



One King to Rule Them All

The Book of Daniel

Sermons by
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FLOURISHING IN A FOREIGN LAND

Daniel 1:1-21

First Message

Bernard Bell

July 11, 2021

SERIES: ONE KING TO RULE THEM ALL

Good morning. After a year of preaching to a camera, it is so good to look out and see real people and real faces. But the cameras are still here; they're part of our new normal.

Twelve days ago Sue and I returned from 18 days in Turkey. It was our first international travel in nearly three years, and my first time on a plane in nearly two years. We returned just three days before the six-month window of remaining validity on my passport. So now it is time to apply for a new passport. I still have a British passport but for over thirty years have been a card-carrying resident alien here. So I am a citizen of one country and a resident of another country. I will apply for a new British passport, which sadly will no longer have "European Union" on the cover. Again the question arises: is it time to become a US citizen? Is it time to harmonize my citizenship and my residency? This would require taking the Naturalization Oath of Allegiance to the United States of America, which begins,

"I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen."

Many of you have taken this oath. You have come here from other countries, and taken US citizenship. Forswearing or renouncing an existing allegiance and swearing a new allegiance is a serious matter.

Sometimes we feel caught between competing loyalties. Which sports team to support? Or perhaps, loyalty to our employer versus loyalty to our sense of ethics or decency or propriety. Peer pressure generates competing loyalties. Politics is about managing competing loyalties.

Today we begin a new series in the Book of Daniel, in which competing loyalties are a major theme. Over the next seven weeks we'll cover the first seven chapters, one chapter per week. We'll then finish the book next year. Today we'll look at chapter 1 which introduces the book, and most of the key characters of the first six chapters. I hope that you have brought your Bibles with you today. I will read all of chapter 1 because it and chapter 12 are the only chapters remotely short enough to read as part of the sermon. The other chapters are very long, so for all these other weeks, I ask that you please read the chapter beforehand—and then bring your Bible here.

I. Exile (1:1-2)

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god. (Dan 1:1-2 NIV)

"Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem and besieged it." How much history is packed into this short statement! Under his father Nabopolassar, Babylon had become the dominant power in Mesopotamia by capturing Nineveh in 612 BC, thus ending the

Assyrian Empire. Babylon then turned its attention westwards to Egypt. The little territory of Judah found itself caught between these two competing empires, Babylon in the east and Egypt in the west.

In the e-news I asked you to read the last three chapters of 2 Kings in preparation for this morning. You would have read of King Josiah leading the people in a covenant renewal, followed by the celebration of Passover. Josiah was the last good and godly king of Judah. But he foolishly and needlessly meddled in the conflict between Babylon and Egypt, and was killed by the Egyptian Pharaoh. Thereafter Egypt and Babylon took turns installing puppet kings in Jerusalem, kings that were to be loyal to their overlord. But these kings repeatedly switched allegiance between Babylon and Egypt; they were trying to play the field. So Nebuchadnezzar came and besieged Jerusalem, again and again. First he took away the golden vessels from the temple—the vessels made by Solomon 350 years earlier for use in the worship of the Lord. Next time he took away many of the leading people. Later he took away yet more people, and all of the bronze items from the temple. He burnt the temple and the palace and the city, and destroyed the walls. By now there wasn't much left of Jerusalem.

Nebuchadnezzar thought that he was acting with agency, that he was victorious because he was the great king of the greatest empire and because his god, Marduk of Babylon, was stronger than Israel's God. But he didn't have agency. It was the Lord who delivered everything into his hands. Babylon's depredations were divine judgment upon God's people. Three weeks ago Sharon preached her first full sermon here, on the Book of Habakkuk. Thank you, Sharon, for drawing the parallel between the tension that Habakkuk felt, at about the same time that Daniel was being taken into captivity in Babylon, and our tension today. That prophet understood that God's judgment upon his people was merited, but he was disturbed that the instrument the Lord was using was the wicked and godless Babylonians.

Through all this turmoil the leadership in Jerusalem was hurtling headlong towards disaster. The final kings switched their loyalties back and forth between Egypt and Babylon, but never gave their allegiance to the Lord, the one who had brought his people up out of Egypt into the land of promise. Instead these kings all did evil in the eyes of the Lord. The faithful prophet Jeremiah repeatedly warned them. But the false prophets gave reassurances that within just two years the Lord would bring back everything that Nebuchadnezzar had taken to Babylon: the temple vessels, the king, the exiles. Not so, said Jeremiah. You're going to be in Babylon a long time. So settle there, build houses, plant gardens, marry, have children, have grandchildren. He proclaimed the word of the Lord:

"Seek the peace and prosperity (*shalom*) of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers (*shalom*), you too will prosper (*shalom*)... I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper (*shalom*) you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future." (Jer 29:7, 11)

Notice the four-fold use of *shalom* in these two well-known verses. NIV translates it as “prosperity.” We could also translate it as “well-being” or “flourishing.” Pursue and pray for the flourishing of Babylon! In its flourishing will be your flourishing! The Lord’s plans for the future *shalom* of his people run through the *shalom* of Babylon! How can this be?

These first two verses have moved us, the readers, from Jerusalem to Babylon, along with the temple vessels. Nebuchadnezzar has placed these vessels in the temple of his god in Babylonia (NIV). But the word used here is Shinar. This word is evocative because it was used in Genesis 11. Humanity gathered together and settled in Shinar, where they built the Tower of Babel. Shinar is where humanity lived in autonomy from God.

Shinar was the precursor to the call of Abraham. The Lord called Abraham out of the land of Shinar. But now his descendants are back in Shinar. All that God promised to and through Abraham seems to have come to an end: a numerous people, living in the land of promise, with God’s presence in their midst. Now it has all gone: the temple and its divine presence, the palace and its king, the city and its walls, the land and its people. There is no more *shalom*. A diminished, displaced, landless people is back in Shinar.

Psalm 137 voices the trauma of these exiles in Babylon:

**By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion...
How can we sing the songs of the Lord
while in a foreign land? (Ps 137:1, 4)**

The pathos of this psalm is conveyed in *Va, pensiero*, the mournful Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves in Verdi’s opera *Nabucco* (Nebuchadnezzar): *O, mia patria, si bella e perduta!* “Oh, my homeland, so lovely and so lost!”

The Book of Daniel is written for this traumatized, displaced people trying to flourish in Babylon and its successor empires. The first six chapters are about four such displaced people trying to flourish in the court of the Babylonian king. Daniel is written for a diaspora community trying to be loyal to God while living in a world that pays God no attention. It is thus quite relevant for us today.

2. New Recruits (1:3-7)

Attention now turns to the king in Babylon:

Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king’s service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility—young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king’s palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king’s table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king’s service. (1:3-5)

A growing empire requires an expanded imperial bureaucracy in service to the king. Nebuchadnezzar enrolled the best young men from Jerusalem: impressive in every way, the cream of the crop. Today they would be admitted to Stanford or Harvard. They were to be taught the language and literature of the Babylonians. They were to be re-educated, indoctrinated into Babylonian culture. They were to dine on the rich food and wine from the king’s table. They were to be absorbed into his magnificent royal court. At the end of three

years of enculturation they would enter the king’s imperial service as loyal subjects and servants of the Great King. They would be assimilated.

Among these impressive Israelite youth were four who will feature prominently in the first six chapters:

Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego. (1:6-7)

We’re told their names: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. They each bore God’s name: these Hebrew names each contain the syllable “iah” for Yahweh, or “el” for God. But these names were stripped from them, and they were given new names, names built around Babylonian deities.

Names are important. Many of you have taken on new names after moving to this country. Growing up in Thailand, my family had Thai names, chosen by my father with careful attention to meaning. Mine was Suwat. All the Thai people knew us by these names.

Names and naming are significant in Scripture. Renaming indicates a new identity. Pharaoh renamed Joseph to Zaphenath-Paneah when he elevated him to leadership of all Egypt (Gen 41:41-45). The Lord renamed Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah, and Jacob to Israel to indicate their new role in his purposes.

The renaming of these four youths is part of their new identity, their assimilation. They now belong to Babylon and its king. Or do they?

3. Resistance (1:8-16)

But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel, but the official told Daniel, “I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you.” (1:8-10)

In response to this redefinition of identity, Daniel pushed back. He resolved to not defile himself with the king’s food and wine, and sought permission from the chief official to refrain. It was an act of resistance. For the second time we read that God gave: God gave Daniel favor and compassion with Ashpenaz. The word translated “favor” is *hesed*, implying loyalty and faithful commitment.

There’s a web of competing loyalties here. We the readers are assured of the Lord’s loyalty and commitment to Daniel in his difficult position. Daniel is drawing a line on his loyalty to the king. By refusing the royal food he is resisting the king’s effort to fully assimilate him into his realm. And poor Ashpenaz is caught between a God-given loyalty to Daniel and loyalty to his boss. He has compassion towards Daniel, but fears that the king will have his head. So Daniel goes not over him, but under him:

Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, “Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants

in accordance with what you see.” So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead. (1:11-16)

Daniel proposed to the guard a test: let us eat only vegetables and drink only water for ten days, then evaluate us. Compare us with all the other young men who eat and drink from the king’s table. After the ten days they did look healthier and sleeker than the others, so the guard made the arrangement permanent.

So what is the deal with the food and drink that we keep reading about in this chapter? Is it that vegetables and water are intrinsically a better diet? This is the basis for *The Daniel Plan* from Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church, which has been heavily marketed with a large portfolio of products. Now I’m sure we would all be healthier eating less rich food and more vegetables. But I don’t think it is the diet itself that Daniel was resisting. He was resisting the source of the food and wine: the king’s table, his hospitality and munificence. He was resisting the king who had assigned the food. Daniel and his friends were showing that their ultimate loyalty was not to the king. They would not eat and drink in solidarity with him. Perhaps there’s also the idea that instead they would eat a simple diet in solidarity with their own people who were poor and wretched exiles. Again, if you read through the last three chapters of 2 Kings you may have noticed the final two verses. Israel’s Primary History (Genesis–Kings) ends with Jehoiachin and all the other conquered kings in Babylon dining regularly at the king’s table (2 Kgs 25:29-30).

But Daniel and his friends were not there. Instead, they flourished on their vegetable diet and the Lord honored them.

4. God’s Gift of Wisdom (1:17)

To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds. (1:17)

For the third time we read that God gave. He had given King Jehoiakim and the temple vessels into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. He had given Daniel loyal love and compassion in the presence of Ashpenaz. Now God gave the youths knowledge and understanding. So their skill didn’t come from their education in Babylonian language and literature but was the gift of God. Specific attention is drawn to Daniel’s ability to understand visions and dreams. This skill will be called upon in the very next chapter when Nebuchadnezzar has a dream.

5. Evaluation (1:18-20)

At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king’s service. In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom. (1:18-20)

At the end of the three years Ashpenaz presented the four young men to the king for evaluation. They were top of the class and so entered the king’s service. Indeed, when it came to wisdom and

understanding they were ten times better than all the others in the king’s employ, all the magicians and enchanters. This does not mean that Daniel and his friends were themselves magicians and enchanters. Those men had to use their magic arts to try to interpret the signs, omens, visions and dreams that populate this book. Daniel and friends did not need the magic arts because they were gifted with wisdom and understanding directly from God. In coming chapters the magicians will find their magic arts inadequate, but God will supply Daniel with the necessary wisdom and understanding.

Daniel was not a prophet, though we tend to think of him as a prophet, and the one reference to him in the NT calls him a prophet. In our English Bibles the Book of Daniel is the last of the Major Prophets. But in the Hebrew Bible Daniel is not among the Prophets. It is among the Writings, just before Ezra–Nehemiah and Chronicles. This is a section covering exilic and post-exilic Israel after everything had fallen apart.

So if Daniel is not a prophet, what was he? He was a man of wisdom and understanding, abilities given him by God. With these gifts he will be able to interpret Nebuchadnezzar’s dreams and the writing on the wall during Belshazzar’s feast. With these gifts he will also be able to navigate the difficult path through competing loyalties: in service to the king of Babylon but giving ultimate loyalty to the Lord God. In the second half of the book Daniel himself sees visions and dreams. And, while not a prophet himself, he studies the prophets. He reads those who said, “Thus says the LORD.”

The chapter ends with a brief historical note.

6. Conclusion (1:21)

And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus. (1:21)

Daniel remained in Babylon, in the imperial service, until the first year of Cyrus the Persian, who conquered Babylon in 539. Cyrus allowed Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, and he sent the temple vessels back with them. This is considered to be the end of the seventy years of exile. So Daniel was in Babylon throughout the entire exile. He himself did not return to Jerusalem, but stayed in Babylon.

Only a few returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. Two generations later Ezra returned to restore the centrality of Torah, followed by Nehemiah who set about rebuilding Jerusalem and its walls. These past two Sundays Jerry and Tim have drawn our attention to these two men and their rebuilding in their two-part series, “Return, Rebuild, Rejoice.” Thank you for drawing the parallels between then and now as we emerge from the pandemic and seek to rebuild.

Despite the rebuilding, Jerusalem remained a minor backwater in a succession of mighty empires: the Persian Empire, Alexander the Great’s Greek Empire, the Ptolemaic Empire of Egypt and the Seleucid Empire of Syria that contested one another with Judah again caught in the middle, and finally the vast Roman Empire. These great empires will feature in the visions of the second half of the book.

Most Jews did not go home to the Land. They remained in the Diaspora, spreading further and further afield. By the time of Jesus there were far more Diaspora Jews living outside the Land than Palestinian Jews living in the Land. To a greater or lesser extent they were all longing for home, and figuring out how to be loyal to the Lord in a foreign land. They were trying to sing the Lord’s song in a

foreign land. And they were reading the Book of Daniel, which gave them hope and assured them that there was a future.

7. Home for the Homeless

The Lord promised through his prophets that he would bring his people home. He has done so not by bringing the Diaspora Jews home to the Land, but by gathering Jews and Gentiles together into Christ. Home is not a land with people, a city with walls, a palace with a king, a temple with divine presence. It is a person in whom all these motifs of land, city, palace and temple are fulfilled. Our Lord Jesus Christ is our home in whom we have our identity. “In Christ” we are home. In him we belong; we belong to God and we belong to one another. Rather than being gathered into one place we are scattered throughout the world. We are all facing the challenge of living in the world while remaining loyal to King Jesus.

Paul wrote to the Philippians: “conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1:27). The verb “conduct yourselves” is literally “to live as a citizen.” Later he states that “our citizenship is in heaven” (3:20). This was language the Philippians could understand. Philippi was a Roman colony. Legally it was a piece of Rome on foreign soil. It was an outpost of Rome, to extend the influence of Rome into Macedonia. The goal of a colony is not to return to the homeland but to extend the homeland into new territory. As citizens of heaven we are to extend the influence of heaven onto earth. We often get this backwards: “Heaven’s not my home, I’m just a-passing through.” We’re eager to leave this world and get to our true home, heaven. The Biblical view is the other way round: heaven is coming to earth. There is a reason God made the earth. He cares for it and wants to restore it. His ultimate goal is to unite heaven and earth together.

Two weeks ago in Turkey Sue and I saw a reconstruction of a boat from 600 BC, around the time Daniel was taken to Babylon. Such a boat was used by Greeks from Foça, near what is now Izmir, Turkey, to sail across the Mediterranean to establish the colony of Marseille. This voyage was recreated in 2009, taking 54 days. The ancient Greeks and Phoenicians, both sea-faring peoples, established lots of colonies throughout the Mediterranean. They were extending their influence throughout the world.

In Christ God has established a beachhead on earth. He has planted a colony, the church. If we are in Christ, our ultimate loyalty is to him. Him we confess as Lord. But we live out our lives on earth in settings that are more or less hostile to him. The country of our citizenship and the country of our residence are not the same. God desires that we flourish in these settings, and fills us with his Spirit that we might extend heaven onto earth. In each of the settings in which we find ourselves God wants us to act for the good of the environment, for mutual flourishing, for the common good.

In his first letter, Peter writes to “God’s elect, exiles scattered throughout” five provinces of Anatolia.

Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. (1 Pet 2:11-12)

We are all resident aliens. Our true citizenship is in heaven not in

any earthly kingdom. But we are resident on earth. We are immersed in society in many different ways: in education, business, caring professions. We are to seek the common good of our society so that both we and society flourish. This can be challenging. We all have to work out how to navigate competing loyalties.

It is especially challenging for those in societies where Christians are persecuted. Each week in the e-news we include a country from the Open Doors Watch List of the fifty countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian. I encourage you to pray for these people.

How do we maintain our loyalty to our true king while living in diaspora, while being resident in a foreign land? We do so by regularly meeting together to worship our Lord. We gather to sing to God and to our Lord Jesus Christ, to hear the Scriptures, to pray, and to be in community. We come before the face of God. We remind ourselves who God is, what he has done in Christ, what he is doing through his Spirit, and in light of this, who we are in relation to God, to one another, and to the world.

And we do so by regularly taking communion together. The Lord has given us two symbols of our participation in him: baptism and communion. Baptism is a one-time act whereby we transfer our allegiance to Christ. We say, “I follow you. You are my Lord.” I liken this to an oath of citizenship. Communion is an oft-repeated act whereby we regularly confess our allegiance to Christ. I liken this to a pledge of allegiance. Throughout the week many things have competed for our allegiance. Regularly we regroup, we regather. Together we confess our allegiance to Christ and we eat and drink at his table. We eat and we drink heavenly food and we are nourished.

We remember our founding narrative: that’s what the Jews do at Passover, what Josiah did in 2 Kings 23. After renewing the covenant they celebrated Passover and they told the story of God delivering them from bondage in Egypt. We tell the story of our Lord Jesus Christ, who though he was in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage, but became like one of us, entered into our story. Taking on human likeness, even a servant, he became obedient to death, even death on the cross. He died there in our place, for us. God vindicated his obedience in resurrection, and invites all to now come and confess this Jesus Christ as Lord, for he has given him the name that is above every other name.

We gather in communion: communion with God in Christ through his Spirit, and communion with one another as we partake as one body.

We eat and we drink, proclaiming the Lord’s death until he come again on that day when our country of citizenship and our country of residency shall be the same, when heaven and earth shall be joined together as one, and *shalom* shall be universal.

To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24-25)

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OCEANS RISE, EMPIRES FALL

SERIES: ONE KING TO RULE THEM ALL

Daniel 2:1-49

Second Message

Bernard Bell

July 18, 2021

“Oceans rise, empires fall.” Some of you may recognize these words from *Hamilton*, from King George’s hilarious song, “You’ll Be Back.” The American colonies declared independence from Britain and its king, and established a different form of government: a President elected by the people for a limited term.

Many countries have followed, moving from a monarchy to a presidency. But there is a temptation for presidents to seek greater power, to behave like a monarch. They do so by establishing a political dynasty, making the presidency hereditary. The Kim dynasty in North Korea is scarcely distinguishable from a monarchy. Or presidents may remove term limits so they can stay in office, as we’ve seen recently in several countries. Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely, as Lord Acton said.

Though America ditched the king, it continues to be fascinated with royalty, especially the British Royal Family. And most young girls love dressing up as princesses.

I grew up under two long-serving monarchs who are held deeply in the affections of their people. King Bhumibol of Thailand reigned for over 70 years until he died in 2016. Queen Elizabeth will pass the 70-year mark next February. Long live the King! Long live the Queen! That has been true for these monarchs. Queen Elizabeth is still in great health and less than three years away from the record 72-year reign of Louis XIV, the Sun King. Certain monarchs acquire the accolade “the Great”: it’s Louis the Great, and Bhumibol the Great. Will it be Elizabeth the Great? I doubt it: it’s not the British way.

Why do we have kings? Kings and cities are closely associated. The Neolithic Revolution happened only 10,000 years ago. Humanity domesticated plants and animals, enabling a settled life in permanent communities. These grew into cities, some 5500 years ago in Mesopotamia. City-states emerged, each ruled by a king. But with power comes the lust for more power, to rule not only over your own people but over other people as well. And so empires emerged 4500 years ago, multiple cities ruled by one strong man. Kingship was viewed as a gift from the gods. There was a close association between a city, its god and its king. The king alone was in the image of the deity, and his reign was legitimized by the deity. Kings, especially rulers of empire, have long been tempted to view themselves as divine.

The Bible takes a dim view of all this. All humanity is in the image of God, not just the king. The first city was built by Cain (Gen 4:17) after he exiled himself from God’s presence. Here he could be master of his own domain, secure behind walls of his own making. Empire began with Nimrod, who expanded his reign from the cities of Shinar to the cities of Assyria, from southern Mesopotamia to northern Mesopotamia (Gen 10:8-12). Both city and empire arose east of Eden, and led to Babel.

I say all this to help get us into the right mindset for Daniel 2, where we read about kings and empires. This is a long chapter, so I will read only a few verses.

1. The King’s Dream (2:1-13)

In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind was troubled and he could not sleep. So the king summoned the magicians, enchanter, sorcerers and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed. (Dan 2:1-2 NIV)

Nebuchadnezzar became king of Babylon in 605 BC, but for years he had been closely involved with his father in imperial affairs. He had conquered Assyria and defeated Egypt. Now he was the undisputed ruler of the Near East. He was top dog. But he couldn’t sleep. He dreamed dreams, which caused his spirit to pound. Given the tight connection between king and deity, between Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and Marduk, the god of Babylon, it was expected that the king would receive visions and dreams from the supernatural world. But the king was not expected to know the meaning of these dreams. They required interpretation, for which he kept a team of magicians, enchanter, sorcerers and astrologers who had been educated in the magic arts. Nebuchadnezzar summoned these experts. They assembled in his presence.

“May the king live forever! Tell your servants the dream and we will interpret it.” (2:4)

They were confident of their professional abilities. Told the dream, they could provide the interpretation. But, contrary to all precedent, the king demanded not only that they tell him the interpretation of the dream, but the dream itself. Three times he asked for both the dream and its interpretation. He threatened great destruction if they failed: they would be dismembered and their houses destroyed. But if they succeeded he promised great riches and honor. They protested that no such thing had ever been requested of their profession.

“There is no one on earth who can do what the king asks! No king, however great and mighty, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or astrologer. What the king asks is too difficult. No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among humans.” (2:10-11)

They were not trained for this. No human on earth could tell the king his dream. Only the gods could reveal it, and they were inaccessible. Despite their magic arts, the magicians had no access to the divine realm.

Nebuchadnezzar flew into a rage. It is a dangerous thing to arouse the ire of an absolute ruler. He decreed that they all be executed, not only the magicians but all the wise men of Babylon. Thus Daniel and his friends were unknowingly swept up into the king’s fury. How will they escape?

2. Daniel’s Intercession (2:14-23)

When Arioch, the commander of the king’s guard, arrived to take Daniel and his friends away for execution, Daniel asked what was up. He spoke “with wisdom and tact” (2:14). Again we see that

Daniel is not a prophet but a wise man, given wisdom so he can flourish in these perilous times in a foreign court. He asked the king for time.

Daniel returned home, explained the situation to his three friends, and urged them to pray: “to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery” (2:18). Daniel agreed with the magicians that no one on earth could reveal both the dream and the meaning; only the gods could do so. The magicians thought the gods were inaccessible since they don’t live among humans, but Daniel and his friends knew they had access to God, not the god of Babylon but the God of heaven. They were in Babylon, far from Jerusalem, far from the temple, the house of prayer. Besides, that house of prayer had by now become a den of rebels. But they knew that, far from home, they could still pray to God. His eye, ear and heart were still open to them wherever they prayed. God is not confined to a building, the temple. The imminent destruction of the temple would not mean that he is defeated. He is larger than a temple, a city, a land, even the whole earth.

