

In the Fire: A Daniel Study
Daniel and the Lions' Den

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July 4, 2021

Everybody loves an underdog. The summer after my sixth grade year was my very first summer of Little League baseball. I grew up in a little town called Keokuk, Iowa. I played for team called the CI Box Company Cardinals, and we had a good baseball team. We had the best shortstop in the league, Robbie Giles. We had the second best pitcher in the league, and then we had a bunch of guys who were just good athletes. They could run, catch, hit, throw—they were just good ballplayers. And then there was me. The summer after my sixth grade year, I was what the kids would've called a geek. I was super skinny, maybe 65 pounds dripping wet. I wore glasses. I was the smart kid, a straight A student. I was such a bookworm that when I got in trouble at home, my parents would ground me from reading. Can you get any nerdier than that? Do you remember that old TV show *Family Matters*? I was a white Steve Urkel. Complete geek, and the world's worst ballplayer. But in Little League, even if you stink, you still get to play two innings. It's the rules. So for my two innings, Coach would always put me out in right field. Nobody hits it out to right field. You can't mess anything up. But when it was my turn to hit, there was nothing Coach could do.

Coach Anderson was a good man, a kind man; he never said a harsh word to me. But I know that when it was my turn to bat, Coach wanted to weep. Because twelve games into the season, I had not even hit one ball. I mean, not even a foul tip. Nothing, nada, zilch. Coach said it was because after I started to swing, I would close my eyes. But he was wrong. I closed my eyes way before I started to swing. Twelve games in, I had a batting average of .000. But I told you we had a good team, so twelve games in, our record was ten and two. We were tied for first place there in Keokuk Little League baseball. We were tied with the Complete Plumbing Royals. Oh, we hated their guts. They were our arch enemies, they were the bad guys of Keokuk baseball, and they were the team that we had to play next. In fact, this was the last game of the season, the championship game. If they won, they would get the trophy. If we won, we would be the champions. For our little town, this game was huge. For a 12-year-old, this felt like Armageddon, the battle of the ages.

The day of the game came, and the game went all the way down to the bottom of the last inning—six innings in Little League baseball—bottom of the sixth inning. We were the home team, so we were up to bat last. We were losing 9-6, and as I sat there on the bench, I thought, “This does not look good,” because on the mound for the Complete Plumbing Royals was the very best pitcher in the league, a kid named Andy Anderson. And this seventh grade kid was huge, massive. He'd been shaving since second grade. He had muscles in places that I didn't even have places, and he could throw that ball so fast. This did not look good. But then an amazing thing began to happen. Our first guy went up to bat and got a single off Andy. Our next guy got up and Andy struck him out. Our next guy got up, and he stroked a single off Andy. Alright, we had runners at first and second. Andy struck out our next guy. But then our next batter, Andy hit him with a pitch. “Take your base!”

You're following me here now. Bases loaded, two outs, championship game, bottom of the last inning, we were losing 9-6, but the winning run was about to come to the plate. The whole place was breathless, wondering, “Who will be up next?” I looked down the bench to see who was up

and that's when I realized, "Oh no! It's me!" I was in for my mandatory two innings in right field, and I had gotten so caught up in the game that I had forgotten to go out on deck. Well, as soon as I realized it was me, I quickly grabbed a helmet, grabbed a bat, took a deep breath, said a little prayer, and stepped out of the dugout. A groan swept through the crowd. Parents were like, "Oh no, it's that skinny kid with glasses. He always strikes out." They were packing up their lawn chairs. "Let's go home, Ethel." The kids in the other dugout were cheering, "Yeah, it's Proctor! He always strikes out." Everybody knew the game was over. Everybody that is, except for one person. At the end of our bench stood Coach Anderson, and as I started to walk toward the plate, Coach Anderson said, "You can do it, Matt. You can do it. Keep your eyes open, Matt. You can do it." I gave Coach a nod and stepped to the plate. Andy Anderson on the mound kicked his leg high in the air and threw the pitch. I closed my eyes and swung that bat. Strike one. "Come on now, Matt. You can do it. Keep swinging that bat. Watch the ball all the way in. You can do it!" I gave Coach another nod and stepped into the batter's box. Andy Anderson pitched; I closed my eyes. This time I didn't swing. "Ball one." "Alright, Matt. Good eye—good job, Matt. You can do it. Keep your eyes open!" You're going to think I'm lying, but this is the absolute truth: the count went to three and two. Bottom of the last inning, championship game, bases loaded, two outs. Andy Anderson was on the mound; I was in the batter's box. He kicked his leg high in the air, slung his arm back, and threw what had to be the fastest fastball of the afternoon. When he did, an amazing thing happened. I kept my eyes open.

