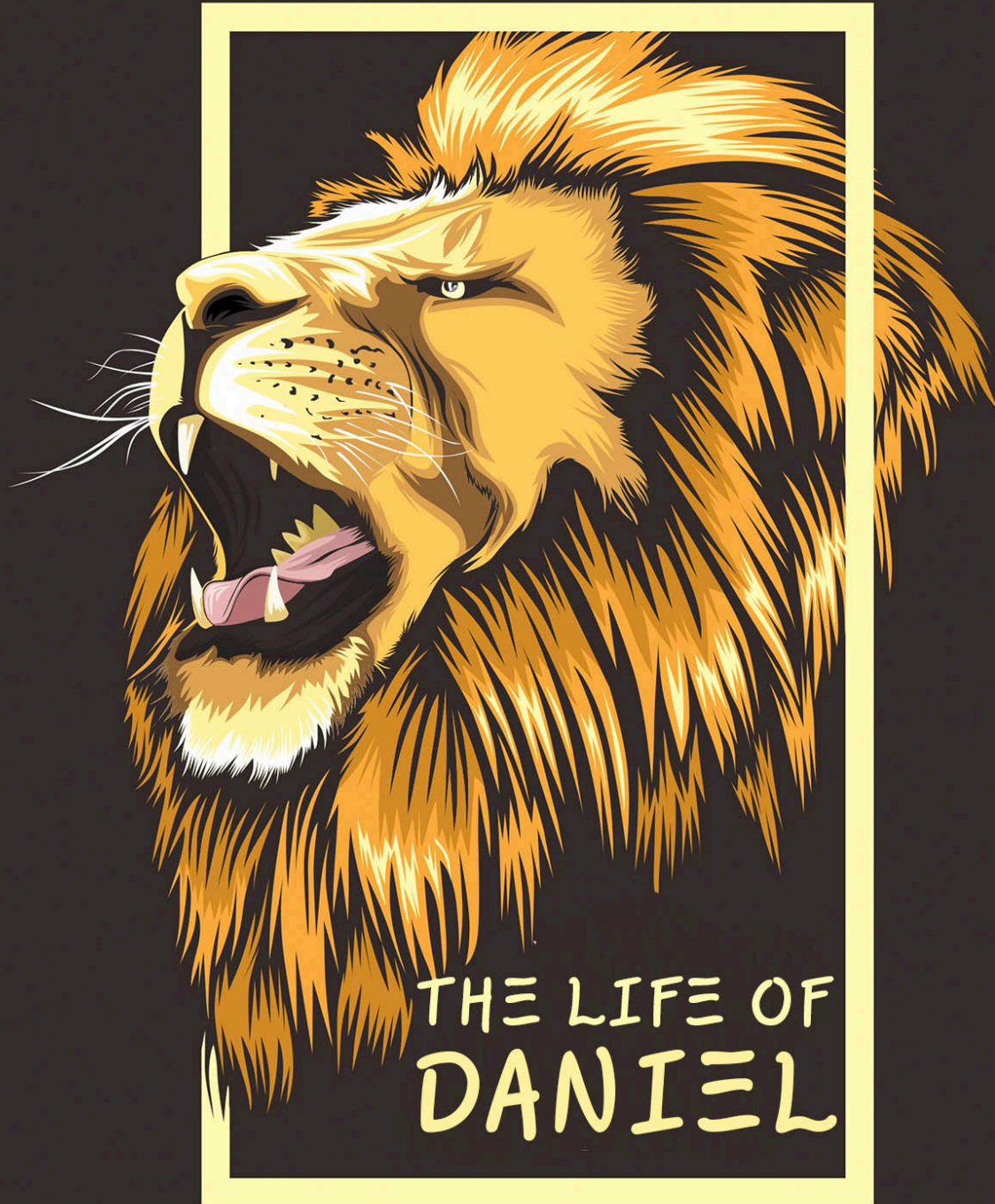


SMALL GROUP GUIDE



THE LIFE OF
DANIEL

LIVING BOLDLY WHEN FACING ADVERSITY

CIRCLES 01/03: HOW TO LIVE BOLDLY WHEN FACING ADVERSITY

If you were to ask children's church teachers some of their favorite stories to tell, I'm sure you'd hear examples like Jonah and the Whale, Noah's Ark, and Jesus Feeding the Five Thousand. They're all classics in the church classroom. If asking for a top-five list, I'm sure most teachers would also include a story or two from the life of Daniel -- a prophet who lived through the dark days of Israel's exile. From the lion's den to the friends in the fiery furnace to the refusal to bow down to the golden idol, this prophetic book contains some of the most famous Bible stories told to kids.

Daniel, a well-known prophet, shines as an example of being fearless when everything seems hopeless. On every page of Daniel's story, we meet a man who lived a life in conflict. He was challenged, sabotaged, and interrogated every step of his journey. Regardless of what was thrown at him, he stood his ground like a lighthouse in a storm. His story shows us what it looks like to live boldly when facing adversity.

READ: Daniel 1:3-7

Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility— young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service. Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.

The book of Daniel tells the story of a charismatic seventeen-year-old leader from the lineage of King David named Daniel. He and his friends were forced to live in Babylon because his city of Jerusalem was seized and enslaved. The people of Israel were forced into exile under the harsh dictatorship of Babylon. This kingdom was completely opposed to belief in the true God. As a nation, they sought vengeance and ignored mercy. They loved war and hated peace. They worshipped idols and disgraced the God of Israel.

In the first chapter, Daniel was recruited to work for the government of King Nebuchadnezzar because of his strength, knowledge, and handsome looks. Seriously, look at verse five. During his orientation ceremony, he was offered a buffet of junk food with an open bar. After being enslaved, I am sure the spread made their mouths water. "Look at all this food," I imagine they thought. Upon close examination of the buffet, the attitude started to shift. Daniel realized that the food was completely contrary to the Kosher commandments in Jewish scripture. Eating this food would break the promise he made to God. Thus, he politely asked not to partake. Daniel 1:8 elaborates, "Daniel was determined not to defile himself by eating the food and wine given to them by the king."

