

BEHIND THE SCENES



Daniel 10:1–11:1

Eleventh Message

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SERIES: ONE KING TO RULE THEM ALL

The news is dominated by Putin's invasion of Ukraine on Thursday. Putin himself didn't invade Ukraine. But Putin is Russia. He has spent twenty years using the democratic process to become Prime Minister, then President, while dismantling democracy behind him. Now he is at the top, a new Tsar. Putin is angry and resentful. He resents that the West won the Cold War. He resents that nearly all the countries of Eastern Europe are now members of NATO. He describes the breakup of the Soviet Union as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century. He disputes that Ukraine should be a distinct nation with its own land and language. In his mind, it belongs with the Russian people, land and language. He is out to avenge the lost honor of Russia. He is out to restore Russia as a grand empire with himself as Tsar. He is seeking revenge on Ukraine and the West. A geopolitical drama is being played out.

The Swiss pastor-theologian Karl Barth famously said, "Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible." I invite us all to seek to understand world events through the lens of Scripture, and not vice versa, not to understand the Bible through the lens of world events.

I've been following Putin's actions against Ukraine through the lens of the Book of Daniel. In Daniel's second vision, in chapter 8, he saw a two-horned ram charging from east to west, then a single-horned goat charging from west to east toward the ram. The goat

charged at it in great rage. I saw it attack the ram furiously, striking the ram and shattering its two horns. The ram was powerless to stand against it; the goat knocked it to the ground and trampled on it, and none could rescue the ram from its power. (Dan 8:6-7 NIV)

Why was the goat so enraged at the ram? Vengeance, just like Putin. The ram was the Persian Empire, which, under Darius and then Xerxes, had twice invaded Greece, seeking to absorb it into their empire. The goat was the Greek Empire of Alexander the Great 150 years later. Alexander had a long memory. He invaded the Persian Empire to avenge those attacks.

Vladimir Putin has a long memory! He has been stewing for a long time. The Berlin Wall fell the same year that the World Wide Web was created—and that was forever ago! As Russian troops have been marching on Kyiv, I am sure that Putin is also thinking back to the year 988 when his namesake Vladimir, ruler of the Rus people, converted to Christianity. This was not purely a religious decision: geopolitics and marriage were involved. He led his people in a mass baptism in the Dnieper River in Kyiv. This was the birth of the Russian Orthodox Church, and a major step in the formation of Russian identity. Vladimir was canonized as St Vladimir, today a patron saint of both Russia and Ukraine. The man leading the resistance to Putin shares the same name: Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine. So we have two Vladimirs facing off over the city of the original Vladimir. One seeks to impose empire; the other is resisting empire.

OT Israel had been on the receiving end of Empire. The northern

kingdom of Israel became a vassal to, and was then swallowed up by the mighty Assyrian Empire, which also took most of the southern kingdom Judah. What was left later became a vassal to, and was then swallowed up by the even mightier Babylonian Empire. More empires were coming: Persia and Greece. The four visions given to Daniel in the second half of the book concern these coming empires and what they mean for God's people.

Daniel's fourth and final vision, chapters 10–12, is by far the longest. It comprises a lengthy introduction (10:1–11:1), the vision itself (11:2–12:4), and a concluding epilogue (12:5–13), which also closes the book. We will spend a week each on these three sections.

Daniel is given this vision in the third year of Cyrus, ruler of the rapidly-expanding Persian Empire. The year is 536 BC, three years after the Persians captured Babylon. Cyrus had issued his decree, allowing Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. But Daniel, an old man, had stayed in Babylon. But for this vision he is to the east of Babylon on the Tigris River, the other great river of Mesopotamia.

A word was revealed to Daniel. The word was true, and it was a great struggle. The revelation is about a great conflict, as we will see in chapter 11. But it was also a great struggle for Daniel to understand the message of the revelation. Much of the chapter is about his struggle to be ready to receive the word. As I said two weeks ago, receiving these four visions (Dan 7–12) has been a traumatic experience for Daniel.

Daniel has been in mourning for three weeks, including Passover which would normally be a festive time. He has given up fine food and wine, and has suspended his personal grooming. Sounds like Lent which begins this week with Ash Wednesday! Later in the chapter we learn that he has set his mind to gain understanding and to humble himself before God (12).

Ten days after Passover, Daniel received a vision. Before he is told the actual message of the vision (ch. 11), he has three encounters with heavenly beings. It is not at all clear how many he sees, nor whom he sees: none of them is identified. During these encounters Daniel spends much of the time face-down on the ground, trembling.

