

THE GOD OF ANIMALS, VII: THE KING OF THE BEASTS
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THE LESSON FOR THE DAY—DANIEL 6:1-29
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It's no wonder that for as long as anyone can remember, the lion has been known as The King of the Beasts. *Panthera Leo* is its formal classification, and that about captures the grandeur of the animal, doesn't it: *panthera leo*.

In this series on animals I've gotten interested in collective nouns, those eccentric words we use to describe a group of items: a *flock* of sheep, a *gaggle* of geese, a *herd* of swine, a *choir* of angels, a *constellation* of stars, a *belt* of asteroids, a *bevy* of quail, a *bevy* of beauties, a *brace* of orthodontists, a *bridge* of admirals, a *death row* of vultures, an *embarrassment* of riches, an *embarrassment* of parents (for teenagers), a *fidget* of altar boys, a *fistful* of dollars, a *geek* of engineers, a *glitter* of generals, a *gossip* of relatives, a *mass* of Catholics, a *nest* of vipers, a *nest* of bowls, a *nest* of machine guns, a *quake* of seismologists, a *quarrel* of lawyers, a *waddle* of basset hounds.¹ A couple of weeks ago I told you that a flock of ravens was once called an *unkindness*, scavengers and harbingers of death that they are. An *unkindness* of ravens. And of course, the best collective noun of them all is a *pride* of lions; that's just right, isn't it?

A pride of lions: Aslan, Mufasa, Simba, even the Cowardly Lion came through in the end. As the second largest cat, the lion is not quite as large as the tiger, but males can approach 550 pounds. Its canine teeth are three inches long; yes, as it turns out, cats have bigger

canines than dogs, a little linguistic joke, I guess.

A lion's roar can be heard five miles away, a ferocity MGM has harnessed for its own purposes since 1924; the current MGM lion is the fifth; his name is, you guessed it, Leo. In the seventeenth century, the Tower of London kept lions as a spectacle for the curious crowds; the price of admission was a dog or a house cat for the lion's supper.

The lion is a ferocious beast, so perhaps it's no wonder that before the dawn of more enlightened attitudes in recent years, a den of lions was a popular instrument of execution, as many Christians discovered to their dismay at the Coliseum in Imperial Rome. Before Nero, there was Darius, the King of the Persians, who'd never heard of gallows, guillotines, electric chairs, or lethal injections, so he used three-inch canines instead.

If you paid any attention in Sunday School, you know that in 587 B.C., Babylon, the world's only superpower, annihilated the city of Jerusalem and carted the Jewish aristocracy off to Babylon, where they became housemaids and stable keeps for their Babylonian overlords.

But superpowers don't last long. While the Jews were still in Babylon, the Persians annihilated the Babylonians just as thoroughly as the Babylonians had annihilated Jerusalem, and the Jews in Babylon found themselves answering to Persian King Darius instead of Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar.

¹<http://www.ojohaven.com/collectives/>.

In Darius' regime, Jews who could read, write, count, pick stocks, calculate derivatives, or, best of all, speak Persian, did all right for themselves. They might get lucky and end up working for the palace, or for whatever passed for Morgan Stanley in sixth-century-B.C. Babylon. Daniel was one such Jewish aristocrat who managed by grit, determination, talent, luck, and God's watchful care, to scale the professional pyramid to its apex in ancient Babylon under Persian King Darius.

He so distinguished himself among the Persians that Darius made him one of 120 satraps who administered the kingdom on the king's behalf. I suppose that for all practical purposes the satraps were like the President's cabinet.

So Daniel, the Tiger Woods of smoky, wood-paneled backrooms, was doing all right for himself, except that there was one lesson Daniel failed to learn: you gotta be good, but not too good, you gotta work hard, but not too hard, or you'll make your peers green with envy and build up a heaping fund of resentment among them.

Daniel's fellow satraps, or cabinet members, notice two things about Daniel: he is inhumanly talented, and insufferably pious. He refused to cuss, prayed three times a day toward the smoldering ruins of Jerusalem, kept kosher, and in the locker room at the squash courts they noticed that he'd altered his anatomy in a minor way.