I saw that ball coming towards me like it was in slow motion. It just kept getting bigger and bigger, and then I watched as my bat began to come around. It didn't even feel like it was me—some supernatural force—and I watched as my bat crashed into that ball. The ball leapt off my bat; it went speeding out past the third baseman, out into left field. I had gotten a hit! I was so amazed I just stood there watching it, and then my teammates yelled, "Run, dude, run!" So I did. I ran like the wind. I ran to first base; I ran to second base. Then they overthrew the cutoff man and I made it all the way to third base. On my hit, the game was tied. Now I don't remember who was up next, but whoever it was, he knocked a single off Andy (who was very shaken by this whole incident, you understand). I crossed home plate—I was the winning run, we were champions of Keokuk Little League baseball, and thank you very much, I was the hero. My greatest moment in sports, right there, sixth grade. Everybody loves a story like that. Everybody loves an underdog.

In the movie *Hoosiers* it's tiny little Hickory High versus big South Bend, and Hickory High wins. We love that. Today is July 4th. In the Revolutionary War, it's 13 little rag-tag colonies, an army of farmers and preachers against the highly-trained military of the mighty British empire, and the Americans win. We love those stories. The unlikely hero, outnumbered, outmatched, outgunned. But against all odds, he prevails. The underdog wins, and we all cheer. Maybe we love those stories because we're Americans, but maybe just because we're humans and we're made in the image of the God, because God loves underdogs. The Bible is full of them: Moses versus the mighty Pharaoh and Moses wins, Gideon and 300 men versus 120,000 trained Midianites soldiers and Gideon wins, shepherd boy David versus giant warrior Goliath and David wins. The Bible says God chooses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, the weak things of the world to shame the strong. Again and again, the underdog wins.

And here's why that's good news: these days, in our culture, Jesus-followers are the underdogs. There was a day when that wasn't true. For many years Christianity was our nation's dominant faith heritage, and whether you were a Christian or not, Christianity was generally respected. We put "In God We Trust" on our money; in court, we took our oaths on the Bible; and once upon a time, Hollywood wouldn't let movies take the Lord's name in vain. Christianity was the home team. But not anymore. These days we're the away team, the visiting team, no more home field advantage. There are more people in the stands booing us than cheering us. In entertainment media, we're mocked. In news media, we're criticized. On social media, we're censored, and sometimes we feel like we're living behind enemy lines. Now, perspective: we have brothers and sisters around the world who live under real physical persecution. I had a man at my house this week, an Ozark Christian College student from a Muslim region of Africa, where he's a pastor, and his house has been burned to the ground, his church has been burned to the ground, and he has machete scars on the back of his head where he was attacked by extremists for his faith. I'm grateful that in our culture, we have religious freedom and no physical persecution. But make no mistake: even here, we are the minority and we are under pressure and we are the underdogs. The Biblical language for this is exiles. The Bible says we are pilgrims, strangers in a strange land. This world is not our home—we are exiles. And that's the story of Daniel.

