

## Devotion Deeper Than Death

South Africa has a tree that makes the record books. The Shepherd's Tree has the deepest roots of any known in the world, with its roots sometimes digging down to more than 60 metres into the soil. A hole 60 metres deep could hold a 30 storey building. The Shepherd's Tree isn't that spectacular on the surface, growing up to 10 metres on the surface. But it's because of its incredible root system that it manages to survive in the dry conditions of the Bushveld and the Lowveld. You might pass the Shepherd's Tree and never know about its record-breaking roots. What keeps it alive and well on the surface is just how deep it is under the surface.

A life of loving God is lot like that. A Christian lives in a world which is dry as far as spiritual nourishment goes. At school, at college, at the office, on the radio, on television, in the magazines, in the malls, there is not a lot of water to feed your soul. People are not discussing spiritual realities, and teaching ways to know and love God. We live in a spiritual desert. And the only way you will survive and continue to bear fruit in such a dry environment is if your roots of devotion go deep. If the tap-root of your heart does not go deep into God's Word and prayer, there's a fair chance that the dust storms of life may just push you over. For Christians to survive, to keep their testimony, to not deny Christ or compromise, they must insist on going deeper in secret with God, than going wider and bigger in front of people. What is unseen and invisible to people should be deeper and more impressive than what is on the surface.

Daniel was that kind of believer. We met Daniel as a teenager in chapter one, and in chapter six, he is getting close to ninety years old. But the uncompromising Daniel of chapter 1 is the same uncompromising Daniel of chapter 6. All the winds of pagan Babylon; all the spiritual dryness of living amongst pagans for over seventy years had not withered him one bit. Clearly, Daniel had a root system of devotion to God that went deep, and allowed him to start well and finish well. Daniel's devotion was deep.

It's been said that the test of your *character* is what it takes to stop you. We might modify that to say, the test of your *devotion* is what it takes to stop you. You can tell exactly how deep the roots of your devotion to God are by how easily you are dissuaded from your devotion. What does it take to stop you from reading the Word and praying? What does it take to stop you from gathering with God's people to worship Him, hear His Word, partake of the Lord's Supper and edify others? A late night? A phone call? An appointment? An interesting show on TV? An invitation to a meal? A job? A tickle in the throat?

Daniel was the sort of man whose devotional roots went so deep that it would have taken a lot more than busyness or money or a job, or a bit of fatigue, or bit or boredom to dissuade him. In fact, in this chapter we see that he was threatened with death itself to give up his devotion to God. As we study it, we'll see how deep his roots went, what they looked like, and the effects they had. They can encourage us to by faith go deeper, and do so consistently.

### I. The Context

<sup>1</sup> *It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom one hundred and twenty satraps, to be over the whole kingdom; <sup>2</sup> and over these, three governors, of whom Daniel was one, that the satraps might give account to them, so that the king would suffer no loss. <sup>3</sup> Then this Daniel distinguished himself above the governors and satraps, because an excellent spirit was in him; and the king gave thought to setting him over the whole realm.*

Daniel is an amazing character who arrived in Babylon when he was around fifteen or sixteen years old, and as we come to this account, he is in his eighties, possibly approaching his nineties. Daniel

was like Joseph – no matter where you put him, he kept rising to the top. He was prime-minister under Nebuchadnezzar, made third ruler for a night under Belshazzar, and now the same thing happens under the Persians.

You remember from chapter 5 that the kingdom of Medo-Persia had been chipping away at the Babylonian empire for some time, and chapter 5 records the last night of Babylonian rule. That very night, the Persian army came in, and took over with very little fighting. Just as Daniel had predicted in his visions, the kingdom of Babylon would be replaced by another kingdom – the kingdom of the Medes and Persians. Amazingly, when these Persians come in and kill Belshazzar, instead of killing Daniel, what do they do? They make him one of three governors, ruling over 120 administrators over former Neo-Babylonian land. It's really remarkable that Daniel not only survived four changes of king in Babylon, he survived a whole change in empire.

