Daniel 6 *Legendary: Daniel: Shutting the Mouths of Lions*

***One Word, Two Dictionaries***The same word can sometimes have different meanings. That is to say, sometimes we use a word, but the people we are communicating with hear something different then what we intended.

For example: when a teenage tells his or her parents that *everyone* will be at the party, what they mean is that most of their friends will be there. Everyone that matters. But when mom and dad reply that there’s no way that *everyone* will be at the party, what they mean is the entire student body cannot possibly be in attendance.

Same word, different dictionaries.

Other examples are slang words. At different times one generation will take a common word and completely change its meaning. Like the word “bad.” When my parents said a musician was bad, they meant he was terrible. But then, some time in the ‘80s, kids decided that the word bad could be good. It started to be that if you said a musician was bad, what you really meant was that he was phenomenal.

Language changes over time. Always has, always will.

Another example is the name of our church: Hope. I don’t think people use the word “hope” today the same way it is used in the Bible. When our church was named, I don’t think the intention was the way we most commonly use the word “hope.”

You see, when I hear people use the word “hope” today, it’s usually in a sense of wishful thinking: “I hope you have a great vacation.” “I hope it will rain soon.” “I hope that the cancer treatments will help.” Hope is often thought of as aspirational, best case scenario, optimism.

Or, we use the word “hope” to describe the mental gymnastics of positive thinking and visualization. “Don’t give up hope.” “Keep on hoping.” “Hope will lead the way.” Hope is thought of as a sunny attitude and a cheerful disposition.

But hope in the Bible has nothing to do with wishful thinking or positive visualization. When the Bible talks about hope, it’s not wishing that everything will turn out okay. When the Bible asks us to hope, it’s not telling us to visualize that things will go the way we want.

Rather, hope in the Bible has to do with a deep-seated conviction and confidence in the living God. Hope, in the Bible, comes from knowing that God is alive, and sovereign, and good. Hope is not wishful thinking, then, but a rock-solid certainty. The Bible doesn’t call us to hope in God the same way a gambler hopes he might hit the jackpot, but rather to have the kind of confidence in God that allows us to know that trusting in Him is not a bet at all.

It’s this stronger, more robust definition of “hope” that comes to me as I read our Bible story for today. Today we are going to look at Daniel 6, the story of Daniel and the lions’ den.

The word “hope” does not appear in the story, but we are going to see that one of the key phrases in the text is “living God.” Daniel’s God is the living God. Daniel is the servant of the living God. And I believe that is the source of Daniel’s hope. And I believe that it is hope that allows Daniel to do the things he does in this story.

Let’s go through the text, and then I’ll have three points at the end.

***Catching Up with Daniel*Daniel 6, verse 1:**

It pleased Darius to appoint 120 satraps to rule throughout the kingdom, **2**with three administrators over them, one of whom was Daniel. The satraps were made accountable to them so that the king might not suffer loss. **3**Now Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and the satraps by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom.

Looking back now, I’m not really sure what I was doing when I set up the schedule for this series. We’re in a series called Legendary, where we are looking at some different heroes of the Old Testament. There’s really no connection from one story to the next, it’s not like we are going chapter by chapter through a book of the Bible. And yet, two weeks ago, we looked at the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, which is in Daniel 3, and then last week we went to 1 Kings and the story of Elijah, and now this week we are back in Daniel. And I really don’t know why I separated them. It doesn’t make much sense.

But one of the things we need to see is that the situation has changed from that story to this one. Let me remind you that Daniel and his friends were in exile in Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed Jerusalem and carried away the most promising young people to be a part of his empire. God took care of Daniel and the others, and they actually distinguished themselves and rose to prominent positions in the government. That’s one of the reasons Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stood out and ended up in the fiery furnace. We have to remember, no matter how successful they were, they were still slaves living in captivity.

Nebuchadnezzar eventually dies. There are some other rulers that sit on the Babylonian throne—and this is one area where there are historical records from outside of the Bible that really match up well with the Bible story—and eventually Nebuchadnezzar’s grandson Belshazzar becomes king.

Belshazzar is a punk. His story is told in Daniel 5. Belshazzar comes off like the proto-typical trust fund kid. He decides to throw a rager of a party and, just to be funny, gets out the gold goblets from the Lord’s temple in Jerusalem and uses them to drink shots out of. All of a sudden, the party is interrupted when a human hand appears and writes a message on the wall. This freaks everybody out and the party comes to a crashing stop while everybody tries to figure out what the writing means. Nobody knows, until someone remembers that Daniel is pretty good at interpreting visions and stuff.