So the other cabinet members get together and come up with a way to get rid of this talented, pious Jewish All-Star who's so good he's making the rest of them look bad. They convince King Darius to pass a law making it illegal to pray to anyONE or anyTHING other than the King himself.

Now, what convinced King Darius to fall for such a transparent ruse is beyond anyone's

ken. The history books suggest that Darius was an otherwise shrewd ruler and even a pious god-fearer himself. Like Daniel, Darius was a monotheist; he worshiped one God. He didn't worship Daniel's god Yahweh, but what's in a name, right?

Still, somehow, Darius falls for the ruse. I can't believe it. Have you ever heard of a national leader who fell for the bad advice of his cabinet? I am shocked; I've never heard of such a thing.

So there's Daniel between the devil and the deep blue sea. To change the metaphor, there's Daniel crushed between two immutable laws—the law of the land and the law of his God.² There's Torah and here's Darius. Bam! Daniel's between a rock and a hard place.

Daniel just goes on praying to Yahweh in that westerly direction, but here's the thing: The Bible takes the trouble to point out that Daniel prays three times a day *with the windows open*. Daniel practices not a private but a public piety. There he is, for all the world to see, praying as conspicuously and shamelessly as Bathsheba bathed.

Poor Daniel. Poor Darius, the ill-advised monarch. He's as trapped as his friend Daniel. Darius loves Daniel. Daniel's a star and Darius knows it, but the King has spoken; the law is carved in granite, literally. Darius has no recourse but to sign Daniel's death warrant.

They throw Daniel into a pit with a *pride* of lions who haven't eaten in a week, and unfortunately, lions eat fifteen pounds of meat a day. Curiously, the pagan Persian Darius seems to have some inkling of this story's eventual conclusion, because before he seals

²This phrasing comes from W. Sibley Towner in *Daniel*, from the *Interpretation Commentary Series* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), p. 81.

up the pit with a stone the size of a Mini-Cooper and slaps a wax of his royal seal upon it for good measure, Darius calls down to Daniel, "May your God, whom you have served so faithfully, deliver you!"

Daniel and Darius both spend a sleepless night and at first break of day Darius hustles to the lion's pit as fast as his quasi-divine feet will carry him, and finds Daniel not only alive but stroking the glorious mane of a lion who's resting his head in Daniel's lap like a pussycat, or at least that's the way the old Sunday School flannel-graphs told the story when I was growing up.

The story has a happy ending, of course. Justice is vindicated. In a bloody denouement, Darius tosses all 119 of the other satraps at the pride of lions, who "break all their bones in pieces before they hit the floor of the pit," as the Bible bluntly puts it without apology.

The story has a happy ending, but Daniel didn't know that when he knelt before those open windows to pray towards Jerusalem three times a day, exposed and vulnerable and publicly, not privately, pious. Daniel knew chances were good he'd be torn limb from limb by that pride of lions. Most falsely accused innocents who maintain their integrity despite lethal consequence get their bones broken in pieces before they hit the floor of the lion's den. You can insist on staying good and right and true, but that doesn't mean you'll stay alive.

You've heard the story of the man who appeared before St. Peter at the pearly gates. The test begins. "Have you ever done anything of particular merit?" St. Peter asked. The man thinks for a moment. "Well, there was that one time," he finally says. "On a trip to the Black Hills of South Dakota, I came upon a gang of bikers who were harassing a young woman. I told them to leave her alone, but they wouldn't listen. So, I went up to the

biggest, baddest, most tattooed biker of them all and smacked him on the head, kicked his bike over, ripped out his nose ring, and threw it on the ground. I yelled, "Now, backoff!! Or you'll answer to me!" "Wow! That's impressive," says St. Peter. "When did this happen?" "Just a couple minutes ago."