Perhaps the Persians already knew Daniel from his many travels as the former prime minister of Babylon. Perhaps they had read the proclamation by Nebuchadnezzar which spoke of Daniel. Perhaps they found out that he had declared Belshazzar's doom the night they came in. Perhaps they simply sensed the same excellent spirit which had seen him promoted again and again. The word *spirit* refers to attitude.

Daniel's example should remind us of the power of a godly attitude. Even though this world is no friend to Christianity, and does not take kindly to our beliefs, a Christian's spirit or attitude should be irresistible. Daniel's was, and he was at age eighty-something, still head-and-shoulders above all his peers, and the king thought of simply making him chief over the whole realm. But when someone seem to be rocketing to the top, what is a fairly predictable reaction from those stuck on the ground? Envy, jealousy, and some kind of plotting.

## II. The Contempt of the Governors

<sup>4</sup> *So the governors and satraps sought to find some charge against Daniel concerning the kingdom; but they could find no charge or fault, because he was faithful; nor was there any error or fault found in him.* <sup>5</sup> *Then these men said, "We shall not find any charge against this Daniel unless we find it against him concerning the law of his God."*

Daniel's fellow governors and satraps were filled with a kind of jealousy, envy and hatred. You have to ask what kind of heart these people had to despise someone as humble and blameless as Daniel, but when it comes to politics and power, the human heart's corrupt nature is brought out. Here are the other two Persian governors, along with some of the 120 satraps, who want to find a way to get Daniel fired or executed. So they go looking. And you can imagine these fellows searching the records, going through the scrolls, looking for some financial discrepancy, some money not accounted for, someone bribed, someone included in a power-grab. I mean, in seventy-years of service, no one can be that squeaky-clean, right? Surely somewhere, there'll be evidence of Daniel paying someone off, or keeping some taxes back, or covering a scandal, or making some indiscreet remark, or hiding some kind of scandal?

But search as they could, there was nothing. You can see the frustration on their faces. You can hear them saying to each other, "This guy is so good, it makes me sick. He's too good to be true!" Could that be said of you and me? That if they searched our records, looked at our tax returns, looked at what we filled in our job applications, looked at our internet browser history, looked at what we were like since becoming believers – would they find nothing to accuse us? We know there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, but there is also the matter of seeking a life of being blameless.

Daniel had that, and these men knew that the only way they could get him, would be if they could somehow find a Persian law that required him to break one of God's laws. What does that tell you about how obvious his devotion to God was? He was no secret believer, no double-agent. They knew his commitments, and therefore they knew that the only way to get him fired would be to produce a conflict between obeying the king and obeying Yehovah.

### **III. The Conspiracy of the Governors**

<sup>6</sup> *So these governors and satraps thronged before the king, and said thus to him: "King Darius, live forever! "*  
<sup>7</sup> *"All the governors of the kingdom, the administrators and satraps, the counselors and advisors, have consulted together to establish a royal statute and to make a firm decree, that whoever petitions any god or man for thirty days, except you, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions. "*<sup>8</sup> *"Now, O king, establish the decree and sign the writing, so that it cannot be changed, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which does not alter. "*<sup>9</sup> *Therefore King Darius signed the written decree.*

Here was the conspiracy – they knew that Jews were consistent, radical monotheists. No other God before Yahweh. No graven images of god to be prayed to or worshipped. So they came up with a plan that for thirty days, the king would serve as the focal point of all prayer. Supreme Being for thirty days. No prayer allowed to any other person, with punishment of death for those who disobeyed. It was common in the ancient world for the king to be considered divine, and for him to receive certain kinds of worship, so this wasn't completely foreign. It was just making him an exclusive deity for a month.

Very shrewd plan, this. They knew this would flatter the king, and appeal to his pride. Imagine your trusted advisors all calling for your worship for a month. And to think that no other prayers would go up except to you. At the same time, making him exclusive deity meant any devout Jew had to disobey this law. They knew that Daniel would disobey this law. So they lie, claiming that *all* the rulers of the kingdom had agreed to this. And while his chest is swelling with pride, they want him to sign and seal it so that it becomes a law which binds even the king. This was one of the features of the Persians. Apparently to avoid rulers just tinkering with laws, a Persian law, once in effect, was unchangeable and irreversible. You see the same thing in the book of Esther, when Haman's decree to kill all the Jews cannot be reversed, it can only be counteracted with another law.