If you, like Daniel, want to be strong in the face of adversity, then you will need to foster some of the character traits of Daniel in Babylon. If you were to flip forward a few pages, you will see that his story is packed full of miracles. However, the first chapter doesn't share anything supernatural. It's all about a young man's willpower. Do you want to be like Daniel? Then you need to be disciplined. This story gives us two powerful principles to help us live a life of discipline despite challenges.

Say No to The Wrong Things

Just like Daniel, we must set ourselves up for success in a culture that demands excess. We are not talking about a buffet of snacks blessed by a Babylonian goddess. However, our culture is constantly trying to trick you into Babylonian behavior. The entrees include dishonesty, lust, greed, hatred, and arrogance. You walk by a buffet of vices every single day. The spread is full of delightful-looking confections, but they all have dangerous consequences.

Gossip is just a group chat away. Vile videos are easily accessible. Selfishness is most people's default setting. Culture is constantly encouraging you to "defile yourself" with addictive substances, the pursuit of prosperity, selfish ambitions, and finding purpose in all the wrong places.

Victory is on the other side of discipline. Just like Daniel, decline anything that can come between you and God. Say no, then go away. Resistance is the first and hardest step of cultivating a life of discipline. It doesn't stop there, though.

Say Yes to the Right Things

How did Daniel stand strong against the culture's temptations? He focused on the positive results that came from his refusal. Daniel knew that rejecting the food was only half the battle. He needed to remain disciplined in what he allowed into his body. Daniel asked the guards, "Please test your servants... Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink" (Daniel 1:12).

Daniel opted for green veggies over protein-packed meats and calorie-dense beverages. This completely countered everything they believed about health. How can these men grow muscles without animal protein? How can they work without carbohydrates? It just didn't make sense to them. Vegan warriors didn't exist. The king's court inevitably scoffed at their plan, assuming that they would be begging for meat in no time.

