

FREEDOM, WORTH THE SACRIFICE

The great composer Antonio Salieri, in addition to having created a number of impressive works of music, also holds the distinction of having taught music to famous composers like Beethoven, Schubert and Liszt. Salieri's ability was such that even today, a couple of hundred years later, you can still buy his music, and you'll still find him mentioned in any music history course worth its salt.

His achievements, to put it mildly, were remarkable. He is among that tiny elite

whose names are remembered by history books – and yet, according to some accounts of his life, he never had lasting happiness, because everything he did seemed to be completely overshadowed by the rising popularity of a young prodigy by the name of Mozart.

All his accomplishments paled by comparison with the brilliant works of the young genius, and while there is little evidence to support the persistent rumour that he killed Mozart, history seems to tell us that he was indeed, from time to time, incredibly jealous.

And sadly, that's something we can all identify with. Looking at one of the most incredible stories of professional jealousy ever told, you'll see how God is able to turn jealousy around and make something good come of it.

We live in a world where professional excellence is stressed, and in a way that's probably a good thing. But have you ever felt, as you strive to produce your very best in the marketplace, that sometimes you feel more envied than appreciated? That, somehow, the people you work with, would rather see you fail than fly because they feel threatened by your hard work and ability!

Or maybe you've been on the other side of the coin – where in spite of your hard work, and your long years at the company, someone else gets that promotion you're pretty sure you deserve. And without lifting a finger, fly right past you!

Well, if you've ever felt that way, you wouldn't be alone. Surveys seem to indicate that as many as one in five employees seem to think they deserve

someone else's job – and if the green-eyed demon of jealousy is left unchecked, resentment can grow to the point where people's lives are affected, and real damage takes place.

Life can be pretty miserable for someone who finds himself or herself the object of professional jealousy. Rumours are started at the water cooler, underhanded character assassinations take place in the lunch room, and before you know it, someone's career, reputation, and livelihood is destroyed.

Of course, the real problem in almost every case is pride – the natural tendency of sinful human beings to think of themselves more highly than they should. The Bible reveals this as the underlying cause of almost every problem we face, from theft and murder to jealousy and rage.

In Isaiah, chapter 14, for example, we read of an angel named Lucifer who couldn't bear the thought of someone else sitting on the throne of the universe. He suffered from an exaggerated sense of self-importance, and it led to the very first case of professional jealousy in recorded history. God speaks to this jealous angel, and explains the problem to him:

For you have said in your heart: 'I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation, on the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High' (Isaiah 14:13, 14, NKJV).

The problem started when a mere angel believed himself to be on the same level as God – and that thought became so

all-consuming that he set aside reason, and let his passions drive him to the point of insanity. “I must be important,” he said, “because I am one of the most beautiful, most intelligent, most powerful angels in all of creation. And it must be obvious to everyone that I deserve a little more recognition.”

Now compare that inflated mind-set to the attitude of the Person who created everything. Speaking of Jesus, the Bible says:

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and

became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross (Philippians 2:5-8, NKJV).

Now remember that this is speaking about the only Person whose importance is actually impossible to overestimate. And yet, He was willing to empty Himself of everything – to assume the humblest of roles – and even let sinful human beings nail Him to a cross. It is the most stunning act of humility in recorded history.

Now think about it. On the one hand, you have Lucifer – the angel with an inflated ego who believes he is more important than God – and on the other hand, you have Jesus, the Divine Creator, the spectacular Son of God, who is willing to humiliate Himself for the sake of a few miserable sinners. It's the story of two opposite characters – a battle between self-worship and self-sacrifice.

It's a theme that weaves its way through the entire Bible, and provides the context for some of the richest understanding of scripture, which brings me to a story that took place some 2500 years ago in the fledgling Persian Empire. In Daniel chapter 6, we read of an old man who has served God faithfully for years, in spite of the fact that he has spent most of his life as a captive in a strange land. The Babylonian Empire has collapsed, and now Daniel the prophet finds himself working for the new administration of Darius, king of Persia. Let's read about it:

It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom one hundred and twenty satraps, to be over the whole kingdom; and over these, three governors, of whom Daniel was one, that the satraps might give account to them, so that the king would suffer no loss. Then this Daniel distinguished

himself above the governors and satraps, because an excellent spirit was in him; and the king gave thought to setting him over the whole realm (Daniel 6:1-3, NKJV).

You know, it really is amazing how Daniel survived from one empire to the next. In spite of the fact that he was a Hebrew captive, he held the highest positions in Babylon, and now, even with a new government, he continues to hold the second highest position in the land. How is it possible that a man with such humble beginnings rises to such an important station in life?

