

DANIEL IN THE LIONS' DEN

A Sermon by Rev. Patrick A. Rose

“So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no injury whatever was found on him, because he believed in his God” (Daniel 6:23).

This is a story of absolute faith and trust, and absolute courage. King Darius of Babylon had issued a decree prohibiting everyone in the kingdom from petitioning any god or man save the king himself for a period of thirty days. All who disobeyed this decree were to be thrown into a den of lions. Daniel was well aware of the consequences of disobeying this decree. He was a governor in Babylon, and he knew full well that even the king himself would not have the power to pardon him should he transgress this law. But Daniel remained steadfast in his allegiance to the Lord God of Israel. He continued to go to his upper room three times a day, kneel in the direction of Jerusalem, and pray to the Lord.

When Daniel's enemies reported his actions to the king, Darius had no choice but to order that, according to the law, Daniel be thrown into the den of hungry lions. But because Daniel was faithful to the Lord he was protected. The lions could not touch him. Daniel, we read, “was taken up out of the den, and no injury whatever was found on him, because he believed in his God.”

It is a simple and a powerful story, bearing witness to a wonderful truth: the Lord protects those who believe in Him. This is indeed wonderful—to know that if we turn to the Lord, if we have faith and trust in Him, then He will look after us and protect us. If we are in danger, if we are scared, if we have nobody to turn to, we can nevertheless place our trust in Him. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for You are with me....” When those who believe in the Lord are in trouble, they can turn to Him for help and protection.

Yet, if we were to judge merely by external appearances, it might seem as if we cannot rely on the Lord's protection. Daniel's deliverance from the den of lions might seem to be only a story, a story with little relationship to the real world of the present day. Sometimes good people do escape misfortune. All too often though, good people, people who seem to have faith in the Lord, appear to suffer no less than the evil. If we judge by appearances, we can easily begin to doubt whether the Lord really protects those who have faith in Him.

We need, though, to look beyond appearances. The Lord never deserts those who trust in Him. If people truly believe in the Lord, then He will continually protect them, and they will have nothing to fear. Of course, in a merely worldly sense there are many things which might still hurt them. Those who have faith in the Lord can indeed suffer misfortune, disease, injury and so on, just as much as do the evil. These sufferings of those in good are very real and should not be belittled. Nevertheless, the truth is that any worldly misfortune, no matter how overwhelming it might be at the time, is only temporary. In time, all of us are called to the spiritual world.

It is there that the real danger lies. Through resurrection each one of us is raised after death into the realm of the spirit. There we will be far above any worldly dangers and misfortunes. And yet, through this same resurrection, people can come face to face with the gravest danger of all. As the Lord says in the New Testament: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that

have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell..." (Luke 12:4-5).

This is the real danger which we all face—the danger of hell itself. And let us not fool ourselves in this regard; hell and the evil which it encourages pose a most horrible threat. After we die, we wake up in the spiritual world—in the middle part of that world, called the world of spirits. After a period of preparation, those who have lived a good life will then be raised into heaven. There they will be happy forever. Those, though, who have given themselves over to a life of evil will descend into hell. They cannot be allowed to remain among and infest those who are good.

Hell, peopled as it is by those who are evil, cruel and selfish, is miserable, gloomy and truly horrible. The danger we face is that if we choose evil, if we choose to love ourselves alone, then this will be the destiny we create for ourselves.

Hell, though, is not merely a potential threat waiting for us after we die. The malignant influence or sphere of hell reaches out and encourages evil wherever it might surface upon the earth. When people in the world turn to selfishness and hatred, whenever there is misery, wretchedness and unhappiness, there the influence of the hells is at work. And if those in the hells were to have their way, they would have all on this earth be like themselves—they would have us choose to love what is evil, selfish and wicked.

The danger of hell then—or what is the same, the danger of evil and selfishness—is present right here in this world. And it is this very danger which is portrayed by the den of lions into which Daniel was thrown. These lions are not an image of worldly danger, but represent the power and the danger of evil.

Now this is something we must reflect upon occasionally. If we did not realize how ferocious the hells really are, then we would not fully appreciate how greatly the Lord loves us, and how He protects us unceasingly, with infinite power, from succumbing completely to the influence of evil.