God came through for them. While eating vegetables and clean foods, they grew stronger every day. Their skin seemed to glow. Their health was near perfect. Through their strict God-honoring diet, they saw their health flourish like never before. They weren't just saying no to unclean food; they were saying yes to their overall wellbeing.

We should do the same. Commit to staying culturally clean. Swim against the current. Respectfully reject anything that can damage your relationship with Jesus. Short-term sacrifice makes way for long-term success.

It's a lot easier to say no to something when you're also saying yes to something else. Don't strictly think of obedience as restrictive. Whenever God wants you to say no to something, it's because He has something better in mind. When you say no to addictive substances, you are saying yes to health. When you say no to hatred, you are saying yes to love. When you say no to gossip, you say yes to respect. When you say no to vengeance, you are saying yes to grace.

Live life like Daniel. Live a life of discipline. Don't defile yourself with culture's temptations. Learn to adamantly say yes to what's best for you and firmly say no to what's bad for you. Like walking past a decadent buffet, there are thousands of distractions designed to get you off the route God charted for you.

When confronted with culture's temptations, respectfully reject them. Keep walking forward with focus. God's path may be harder, but it's always heading someplace better. Stay steady and stay strong.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and what was the lowest part of your week?

1. What's one thing that sticks out to you about Daniel?
2. Daniel's environment and the Babylonian culture made it easier to betray God than follow Him. Have you ever felt this way?
3. What motivated Daniel to refuse the king's food that went against his faith?
4. What are common temptations in the world around us that lead us away from God? How can we withstand those temptations and choose to glorify God instead?

Application: What's one temptation surrounding you that you'd like to stand against this week? How can you be bold like Daniel? What will you choose to do instead?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Ephesians 2:8-10

1 Corinthians 15:10

Romans 6:11-14

John 1:16-17

Titus 2:11-14

Romans 5:6-20

Psalm 131

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLE 02/03: **BEING FAITHFUL IN THE FIRE**

Ancient warfare was harsh. It was a terrifying mixture of theater and tragedy. Get this. The Roman army was known to decorate their front-line ships to look like gods, goddesses, and mythical sea creatures. These vessels were like floating shrines, decorated with gems, gold, and expensive fabrics. Each ship was a piece of art. Now, imagine you are an enemy of Rome. A multicolored wall of gorgeous boats moves towards you at the speed of a dolphin on Red Bull. It almost looks like a parade on the water.

As the ships get closer, your eyes cannot comprehend what's in front of you. "Are their boats leaking?" you ask your fellow sailor. It appears as though the mouths of their goddess statues are spewing liquid. Before you can figure out what's happening, the surface of the ocean bursts into flames. These ships aren't leaking; they are spitting out flammable gas. These front-line ships are basically floating flame throwers. In a frenzy, your fleet retreats. Tragically, some of your best sailors were left behind in the inferno.

Since the beginning of humanity, fire has been used as an intimidation technique. Ancient armies loved using fire on the front lines. The early Aztecs launched fiery arrows. Fireworks were invented by Chinese soldiers to scare enemy soldiers. Folklore teaches that dragons could shoot flames from their nostrils. Fire strikes fear, which is why it was the go-to threat of ancient Kingdoms like Babylon. This is even evident in the story of Daniel. King Nebuchadnezzar tried to scare his subjects into obedience using a tactic as old as time — a furnace made of fire.

READ: Daniel 3:1-6

King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide,[a] and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it. The herald loudly proclaimed, "Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace."

At the beginning of Daniel 3, Nebuchadnezzar decides to order a custom-built statue. This thing was huge, measuring 90-feet high and nine feet wide. Most scholars believe this statue was actually an image of the king himself. As if that wasn't narcissistic enough, he mandated that everyone in the nation bow down before the newly-minted idol.

