

Daniel Series Part 13

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[0 : 0 0] Decision time. I wonder if that very expression fills you with a measure of dread. Decision time.

From the trivial to the transcendental, we are constantly making decisions. Do I go for frosted or regular shreddies? Do I walk to the shop or jump in the car? Do I study for another hour or collapse into bed? Do I creep up to 40 miles per hour in the 30-mile zone or stick to 30-ish?

Do I flirt just a little with the pretty girl at the photocopier or remember the ring on my left hand? What decisions we take can reveal a great deal about who we are and what or who governs our lives.

What values or reference points inform and even determine the decisions that you take? Perhaps your response to an array of possibilities and the consequent decisions required is the ever more popular, whatever. Now, while you may have my sympathy, the reality is that whatever often isn't an option. A decision needs to be taken, and decisions have consequences. Now, the consequences of frosted versus regular shreddies may not be life-changing, but speeding to get home two minutes early or that innocent flirt at the photocopier could well prove to be altogether more sobering as regards the possible consequences. Now, this morning we want to think about decisions and their consequences as we consider one of the most well-known stories in the Bible, Daniel in the Lion's Den, and in a sense because of its familiarity. We are going to approach it from a slightly different angle of considering or examining decisions that were taken by some of the principal actors in the account and thinking a bit about those decisions and the consequences of them.

Three decisions that we want to identify and give some thought to. First of all, the decision of Daniel's colleagues to destroy him. Then we will look at the decision of King Darius to sign the infamous decree that we've read about. And thirdly, the decision of Daniel to disobey the royal decree. Three decisions.

[3 : 06] And as we consider each in turn, and importantly, the resulting consequences, I would encourage you as we go along to examine yourself and the manner in which you take decisions. We can learn from those who make solid and grounded decisions, but we can also learn from those who mess up big time in the decisions that they take. Well, we begin with the decision of Daniel's colleagues as we have it related to us at the beginning of the chapter from verse 1 through to verse 6. Now, we've read the chapter. We don't need to read those verses again. We know what they decided to do. They decided to destroy Daniel. But this was a choice that they made. Again, the account is so familiar to many of us that we don't even for a moment imagine, well, what might have happened or what might have they done. It almost seems as if, well, this is what they had to do. But of course, that's not the case. They chose to destroy Daniel. They decided to do that. They could have taken a different decision. We are given a little of the background in the chapter. The new king, King Darius, appoints the satraps or provincial rulers. These were men who were responsible for security matters and also for collecting tributes. And he places the satraps under the direction of three, what are called here, administrators. And Daniel is one of those three men. Now, remember that Daniel has been serving in the higher echelons of the imperial civil service for close on 70 years, now under a third emperor,

Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar, emperors come and go, but the man of God remains. And as Daniel remains in the imperial civil service, if we want to call it that, it seems reasonable to presume that many of the other men who are appointed, these 120 satraps, perhaps many of them, had also served under previous administrations.

And I mention that because in all these years, these decades of service that Daniel had offered to these successive emperors, often occupying very senior and enviable positions, as far as we know, he had never faced the prospect that he now faces of a face-to-face encounter with famished lions. So presumably in the past, these men or others like them, who had also seen Daniel in all his capacity and in the favor with which he was held by previous emperors, they had not decided to do what these men decided to do on this occasion.

But these men are driven by jealousy. The king identifies very quickly Daniel's exceptional qualities, as they're described there at the beginning of the chapter, and very wisely determines that even having placed them already as one of the three who were overseeing the work of all the satraps. Daniel should occupy a place of greater preeminence as the principal man responsible for all of this administration. And the men who surround him, the other administrators of satraps, they are driven by this decision to great and deep jealousy towards Daniel. They didn't need to respond in that way. These men could have celebrated Daniel's promotion and recognized it as well deserved. They could have endeavored to learn from and emulate his exceptional qualities. They could have, but they didn't. They were jealous, pure and simple, and they decided to do him harm.