Over the last several weeks here at the Creek, you've been studying through the book of Daniel. Quick reminder of the backstory: in the year 605 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon attacked Jerusalem, defeated it, and took their treasures, their most prized possessions, back to Babylon. But more importantly, they took their most prized people back to Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar took the cream of the crop—Hebrew teenagers, the best and brightest—back to Babylon and reprogrammed them for government service. The Babylonians gave them new names, new clothes, and a new language, and indoctrinated them as Babylonians. But at least a few of them still remembered the one true God. You heard their story two weeks ago: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Daniel 3 is an underdog story. Three Hebrew teenagers against mighty Nebuchadnezzar. They refuse to bow to his idol, he throws them into the fiery furnace, they come out alive, don't even smell like smoke. That's all a set up for our text today, Daniel 6.

This is the story of Daniel and the lions' den. It's one of the most famous stories in Scripture, and when you compare Daniel 3 to Daniel 6, Daniel is an even bigger underdog. In Daniel 3, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are young, strong teenage boys, wired to take risks. But in Daniel 6, this is 70 years later. Daniel is now an old man, 85-86 years old, tired. Older people like to play it safe, so this is harder. In Daniel 3, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego have each other, a band of brothers. In Daniel 6, Daniel is alone. In Daniel 3, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego weren't personally targeted. But in Daniel 6, a law was written specifically to assassinate Daniel. In Daniel 3, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego spend a few minutes in the fiery furnace. That's a big deal, to be sure, but in Daniel 6, Daniel spends the whole night in the lions' den. It doesn't get more underdog than this. This is an amazing story. We're going to walk through this whole chapter and experience this story again and since we are underdogs, this is our story,

Here's the question we're going to ask: how does Daniel do it? How does Daniel get to that victory in the end? How does a spiritual underdog win? Here's the story:

It pleased Darius to appoint 120 satraps to rule throughout the kingdom, with three administrators over them, one of whom was Daniel. The satraps were made accountable to them so that the king might not suffer loss.

Stop right there: Nebuchadnezzar is no longer king. The Persians came in, defeated the Babylonians, and took over the city of Babylon, and now Darius is the new king. He's organizing his new government with a new organizational chart. Instead of 50 states, they've got 120 states. He appoints 120 governors, and then he appoints three vice presidents over them, one of whom is Daniel.

Now Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and the satraps by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom.

He's going to make Daniel executive vice-president, number two guy in the whole kingdom.

At this, the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, . . .

Why? Maybe because they were jealous, maybe because they were prejudiced—Daniel was a Jew, they were Persians—or maybe it was because they were using their positions to skim government money and line their own pockets, but they knew if good ol' honest Daniel was in charge, there would be no more kickbacks for them. So, what do they do? They decided to cancel Daniel. They looked for something to bring him down,

. . . but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent.

Daniel was honest and really competent in his job; he was good and good at what he did.

Finally these men said, "We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God." So these administrators and satraps went as a group to the king and said: "May King Darius live forever! The royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisers and governors have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or human being during the next thirty days, except to you, Your Majesty, shall be thrown into the lions' den. Now, Your Majesty, issue the decree and put it in writing so that it cannot be altered—in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed." So King Darius put the decree in writing.

Every king likes to have his ego stroked. These guys are so smart. "King, we think you're awesome, and we want to declare this Darius Appreciation Month. We'll have Darius parades and Darius Day sales, and everybody will pray to Darius. This will be a great way unite the kingdom under your rule." The king, bless his heart, he doesn't see through it. Darius comes off here as a gullible guy—a likable guy, but a gullible guy. He's just like, "Okay. Sounds great." This is hilarious. The king's just gregarious, he doesn't think they're nefarious, he just thinks they're pro-Darius. I'll stop right there. I promise.

At first, as I read this text, I thought maybe the secret to Daniel's victory was his integrity. How does a spiritual underdog win? Maybe we win if we *practice the integrity of Daniel*. The text underlines how uprightly Daniel lived. He was honest and diligent. His enemies tried to find something against him, so they turned the Persian version of the FBI loose—surveillance, wire taps, background check. They found nothing. His books were all in order. No bribes, no bombshells, no mistresses. None of that. This is remarkable. We know that the chapter ends with a miracle: the lions' den. But the chapter also begins with a miracle—a squeaky clean politician. That's amazing. They could find no charge against him. When I read this text, the question I ask myself is: if the FBI combed through my life, what would they find? Would there be harsh words, off color jokes, statements that weren't completely true, lazy moments here, angry outbursts there, self-centered moments here, self-promoting moments there? If they searched through your life, what would they find? Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher who said, "God is dead," once said to a Christian friend, "You will have to look more redeemed before I believe in your redeemer." 1 Peter 2:12 says, "Live such good lives among the pagans that though they try to accuse you of wrongdoing, they may see your good deeds and glorify God."