The conflict between the men of Israel and the King of Babylon hit a tipping point in the third chapter of Daniel. If Daniel and his friends obeyed the king and worshipped the

idol statue, they'd be betraying God. Do they disobey God to save their lives, or do they disobey the king to face execution in a furnace?

The statue was unveiled, the band played a melody, and the nation began to bow. Row after row, standing subjects took a knee before the 90-foot statue. It must have been a mesmerizing moment for the king. He gleefully gazed at thousands of people bowing before him— except for three people. Friends of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, refused to bow before the king's graven image.

The other members of the court snitched to the king, saying, "there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon— Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up" (3:12).

This made Nebuchadnezzar's blood boil. Who were these refugees that didn't fear him or respect him? Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego knew that failure to bow would send them into the fire. That didn't stop them from standing up for what they believed in, even if they were standing alone.

They could have easily rationalized bowing down. They could have outwardly bowed while inwardly praying to God. They could have claimed, "God doesn't want me dead." They could have crossed their fingers the whole time. They didn't. They boldly stood their ground when everyone else was against them. Their boldness ended up landing them in the fiery furnace.

READ: Daniel 3:22-25

The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace. Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?" They replied, "Certainly, Your Majesty." He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods."

After Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stood up to the king, his red-hot rage led him to throw the three men into a fiery furnace. The three men fell to the floor, and the public watched in horror. The men stumbled and casually stood to their feet. While flames whipped around them, they looked calm and collected. How were they unharmed? The king demanded that they turn the heat all the way up. As the fire grew hotter, the men started to look more comfortable. As he investigated the miracle before his eyes, he saw that there were actually four men inside the fire. God was with them in the fire. He protected them. He rescued them.

This wildfire of a story gives us three keys to living boldly in the face of adversity.

One: Stand Up for What You Believe In

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stood up for their faith even when it was difficult. Which brings us to an important question: What do you need to stand up for today? God may be calling you to speak out against the idolatry of our culture. God may be calling you to stand up for derogatory or prejudiced language at your school. God may be calling you to challenge the cultural current of objectification. God may be calling you to step up and share your faith, even if it frightens you.

Just like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, live fearlessly. Stand up for what's right — even if you're standing alone.

Two: Jesus Will Protect You — Even in the Fire

When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown into the fire, everyone expected them to die immediately. The Bible records that the flames were so hot that soldiers outside the furnace died from mere exposure. Just being near the blaze was enough to kill someone. Naturally, everyone assumed these rebellious Hebrews would be burned within seconds. Shock swept over the crowd when the fire didn't seem to phase these faithful men. They weren't in pain. They weren't falling to their knees. They were just walking around the furnace as if it was a leisurely stroll in the park.

After the king threw his victims into the fire, he squinted his eyes at a perplexing sight. There were four people in the fire, not three. Not only did their party grow by one, but they all looked like supernatural figures in the flames. The presence and power of God protected them when the flames tried to consume them.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced an impossible situation, but our God loves working through the impossible. The impossible is just an invitation for Him to show up and show off. Whenever your circumstances or feelings feel like fire, know that God is with you. He can do the impossible for you.

Three: Faithfully Walk Through Fire

These men dove headfirst into danger because they knew God was on their side. The same is true for you. With God's power within you, you can walk through the fires of life unharmed. I do not know what circumstances, feelings, or fears feel like fire for you right now. They could be a disease in your family, a devastating breakup, a disaster, or a disappointment. Whatever they are, trust God as you walk through the fire. He will be there with you. He will protect you. He will rescue you. People will notice, and God will be glorified.

This is an important lesson. God could have easily just snapped His fingers and teleported these men to a beach in Bermuda before the king arrested them, but that's not what happened. God allowed them to face the punishment. God allowed them to feel the heat of the fire. God allowed them to walk into an impossible situation. Why? Because it allowed God to be glorified. When you faithfully walk into fire, people begin to notice.