There are no guarantees. Staying right and good doesn't always mean staying alive and well. Pick your martyr: St. Paul, who challenged Nero's supremacy, and lost. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who went toe-to-toe with Hitler, and lost. Martin Luther King, who stared down the Ku Klux Klan, and lost.

But sometimes. Sometimes. This story teaches us that this is God's world, and in God's world no lie can live long. This story teaches us that the lion is not The King of the Beasts; God is the King of the Beasts, and sometimes, sometimes, God sends an angel to stifle the lion-hearted appetite and lock the leonine jaw.

This story teaches us that sometimes people of faith might get crushed between two immutable laws: the law of the land and the law of your God. Has anybody here ever felt crushed between two immutable laws: the demands of your boss and the wisdom of your faith? The whim of the pack and the whisper of your conscience?

Learn something from this story: it teaches us that there are worse things to lose than your life; you might lose your integrity, you might lose your soul, you might lose the core of what you are, you might have to say goodbye to your own most cherished convictions.

This story teaches us that you should never capitulate to the law of the land if the law of the land is stupid, like Darius' edict to bow the knee before a ridiculous potentate.

Sometimes the law of the land is stupid. Did you see the article in *The New York Times* the other day about the military lawyers who are defending the inmates at Guantanamo? The Pentagon thought it would be easy to consign these so-called ‘enemy combatants’ to perpetual incarceration. They thought they could run a kangaroo court of easy convictions. They thought military-attorney comrades would roll over and play dead. But there are some military lawyers who refuse to capitulate to stupid laws. Lieutenant Commander William Kuebler of the United States Navy refuses to capitulate to stupid laws. He keeps harassing the courts on behalf of his clients.

By his own admission, William Kuebler is a born-again Christian and arch-conservative who has never voted for a Democrat in his life, and yet he is going up against a law of the land he thinks is ridiculous. You know what? Defending terrorists is not exactly the best way to get ahead if you’re a career Navy guy. Challenging the whole Pentagon system is not the way to climb the military ladder. Mr. Kuebler has chosen to face the professional lion’s den; he does not know if someone will lock the lion’s jaws or if his bones will be broken in pieces before he hits the floor.

Elijah Parish Lovejoy was a Presbyterian minister from Maine who later graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary. In 1827 he moved to St. Louis, started a religious newspaper, and went to war against slavery. When he attacked a judge named Luke E. Lawless for refusing to prosecute a mob that had lynched a free black man, Mr. Lovejoy was run out of town. How’s that for poetry: a dirty judge named Luke E. Lawless?

After he was run out of town in St. Louis, Mr. Lovejoy set up shop across the river in Alton, Illinois, and continued publishing his abolitionist newspaper. Three times they dumped his printing presses in the Mississippi River. The fourth time, Mr. Lovejoy decided he

wasn’t going to take it any more and threw himself across his fourth printing press. They shot him five times with a shotgun and he died on the spot. This was in 1837.

Ken Burns began his documentary on the Civil War by telling the story of Presbyterian minister Elijah Parish Lovejoy. That was the beginning of the Civil War, according to Mr. Burns.

Said the Reverend Lovejoy, “If the civil authorities refuse to protect me, I must look to God. If I die, I will make my grave in Alton. I have sworn eternal opposition to slavery and by God I will not turn back. I can die at my post but I cannot desert it.”³

There are worse things to lose than your life. You could lose your soul. You could miss your calling. You could deny the very purpose of your existence.

If you’ve been paying any attention, you’ll notice that the story of Daniel and the Lion’s Den foreshadows another even more famous story about a falsely accused innocent who is thrown into a pit and left for dead. When the ill-advised authorities hustle to the pit at first break of day, they find that an angel has come to roll the stone away; he is not in pieces, as they’d expected, he is safe and sound.

This is God’s world, and in God’s world, no lie can live long. This side of the grave or the other, there is vindication. In life and in death, we belong to God.

³Quoted by William O. Douglas, “The Martyrdom of Elijah P. Lovejoy, in *Nation Under God*, ed. Frances Brentano (New York: Channel Press, 1964), p. 76. Slightly adapted.