The punishment for breaking this law is to be thrown into a den of lions. Again, the accuracy of the book of Daniel is amazing. What did Nebuchadnezzar use to execute? A fiery furnace. The Persians though, worshipped a god of fire, so it would have been sacrilegious for them to use fire to kill criminals. So they used lions, a particularly cruel and torturous form of execution. And once signed, they walk out that throne room and probably grin from ear to ear, and congratulate one another for such a clever plan.

So with the thought of being torn apart by lions for praying to Jehovah, what does Daniel do?

### **IV. The Consistency of Daniel**

<sup>10</sup> *Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days.*

Daniel finds out that this decree has been signed, and he goes home. And closing every door, and making sure no one was looking, with his eyes open, he prayed silently. Is that what he did? No! He goes to the upper room, opens the windows, faces west towards Jerusalem, kneels down and prays

with thanksgiving. Notice the qualification: *as was his custom since early days*.

Since his teens, Daniel had gone up to his upper room three times a day. Maybe he was taking that from Psalm 55:17:

**Psalm 55:17** *Evening and morning and at noon I will pray, and cry aloud, And He shall hear my voice.*

And, at every one of those times, he would kneel down, open his window and face in the direction of Jerusalem. He took the words of Solomon seriously, spoken when the Temple was dedicated:

**1 Kings 8:30** *"And may You hear the supplication of Your servant and of Your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. Hear in heaven Your dwelling place; and when You hear, forgive."*

You can imagine that if a man has been praying three times a day for seventy years, opening his window and praying, neighbours would have known it. I don't think Daniel was like the Pharisees, trumpeting his prayers for all to hear, he was simply praying toward the site of Solomon's temple. So with that kind of regularity, what would have happened if Daniel had no longer gone home three times a day, no longer opened the windows, and no longer prayed towards Jerusalem? Well, everyone would have known: Daniel has denied his God. Daniel has given in to the decree, and will pray to the king and the king only.

With this kind of consistency, Daniel either continues as he always had, in defiance of the king's decree, or changes his practice and denies his god.

But what does he do? He changes nothing. His devotion is as steadfast as it has always been. It reminds me of the account we've mentioned several times before of the disciple of the apostle John, Polycarp. He was in his nineties when arrested by the Romans for his faith and told to deny Christ. He refused. He was brought into the stadium to be killed before the audience of unbelievers. The Governor looked down on him and said, "Consider your age, and be sensible. Swear and deny Christ, and I will release you." Polycarp answered, "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, Who hath saved me?"

Daniel is of the same spirit – all these years my God has been faithful to me, why should I now be unfaithful to Him? Daniel's devotional roots went deep. They went deeper than comfort. They went deeper than reputation. They went deeper than career and money. They went deeper than the love of his own life. Just like his three friends in chapter 3, Daniel was willing to die for his devotion to his God.

## V. The Condemnation of Daniel

<sup>11</sup> *Then these men assembled and found Daniel praying and making supplication before his God.* <sup>12</sup> *And they went before the king, and spoke concerning the king's decree: "Have you not signed a decree that every man who petitions any god or man within thirty days, except you, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions?" The king answered and said, "The thing is true, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which does not alter."* <sup>13</sup> *So they answered and said before the king, "That Daniel, who is one of the captives from Judah, does not show due regard for you, O king, or for the decree that you have signed, but makes his petition three times a day."*

Daniel has willingly, and knowingly walked into the trap of these men. It wasn't hard for them to catch him, they probably just stood outside, and Daniel, like clockwork, opened the windows, knelt and prayed. And off they went to the king, slapping each other on the back, rubbing their hands, overjoyed at the thought that they had caught their fish, and not even the king could save him now. They remind the king of the law that he originally thought they had made to honour him. Well, in a moment, he finds out that they made the law not to honour him, but to have Daniel killed. Daniel,

they say, does not respect you, Daniel does not honour your laws.