Their decision was governed or driven by selfishness and spitefulness, and it was taken in the full knowledge that what they were doing was wrong. They knew Daniel was an innocent man. The account makes that so evident. They knew he was innocent. They knew that they wouldn't be able to find any fault in regard to the carrying out of his duties. And yet, though they knew he was innocent, they knew he would show no tolerance to any kind of corruption, to creative expensive counts or backhanders in the running of the administration. And so, they consciously decide to do him harm.

[8 : 23] This was their decision. And we'll come back in a moment to the consequences. But let's be very clear. These men decided to do what they did. Before we move on to the next decision, let's just fast forward to today. Is it so different today? Now, your workplace may not be the stage for colleagues scheming to take out workmate by violent means. I certainly hope that you're not subject to those kind of threats.

But in a million different ways, we decide, we decide to do others harm for our own advantage. Now, our preferred weapon of choice is lying. These men used that weapon among others.

Lying, I'm sure we would all agree, and you would imagine, not only those of us gathered here, but those with whom we work. We all say, well, lying's a bad thing, surely. Well, indeed it is. But it is becoming more and more common. Maybe some of you heard recently, just this past week, there was on the news a report on a study that has been conducted at the University of Essex concerning levels of honesty in British society. They were comparing how that has changed over the last 20 years, or something of that order, if I'm not mistaken. A very fascinating study, and the general conclusion, the very forceful conclusion, is that there has been a marked decline in the levels of honesty within our society. For example, it was concluded that two out of three people would be prepared to lie if they perceived that such an action would be in their own interest.

So, in a work situation, if they thought that lying would favor their possibilities of advance, of promotion, then they would be prepared to do that. I think one of the very concrete examples that was given was in an application form for a job, or in a CV.

Two out of three people felt that it would be legitimate, or in any case, they would be willing to lie in order to gain an advantage. I wonder how they would consider that in terms of the implications. Maybe folk think, well, that's a victimless crime.

[10 : 50] You know, I just bend the truth a little on my form. I get the job. What's the harm done? No victims. Well, tell that to the sucker who was honest in his application form and lost out in the job because of your twisting the truth just a little.

Decisions. Decisions that we take every day. What do I do? Decisions that we take in order to favor ourselves and do harm to others.

Daniel's colleagues took a decision. They decided to harm him. What about King Darius? King Darius also took a decision, and he took the decision to sign the decree.

Now, Darius has been in post for a few weeks, perhaps at most a few months, and his senior civil servants appear en masse with a rather flattering proposal.

Darius is to be the supreme deity for 30 days. Now, we've all heard of 15 minutes of fame, but that pales into insignificance next to 30 days of deity.

[12 : 01] Well, it's decision time for Darius. What will he do in the face of this proposal? Again, he has a decision. He didn't have to sign the decree.

He didn't have to go along with the proposal that was made to him. He could have paused and started to think for a moment, usually a very sensible thing to do when we have a big decision.

He could have considered whether this was, in fact, a very good idea or not. He could have maybe noticed that his most trusted administrator was not even present.

We're told that they all came to make this proposal, but clearly Daniel wasn't there, the man who Darius had already identified as the most capable and most trustworthy of all the men.

But he wasn't there. He could have thought, why isn't Daniel here? But he didn't. He didn't do these things. He could have asked, is this the right thing to do?

[13 : 01] Is this a wise course of action? He could have asked himself, how will I respond to the multiple pleas heading in my direction from across the empire as everybody prays to me?

Will I be able to step up to the mark if I'm granted such an exalted position? He could have done all of these things and thought all of these things. Darius could have treated the proposal with the contempt and indeed the ridicule it deserved, but he didn't.

Why did he decide to sign the decree? He may have been reluctant to antagonize his team of satraps and the provinces they represented. He is just bedding in to his reign after all.

But the root of the matter was pride. He was the main man. And this decree served to celebrate his power and majesty. Of course, there's nothing new under the sun.

This was the Achilles heel of Nebuchadnezzar before him and indeed Belshazzar. Darius messed up on this big decision because he considered himself to be supreme and not subject to any higher authority, something that the decree very eloquently presented concerning him.

[14 : 17] Now, that may seem very alien to us, decrees about nobody praying to anybody except to this man. But is it so different today?