In his first encounter (5–9), Daniel sees a man dressed in linen. But this is no ordinary man: his appearance is dazzlingly bright. Some think this is an angel, others that he is so dazzling that this must be God himself. The imagery is similar to Ezekiel's vision of "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord" (Ezek 1:28). That vision left Ezekiel flat on his face. You women may recognize the language here, for it reappears in John's vision of the risen Lord Jesus standing amongst the lampstands (Rev 1:13–16). At the sight, John fell prostrate as though dead!

It is an awesome thing to come face-to-face with the holy, as do Ezekiel, Daniel and John; as also did Isaiah and Jeremiah. Rudolf Otto, in his classic book *The Idea of the Holy* (1923), described the holy as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the mystery that causes trembling and fascinates.¹ God is mysterious because he is not like

us; he is altogether other. The revelation of himself causes us to tremble. But we are also fascinated and drawn to him. As we said together in our Call to Worship: “Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness” (Ps 29:2). Which in Scripture usually means falling on your knees, face to the ground, in worship.

This was true of Moses. When God revealed himself as “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin,” Moses immediately bowed to the ground and worshiped. Then he asked the Lord to go with them. “Although [or because] this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance” (Exod 34:6-9). There’s a great gulf between us, but please take us as your people! It was a dangerous thing to have the presence of God in their midst, but it was a necessary thing. It was their only hope.

This mystery that both terrifies and fascinates is beautifully depicted in the classic children’s book *The Wind in the Willows*, when Mole and Rat encounter an august Presence—“august” means “inspiring awe and reverence.”

Then suddenly the Mole felt a great Awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head, and rooted his feet to the ground. It was no panic terror—indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy—but it was an awe that smote and held him and, without seeing, he knew it could only mean that some august Presence was very, very near. With difficulty he turned to look for his friend, and saw him at his side cowed, stricken, and trembling violently. And still there was utter silence in the populous bird-haunted branches around them; and still the light grew and grew...

“Rat!” he found breath to whisper, shaking. “Are you afraid?”

“Afraid?” murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. “Afraid! Of HIM? O, never, never! And yet—and yet—O, Mole, I am afraid!”

Then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and did worship.²

Daniel’s friends didn’t see the vision: they were so terrified that they ran away and hid. But Daniel saw this great vision. He was undone: it took his strength away. Then the dazzling one spoke, and Daniel fell into a deep sleep: a supernaturally-induced state, so more like a trance, in which he was receptive to the vision.

Daniel’s second encounter (10-15) begins with a touch, the first of three touches he will receive. A hand lifts him to his hands and knees, but he’s shaking like a leaf. Assured that he is highly esteemed, he is told to stand upright in readiness for the message.

But he’s still trembling, so the heavenly messenger says, “Do not be afraid.” Daniel’s words were heard in heaven as soon as he started praying—just like in chapter 9. This heavenly messenger has been sent in response, which suggests he is Gabriel, the messenger of chapter 9. But he was delayed. For 21 days his way was blocked by the prince of the Persian kingdom, and he was detained with the king of Persia. The standoff lasted until Michael, one of the chief princes came to help him. Now he is here, and will tell Daniel what will happen to his people in the future. But Daniel is back on the ground, speechless.

Daniel’s third encounter (16-19) is with “one who looked like a man.” He receives a second touch, this time on his lips so he can speak. But all he can say is how weak he is as a result of the vision. He receives a third touch to strengthen him, and is again told, “Do

not be afraid; you are highly esteemed. Peace to you! Be strong, be strong” (19). His strength returns and now at last Daniel is ready to receive the message. What a great struggle it has been to get Daniel to this point, where he is ready to be told what will happen to his people in the future.

The messenger angel will tell Daniel what will happen, what is written in the reliable document, the Book of Truth. But the angel is in a hurry. He needs to get back to the fight against the prince of Persia, whom he knows will soon be joined by the prince of Greece. Only Michael, “your prince,” the prince of Israel, has come to his aid, allowing him to come with this message for Daniel.

So, what are we to make of these princes of Persia, Greece and Israel? On one side are the prince of Persia and later the prince of Greece. On the other side are Michael prince of Israel and this heavenly messenger who had been sent to Daniel but was blocked for three weeks.

The vision in chapter 11 will be about future kings of Persia, then the kingdom of Greece: a mighty king who is Alexander the Great followed by a dizzying sequence of kings of the north and kings of the south, successors to Alexander’s Greek kingdom. The vision covers 350 years of geopolitical history.

Behind the scenes there is a cosmic conflict. The princes of Persia, Greece, and Israel are all supernatural beings. In a sense they are guardian angels of these earthly powers. This is apocalyptic literature. It is a revelation or uncovering of things that are not perceptible on the earth-bound stage. Apocalyptic takes us behind the scenes to see unseen realities, that is, unseen to the human eye.