## **VI. The Consternation of the King**

*<sup>14</sup> And the king, when he heard these words, was greatly displeased with himself, and set his heart on Daniel to deliver him; and he labored till the going down of the sun to deliver him. <sup>15</sup> Then these men approached the king, and said to the king, "Know, O king, that it is the law of the Medes and Persians that no decree or statute which the king establishes may be changed."*

There's little doubt the king loved Daniel. He wanted to promote him over the others. Never in a million years did he think that this law, which he had signed, would be used as a net to catch Daniel. How he kicked himself. How his pride had blinded him to the evil intention of these men! All day long, he no doubt consulted his experts in Persian law, and went through the scrolls searching for a loophole, searching for some law which would trounce this one, some reason to get Daniel off the hook.

It was Persian law that a criminal had to be executed the same day as he was found guilty, so the king had only until sunset to find a way to exonerate Daniel. But try as he might, he couldn't. His crafty administrators had made the law so that it was clear, and Daniel had clearly broken it. It was checkmate. And now these men come and push the law under the king's nose. You know, O king, that a law made by the king cannot be changed, not even by the king. You can almost hear them gloating: there goes your favourite governor, and there's nothing you can do to change it. How the king must have despised them in that moment.

## **VII. The Consignment of Daniel**

*<sup>16</sup> So the king gave the command, and they brought Daniel and cast him into the den of lions. But the king spoke, saying to Daniel, "Your God, whom you serve continually, He will deliver you."*

Then a stone was brought and laid on the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the signets of his lords, that the purpose concerning Daniel might not be changed.

The den of lions was typically a natural or man-made cave. The Persians had made walls within them, with doors that could be opened or closed from above. That way, they could keep the lions in one chamber, clean the other, and so forth. The person to be executed would have been taken to an opening on top, and thrown down. There would have been several lions, voraciously hungry lions, so much so that the last verses describe a horrific scene of ravenous lions just utterly destroying people thrown in.

So it wasn't as if Daniel could have found a little place to hide and pass the night. It wasn't as if these lions were overfed, or old and toothless. They would have been hungry, restless and aggressive, as lions kept in such a space often are.

Before he's thrown in, what does the king say? Your God, whom you serve continually, He will deliver you. How did he know that Daniel served his God continually? Because of how deep his devotion was. The king is really saying more than he knows for sure, but he is saying what makes sense to the observer. If your God has anyone that He should favour or deliver, it will be you Daniel. No one is as devoted to worshipping your God than you.

Once Daniel was dropped in, a stone was put on the mouth, the king and his lords sealed it, so that

if the seal was broken illegally, everyone would know. And with that, the king goes home, with a pit in his stomach.

### **VIII. The Concern of the King**

*<sup>18</sup> Now the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; and no musicians were brought before him. Also his sleep went from him.<sup>19</sup> Then the king arose very early in the morning and went in haste to the den of lions. <sup>20</sup> And when he came to the den, he cried out with a lamenting voice to Daniel. The king spoke, saying to Daniel, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?"*

This king can't eat and he can't sleep. He doesn't want entertainment. He's just torn up inside at the thought of having lost his best man, and a friend. And as soon as the light of the rising sun seems to break over the land, he's running over to the den, hoping against hope that Daniel might still be alive. And once there, he speaks, not knowing if he is calling out to dead bones, or miraculously, to Daniel. He would have known the accounts of Daniel's miraculous interpretations, and the deliverance of Daniel's friends, and so he is hoping that perhaps another miracle has occurred. And now he turns what he had said to Daniel as a statement, into a question: Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you?

I wonder what happened to the king's expression on his face, when he heard a voice replying.