Millions of decisions are taken daily in Aberdeen on exactly the same basic philosophical grounding of our supposed autonomy.

This is the idea here. You see, Darius is willing to go along with this. Indeed, enthusiastically goes along with this because it declares him to be entirely autonomous.

He is the top dog. He's overall. He can do anything he wants. There is not even a deity above him. And as I say, is that so different to the way decisions are taken today?

I'll do what I want. It's my life. I don't have to submit to some authority over me and certainly not any God who would claim to be able to govern over me.

[15 : 20] No. I'm my own man. I'll do what I want. It's my own life. It's my own body. It's my own money. It's my own time. I'll do what I want. And so as we take decisions, this delusion of autonomy determines the decisions that we take.

When I was noting down this and I put millions of decisions, I thought, well, maybe that's a bit of hyperbole. But then I thought, well, is it? I wouldn't be surprised if millions of decisions are taken daily on that basis.

But we don't need to quibble with the mass. If it's thousands, we can go with thousands. But it's not only in the area of our own individual lives. In the area of public policy in our society, this delusion of autonomy drives so much of the decisions that are taken.

You will be aware in this past week or so, assisted suicide has once again come onto the table, even though it was very firmly defeated, less than what, a couple of years ago in the Scottish Parliament.

Once again, Margot MacDonald, you can't fault her for her persistence, brings it once again to the table. Assisted suicide. And what's behind the hard sell on assisted suicide?

[16 : 39] Well, the biggest argument in its favor is this argument of autonomy. Let people do what they want.

Don't impose on others your morality or your ideas. If somebody wants to do this, then they're autonomous. They can do what they want. If they want to take their lives, if they need help for that to happen, then who is anybody to stand in their way?

It's the same idea. I'm in charge of my life. I can do what I want. And this delusion is as old as the hills. Literally as old as the hills.

Because it goes back to the Garden of Eden. What was the temptation that the serpent presented to Adam? You will be like God. You will be like God.

Autonomous. You can do what you want. Not subject to anybody. Nobody telling you what to do. No rules to follow. Nobody to bow down before. Your own man.

[17 : 41] Do what you want. Well, King Darius had a decision to make. He actually had a second big decision.

Even once he realized that he had fallen into the trap laid by the satraps. And we just want to mention this very briefly in passing. You see, he's fallen into the trap when he signs the decree.

He decides to sign the decree. That was a big, bad decision. But then he discovers the consequences of it. Or at least in a measure the consequences of it.

And the imminent death of Daniel. But at that point he also has a decision. Does he go through with the sentence established. And send Daniel to his death. Or does he recognize that such an action would be evil.

And refuse. Now I think maybe some of you as I even lay out the scenario. Are thinking, well, hang on. He didn't really have a decision there. His hands were tied. The famous law of the Medes and the Persians.

[18 : 44] Which cannot be repealed. Even if he wanted to save Daniel. He couldn't indeed. As we read the chapter. That's the impression that is given. That he did all that he could. But he couldn't.

His hands were tied. Well, I leave this with you. And you can do with this as you please. It's one way of considering the evidence.

You may fall in another direction. As you consider the evidence. But I'm far from persuaded. That his hands were as tied. As they would appear to be. In this very chapter.

We have recorded. Possibly. You can listen to what I say. And see if you agree. But possibly two occasions. Where Darius puts to one side. His stupid law. We're generally told that stupid.

Isn't a very good adjective. Or nice adjective to use. But there are times when it's appropriate. And this was a stupid law. And there are two occasions. It seems to me. Where he does put it to one side. Notice in verse 16.

[19 : 39] It's an interesting little quirk. If you wish. In verse 16 we read. So the king gave the order. And they brought Daniel. And threw him into the lion's den. The king said to Daniel.

May your God. Whom you serve. Continually rescue you. Now that's practically a prayer. Now you could say. That he could get off on a technicality. It wasn't actually a prayer. But really what he's doing.

Is he is. He is at the very least. Aspiring to the possibility. That this other God. Could save Daniel. Now the law. Said that for 30 days. You couldn't pray to anybody.