After pulling Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego out of the fire, the king patted the ash off of their cloaks and exclaimed, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants!" (Daniel 3:28). Their serenity in the face of calamity caused their attempted murderer to turn to God. How amazing is that?

The way we live in the face of adversity is often our most valuable testimony. When you get tragic news, pray for peace. When you walk into complicated circumstances, ask God for guidance. When everything seems dark, let your light shine. People will notice and God will be glorified. Let people witness you walk through fire in faith. The king saw that these men were willing to risk death because they trusted in God. When people see you trust God through challenging times, they will desire whatever brought you through the fire. Your response to pain can become your testimony without even sharing a word.

When life feels like a fiery furnace, remain faithful. Jesus is with you. You will get through it. God will be glorified in the end.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and what was the lowest part of your week?

1. What's one thing that stood out to you about tonight's message?
2. What do you think made Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego so brave? How can we live with the same bravery?
3. Have you ever watched someone live through something tough with faith? What did that teach you?
4. How can we "walk faithfully through the fire" and glorify God even when life gets hard?

Application: What's one thing that you want to stand up for this week because it's the right thing to do? How can you do that?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

1 John 1:15
Hebrews 4:12
James 1:17
John 4:24
Matthew 6:26
Revelation 21:3
Psalm 116:5

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLE 03/03: **CHARACTERISTICS OF A BOLD LIFE**

We are spoiled with entertainment these days. You can watch any movie ever made with the tap of a finger, you can stream millions of songs in one app, and you can view countless youtube videos of turtles eating fruits. In this day and age, entertainment is everywhere. In the past, people perceived fun differently. At the turn of the century, nearly every American anxiously awaited the arrival of circus tents and dancing clowns. In the 1800s, people would flock to baseball games and freak shows. In the 1600s, people would play marbles and a game called "hoop and stick."

In the ancient world of Daniel, their idea of entertainment was far more twisted than movies and marbles. Mesmerized onlookers would gather in ancient colosseums to watch people get tortured and eaten by wild animals. Yeah, that was their thing. That was their twisted idea of entertainment. They would get the kids dressed up, buy some snacks, and cheer as they watched a criminal get mauled by a grizzly bear. It's disgusting, and it's also the exact situation that Daniel found himself in towards the end of his life.

READ: Daniel 6:6-10; 16

So these administrators and satraps went as a group to the king and said: "May King Darius live forever! The royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisers and governors have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or human being during the next thirty days, except to you, Your Majesty, shall be thrown into the lions' den. Now, Your Majesty, issue the decree and put it in writing so that it cannot be altered—in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed." So King Darius put the decree in writing. Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before. [...] So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions' den. The king said to Daniel, "May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!"

Daniel in the Lion's Den is probably one of the best-known Bible stories in the world. When kids are coloring pictures of this scene in Sunday school, they are usually filling in the lines of a young man cuddling a large lion. It's cute, but it's not very accurate. This leads us to believe a big misconception: people assume that Daniel was a teenager when this took place. That isn't true. He was an old man in his late eighties. You heard that right. The members of the royal court threw an elderly man into a pit filled with hungry lions.

How did he get there, though? Some of Daniel's competitors wanted to take him out, so they convinced the king to put out a decree that people could only pray to him. This was a surefire way to destroy Daniel because they knew that he prayed to God at least three times a day. The king signed the deal, and Daniel just became a three-times-a-day criminal.

Taking one final peek at the life of Daniel, let's examine three character traits of a bold life.

Perseverance

At the beginning of this chapter, life is a dream for Daniel. He's risen up the ranks of the kingdom once again. Now he is a "satrap" (6:1-3), which is basically a mayor with more power. Daniel exudes so much wisdom and promise that the king planned to promote him to oversee the entire nation. Jealousy plagued the rest of the rulers. They scoffed, "How could the king give so much trust to an old man from Judah? His people are captives of the kingdom. Why does our ruler adore him?" The other Satraps decided to create a scandal. They wanted Daniel gone, so they dug up a little drama. These leaders knew that Daniel openly prayed three times a day, so they lobbied for a new law to make prayer illegal. Once the law was on the books, they started stalking Daniel to wait for his rebellion.

