

Sunday, September 6, 2020 – Forward in Freedom Series I
“Forward in Freedom with PRAYER”

Daniel 6: 3-23

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Story Interrupted Structure

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

We’ve spent the past three weeks exploring the “why” – the theological underpinnings of what it means to move forward in freedom. Today we shift our emphasis into the nuts and bolts practical side of moving Forward in Freedom. For that, we’ll start with our Old Testament reading from Daniel 6 to look at the central role of prayer as we move forward.

Daniel is a name many kids learn in Sunday School, including the story in our text today, but it’s helpful to have a fuller picture. The Babylonian empire, centered near modern day Baghdad destroyed Jerusalem in 586BC – its’ temple, its’ palace, its’ walls. All the nobility, all the well-educated officials were forcibly brought to Babylon to assimilate as Babylonian citizens. Among these deportees is a young Daniel – he quickly rises, seen as a highly capable leader and administrator who finds favor with multiple kings. In the verses right before our text today Daniel lives through yet another tumultuous political transition, when the Medes and Persians conquer Babylon and inherit the conquered captives from Jerusalem. With the new king Darius, Daniel finds even higher favor, eventually delegated all the day-to-day governing decisions for the king. For the career officials this favor given to Daniel is infuriating – but the guy is so squeaky clean, so competent and uncorrupted that nothing they throw at him can stick.

Jesus tells us to expect people to hate us for our faithfulness to God and to expect suffering on account of our faith. As people adopted in baptism, forgiven through God’s Gifts and sent on His mission God doesn’t request simply a slice of our life or a piece of our devotion. He is Lord of all. Every aspect of who we are – in our families, in our workplaces, as citizens and in our church says something to others about who our God is. That kind of faithfulness doesn’t just happen. It gets tested. It gets strengthened through time in God’s Word, through prayer – intentionally, regularly, daily as we seek to live according to what God wants in every aspect of our lives.

Daniel’s enemies fabricate a trap. Emperor worship is common in many cultures, both ancient and modern. With all their fine flattery Daniel’s officials convince the king to decree 30 days of worship devoted exclusively to him – all to set a trap for Daniel, who they know will not worship another god.

And they're right. The trap is set. Daniel prays regularly, three times a day to his God, the one true God, and the scheming officials know it. I wonder what kinds of things Daniel prayed about. I have some pretty good guesses. There are some staples of prayer – confession of our sin, giving God thanks and praise. There are also some specific circumstances facing Daniel – he's an alien, responsible under King Darius but truly responsible to God. Notice that he doesn't use his position to charge at the king and demand that he rethink his decision. He properly recognizes that, despite his position of authority he's a stranger in a strange land, that he should not expect the government to do the godly thing. I imagine him praying for guidance on how to honor the legitimate governing authority, that would only exist if God allowed for it. For resolve to keep doing what is right when he is being asked to sin. For wisdom and courage of conviction. And, given what we know about Daniel's character I think too he prayed for Darius. I think he prayed for the enemies who schemed against him. That he prayed for other captives from Jerusalem living under this law ordering them to worship idols.

Times such as Daniel's, and times such as ours call for that kind of vigorous prayer life. Time in confession of our own sin, of thanks and praise, for wisdom for leaders in those four areas of family, work or school, government and church. Wisdom for how to face the challenges and hardships of today, intercession for others, prayers for people who don't know Jesus and yes, prayers for those who make living our faith most difficult.

The trap is sprung. Darius had decreed an unchangeable law for this 30-day period and Daniel had violated it, on penalty of death. The text doesn't tell us, but I have to guess Darius saw his mistake, saw the scheming, but his hands were tied. He liked Daniel, needed Daniel, wracked his brain trying to find alternatives but he was stuck. He was burned by his own bad decision.

Part of the issue is it was a kneejerk decision made without the benefit of counsel. I think we can all relate to that... poor decisions, made quickly, made when flooded with emotional concerns, made under duress, made without stopping to think, made without first making time for prayer.

And now the king has to follow through on his decree. Daniel is put in the lion's den – but before he is, the king wishes him well – praying that Daniel's God will save him. I think it's worth nothing that as the king commends Daniel to God's care, Daniel had already been doing that for himself every day. Sometimes like Darius we get ourselves into the messes we have, other times, like with Daniel, the

messes happen to us, but regardless we're all under God's care. Every breath, every decision, every step forward we take is always and only in God's hands.

After an evening in the pit with the lions Darius, anguished calls out to Daniel, "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?" 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."

Both parties know where the credit is due. The credit belongs to God. God rescues Daniel. Would that our lives always reflect this as well! Always and only by the grace of God – claiming us in our baptism, forgiving us our sins, giving us new life in the resurrection, steeling us against the many challenges and adversities that face us. See, the same God that puts a claim on the whole of our lives, every aspect of our lives, does so for a purpose – that everything we do would show the rest of the world who our God is. Whether we thrive or suffer or anything in between, we pray that God would be glorified, that we would point to our hope in Jesus, our Savior in all that we do.

For us, that means that being a Christian is much more than an hour on a Sunday. Our identity in Jesus, our identity as Christians, comes before our family. It comes before our boss. It comes before our reputation with our friends. It comes before our personal preferences, our opinions on current events or social issues, our patriotism, our political party affiliation. It comes before, as is referenced in Jesus' words in our Gospel lesson, our grudges or our discomfort with confrontation to seek restoration with each other. Who we are as disciples of Jesus and a priesthood of believers in the body of Christ with each other so overwhelms every other priority that, like Daniel, we would be ready to sacrifice *anything* that would get in the way of who we are in Jesus.

Such strength and resolve doesn't come from inside us. That's why we must pray. Who we are in Christ is forged in trial, and in longsuffering with each other, and in prayer that in every part of our lives – family, work, citizens and church members – we would shine the light of Christ in everything we think, say and do – to God's glory. And the good news is the power to do this is already ours! We didn't have to

earn it – it was given to us by the one, most selfless human who ever has lived, who always and only had the will of God first and suffered all, even death on the cross to leave your sin and mine in the grave.

And there are tools at our disposal to strengthen us. Be with us in worship – in person or online. Receive His Gift in the Lord's Supper. Spend time in the Word. Spend time praying to the God who invites you to come like a dear child would go to their dear Father. And so we pray without ceasing.

The Forward in Freedom campaign needs your prayer, too. Pray that we would live to God's glory. Pray for strength of faith. Pray for the people impacted, both now and in the future by the ministry to be carried out in the years to come. And please, plan to join us this Saturday on a morning of prayer, on our campus or in your home, as we pray that everything that aids in moving Forward in Freedom would be to the glory of God and His kingdom. In Jesus' name, Amen.