The Lord heard their prayer and that night the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision. This is the turning point of the chapter. Daniel responded with a beautiful hymn of praise:

**“Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever;
wisdom and power are his.
He changes times and seasons;
he deposes kings and raises up others.
He gives wisdom to the wise
and knowledge to the discerning.
He reveals deep and hidden things;
he knows what lies in darkness,
and light dwells with him.
I thank and praise you, God of my ancestors:
You have given me wisdom and power,
you have made known to me what we asked of you,
you have made known to us the dream of the king.”**
(2:20-23)

“Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever.” This praise lies at the center of the chapter, and expresses two key ideas that are central to this chapter and to the whole book.

God reveals mysteries, things that are deeply hidden to normal human understanding. Wisdom and power belong to God, but he gives wisdom to the wise, and has now given wisdom and power to Daniel specifically. Wisdom so that he might interpret dreams, and power so that he might stand in the presence of the king even though he is a lowly exile without power.

Secondly, God, in his wisdom and power, “deposes kings and raises up others.” Kingdoms may rise, kingdoms may fall. Nebuchadnezzar has defeated all other powers and now reigns supreme, but his kingdom is not secure. He needs to learn this lesson. All kings and empires need to learn this lesson: God deposes kings and raises up others.

3. Daniel Before Nebuchadnezzar (2:24-49)

Daniel returned to Arioch, requested an audience with the king, and was immediately ushered into his presence. The anxious king asked, “Can you tell me the dream and its interpretation?” Daniel answered:

“No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, but there is a God in

heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come. Your dream and the visions that passed through your mind as you were lying in bed are these:

“As Your Majesty was lying there, your mind turned to things to come, and the revealer of mysteries showed you what is going to happen. As for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because I have greater wisdom than anyone else alive, but so that Your Majesty may know the interpretation and that you may understand what went through your mind.” (2:27-30)

A mystery is hidden to human understanding. Therefore, no human being, no matter how skilled in the magic arts, can perceive it. No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can peer into such matters, let alone understand them. But there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. In a dream he has shown Nebuchadnezzar what will happen, and he wants him to understand. Therefore he has revealed both the dream and its meaning to Daniel. God wants Nebuchadnezzar, at the beginning of his glorious reign, to know about the future, and specifically about the fate of his own kingdom, indeed of all human kingdoms.

3.1 The Dream (2:31-35)

Daniel first tells the dream. The king’s dream contains just two items: a statue and a stone.

“Your Majesty looked, and there before you stood a large statue—an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance.”
(2:31)

How large the statue we’re not told. Narendra Modi, India’s prime minister, recently unveiled a 600-foot tall bronze statue. It’s not of himself, but it’s a statue that does advance his own agenda. In the Roman Empire, large statues of certain emperors were installed in temples as part of the imperial cult.

This statue was composite, made from different materials: a head of gold, an upper torso of silver, lower torso of bronze, legs of iron, and feet partly of iron, partly of baked clay.

The second item was a stone:

“While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands.” (2:34)

This stone struck the statue on its composite feet and shattered every part of the statue into such small pieces that the wind blew it all away. No trace of the statue was left. But the stone grew into a huge mountain and filled the whole earth. The mighty statue was ephemeral. But the small stone grew into something universal and eternal.

3.2 Interpretation (2:36-45)

Daniel moves from dream to interpretation, beginning with the statue. Nebuchadnezzar, “the king of kings,” is the head of gold. Let he think that he has attained greatness by his own superior power, Daniel informs him that it is God’s gift:

“The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory... he has made you ruler.” (2:37-38)

Nebuchadnezzar is not supreme. God has granted dominion, but he can also take it away. God deposes kings, and he raises up others. Nebuchadnezzar’s kingship will not be eternal. After him will arise three more kingdoms or kingships. The second will be inferior, the third will be universal, and the fourth will be tremendously strong

and brutal, but fragile because divided.

What are these kingdoms? Can we identify them, especially the fourth kingdom with its divided toes? Much has been written about the identity of this four-part statue, but this has not produced unanimity.

There are three major views. The first two views assume four kingdoms, or, better, four empires, and assume that Nebuchadnezzar, clearly identified as the head of gold, represents the whole Babylonian empire. In the first view the four empires are Babylon, Media, Persia, and Greece, that is the Hellenistic empires of Alexander the Great and his successors. In the second view the four empires are Babylon, a joint Media-Persia, Greece, and Rome. The third view assumes individual kings rather than kingdoms, in the sequence Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Darius the Mede and Cyrus the Persian. These are the four kings of Daniel 1–6.

Some of you are very interested in this, having studied Daniel. But for others your eyes are glazed over, lost in this ancient history. So what do I think? All three views are held by people I respect. My current thinking is to reject all three because I disagree with the premise of hardwiring the four parts of this statue in Daniel 2 to specific empires or kings.

Though the four-part statue signifies four reigns, whether kingdoms or kingdoms, it is all one statue. It is the same thing manifest in different forms. It is human empire in autonomy from God. The statue has four parts because four is the number of universality. It is the nature of human empires to think themselves all-powerful and eternal. Empires come and empires go, but in God's sight it's all the same thing: the empire of humanity.

Daniel identifies Nebuchadnezzar as the head of gold. This is the one identification of which we can be sure, because it is in the text itself. But his is by no means the first empire. There had been empires for two millennia already. These empires steadily got bigger and bigger. The northern kingdom of Israel was taken by the Assyrian Empire. But Assyria was conquered by the Babylonian Empire. Babylon had a larger appetite and tried to conquer Egypt as well, but failed. The Persian Empire conquered Babylon and Egypt and what is today Turkey. Still its appetite was not satisfied and it made a failed attempt to conquer Greece, a long way from Persia. Next, Alexander the Great burst out of Macedonia, rapidly conquered the entire Persian Empire, and kept going far to the east, all the way to the Indus River. The Roman Empire was larger still.

The third element of the statue “will rule over the whole earth.” But hardwiring this to Persia or Greece misses the point that it is in the nature of empire to seek to rule over the whole earth. Such appetite for universal rule is intrinsic to empire. Empire is never satisfied. From the fifteenth century on, European nations sought to build truly global empires, aided by advances in shipping. Finally, the map was colored mostly red and the sun never set on the British Empire, the largest empire in history.

As empires expanded they brought under their umbrella a vast array of different peoples. This feature of empire is attributed to the fourth part of the statue. But, again, it is not limited to one specific empire, whether Greece or Rome. This attitude goes back at least as far as the Persian Empire. One myth of empire is that such rule over diverse peoples beyond the heartland is a beneficial rule, that the distant peoples are fortunate and blessed to be brought into the dominion of the glorious empire. But the conquered people don't necessarily see it this way!

Human empire strives for universal rule and inclusion of all

peoples under its rule. This is intrinsic to empire, not just characteristic of a particular empire. But human empire cannot achieve this. It cannot truly unite the peoples of the world. In the Bible's telling, humanity gathered together at Babel to prevent spreading out across the earth. It sought unity and common purpose in building a tower to heaven. But God has scattered the peoples. How can the scattered peoples of the world be brought together? Not in human empire.

Human empires get stronger over time. But the feet and toes of the statue are of incompatible materials, iron and baked clay. The base on which the statue of human empire stands is fragile and liable to collapse. Human empires are not stable, no matter how strong and invincible they might seem. Human history shows this again and again. So that's the statue: not four specific human empires, but human empire in general.

Next the stone. While human empire is growing, God is at work: “the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed” (2:44). God's empire is a quite different empire. It is not a human creation: the stone is cut out without human hands. The stone both destroys the fragile statue that is human empire, and itself grows to fill the earth as God's empire. It destroys human empire but is itself indestructible. It terminates human empire but is itself eternal. Empires rise, empires fall, but God's empire will endure. God deposes kings, and he raises up others.

4. Elevation of Daniel (2:46-49)

In response to Daniel's interpretation, Nebuchadnezzar prostrated himself before him, an ironic image for Jews living under the tyranny of his reign. He acknowledged Daniel's God:

“Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery.”
(2:47)

What is the mystery? That God deposes kings and he raises up others, that all human empires will fall, and that he will bring in his eternal empire.

The king elevated Daniel to high office, over Babylon, the most important province in the land, and over all the wise men. He approved Daniel's request that his three friends be appointed his assistants. These promotions, both of Daniel and of his three friends, will generate jealousy and hostility among the magicians that will cause problems for these faithful Jews in later chapters, as we shall see.

God gave Nebuchadnezzar a dream, and Daniel told him both the dream and its interpretation, which God had revealed to him. Nebuchadnezzar needed to learn important truths about his own limitation and God's supremacy. But this chapter has a wider audience than just Nebuchadnezzar. The Book of Daniel gives encouragement to a captive people seeking to flourish in a foreign land. It gave hope to the Jews who were exiled far from their land, living under a succession of ever-mightier empires: Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome and beyond.

While I don't want to tie the statue down to four specific empires, I'm sure that Jews living under the tyranny of the Seleucid Empire in the early second century BC saw that empire as the fourth empire of the statue. Antiochus IV Epiphanes attempted cultural genocide against the Jews as he sought to unite his vast empire under the umbrella of Hellenism. But his empire fell. Likewise, I'm sure that Jews in the first century AD saw the Roman Empire as the fourth

empire, strong and brutal.

To these Jews, living in exile under foreign domination, what was the rock? It was God, frequently described in Israel's Scriptures as a Rock. The Book of Daniel, and this vision in chapter 2, helped the Jews hold on to their conviction that God, their Rock, would prevail over all human kingdoms and would bring his people home. He would send the Messiah who would conquer all enemy empires, restore the people, and establish an everlasting kingdom, in fulfillment of his promises and covenant with David.

They held on to the vision expressed in our Scripture reading, Psalm 72, written of Solomon. That the king would endure as long as the sun and the moon; that he would rule from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Centuries later, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, announcing a son:

“The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.” (Luke 1:32-33)

His kingdom will never end. But Jesus was crucified by the Romans using the brutal punishment they reserved for those who dared resist Rome's rule, who dared resist empire. Here was the fourth empire at work, strong as iron, breaking and smashing all other power.

But therein lay its undoing. Now in the grave was one, the only one, on whom death had no claim. The only faithful human. God vindicated him in resurrection. The risen Jesus ascended into heaven, entering into God's glorious presence, where God has enthroned him as king, and given him the name above every name. God has poured out his Spirit, inviting all to come to Jesus, receive forgiveness, and enter into his kingdom. The risen, exalted and glorified Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords. His is an eternal kingdom that cannot be destroyed. It is a universal kingdom, for all peoples are invited to enter in and find unity. It is the one place where scattered humanity can truly be brought together as one. It is a benevolent kingdom in which humans can truly flourish. But it requires giving up all human pretensions to empire, beginning with self.

Christ Jesus is the stone. “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (1 Pet 2:7, quoting Ps 118:22). Those whose lives are built on him will find him to be a sure foundation, a true cornerstone, a solid base for life. But to those who oppose him, he will be “A stone that causes people to stumble, and a rock that makes them fall” (1 Pet 2:8, quoting Isa 8:14). A stumbling stone: the Greek word is *skandalon*. All humanity is faced with a choice: to embrace Jesus as cornerstone of our lives, or resist him as a scandal. It is a scandal that God's eternal, universal empire should be founded on one who renounced power and position, who gave up himself even unto death at the hands of human empire. It is a scandal that we should have to give up ourselves to enter his kingdom. But in so do-

ing we find our true selves, our true flourishing.

Our women will be studying Revelation, starting in September. The book is “The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place” (1:1). What must happen? The answer is very similar to that given here in Daniel 2. In the middle of the book the cry goes up:

**“The kingdom of the world has become
the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah,
and he will reign for ever and ever.” (Rev 11:15)**

That's what must happen: a transfer from human empire to God's glorious empire in Christ. Therefore, two other things must happen. Babylon, the world city, the world empire, must fall, accompanied by the cry, “It is done!” (Rev 16:17). And New Jerusalem, the heavenly city, will descend so that God and his people dwell together, also accompanied by the cry, “It is done!” (Rev 21:6).

The apostle Paul was convinced that this transfer from human empire to God's empire had already begun in Christ. He was confident that the Roman empire would eventually fall, even though it kept growing for nearly another century. And he was confident that the kingdom of God in Christ would grow and become universal.

God deposes kings and raises up others. In this central message, Daniel 2 contains both warning and hope. A warning to those who build empires that God deposes kings. Sadly, too often even Christians have built empires, exalting self in pursuit of power, position and influence. All empire builders, however that practice be disguised, are warned that God deposes kings.

But also hope and encouragement. God has raised up his eternal kingdom in the risen and exalted Lord Jesus. There is hope for those who are suffering under human empire. There is hope and encouragement for the persecuted church, for which we pray each week, as we follow the Open Doors World Watch List. This week we pray for Mauritania. There is hope for those who have been hurt by power, by empire. Jesus renounced power. He suffered at the hands of empire. He cares for the weak, the broken-hearted, the lost and forgotten. He is able have compassion for those who hurt. This is the opposite of human empire where it is the strong, the powerful, the connected who succeed.

Isaac Watts took Psalm 72, the psalm about Solomon, and rewrote it in light of Christ Jesus, the greater than Solomon:

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun,
Does his successive journeys run,
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.

Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

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DARE TO HAVE A PURPOSE TRUE

SERIES: ONE KING TO RULE THEM ALL

Daniel 3:1-30
Third Message
Bernard Bell
July 25, 2021

Dare to be a Daniel,
dare to stand alone,
dare to have a purpose true,
and dare to make it known.

This is the chorus to a song that I sang frequently when I was young. Earlier this year, when I was preaching on the Man of Lawlessness (2 Thess 2:1-12), Christine sang *Dare to be a Daniel* as the children's song. On that occasion Lisa's children's message was about Daniel in the Lions' Den (Dan 6), and our Scripture reading was an abridgment of Daniel 3, our text for today.

Dare to have a purpose true. Do we have a purpose to which we remain true no matter what is going on around us? Are we able to resist pressure to conform? We all face great societal pressure to conform. Teenagers, especially young girls, face intense peer pressure. It's uncomfortable to stick out as different, to swim against the crowd. But if we dare to have a purpose true, there are times we will stick out from the crowd. Paul wrote, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world" (Rom 12:2). Or, as J.B. Phillips so memorably put it, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould."

Today we come to Daniel 3, the well-known story of the fiery furnace. Looking ahead, it is parallel to the story about Daniel in the Lion's Den (chapter 6). Again it is too long to read as part of the sermon, which is a pity, because it is a very fun chapter to read aloud—not that being thrown into a superheated fiery furnace is fun. Again, I hope you have brought your Bible. I shall read only select verses, but I will read the first scene in full to give you a flavor of the chapter:

King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it.

Then the herald loudly proclaimed, "Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace." Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the nations and peoples of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. (Dan 3:1-7 NIV)

In the previous chapter King Nebuchadnezzar had seen a vision of an enormous statue or image with a head of gold. Now he made

a huge image of gold. It was 60 cubits tall, that's 90 feet. We don't know what precise form it was, whether it was a statue or some other monument, but it was an image: it depicted and represented the king or the deity or both. Given the close association between Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, and Marduk, the god of Babylon, it doesn't matter which. It was Nebuchadnezzar's image: eight more times we read that it was the image which King Nebuchadnezzar set up. The image was a projection into the world of the greatness of Nebuchadnezzar, of his gods, and of Babylon. It was meant to dazzle.

The king was at the center of a vast empire with a vast imperial bureaucracy. There were satraps and prefects and governors and on and on. He summoned this entire bureaucracy to assemble for the dedication of his gold image. There was immediate compliance: the long list assembled for the dedication. The image was now the focal point of the entire empire.

The king issued a decree through his herald, not just to the assembled dignitaries but to all nations, peoples and languages. When the music starts—and now we have a long list of instruments—everyone must fall down on their faces and pay homage to the image. It's literally an orchestrated worship! Fall down and worship, we hear repeatedly throughout the chapter. Fall down and worship the image; fall down and worship the king of Babylon; fall down and worship the gods of Babylon. And if you don't?

If you don't fall down and worship, there was a penalty. A penalty for non-compliance. A penalty for not signaling allegiance to the image and to the king and gods it represented. Those not conforming to the king's decree would be thrown immediately into the midst of the blazing fiery furnace. This blazing fiery furnace looms large throughout the chapter.

Again there was immediate compliance: the orchestra played and everyone fell down and worshiped the image. The empire was united. Everyone conformed. The king was satisfied. No one was thrown into the blazing fiery furnace. All was well in Babylon.

But not so fast. Some of the king's astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. The unity of all nations, peoples and languages was shattered by singling out the Jews. The astrologers reminded the king of his decree: again we hear the list of musical instruments, the requirement to fall down and worship, and the threat of the blazing fiery furnace. Then they got specific:

"But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up." (3:12)

They singled out the Jews—not all them, just three in particular, the three "whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon." Now we see what was motivating these astrologers. It was not noble jealousy for the honor of the gods of Babylon. It was not noble jealousy for the honor of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. It

was not noble jealousy for the unity of the empire, all nations, peoples and languages. It was evil jealousy towards these three Jews whom the king had promoted at the end of chapter 2.

I very much doubt that these three Jews were conspicuous in their refusal to fall down and worship, that they made a show of not conforming. I assume that their resistance was quiet and unobtrusive, that they were not calling attention to themselves. They were trying to flourish in a foreign land while still being loyal to the Lord. But the jealous astrologers went out of their way to notice; they were looking for a reason to engineer their downfall.

The astrologers intensified the charge. It was not only that these Jews refused to fall down and worship Nebuchadnezzar's gold image. They don't serve the king's gods.

Their charge struck home, as they knew it would. The king flew into a furious rage, summoned the three men, and they were brought before him. The king said to them,

"Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" (3:14-15)

Despite his furious rage, I think the king dealt kindly with the men initially. "Is it true?" he asked. "Is it true that you don't serve my gods or worship my image?" He offered them a second chance, using an "if...if not" construction. "*If* you are ready, when you hear the music, *then* fall down and worship the image." Perhaps they hadn't been ready the first time the orchestra played. But now they are ready: cue the music, and fall down in worship. The end will be that all will be well.

But *if not*, or perhaps we should "*else*." If you don't worship the image, *then* it's into the blazing fiery furnace immediately. Endif. And the end of them.

Then the king adds a zinger to emphasize the finality of the end: "Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" It's a rhetorical question expecting the answer, "None." Surely no god can rescue like this.

How will the three men respond to this tremendous pressure to conform? How will they respond to the king's "if...if not," his "if...else"? If you conform to what everyone else is doing, you'll be fine. If you don't conform, but insist on being different, it's the end. The king was not asking them to stop their worship of Yahweh, their god, the god of the Jews. They could still worship him in private, but now in public they must bow down and worship Nebuchadnezzar's image. They must acknowledge the superiority of Babylon, its king and its gods. They were now in his glorious empire, while Jerusalem lay in ruins. There must be public unity and conformity throughout the empire, centered on Nebuchadnezzar's gold image.

The three men responded to the king's "if...if not" with their own "if...if not."

"If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." (3:17-18)

If... But what is the "if"? There is considerable difference across

the English translations. The text can be read three different ways.

According to NIV and ESV, "if" refers to what the king has just said, the threat of the blazing fiery furnace. *If* they are thrown in, *then* they are confident that God is able to deliver them and will deliver them both from the furnace and from the king's power. In this reading these three men are superheroes with superhero faith that God is both able and actually will deliver them.

Other translations render this as "*If* God exists, *then* he is able to rescue us and will rescue us." If God exists: perhaps in the sense "If such a God exists," in reply to the king's challenge, "what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" (15).

The third option, given in the NIV margin, is, "*If* our God is able to deliver us from the fiery furnace, *then* he will deliver us." Many don't like this translation, because it suggests the three men doubted the power of God.

My own working rendition is: "*If* there is [a god who is able to deliver us from your hand], *then* our God whose servants we are is the one able to deliver us. From the blazing fiery furnace and from your power, O king, he will deliver."

Next the "if not" clause. "If God does not deliver us from the blazing fiery furnace, we want you to know something, O king: your gods we will not serve and the gold image you set up we will not worship." Not now, not ever, not even when faced with the blazing fiery furnace. They don't know if God will deliver them or not. They leave that in God's hands. Either way, if and if not, they will not bow down. They stand on principle. They dare to have a purpose true and to that purpose remain true.

Nebuchadnezzar had reduced this to a negotiable if...if not: *if* you bow down and worship *then* life, but *if* you do *not* bow down and worship *then* death. He had reduced it to a carrot and a stick, an enticement and a threat. He reduced it to a transaction. The outcome was different: life or death in the blazing fiery furnace. But for the three Jews refusal to worship false gods was non-negotiable. If or if not, the outcome was the same: we will not bow down and worship. Whether God delivered or not was secondary. Whether they lived or not was secondary.

They will not break the first two commandments:

"You shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them." (Exod 20:3-5)

They dared to have a purpose true: to remain true to the Lord, the true God. This confession of the three Jews is the center of the chapter on which everything turns.

In v. 13, before this confession, Nebuchadnezzar was furious and threatened the Jews with the blazing fiery furnace. Now in the parallel paragraph after their confession, he "was furious" and "his attitude toward them changed" (19a), literally the image of his face was changed. His face was as red hot in anger as the blazing fiery furnace was red hot in heat. But the furnace wasn't hot enough for his red-hot anger: "He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual" (19b). The furnace was probably a brick kiln. Mesopotamia had no stone for building, but ample mud and clay for making bricks. As we read in the Tower of Babel story, "'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar" (Gen 11:3). The brick kilns reached 1000° C to bake the clay bricks into fired bricks. Seven times hotter is hot

indeed.

Nebuchadnezzar ordered his strongest men to bind the three Jews and throw them into the blazing fiery furnace, fully clothed—another list: robes, trousers, turbans and all. In they went. The super-heated furnace was now so hot that it killed the men who threw them in. After repeated warnings of the penalty of being thrown in, in they went. They fell into the midst of the blazing fiery furnace. What god will be able to rescue them?

The king peered in, eager for the satisfaction of seeing these rebels burnt to a crisp. But he leapt up in astonishment:

“Weren’t there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire? ...Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.” (3:24-25)

Not only are the three Jews not burnt to a crisp, their bonds are gone, they’re walking around, and they seem fine. And there’s a fourth person in there, one who “looks like a son of the gods.” This is often interpreted as the pre-incarnate Christ, but I prefer to keep the second person of the Trinity away from the earth until he enters as the Word of God incarnate. Instead, this is an angel, a messenger sent from God to be present with his people, even in the midst of the blazing fiery furnace.

Addressing them as “servants of the Most High God,” Nebuchadnezzar ordered them to come out. And out they came. All the officials crowded around to see and to smell. The fire had not touched them, not even the smell. The king praised the Jews and their God for their obstinate defiance!

“Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king’s command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God.” (3:28)

They were willing to give up their lives, rather than compromise; willing to die rather than break the first two commandments. They dared to have a purpose true. As they sought to flourish in a foreign land, they remained true to the Lord their God. They would not give their allegiance to another. God and God alone.

Then the king issued a new decree:

“Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way.” (3:29)

The king who had rhetorically asked, “What god will be able to rescue you from my hand?” (15) now confesses that “no other god can save in this way.” He was not calling for all his peoples to worship the God of the Jews. But the Jews can now continue to serve and worship their God without harassment. Anyone who does harass them, and here he perhaps looks directly at his astrologers, will suffer the same fate he threatened against his astrologers in the previous chapter if they couldn’t tell him his dream (2:5).

