

Introduction:

Isn't it amazing how we never grow old for the familiar stories of the Bible? I just love to read, hear, and see stories such as Noah and the Ark, Jonah and the Great Fish, Moses and the Red Sea, Samson and the Temple of Dagon, or David and Goliath. Exciting historical stories of God's deliverance of chosen men and women of God.

One of my most favourite stories as I was growing up was one which is as exciting as an edge-of-your-seat Spielberg movie – it is of course the story of Daniel and the Lion's Den, and it has captivated both young and old for generations.

Even if you haven't read the story in years, you probably still recall it with such vividness in your minds. A prominent godly man, ninety-year-old Daniel, was framed by a few jealous men in the king's court. Though innocent and faithful, he was still thrown into a den of hungry lions. Waiting for the outcome was nerve-shattering: would he be ripped to shreds by the wild lions or would someone, somehow, come to his rescue?

Well, the king, Darius, who greatly respected Daniel, couldn't stand the suspense and came to the lion's den early the next morning. To his amazement, Daniel was still alive! God has rescued him, miraculously closing the lions' mouths.

Daniel was not the only one thrown to the lions. Jesus spent the last six months of His life in a lion's den of savages intent on tearing Him to pieces. Eventually these brutal beasts, these people who hated Him, cornered Him at the cross (*Ps. 22:12-18*). But in our study today, Jesus escapes the enemy's sharp fangs and manages to shut their objecting mouths.

1. BACKGROUND AND SETTING

Before we lower ourselves into the lion's den with Jesus and His adversaries, let's get a good look at the scene in its geographic and cultural context.

A. Where? Chapter 7 contains two lion's dens. The first is in Galilee (vv1-9), the quiet, pastoral, safe, familiar home base of Jesus. The other is in Judea (vv10-52).

B. When? Bible scholars generally agree that the time setting falls within the last six months of Jesus' life. Verse 2 gives us the indication as to the specific time: *"when the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles was near."* Israel celebrated three great annual feasts: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. The last was held in early October and lasted eight days. It was a feast of thanksgiving primarily for the blessings of God in the harvest, but it was also a time of remembering the blessings received during the wilderness wanderings, the time when God dwelt with His people in the tabernacle. All the Jewish males within a 25km radius of Jerusalem were obligated to participate in this festive event, while a multitude of devout Jews from outside the area also attended.

C. Why? It was becoming dangerous for Jesus to be seen in Judea, and His appearance at the Feast of Tabernacles, or Booths, in Jerusalem must be carefully arranged. With the ill winds of hatred stirring up a storm of opposition against, Jesus, talk of assassination was swirling in the air. There was a contract out on his life – like Daniel, He was the target of a number of men devoted to taking His life.

2. PEOPLE AND REACTIONS

Like Daniel, the Lamb of God finds Himself surrounded by a pack of lions – or, more accurately, a pride of lions – fierce, savage beasts in human form who attack Him intensely and incessantly. We see this hostile attitude first in His own brothers, then in the Jewish people, and ultimately in the crowd in general, who, for the most part, reject Him and His message.

A. His brothers (vv3-9). In these verses, the roaring lions are Jesus' own brothers: James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas (Matt. 13:55). With obvious sarcasm, His own brothers say, "Hey brother, if you're such a famous star, what are you still doing around here? You should be in Jerusalem where all the action is. That's Hollywood. This is nowhere! Why don't you go and do all your little tricks out there in the open where the crowd is?" Why do you think that His own brothers would respond like this? Because they did not believe in Him. Right up until the resurrection, His brothers were not willing to give Him the time of day. By the way, this isn't anything out of the ordinary, is it? How often do we see, amongst siblings, one seems to be extremely popular, and the other sibling often endures, tolerates, or even actually despises the other? But near the end of the New Testament we find two letters written by James and Jude. And who are they? Brothers of Jesus. It took the resurrection to turn His family to Him in faith.