### **IX. The Conservation of Daniel**

*<sup>21</sup> Then Daniel said to the king, "O king, live forever! <sup>22</sup> "My God sent His angel and shut the lions' mouths, so that they have not hurt me, because I was found innocent before Him; and also, O king, I have done no wrong before you." <sup>23</sup> Then the king was exceedingly glad for him, and commanded that they should take Daniel up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no injury whatever was found on him, because he believed in his God.*

Daniel uses the usual words to the king, as if his own life has not been, nor still is, in danger. How is Daniel still alive? Daniel has been found innocent before God, so he sent his angel to protect Daniel from the lions. And Daniel adds, I have been innocent before you. I am no traitor, I am no conspirator against your throne. My loyalty is not in doubt.

The king happily has Daniel brought out, and he has not been harmed. Not a scratch from a lions paw, not a shred of his clothing ripped by a lions mouth – untouched, unharmed. Why? The end of verse 23 tells us "because he believed in his God."

Isn't that the message throughout the book? God is great enough to rule over kingdoms, kings, fire, lions, and He is good enough to protect and deliver His people devoted to Him - His people who believe in Him, whose roots of devotion go deep, experience His kind deliverance.

One the other hand, what happened to the murderers who plotted against Daniel's life?

### **X. The Condemnation of Daniel's Enemies**

*<sup>24</sup> And the king gave the command, and they brought those men who had accused Daniel, and they cast them into the den of lions -- them, their children, and their wives; and the lions overpowered them, and broke all their bones in pieces before they ever came to the bottom of the den.*

We don't know how many of the men were involved in the plot. It was probably the other two governors, and some of the satraps. And the Persians were a cruel people. God's law that a child will not be punished for his father's sin or vice versa did not hold in the hearts of these pagans. Into the

lion's den went these murderers with their families, and the Scriptures tell us what a violent end they met.

King Darius then made a decree, like Nebuchadnezzar had done.

## **XI. The Conclusion of the King**

*<sup>25</sup> Then King Darius wrote: To all peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you. <sup>26</sup> I make a decree that in every dominion of my kingdom men must tremble and fear before the God of Daniel. For He is the living God, And steadfast forever; His kingdom is the one which shall not be destroyed, And His dominion shall endure to the end. <sup>27</sup> He delivers and rescues, And He works signs and wonders In heaven and on earth, Who has delivered Daniel from the power of the lions. <sup>28</sup> So this Daniel prospered in the reign of Darius and in the reign of Cyrus the Persian.*

Daniel's unmixed devotion, his quiet, consistent prayer life, resulted in a worldwide law that people ought to tremble and fear before Jehovah. Daniel didn't try to have this law made, he wasn't angling for special laws like the conspirators were. But his pure, devoted life went so deep that his life was like a massive oak tree, whose branches stretched far beyond the roots.

Not even the threat of death itself could stop him from being devoted to God. Did he get roots that deep with one explosive quiet time? Do you suppose that in those seventy years, the routine of praying three times a day was sometimes unexciting? Do you suppose that it wasn't always fireworks and explosive highs? Do you suppose that sometimes it felt more like an oak tree might feel in putting its roots down – maybe one millimetre a day? One millimetre doesn't feel like much, but over seventy years, it means massive roots.

Devotion to God is much like that. It's not how many explosive, ecstatic experiences you've had that matters. What matters is steady, ongoing, consistent devotion to God that quietly deepens. Like the Shepherd's Tree, your might may not be outwardly spectacular. You might not be famous or notorious, powerful or envied. People pass you in the streets and the shopping centres and don't stop you to ask for your autograph. But if your roots are deep, there is no telling how mightily God may use you. And because it remains in place, it means the fruit is bigger and stronger, and the influence is greater.

How deep is your devotion? What does it take to stop your devotion? Busyness? A TV show? A meal? A job? A promotion? Boredom? Fatigue? Persecution? If you are steadily deepening your roots into God and His Word, it will take more than these things to stop you praying, reading, or assembling with God's people.

We look at Daniel's fearlessness and we often say, “Dare to be a Daniel”. But we should also say, “Drill to be a Daniel”. Steadily, consistently, repeatedly seek the face of God. If you take care of the depth of your devotion, God will take care of the breadth of your influence. If you focus on steadily, consistently seeking God, who knows what kind of influence you might have?