So Daniel comes and he identifies the writing as Aramaic: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PERES. Then he interprets: “Your days are numbered, you have been weighed and found wanting, your kingdom is divided and about to be handed to the Medes and Persians.” This is where we get the expression: “The writing is on the wall.”

And that very moment—and we know this from sources outside of the Bible—there is a combined army of Medes and Persians camped outside of the supposedly impregnable city of Babylon and they are diverting the flow of the Euphrates river so that they can simply walk across the river bed and into the city.

That night Belshazzar is executed and the Babylonian empire comes to an end in one of the most abrupt and bloodless defeats in world history.

And that’s where we are as Daniel chapter 6 begins. The leader of the Medes and Persians is a man named Cyrus. And he’s now in charge. The man named in verse 1—Darius—is probably a a royal title for Cyrus—like Caesar (cf. the alternate reading of verse 28).

There needs to be a restructuring of the government. All the people loyal to the Babylonians need to be removed, and new people need to be put in charge of all the departments so that effective control of this far-flung empire can continue. In a lot of ways, this could have been very bad for Daniel. Daniel could easily have been thrown out (that is, executed) with all the other members of the Babylonian regime.

But somehow, Daniel stands out to the new leaders. For one thing, he’s an Israelite, not a Babylonian. For another, he’s really good at his job. There is some wisdom to keeping around somebody who knows how things used to work. So Daniel not only survives the transfer of power, he actually distinguishes himself to the point where he’s one of the top administrators in the new government. He quickly becomes one of Darius’s favorites.

***The Conspiracy***And, if you remember the story from Daniel 3, you know what that leads to. **Verse 4:**

**4**At this, the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent.

Here’s more office politics. Petty jealousies and racial discrimination. “How come that Jewish slave is getting promotions we oughtta get?” So they set out to run a smear campaign

But here’s the thing: as hard as they look, they can’t find any dirt on Daniel. He’s really good at his job. There’s no whiff of scandal or corruption in his closet. Not a dime has gone unaccounted for. There’s no intern scandal, no compromising relationships. There’s not a single ex-employee with anything bad to say about him. They have nothing to pin on him.

Now, think about how remarkable that is. One of the things we need to know is that at this point, Daniel is an old man. We tend to childify the story of Daniel. The story of the fiery furnace and the lions’ den make pretty good adventure stories, they make good children’s books. And so we tend to picture Daniel as a young man. He was a young man when he was carried into exile. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were presumably young men when they refused to bow down to the statue. We tend to assume Daniel was still a young man when he went into the lions’ den. Most of our children’s stories about him picture him as a strapping young man. The kind of man who could maybe wrestle a lion’s mouth shut with his bare hands.

But that’s not the case. We know—from the Bible and from other sources—that at least 66 years have passed from Nebuchadnezzar’s defeat of Jerusalem to the victory of the Persians and Medes. If Daniel was a teenager when he first came to Babylon, that means he’s at least 80 years old now, maybe older. He’s not jacked and stacked, he’s old and stooped.

And that also means he’s got 66 years of public service—66 years as a key administrator under 7 different kings and 2 different empires—and there’s not a hint of wrongdoing on his record. These guys who are motivated to make him look bad can’t find a single thing. **Verse 5:**

**5**Finally these men said, “We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God.”

They can’t find anything bad about Daniel, so they decide to take the thing that makes him so good and make it look bad. **Verse 6:**

**6**So these administrators and satraps went as a group to the king and said: “May King Darius live forever! **7**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. **8**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.” **9**So King Darius put the decree in writing.

The leaders in these stories don’t look very smart. They seem pretty easily manipulated.

The rival group of administrators go to Darius and flat out lie. They say that all of the officers are on board with this plan. The implication is that Daniel is in agreement. He’s not. And Darius doesn’t bother to check with Daniel. That’s mistake number one.

There’s also a blatant appeal to Darius’ ego. Thirty days where no one can pray to any god or idol or human being other than Darius. Basically, a thirty-day King Darius holiday. You can see how that might appeal. But you can also see how it might be a good way for a new ruler to solidify control. It’s a reminder to everyone that there is a new sheriff in town. At any rate, Darius agrees. That’s mistake number two.

And then there’s this whole deal about laws being unalterable. That seems kind of strange to us, and you may remember something similar from the story of Esther. But it has a certain logic to it. If the king wants to be seen as the unquestionable authority in the land, then nobody should be changing his laws—not even himself. If the king appears to be wishy-washy, maybe the people will look for a new king. So Darius makes this new law inviolable, that’s mistake number three.