I want you to notice that the text specifically singles out Daniel's faithfulness in his job. He's one of the great heroes of the Old Testament—but notice that his day job was not prophet or priest. He was a government administrator for a pagan king, a completely secular vocation. Sometimes in the church, we draw this distinction between sacred and secular jobs. There's clergy and laity. There's professional Christians—preachers, missionaries—and there are Christian professionals—lawyers, teachers. Sometimes we think to make a real difference you have to be a preacher or a missionary. Most of the heroes of the Bible didn't get a paycheck from a church: Moses was a shepherd, Gideon was a farmer, Deborah was a judge, Jesus was a carpenter, Peter was a fisherman, Luke was a doctor, Lydia sold textiles, and Paul was a tentmaker. They all came out of the marketplace. Every summer a lot of churches have an event for kids called Vacation Bible School, but somebody said they ought to have at the same time an event for grown-ups called Vocation Bible School, where they help people think about their work Christianly.

Colossians 3:23 says, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men." Your job is more than just a way to pay your bills, more than a way to achieve success and recognition. It's a way to worship God. The word vocation means "calling." What if you approached your work as a calling from God? Martin Luther King said, "If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets as Michelangelo painted, as Beethoven composed music, as Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven pause to say, 'Here lived a street sweeper who did his job well.'" What if Christians excelled at their jobs? What if Christians were the ones in every workplace who resolve conflict and who go the extra mile and who help their co-workers deal with grief, and whose lives shine a gentle light of grace and truth? And what if, instead of a frontal attack on the forces of darkness, a head-on assault, what if we underdogs just infiltrated the workforce across culture, across industries, and worked with excellence and integrity? Like secret agents behind enemy lines, what if we subverted the kingdom of darkness like a thousand points of light? Maybe that's how underdogs win—practicing the integrity of Daniel. Let's keep reading.

Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.

Don't rush past this moment because this moment is the real test. The greatest danger Daniel faces is not the lions in the den. The greatest danger Daniel faces is the temptation not to pray. He could be tempted to go ahead and pray and just not open his windows. Keep it on the down low. But I love Daniel. He does not lower his flag at all. He flies his colors at the top of the flagpole for all to see.

Then these men went as a group and found Daniel praying and asking God for help. So they went to the king and spoke to him about his royal decree: "Did you not publish a decree that during the next thirty days anyone who prays to any god or human being except to you, Your Majesty, would be thrown into the lions' den?" The king answered, "The decree stands—in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed." Then they said to the king, "Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, Your Majesty, or to the decree you put in writing. He still prays three times a day." When the king heard this, he was greatly distressed; he was determined to rescue Daniel and made every effort until sundown to save him. Then the men went as a group to King Darius and said to him, "Remember, Your Majesty, that according to the law of the Medes and Persians no decree or edict that the king issues can be changed." So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions' den. The king said to Daniel, "May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!"

Here's a takeaway: you can practice the integrity of Daniel and you still won't win everybody to your side. So maybe this is actually the key to victory. Maybe it's *expect the hostility of culture*. Several years ago, someone gave me one of these which sits on my desk. You remember these from the old Staples store commercials—the easy button. You remember those commercials. They told us that anytime you have a problem, just push the "easy button" and all will be solved. Out of copy paper? Press the "easy button," and paper appears. Out of copier toner? Press the "easy button," and poof, the copier's working again. Co-worker playing obnoxious rap music? Press the "easy button," and poof, now he's listening to country-western. Some Christians think we're supposed to get handed an "easy button" on our way out of the baptistery. Now that you're a Christian, God will make all your problems disappear. Hard time paying the bills? Press the "easy button," and suddenly your bank account is full. Have a boss who's as mean as Darth Vader? Press the "easy button," and suddenly he's baby Yoda, cute and cuddly. Wouldn't that be great?