Other than to Darius. And yet here he is. Almost praying. To the God of Daniel. Well that's debatable. But what about the end of the chapter. Here. Verse 26.

Now the flow of events. Is all very quick. The law is issued. Daniel breaks the law. Immediately he is accused. Immediately he is sent. To the lion's den. The whole thing is. It begins and ends.

[20 : 36] In 24, 48 hours. And yet. Well within the 30 days. That's the point. And yet what does Darius do. At the end. I issue a decree. That in every part of my kingdom. People must fear and reverence.

The God of Daniel. He's breaking his own law. So this idea. That his hands were so tied. That he had to send Daniel. To the lion's den. And I don't think holds.

Sufficient water. In any case. Darius chose. To send Daniel. To the lions. He didn't want. To endure. The loss of face. And the political cost.

Of not doing so. The political cost. Of not sending him. To the lion's den. Was too great. And so. To the lions. Daniel must go. This is very contemporary.

Pragmatism. Over principle. Pragmatism. Over principle. Yes. I could spare Daniel. But what's the cost. To me.

[21 : 34] Politically. You know. The loss of face. I've declared. So. So boldly. That this is what will happen. So he sends him. To the. Lion's den.

Moving on. The decision of Daniel. To disobey. The royal decree. Well Daniel. We know the story. Discovers. About the royal decree. He has a decision to make. Does he comply.

With the decree. Or does he disobey. The decree. Now Daniel. In his own mind. Could have made. A hugely convincing case. For going along. With this stupid law.

Or at least. Appearing to do so. You know. 30 days. What's 30 days. 30 days. Flies by. God would understand. If Daniel took a break. From prayer.

For a month. He's been praying. Faithfully for decades. What's 30 days. Or in any case. He could continue. Praying in private. That was a big advantage.

[22 : 28] Of serving the living. And true God. Who was not trapped. In temples. And holy space. In the privacy. Of his own home. And behind firmly. Closed doors. He could continue to pray.

Discreetly. But Daniel. Decides. To disobey. Why? Why does he decide to disobey. The queen. The king's.

Decree. Well he. Disobeys the king's decree. Because he's a bible superhero. We all know that. Dare to be a Daniel. And this was daring Daniel.

At his best. Well yes and no. Daniel was courageous. And he is to be commended. For his courage. And yet. His decision to disobey. And it was a decision.

Was well grounded. It was grounded. Into connected convictions. In his conviction. That heaven rules. Which we see. As the big theme.

[23 : 24] Of this book. In his conviction. That obeying God. Will always be more sensible. Than obeying men. And it was grounded.

In his own experience. Of God's protection. And vindication. For 70 years. Or so. He had survived. And prospered. In Babylon. Under successive emperors.

Why should this year. Be any different. Now that is not to say. That Daniel was sure. That he would emerge. Unscathed. Or even alive. From the lion's den. But to recognize.

That Daniel. Daniel had good reason. To feel secure. In the hands of God. As it was put. By somebody. I think. With great merit.

A man of God. Is immortal. Until his work. Is done. And Daniel knew that. And so. He. Very reasonably. Decides. To disobey.

[24 : 18] The king's decree. He decided. To honor God. Rather than men. A very wise decision. What about you? Are you persuaded. That heaven rules?

Are you convinced. That it is actually. Very sensible. And reasonable. To honor God. Rather than men. Three decisions. The satraps. The king. And Daniel.

Much more briefly. What about the consequences? We begin by. Thinking of the king. And Daniel. And we limit ourselves. To one. Revealing contrast. How the king.

And Daniel. Spent the night. Following. The execution. Of the imperial decree. First. Just remember. Where they spent the night. The king. In his palace.

Surrounded by luxury. And Daniel. In the pit. Surrounded by lions. Who has got the short end. Of the stick? Well. The king. He has a palace.

[25 : 15] But he has no peace. He has food. In abundance. But he has no appetite. He has pleasure. On call. But no desire. To call. He's laden.

With guilt. And tormented. By his own folly. And these are the consequences. Of his decision. In contrast. Daniel.