***Civil Disobedience***  
How, now, is Daniel going to respond to this law that has so blatantly been engineered to get him in trouble? **Verse 11:**

**10**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. **11**Then these men went as a group and found Daniel praying and asking God for help.

What strikes me about this is that it is not a deliberate act of provocation by Daniel. The situation with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego was, by its very nature, public. Everybody was in a big courtyard, so when the whole crowd hit their knees, the three Israelites who were still standing stood out. This is different. It’s a bad law, but it’s not like Daniel is going out on the street or into the king’s courtyard and publicly praying to God. He doesn’t do anything provocative or demonstrative, he just does what he has always done. “Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.” He doesn’t call attention to himself, but he’s not about to alter his ways either.

And that’s exactly what his opponents were counting on. They knew his habits, they staked him out, and as soon as they caught him praying, they tattled on him. **Verse 12**:

**12**So they went to the king and spoke to him about his royal decree: “Did you not publish a decree that during the next thirty days anyone who prays to any god or human being except to you, Your Majesty, would be thrown into the lions’ den?”

The king answered, “The decree stands—in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed.”

They really know how to set up the king: “Just checking, you made this law, right?” “Yep. Nobody can break it.” “OK. Let us tell you who is breaking it..” **Verse 13:**

**13**Then they said to the king, “Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, Your Majesty, or to the decree you put in writing. He still prays three times a day.” **14**When the king heard this, he was greatly distressed; he was determined to rescue Daniel and made every effort until sundown to save him.

This is when everything clicks into place for the king, and he realizes he has been played. He likes Daniel. He’s got nothing bad to say about Daniel. Nobody has anything bad to say about Daniel. Plus, Daniel is really good at his job. Daniel is an asset to the king.

But now he’s been backed into a corner. And try as he might he can’t think of a way to get Daniel out of it. Maybe he could feed the lions so they won’t be hungry? Maybe he could slip the lions some sleepy juice? Maybe he could write a new law that somehow gets Daniel off the hook?

His advisors know what he’s thinking. **Verse 15:**

**15**Then the men went as a group to King Darius and said to him, “Remember, Your Majesty, that according to the law of the Medes and Persians no decree or edict that the king issues can be changed.”

There’s no way out, your Majesty. Don’t get wishy washy now. **Verse 16:**

**16**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!”

This sounds like a prayer, and it comes from the king. The king who is sending him to the lions is literally praying for God to rescue Daniel.

***Here Kitty, Kitty!*Verse 17:**

**17**A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel’s situation might not be changed. **18**Then the king returned to his palace and spent the night without eating and without any entertainment being brought to him. And he could not sleep.

It’s really an elaborate way to execute someone, maybe needlessly complex. Like a Bond villain. But there is also a test of innocence implied. Once the person is tossed into the pit with the lions, there is a possibility he might survive. It’s remote, but possible.

So they seal the entrance and put seals on the door so nobody can come and sneak him away, and then they wait for one night. And for the king, it is a long and sleepless night. He’s truly worried about Daniel. He cares about Daniel. And also…I think he believes there may be some chance that Daniel will survive. Dare I say, he has some hope. **Verse 19**:

**19**At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions’ den.**20**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?”

It's really a ridiculous question. But the king has really been wrestling with this all night, and he believes there is a possibility. Notice the way he addresses Daniel: “servant of the living God.” If Daniel’s God is really living, then maybe…

I wonder of Daniel answered quickly, or if he made the king wait a little while. **Verse 21:**

**21**Daniel answered, “May the king live forever! **22**My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, Your Majesty.”

This isn’t Daniel the lion tamer. He didn’t wrestle them into obedience, he didn’t whisper them down. It was God. He sent an angel. And that angel shut the mouths of the lions. **Verse 23:**

**23**The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.

**24**At the king’s command, the men who had falsely accused Daniel were brought in and thrown into the lions’ den, along with their wives and children. And before they reached the floor of the den, the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones.

This is pretty dark. What happened to the men who had lied on Daniel makes sense, because they were obviously trying to manipulate the king. Including the wives and children is undoubtedly harsh, but that comes from Darius not from God. This verse does do away with the notion that the lions were defective or not hungry. Whatever restrained them from eating Daniel, it wasn’t in effect when the conspirators came their way.

The story ends in much the same way Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego’s story ended: with the king talking about how great God is. **Verses 25-27:**

**25**Then King Darius wrote to all the nations and peoples of every language in all the earth:

“May you prosper greatly!

**26**“I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel.

“For he is the living God  
    and he endures forever;  
his kingdom will not be destroyed,  
    his dominion will never end.  
**27**He rescues and he saves;  
    he performs signs and wonders  
    in the heavens and on the earth.  
He has rescued Daniel  
    from the power of the lions.”