Occasionally we get to go behind the scenes. After watching a movie, if you stay long enough for the credits, the list of actors is followed by a very long list of those who worked behind the scenes so that these actors could appear in front of the camera. We have a talented and dedicated tech crew working behind the scenes to produce our livestream service each week. Sometimes we are advised not to go behind the scenes, such as to see how sausages are made—though there is a sausage-making session here each year prior to the Craft Faire, if you’re curious. Sometimes seeing behind the scenes is anticlimactic, such as when Toto pulls back the curtain to reveal the Wizard of Oz.

What can we learn about conflict between nations by going behind the scenes? What is the origin of peoples and nations, languages and lands? The Lord scattered humanity at the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9), dividing them into the seventy peoples listed in the Table of Nations (Gen 10). In the visible, earth-bound world, each of the seventy had its clans, its language, its land and its people. In the unseen realm, God assigned these peoples to heavenly beings:

**When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance,
when he divided mankind,
he fixed the borders of the peoples
according to the number of the sons of God.
But the LORD’s portion is his people,
Jacob his allotted heritage. (Deut 32:8-9 ESV)**

He allocated the 70 peoples to “the sons of God.” These are members of his heavenly court; they are supernatural beings. But they deceive their earthly nations into worshiping false gods and thereby living disordered lives. God allows them to go their own way. But he took for himself Israel.

Israel is not mentioned in the Table of Nations. It is not one of the seventy. The Lord started a new people, beginning with one per-

son, Abraham. He reached into the seventy nations and he took out one person. He was not better than anyone else: he was a moon worshiper living in Ur. This was a surprising choice since his wife was old and barren. Out of this barrenness the Lord would build a new people, his people, over against all the other peoples. And through this people he would ultimately bless all peoples. The Lord revealed himself to Israel and gave them the gift of order: order in time with the Sabbath; order in space with the Tabernacle then with the Temple, the City and the Land; and order in ethics with his commandments, the Torah. The Israelites were to live differently from the disordered lives of the seventy nations, the Gentiles. They were to live in loyalty to Yahweh, the one true God. They were to orient their lives onto this one true God who had called them to be his people.

Some of the spiritual princes roused their earthly rulers to empire-building. The first empire builder is Nimrod, mentioned in the Table of Nations. The prince of Persia and the prince of Greece are the supernatural forces behind the empire-building of the Persian and Greek kings. God's people are swallowed up by empire, but on their side in the cosmic realm they have Michael.

Now this may all sound very strange to us living in the post-Enlightenment West. But you women are immersed in the Book of Revelation. This also is apocalyptic literature. It is fortuitous that we are going through Daniel and Revelation at the same time, the two apocalyptic books in Scripture. In Revelation the veil is pulled back for John so that he can see what is going on beyond the earth. He sees two additional realms: heaven above and the Abyss below. In heaven he sees God enthroned in the midst of his heavenly court: the four cherubim, the 24 elders, the seven angels of the presence, and countless other angels. He is the one true God. He is worthy to receive worship because he has created all things.

John sees a cosmic battle. A great red dragon with seven heads, ten horns and seven crowns seeks to devour the offspring of the woman, but the child was snatched up to heaven, leaving the dragon frustrated.

Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. (Rev 12:7-9)

The dragon pursued the woman, but she is whisked away from his grasp. Now seriously enraged, the dragon went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring: those who faithfully follow Jesus. And God allows this. The dragon gives his power, his throne, and great authority to the beast. The false prophet orchestrates the worship of the beast. But the beast is not worthy of worship, though he seems to have all the power.

When I preached through Revelation twenty years ago, I called the series “The Seen and the Unseen.” In the “seen” world, the Christians are small communities within the vast, all-powerful Roman Empire. Revelation pulls back the veil to show them the “unseen” realm behind the scenes. There is a cosmic conflict between heaven and the Abyss over the earth in between. Each has a colony on earth. The churches are an outpost of heaven. They are given this peek behind the scenes so that they be encouraged to persevere in loyal devotion to the Lamb whom they follow. And so that they recognize that the claims of the beast and the false prophet are false. Rev-

elation, like Daniel, is resistance literature. It enables the Christians to remain faithful to God and to resist the false claims of power, of empire, of those not worthy of worship demanding worship.

John saw the dragon and his angels hurled out of heaven down to the earth. Various passages in Scripture show that some heavenly beings have rebelled against God. This includes Satan himself, many angels, and the “sons of God” to whom the nations were assigned.