Has slept like a baby. Or perhaps he spent the night. In animated conversation. With the angel. We don't know. He had a great night. In the lion's den.

Daniel was vindicated. And emerges unscathed. And this. Was the consequence. Of his decision. But then we also have the satraps.

And this is. Altogether. More solemn. And in many ways. Repulsive. The fate. Of the perpetrators. Of the satraps. Of the administrators.

[26 : 10] Who had sought. Daniel's destruction. Their fate. Was just. They received. The punishment. They had intended. For Daniel. But what of their families? We're told.

That their families also. Are thrown. Into the lion's den. Now what we have. And this is difficult. Let's not. Pretend otherwise. It is difficult. What we have here.

Is an accurate record. Of what happened. But it need not. Be understood. As constituting. Approval. Of the actions. Of King Darius. This is what he did. These were the consequences.

Of the bad decisions. Of the satraps. But what is. Solemnly true. Regardless of what we make. Of the. The families.

As victims. As victims. Of the sins. Of others. But that very truth. Does remind us. That it is. Solemnly true. That our bad decisions.

[27 : 07] Do affect others. And we often drag down. With us. Innocent. Victims. Well what is the lesson. Of all this? We thought about these decisions. We've.

Given some time. To consider. Some of the. The reasons. Why. These men. Went in one. Or other. Direction. But. But what do we learn from this? Is the lesson.

That we come out of. From all of this. Well be sure. To make good decisions. Well that is. A good lesson. To learn. And we. Would do well. To take it on board.

And resolve. To examine. Very carefully. What informs. The decisions. That we take. And why it is. That we often do. Mess up. And make foolish decisions. With painful consequences.

That would be a good thing to do. But is that it? Do we go home. And just try. To be like Daniel. And maybe get very frustrated. When we fail.

[28 : 03] To be like Daniel. Is there no hope. For those of us. Who unlike Daniel. Have already messed up. And taken some dreadful decisions. And are now living.

With the painful consequences. Well there is hope. Because Daniel points. To one. Greater than Daniel.

Daniel points. To one. Who was also. Falsely accused. Daniel points. To one. Who was also. Innocent. All. Together. Innocent.

Daniel points. To one. Who was also. Condemned. And sentenced. To death. Daniel points. To one. Who unlike Daniel. Was not. Delivered.

From the jaws. Of death. But tasted death. You see. Daniel points us. To Jesus. And Jesus. Also had. A decision.

[28 : 59] To make. We've read. Of his agony. In the garden. Of Gethsemane. He had to decide. He had to decide. If he would. Hand himself. Over. To death.

In the place. Of folks. Like you and me. Who have made. Lots of bad. Bad decisions. And he. Agonized. Over that decision.

In Gethsemane. And sweated. Drops. Of blood. At the prospect. Of carrying. The sin. Of the world. And enduring. The wrath.

Of God. In our place. Of God. But when. The moment. Of decision. Came. He set his face. To the cross. And he willingly.

Embraced. Death. And that decision. Of Jesus. Provides hope. For those of us. Who have messed up. And continue.

[29 : 51] To mess up. Those of us. Who have made. And continue. To make. Bad decisions. Decisions. To do. Our own thing. And live life. As we see fit.

Decisions. To disobey God. Decisions. To sin. And these decisions. Have consequences. And we are not. Freed. From many. Of the temporal. Consequences.

Of our decisions. But the most. Solemn. Consequence. Concerns. Our eternal. Destiny. Cast. From the presence. Of God. And receiving.

The just. Punishment. For our rebellion. But in Jesus. There is hope. Because he decided. To take the punishment. We deserve.

He decided. To die. In our place. And though he tasted death. The father. Raised him. On the third day.

[30 : 45] In triumphant. Vindication. And today. Today. This morning. Jesus. Offers forgiveness. And a fresh start. To all.

Who have messed up. And all. Who have made. Some really. Bad. Some really stupid. Decisions. If that's you. Then come to Jesus.

For that. Fresh start. That he gives. That forgiveness. That he. Freely offers. Come to him. And put your trust. In him. Let us pray. Music.

Wait. Just five.