The lions among which Daniel was thrown were indeed ferocious. When Daniel's enemies were later thrown into the den, the lions caught them and immediately broke all their bones into pieces. The destructive power of these animals is a picture of hell itself. Indeed, in *True Christian Religion* 123 hell is said to be "like a huge lion." It is said that the devils of hell attack those who would follow the Lord with "diabolical fury." We would succumb immediately to the evil sphere of hell were it not for the Lord holding this monstrous lion in check.

Hell is, then, like a lion. More specifically, when a lion portrays evil, it represents the power of hell to destroy what is good and true. And this power, the power of evil to destroy, is symbolized by "lions" in many places in the Old Testament. In *Jeremiah*, for example, in a prophesy of destruction, it is said: "The lion has come up from his thicket, And the destroyer of nations is on his way" (4:7). In the *Psalms* the evil are explicitly compared to lions. They are compared to "a lion that is eager to tear his prey, and...a young lion lurking in secret places (17:12)."

Those in hell, and the evils which they inspire, are indeed like lions in a number of obvious ways. First of all, there is, of course, their tremendous strength—the lions in the den tore apart the very bones of their victims. The power of evil destroys what is good. The Heavenly Doctrines of the New Church speak of lions as representing the way in which evil tears good to pieces. The devils indeed do everything they can to destroy all that we believe and love from the

Lord. They encourage hatred, revenge, pride: evils which completely tear apart and obliterate all that is loving, kind and humble within our minds—all that is good and true from the Lord.

The hells, then, are like lions in the way they tear apart all that is good and true. But they are like lions also in the way they seek their prey. The danger of a lion lies not only in its power, but in its stealth. Before attacking, a lion stalks its prey, quietly. And this is exactly the way the hells operate—secretly and invisibly. A lion hiding itself represents, we are told, the interior natural person. Evil tendencies lurk deep within the natural mind of a person, and the hells flow into these evils, quietly encouraging the person to twist and pervert all that is learned from the Word. If the hells operated openly, they would pose far less of a threat, but because they secretly encourage us to explain away—within ourselves—the truths of the Lord’s Word, they can bring about our downfall.

It is so easy, indeed too easy, to reason ourselves into doing things we know to be wrong—things the Lord says in His Word are wrong. Even though the Lord teaches us not to do something, we can so twist the truth in our minds that this truth is rendered powerless.

And this happens slowly, quietly, in small steps. Evil is something that sneaks up on a person, just like a lion. We tell ourselves that it won’t really matter if we do just one small thing that is wrong. But one small evil leads to another, quietly, almost without our noticing it. And, in this way the influence of the hells creeps upon us, hiding behind our thoughts, hiding and preparing to pounce upon us and devour us.

The thought of falling prey to the teeth of a lion is a horrifying thought. And yet hell also has its teeth, teeth which destroy not the body, but the soul. Teeth represent things of the thought—falsities and false reasonings—which powerfully tear apart all that is good within us. And this is exactly how evil works when it is active within us. Whether we experience vengeful thoughts, proud thoughts, or lascivious thoughts, it is through our thoughts—thoughts that are false—that evil destroys what is good and true within us. Especially dangerous are those false thoughts which tell us that it is okay to be vengeful, that it is okay to be proud, and that it is okay to be lascivious. Such thoughts are falsities of evil, the very falsities by means of which evil gains power over us. These false thoughts are the teeth of a lion. Once we really think and believe that evil is justified and allowable, we have fallen prey to the hells.

Now this is a terrifying picture. But it is a true picture, in the sense that this is indeed the nature of evil, and the nature of the hells which inspire it. And we must know and realize that, left to ourselves, we would be completely at the mercy of the hells. But this is only half of the picture. From the story of Daniel, we know that if we trust in the Lord, He will protect us. Even though we are surrounded by the lions of hell, we will be safe from harm. Hell is indeed said to be like a huge monstrous lion. But it is also said that this lion is kept “manacled and fettered” by the Lord.