Finally the king promoted the three in the province of Babylon (30), no doubt much to the chagrin of the astrologers who tried to destroy the three.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego told the king, “we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up” (18). They refused to break the first two commandments, prohibiting other gods, and making, bowing down to and worshiping images.

But the very reason they were in Babylon was because Israel had failed to keep those two commandments. Indeed, Israel broke those commandments almost as soon as they were given. Moses came down from Mount Sinai carrying the two stone tablets on which the Lord himself had just inscribed the Ten Commandments. He found the people worshiping a golden calf which Aaron had made for them. Moses hurled the tablets to the ground and they shattered. The covenant between God and his people lay broken. But thanks to Moses’s bold intercession God spared Israel and wrote on a new set of tablets. But Israel remained prone to idolatry, to switching its allegiance to other gods, false gods. Again and again and again. Israel failed to follow the Lord wholeheartedly. Finally the Lord removed his presence from the temple, and removed Israel from the land, sending them into exile in Babylon.

It was during the exile that the Jews finally got serious about keeping the commandments, about living life according to God’s Law, about not giving their allegiance to other gods. Three weeks ago Tim directed our attention to Nehemiah 8. Back in the Land, nearly a century after the end of the exile, Ezra the scribe, the teacher of the Law, stood in front of all the people in Jerusalem and read the Law, and the Levites instructed the people in it. The people bowed down and worshiped the Lord. It was a day of tears: of great weeping but also of great joy. Weeping in realization of how much they had broken the Law. But great joy because now the Law was put back in the center of their lives, they understood it, and they were worshiping the Lord and him alone. It was a time of restoration.

That was after the return from exile. But most Jews remained outside the Land, living in foreign empires, struggling to remain faithful to the Lord. Even those living in the Land were also living under these foreign empires. They faced great pressure to bow the knee to their rulers. This pressure reached its peak in the early second century BC, when Antiochus IV Epiphanes of the Seleucid Empire attempted to eradicate all Jewish practice. He attempted cultural genocide. He desecrated the temple in Jerusalem. This event is part of the background to the Man of Lawlessness in 2 Thessalonians 2. But one man resisted, launching the Maccabean Revolt that eventually retook the Temple, and rededicated it, an event commemorated ever since in the Jewish feast of Hanukkah, meaning Dedication.

The Jews took idolatry seriously as a result of the Exile. They remained true to their God. The Romans learnt that the Jews would rather die than be forced to worship false gods. The Romans could never understand their obstinate attitude, that they were willing to die for this. But they did allow the Jews to pray not to the emperor, as everyone else was required to do, but to pray for the emperor.

Worship is a major theme in the Book of Revelation which our women will study this coming year. The false prophet orchestrates the worship of the beast. Readers in the first century would have seen the Roman Empire, where the imperial cult was rapidly growing. Emperors viewed themselves as divine, and were worshiped as lord and god. Temples were built for this imperial cult, where big statues of the emperors were put up, and they were worshiped.

The stories of Daniel were a great encouragement to the Christians, as they had been to the Jews. The Book of Daniel is a backdrop to the Book of Revelation. These are stories of resistance that encourage others in their resistance, then and now.

In the mid-second century, Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, was arrested and commanded to deny Christ. As the official brought him into the arena, he asked, “What harm is there in saying, Lord

Caesar?” The proconsul, the governor of the province of Asia, said, “Swear by the fortune of Caesar; repent...I will set thee at liberty, reproach Christ.” Polycarp replied, “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury; how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?” He was burnt alive there in the arena, one of the early martyrs. He was a faithful witness (Gk *martyros*) even unto death, whence the word “martyr” came to mean someone killed for their faith.

One of my favorite movies is *A Man for All Seasons*, which we watched again on Friday evening. It’s about Sir Thomas More maintaining his integrity under intense pressure to compromise his beliefs, to approve the divorce of King Henry VIII. He dared to have a purpose true. And he paid with his life. God did not deliver him from death, but More maintained his integrity to the end. He had a non-negotiable that could not be reduced to “if...if not.” If he lived or if he did not live was secondary. The “then” was the same: he would stand before God with a clear conscience.

This month’s cover article in *Christianity Today* is about the Nigerian schoolgirls who were abducted by Boko Haram in 2014 and held for several years. Two *Wall Street Journal* reporters investigated how the girls survived their long ordeal. They write “We saw clearly how the teenagers’ will to survive was inseparable from their religious convictions.” Most were Christians; many had sung in church choirs. They had a Bible which they kept hidden from their captors. And they sang the hymns and songs they knew so well. One was a hymn about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. These girls had a purpose clear as they sang, “We, the children of Israel, will not bow.” They dared to resist, inspired by the Biblical stories of those who had dared to resist. They did not know if they would be rescued. But rather than brooding on “what if,” they equated the “if” and the “if not.” If we are rescued or if we are not rescued is the same: we will not bow. And so they endured. They encouraged one another to be

faithful, and they were faithful.

We don’t face pressure to bow down to statues, golden images and idols. But we are very good at making idols to which we give our allegiance. Our heart is a great factory of idols. Often we wrap a religious garb on these idols. The idol we bow down to might be the God of our cause, whatever that cause might be: God of my comfort, or God of my success, or God of my nation. We cloak God in our own agenda. In one way or another we give our allegiance to one who is other than the God who has revealed himself in Scripture, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

How do we remain true in our allegiance to God and to Christ? As I said two weeks ago, it is so important that we meet together. We gather together and we sing, we pray, we read and hear the Scriptures, we take communion together. Many churches say the Creed together and the Lord’s Prayer together. In all these ways we focus our attention on God and God alone. We go away, refreshed in our allegiance, in our commitment to serve God and worship him, and not give our allegiance to another. May God grant us grace that we might dare to have a purpose true, and to that remain true.

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen. (Rev 1:4-6)

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HEAVEN RULES

Daniel 4:1-37
 Fourth Message
 Bernard Bell
 August 1, 2021

SERIES: ONE KING TO RULE THEM ALL

“I’m the king of the castle.” This was a popular playground taunt in my childhood. “I’m the king of the castle and you’re the dirty rascal.” It didn’t matter how small the mound, whoever was on top claimed to be king. And everyone else would try to depose him and claim the title of king.

That was a childhood song, but real life isn’t much different. Kingship arose in the third millennium BC in the city-states of Mesopotamia, each ruled by a king. The size of the king’s mound, his castle, was the city. The first empire emerged around 2300 BC when Sargon ruled all Mesopotamia. Being king over a city or over an empire was a powerful but precarious position. You could claim, “I’m the king of the castle,” but there were always others eager to depose you and claim the crown themselves.

In Shakespeare’s play of the same name, Richard II, who has just been deposed by his cousin Bolingbroke, Henry IV, laments the fate of kings in what has become known as his Hollow Crown speech:

...let us sit upon the ground
 And tell sad stories of the death of kings:
 How some have been depos’d, some slain in war,
 Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed,
 Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping kill’d,
 All murdered—for within the hollow crown
 That rounds the mortal temples of a king
 Keeps Death his court... (*Richard II* 3.2)

The hollow crown: all earthly kings must die. The BBC made a film adaptation under this title *The Hollow Crown* of Shakespeare’s history plays—all the Richard’s and the Henry’s in all their parts, 8 plays in all. In one way or another all kings die. No matter how big the mound they stand on, all will be deposed by death or by more nefarious means. But it can be a hard lesson for a king to learn his finitude, whether his castle be a city, an empire, a business, or even a church. It often takes a hard fall, for pride goes before a fall.

In Daniel 4, mighty King Nebuchadnezzar tells of his hard fall that taught him his finitude. He does so in the form of a letter addressed to the whole world. Again, this chapter is too long to read in its entirety, so I will read only some verses.

King Nebuchadnezzar,

To the nations and peoples of every language, who live in all the earth:

May you prosper greatly! (Dan 1:1 NIV)

Nebuchadnezzar was king of Babylon 605–562 BC, a reign of 43 years. He was the greatest king of Babylon and the greatest king of his day. He was a warrior king. During the reign of his father Nabopolassar who established the neo-Babylonian Empire, Nebuchadnezzar was out in the field winning military victories, defeating the Assyrians and the Egyptians. He was a builder-king who made Babylon into a resplendent city, as we’ll hear later. He was “king of the castle” supreme. He was the head of gold of the enormous statue seen in his dreams in chapter 2. In chapter 3 he had

made an enormous gold statue and commanded all nations and peoples of every language to fall down and worship it, else be thrown into the blazing fiery furnace.

Now he writes to all nations and peoples of every language throughout the earth with a quite different message, a message that he had to learn the hard way. It’s a message about the Most High God in whose presence he isn’t most high anything.

It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me.

**How great are his signs,
 how mighty his wonders!
 His kingdom is an eternal kingdom;
 his dominion endures from generation to generation.**

(4:2-3)

Six times in this chapter he refers to God as Most High. What he has come to learn about the Most High God is that “His kingdom is an eternal kingdom; his dominion endures from generation to generation.” To drive home the point he will repeat this statement at the end of his letter: “His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation” (34). Dominion or sovereignty is the key theme in this chapter. “Dominion” and the cognate word “ruler” occur four times each. Who is the ruler whose dominion is eternal? Nebuchadnezzar must learn that it is not himself on earth but God in heaven.

Israel already knew this. Our call to worship, a psalm of praise to the Lord, ended with similar language:

**Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
 and your dominion endures through all generations.**

(Ps 145:13)

Israel clung to this truth during the exile. But Nebuchadnezzar had to learn this truth the hard way.

It is the hope of every monarch that his kingdom endure from generation to generation, that dynastic succession hold. But this is a vain hope. No earthly kingdom lasts forever. As Shakespeare wrote, “within the hollow crown that rounds the mortal temples of a king keeps Death his court.” Death comes to all.

1. Nebuchadnezzar’s Dream (4:4-18)

How did Nebuchadnezzar learn that he is not the ultimate sovereign? It came in a dream, which he tells us about in verses 4-18.

I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at home in my palace, contented and prosperous. I had a dream that made me afraid. As I was lying in bed, the images and visions that passed through my mind terrified me. (4:4-5)

Life was good for the king. He had defeated all his enemies. His reign was secure. He had built Babylon into a magnificent city. He was content and flourishing in his palace in Babylon. But there was a problem, the same problem he had in chapter 2. In bed at night his

sleep was troubled by a dream. Fantastic images flitted through his mind and terrified him.

He did the same thing he had done in chapter 2: he summoned his team of magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. This time, unlike before, he told them the dream. But, as we might expect by now, they could not interpret it. At last Daniel came in. The king had confidence in his ability:

“I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you, and no mystery is too difficult for you. Here is my dream; interpret it for me.” (4:9)

Three times the king acknowledges that “the spirit of the holy gods” is in Daniel (8, 9, 18), and therefore he has unique ability to interpret his dream. The king tells Daniel his dream. There are two components: a mighty tree and a heavenly messenger with a disturbing message. First, the tree:

“I looked, and there before me stood a tree in the middle of the land. Its height was enormous. The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky; it was visible to the ends of the earth. Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it the wild animals found shelter, and the birds lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed.” (4:10-12)

Next a mysterious messenger delivering an ominous message:

“I looked, and there before me was a holy one, a messenger, coming down from heaven. He called in a loud voice: ‘Cut down the tree and trim off its branches; strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the animals flee from under it and the birds from its branches. But let the stump and its roots, bound with iron and bronze, remain in the ground, in the grass of the field.

‘Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, and let him live with the animals among the plants of the earth. Let his mind be changed from that of a man and let him be given the mind of an animal, till seven times pass by for him.

‘The decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of people.’” (4:13-17)

Nebuchadnezzar may not yet know the meaning of the dream with its tree and life among the animals. But the lesson is already clear: “so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of people.” There’s the key word “sovereign,” cognate with the earlier word “dominion.” This is a lesson for the living, for all people to learn. Two more times this lesson will be stated, specifically for the king: “until *you* acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign” (25, 32). Which of course means that Nebuchadnezzar is not ultimately sovereign, no matter how great he be. There is a higher throne.

Having told him his dream, Nebuchadnezzar again appeals to Daniel, using his Babylonian name Belteshazzar, to interpret the dream (18). His wise men cannot do so, “But you can, because the spirit of the holy gods is in you.”

2. Daniel’s interpretation (4:19-27)

In the next section of the letter (19-27) Nebuchadnezzar writes of how Daniel interpreted the dream to him.

Daniel was hesitant to speak at first because he understood the dream only too clearly, and was alarmed at its implications for the king. He was perplexed, or better, he was appalled. Nebuchadnezzar urged him on, to not be afraid to tell him the interpretation. But Daniel wished the dream’s meaning were true for the king’s enemies instead, so awful were the implications.

Daniel repeated the vision that the king had earlier told him. The tree grew strong. It was rooted in the earth but its top reached the heavens, and it was visible to the ends of the earth. This is the cosmic tree, the *axis mundi*, the axis of the world. The axis between earth and heaven runs through this tree. In this tree all creatures find sustenance and safety for a flourishing life. Daniel gives the interpretation of this first part of the dream, saying to the king, “You are the tree”:

“Your Majesty, you are that tree! You have become great and strong; your greatness has grown until it reaches the sky, and your dominion extends to distant parts of the earth.” (4:22)

Nebuchadnezzar was the world ruler, the great king. One of his titles was King of the Universe. This title had been used for 1500 years already, since the earliest days of empire. But it came closer to reality for him. His empire encompassed not just all of Mesopotamia but the whole Levant, the eastern end of the Mediterranean. His was a large dominion.

But there’s the second part to the dream: the decree announced by the heavenly messenger (23). The decree to cut down this mighty tree, leaving just the stump of its roots. This stump remains in the field among the wild animals. Daniel next gives the interpretation of this second part of the dream (24-26).

“This is the interpretation, Your Majesty, and this is the decree the Most High has issued against my lord the king;” (4:24)

There is a higher authority than Nebuchadnezzar the great king. The ruler in heaven has issued a decree against the ruler on earth. Now the metaphor changes from a tree to a deranged human.

“You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes. The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules.” (4:25-26)

The lesson Nebuchadnezzar has to learn is clear: “until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes...when you acknowledge that Heaven rules.” The Most High is sovereign; Heaven rules. “Sovereign” and “rules” are actually the same word in the original, with “Heaven” used as a circumlocution for God. Nebuchadnezzar is not the ultimate ruler. There is a higher throne. Heaven rules, not Babylon. Four times we are told that it will take “seven times” for Nebuchadnezzar to learn this lesson, probably seven cycles of the seasons, seven years. This is not an easy lesson to learn: that you are not sovereign, not the king of your castle, not the ultimate ruler.

Daniel ends his interpretation of the dream with some advice for the king:

“Therefore, Your Majesty, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your

prosperity will continue.” (4:27)

Daniel urges the king to change his behavior from earth’s model of a king to heaven’s model of a king. Attention to the poetic parallelism helps clarify what he is saying. Daniel urges the king to discontinue his old behavior, his sins and his wickedness, and to replace this with new behavior: doing what is right by being kind to the oppressed. The OT vision for a king is that he do justice and righteousness, the Hebrew word pair *mishpat* and *tsedaqab*. We tend to hear “practicing righteousness” in terms of justification before God; we hear it in legal or forensic terms. But this word pair really applied to the proper functioning of society so that all flourish, including especially the poor, the weak, the vulnerable. Doing righteousness means showing favor to the oppressed so they be included in the flourishing of society.

In building his vast empire Nebuchadnezzar had run over lots of people. This is what tends to happen in building any human empire: lots of people, big and small, get crushed. But a wise ruler will care for the little people. He will be like that large tree in which all find sustenance and safety, so that all flourish.

Who are the oppressed in Nebuchadnezzar’s empire? Certainly the Jews. Some of them remain in the Land, in what is left of Jerusalem, but the Land is now part of the Babylonian Empire. Many of them are in exile in Babylon, trying to flourish in a foreign land. They are a traumatized, displaced people.

If Nebuchadnezzar, the great king, will deal compassionately with the last, the least and the lost, then perhaps his prosperity can continue, the prosperity he had while sitting contentedly in his beautiful palace (4). How can he sit there at ease and look out upon the suffering of the oppressed and not do something? Daniel is urging a different idea of kingship, a kingship more in line with the heavenly model than the earthly model. It’s a vision of kingship which Israel’s kings were supposed to practice but rarely did. Their failure to do justice and righteousness was another of the reasons for exile.

3. The Dream Fulfilled (4:28-33)

The final major section is an account of the fulfillment of the dream, referring to Nebuchadnezzar in the third person.

All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, he said, “Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” (4:28-30)

The king had indeed built or rebuilt Babylon into a magnificent city. He restored the beautiful Ishtar Gate that is now in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. He restored the Processional Way, lined with beautiful tile-work lions that are now in various museums around the world. I’m using one of these tile-work lions as the image for this series. Daniel himself would have seen these. The king restored the temple of Marduk, and the ziggurat, the mighty tower at the center of the city, the axis between heaven and earth in their cosmology. Nebuchadnezzar the builder made his city great: Babylon the Great. It was a fitting residence for Nebuchadnezzar the Great. It was the center of the world, the world city.

“Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” But as soon as he said these words, a voice came from heaven, “Your royal authority has been taken from you...until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them

to anyone he wishes” (31-32). And it was so. He became like an animal.

At the end of the seven periods, Nebuchadnezzar finally looked up to heaven and he was restored. Here at the end of his letter, he writes again in the first person as he did at the beginning. He praised God in a doxology, also echoing the letter opening:

**“His dominion is an eternal dominion;
his kingdom endures from generation to generation.
All the peoples of the earth
are regarded as nothing.
He does as he pleases
with the powers of heaven
and the peoples of the earth.
No one can hold back his hand
or say to him: ‘What have you done?’” (4:34b-35)**

Nebuchadnezzar closes his letter with a happy ending. He was restored:

“At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honor and splendor were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisers and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.” (4:36-37)

“Those who walk in pride he is able to humble.” Many take this away as the primary lesson of this chapter. “Pride comes before a fall” is the proverbial saying, drawn from Proverbs: “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov 16:18). This is indeed true, but surely it’s not the primary lesson of Daniel 4.

This chapter is about a very specific form of pride. The chapter is a contest between Nebuchadnezzar, king on earth, and the Most High God, king in heaven, over who really rules. Nebuchadnezzar does indeed rule on earth over a vast empire. But dominion belongs to God in heaven. Heaven rules.

This is the sort of message that the Jewish exiles in Babylon needed to hear. They may have been awed by the king’s splendor and Babylon’s greatness. But they are reminded that Babylon is not an eternal kingdom. God’s kingdom is. All four of these chapters about Nebuchadnezzar encourage resistance to the claims of Babylon and its greatest king. They encourage loyalty to God Most High, for Heaven rules. They enable Daniel and his three friends and all the other Jewish exiles in Babylon to seek to flourish in a foreign land while remaining true to the one true God. Under Babylonian rule, Persian rule, Greek rule, Roman rule, and beyond.

My title for this series on Daniel is “One King to Rule Them All,” with obvious allusion to a certain book and movie. Chapter 4 is about conflicting claims to sovereignty: who is the one king to rule them all? There’s a claim on earth and a claim in heaven. But really the whole book is about this. Who is the one true king? The aspiration of any empire-builder is to be the one king that rules the world. Nebuchadnezzar encapsulates that, but he is by no means the only claimant to earth’s throne. Chapter 5 will be about Belshazzar, chapter 6 about Darius. Chapter 7 is a vision about multiple kings and kingdoms.

All human rulers must learn that God is sovereign. He has appointed over his kingdom the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Nebuchadnezzar gloried in his greatness before God humbled him. God

has appointed as the true King of kings and Lord of lords one who humbled himself to begin with. As we heard in our Scripture reading (Phil 2:5-11) about Christ Jesus,

Who, being in very nature God,
 did not consider equality with God something to be used
 to his own advantage;
 rather, he made himself nothing
 by taking the very nature of a servant,
 being made in human likeness.
 And being found in appearance as a man,
 he humbled himself
 by becoming obedient to death—
 even death on a cross! (Phil 2:6-8)

Therefore: because he took this downward path of self-humbling, of making himself nothing, of becoming like us, entering into human history, taking the form of a servant. Therefore, God has exalted him to the highest place as King of kings and Lord of lords. The Lion has conquered by being the slain Lamb. We now give our allegiance to a King who gave himself for his people.

In the Book of Revelation, which our women will be studying starting next month, in the center of the book we hear this cry that goes up: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ and he shall reign forever and ever” (Rev 11:15). There are two implications of this. Firstly, Babylon must fall. Babylon the Great, mentioned five times in the book. Babylon the Great, the city of the world’s kings, must fall. Secondly, the heavenly city

must descend to earth so God and his people can dwell together, as heaven and earth are joined.

In *Paradise Lost*, John Milton has Satan say, “Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven.” But when we surrender our attempts to be king of the castle, when we bow down and give our allegiance to Christ, the King of kings, and serve him, we find our true freedom, for he is the one “whom to serve is perfect freedom.” Under his rule all flourish. The path to flourishing is not to climb to the top of the mound and say, “I’m the king of the castle,” but to bend the knee to the heavenly sovereign, for Heaven rules.

Jesus is “the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth” (Rev 1:5). May God grant us the grace to bow down, come into his kingdom and flourish. He knows our weakness. Jesus on earth cared for the weak, the poor, the outcasts, the vulnerable, and is able still to empathize and sympathize with those who feel that way. So, if that’s how you are feeling, we have One who knows our weakness and understands and can lift us up. For of such is his kingdom made.

To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.
 (Jude 24-25)

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THE MOVING FINGER WRITES

SERIES: ONE KING TO RULE THEM ALL

Daniel 5:1-31

Fifth Message

Bernard Bell

August 15, 2021

More than thirty years ago a friend gave me a copy of the children's book, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* (1972), writing on the inside front cover, "Just to encourage you that there are others in the same boat." I cannot remember what my situation was back then. But this book came to mind this last week, so I pulled it off our shelf. For Alexander the day started badly from the moment he woke up: "I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day." At the end of the day, back in bed, he says, "It has been a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. My mom says some days are like that."

I was thinking of this book, not because I was having a bad day, but because I was thinking about King Belshazzar. Unlike Alexander, his day started out very well, but ended up being a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day, a day very much worse than Alexander's bad day. It was the worst day of his life. Indeed, it was the last day of his life, of his reign, and of the entire Babylonian Empire. How did a day that started so well go so horribly wrong?

The first four chapters of Daniel have been about King Nebuchadnezzar. But in chapter 5 we encounter a new king, Belshazzar. Who is he? Nebuchadnezzar was the second king of the neo-Babylonian Empire. Technically he was Nebuchadnezzar II, but no one remembers the "II" part. He was Nebuchadnezzar the Great, Babylon's greatest king. It was he who took the Jews into captivity in Babylon. Thus he was the first king of the Jewish exile in Babylon. He ruled for 43 years (605-562 BC). In the six years after his death there were four different kings, with the fourth, Nabonidus, being a usurper who seized the throne. After ruling in Babylon for a while he went on an extended vacation, spending ten years at an oasis in the Arabian desert. No one knows why. He left his son Belshazzar in charge in Babylon. This Belshazzar was, in effect, the king. And we'll see that he was the last king.

Chapters 2-7 of Daniel are arranged chiastically in an A,B,C, C',B',A' pattern, in which chapters 2 and 7 are paired, as are 3 and 6, and 4 and 5.

