

Explore the Bible Series for August 14: Daniel's faith was strong before the lion's pit

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Daniel's faith was strong before the lion's pit

- Daniel 6:1-28

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Throughout the Old Testament, imprisonment or confinement was a powerful symbol for exile. The term for "prisoners" comes from the word "to bind" or "to tie" (asar). Such language appears in Genesis 39:20; 40:3, 5; Isaiah 42:7, 49:9 and 61:1; and in Psalm 146:7-8. We are told that in addition to being bound as Daniel's friends were in chapter 3, prisoners were thrown in pits (see Jeremiah 37). The idea of the pit became associated with prison and more ominously with death itself (Psalm 88; Jeremiah 41:7-9). In Lamentations 3:53-55, the writer laments the exile, crying out: "They have flung me alive into a pit; and hurled stones on me; water closed over me. ... I called on your name O Lord from the depths of the pit."

The story of the lion’s den in Daniel has the power of such an association. For those who would have read the story found in Daniel 6, the lion’s den would have meant far more than simply a place of punishment for political dissenters. Those who read the story of Daniel would have associated the events of their own exile with the events surrounding the lion’s den.



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In both stories—that of Daniel among the lions and God’s people in exile—deliverance seemed quite unlikely. Yet it is in the midst of those unlikely places that God chooses to stand with the “bound” and the “imprisoned.”

Many Christians enjoy reading the story of Daniel and the lion’s den, but may miss the true transforming power of this text. The story is appealing because, in the end, the world is made right. Daniel is charged wrongly, thrown to the lions, but delivered. While appreciating the story, Christians struggle to determine how such a story is relevant to their lives. Must we be political dissenters to recapture the power of this story? Is this story only for those who have stood up for the faith against larger powers? If we limit the text to such readings, I fear we have deprived the text of its ability to intersect our own lives.

By understanding the lion’s den as symbolic of exile and imprisonment, the story may take on an added note of urgency for the reader. The questions that might have entered the minds of those in exile would have been: “Can we survive exile? Will God redeem us from this imprisonment?” And later

Jewish communities under oppressive Greek rule would have wondered whether they could survive the persecution and imprisonment so many faced in that day. The story in Daniel is emphatic—God will redeem his faithful from the “pit.”

Although this scenario seems quite foreign for Christians in North America, people wake up daily imprisoned and in exile. The materialism and prosperity of our society has yoked us to jobs that strip us of the energy and time that might be spent on work for the kingdom. The frenetic pace of our lives keeps us in exile from one another and from God.

Many people silently live with the pain of knowing what it is like to live in the pit. The story of Daniel is a vivid reminder that we are never alone in the pit or in the fiery furnace. The God who redeemed his people out of exile is the same God who redeemed Daniel from the lion’s den—and he is the same God who can faithfully deliver us from our own exiles and imprisonment.

What is surprising in this narrative is that Daniel does not speak until after the night in the lion’s den. There are no words on the mouth of Daniel. Before Daniel entered the lion’s den, we might have expected a proclamation of faith, such as the one given by his friends in chapter 3.

But Daniel is silent—but not without faith. We are told in verse 23, “When Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.” Imprisonment and exile often result in despondency and despair, belief that there is no hope in the face of insurmountable challenges.

But Daniel emerged from the pit—from imprisonment and exile—not because of what he said, but because of the faith he possessed. It was a faith that had been patiently nurtured in that upper room. Encounters with God in the upper room led to trust in God in the pit. Trust is not had in the

crisis of life—trust is garnered in the ebb and flow of life, enabling one to endure when crises arise. We would do well to do the same.

Discussion question

- In your life, is there a sense of exile or imprisonment? In what areas do you feel in need of deliverance?
- How can you live your life to nurture the kind of faith exhibited by Daniel?

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