Is it because he jostled and jockeyed his way to the top? Not at all. Daniel's greatness was born of humility, not politics. His greatness was based on his long-standing relationship with God, and the watertight character he developed as

a result of that relationship, made him an important asset to the king.

Who wouldn't want to hire a man whose honesty was unquestionable? Who wouldn't want to have an employee who was always motivated by principle instead of greed or ambition? Daniel was the perfect chief of staff for a busy king living in a world full of conquered nations and political uncertainty. But the very thing that made Daniel so important to the king also made him a source of hatred to those who worked under him.

So the governors and satraps sought to find some charge against Daniel concerning the kingdom; but they could find no charge or fault, because he was faithful; nor was there any error or fault found in him (Daniel 6:4, NKJV).

It's really one of the earliest recorded cases of professional jealousy. These men simply couldn't understand why in the world a Hebrew captive should have the number one job in the kingdom, and so they set to work trying to undermine his character – trying to find something they could use to destroy his career. But amazingly, Daniel's integrity was so perfect, they couldn't find a single thing.

Imagine having a relationship with God so strong that when the devil puts you under his microscope, he has trouble finding something to hang you with. Imagine having the character of God shine so brightly in your life that the world has trouble finding your flaws. To a thinking person, it would make them want to become more like you – but to someone blinded by jealousy, someone drunk with the wine of Babylon, it only

stirs up their determination to destroy you. And that's exactly what happened to Daniel:

Then these men said, "We shall not find any charge against this Daniel unless we find it against him concerning the law of his God" (Daniel 6:5, NKJV).

Daniel's character was so perfect, they couldn't find a single flaw, and so the only thing left was to take his positive attributes and twist them to the point where they could be used against him. They knew that Daniel placed a great deal of importance on the ten-commandment moral law of God, and if they could only create a situation where keeping that law became either dangerous or absurd, maybe they could catch him.

And it's at this point in the story, buried just beneath the surface, that we find the

tale of Lucifer's original plot against God. In order to occupy the throne of God, he was going to have to cast doubt on God's character, and turn the angels against Him. But the character of God is a pretty tough thing to slander, particularly in front of billions of angels who see Him every day.

And so, the only thing left is to take God's positive attributes and twist them to the point where they can be used against Him. The devil chose to go after the moral law - the very foundation of God's government.

In the Old Testament, you might remember that God's presence would literally dwell above the Ark of the Covenant, making it a tangible symbol of His throne. And inside that ark, right under the lid known as the mercy seat, was a copy of the Ten Commandments,

engraved in stone by the very finger of God. His law was in His throne, and that tells me that those Ten Commandments – which are really rules for a happy existence - form the foundation of God’s divine government. The Bible says that “...*sin is the transgression of the law*” (1 John 3:4, KJV) which means that everytime an evil angel convinces someone to sin, he’s actually causing him or her to question the importance of the law of God.

And that has been the basis of Satan’s attack on the kingdom of God right from the word “go.” From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible tells the story of Satan’s assault on the law of God, because in reality, he knows that law is a picture of the perfect character of God. In the Garden of Eden, Satan asked Adam and Eve if they really thought that sin would bring death. “Maybe God is trying to hide

something from you,” he said. “Maybe the price of breaking God’s law isn’t really death, and if you break it, you’ll discover that you can be as important as God.”

Now of course, I’m paraphrasing, but that’s the essence of the devil’s argument in Genesis chapter 3. He’s trying to convince Adam and Eve to doubt the word of God, and he’s trying to convince them that they have every right to be as important as their Creator. What he’s really trying to do is make them commit the same sin he did!

At the end of the Bible, you have another good example of how the devil works. In Revelation chapter 13, he tries to convince the whole world, upon threat of death, to bow down and worship the image of the beast – a clear violation of God’s ten-commandment moral law.

And what's interesting, is the fact that God describes those who remain faithful to Him as people "... *who keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus*" (Revelation 14:12, NKJV).

So, in the book of Daniel, chapter 6, we shouldn't be surprised when a group of wicked men suddenly go after Daniel on the basis of his faithfulness to God's law. They actually tried to create a situation where Daniel might question the importance of obeying God - and that's a strategy that the devil has used for a very long time.

Even today, he tries to create situations where obedience might be questionable. There are those, for example, who promote the idea of moral relativity – who hunt for examples where an absolute moral code might fall apart. "Is it always right to be honest?" they ask. "Even

if you need to steal to achieve some higher good?”

You see, if the devil can make one requirement by God appear to contradict another, he can call into question God's entire moral system. One of his favourite stunts is to make God's teaching seem contradictory. And frankly, when you're dealing with selfish human beings, it's not hard to create a little confusion.

When the devil discovered he couldn't get Daniel on things like immorality, he tried to confuse the issue and make it almost impossible to obey God. He tried to create the impression that times and circumstances had changed, and that God's moral requirements didn't apply the same way they used to.