- A. Vision of 4-part statue: 4 kings/kingdoms (2)
- B. Three Jews in blazing fiery furnace (3)
- C. Nebuchadnezzar's humbling (4)
- C'. Belshazzar's humbling (5)
- B'. Daniel in lions' den (6)
- A'. Vision of 4 beasts: 4 kings/kingdoms (7)

So in these next three weeks we will revisit themes of chapters 2-4 but in reverse order. Today's chapter 5 is the counterpart of chapter 4. This means that King Belshazzar of chapter 5 is paired with King Nebuchadnezzar of chapter 4. Does he compare well?

Though dead, Nebuchadnezzar looms large over this chapter. Repeatedly Belshazzar is confronted with him. Repeatedly Nebuchadnezzar is described as Belshazzar's father. Strictly speaking he was not: Belshazzar's father was Nabonidus, lounging in his desert oasis. But father-son language is used more freely in Semitic languages. In the context of the Book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar

was his father as king of Babylon. Repeatedly we are invited to compare these two kings, Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar, as father and son. More particularly, an overachieving father and his underachieving son. But in the end the comparison concerns their attitude to God, the one true God, the God of Daniel and his three friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. It's a comparison between the first and the last kings of the Babylonian exile.

Belshazzar's Feast (5:1-4)

King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them. While Belshazzar was drinking his wine, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. (Dan 5:1-2 NIV)

King Belshazzar made a great feast. Straight away the memory of Nebuchadnezzar is evoked, for chapter 3 begins, "King Nebuchadnezzar made a gold image" (3:1). On that occasion Nebuchadnezzar summoned all the imperial officials to the dedication of the image, and commanded all nations, peoples and languages to bow down and worship that image. Here Belshazzar gathers his nobles, his wives and his concubines for a drinking party. He commanded that the Jewish temple vessels be brought so they could drink wine from them. These are the vessels brought from Jerusalem. Brought by whom? By Nebuchadnezzar his father—here's the first of the many references to his "father." Nebuchadnezzar had placed these vessels in the treasury of his god in Babylon. He treated them as sacred. But Belshazzar his son intends to desecrate them.

So they brought in the gold goblets that had been taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone. (5:3-4)

Belshazzar carried through with his plan. He defiled the sacred vessels in two ways: by using them as wine goblets in his feast, and by praising the idols, the gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone. He used the vessels intended for the worship of the one true God to worship created images that represent non-gods, something that his father would never have done.

Right from the start, the chapter compares Belshazzar unfavorably with Nebuchadnezzar his father. But in Belshazzar's mind his day was going very well. He was surrounded by *his* nobles, *his* wives, *his* concubines, many of each, with himself at the center. He was having a great day.

The Writing on the Wall (5:5-9)

Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. His face turned pale and

he was so frightened that his legs became weak and his knees were knocking. (5:5-6)

Suddenly, at that very moment, when Belshazzar and his revelers were praising the false gods with wine served in the true God's sacred vessels! At that very moment, fingers appeared out of nowhere and wrote on the wall, as the king watched. His reaction is described in four ways. His countenance changed: his face went pale. His thoughts were alarming him. "His legs became weak" (NIV), but this is a considerable under-translation. The text is literally "the knots of his loins were loosened," which CSB is bold enough to translate as "he soiled himself," which I think is about right. Finally, he was shaking so badly that his knees were knocking together. His day of celebration had suddenly taken a turn for the worse. His terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day had begun.

What was the king to do? He did what his father Nebuchadnezzar had done: he called in the experts.

The king summoned the enchanters, astrologers and diviners. Then he said to these wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing and tells me what it means will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around his neck, and he will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom."

Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant. So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled. (5:7-9)

The king wanted the magicians to do two things: read the writing and provide the interpretation. Why did he want them to read the writing? This suggests he couldn't read it himself. The inscription would have been written without vowels, just consonants, so reading would require providing the correct vowels. Despite the great rewards offered by the king, the magicians were unable either to read or to interpret the message. By now this is what we've come to expect of these magicians. In light of their failure Belshazzar was even more shaken. His day was steadily getting worse.

The Queen's Speech (5:10-12)

Next, a formidable woman entered: the queen, or more probably, the queen mother. She had not been invited to the feast.

The queen, hearing the voices of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. "May the king live forever!" she said. "Don't be alarmed! Don't look so pale! There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. Your father, King Nebuchadnezzar, appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. He did this because Daniel, whom the king called Belteshazzar, was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve difficult problems. Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means." (5:10-12)

"May the king live forever!" She wanted to help. "Don't be so alarmed. The help you need is right here at hand." But then she reminded this king about his father the king. King Nebuchadnezzar knew what to do when the magicians failed. He would call in Daniel, because he knew that the spirit of the holy gods was in him, which we heard three times in chapter 4 (vv. 8, 9, 18). So, do what your father did: call for Daniel and he'll tell you the meaning of the

writing.

The queen mother was trying to help, and indeed she provided the right help. But I'm sure her suggestion made Belshazzar's bad day even worse, by comparing him unfavorably to his father. He does not seem eager to accept her suggestion, to copy his father, because we do not read that Belshazzar called for Daniel. Nevertheless, Daniel was brought in, and Belshazzar addressed him.

Belshazzar's Speech (5:13-16)

So Daniel was brought before the king, and the king said to him, "Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my father the king brought from Judah? I have heard that the spirit of the gods is in you and that you have insight, intelligence and outstanding wisdom. The wise men and enchanters were brought before me to read this writing and tell me what it means, but they could not explain it. Now I have heard that you are able to give interpretations and to solve difficult problems. If you can read this writing and tell me what it means, you will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around your neck, and you will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom." (5:13-16)

The king addressed him in a derogatory manner: "Oh, you're Daniel, one of the exiles my father the king brought from Judah." You're one of those refugees, a displaced person. You're not one of us. You're a nobody. Then, rather than saying, as his father had, "I know that the spirit of the gods is in you," he said, "I've heard about you: that the spirit of the gods is in you; that you have illumination, insight and wisdom." He's only just heard this, because this is exactly what the queen mother has just told him (v. 11). He next complains of the inability of the magicians. Then again he said, "I've heard about you: that you can give interpretations and solve difficult problems." Again this is what the queen mother has just told him (v. 12). In the final sentence Nebuchadnezzar would have said to Daniel, "Read this writing and tell me what it means," confident that Daniel could do so. But his son lacks this confidence: "If you can read this writing and tell me what it means." He promises the same extravagant reward that he promised to the magicians.

It is clear from this speech that Belshazzar knows about Daniel, but has chosen not to know him. Daniel has been forgotten, sidelined, marginalized, excluded. Yet again Belshazzar pales in comparison with his father Nebuchadnezzar who valued Daniel so highly. Did the Jews as a whole also feel this way? That God had forgotten them, that he no longer saw them? As the exile dragged on was there any hope for being re-included in God's purposes? Did God remember them? Would he be faithful to his promises to bring an end to that exile and bring them home? I'm sure that Daniel, during all the years that he was ignored by the king, was wondering what his purpose was.

Daniel's Speech (5:17-28)

Then Daniel answered the king, "You may keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else. Nevertheless, I will read the writing for the king and tell him what it means." (5:17)

Daniel declined Belshazzar's promised rewards, which left him free to speak his mind. And speak his mind is what he intended to do. Nevertheless, he would read the writing and tell the king its meaning. But first he had some pointed things to say to the king.

"Your Majesty, the Most High God gave your father

Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor. Because of the high position he gave him, all the nations and peoples of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled. But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like the ox; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and sets over them anyone he wishes.” (5:18-21)

Daniel starts by respectfully addressing Belshazzar as “You, O king.” Then, translating more literally, especially the word order, he continues, “The Most High God sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor gave...” Gave to whom? We have to wait to the very end of the sentence to find out to whom God has given these things. Not to you, Belshazzar, but “to Nebuchadnezzar your father.” Ouch! He was the great king, not you! In his greatness he was feared by all nations and peoples of every language, terms we’ve heard several times before. He acted like God: killing and letting live, raising up and putting down as he wished. But Nebuchadnezzar had to learn that he was not God. He had to learn that his sovereignty, greatness and splendor were not his own doing, but were given to him by God.

So the Lord humbled him until he acknowledged that it is the Most High God who is sovereign. This is what the previous three chapters have been about, especially chapter 4. Nebuchadnezzar was ultimately responsive. It was a hard lesson, it took extreme measures, but he did eventually humbly acknowledge God’s sovereignty over all earthly kingdoms. Therefore, Nebuchadnezzar your father was a great king, even in God’s sight. After reviewing the positive example of Nebuchadnezzar the father, Daniel now turns to Belshazzar the son:

“But you, Belshazzar, his son, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways. Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription.” (5:22-24)

“But you, his son, Belshazzar.” Here we go again! The son is compared to the father and found wanting. “You have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this.” Belshazzar knew what had happened to Nebuchadnezzar, and he knew what he should have done. In the case of Nebuchadnezzar, his specific assault on the Most High was to stand on the roof of his palace, look out over Babylon the Great, and boast, “Is not this the great Babylon I have built by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” (4:30). In the case of Belshazzar, his specific assault on the Lord of heaven was to have the temple vessels from Jerusalem brought to him and his revelers so they could drink wine from them and show their allegiance to their so-called gods which are no gods at all. For this sacrilege and for not honoring the true God, God himself has sent the hand that wrote the inscription.

Only after this stinging indictment is Daniel ready to read the

inscription and give its meaning. In giving this indictment Daniel is functioning as a prophet, not in the sense of foretelling the future, but of bringing God’s word. Though he does not say, “Thus says the Lord,” it is clear that he is delivering the divine verdict on Belshazzar and his sin.

Now we are ready for the inscription and its meaning:

“This is the inscription that was written:

MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN” (5:25)

Daniel is able to read the consonants on the wall and turn them into words. He supplies the vowels for the consonants, reading the words as nouns. *Mene*, *Tekel*, *Parsin*: these are units of weight and of monetary value. *Mene* is Hebrew *mina* that occurs in both OT and NT. *Tekel* is Hebrew *shekel*, which even today is the unit of Israeli currency. *Parsin* is the dual form of the singular *peres*, meaning “divided in half,” so two *peres*, two halves, either two half-minas or two half-shekels. This is the reading of the words.

Next Daniel interprets the three words, and now he reads them as verbs:

“Here is what these words mean:

Mene : God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.

Tekel : You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.

Peres : Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.” (5:26-28)

Read as verbs the three words *mene*, *tekel* and *peres* mean *numbered*, *weighed* and *divided*. In the third word there is an additional wordplay with the word for Persian.

Your days are numbered. You’ve been weighed in the balance and found wanting. The writing is on the wall. These three expressions have all entered into our vernacular today as familiar idioms. Belshazzar does not measure up to great Nebuchadnezzar. God used Nebuchadnezzar as his instrument of judgment upon sinful Judah. The great king captured Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, palace and city walls, and took the leading people captive to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar thought he was acting on his own initiative, that he was the one with agency. But at the beginning of the book of Daniel we were told that it was the Lord who delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, together with the temple vessels (1:2). It took four chapters for Nebuchadnezzar to really learn this, that his own sovereignty was delegated from a higher sovereign, from God Most High, and that his accomplishments were gifts from God. But Belshazzar was not like his father Nebuchadnezzar, as we’ve been repeatedly told in this chapter. He did not humble himself. Therefore his time was up. And Babylon’s time was up. His days are numbered. He’s been weighed in the balance and found wanting. The writing is on the wall.

I took my title for this sermon from the first line of a quatrain, a four-line stanza, attributed to the Persian poet Omar Khayyam (1048-1131):

The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.¹

It is written. No word can be erased. The writing on the wall was indelible. Belshazzar could not erase it.

The End (5:29-31)

Then at Belshazzar's command, Daniel was clothed in purple, a gold chain was placed around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom.

That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two. (5:29-31)

As Belshazzar had been partying with his many nobles, wives and concubines, the Medes and Persians had been tightening a noose around Babylon—Babylon the Great, thought to be invincible, secure behind its great walls. In the middle of the night they entered the city without opposition, captured the city, killed the king and ended the Babylonian Empire. In just a matter of hours Babylon the Great had fallen. Just 23 years after the reign of Nebuchadnezzar the Great, it was all over. Babylon the city continued but now as just another city within a new empire, the Persian Empire whose capital was elsewhere. Darius took over the kingdom, or better, he received the kingdom. For in the unseen realm it was God who brought this about.

It was God who gave Jerusalem into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, along with King Jehoiakim and the temple vessels. It was God who gave Babylon into the hands of the Medes and Persians. It was God who was at work at the beginning and the end of the exile of his people in Babylon. Soon Cyrus the Persian allowed the captive Jews to return home to rebuild the temple and to repatriate the temple vessels.

At the beginning and the end of the exile God was being faithful to his covenant with his people. At the beginning of the exile he was faithful by bringing judgment upon his people for breach of covenant. They had broken that covenant and he would not allow that to happen without consequences. King Nebuchadnezzar was his instrument of judgment. At the end of the exile he was faithful by bringing his people home as he had promised. He brought judgment upon Belshazzar the king and upon Babylon the Great. Therefore it could be said of the Lord, "Give thanks to the LORD for he is good; his loyal love (*hesed*) endures forever." These words closed out our call to worship:

give thanks to him and praise his name.

For the LORD is good and his love endures forever;

his faithfulness continues through all generations.

(Ps 100:4b-5)

These stories of Daniel helped sustain God's people as they lived under a succession of pagan empires. How did Nebuchadnezzar come to know the one true God and acknowledge that he himself was not God? Because of four Jews living in Babylon who remained faithful to their God at great risk to their own lives. There would be other Jews living in subsequent empires who also remained faithful to God: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther. How did Belshazzar, a king who trivialized the one true God and his faithful servant Daniel, come face-to-face with God? He paid God and his people no attention, but God confronted him with that writing on the wall. And Daniel was faithful even though it seemed that he had been forgotten for many years. God called his people to be faithful, even when they were not in the Land. And God would show himself faithful to his covenant.

We gather on Sunday mornings to pay attention to God, the one true God who has shown his covenant faithfulness supremely in the Lord Jesus Christ. We gather to humbly remind ourselves that we are not God. During the week we tend to become self-centered, and come to believe that what we have is through our own accomplishments. But on Sunday we come collectively before God and remind ourselves that we are not God, and that God is God. We reaffirm that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is sovereign. We gather to give thanks for he is good; his loyal love endures forever. His loyal love endured throughout the Babylonian exile. His love endures through our situations: through the pandemic, through our own grief and heartache, through our terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days as well as through our days of joy and gladness. His loyal love endures when we feel forgotten and marginalized. He is faithful to his purposes.

These stories in Daniel also cultivated in his people the appetite for God's eternal kingdom. A kingdom that would not be like the Babylonian Empire, or the Persian Empire, or the Greek Empire, or the Roman Empire. We will get a glimpse of this eternal kingdom in chapter 7. There is a king who is fit to sit on the throne of God's kingdom, even our Lord Jesus Christ. We gather on Sundays to pay attention to him, to sing our praises to him, to acclaim him as King of kings and Lord of lords, and know that his kingdom is eternal.

We gather on Sundays also to affirm that God is a generous God who gives. What we have is not our own accomplishments, but the gift of God, as Nebuchadnezzar had to learn.

We have seen the advice of two mothers. Alexander's mother who said "Some days are like that." Some days are terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days. I know some of us feel this way as we endure the pandemic which goes on and on. Some face ill health. Others are grieving the loss of loved ones. There are days that are like that because here on earth we are not yet into that final eternal kingdom. But God has not forgotten us. He sees us just as he saw Daniel and his three friends in Babylon. He is able to sustain us.

The second mother is the queen mother who said to Belshazzar, "There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him." There is someone to whom we can turn. Not a human king, not an earthly sage. We have one far greater, even the Lord Jesus Christ himself, who is in God's very presence, interceding for us. Through him we can pray, knowing that we have the Father's ear. The Lord Jesus understands: he knows our struggles, our weakness, our grief, our heartache. And so we take it all to him in prayer, to our advocate, to our representative in God's presence. And we avail ourselves of the Holy Spirit whom God has poured into our hearts to be his presence with us.

Then we go out as ambassadors of this great king, seeking to flourish in whatever environment we find ourselves, whether that be conducive or difficult. Just as Daniel and his three friends flourished in the difficult environment of Babylon.

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever. Amen.

1. Edward J. Fitzgerald, *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (1859).

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DARE TO STAND ALONE

SERIES: ONE KING TO RULE THEM ALL

Daniel 6:1-28

Sixth Message

Bernard Bell

August 22, 2021

Last month I read of a French woman who found to her surprise that she had been declared dead. It seems that a disgruntled former employee persuaded a court to declare her dead even without a death certificate. She has spent several years now trying to get herself declared undead. But French bureaucracy seems unable to do so. Even the highest court in the land stated that it was beyond their competence to bring her back from the dead. She lives in legal limbo, caught in a bureaucratic nightmare. She is trapped by a declaration of death that cannot be revoked. It sounds like something from a comedy, designed to elicit laughter. But it is true, and causes her great inconvenience as she tries to live as a dead person in a bureaucratic society.

Today we come to Daniel 6, a chapter filled with the language of bureaucracy and a decree that cannot be revoked. Both the king and one of his most loyal subjects get trapped by this decree as disgruntled bureaucrats manipulate the legal system to their own advantage and engineer the downfall of a colleague.

Chapters 2–7 have a chiasmic structure. So chapter 6, Daniel in the Lions' Den, pairs with chapter 3, his three friends in the blazing fiery furnace. There are numerous parallels between the two chapters.

A. Vision of 4-part statue: 4 kings/kingdoms (2)

B. Three Jews in blazing fiery furnace (3)

C. Nebuchadnezzar's humbling (4)

C'. Belshazzar's humbling (5)

B'. Daniel in lions' den (6)

A'. Vision of 4 beasts: 4 kings/kingdoms (7)

At the end of the previous chapter the Medes and the Persians had captured Babylon and killed its last king, Belshazzar. The Babylonian Empire is over. Darius the Mede is the new ruler in Babylon. He is the king of chapter 6.

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. 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. (Dan 6:1-3 NIV)

The Persian Empire was much larger than the Babylonian Empire. A large empire requires a large bureaucracy, so King Darius appointed these 120 satraps to govern in the various provinces. Over them he appointed three chief ministers, Daniel being one, to whom these satraps were accountable. This need for accountability lest the king suffer loss suggests that the satraps were not trustworthy, that they were likely to use their position for their own personal advantage rather than for the welfare of the king and his empire. But Daniel distinguished himself above all these officials because of his exceptional spirit. Therefore the king intended to appoint him over the entire kingdom. He would be the Chancellor, the Grand Poobah. Or, as *The Jesus StoryBook Bible* states, "his most important

helper of all." Daniel was flourishing in a foreign land. His star was continuing to rise.

Not surprisingly, this aroused the jealous hostility of the satraps and the two other chief ministers.

At this, the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent. 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." (6:4-5)

Daniel's colleagues looked carefully to find any fault in how he served in office. But they could find neither corruption nor negligence, neither sins of commission nor sins of omission, fault neither in what he did nor in what he did not do. Daniel was above reproach: he was trustworthy and completely reliable—unlike them. He was faithful to the king and faithful to his job. Frustrated in their efforts to find anything against him the officials realized that their only avenue was to find something in connection with the law of his God, in his behavior as a faithful Jew. They hatched a plot to bring him down.

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. (6:6-9)

The chief ministers and satraps went to the king. The verb translated "went as a group" implies collective assembly in rebellious turmoil. These officials were agitated, in a state of unrest. Desperate to orchestrate the downfall of Daniel they schemed and acted together. Three times in the chapter they gather as an agitated throng. Their first destination is the palace where they came before the king. They flattered him: "May King Darius live forever!...Your Majesty, Your Majesty." As *The Jesus StoryBook Bible* puts it so colorfully: "Your Most Glittering Highness...Majesterial Brightness." The entire imperial bureaucracy, all its many levels, has agreed that the king should issue an imperial edict. Of course here they were wrong, for Daniel his chief official was not party to this decision. What was this edict they wanted issued? That for the next thirty days people in the empire should pray only to the king, not to any god or any other person. The king should issue this decree in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians which cannot be revoked.

The king is easily won over by their flattery. He simply enacts their wish as a written decree. The penalty for non-compliance is to

be thrown to his lions.

So now the conflict is set. It's a conflict between two laws: the law of God and the law of the Medes and Persians which cannot be revoked. For the bureaucrats the irrevocable law of the Medes and Persians is just a tool to be used to their own advantage. They know that Daniel will be loyal to the law of his God. In their mind they have a foolproof plan. Like the agitated throng of evildoers in Psalm 64, they plot injustice and say, "We have devised a perfect plan!" (Ps 64:6).

Our attention now turns to Daniel:

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. (6:10)

Though Daniel was one of the three chief ministers, he was not privy to the "unanimous" agreement of all the bureaucrats. When he heard of the king's edict he did nothing different. He went home and prayed to his God, as he always did. Three times a day he knelt and prayed, facing Jerusalem. This was his daily custom. Even an irrevocable imperial decree was not going to stop him. Even the threat of death would not stop him.

At this point many sermons have an extended piece about the importance of being a prayer warrior, of petitioning God in fervent prayer. Such sermons make me feel very guilty about my inadequacy in prayer. But I don't think fervency in prayer is the point of this passage. I do have some comments to make about Daniel's prayer life, but they are not what I usually hear in sermons on this chapter.

Daniel prayed set prayers at set times in a set place in a set direction. He prayed three times a day. Thrice-daily prayer services are still the Jewish custom. The early church prayed three times a day. St Benedict expanded this into eight times of prayer as part of the regular daily life for monks. The central feature of Anglican liturgy is the daily office of Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer. These set times of prayer give a rhythm to the day.

Daniel prayed in a set direction, facing Jerusalem where the temple had been. The temple was a house of prayer. It was the axis linking earth and heaven. It was the conduit to the open eye, ear and heart of the Lord God. Solomon understood this in his great prayer of dedication for the temple he had just built:

May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, 'My Name shall be there,' so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place. Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive. (1 Kgs 8:29-30)

Solomon went on to say that even if God's people be in exile far from Jerusalem, they could pray towards this place, confess their sins, and know that God would hear them. This is what Daniel was doing in exile. He was in Babylon, far from Jerusalem. But he was praying towards that place, even though there was no longer a temple there. He was praying, knowing that his prayers would be conveyed to the one true God in heaven. The prayer life of the Jews could survive the loss of their house of prayer.

Jerusalem represented the past: it was where the temple had been. It was the homeland from which Daniel and many others had been exiled. But it also represented the future. God had promised that he would bring his people home. Jews today end the Passover meal by

saying, "Next year in Jerusalem." Praying towards the temple kept alive Daniel's hope of restoration. With hope, people can endure much; without hope we shrivel and die. Facing Jerusalem in prayer kept Daniel's hope alive as he remembered God's promises.

As Christians we don't pray in a set direction. Our prayers are not oriented towards a place but towards a person, our Lord Jesus Christ. We pray to and through him, knowing that he is our conduit to God. Seated at the Father's side, Jesus has the Father's eye, ear and heart, as he intercedes for us.

