

Praying Through Tough Times  
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Daniel 6:1-23  
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It was a tough time for the sanitation workers in Memphis in 1968. They worked in dangerous conditions for very low wages. The average pay was \$1.58 per day (the equivalent of \$12.58 today). Forty percent of Memphis sanitation workers were on welfare because their wages were so low. Workers had no pension, no benefits, no vacation. In February 1968, things came to a head and a strike was called. Two weeks before two sanitation workers had been killed, crushed by the back of a garbage truck when it malfunctioned after the men had taken shelter there during a rain storm. The widows of these men received no compensation after their deaths. Praying and organizing through that tough time was Martin Luther King Jr. In March of 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. had come to Memphis to lead a nonviolent demonstration in support of the workers. Unfortunately, some rowdy troublemakers joined the tail end of the march. There was looting. One man died. King vowed to return to the city, which he did the first week of April. King was a galvanizing force: his presence opened a window so they could see the truth: they mattered. The rallying cry for the sanitation workers was "I am a Man." That slogan proclaimed their integrity and dignity in defiance of all that would belittle and demean them. Fifty years ago last Wednesday MLK was killed on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis during that strike. Last week the I Am A Man Plaza was dedicated in Memphis, with a statue in the center commemorating that strike and that slogan "I am a Man."

It was a tough time for Daniel and the exiles from Judah now in Babylon. It was up to him to find a way to live with integrity as a faithful Jew among people who worshipped human kings and golden statutes. Soon after arriving in Babylon, Daniel is singled out for his extraordinary intellectual and leadership gifts. Along with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, Daniel is trained in the Babylonian language and culture. King Nebuchadnezzar orders Daniel and the others to eat royal food rations as part of his training period but Daniel is unwilling to violate Jewish dietary laws. He convinces the guard to allow the four of them eat only vegetables and drink only water. With God's help, Daniel and the others gain weight and vitality and good health just like the other trainees. Daniel's gift for dream interpretation earns him the King's respect and admiration. King Darius appoints Daniel as one of three presidents ruling Babylon on his behalf. The other presidents are jealous and plot against Daniel. They get King Darius to sign a law: anyone who prays to some god other than the King shall be thrown into a den of lions. Daniel remained a faithful Jew. He worshiped the LORD alone. Listen again to verses 10 and 11 of Daniel chapter six: "Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open towards Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and

praise him, just as he had done previously. The conspirators came and found Daniel praying and seeking mercy before his God.”

Some say Daniel just kept doing what he’d been doing all along: praying to God by facing his homeland. Others say his opening the windows was an intentional act of civil disobedience: open defiance of the king’s order. In some translations of Daniel, the wording is passive: the windows were opened (meaning they had always been opened and this day was no different). In other versions, the active voice is used. Here’s how the Douay Bible reads: “Now when Daniel knew...that the law was made, he went into his house and, opening the windows in his upper chamber towards Jerusalem, he knelt down three times a day” to pray. His daily prayer practice had become an act of defiance against all that threatened to erode his loyalty to God.

In response, Daniel is thrown into the den of lions. A stone is placed over the top of the hole and sealed with the king’s seal, to ensure no one comes to Daniel’s aid. King Darius returns to the palace where he fasts all night and sleeps little. In the morning, the king removes the stone and shouts “has your God whom you faithfully serve been able to deliver you from the lions?” Daniel replies “My God sent his angel and shut the lions’ mouths so that they would not hurt me.....” A new decree is issued by the king: that all the people in my royal dominion should tremble and fear before the God of Daniel: for he is the living god, enduring forever.... He delivers and rescues, he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth; for he has saved Daniel.” Prayer in front of the open window got Daniel through some tough times.

The year is now 1908. That was a tough time in South African history. The legal system of racial segregation known as apartheid was making life increasingly difficult, not only for blacks but for those of “mixed races” including immigrants from India. Mohandas Gandhi came to South Africa and lived there for twenty-one years (1893 – 1914) working as a lawyer. During this time he developed his ideas about “*satyagraha*” (loyalty to the truth). He led the fight against “pass laws” which required certain racial groups to carry documents which were used to restrict travel and housing. In 1908 Gandhi was arrested for refusing to carry a pass. Encouraging Indians to also defy the pass laws, Gandhi called the book of Daniel one of the greatest examples of non-violent resistance to oppressive government. In speaking to Western audiences about the need to change apartheid with non-violent resistance, Gandhi often retold the story of Daniel. He’d point out that Daniel was a model citizen in all ways except his resistance to laws that violated his conscience. In particular quoted Daniel 6:10-11 – the verses about Daniel praying in front of the open window. Indians should “sit with their doors flung wide open and tell those gentlemen (the South African authorities) that whatever laws they passed were not for them unless those laws were from God.....When Daniel disregarded the laws of the Medes and Persians which had offended his conscience and meekly suffered the punishment for his disobedience, he offered “*satyagraha*” in its purest form.”

Sanitation workers in Memphis; Daniel in Babylon; and the Indians living in South Africa under apartheid. Here’s what all these have in common. They prayed

through tough times as they found an open window. The open window is a symbol for whatever helps us keep our integrity in tough times. Daniel served in the court of the king. I imagine Daniel was tempted by power and prestige as any of us would have been. But Daniel remained faithful to God. He kept his integrity as Jew through his refusal to violate the dietary laws, his steady loyalty to God and God alone, his openly defying the law of the land. Daniel knew who he was: a servant of the LORD, Verses 10 and 11 of chapter 6 describe Daniel praying in front of that open window that Daniel either refused to shut, or defiantly flung open so his accusers will hear his prayer – that is a symbol of resistance against all that threatens human dignity and worth. Those sanitation workers using the slogan “I am a Man” protested and prayed in the spirit of Daniel whose words and actions said “I am a Jew”, just as Gandhi and the Indian protestors in South Africa said, in effect, “we are persons with freedom, dignity and worth. Treat us that way.”

So, here’s what I hope you will take away from all this, as you pray through your tough times. We may not have literal lions staring us down. No one is throwing us into a den of lions, but that doesn’t mean we don’t have “lions” of our own. Maybe you are confront despair which comes from facing a personal sorrow. For some our “lions” are discrimination, for others oppression, or physical or mental illness. Life can be tough, very tough. If you want to face down your lions it means living out Daniel 6:10-11: find your open window. Do whatever you need to do to stay in touch with what you know to be true; what you know in your heart to be true and what you deeply value. If we can hold on to these with just a bit of the determination Daniel showed, we’ll be doing well.

Prayer in tough times can be an act of defiance. Whenever that sense of who we are – who God made us to be – is violated– prayer can be a form of resistance to all that is ugly, mean, cruel in this world. Prayer in tough times helps us keep our integrity, refusing to let go of who God created us to be.

In prayer, God has given us what we need to get through the tough times. Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory, through our LORD Jesus Christ. Amen.