A young man came into my office once, sat down, and began the conversation with these words: "I had no idea. For some reason, I thought when I became a Christian my troubles would go away. I didn't know it would be so hard." But you've read your Bible, and you know the Bible promises hardship. There is no easy button. "Do not be surprised at the fiery trial you are now going through as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Peter 4:12). "In this world, you will have trouble" (John 16:33). "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Jesus said, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also"

(John 15:20). Paul said, “Anyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). We expect hostility. Someone said, “If you’re trying to be the light of the world, you’re going to attract a few bugs.” Some believers get worried if they’re persecuted. What are we doing wrong? No, you should be worried if you’re never persecuted. That might mean you’re not living your faith out as you should. That’s when you ask: what are we doing wrong? The problem here in our text isn’t that Daniel was thrown in the lions’ den for praying to God. The problem is that he was the only one.

Daniel expected hostility and he was ready for it. Do you know why Daniel was able to make the right decision in the moment of crisis? Habit. He had developed habits of holiness. I did the math. Daniel prayed three times a day every day. At this point he had been in Babylon 70 years. Three times a day times 365 days a year times 70 years means that Daniel had knelt in front of that window over 75,000 times. That’s why the entire Persian empire could not pry apart his aged hands clasped in prayer. When Darius issued his decree, Daniel didn’t hesitate. He didn’t wrestle in a moment of inner turmoil and then decide what he was going to do. No, spiritual muscle memory just took over. Do you know what my fear is? Daniel was commanded not to pray for a month and he couldn’t go one day. My fear is that too many Christians go a whole month without any devotional time, and they don’t even notice. If we are going to condition ourselves, strengthen ourselves for the coming hostility, it will happen in habits of holiness. Our faithfulness won’t be decided in one moment of crisis; it will be decided in a thousand moments of daily choice. Faithful choices become faithful habits, which become faithful character. Somebody called it “a long obedience in the same direction.” That is when you’re ready for the crisis. And maybe that’s the key to victory: Daniel expected the hostility.

But I’m going to tip my cards here. I’ll tell you why I think the Daniel the underdog wins in the end. It’s simple: he chose to *trust the sovereignty of God*. Let’s finish the story.

A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel’s situation might not be changed.

I want you notice: that language ought to sound familiar because the gospel writers use that same language about the burial of Jesus: a stone rolled across the mouth of cave, the ruler’s seal on the stone so no one will move it. Back to our text.

Then the king returned to his palace and spent the night without eating and without any entertainment being brought to him. And he could not sleep.

Let me stop right here and note the irony. The king is the one who couldn’t sleep. But do you know what I think Daniel was doing? If Jesus could sleep in the boat in the middle of the storm (Mark 4), if Peter could sleep in prison the night before his execution (Acts 12), then my hunch is that Daniel slept in the lions’ den. When you know God’s in charge, you sleep like a baby. But the king tossed and turned.

At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions’ den. 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?" Daniel answered, "May the king live forever! 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." The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.

Can I read that again? He was lifted from the den without a scratch because he had trusted in his God.

At the king's command, the men who had falsely accused Daniel were brought in and thrown into the lions' den, along with their wives and children. And before they reached the floor of the den, the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones. Then King Darius wrote to all the nations and peoples of every language in all the earth: "May you prosper greatly! I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel. For he is the living God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end. He rescues and he saves; he performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth. He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions." So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.

Daniel trusted in the sovereignty of God. When I was kid in Sunday School, I learned about the three "omnis" of God: omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence. Daniel had read his Bible since he was a kid. He knew about the omnipresence—the everywhere-ness—of God, because he had read Jeremiah 23:24. God says, "Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?" I heard the story of some kids at a Christian school who lined up in the cafeteria for lunch. At the near end of the table was a big basket of apples, and one of the lunch ladies had written a note: "Take only one; God is watching." At the other end of the table was a big basket of chocolate chip cookies, and a little boy had written a note, "Take all you want. God is watching the apples." There is no place that God is not watching because there is no place where He is not. He fills the entire universe. There is not a single square inch of the cosmos and beyond that God does not inhabit. He sees everything, and Daniel knew the omnipresence of God meant God saw him. He was not forgotten.