But Jesus responds to their sarcasm with seriousness by saying that *"the right time has not yet come,"* meaning that the right moment for Him to appear at this Feast was down the track.

B. The Jews (vv10, 14-15). In quiet, unpretentious obscurity, Jesus departs for the Feast a while after His brothers have left. But like the most suspenseful spy novels, the plot thickens as the religious officials try to track Jesus down. Finally, during the middle of the feast, Jesus makes His identity and whereabouts public – a courageous act in light of the fact that He's a target for assassination.

There are two prides of lions here in the city of Jerusalem. First, the Jews – they were the Pharisees, Scribes, and religious officials. Second, the crowd or the multitude who listened to the Jewish officials – this second group remained quiet for now for fear of the Jews.

Here, the Jewish religious officials are most concerned about Jesus' credentials. Here was a problem of academic snobbery. They saw Jesus teaching at the temple courts and asked, "where did this guy get His training?" "After all," they muttered amongst themselves, "the guy doesn't even have a Theological Degree." They felt threatened that He would gain a larger following of people than they. This all becomes apparent in vv30-32, where they even sent the temple guards to capture Jesus, but they couldn't lay one hand on Him.

I think that this is a beautiful point to pause and say that God will not allow one hand to be laid on you unless He allows it. Some people live with such a fear of what can be called 'accidental circumstances'. For example, there are some who will not fly for fear of mechanical failure or a crash, and some who will not engage themselves in a particular occupation for fear of what may happen.

Let me tell you something: Psalm 139:16 says, *"All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."* I find such great relief in that knowledge. There is no accidental death! God is in control of the length of my life, and when it is time for me to go, it will be God's ordained time. Some of you may find that a hard pill to swallow, but I find great comfort in the sovereign hand of God. Jesus stood in the midst of that pack of assassins and not one of them could lay a hand on Him because it was not God's time. Praise God! Please, be forever released from the fears of the future and the "what if's," especially as it relates to death. He knows what He's doing.

C. The crowd. And then there was the multitude. There were many different varying responses and mixed reactions to who Jesus was, but I'm pleased to say that there were many who did put their faith in Him (v30-31, 40-41).

Because of the diverse opinions about Jesus, tension charges the atmosphere (vv43-44). Many of the lion's roared, but there was nothing they could do – a mute testimony to the fact that there's no lion, even of the human variety, that God cannot tame.

3. JESUS AND GOD

What was it that Jesus said in return to their accusations? Why were there people in the crowd that believed and put their faith in Him?

A. The Father (vv.16-18, 28-29, 33-34). Look at what He said about the Father. He said that He got His teaching from the Father and that He came from the Father. Anyone seeking God's will, will see the truth of what He is teaching. That's true across the board. If you really want to know the will of God, He delights to show you and confirm His will in your life.

But I like what Jesus was doing here... Jesus didn't point to His credentials, but to His doctrine. It was as if He said, "I don't have a Theological degree, but judge Me by My doctrine." If the Jewish leaders listened carefully to the doctrine of Jesus, they would know that it was all rooted in the Old Testament Scriptures, and that it was from God. Jesus didn't claim to be self-taught; He claimed to be God-taught, practically inviting His listeners to examine His teachings according to the Scriptures.

I think also that Jesus gives us two measures of a true teacher. Does the teaching come from God? That is, is it according to the revealed Word of God? And, does the work give glory to God?

He also said that He knows the Father because He is from Him and was sent by Him. And later he says He will be returning back to His Father. He spoke of His coming, and He spoke of His ascension. This would have really pricked some of the listeners to hatred, whilst others would have listened and thought that this man knows things that their religious leaders do not, and they wanted more of what he was saying.

B. The Spirit (vv37-38). Then on the last day of the feast, He let them in on a whole new truth that up to this point had never been revealed in the ministry of Jesus. He told them about the Holy Spirit. To appreciate and truly understand what just happened, you must understand a little of the ceremonial background to that final day.