Thirdly, Daniel was praying and giving thanks (10); he was petitioning and seeking favor (11). He was doing so probably using set prayers. The psalter is the most important collection of set prayers: 150 of them. It contains praise and thanksgiving, confession and petitions for mercy. The monastic daily office, Anglican daily liturgy, Jewish daily liturgy, all use set prayers, with the Psalter as the primary source book. The monks pray through the psalter every single week. We tend to look down on set prayer, viewing it as rote, as empty ritual. That's the attitude that I had for a long time. But set prayers have the advantage that they are very well thought out. They are the collected wisdom of God's people. If they are not straight from Scripture, they are deeply formed by Scripture. We will see Daniel's facility in prayer in chapter 9 where he addresses a long prayer to God, a prayer shaped by earlier Scripture.

Set prayers at set times in a set direction. Some of you may think of Muslims, since this is what they do. Yes, but Muhammad was following the long-established pattern of Jews and Christians, whom he would have observed in his travels through Arabia and Syria. He also followed the custom of Christian monks who prostrated on their knees, as Daniel did and as was customary in the Ancient Near East.

Daniel prayed alone at home out of necessity. And Jesus does say to go into your own room and pray in private, but this is in contrast to hypocrites who pray in public to be seen and receive praise and accolades. But prayer is also corporate. Jesus also said, "where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them" (Matt 18:20).

Each Wednesday morning a group gathers here at PBCC for corporate prayer at a set time—though currently they meet on Zoom. Shawn started this prayer group after his sabbatical at Regent College a few years ago. He was so transformed by what he learnt there, including about formal prayer, that he wanted to continue it here. Each week the prayer time starts with a set prayer: the Anglican collect for the week. Each prayer time ends with a set prayer: saying the Lord's Prayer together. A second prayer group is starting on Tuesday evenings, following the same pattern. We also have a prayer team that meets here on Sunday mornings.

Daniel was a man of prayer, but I don't think he was what we would call a prayer warrior. I doubt that he was wrestling with God in prayer. He wasn't praying against the king or against the officials. Instead, three times a day he got on his knees, signifying his humble submission before God. He faced Jerusalem, knowing that his prayers would be heard in heaven. He paid full attention to God. Three times a day he reoriented himself onto God. Even when there was an irrevocable decree forbidding him to do so. Even when he was facing the penalty of being thrown to the lions. This was his daily pattern, day in and day out. Three times a day he heeded the psalm: "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10).

Daniel was a man at rest. He was unlike the other officials who were worked up, frenetically orchestrating his downfall. They were rushing around as an agitated throng, to the palace, to Daniel's house, back to the palace. Daniel was not like the king who was

passively compliant in the hands of his officials, easily maneuvered into their conspiracy. Daniel was the calm at the center of the storm. He was simply being faithful to God. Three times a day he turned aside and stilled himself before God. He regularly reoriented himself onto God in stillness and quiet.

When I think about Daniel at prayer in this way, I don't feel so guilty that I don't spend five hours a day wrestling in prayer. Instead, I find this rhythm of prayer deeply attractive.

In his thrice-daily prayer, Daniel was not trying to be conspicuous. Yes, the window was open. Yes, he could be seen. But he was simply continuing his daily practice. The officials knew his daily practice, so they had no trouble finding him:

Then these men went as a group and found Daniel praying and asking God for help. (6:11)

For the second time the officials go as an agitated throng, this time to Daniel's house. Daniel at rest inside is juxtaposed with the restless throng outside. Earlier they had *sought* to *find* a charge against him but could *find* nothing. Now they *find* him and he is *seeking* God, as they knew he would. Now it's time to close in for the kill.

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." (6:12-13)

The officials skillfully lead the king into their trap. First they asked the king to confirm the decree. Unaware of their devious purposes, he affirmed that the decree is irrevocable. Then the bureaucrats sprang their trap: Daniel the exile pays no attention to you or to your decree. Just like Belshazzar belittled Daniel for being one of the Jewish exiles (5:13), so do these conspirators. Their jealousy is clear: this Jewish exile, this refugee is too successful; he's intruding on our territory. He needs to be put in his place.

When the king heard this, he was greatly distressed; he was determined to rescue Daniel and made every effort until sundown to save him. (6:14)

The king immediately realizes he's been duped and is now trapped. He makes every effort the rest of the day to come up with a solution. But he's trapped by his own irrevocable decree. He's in a bureaucratic nightmare.

At the end of the day the officials return to the palace.

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!" (6:15-16)

For the third time the officials go as an agitated throng, back to Darius, to remind him of his decree. Defeated, Darius sends Daniel to the lions. Heartbroken, he makes one final comment to Daniel:

"May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!" In chapter 3, prior to sending Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to the blazing fiery furnace, Nebuchadnezzar had gloated, "what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" (3:15). They had replied,

"If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." (3:17-18)

Nebuchadnezzar willingly sent them to the furnace, infuriated by their obstinance. But here Darius has tried to avoid sending Daniel to the lions' den. He sends him there unwillingly.

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. 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. (6:17-18)

The king spent the night alone in his palace. Alone without any of the usual diversions to keep him happy: wives, concubines, dancing girls, whatever. He was without these distractions; just him alone with his thoughts. Meanwhile, Daniel spent the night in the lions' den: the scary sleepover. Will he survive?

At first light the king hurried to the lions' pit.

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. (6:19-23)

The previous evening Darius had said, "May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!" Now he cries out in anguished distress, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?" Yes, replies Daniel. Finally we hear Daniel's voice! This is the only time in the chapter that he speaks. Yes, God sent his angel to be his presence with him there in the lion pit. Daniel had done no harm, either to God or to the king. Therefore the lions did him no harm. Daniel was raised from the pit, and no harm was found on him. Why? Because he trusted God. He was faithful to God, just as he had been faithful to the king and to his job at the beginning of the chapter.

At the king's command, those who plotted to destroy Daniel were themselves thrown into the lion pit, and devoured before even hitting the ground. Their "perfect plan" backfired in a most spectacular way.

King Darius wrote to the entire empire and issued a decree, "that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel." He backed this up with a glorious doxology, an expression of praise to the one true God:

**"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.” (6:26b-27)**

What endures forever? Not the Babylonian empire; that has already fallen. Not the Persian Empire; this too will fall. Not the laws of the Medes and Persians which supposedly cannot be revoked. But God and his eternal kingdom. This is what King Nebuchadnezzar had finally come to realize after four chapters, resulting in a doxology from his lips at the end of chapter 4:

**His dominion is an eternal dominion;
his kingdom endures from generation to generation. (4:34)**

This is what King Darius has now come to learn. This is what King Belshazzar in between failed to learn.

The chapter ends with a brief conclusion:

So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian. (6:28)

The chapter begins with Daniel flourishing in a foreign land. It ends with him flourishing in a foreign land. But in the middle life has not been easy. Daniel had been faithful to his king and to his job. But the entire imperial bureaucracy was determined to bring him down. They thought they had succeeded as he was thrown to the lions. His situation seemed hopeless. But in prayer he kept orienting himself onto God. And God was present with him even in the lion pit, just as God had been present with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the blazing fiery furnace.

These two stories encouraged future generations of Jews living in the Diaspora under foreign empires to remain faithful both to God and to their position in those empires. Some of them would not be delivered from their trials. They would be killed, martyred for their faithfulness to God. We heard about some of these people in our Scripture reading from Hebrews 11. The first part of the chapter is of victory, of overcoming giants. The heroes of faith “conquered kingdoms...and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames” (11:33-34). But then the mood turns: there were also faithful people who were killed. “They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword” (11:37). In our next chapter, Daniel 7, we will see why God’s faithful people are killed for being faithful.

Throughout history and around the world today God’s faithful people are being killed for being faithful. We pray for the persecuted church. We are concerned today for the future of our Christian brothers and sisters in Afghanistan. This was the country highlighted in our e-news this week, as we follow the Open Doors World Watch

List of the countries where Christians are most persecuted.

These stories of Daniel encourage us today. We’re not facing the blazing fiery furnace or the lion pit. But we face various trials: ill health, death of family members, weariness from the ongoing pandemic, and many others. We just sang, “Be still and know that the Lord is in control. Be still my soul, stand and watch as giants fall.” Many of the giants that need to fall are not external threats, but internal ones: fear, anxiety, worry, agitation, desire for control. We can be fervent in prayer but still have all these giants in control of our life. We can wrestle with God in prayer but still be consumed with fear, anxiety and worry in a state of agitation. It is a much harder thing to still ourselves before God; to submit ourselves and be willing to live faithfully in whatever situation he has us; to accept his will, whether he deliver us from the difficult situation or leave us in the difficult situation. Some might object that this is an invitation to passivity or laziness. But learning to be faithful and obedient where God has us now, even when things are set against us, is anything but passive. It is a very challenging thing to do. But thereby we slay the giants of fear, anxiety, worry and agitation.

Daniel dared to stand alone not in opposing the king or the empire or the officials. He dared to stand alone by quietly going to his home, getting on his knees and praying to God. He stilled himself before God. He was not agitated like the officials. He was calm and faithful: faithful to the king and faithful to God. He could still himself before God even in the face of death, because stilling himself before God was his daily practice. He was a man oriented onto God. May this be true for us also. May we be able to still ourselves before God.

I close with two set prayers. The second is the Lord’s Prayer which we’ll say together. But first, the collect for today, the 12th Sunday after Trinity. This is a prayer that goes back 1400 years.

Almighty and everlasting God, who is always more ready to hear than we are to pray and who wants to give more than we desire or deserve, pour down upon us your abundant mercy, forgiving us those things in which our conscience is afraid and giving to us that which our prayer dare not presume to ask, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Lord God, the light of the minds that know you, the life of the souls that love you, and the strength of the hearts that serve you: Help us...so to know you that we may truly love you, and so to love you that we may fully serve you, whom to serve is perfect freedom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for the Feast of Augustine of Hippo, August 28)

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TWO KINGDOMS

SERIES: ONE KING TO RULE THEM ALL

Daniel 7:1-18
 Seventh Message
 Bernard Bell
 August 29, 2021

We have all been horrified by the recent events in Afghanistan, especially Thursday when a suicide bomber blew himself up at the entrance to Kabul airport, killing 170. We're struggling to keep track of who's who: Taliban, Al Qaeda, ISIS, and now ISIS-K. Who is the enemy? Who is fighting whom? It has been strange to see armed US troops standing alongside armed Taliban fighters, whom they were fighting just a few weeks ago. ISIS formed in 2014 when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi broke away from Al Qaeda, proclaiming himself caliph of the Islamic State. ISIS-K is the Afghan branch in Khorasan. Evoking past glory, they took an ancient name from the old Persian Empire. ISIS-K attracts jihadists who think the Taliban is too moderate, that it sold out by signing the agreement with the US last year. In 2019 al-Baghdadi killed himself during a US raid. ISIS was declared defeated. But, alas, ISIS continues, committed to armed struggle, to death and destruction.

We struggle for words. How do we describe last week's attack? Beastly? Subhuman? Demonic?

Caliphs and caliphates, rulers and empires, kings and kingdoms. This is what the Book of Daniel is about. Today's chapter 7 is regrettably relevant to the situation this week for it presents a series of beastly, subhuman rulers and empires bringing destruction and death.

In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel had a dream, and visions passed through his mind as he was lying in bed. He wrote down the substance of his dream. (Dan 7:1 NIV)

We notice several changes here from what has gone before in the first six chapters. We have crossed a seam in the book. There is a chronological discontinuity here. The first six chapters were six stories during the reigns of Nebuchadnezzar (1-4), Belshazzar (5), and Darius (6). The last six chapters are four visions during the reigns of Belshazzar (7-8), Darius (9), and Cyrus (10-12).

In the first half it was Nebuchadnezzar who had dreams (2, 4) and Daniel interpreted them for him. In the second half it is Daniel who has the visions, and a heavenly figure interprets them for him. These features divide the book into two halves, each of six chapters.

But there is another division. Chapters 2-7 are in Aramaic, the international language of the Babylonian and Persian Empires. Chapters 1 and 8-12 are in Hebrew. Furthermore, chapters 2-7 have a chiasmic structure, as we've seen these past two weeks.

A. Vision of 4-part statue: 4 kings/kingdoms (2)

B. Three Jews in blazing fiery furnace (3)

C. Nebuchadnezzar's humbling (4)

C'. Belshazzar's humbling (5)

B'. Daniel in lions' den (6)

A'. Vision of 4 beasts: 4 kings/kingdoms (7)

Today we look at the second half of the outer envelope of this structure: chapter 7 which matches chapter 2. As we have now come to expect, there are numerous parallels between these two chapters, 2 and 7.

Chapter 7 is the most important chapter of the book. It concludes the Aramaic chiasmic structure of chapters 2-7, and it introduces Daniel's four visions of chapters 7-12. Today's sermon will focus on chapter 7 as the climax of chapters 2-7. Early next year I will return for the second half of the book, starting with a second sermon on this chapter, focusing on how it introduces Daniel's four visions of chapters 7-12.

So, Daniel had a dream and visions, which he wrote down. In vv. 2-8 he describes what he saw on earth; in vv. 9-14 what he saw in heaven. There is, as it were, a lower register and an upper register. We are to keep them both in view: what happens on earth and what happens in heaven.

First, the lower register, what Daniel sees on earth:

Daniel said: "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me were the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea. Four great beasts, each different from the others, came up out of the sea.

"The first was like a lion, and it had the wings of an eagle. I watched until its wings were torn off and it was lifted from the ground so that it stood on two feet like a human being, and the mind of a human was given to it.

"And there before me was a second beast, which looked like a bear. It was raised up on one of its sides, and it had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. It was told, 'Get up and eat your fill of flesh!'

"After that, I looked, and there before me was another beast, one that looked like a leopard. And on its back it had four wings like those of a bird. This beast had four heads, and it was given authority to rule.

"After that, in my vision at night I looked, and there before me was a fourth beast—terrifying and frightening and very powerful. It had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. It was different from all the former beasts, and it had ten horns.

"While I was thinking about the horns, there before me was another horn, a little one, which came up among them; and three of the first horns were uprooted before it. This horn had eyes like the eyes of a human being and a mouth that spoke boastfully." (7:2-8)

The four winds churned up the sea. In normal narrative the Great Sea is always the Mediterranean. But we're not in normal narrative here; we're in the report of a vision—an apocalyptic vision full of symbolic elements. To us these seem strange, but not so to an ancient audience. The great sea is the waters of chaos, present at the beginning of creation. These disordered chaotic waters threaten to overwhelm the ordered world. Out of these waters of chaos rose four great beasts. The first three are described as being like something, like a familiar wild animal. The first like a lion, the second like a bear, the third like a leopard. But the fourth was different: it was not like

any natural beast. Why beasts and why four?

These beasts are wild beasts, ferocious beasts. The lion, the bear, and the leopard were all familiar to the ancient Israelites; we read of them in the OT. There were no tigers, otherwise we could say, "Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!" These wild animals didn't live in a zoo; they weren't confined safely behind bars. They lived in the wild, disordered land beyond human habitation and cultivation. From there they raided into the human realm, bringing death and destruction. David fought off the lion and the bear, qualifying him to face the giant Goliath, who was threatening Israel with death and destruction.

The bear explicitly brings death and destruction: it has not finished devouring its last meal but is told to get up and devour more, much more. The fourth beast is even more ravenous, crushing and devouring its victims.

The first and third beasts, the lion and leopard, are winged. They are hybrid creatures, part animal, part bird. They are disordered creatures, from the realm of chaos. They are mongrels.

Four is the number of universality. God sent four disastrous acts of judgment against Jerusalem: sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence (Ezek 14:21). Changing the metaphor, God compares his judgment upon his own people to the death and destruction of wild beasts:

**So I will be like a lion to them,
like a leopard I will lurk by the path.
Like a bear robbed of her cubs,
I will attack them and rip them open;
like a lion I will devour them—
a wild animal will tear them apart. (Hos 13:7-8)**

Like a lion, like a leopard, like a bear, a wild animal: the same four beasts as Daniel 7.

So what is going on here with this imagery of beasts?

Out of the chaotic waters of the unformed primeval sea, God brought order. He formed a world which he populated with life. He created the human to have dominion over this life: the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the land animals. Adam was created to rule and to steward the world, living in faithful obedience to God who had provided everything he needed to flourish. But Adam broke faith and disobeyed. God expelled humanity from the garden to live east of Eden. Ever since, creation has been groaning, waiting for its true ruler. Cain, after destroying his brother Abel in death, exiled himself from God's presence and went further east of Eden. There he built a city where he could rule as king of his own domain. Empires rose. Death and destruction spread. Order continued to give way to disorder.

Out of the chaotic rebellious disorder of Babylon God called Abraham. Out of the disorder of Egypt he called his people Israel. He brought them in to the Promised Land, the land of order, the new Eden. Here he gave them a king after his own heart, one able to defeat the lion and bear. But both king and people rebelled against God. They were unfaithful.

God brought judgment upon his own people. He removed his presence from among them, expelled them from the land, and brought foreign empires to possess the land and rule over his people. But these empires were beastly empires. They were not what true rule should look like, the rule intended by God when he created Adam, the rule intended by God when he gave them as king David the lion-and bear-tamer.

Ever since, the world has been waiting for the return of the King, for the arrival of the one, true King who will be faithfully obedient and will rule the world in justice and righteousness. One King to rule them all.

The beasts are identified as four kings (v. 17). There is an obvious parallel to Nebuchadnezzar's vision of chapter 2: an enormous statue with a head of pure gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet partly iron, partly baked clay. Daniel interpreted this for Nebuchadnezzar: he is the gold head. The other three parts are three kingdoms. The parallel between the fourth part of the statue and the fourth beast is particularly close; there is much shared language.

What are the four kings or kingdoms? The gold head of the statue is explicitly identified as Nebuchadnezzar. The first beast is also Nebuchadnezzar. There had been prior kings and empires, but it was Nebuchadnezzar who captured Jerusalem, and took the people and temple vessels captive to Babylon. He is the beginning of God's people living under foreign dominion, living under beastly empire. Nebuchadnezzar had to learn an important lesson. God humbled him until he learnt that God's dominion not his was eternal. In chapter 4 Nebuchadnezzar became like an animal and his hair like eagles' feathers. Here in chapter 7 the wings of the first beast were ripped off: he ceased to be a mongrel beast. It was raised up on two feet like a human and given a human mind: he ceased to be a beast. He became human. To be truly human is to acknowledge that one is only human not God, and that God is God.

Opinion is divided on the identity of the other three beasts. There are two major views, differing primarily on the identity of the fourth beast, whether it be Greece, that is the Greek empires of Alexander the Great and his successors, or Rome. The four beasts are either Babylon, Media, Persia and Greece; or Babylon, Media-Persia, Greece and Rome. So, do I identify the fourth beast as Greece or Rome? My answer is the same as six weeks ago: neither and both.

The first beast is Nebuchadnezzar specifically, not Babylon in general, because Belshazzar did not learn his father's lesson. He remained a beast because he refused to acknowledge the sovereignty of God. The other three beasts are not specific empires, but empire in general. Empire is ravenous; it brings death and destruction. Empire is given dominion. Who gives dominion? It is not stated, but must be God who grants temporary dominion to earthly empires.

Though I do not think that the fourth beast of Daniel's vision or the fourth part of Nebuchadnezzar's statue is Greece or Rome, I am sure that Jews living in the early second century BC would have identified the rule of the Hellenistic Seleucid Empire as the fourth beast. And that those living in the first century AD would have identified Rome as the fourth beast.

There was a second part of Nebuchadnezzar's dream: a rock, cut not by human hands, hit the feet of the statue. The statue shattered and disappeared. But the rock became a huge mountain filling the earth. So also there is a second part of Daniel's dream. He sees into heaven, into the upper register.

**"As I looked,
"thrones were set in place,
and the Ancient of Days took his seat.
His clothing was as white as snow;
the hair of his head was white like wool.
His throne was flaming with fire,
and its wheels were all ablaze.**

**A river of fire was flowing,
coming out from before him.
Thousands upon thousands attended him;
ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.
The court was seated,
and the books were opened.” (7:9-10)**

It’s an awesome vision of God’s throne room. The Ancient of Days, the eternal God, sat down on his throne, attended by countless courtiers. The court took its seat. The books were opened. It’s time for a judicial ruling from the ultimate authority, the eternal God. What ruling will the judge issue?

“Then I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn was speaking. I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire. (The other beasts had been stripped of their authority, but were allowed to live for a period of time.)” (7:11-12)

While this seating of the court was happening in the upper register, down in the lower register the little horn was mouthing off. It was full of words, great words, boastful, arrogant words, words of self-exaltation, words against God and his people. But, effortlessly, the fourth beast was slain and thrown into the blazing fire, the river of fire flowing from God’s presence, the river of judgment and final destruction. When God calls time, it is over, effortlessly!

Daniel sees more:

“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” (7:13-14)

One like a son of man: this means he is truly human, in contrast to the sequence of earlier figures like beasts. The beasts rise from chaos and bring destruction. This truly human one will be like the first human, Adam, whom God created to rule over his creation, to bring order. He comes with the clouds of heaven, the clouds upon which rides God Almighty. He is given dominion, glory and power—eternal dominion. All nations and peoples of every language worship him. We’ve heard this language before. Nebuchadnezzar was given dominion but had to learn this was not eternal dominion. He commanded nations and peoples of every language to worship his image, but had to learn this was inappropriate. But here is one who is given eternal dominion, and whose worship by all nations, peoples and language is appropriate: the one like a son of man.

Here is the true ruler for which creation has been groaning since the expulsion of Adam from the garden. Here is the one true King for whom God’s people have been waiting since the fall of Jerusalem. One King to rule them all.

Who is this one like a son of man, one who is human but rides the clouds like God? With the hindsight of the NT we can answer: it is the risen Lord Jesus Christ. As we heard in our Scripture reading, when Jesus was arrested and brought before the Jewish leaders, the high priest asked him,

“Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?”

“I am,” said Jesus. “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” (Mark 14:61-62)

The high priest immediately understood the claim Jesus was making, and declared it blasphemy. The leaders condemned Jesus as worthy of death. The guards took him away and beat him. Jesus submitted to their abuse and scorn. The Jewish leaders entered into an unholy alliance, a mongrel alliance with the Roman authorities to kill him in the most brutal and shameful way possible.

But God has installed this one, despised and forsaken, as ruler of his kingdom and Lord of all. The good news of Christ crucified is a scandal to the Jews, folly to the Gentiles, but the power and wisdom of God to those who give their allegiance to Christ.

Daniel was troubled by what he saw in his vision and requested an interpretation.

“I, Daniel, was troubled in spirit, and the visions that passed through my mind disturbed me. I approached one of those standing there and asked him the meaning of all this.

“So he told me and gave me the interpretation of these things: ‘The four great beasts are four kings that will rise from the earth. But the holy people of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever—yes, for ever and ever.’” (7:15-18)

Daniel has seen the one like a son of man given eternal dominion. Now he is told that the saints of the Most High will also receive this eternal kingdom. One like a son of man, and the saints of the Most High. These are two new elements that were not in the first half of the book. We will hear more about the saints in the second half of the chapter.

Meanwhile, Daniel wants to know more:

“Then I wanted to know the meaning of the fourth beast... I also wanted to know about the ten horns on its head and about the other horn that came up.”(7:19-20)

Some of you no doubt feel the same way: you want to know about the fourth beast, the ten horns and the little horn. But you’ll have to wait a few months until we cover the rest of the chapter.

King Nebuchadnezzar had to learn that it was not appropriate for nations and peoples of every language to worship him. But it is appropriate to worship the true King, this one like the son of man who was ushered into the presence of the Ancient of Days to be given eternal dominion. The succession of beastly empires did not end with Greece or Rome. It continues. Some of God’s people live today under harsh beastly empires. We are concerned for Christians in Afghanistan as the Taliban takes over the country. Each week we pray for the persecuted church in a different country from the Open Doors World Watch List. God is able to preserve his people under great persecution.