We are shown behind the scenes what God has done with them, in two more apocalyptic passages:

God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them in chains of darkness to be held for judgment. (2 Pet 2:4)

the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their proper dwelling—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day. (Jude 6)

The hell into which they have been cast is Tartarus, the realm of the disobedient angels pending their final judgment. These fallen angels are demons.

Again behind the scenes we are told that God in Christ has defeated all of these evil powers:

having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. (Col 2:15)

God has exalted the risen Lord Jesus high above every other spiritual power and

seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. (Eph 1:20-21)

All these powers and principalities have a beginning and an end. They are not eternal.

in him [Christ] all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. (Col 1:15-16)

At the end of time, Christ will destroy “all dominion, authority and power” (1 Cor 15:24).

By contrast, Christ has no beginning and no end: he is the incarnate eternal God. He is worthy of worship because he was there at creation. He is worthy of worship because he has redeemed us and has triumphed over the demonic forces.

How has Christ triumphed over these demonic powers? The lion of Judah has conquered. But not by using the power of a lion. This is what the devil does: he is a lion prowling around, seeking whom he may devour. This is what empire does. This is what nations gone wrong under demonic powers do. This is what Putin is doing. No, the lion has conquered by being the slain Lamb. He has conquered despite being slain by the forces of evil. No, he has conquered *by* being slain by the forces of evil.

C. S. Lewis imaginatively portrays this in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Aslan allows himself to be tied to the stone table by the evil forces of the White Witch, then she kills him. All looks lost: evil has won, winter is endless. The next morning Susan and Lucy go to the table where they find Aslan bound and lifeless. They turn around, and hear a great crack. Turning back, they see the table empty and cracked in half. Aslan soon appears to them and explains,

“when a willing victim who had committed no treason was killed in a traitor’s stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards.”³

As Jesus died on the cross it looked as though evil had triumphed, that empire had won, that the supernatural forces behind the earthly powers had been victorious. But Jesus entrusted himself to God: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). He knew that he was innocent. He knew that his Father saw him. He had refused to respond with raw power. Instead he had prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Instead he had promised the penitent rebel beside him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

And now God invites all to come and find forgiveness. Both Israel and the nations need deliverance from the forces of evil. How are they delivered? By the gospel. By this good news of what God has done in Christ. Paul said,

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. (Rom 1:16)

Why might he be ashamed? Because the gospel seems weak: at its heart is not a roaring lion but a slain Lamb. To the Jew this seem scandalous. To the Greek it seems utterly foolish. But it is the power of God unto salvation. Paul is so convinced of the power of this gospel that he wants to go to Spain to proclaim it where it has not yet been heard. To proclaim it to other peoples still living in the bondage of darkness. He wants the assistance of the Roman churches in this endeavor.

Through the gospel, the good news of what God has done in Christ, God is building a great kingdom. But not the way a human empire is built with power, and by running over peoples and nations. It is a kingdom built on love, grace, peace, reconciliation, forgiveness. Into it is drawn a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language, to become one new family. Its citizens refuse to respond to evil with evil, but choose to overcome evil with good.

So as we read the news about Ukraine and seek to understand it in the light of Scripture, what do we see behind the scenes? This is where we can be helped by Daniel and by Revelation, these two apocalyptic books of resistance.

We acknowledge that there is evil in the world. There are demonic forces behind human behavior. But these powers have been defeated; the back of evil has been broken. We see the glory of Christ, who went into the heart of evil, over whose dead body the back of evil was broken. After putting God to death there is nothing worse that evil can do. We see the power of the gospel to set people free from these demonic realms. We see that God is building a worldwide family, including Russians and Ukrainians, people who are or have been at enmity with one another, drawn together into this kingdom where we are brothers and sisters together. We pray for our brothers and sisters in Ukraine, where there is a vibrant church. We pray that God will enable them to be loyal to him, to his purposes, and to his way of working, to respond to evil with good. As we look for opportunities to overcome evil with good, the Scriptures are particularly concerned that we care for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the sojourner. There are many of them right now in Ukraine. We also have these people close to hand: Afghan refugees who are arriving in the Bay Area, having lost everything. This is the ministry of Jim Ross, reaching out to The Very Least.

One of the ways we resist evil is by taking communion together, reminding ourselves of whom it is we orient our lives around. It is a subversive act.

1. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), chapters 4-6.
2. Kenneth Grahame, chapter 7, “The Piper at the Gates of Dawn,” *The Wind in the Willows* (1908).
3. C. S. Lewis, chapter 15, “Deeper Magic from Before the Dawn of Time,” *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950).

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