Notice when this happened? On the last and greatest day of the feast. There was a massive procession from several corners of Jerusalem; the people came with their palms and their willows to the Temple and marched around the great altar. At the same time a priest took a golden pitcher... and went down to the pool of Siloam and filled it with water. It was carried back through the Water Gate, up to the Temple altar and poured out as an offering to God. And all the while the people would recite these words: *"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters and drink" (Isa. 55:1)*. The whole dramatic ceremony was a vivid thanksgiving for God's good gift of water and an acted prayer for rain, and a memory of the water which sprang from the rock when they travelled through the wilderness.

Right in the middle of that chant, Jesus stood up and made Himself obvious to everyone. I'm sure that He said, *"This is the water of tradition. But if anyone will come to me and believe, I will give you water that will flow out of your life endlessly."* And He was referring to the Spirit of God which was given at Pentecost.

Remember the song that we used to sing:

*There is a river that flows from God above
Come to the waters, there is a vast supply*

*There is a fountain that's filled with God's great love
There is a river that never shall run dry*

I can guarantee that when the day of Pentecost came and Peter came out and said, "In the last days, God says, 'I will pour out my Spirit on all people', every person there, who was also at this feast, would have remembered what Jesus did on this day. They all would have remembered His offer of the refreshing water of the Holy Spirit who quenches all spiritual thirsting. But even as Jesus extends Himself to these ruthless lions, His words fall on many deaf ears. But some did believe.

In the shadows of the lions' den, a voice spoke up in defence of Jesus (vv50-51). Remember Nicodemus from chapter 3 – the Jewish leader who came to Jesus concealed by night? Here we see him take a small but definite step out into the open. Finally, by the end of the Gospel, Nicodemus will boldly identify himself with Christ. Little by little, Nicodemus' faith grew and eventually he came forward. He asks a question which says that they should first investigate and find out what He is about and then make a decision.

I remember talking to a young fellow about Jesus on one occasion. He said that he flatly rejects and doesn't agree with the 'whole Christian philosophy thing'. So I asked him to explain what he understands about Christianity. He answered that Christianity is all about not judging others and loving everyone. I told him that he has no idea what Christianity is or is about and from there went on to explain Jesus Christ. The point I want to make is that untold numbers of people reject Christ without even making an effort to investigate who He is and what He claimed.

Christianity is not a philosophy..... it is following and serving Someone who did something for us that we never deserved but we so desperately needed, and that no-one else in the entire world could have nor would have ever have done for us but He did, and our life is now forever changed for the better... and for that we love Him with all of our heart and we want to tell others about what He's done.

In response to Nicodemus' question, look how these Jews answer him (v.52). They never even answered his question. Nicodemus would have said quietly, "Oh yeah, I've looked into it. Let me tell you which prophets have come out of Galilee: Elisha, Jonah, and Nahum. Yes, there were prophets that arose from Galilee, but you never took the time to examine the evidence fellas. And so you're roaring in ignorance."

Look at the final *verse 53, "Then each went to his own home."* That's when Nicodemus went home that night and looked at the ceiling from his bed and said, "yep, that does it. I am now convinced." No doubt he thought, "How can I get my peers to stop ignoring the evidence that He is, in fact, the Son of God?" He was a lion tamed by God. For many, sadly, they must go through a tumultuous, difficult, heart-rending series of life events before they will finally stop their roaring and fall to their knees before Jesus Christ. By continuing to ignore the evidence, they go through life as blind men in darkness and missing out on the glorious hope and refreshing difference the Spirit of God can bring.

Conclusion

Some of you here are thinking, "Oh, if only you knew. You've told the story of my life. I've fought and rebelled, ran and argued. Now, I'm at the end of my rope." Be through with your roaring and your running. Turn your life over to the Son of God who will gladly give you rivers of living water through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Investigate the evidence and see, Jesus is truly who He says He is and He can do abundantly more than we can even think. He extends His arms out to us all today and says, "If you're thirsty, come to Me and drink."

Let's pray.