He couldn't get Daniel to do something wrong, so he tried to get Daniel to stop

doing right. We read how his enemies ran into the throne room of Darius and convinced him to sign a law “..that whoever petitions any god or man for thirty days, except you, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions” (Daniel 6:7, NKJV). You know, I have no idea how they convinced the king to sign that law, because the Bible doesn’t tell us. The original language suggests that they expressed a good deal of anxiety, and pressed themselves on the king rather suddenly – so maybe they presented their law as a matter of the utmost urgency. Maybe they suggested that the security of the kingdom was being threatened, and a law was needed to unite everybody. I don’t know what they said, because the Bible is silent. But one thing is for sure – it’s going to happen again.

In broad, beautiful strokes, the story of Daniel’s faithfulness points us down

to the last days of earth's history, when again, for some reason we don't know yet, people will rush to the highest authorities on the planet and force a universal law for false worship. According to Revelation chapter 13, the very lives of Christians will be at stake.

And, again, if the story of Daniel is any indication, the issue will revolve around the refusal of God's people to give up on God's moral requirements.

It sounds hopeless, but that's why I'm glad we have the story of Daniel. In spite of persecution, he chose to stand true. He could have prayed in bed, away from prying eyes, but he didn't. He refused to be bullied. He stood by the window, publicly affirming his love for God.

And of course, his enemies were expecting as much, he was thrown into

the lion's den. All the forces of hell unleashed their anger against him, and it looked pretty bad. Nobody could survive the lion's den. But at that moment, as Daniel lay down for the night and rests his head on a sleeping lion, the hope of Bible prophecy peeks through the darkest clouds of human existence.

You may have read the story a million times, but I want to encourage you to look at it once more. The Bible says that Daniel was thrown into a den, and a stone was rolled across the opening and sealed with the king's seal. And at that dark moment, we catch a glimpse of what's really going on behind the scenes every time someone faces persecution for their faith in God.

At this moment in the story, Jesus suddenly steps up to the front lines of the great controversy between good and evil and places His nail-scarred hand

on our shoulders to reassure us. Buried just beneath the surface of the lion's den is the story of Jesus. You see, even God's own Son wasn't spared life's darkest moments.

The Bible says that even though He was the spotless Lamb of God, He slumped to His knees in Gethsemane, and under the weight of the sins of the world, He experienced such agony that the blood began to run out of His skin. "Father, I don't really want to do this," He prayed, "but I'm here to do your will. I'm going to save these people." He stood true under the devil's strongest attacks, and then the spotless Son of God hung on a cross and breathed His last.

If that's not the story behind the 'lion's den', I don't know what is. A jealous angel tried to destroy the spotless Son of God. He tried to tarnish His character,

and when that didn't work, he put Him to a shameful death on the cross. The jeering cries of the crowd are just a reflection of the age-old battle for the throne of God.

The Bible says they took the lifeless body of Jesus and laid it in a tomb. They rolled a big stone across the mouth and sealed it – symbolically demonstrating to the whole universe that the devil had won, and God was dead. But on the third day, very early in the morning, those who loved Christ discovered that He was very much alive.

Now look again at the story of Daniel, and you can't miss it. The forces of evil convince a king to destroy someone he loves, just like the devil convinced the human race to crucify Jesus. Racked with anxiety, Darius tosses and turns all night, thinking about what he did to Daniel.

As you see Jesus hanging on the cross, in your heart, you feel deep remorse for the fact that your sins put Him there. When you were first duped into sinning against God, you never thought that the consequences could be so high. You never dreamed that a single sin could nail the Son of God to a cross. But now you can see it. Your crimes against God's law put nails in His hands and feet – your sin put Him in the grave. But that's not the end of the story.

Then the king arose very early in the morning and went in haste to the den of lions. And when he came to the den, he cried out with a lamenting voice to Daniel. The king spoke, saying to Daniel,

“Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?”
(Daniel 6:19, 20, NKJV).

Today, God is asking you to run to the tomb of Jesus, just like Darius, and he wants you to cry out, “Is everything all right, Jesus? Is everything going to be all right?”

And when you do that, you’re going to discover exactly what Darius discovered. He’s still alive. The devil has been silenced by the fact that the grave could not hold Jesus. And because of that, you can face anything the devil throws at you. Even the grave doesn’t pose a threat.

Today, you may be facing a ‘den of lions’. You might be suffering for what you believe. Maybe the people around you don’t understand your commitment to God, but you really can stand firm. Based on ancient history Daniel assures us that it really is going to be all right. The moment is coming when Jesus will stand at the

door of our tombs on the resurrection morning and cry out, “Is everything all right?” And He’ll do it with a smile on His face, because He already knows the answer.