Daniel knew the omniscience of God; that's his all-knowingness. He is all-knowing. Daniel had read Psalm 147:5, "Great is the Lord . . . His understanding has no limit." He knows everything in the past. Pick any date in history, and God can tell you everything that happened that day. He knows that on July 4, 1021, there was a little girl named Li born in China and he knows there was an old man Antonio who died in Italy and a young warrior Muchengetwa in Africa who got married. And he knows on that day in history, every word that was spoken, every lie that was told, every item that was sold, the flight pattern of every bird, the path that every fish swam through the sea, everything that was happening all the way down to the molecular level on that day. He knows everything in the past, and God knows everything that is happening in the present. Right now, he knows how fast your heart is beating, how many hairs you have on your head, he knows what clothes you are wearing and why you picked them out this morning.

The omniscience of God includes not only the past and the present but the future as well. Daniel had read Isaiah 46:9-10, "I am God . . . I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times what is still to come." God knows history before it happens. He knows everyone who's won a presidential election in the past, and He knows everyone who's going to win a presidential election until Jesus comes back. He knows everyone who's won an Olympic medal in the past, and He knows everyone who's going to win an Olympic medal until Jesus comes back. God knows the last time Indiana Hoosiers football won the Big Ten Conference, and He knows when Jesus is coming back. "Before a word is on my tongue, you know it. . . . All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be" (Psalm 139:4,16). Daniel knew that God was omniscient, wise, all-knowing, which meant God's plan for him was perfect even if Daniel didn't understand it.

And Daniel knew the last "omni" of God: his omnipotence, the all-powerfulness of God. He had read Isaiah 40:12, "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand?" Think of that. God measuring the waters in His hand. In Genesis 1, He's making the world, He pours a little water into His palm—that's the Pacific Ocean! He pours a little more water—that's the Atlantic Ocean! Flicks the water off his fingertips—that's the Great Lakes! God is so huge that He could play kickball with our planet. He could flick his finger and send our solar system spinning off into space. Daniel read Genesis 1 where God took a handful of words and spoke ten thousand galaxies into existence, a God clothed in power and splendor and majesty and authority. And Daniel had read Psalm 18:2, "The Lord is my rock . . . in whom I take refuge."

I live in Joplin, Missouri, and there is a local artist in the Joplin area, Jack Dawson. He's a believer, and so his paintings are visual sermons. In our college bookstore, we sell this painting entitled "Peace in the Midst of the Storm." If you look at the picture, you see a mighty storm crashing against a seaside cliff, but a closer look at the painting reveals a dove peacefully protected in the cleft of the rock. Of course, the Rock represents God our refuge in the midst of life's tempests—"Peace in the Midst of the Storm." Earlier this summer, those of us in Joplin marked the tenth anniversary of the Joplin tornado. Many of you remember this from the news. On May 22, 2011, a sleepy Sunday afternoon, at 5:30 p.m. the tornado sirens sounded, and at 5:41 p.m. a massive EF5 twister, almost a mile wide, with winds up to 200 mph and multiple vortexes, ripped through the city of Joplin, leaving 13 miles of destruction. Eight thousand homes and 161 lives were lost. But here's my testimony: many more were saved, by the hand of God.

That afternoon, my wife Katie and I were playing with the church's children's choir at a park in southwest Joplin when the sirens sounded. We loaded the twenty-five children into vehicles and immediately left to find shelter. Because the tornado was wrapped in rain and hail, the funnel cloud was impossible to see, and we were unknowingly driving right into the tornado's path. Then a large tree fell inches in front of the lead vehicle, which my wife was driving. She skidded to a stop two inches from the tree and the vehicle behind her crunched her rear bumper. At that point, we had to abandon that vehicle. We ran to the first available house and banged on the door. The kind older couple who answered hurriedly ushered the whole choir down into their basement. After the tornado passed, the destruction we'd avoided became clear. The tornado's first fatalities were a few hundred yards beyond where the tree had fallen across the road in front of us. The tree saved our lives, and I can almost imagine God knocking it over into our path.