If we trust in the Lord, He will protect us from the hells. This truth is at the very heart of the faith of the New Church. Indeed, in its universal form and in its very essence, this faith involves trust in the Lord. As is said right near the beginning of *True Christian Religion*: “The Lord from eternity, who is Jehovah, came into the world to subjugate the hells and to glorify His Human; and without this no mortal could have been saved; and those are saved who believe in Him.” Why did the Lord come into the world? It was, first of all, to subjugate the hells. At that time their influence was beginning to win over the minds of people in the world. And so the Lord came that He might do battle with the hells, conquer them, and so hold them in subjection to

Himself, lest humankind be engulfed by an overwhelming sphere of evil. He came to save us—to save us in the sense of rescuing us from a very real and horrifying danger. If He had not come, all humanity would have been destroyed by the hells, so great is their power of destruction.

And here it is that we see the other meaning, or signification, of “a lion.” There are two ways of looking at a lion. A lion is indeed a dangerous animal. But it is also a beautiful and magnificent animal—strong, powerful, and noble. It is rightly said to be the “king of the beasts.” The lion symbolizes power. It can symbolize the power of evil. In other places in the Word, though, it is used to portray the *Divine power* of the Lord Himself. This power is not terrifying, except to those in evil. It is a power which goes forth to protect and to save. And the hunger of the lion as it goes forth to secure its prey, and the possessiveness with which it guards its prey once it is caught, signifies, in a good sense, nothing other than the burning desire of the Lord to rescue those He loves from the clutches of hell. His hunger is the hunger of love, and His power is the power of Divine truth, by which He defends and saves those He loves. Therefore the Lord is called “the Lion of the tribe of Judah.” “Judah” stands for the Divine love, and it is from this love, and by means of the power of Divine truth—represented by a lion—that the Lord, as the Lion of Judah, delivers people from the influence of the hells.

Now this is a wonderful truth. A lion is powerful. A lion, with virtually no predators apart from humans, normally has nothing to fear. After it has eaten, it can rest, peacefully, with no reason whatever to be afraid. Because it is so powerful, it can be at peace. Nothing can harm it. So it is with the power of the Lord. Compared with the Lord, the hells are not a lion—except perhaps a lion in chains—for they have no strength against Him whatsoever.

The Lion of Judah cannot be hurt in any way by the devils of hell. Indeed, the devils are terrified of the Lord. They cannot abide the sphere of the Divine. And, if we place ourselves under the Lord’s protection, we too will be safe from the hells. If we place our faith and trust in the Lord, and receive and live the truth of His Word, we also will have the strength of a lion against the devils. In the other world this is clearly seen. We are taught that a single angel who is in Divine truths from the Lord can terrify a whole host of evil spirits, and cast them into hell, merely by looking at them. They dare not come near him. Even though the angel might not be particularly strong in body, he nevertheless has, by means of Divine truths from the Lord, the strength of a lion over evil spirits.

Such is the power of Divine truth. Such is the power of faith in this truth. Faith is, of course, far more than a matter of mere thought, mere belief. To have faith in the Lord’s truth means not only to believe, but also to love and live it. But, if we do this, if we truly trust in the Lord, and so do what He teaches us, we also, as to our spirits, will have the strength of a lion. No evil spirit will be able to destroy what is good from the Lord within us.

The story of Daniel therefore contains an eternal truth. If we have faith in the Lord, as Daniel did, then we will be safe from the onslaughts of the evil spirits of hell. Though those evil spirits may be as terrifying as hungry lions, we will have far greater power than they. Yes, the path to heaven is beset with temptations. There will be times when the evil spirits seem to gain power over us. There may be times when we shudder with terror at the thought that we ourselves may end up in hell—that we are too selfish and too proud, to ever go to heaven. It is then that we must remember and place our trust in the power of the Lord.

Daniel could so easily have placed his trust only in himself. He could so easily have decided, from fear for his life, to obey the edict of the king and cease his prayers to the Lord. But he remained true to his God. Daily, indeed three times a day, he turned toward Jerusalem and prayed to the Lord. Because of this he was safe, safe from his enemies and safe from the lions. He was protected by the Lord Himself. “So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no injury whatever was found on him, because he believed in his God.” If we also believe in the Lord—and live what He teaches us throughout the course of each day—then we too will be safe, safe from all danger, safe from all harm.

Amen.

Lessons: Daniel 6:4-17; Revelation 5:1-5; *True Christian Religion* 2

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