The Jews expected that God would remove the beastly empires, which they identified as Rome, and bring in his eternal kingdom. Instead, in the middle of time, with the beastly empires still in place, God has brought in his eternal kingdom. Beastly rule continues on earth. But God in Christ has defeated the powers of darkness behind these beastly kingdoms. He “has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:13-14).

He is building a truly universal kingdom, even while the kingdoms of this world continue. Transferred into God’s kingdom in Christ, we are people who formerly didn’t belong together now learning how to belong together in Jesus. We are now family, sharing in each other’s lives: joys and sorrows, celebration and grief. Living life together. Today is Connections Sunday, when you can learn

about the opportunities to engage in community life together here at PBCC. Together we help one another remain faithful, so we can flourish in God's kingdom while yet living as exiles in a foreign kingdom.

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus...make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. (1 Thess 3:11-13)

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THE LION AND THE LAMB

SERIES: ONE KING TO RULE THEM ALL

Daniel 7:19-28

Eighth Message

Bernard Bell

February 6, 2022

Happy New Year—Lunar New Year. Last Tuesday we moved from the Year of the Ox into the Year of the Tiger. The ox and the tiger are both animals of great power, unlike the rat the previous year and the rabbit next year. The ox is domesticated: its strength can be harnessed for human good. But the tiger is a wild animal, that can turn ferocious even in captivity, as Roy and Siegfried found out 20 years ago.

The English poet William Blake wrote a famous poem, *The Tyger*:

Tyger Tyger, burning bright, / In the forests of the night.¹

That's a vivid image for me. I went to school in the jungle in Malaysia, where tigers prowled. A few years after I left, one of the staff painted a lovely mural on the wall of the dining room: a momma tiger and two playful cubs. But tigers are not safe: in my first year the school dog, a German Shepherd, disappeared, taken by a tiger.

Later in his poem, Blake asks:

Did he smile his work to see?

Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Earlier he wrote the poem's counterpart, *The Lamb*, which begins:

Little Lamb who made thee? / Dost thou know who made thee?²

Blake seemed fascinated that the same hand would make both the tiger and the lamb: the one a symbol of ferocious power, the other a symbol of weak vulnerability.

Today we return to the Book of Daniel after a five-month break. There are no tigers in Daniel, but there are ferocious wild beasts: a lion, a bear, a leopard, and a mysterious fourth beast beyond comparison.

Since it has been five months, let me give a brief recap of the book. The book has two halves. The first six chapters are six individual stories set within the royal court in Babylon. They feature Daniel and his three friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They are Jewish exiles, taken from Jerusalem to Babylon. The stories show how they stay loyal to their God in a foreign land.

The second half of the book, chapters 7–12, is a sequence of four visions seen by Daniel.

The book also divides another way: half the chapters are in Hebrew and half in Aramaic, the international language of the Babylonian and Persian Empires. The Aramaic chapters 2–7 have a chiastic structure:

A. Vision of 4-part statue: 4 kings/kingdoms (2)

B. Three Jews in blazing fiery furnace (3)

C. Nebuchadnezzar's humbling (4)

C'. Belshazzar's humbling (5)

B'. Daniel in lions' den (6)

A'. Vision of 4 beasts: 4 kings/kingdoms (7)

The theme of this structure is not the faithfulness of the Jews but

the identity of the true empire and its ruler. The kings in Babylon think that they rule the world, but they must learn that there is a higher throne, and that their empire is not eternal.

The outer envelope, chapters 2 and 7, is two visions of a sequence of four kings or kingdoms: Nebuchadnezzar's vision of a four-part statue (2), and Daniel's vision of four beasts (7). The Babylonian Empire will fall, to be followed by further empires until, ultimately, God's eternal empire.

The middle pair, chapters 3 and 6, features faithful Jews defying imperial edicts to worship or pray to human emperors. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego faced certain death in the blazing fiery furnace (3); Daniel faced certain death in the lion's den (6). Yet God delivered them.

The inner pair shows the humbling of two kings: Nebuchadnezzar (4) and Belshazzar (5).

Who is truly sovereign? Is it the king of the mighty Babylonian empire or is it Yahweh, God of the Jews? To the human eye it seems that Babylon is supreme. Mighty Babylon has conquered Jerusalem, destroying the temple, palace, and city walls, and taking Jews captive to Babylon. But chapter 1 makes it clear that it is the Lord who has given Jerusalem, its king, and the temple vessels into Babylon's hand. Babylon is God's instrument of judgment upon his unfaithful people.

It takes three chapters (2–4) for mighty Nebuchadnezzar the Great to learn that he is not so great. By the end of chapter 4 he has learnt his lesson:

"I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever.

**His dominion is an eternal dominion;
his kingdom endures from generation to generation."**

(Dan 4:34 NIV)

But his successor King Belshazzar defied God, so divine judgment fell on him and on Babylon. Both king and empire were overthrown by the next empire.

Chapter 7 forms a hinge in the middle of the book. It closes the chiasm of the Aramaic section, looking back to chapter 2. But it is also the first of Daniel's four visions. It looks ahead to chapters 8–12, in which Daniel is shown what will happen far beyond the end of the Babylonian captivity.

Daniel saw four beasts rising from the sea. The sea is chaos and the beasts are destructive. The first three are like a lion, a bear, and a leopard: wild beasts that lurk beyond civilization and threaten life. These are also hybrid creatures, further emphasizing their chaotic nature: the lion and the leopard are winged, and the leopard has four heads. The fourth beast is terrifying beyond description: crushing and devouring and trampling. This beast has ten horns, from which emerged a little horn speaking arrogantly.

But Daniel also saw into the heavenly realm: the Ancient of Days surrounded by his court. The court ruled; the beasts were judged.

The first three were stripped of their rule; the fourth was slain. Then Daniel saw one like a son of man coming on the clouds into the presence of the Ancient of Days, where he was given eternal dominion.

Daniel asked for the meaning of what he had seen. The interpretation was given:

“The four great beasts are four kings that will rise from the earth. But the holy people of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever—yes, for ever and ever.” (7:17-18)

It is the same message as chapter 2. There will be a succession of human rulers and empires. Oceans rise, empires fall. All human empires will pass away, replaced by God’s eternal kingdom, which is given both to the one like a son of man, and to the faithful saints of the Most High. God’s people are given hope for the future.

This much we covered five months ago.

But Daniel is not satisfied with this answer, and some of you were not either. You were disappointed that I stopped at this point. Daniel wanted to know the meaning of the fourth beast, the ten horns, and the little horn. So do many others. The fourth beast, the ten horns, and the little horn have long captivated people’s imagination. There has been enormous speculation over their identities. Much has been written. Some of you have studied this matter and are eager to see what I am going to say. So I am aware yet again that I am speaking to two different audiences here: those who are very familiar with this topic, and those for whom this is strange, foreign territory.

Three times our attention is focused on the fourth beast. First in Daniel’s vision:

a fourth beast—terrifying and frightening and very powerful. It had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. It was different from all the former beasts. (7:7)

Next in his request for the meaning:

the fourth beast, which was different from all the others and most terrifying, with its iron teeth and bronze claws—the beast that crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. (7:19)

Finally in the interpretation:

“The fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will appear on earth. It will be different from all the other kingdoms and will devour the whole earth, trampling it down and crushing it.” (7:23)

The fearsome destructiveness of this fourth beast is drilled into us. It is different from the other beasts. It is so brutal and destructive that it cannot be compared to any wild animal like the lion, the bear or the leopard. With iron teeth and bronze claws to crush and devour and trample, this is “nature red in tooth and claw” on steroids.

This fourth beast is a fourth kingdom. But which kingdom? Is it the Seleucid empire of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the early second century BC? Or is it the Roman Empire of the first century AD? This is the same question posed by the four-part statue of chapter 2. And I’ll give the same answer as I gave six months ago: it is neither. I think the number four is being used symbolically in two ways. Firstly, four represents universality: the universality of human empire. And secondly, four represents escalation: three, yea four. There will be a sequence of human empires: three, yea four, with the fourth being the human empire in its fullest state. Human empire is de-

structive, and the fourth empire will be destructive to the *n*th degree. It is human arrogant pretension to power reaching its *telos*: its full flowering, but also its terminus, its end-point. I don’t identify the fourth beast of Daniel 7 as any particular empire. But I’m sure that Jews in the year 167 BC rightly saw the Seleucid Empire as the fourth beast, and the Jews of the first century AD rightly saw the Roman Empire as the fourth beast.

This beast has ten horns which are ten kings. From their midst emerges a little horn, which is also a king and conquers three of the ten kings. Attention is focused three times on this little horn. First in Daniel’s vision:

This horn had eyes like the eyes of a human being and a mouth that spoke boastfully. (7:8)

Next in his request for the meaning:

the horn that looked more imposing than the others and that had eyes and a mouth that spoke boastfully. As I watched, this horn was waging war against the holy people and defeating them. (7:20-21)

And finally in the interpretation:

“He will speak against the Most High and oppress his holy people and try to change the set times and the laws. The holy people will be delivered into his hands.” (7:25)

The little horn follows a similar 3+1 pattern. The first three beasts yield to a fourth beast that is different and climactic. So, in the same way, the three kings yield to a fourth king that is different and climactic. The fourth beast is human empire in its climactic manifestation. The little horn is the individual human ruler in its climactic manifestation.

There is a disturbing new element here in this second half of Daniel’s vision. The little horn wages war against the saints of the Most High and defeats them. Moreover, the saints are delivered into his hands. Who delivers them?

God will allow his saints, his faithful people, to be attacked. Under Babylonian rule the Jews had suffered exile and captivity as divine judgment upon their wickedness, their unfaithfulness. But this is different. A time is coming when God’s people will suffer while being faithful. Indeed, they will suffer *for* being faithful. They will be martyrs, killed for their faithfulness to God.

This is what happened under the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes of the Seleucid Empire in 167–164 BC. He attempted cultural genocide: to wipe out the faith and practice of the Jews. He was the little horn. But this also happened under the Roman emperors of the first century AD, whether Caligula or Nero or Domitian. They were the little horn. Each viewed himself as divine, as God made manifest on earth. This is the meaning of the title Antiochus used to proclaim himself to the world: Epiphanes, God Manifest. The earthly manifestation of the great god Zeus. Certain Roman emperors did the same.

How long would God allow this to happen? Daniel saw the little horn

was waging war against the holy people and defeating them, until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favor of the holy people of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom. (7:21-22)

He was told:

“The holy people will be delivered into his hands for a time,

times and half a time.” (7:25)

How long? For a time, (two) times and half a time, usually interpreted as 3½ years. I think this is best understood as half of seven. It is not a full period of time (7), but is cut short. It may seem interminable but the time will be fulfilled. There will be an end. And then the Ancient of Days will issue his judicial ruling.

“But the court will sit, and his power will be taken away and completely destroyed forever. Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven will be handed over to the holy people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him.” (7:26-27)

There will be justice in the end. The divine court will sit. The Ancient of Days will rule in favor of the saints of the Most High, in favor of the martyrs. Such a verdict does not save them from death: they have already died at the hands of the little horn. But there will be justice beyond the grave, beyond the grave.

How does this justice happen?

It so happens that our women have been studying Revelation 13 this past week. There was no attempt to coordinate calendars to make this happen! But it is fortuitous.

The imagery of Daniel 7 permeates Revelation 13. The beast of Revelation is all four beasts of Daniel 7 rolled into one. It rises from the sea. It has seven heads, the total of the four beasts of Daniel. It is like a leopard, like a bear, and like a lion. But it is also specifically the fourth beast. It has ten horns topped with ten crowns, the diadems of rulers, for the ten horns are ten kings. It is also the little horn given a mouth uttering proud words and blasphemies for 42 months, that is 3½ years, the “time, times and half a time” of Daniel 7:25.

The beast is allowed “to wage war against God’s holy people and to conquer them” (Rev 13:7). Again, who does the allowing? It is God. Within the mystery of God’s purposes is allowing his people to be conquered by the forces of evil. “Conquer” is an important verb in Revelation and crucial to understanding the book. The beast conquers the saints (13:7), but they have conquered the dragon by the blood of the Lamb and by their faithful testimony even unto death (12:11). They are the martyrs: faithful in witness, which is the original meaning of “martyr”; and faithful witnesses even unto death, which became the meaning of “martyr.” They follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who is the archetypal witness and martyr. This all makes sense, both in Daniel and in Revelation, only when seen through the lens of Christ.

William Blake juxtaposed the tiger and the lamb. The Bible knows nothing of the tiger. But it juxtaposes the Lion and the Lamb in the person of Jesus.

John, like Daniel, has a vision into God’s heavenly court. He hears, “See, the lion of Judah has triumphed [conquered].” He looks, expecting to see a lion. But he sees a lamb standing as though slain (5:5-6). Here, as elsewhere in Revelation, John hears one thing and sees another thing, yet the two are the same. The conquering lion and the slain lamb are the same! More than that, the lion has conquered *by being* the slain lamb!

At the beginning of Revelation Jesus is described as:

the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. (1:5)

This is crucial. He is the faithful witness. He, who, before time, was in the Father’s loving embrace, gazing eye-to-eye into his face—

this very one has made God known in the world. But his faithful witness was rejected. It was rejected by his own people who entered into an unholy alliance with the fourth beast. For his faithful witness he was killed. But he is risen, and is the firstborn from the dead, and ruler of the kings of the earth. We are called to follow him in faithful witness, through death into resurrection life in God’s kingdom over which the risen Lord Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords. To those who faithfully follow him Jesus promises:

“The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.” (3:21 ESV)

Revelation includes many words of pastoral counsel. Among them are two calls for endurance and two calls for wisdom for how we should respond to the beast:

This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of God’s people. (13:10)

This calls for wisdom. (13:18)

This calls for patient endurance on the part of the people of God who keep his commands and remain faithful to Jesus. (14:12)

This calls for a mind with wisdom. (17:9)

All four words occur in the context of the beast. How do you resist the beast and his power? With endurance and by faithfully following the Lamb. And with wisdom to see the beast for what it really is: it is not worthy of worship, and is headed for destruction.

On Friday, after I had written this sermon, I read David Brooks’s weekly opinion column in *The New York Times*.³ It is about the current divisions within the evangelical church spawned by three big issues: race, Trump, and sex abuse scandals. He writes, “The proximate cause of all this disruption is Trump. But that is not the deepest cause... Power is the core problem here.” Power is the problem.

Like many others, I have been listening to *Christianity Today*’s podcast *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*. Mark Driscoll, the senior pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, built an empire—it’s hard to use any other word than that. Many were blessed, but many were hurt. In Driscoll’s own language, those who got in the way of building the empire were thrown off the bus, run over by the bus, and joined the pile of dead bodies behind the bus. But this is like the fourth beast that crushes and devours and tramples. It emerges that Driscoll was a narcissist, just like the little horn. In 2014 the Mars Hill empire suddenly collapsed. Just like Babylon: “Fallen, fallen, Babylon the Great, in just one hour.”

Driscoll’s favorite image of Jesus was the rider on the white horse, eyes blazing, sword flashing (Rev 19:11-20). Unfortunately this image of Jesus nurtured a toxic masculinity in the Mars Hill culture. The central image of Jesus in Revelation is not the rider on the white horse, but the Lamb.

David Brooks sees signs for hope, citing a case from Fuller Seminary which has a very diverse and international student body:

after ISIS launched a series of deadly attacks against Egyptian Christians, some Americans at Fuller wanted to hold a memorial service. The Egyptian students said, in effect: “What are you talking about? This is a cause for a celebration. This is about acknowledging what it means to live as a Christian in a context in which you have the privilege of martyrdom.” That idea is foreign to most American Christians, but the Egyptians led a celebratory service, which was followed by communion.”

We continue to pray for the persecuted church around the world,

highlighting a different country each week in our e-news. A few weeks ago Voice of the Martyrs released its *World Watch List 2022*, listing the fifty countries in which it is most difficult, most dangerous to be a Christian.

God's path to victory is not the "nature red in tooth and claw" of the lion or the tiger. But the weak vulnerability of the lamb, who died in our place that we might have life. God in Christ submitted himself to the brutality of human empire, of the beasts. Jesus was crushed, devoured and trampled by the fourth beast of his day. But in the death of Christ on the cross evil exhausted itself. God had absorbed the very worst of evil. God had absorbed the full power of the beast against him. After that there was nothing worse that evil could do. On the cross God in Christ triumphed over all the evil forces. Not with the strength of a lion, but with the weak vulnerability of a

lamb. This is upside-down power. It is this upside-down power that the church is called to use and to proclaim.

We are called to follow the Lamb wherever he goes. Our Lamb has conquered; let us follow him. To remind us that it is the Lamb that we follow we regularly take communion together, just like those Egyptian Christians.

1. William Blake, "The Tyger," *Songs of Experience* (London, 1794).
2. William Blake, "The Lamb," *Songs of Innocence* (London, 1789).
3. David Brooks, "The Dissenters Trying to Save Evangelicalism from Itself," Opinion, *The New York Times*, February 4, 2022.

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DARKNESS BEFORE DAWN

SERIES: ONE KING TO RULE THEM ALL

Daniel 8:1-27

Ninth Message

Bernard Bell

February 13, 2022

I hear that this afternoon on TV there is a wildlife program about conflict between tigers and rams. But I am a little puzzled. Tigers are solitary animals. They don't hunt together like lions. I don't know about rams, but they do go after goats. The best way to catch a tiger is not by its tail but with a goat, tied to a tree. The goat is no match for the tiger. And then the tiger is no match for the person hiding up the tree. As for the rams, they tend to fight each other for the ladies; I'm not sure how well they would cooperate to fight against tigers. But I like nature documentaries, so I'm intrigued to watch this one.

But I now see that I've got the wrong end of the stick. The penny just dropped. The tigers and the rams are not "real" tigers and rams at all. They're "only" two football teams: the Cincinnati Bengals and the Los Angeles Rams, facing off in the SuperBowl. But it's not my cup of tea. Still, I'm glad many of you and others in the Bay Area will be watching it. This makes it the best time of year for a bike ride.

But I've been watching rugby: the annual Six Nations Championship started last weekend. Scotland beat England, which is the most important thing. Fans go to a rugby game not just to watch the play but also to sing. What do they sing? The Scottish fans sing *Flower of Scotland*, which is so popular that it is Scotland's unofficial national anthem. O flower of Scotland! What a wimpy image! It doesn't project power. Not like the Lions or the Bears.

But Scottish, English, and Irish rugby all use a flower as their symbol: the thistle, the rose, and the shamrock. So the Scottish thistle defeated the English rose. Not the Thistles defeated the Roses. No, the singular flower stands for the country. It wasn't just the Scottish rugby team that defeated the English rugby team. Scotland defeated England. The thistle defeated the rose. Yesterday Scotland played Wales, whose national flower is the daffodil. So, some of the Welsh fans were dressed as daffodils. For them the daffodil *is* Wales and Welshness.

Now when the Scots sing "O flower of Scotland," they're not thinking about a flower at all, even though most of them have a thistle somewhere on their clothing or painted on their face. The flower of Scotland is actually people, long ago in ancient history. The song evokes a powerful memory of those who rose up and defeated the English 700 years ago at the Battle of Bannockburn (1315), popularized by the movie *Braveheart*. May the same happen today on the field with the current flower of Scotland, its rugby team.

As I'm preaching through Daniel and as our women are studying Revelation, I know that some of you are struggling with the concept of metaphors. You are used to reading the text "literally," and you are disturbed by the fact that I am not. But what is a literal reading? As I hope you have now seen from my introduction, when metaphors are involved a "literal" reading is usually the farthest thing from the intended meaning. We all use metaphors and other figures of speech in our every-day communication. Metaphors can't mean just anything. Metaphors work because of a shared culture. We navigate them automatically when communicating within a culture. But if we are communicating cross-culturally we are easily baffled by

metaphors.

Metaphors and images are even more common in dreams. Both Daniel and Revelation consist largely of dreams or visions. In Revelation the primary narrative thread is "I saw," 45 times. Four times John was "in the Spirit." He was in a Spirit-induced visionary state in which he was shown things. The source book for most of the metaphors in Revelation is not 21st-century America, but the OT. We often have trouble understanding Revelation because we don't know the OT well enough; we don't know the source book of the imagery.

Biblical interpretation has been dominated by white Western males, who read the Bible within a particular culture. I'll use an example from Revelation. At the opening of the fifth and sixth seals, John sees a swarm of locusts emerge from the Abyss and an enormous army of mounted warriors cross the Euphrates (Rev 9). Many American readers, who are most insistent that they are reading literally, think that what John sees represents modern or even future military hardware: helicopter gunships, even nuclear war. But if you talk with someone from Africa, an enormous swarm of locusts is still a very real image of total devastation. They've experienced locust swarms. And a student of history is familiar with the many times that hordes of mounted warriors swept westwards from beyond the Euphrates. Furthermore, focusing on modern military hardware feeds a fascination with militarism that I find dissonant with the message of Revelation.

Fortunately we are now hearing more voices from different cultures: from women, from scholars in the two-thirds world, and from social and cultural anthropologists. They read images quite differently. They can help us understand the metaphors.

In the first half of Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar had two vivid dreams at night. This was expected of a king. But it was not expected that the king know the meaning of the dreams, that there was a plain "literal" meaning. Instead, the king employed magicians to interpret the imagery. This was true also of Pharaoh in Joseph's day. Today one might seek out a psycho-analyst to interpret dreams or nightmares. The court magicians were unable to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's dreams, but God gave Daniel the ability to do so. Now in the second half of the book it is Daniel who has visions—four of them. He cannot interpret his own visions. Again, there isn't a plain "literal" meaning. Instead, heavenly angels interpret the meaning for him.

Today we come to Daniel's second vision. He receives it two years after the first vision, in the third year of King Belshazzar, the final king of the Babylonian Empire. The date is about 550 BC. In his vision he is transported to Susa, 200 km east of Babylon, which would become the capital of the next empire, the Persian Empire.

His vision is action-packed. It contains a ram (a male sheep), a (male) goat, and lots of horns: eight of them. Sheep and goats are both domesticated animals, unlike the wild beasts of chapter 7. Females are docile, but not the males. They're macho. They can have impressive horns which they use against competing males. Through-

out the Bible and the ancient world, horns represent power, both physical strength and authority or rule.

First, Daniel sees a two-horned ram, a male sheep. If you drive a Dodge Ram truck you're familiar with the two-horned ram. The Ram logo depicts the impressive horns of a male bighorn sheep. In Daniel's vision, one horn is longer and came up later than the other. This is contrary to nature, but we're in a vision where such things happen and they convey meaning. This ram charges forth from Susa in the east, towards the west, the north and the south. It overwhelms all in its path. No animal can stand in its way and there is none to rescue. The ram accomplishes its plan, and becomes great.

Next, a goat. We're not talking cute goats in pajamas, but a male goat with serious horns. Actually it's just one horn, which, again, is unnatural, but this is a vision. This goat comes charging from the opposite direction, from the west. At top speed it charges into the ram, shattering its two horns, knocking it to the ground, and trampling it underfoot. The tables are turned: now it's the ram's turn to have none to rescue to it. The goat becomes very great. But at the height of the goat's power an unexpected thing happens: its horn is broken off. We're not told by whom, but God is implied. In its place grow four horns towards the four winds of heaven, or, we would say, the four points of the compass.