That Sunday evening at 5:30, our college librarian John Hunter was sitting down to hot biscuits with his wife and granddaughter when they heard the warning sirens. Going into the bathroom, they waited and soon heard a deafening sound. John leaped to cover his granddaughter in the bathtub. “It was as if a giant were pounding the house with his fist,” John would later write. The roof soon disappeared; sheetrock and two-by-fours were coming down on top of his head; insulation, broken glass, and large hail pummeled them. When the storm passed, John opened the bathroom door, which was now his front door, because it was in the only wall left standing in his house, as you can see in this picture. (Please view the video recording of this sermon to see the photo.) Though the house was destroyed around them, John and his family were all miraculously kept safe. As you can see in the picture, on the one wall of their home left standing, a single painting unbelievably still hung. True story. The painting? Jack Dawson’s “Peace in the Midst of the Storm.” God put a little reminder there: He was in control the whole time.

How did Daniel go so calmly into the lions’ den? Because he trusted in a sovereign God—always present, all-knowing, all-powerful—a God who delivers from storms and wild beasts and any enemy we face.

I’ll close with this. On Monday of this week, I was having lunch with a friend of mine. He’s a big weightlifter —muscles, workout warrior, a bad man. He has a shirt that says, “Pray for the Bear.” So I said, “Ok, I’ll bite. What does the shirt mean—pray for the bear?” He said, “Well, if I ever get in a fight with a bear, pray for the bear.” And I laughed. And then I thought of Daniel. Daniel was not a weightlifter and Daniel was not a warrior. He was an old man. But Daniel could wear a shirt like that. Because Daniel had read the story of David the shepherd boy, who had faced off with a lion and killed it with the help of Almighty God. He had read the story of Samson, who had faced off with a lion and killed it with the help of Almighty God. He had read the story of Benaiah, who fell into a pit with a lion and killed it with the help of Almighty God (2 Samuel 23:20). He had read Psalm 91, “If you say, ‘The Lord is my refuge’ and if you make the Most High your dwelling . . . you will tread on the lion.” Daniel knew that same God was with him. So it wasn’t Daniel in the lions’ den, it was the lions in Daniel’s den. And if you throw Daniel in a pit with a lion, you better pray for the lion. He doesn’t stand a chance.

Listen to me, Christian: you can wear this shirt too. Yes, we look like the underdog now, but we have an all-present, all-knowing, all-powerful God, and when we trust Him, when we stand with Him, we will win. And I know that because 500 years after Daniel, there was another man who lived a blameless life, another man whose enemies conspired against him, and arrested him while he was praying, and convicted him on trumped up charges, and condemned him to die just like Daniel, and put him into a dark cave and rolled a stone across and sealed it. But this time, it looked like the underdog had lost. Because unlike Daniel, Jesus was dead. No pulse, laying-there-rigid-on-the-stone-cold-table-in-the-tomb dead. He lay there dead Friday night. He lay there dead Saturday morning. He lay there dead Saturday night. But then came Sunday morning. As the first rays of dawn broke over the horizon, a voice came rumbling in on the wind—a whisper from God Himself: “Arise, my Son.” As those words echoed deep inside that cave, something happened. A heart that was still as the grave suddenly began to beat again. Blood thick and cold rushed warmly through the veins. A chest heaved upward, taking in a great breath. Stiff fingers moved, eyes opened, legs swung off the table. He stood back up. Jesus Christ roared

back to life. He destroyed sin and death and Satan himself. When you belong to Jesus, you are not an underdog. In Christ, you are more than conquerors, and when your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking to devour you, all I can say is: you better pray for the lion. He doesn't stand a chance.