This is a remarkable description of God that is spoken by a pagan. There is no evidence that Darius becomes a committed follower of the LORD, and yet he recognizes powerful truths about Him:

* He is the living God.
* He endures forever.
* His dominion will never end (we go from Babylon to Persia, but God’s kingdom has no end).
* He rescues and he saves.
* He performs signs and wonders.

For Darius, there is no doubt, it is God who has rescued Daniel.

And for Daniel too, I am sure. I’m sure for Daniel there is no doubt. It is the living God who rescued him. He put his hope in the Lord. He put his hope in God. And he walked out of the Lions’ Den.

***Hope in the Living God***Now, let’s talk about what hope like this can do for us. Let’s look at how hope made a difference for Daniel, and how hope can make a difference for us as well. Three things.

**1) Hope in a living God enables us to live with integrity.**

One of the things that stands out about Daniel is his reputation. He is promoted because he is good at his job. Because he is honest. Because he is trustworthy. King after king elevates him to positions of great responsibility because they know, without a doubt, that they can rely on Daniel.

When his enemies, consumed with jealousy, look back on 66 years of service, they can’t find a single negative thing to pin on him.

And remember, Daniel is not where he wants to be. He’s in exile. He’s a slave. He has not chosen to live in Babylon or to work for these kings. But he has placed his hope in the living God and so, whatever his circumstances, he is going to act with integrity and character and he is going to do it all for the glory of God.

Daniel’s is a life that demands explanation. He doesn’t do all kinds of preaching. He’s not up in people’s faces with his belief in God. But he lives in such a way that people can’t help but take notice.

And we’re called to live with the same sort of integrity. I heard a quote this week. I don’t remember who said it, or exactly how it was worded, but it went something like this: “The world has no idea of the ins and outs of my Christianity. They don’t know about theology or worship styles or denominations. But the world knows conduct. And it is watching me to see how I live. They will know if my faith is real if they see it in the way I conduct myself.”

That’s integrity. It comes from hope in the living God.

2) **Hope in the living God leads to Godly habits.**

Another thing that stands out in this story is the word “continually.” When the king condemns Daniel to the lions, he says: “May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!” (v. 16) And then, when he calls into the lions’ den the next morning, he asks: “has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you?” (v. 20)

That idea of continuous service fits well with what it says about Daniel’s prayers. He prayed three times a day, “just as he had done before.” (v.10) In other words, it’s not hard to imagine that this prayer routine is something Daniel had practiced 7 days a week, 365 days a year, for the past 66 years. It was not something new. When the test came, Daniel was ready.

Coaches like to talk about how the habits that are picked up in practice prepare players for the games. You’re supposed to practice like you want to play. If you are lazy and sloppy in practice, then you’ll be lazy and sloppy in the games. But if you practice with hustle and good technique, then those things will show up on game day.

It seems to me that Daniel’s hope in the living God led him to develop Godly habits. For 66 years he practiced, without noticeable results, so when game time came, he was ready. His past faithfulness prepared him to be faithful at the critical moment.

In the same way, we should practice the way we want to play. Look to the living God and develop Godly habits.

3) **Hope in a living God allows us to see God’s hand at work.**

There is a bigger story being told in Daniel, and we shouldn’t miss it. We need to remember that Daniel’s story takes place while Israel is in shambles and the people are in exile. Not just Daniel, but every Israelite is essentially homeless. And the prophets have predicted that this exile would last 70 years.

In fact, while we aren’t told what Daniel was praying about when his jealous co-workers came to tattle on him, we can make a pretty good guess: In chapter 9, we are given the words to one of Daniel’s prayers, and it is all about Jerusalem. It’s not an accident that he was facing toward Jerusalem when he prayed. Daniel was praying for the return of his people to their homeland. He was praying for the restoration of the city that represented God’s glory on earth. He was praying for an end of the exile.

And it’s worth noting that, in Ezra chapter 1, when the first exiles are allowed to return to Israel, 70 years after Nebuchadnezzar tore it all down, it is Cyrus, the King of Persia, that allows it to happen.

In other words, the very same king who saw evidence of the living God in the miraculous deliverance of Daniel, is the king who allowed the Jews to go back home. God was at work in history by guiding the heart of the king.

And Daniel saw it all. He lived through the 70 years of exile. He never got to go back home himself. But he saw the hand of God at work. He saw his hopes for Israel fulfilled. Not because he wished it would happen, not because he visualized it happening, but because he was confident in the living God. He had hope.

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