Thus far the vision has been vivid and action-packed. But the ram and the goat and their seven horns are not the focus of the vision; they're just the prelude. Before we move on, let me give the interpretation of these elements. This is supplied by the angel Gabriel later in the chapter (20-22). He is very brief: just thirty words in Hebrew. But this interpretation covers 370 years of history!

The ram, the goat, and the horns are all symbolic: they each represent something or someone else. The two-horned ram represents the kings of Media and Persia (20). Persia is the horn that grew up later and became longer.

In 559 BC Cyrus became ruler of Persia, then a small territory within the large Median Empire. In 550 he rebelled and conquered the king of Media, who was also his grandfather. He married the king's daughter, and established the Persian Empire. Under Cyrus the Great and Darius the Great the Persian Empire grew very large, reaching all the way to the edge of Greece. Twice Persia attempted unsuccessfully to conquer Greece, first under Darius (490) then under Xerxes (480).

The goat is the king of Greece, and the large horn its first king (21). This is Alexander the Great (r. 336-323). 150 years after Darius and Xerxes, he burst out of Greece. In just three years (334-331) he conquered the entire Persian Empire, thus avenging for Persia's invasions. He built an enormous empire, the largest yet.

But Alexander died suddenly in his prime in Babylon (323), without a designated heir. For fifty years, his generals fought each other as they attempted to carve out their own mini-empires. These are the four horns representing four kingdoms (22). They are not a sequence of kingdoms as in chapter 7, but concurrent. Some see literally four kingdoms, but I read the number symbolically. There were more than four generals carving out mini-states. But they were to the four points of the compass. Each was smaller than Alexander's vast empire; none had his same power.

By the end of the fifty years of strife, two of these empires dominated the Near East: the Seleucid Empire in the north and east, and the Ptolemaic Empire in Egypt. Jerusalem was caught in the middle between them. We'll hear more about these two empires and Jerusalem in the middle in chapter 11.

The vision and its interpretation have thus far swept through many centuries. The pace now slows down; the remainder of the vision covers less than seven years. The focus is on another horn that emerges from one of the four. The vision first portrays the rapid growth of this little horn:

Out of one of them came another horn, which started small but grew in power to the south and to the east and toward the Beautiful Land. It grew until it reached the host of the heavens, and it threw some of the starry host down to the earth and trampled on them. It set itself up to be as great as the commander of the army of the Lord. (Dan 8:9-11a NIV)

There is agreement that this little horn is Antiochus IV Epiphanes. In 175 BC, he seized the throne of the Seleucid Empire through nefarious means. Starting small, he sought greatness.

There is an ominous progression throughout the vision. The ram rapidly built a large empire; it "became great" (4). The goat even more rapidly built an even larger empire; it "became very great" (8). They both built earthly empires. The little horn grew to the south and to the east and to the Beautiful Land, the land of Israel, and more specifically Jerusalem (9). Its empire on earth was not as large as the ram's or the goat's. But the little horn had other aspirations for greatness. It continued growing. It grew as far as the host of heaven (10), and still further, as far as the commander of the host (11), God himself. The little horn expanded vertically in an assault on heaven. Antiochus attempted to become God.

The vision continues with the actions taken by the little horn in its assault on heaven:

it took away the daily sacrifice from the Lord, and his sanctuary was thrown down. Because of rebellion, the Lord's people and the daily sacrifice were given over to it. It prospered in everything it did, and truth was thrown to the ground. (8:11b-12)

Here ends the vision. What a dark ending. The little horn has assaulted the Lord, his temple, and his people. It has accomplished everything it set out to do. Where is the light at the end of the tunnel? Is there anyone to deliver?

Next Daniel hears a conversation between two holy ones, presumably two angels in heaven. One asked the other:

"How long will it take for the vision to be fulfilled—the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, the rebellion that causes desolation, the surrender of the sanctuary and the trampling underfoot of the Lord's people?" (8:13)

The answer is given:

"It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated." (8:14)

How long? This is one of the most commonly asked questions in Scripture: "How long, O Lord?" It's a commonly-asked question today. How long will this pandemic continue? At midnight on Tuesday the state mask mandate will expire. But not here in Santa Clara County. How much longer will we be under a mask mandate? We all want to know. Is there an end in sight?

The angel singles out four items in the vision: the daily sacrifice, the rebellion that causes desolation, the surrender of the sanctuary, and the trampling underfoot of the Lord's people. The daily sacrifice is the *tamid* offering, the "continual" burnt offering of a lamb every morning and every evening, ever since the tabernacle was constructed over a thousand years earlier. But the little horn has taken this away. The sanctuary is the Lord's Temple in Jerusalem, over-

thrown by the little horn. The daily sacrifice, the sanctuary, and the Lord's people have been handed over to the little horn because of rebellion. Whose rebellion? Sadly, the rebellion is by the Lord's own people against him. It is the Lord who has handed them over into the oppressor's power because of their unfaithfulness; they have broken covenant. This is the "time of wrath" (19): God's wrath against his own people.

In 167 BC Antiochus acted against the Jews in Jerusalem. In the temple he set up a statue of Zeus. He desecrated the altar. He stopped the twice-daily sacrifice. He outlawed all the ordained customs of the Jews: circumcision, sabbath observance, and Torah, the Jewish Law. It was cultural genocide. Many Jews were killed. Antiochus called himself Epiphanes: God manifest. He proclaimed and presented himself as God manifest on earth. This was all a desolation, an abomination. But it was precipitated by the rebellion of God's own people.

"How long will this desolation last?" asked the angel. "It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings" (14). But what does this mean? Does an evening and a morning count as one or two? Is it 2300 days or 1150 days? Is it a little over 6 years or a little over 3 years? Those who read the number literally cannot agree. And those who read 2300 symbolically do not agree either. Perhaps we have to be content not knowing in full what this number means. It is a significant period of time, but a limited period of time.

Three times Daniel is told that his vision concerns distant events: the time of the end (17), the appointed time of the end (19), the distant future (26). It is clear that the distant days will be dark indeed. Daniel is told to seal up the vision because it concerns these distant event (26). It is not for the present time. He could have tried to put this all out of his mind, knowing that he would be long-dead before the vision be fulfilled. He does get up and go about the king's business. But he identifies emotionally with the horror of the vision:

I, Daniel, was worn out. I lay exhausted for several days... I was appalled by the vision; it was beyond understanding. (8:27)

Poor Daniel; we need to spare a thought for him. It's traumatic receiving these visions. In the previous chapter the vision left him troubled in spirit and disturbed (7:15). The interpretation was even worse, leaving him deeply troubled and ashen-faced (7:28).

But there are two small notes of hope: "the sanctuary will be reconsecrated" (13), and "he [the little horn] will be destroyed, but not by human power" (25). Nothing further is said. But the presumption is that God himself will be the agent of the little horn's destruction. This will have to be enough for Daniel to hold onto. And it will have to be enough for the faithful Jews in Jerusalem to hold onto centuries later during the persecution by Antiochus.

The book of Daniel is resistance literature. In the first half of the book, the stories of Daniel and his three friends resisting the blasphemous edicts of the kings in Babylon inspire others to resist also, to remain loyal to the one true God while living in pagan empires. In the second half, the visions of horrific beastly empires and of targeted attacks on God's faithful people inspire future generations to see the beasts for what they are—imposters—and to remain faithful to the one true God. These beasts and the little horn are not worthy of worship.

The little horn makes an assault on heaven, setting itself up as God. This is the vision of every emperor: to be God. This was true of Pharaoh, of Nebuchadnezzar, of Antiochus, of Roman Caesars. This is true of Antichrist, whether of John's letters or the man of law-

lessness of 2 Thess 2. This assault on heaven is a major part of the dynamic of the book of Revelation. The dragon has placed the beast on the throne. The false prophet orchestrates humanity to worship the beast. Revelation is also resistance literature. It unmasks the beast for what it really is: one not worthy of worship. It inspires the Christians to remain faithful: loyal and devoted to the Lamb whom they follow. Unlike the beast, the Lamb *is* worthy of their worship, and he is worthy of our worship today.

Isaiah penned a poem about the king of Babylon:

**How you have fallen from heaven,
morning star, son of the dawn!
You have been cast down to the earth,
you who once laid low the nations!
You said in your heart,
"I will ascend to the heavens;
I will raise my throne
above the stars of God;
I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly,
on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon.
I will ascend above the tops of the clouds;
I will make myself like the Most High." (Isa 14:12-14)**

"I will ascend to the heavens...I will make myself like the Most High." The poem alludes to the morning star, son of the dawn. Venus is currently visible in the pre-dawn sky. It is the brightest object in the sky, 25 times brighter than Sirius the brightest star. I've been out the past few mornings to look at it. Even well into dawn, when the sky is quite bright and the stars have disappeared, Venus is still visible. But then the sun comes up. Venus disappears. It is outshone. The Hebrew word translated as "morning star" is *heylel*, meaning a shining object in the sky. It was translated into Latin as *lucifer*, a perfectly good translation since it means "light-bearer." But along the way Lucifer was capitalized. Lucifer is not really in the text, but the poem does expose Satan's desire: to shine as brightly as God, indeed to supplant God. This is at the heart of Satan's operations.

The darkest hour is just before dawn. Some faithful Jews refused to comply with Antiochus's orders. They started the Maccabean Revolt. Three years later they captured the temple and rededicated it, commemorated ever since in Hanukkah ("Dedication"). But then they corrupted themselves with power. They built an empire. They persecuted and killed many of their own people—faithful Jews. They succumbed to the darkness.

Where then is the true sun that dispels the darkness? God's answer to the assault on heaven is not to respond with overwhelming power, but to send his Beloved into the world. His Beloved gave up his privileged position in the Father's embrace, humbled himself, made himself nothing, took on the form of a human being, even of a servant. As we read in John's Prologue:

In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it... The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. (John 1:4-5, 9-11)

As we sing in the ancient hymn, *Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence*: "The Light of light descendeth from the realms of endless day." But the world preferred to live in darkness. It put out the light. The Jewish leaders collaborated with the Roman authorities to put to death

this one who was a threat to their power. This was the darkest hour of all. Jesus died and was placed in the grave. But this was also the finest hour. A human being had been faithfully obedient to God to the very end. He had absorbed the very worst of evil and darkness but remained faithful.

It is customary to think that God turned his face away when Jesus hung on the cross. But I picture a different scenario. I think the Father was beaming on his Son with infinite pleasure, as Jesus forgave those who did him evil, as he committed his spirit into his Father's hands, and as he cried out "It is finished!" But no one else knew that it was the finest hour. The disciples thought it was the darkest hour. The Jewish leaders were micromanaging the situation lest it get out of hand. For the Romans it was just another day, disposing of troublesome revolutionaries. But God knew that it was the finest hour.

Most of us go through dark times. I think of the Coptic martyrs whom ISIS lined up on the beach beside the Mediterranean. The darkest hour for them, and yet the finest hour, as they remained faithful to death and were joined in their martyrdom by a black African. Our darkness may not be as dark as theirs, but we still encounter darkness. What is yours? Perhaps your darkness is the never-ending pandemic. Or fear, uncertainty and doubt. Or worry and anxiety about kids, employment, health or old age.

How do we respond when it is so dark? In a passage that our men studied just two weeks ago, Paul urged, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:21). How do we do this? How do we live in darkness but not respond with darkness, not be sucked into darkness? How do we live under evil and respond without getting sucked into evil? How do we respond to evil with good, to darkness with light? By looking to Jesus and praying for God's spirit to

work in us—so that we can respond to darkness with light: with love, kindness, gentleness, with the fruit of the Spirit. This is what God is wanting to work in us, so that we are able to disempower darkness and evil, not with power, but with the fruit of the Spirit. Then, for us too, the darkest hour can be our finest hour, when we respond to evil with good, to darkness with light. I cannot promise you that the darkness will lift, that it will all go away. But what I can say is that in our darkness God wants to enable us to respond with light. To respond as Jesus responded to his darkness.

Which Jesus do we look to? Last week I mentioned Mark Driscoll's favorite image of Jesus: the rider on the white horse, slashing away with his sword, dripping with blood. But one of the most potent symbols of Jesus is the *Agnus Dei*, the Lamb of God. This is an ancient symbol, going back well over a thousand years. It is rich in meaning. It is the antithesis of the beasts, the antithesis of the horns, the antithesis of power. This lamb has no horns. Instead it has a wound. It is a lamb standing—standing as though slain. Its breast is pierced by a cross. From the cross flies the banner of resurrection, a red cross on a white background. Behind its head is a golden halo or nimbus, signifying deity. This is God. The red cross in the halo signifies that this is Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. In our window this *Agnus Dei* is atop the cross, facing the Lion. The Lion has conquered not with the power of a lion, but by being the slain Lamb. May we be shaped by this image of Jesus in our dark times. May it inspire us to our own acts of resistance: resistance to darkness and to evil by doing good and living in the light.

Our Lamb has conquered. Let us follow him.

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HOW LONG?

SERIES: ONE KING TO RULE THEM ALL

Daniel 9:1-27

Tenth Message

Bernard Bell

February 20, 2022

Two weeks ago Sue and I attended a concert for the first time in two years: Bach's *Mass in B minor* at Stanford's Bing Auditorium. Our previous concert had been at the same venue, on March 4, 2020. That started with an announcement that it would be the last event: Stanford was canceling all events with over 150 people. Over the next two weeks the Bay Area rapidly shut down, and by March 19 the entire state was under a shelter-in-place order. On March 22 I preached to an empty auditorium.

How long would this last? We all thought it would be just a few weeks, then we would return to normal. But there were some doctors saying it was more serious. It did indeed turn out to be much more serious. We're still not out of it.

How long? When will it end? Is there an end in sight? Questions we've all been asking. Questions the Psalmist asked, as we read in our Call to Worship: Psalm 13 with its fourfold "How long?" in the first two verses. Perhaps now we have more sympathy for our kids who ask on a road trip: How much longer? Are we there yet?

Today we come to Daniel's third vision. It is the first year of Darius the Mede. The Babylonian Empire has ended, swallowed up by the rapidly-expanding Persian Empire. The year is 539 BC. Daniel, ever the faithful Jew, has been reading the Scriptures, and specifically the writings of Jeremiah, the Lord's faithful prophet who had not been afraid to confront his people with bad news from God:

Because you have not listened to my words, I will summon...my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon...and I will bring [him] against this land and its inhabitants... This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and [they] will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt. (Jer 25:8-12 NIV)

That year was 605 BC, the year that Jerusalem first came under the power of Nebuchadnezzar, and also the year that Daniel was carried off to Babylon. How long? God's disobedient people would be under Babylonian power for 70 years.

Eight years later in 597 Jeremiah sent a letter to the Jewish exiles in Babylon. False prophets were claiming that the exile would last just two years, then they would be back in Jerusalem: life would quickly return to normal. Jeremiah told the exiles to adjust to a new normal: long-term life in Babylon. He told them to build houses and settle down, plant gardens and eat their produce, marry and have children and grandchildren. He told them to seek the welfare (*shalom*) of their city of exile, for in its welfare (*shalom*) would be their welfare (*shalom*) (29:5-7). But there was hope far off:

When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future... I will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the

nations and places where I have banished you... and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile. (Jer 29:10-14)

I. Daniel's Prayer (9:3-15)

Now the Babylonian Empire has ended. Daniel has been in Babylon for 66 years. The seventy years must be nearly up. The hope that was once far off is now close. Several passages in the OT promise that if God's people, in exile for their disobedience, seek the Lord in humility and confession, then he would remember them.

And so Daniel does exactly this. He seeks the Lord in prayer: in confession and petition. He has been faithful to the Lord throughout his many years in Babylon. He has been faithful in prayer, risking even the lions' den to keep praying. Nevertheless he identified with his people. He prepared himself by fasting, and putting on sackcloth and ashes, all symbols of repentance and sorrow. Then he prayed a great prayer of corporate confession and petitioned the Lord for mercy. This is one of the great prayers of the OT.

His prayer is not original. It draws upon the reservoir of language contained in Scripture. He had existing language to use. Often evangelicals look down on set prayers as being inauthentic, rote, empty ritual. But set prayers are well thought out.

The church has another great reservoir of set prayers in the *Book of Common Prayer*, prepared in 1549 by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer for the fledgling Church of England. He drew on another reservoir: a thousand-plus years of liturgy of the Western church. The Prayer Book has in turn become a reservoir from which God's people have drawn for 450 years. I'll draw from it today.

There are four major aspects to Daniel's prayer: he praises God's character, confesses Israel's sin, laments Israel's sorry condition, and petitions the Lord for mercy.

First, he praises God: "Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love" (4). Later, "The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving" (9). This was fundamental to God's self-revelation. Atop Mt Sinai, after the episode of the golden calf, Moses asked God to reveal his glory. The Lord declared himself to Moses 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. (Exod 34:6-7)

This became for Israel a credal statement about God, repeated throughout the OT. Who is Yahweh, the God of Israel, the one true God? This is as good a formulation of God as any.

Secondly, Daniel confesses the people's sin. He includes himself, even though he has been faithful. It is "we" not "they." This is a prayer of corporate confession: "we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled" (5). He repeats at the end of his confession: "we have sinned, we have done wrong" (15). Sinned, done wrong, been wicked, rebelled. This is comprehensive. But it is

even worse.

He piles on terms to express the depth of Israel's sin. He repeats sin (8, 11) and rebelled (9). He adds yet more terms. Unfaithfulness (7): we have been disloyal with disloyalty. Israel has violated its legal obligations under covenant. Four times he says we have not listened, either to the Lord (10,11,14) or to his faithful prophets who spoke in his name (6). Instead, we turned away and transgressed the Lord's commandments, his Torah (5, 11). This is as comprehensive a confession as there is in all Scripture. He doesn't whitewash, or trivialize what the people have done. He doesn't sweep it under the carpet.

We find similar honesty in the Prayer Book. In both Morning and Evening Prayer, so twice daily, the General Confession begins:

We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us.

This, too, is comprehensive. Sins of omission: we have left undone those things which ought to be done. Sins of commission: we have done those things which ought not to be done.

In a chiasm that NIV completely obscures, Daniel contrasts the Lord's character with Israel's sin (7-9):

To you, O Lord, belongs righteousness, but to us [belongs] open shame... To us belongs open shame... To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness. (7-9 ESV)

On Israel's side is "open shame"—literally "shame of face." Shame that is openly visible all across one's face. Many of you are from honor-shame cultures, so you understand this language. This is illustrated in Jesus's parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). Both went to the temple to pray, but that was their only similarity. The Pharisee prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people." But the tax collector hung his head: his face was so full of shame that he could not look up to heaven as he cried out, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

"To us belongs open shame... to us belongs open shame." Who is the us? Daniel casts the net very wide: "the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Israel, both near and far, in all the countries where you have scattered us" (7); "our kings, our princes and our ancestors" (8). Who is us? It is everyone!

Why is God's people so shame-faced? "Because of our unfaithfulness to you" (7); "because we have sinned against you" (8). In the inner pair of the chiasm, God's people is as bad as can possibly be.

Now the outer pair. On the Lord's side is Righteousness (7), and Mercy and Forgiveness (9). All three words have the article in Hebrew, so I've capitalized them. To us these might seem contradictory.

First, his Righteousness. Many think of this as a dry, legal concept, a forensic term. It is personal. God has acted rightly and faithfully in all that he has done. He has been true to his character, to his covenant, to his promises. What he says, he does. This is his Righteousness.

Secondly, his Mercy or Compassion and his Forgiveness. He has a tender heart: the same heart a woman has towards the child of her womb.

Both sides of this are expressed in the Lord's self-revelation to Moses. He is "abounding in love and faithfulness"; that is in *hesed* covenant loyalty, and in truth or reliability. He is also "the compas-

sionate and gracious God, slow to anger...and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." It is because God is characterized by Righteousness that he is also characterized by Compassion and Forgiveness. The two meet in him. He pursues restorative justice rather than only retributive justice.

Why is God a compassionate and forgiving God? Daniel gives the reason in verse 9b, but translations differ in how they render the conjunction. Does God forgive "*even though* we have rebelled against him" (NIV and others), or "*for*" (ESV), or "*because* we have rebelled against him"? Is God a forgiving God despite our rebellion or because of our rebellion? He forgives because we are rebellious.

Similarly, the evil of the human heart was grounds for divine judgment in the Flood, but also grounds for God's mercy in not repeating that act. It is because "every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood" that God keeps the world going (Gen 8:21).

Similarly, at the episode of the golden calf, Israel's stiff-necked nature was grounds for divine judgment, but also for divine mercy. Moses petitioned the Lord: "*Because* this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and sin" (Exod 34:9).

This is the second aspect of Daniel's prayer: a comprehensive statement of Israel's sin both on its own, but also contrasted with God's faithfulness and his forgiving compassion.

Referring again to the Prayer Book, in the Prayer of Humble Access, in the liturgy of Holy Communion, we pray:

We do not presume to come to this your Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercies.

Thirdly, Daniel laments the sorry condition of people and land. The Lord has brought on them "great disaster," the desolation of Jerusalem, both city and temple.

Finally, he petitions the Lord to "turn away your anger and your wrath" (16), "to look with favor on your desolate sanctuary" (17).

Four times Daniel has confessed that we have not listened/obeyed. But he now petitions God to listen to his pleas. We haven't listened to you, but please listen to us!

Twice Daniel petitions the Lord to act "for your sake" (17-18). What do we mean when we say "for his name's sake"? Daniel has a God-centered not man-centered perspective. God needs to act for his sake not for Israel's sake or for our sake. Both Jerusalem and the people bear God's name. So God's honor and character are at stake. God has called out Abraham and his descendants to be a new humanity, to which purpose he has bound himself in covenant. He will succeed in this purpose. This is his Righteousness. He said he will do something, and he will do it. He will fulfill his purposes. Because the other party to the covenant is flaky, he will forgive and restore, so that he be proved faithful and succeed in his purposes. Now, this is to the great benefit of his people, but it is not primarily for his people. It is for the honor of God's name: that he fulfill what he set out to do. This is why it is important to hold together God's Righteousness and his Compassion and Forgiveness. These meet together in "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God...abounding in love (*hesed*) and faithfulness."

Daniel ends with an impassioned plea: "Lord, listen! Lord, forgive! Lord, hear and act!" (19). Will God hear? Will he forgive? Will he act? How long will it take?

2. Gabriel (9:20-23)

While Daniel was still praying this corporate confession, the angel Gabriel came to him in a vision. He said, “As soon as you began to pray, a word went out, which I have come to tell you” (23). Looking again to the Prayer Book, this time the Collect for the Twelfth Sunday of Trinity:

Almighty and everlasting God, who is always more ready to hear than we are to pray and who wants to give more than we desire or deserve, pour down upon us your abundant mercy, forgiving us those things in which our conscience is afraid and giving to us that which our prayer dare not presume to ask...

Daniel didn't have to harangue God to hear and see. He didn't have to try to get the right formula. As soon as he prayed God heard. And Gabriel was sent to enable Daniel to understand the times, to give him insight and understanding. But what Gabriel says in vv. 24-27 seems counterproductive to insight and understanding!

3. The Seventy Weeks (9:24-27)

Seventy ‘sevens’ are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the Most Holy Place. (9:24)

Jeremiah said that God's judgment of exile would last 70 years. These 70 years are nearly up. But Gabriel seems to be saying that this is insufficient time. Both people and city need much longer for restoration: 70 “sevens.” Gabriel specifies six purposes for these 70 sevens, arranged in two triplets.