Daniel persevered, though. Despite it being illegal, he continued to pray three times a day publicly. He knew there would be consequences. He knew people were likely watching. He knew that the king had a den full of hungry lions. None of that stopped him from being persistent in his calling and devotion to God. We should strive to do the same. Be persistent in your relationship with God — even when it's hard, even when it's inconvenient, and even if it becomes illegal. A fearless life is a life of devotion, persistence, and discipline.

READ: Daniel 6:19-20

At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions' den. When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?" Daniel answered, "May the king live forever! My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions.

Protection

Daniel's persistence leads to a lion-infested prison. Daniel's day took a sharp turn as he was arrested, prosecuted for praying and sentenced to execution. The Babylonians were grotesque in their treatment of criminals — especially through capital punishment. They didn't just kill people; they made a show out of it. They were so twisted that they threw an elderly man into a den of lions as the public peered over the ledge of the pit.

Daniel found himself surrounded by blood-thirsty lions with no escape. He wasn't armed with a sword, shield, or catnip. He had nothing except his wrinkled fists and his faith in God. It sounds like the odds are stacked against him, but that's all he needed. When Daniel was surrounded by predators, God protected him. An angel visited to shut the mouths of the lions. When Daniel was trapped, surrounded, and overwhelmed, his faith made him fearless. His personal relationship with God protected him.

You will find yourself in a pit like Daniel one day -- surrounded by lions with no escape. I am not talking about literal lions here, but metaphorical ones can be just as

frightening. Perhaps you feel trapped in a pit surrounded by helplessness, doubt, apathy, stress, loneliness, rejection, or abandonment. All of these can feel like blood-thirsty beasts circling you while you cower in the corner. However, God is stronger. To God, a lion is just a kitten. To God, stress is just a place to bring peace. To God, every impossible circumstance is a chance for Him to show up and show off. God protected Daniel, and God will protect you too. God shut the mouths of the lions for Daniel, and he can do the same for the lions you're facing too.

Prayer

Prayer brings out boldness. While surrounded by flesh-eating lions, Daniel prayed. His prayer ultimately protected him. In order for us to live bold lives, we must admit that we cannot do it on our own. We need God's intervention, presence, and empowerment. The moment Daniel found himself in a difficult situation, he prayed. How could he pray to God so calmly while hearing the low roars of lions? Because Daniel had learned how to rely on God's presence. He knew He wasn't praying and pleading with a distant God. God's presence was right there in the pit. I assume that mindset dramatically changed Daniel's approach to prayer.

God was with Daniel in the lion's den. He's with you too. You aren't promised a life free of pain, but you are promised His presence. God will be with you through it all. Daniel prayed in the pit while surrounded by blood-thirsty beasts. Do the same. When you pray, you aren't praying to a distant God hidden in the darkness of the universe. Not at all. You are praying to a God who is present with you. Even if you are in a pit with lions, God is present. Even if you have a hard time feeling it, God is present. Even when heartache throbs like a lion bite, God is present.

Trust God. Focus on His nearness. He will come closer to you. He will be with you. He will protect you. That's the power of a bold life.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and what was the lowest part of your week?

1. What's one thing that stood out to you about Daniel in today's message?
2. Have you ever been condemned, made fun of, or rejected because of your faith? How did you respond?
3. What might help us persevere in our faith when we face pushback or difficult situations?
4. What should the prayer life of a bold Christian look like?

Application: Commit to praying every day this week for boldness in your faith. When can you commit to praying on a daily basis? Is there anything else Daniel has inspired you to pray for?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Ephesians 6:10-20

Psalms 106:19-23

1 Timothy: 1-7

Matthew 5:43-48

Colossians 3:1-17

Colossians 4:2-6

1 Peter 3:8

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.