The first triplet concerns transgression, sin and wickedness. To finally put an end to them and atone will take much longer than seventy years. It will take 70 “sevens.”

The second triplet is positive. Firstly, to bring in everlasting righteousness. Daniel's prayer confessed that righteousness belongs to the Lord and Israel has none. Secondly, to seal vision and prophecy: to authenticate the prophetic vision as true. And thirdly, to anoint the Most Holy Place: to reconsecrate the inner sanctuary of the Lord's sanctuary in Jerusalem that currently lies in ruins.

It is assumed that the “sevens” are weeks, hence the widespread reference to the Seventy Weeks of Daniel 9. It is further assumed that each “seven” is a period of seven years. So, the seventy weeks are 490 years.

Gabriel breaks down the seventy sevens into three periods: an initial seven sevens, then sixty-two sevens, and a final seven, in the middle of which something happens.

Much has been written about these three verses (25-27). Yet again I am in the position of speaking to two different audiences. A few of you know a lot about the Seventy Weeks, and are eager to see what I am going to say. But most of you have no idea; you have no insight or understanding of these seventy sevens or weeks.

Many take the seventy “sevens” as a literal 490 years, divided into 49, 434 and 7 years. But these many interpretations differ widely on their timelines.

They disagree on when to start the clock. It starts “from the time the word goes out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem.” But which word is this, and when was it given? Is it one of Jeremiah's prophecies? But which one: in 605, or 597, or 587? Or is it a decree by one of the Persian kings? The decree by Cyrus allowing Jews to return to rebuild the temple (538)? Or the decree by Artaxerxes allowing Ezra to return

(458), or Nehemiah to return (444)? That's a range of 160 years just on when to start the clock!

They disagree on the speed of the clock. One popular view requires running the clock at 360 days per year rather than 365. They disagree on whether the clock runs continually. Some interpretations stop the clock for an extended time-out. So, there's wide disagreement on the clock.

They disagree on the two references to an anointed one. The seven “sevens” run until an anointed ruler (25). Who is this anointed one? NIV has capitalized this and added the article: “the Anointed One.” Because in Sunday School we learn that the answer is always Jesus! But this is not at all evident. Others take it as King Cyrus, who is called the Lord's anointed (Isa 45:1), or Joshua or Zerubbabel, also called “anointed” (Zech 4:14).

After the 62 “sevens,” an anointed one will be cut off, presumably by death (26). Is this the same anointed one as in v. 25? NIV clearly thinks so. But this requires combining the 7 sevens and the 62 sevens into one block. But this is contrary to the Hebrew text.

And so the problems continue. Those who interpret these verses literally have produced a large number of wildly different timelines.

I do want to detail one of these literal interpretations because it has been so influential as a core part of dispensationalism. I know that many of you have grown up with this view. It is deeply ingrained in the thinking of some people.

The clock starts with Nehemiah, then runs at an accelerated pace of 360 days per year. The two anointed ones are both Jesus. He comes on Palm Sunday, entering Jerusalem as Israel's King. But on Good Friday he is put to death, rejected by his people. The clock stops with the death of Jesus, and has remained stopped. During this stoppage God pursues plan B, the Church Age, which was not foreseen in Daniel 9 nor elsewhere in the OT. The Church will be raptured out of the earth, whereupon the clock starts ticking again for the final “week,” the final 7 years. This is the Great Tribulation. Antichrist will come and destroy city and temple. But wait, there is no temple in Jerusalem. It was destroyed in AD 70. So, the Jerusalem temple has to be rebuilt before the final week, so that it can be destroyed. This is why so many American evangelical Christians are so interested in rebuilding the temple. The “week” ends in Armageddon, which ushers in the millennium. I'm sure some of you grew up with detailed charts and timelines of this interpretation, which claims to be a literal interpretation.

Is there a different way of reading the text? Is there a way of reading it symbolically? I think there is. All the clues are given within Scripture itself, if we just allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. There are two important passages to help us.

Firstly, we note how Israel's Scriptures end. Chronicles is the last book in the Hebrew canon. It ends with a summary of the exile (2 Chr 36:15-23). Because of their repeated unfaithfulness, God gave his people over to Nebuchadnezzar who took them into exile in Babylon, where they served him until Persia came to power. During this period the land enjoyed its sabbath rests for 70 years. At the end of the 70 years King Cyrus of Persia proclaimed that God had appointed him to rebuild his temple. God's people could go home, and “may the Lord their God be with them.” Thus ends the Hebrew Bible. The reason for 70 years of judgment is so that the Land can enjoy its long-overdue rest. The decree by Cyrus is a liberation for the people from slavery to Babylon. They are free to go back home.

The other passage is Leviticus 25-26. Can anything good come

out of Leviticus?!! These two chapters teach us how to count. First, the Sabbath Year (25:1-7). The land was to work for six years then rest for a year. Next the Jubilee Year (25:8-55). After seven sabbath cycles, that is 49 years, in the fiftieth year people in slavery were restored to freedom. God provided both land and people with a periodic reset. Chapter 26 contains warnings of punishment for disobedience. Four times Israel is warned that if it persists in not heeding the Lord, he will punish their sins seven-fold (26:18, 21, 24, 28).

This is sufficient to construct a symbolic timeline. The seventy years of exile was God's judgment on his people for their sin. The land enjoyed its sabbath rests, suggesting that for 420 years it had been denied rest. By the end of the exile Israel the Land was restored and ready for work again. But 70 years was not enough to restore Israel the People. God imposed seven-fold judgment: 70 sevens. But this period is also ten jubilee cycles. The first period of 7 sevens is one jubilee cycle, which is also the exile, ending in freedom as Cyrus allowed Israel the People to go home to Israel the Land. The people had been freed from slavery to Babylon. But it was only a limited freedom. The completion of Israel's seven-fold judgement is also the completion of the tenth jubilee cycle. So the expectation is of a grand Jubilee, a proclamation of freedom for the people. But just before that liberation the final seven is a dark time. As I covered last week, the darkest and coldest hour of the night is just before dawn.

This interpretation shows that God cares about both Land and People. Both needed restoration. The sabbath years were for the Land. The jubilee years were for the People. The exile restored the Land. But it takes sevenfold to restore the People in a grand Jubilee.

In Luke's telling of the story of Jesus, after he had been baptized and filled by the Spirit, and had faithfully passed the test in the wilderness, his first act was to speak in the synagogue in Nazareth. He quoted Isaiah 61:1-2.

**“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,**

**to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (Luke 4:18-19)**

Then he said, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”
The Jubilee has arrived in Jesus!

But Jesus was rejected and killed. It was the darkest hour. But it was also the finest hour as a human being finally fulfilled the human side of the covenant. There finally was a loyal, faithful partner. Jesus did what both Adam and Israel had failed to do. For this he was killed by a rebellious humanity. The darkest hour of all was killing the one true faithful human, the only loyal one. God vindicated him in resurrection. Then, amazingly, God spreads his arms wide and bids all come and find forgiveness in Jesus. Because he is a compassionate and forgiving God. He invites all to come and enter into his Jubilee. To find liberation from bondage and slavery to sin.

We have seen that sin is dark. It is much worse than we thought. You may feel deep shame, that your sin is a burden too heavy to bear. But, secondly, we have seen that God's character combines his righteousness with his compassion and forgiveness. They meet together in him and supremely in Christ Jesus.

God has a purpose: a purpose for the world and a purpose for people. He has created the world as an expression of his love, to be a vehicle for his glory, and to be the place where he dwells with his people. He has created people in his image to represent him in the world. And to ultimately be his people over whom he spreads his glory, drawing us into his eternal glory. He accomplishes this in Christ Jesus. And ultimately there will be a new heavens and a new earth, in which he dwells with his people. God will be faithful to his intentions for both world and people. This is his righteousness.

Thirdly, we have seen that God is abundantly ready to hear our prayer when we cry out, “Lord, have mercy.” He responds in compassion and forgiveness, because this is who he is. He restores because he is a righteous God. He invites us into freedom, in Christ Jesus. He invites us into his Jubilee.

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BEHIND THE SCENES

SERIES: ONE KING TO RULE THEM ALL

Daniel 10:1–11:1

Eleventh Message

Bernard Bell

February 27, 2022

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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FAITHFUL RESISTANCE

SERIES: ONE KING TO RULE THEM ALL

Daniel 11:2-45

Twelfth Message

Bernard Bell

March 6, 2022

The world admires and is inspired by the resistance of the Ukrainian people and their President, Volodymyr Zelensky. He has risen to the occasion, refusing to flee. He is providing a very different sort of leadership than Putin.

The world is showing its own resistance in many different ways. By flying the Ukrainian flag. By projecting the flag onto famous buildings: the Eiffel Tower, the Sydney Opera House, the Empire State Building, and many more. By opening Saturday Night Live with a Ukrainian choir singing *Prayer for Ukraine*. And by many standing ovations: in Congress for the Ukrainian ambassador during the State of the Union Address in a rare moment of bipartisan unity; in the UK House of Commons for the ambassador—which is exceedingly rare; and in the EU Parliament for President Zelensky, speaking by video link.

These are relatively costless but effective expressions of solidarity with the people of Ukraine in their resistance to Russian aggression.

As I continue to follow the war in Ukraine through the lens of Daniel, I find that this week's chapter 11 is even more relevant than last week's chapter 10.

Chapters 10–12 contain the fourth and final vision given to Daniel. Chapter 10 is the lengthy introduction. The actual angelic message of the vision is in 11:2–12:4, after the angel's words, "Now then, I tell you the truth" (11:2a NIV). I will leave the last four verses of the message (12:1-4) for next week. The angel's message is very long: it took eight minutes to read just now.

Did you keep track of people and events during the reading? It sounds like a history book, and of a period of history that most people know nothing about. Most of the chapter can be mapped onto the history of the Ancient Near East over a period of 370 years, 536–166 BC. But this chapter does not serve well as a history text. Many kings are mentioned, but we are not given any names. What sort of text is it then? I find it helpful to think of this chapter as showing patterns of history. With patterns we don't need to know actual names. Some of you are data scientists: you anonymize data but are still able to discern patterns. Here in Daniel 11 we have anonymized kings, but the pattern is very clear. More important than names is the repeated vocabulary and themes. These clearly reveal the patterns. I want to highlight four groups of words.

The most obvious vocabulary is of kings, kingdoms and dominion. These kings are always on the move: they "rise up," they "come," and they "return." This is what most kings in the ancient world did: they rose up in succession to the previous king, they went into battle against another kingdom, and they returned home. We are being shown patterns of behavior.

Twice in v. 4 NIV translates the word "kingdom" as "empire." I wish this were done more frequently, and that other translations would also do so. What is the difference between a kingdom and an empire? A king rules over his own people; the kingdom and the people are one. As we saw last week, the Table of Nations (Gen 10) presents family clans, land, language and people as a quartet of fea-

tures defining each of the seventy peoples. An empire contains many peoples. All the kings in this chapter are rulers of empire, not merely kingdoms. Empires are insatiable: for land, people, power and wealth. Empires need other peoples and lands to supply their insatiable appetite. The empire supplies the capital city; the body nourishes the head.

The chapter features four empires. Verses 2-4 serve as a quick introduction, covering 200 years of history. The sequence of empires starts with the Persian Empire (2), in which more kings will arise. How many more kings? The familiar pattern of 3+1; three, yea a fourth. There were actually 13 kings of the Persian Empire beginning with Cyrus the Great. But in the imagery that we have seen again and again in this book, there are 3+1 where the fourth is the pinnacle of power, wealth, and fearsome strength. The Persian Empire was huge, and its kings lived in great splendor and wealth. But empire is never satisfied, so two of the kings attempted to conquer Greece to make their empire still bigger.

Next a mighty king arises (3). This is Alexander the Great who rapidly conquered the Persian Empire. Ominously, he does as he pleases, which is a recurring theme, first used of the Persian kings (8:4). But Alexander's empire does not last long. As soon as he arises, it is broken up and divided to the four points of the compass (4). After his early death, his generals squabbled over the empire, carving out their own mini-empires.

This has all been covered in an earlier vision, chapter 8, where the two-horned ram was Persia, the one-horned goat was Alexander, and the four horns were the successor empires.

Now the pace slows down for the kings of the North and the South (5-20). These are the rulers of the Seleucid Empire to the north in Syria and the Ptolemaic Empire to the south in Egypt. These are the two most successful empires to emerge from the pieces of Alexander's massive empire. They are north and south from Jerusalem. These verses cover about 130 years, so there are actually numerous kings. They spend most of the time invading each other—because that is what empires do.

The pace slows further still for a "contemptible person" (21). The text does not initially identify him as king, because he "has not been given the honor of royalty." Nevertheless, he seizes the crown and behaves like a king. It is unclear if this usurper king is the subject all the way through the end of the chapter—that is a matter of debate.

So, this chapter is about kings and kingdoms. It is about dueling empires. First an east–west duel between Persia and Greece. Next a north-south duel. New rulers regularly arise, and attempt to get dominance over the other empire. If you want to know details of which kings are fighting which kings, you can consult a detailed commentary. But I am not going to give you that information, because I do not think the angelic message is really about the actual history of these kings. I am going to treat this as anonymized data because this is ultimately about patterns.

Jerusalem is caught in between these two empires of North and

South. But Jerusalem is used to being in between. Previously it was in between the ram that charged from east to west, and the goat that charged from west to east. Not much changed when Jerusalem's occupier transitioned from the Persian Empire to Alexander's Greek Empire. Now, with the kings of the North and the South, the conflict is closer to home, since the capital cities of the Seleucid and Ptolemaic Empires are much closer, and the routes along which the dueling armies pass are through the land of Israel. But Jerusalem is not yet directly impacted during the first few rounds of dueling.

The second set of repeated language is military language. There are armies and fortresses; there are siege ramps to capture the fortresses of the other side. There are numerous words for strength and power. These empires are always fighting one another. Sometimes one army is so powerful that it sweeps the other side away like a flood. This is clearest in vv. 10-13 which describes an escalating arms race. There is rarely a moment of peace in the entire chapter.

The third set of language concerns deceit. Three times there is an attempt to make an alliance between the empires. On two occasions, one king gives his daughter in marriage to the other king. That was the way it worked back then. Love had nothing to do with it. This was the same of Vladimir of Kiev in 988: the Byzantine Emperor gave his sister in marriage in return for military support, on condition that Vladimir convert to Christianity. In v. 6 it is the king of the South who gives his daughter; in v. 17 it is the king of the North. But these are not honest deals. The father of the bride is not seriously seeking peace. Instead he is using his daughter as a means to infiltrate the enemy court. When the king of the South gave his daughter to the king of the North (6), there was a betrayal. The king of the North abandoned his new wife, the other king's daughter, and went back to his first wife whom he had been forced to put away. Everyone felt betrayed, resulting in much bloodshed. In v. 17 the king of the North gave his daughter "in order to overthrow the kingdom." But she frustrated her father's deceitful design by actually being loyal to her husband.

The deception continues. In v. 27 the two kings, of North and South, "sit at the same table and lie to each other." It is impossible for rulers of two empires to sit at the same table and be honest with each other. By definition, empire does not allow the presence of another empire in the vicinity.

A final set of words concerns arrogance. This, too, is of the nature of empire. In 8:4 we read that the ram, that is Persia, did as it pleases. Now we read the same thing three more times: of Alexander the Great of Greece (3), of the king of the North (16), and of the final king (36). The king of the South was filled with pride (12). The final king exalts and magnifies himself above every god (36-37). This is the goal of every emperor, whether Babylonian, Persian, Greek or Roman. The delusion of thinking himself god. We have seen this theme throughout the entire book of Daniel.

Empire, power, deceit and arrogance. This vocabulary is repeated throughout the chapter because this is true of all empire. This comes through loud and clear throughout the anonymized list of kings. The individual king may change, but the patterns of history remain the same. Some rulers are such effective empire-builders, using these four means, that they are called Great: Cyrus the Great and Darius the Great of the Persian Empire; Alexander the Great; Antiochus III the Great of the Seleucid Empire; Peter the Great and Catherine the Great of the Russian Empire. But others are given a less noble moniker: Ivan the Terrible, the first Tsar of Russia.

Empire, power, deceit and arrogance. These are true of Putin. He is not leading Russia as a President, as one who cares for the people. He is functioning as an absolute monarch, as the Tsar. How will he be known: Putin the Great or Putin the Terrible? Will his name live on in fame or in infamy? Or will his name be blotted out?

This is all very different from the way Israel's king was supposed to behave. He was to lead the people in righteousness and justice. He was to shepherd the people so that all flourish, especially the weak: the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant.

As the kings of the North and South fight each other for dominance, the conflict does eventually come to Jerusalem. The king of the North establishes himself in the Beautiful Land (16). Jerusalem and the Land of Israel passes from the Ptolemaic Empire of the South to the Seleucid Empire of the North. This happened under Antiochus III, Antiochus the Great. But the angel does not call this king of the North "Great." Instead, this king does as he pleases (16), just like the Persian kings, just like Alexander. This is never a compliment. Instead it indicates a coming fall.

How does this "great" king fall? He overstepped himself and came to ruin. His devious plan to gain control of the South by marrying off his daughter was frustrated when she proved loyal to her husband (17). So he turned his attention elsewhere, to capture territory—because this is what empires do. But he ran into a new, rising power—the "commander" (18) led the Roman army. Rome inflicted a devastating defeat then imposed an enormous financial penalty. The king was killed on his way home. Swift was his fall. He was succeeded by one son then another. The first was killed (20).

The second son is the "contemptible person" (21). This is Antiochus IV. He was of royal blood, since his father had been king, but he was not in the line of succession. He seized the throne "through intrigue" (21) and by acting deceitfully (22). He attacked the king of the South—again because this is what kings do. But then the two kings "sit at the same table and lie to each other" (27). He returned home, with his heart set against the holy covenant (28), that is, against God's people in Jerusalem. Now the behavior of these kings directly impacts Jerusalem through this one king. He is the particular focus of the rest of the chapter. After invading the South again he is opposed by ships of the western coastlands, again the Romans, who tell him to go home. Thwarted in his imperial ambitions, he looks elsewhere.

Now the pace slows further still. We will pay particular attention to vv. 30-39.

Then he will turn back and vent his fury against the holy covenant. He will return and show favor to those who forsake the holy covenant. (11:30)

He is on his way home from Egypt after Rome had blocked his plans. He is in an angry rage, so he vented his fury on Jerusalem and the Jews. It seems that he raided the temple treasury. He returned to Jerusalem where he lavished gifts upon Jews who took his side.

His armed forces will rise up to desecrate the temple fortress and will abolish the daily sacrifice. Then they will set up the abomination that causes desolation. With flattery he will corrupt those who have violated the covenant, but the people who know their God will firmly resist him. (11:31-32)

Antiochus IV desecrated God's sacred sanctuary, the temple in Jerusalem. He abolished the daily sacrifice, that is, the lamb that went up as a "continual" burnt offering every morning and every evening, every day of the year, as had been done for a thousand years.

He set up the abomination of desolation. He put up a statue of Zeus in the temple. He sacrificed a pig on the altar. He acted against all the symbols of Judaism.

God's people were now faced with a choice: how to respond to this brutality and religious oppression. They responded in three different ways. Now we are getting to the heart of the chapter.

Some Jews sided with the king: to save their skin, or because they could profit from association with the king, or because they supported his hellenistic policies of promoting Greek culture. These are "those who forsake...and have violated the covenant" (30, 32). The king flatters them. He rewards them. But they are corrupted by him. One notable way in which they are corrupted is that they outbid one another to purchase from the king the office of high priest. In those days without their own king, the leader of the Jewish people in Jerusalem and the Land was the high priest. The last legitimate high priest, the "prince of the covenant" was killed (22). The office of high priest would be for sale for the next 250 years. This is the first response, to cooperate with the regime in return for material reward.

Others chose to resist. These are "the people who know their God." They acknowledge God as the one true God. They remain true to him, loyal and devoted. They firmly resist the king. They are strong and they take action. Some responded with active resistance. One family of Jews killed a soldier then fled to the hills where they launched a rebellion, the Maccabean Revolt. They took up arms. The leader, Judah, earned the nickname ha-Maccabee, the Hammer. This active resistance proved successful, and after three years they recaptured the temple and rededicated it, an event commemorated ever since as Hanukkah. But there is a danger in active resistance such as this. The rebels kept going in their attacks on the Seleucid forces. Eventually they drove the Seleucids completely out of the Land. Israel became an independent nation again. It needed a king. The leader of the revolt declared himself king, even though he was of the line of Levi not the line of Judah. The kingdom proved successful militarily. It expanded to be as large as it ever was under David and Solomon. But it was corrupt. The active resistance used the same methods as the oppressor, thereby corrupting itself. Eventually it became the oppressor, killing many faithful Jews. This second response is active resistance, which runs the risk of responding to evil with evil.

There is another form of resistance:

Those who are wise will instruct many, though for a time they will fall by the sword or be burned or captured or plundered. When they fall, they will receive a little help, and many who are not sincere will join them. Some of the wise will stumble, so that they may be refined, purified and made spotless until the time of the end, for it will still come at the appointed time. (11:33-35)

The wise did not take up arms. Instead they taught: they gave instruction on how to understand the times. Who are these wise people? They are the spiritual successors of Daniel and his three friends. One of their qualifications to enter training for the Babylonian king's service was "showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand" (1:4). The word translated "showing aptitude" is the same word translated here as "the wise." Daniel and his friends were trained in Babylonian language and literature so that they could serve the king. But they also had wisdom and knowledge and understanding to be able to remain faithful to God while in such service. They walked the fine line of serving both the king and their God. When loyalty to the king conflicted with loyalty to God, they were not afraid to refuse the king. They did so

at great peril. Daniel was thrown into the lions' den. His three friends were thrown into the super-heated blazing, fiery furnace. God did deliver them, but they did not count on that deliverance when they were thrown in to meet their death.

These stories of Daniel in the first half of the book would help these wise people at the time of Antiochus IV 350 years later. They resisted passively. They did not take up arms. Like Daniel and his friends, they risked death. But unlike Daniel and his friends, God did not deliver them from death. They fell by the sword or the flame, by captivity or plunder. They were martyrs. But in their martyrdom they were "refined, purified and made spotless until the time of the end."

So, three responses to oppression. Join the oppressor out of fear or for reward. Active resistance, responding in kind. Or passive resistance, quietly teaching people how to understand the times, and unmasking evil.

This pattern persisted in the time of Jesus. The Sadducees were the religious leaders in Jerusalem. They acted in cooperation with the Roman government, from whom they purchased the office of high priest. In return they were rewarded with power and wealth. Secondly, there were Zealots who were willing to use violence against the Roman oppressor. Among Jesus's own disciples was Simon the Zealot, and perhaps Judas Iscariot. Jesus followed the third way of passive resistance.

The contemptible person, Antiochus IV, continued his imperial ambitions. He did as he pleased. This is now the fourth ruler to be so described, after the Persians, including Cyrus the Great and Darius the Great, Alexander the Great, Antiochus the Great. But, as we've seen, "doing as you please" does not mark one out as great. It marks one out for a fall.

Antiochus IV exalted and magnified himself above every god (36). The word "god" occurs eight times in vv. 36-39. He exalted himself above them all (37). Antiochus proclaimed himself to the world as *Theos Epiphanes*, God made manifest. He presented himself as God on earth. So he is known to history as Antiochus IV Epiphanes. This is the pinnacle for empire-builders: to be god, as we have seen throughout the book. But he was resisted by those who changed his moniker from *Epiphanes*, God made manifest, to *Epimanes*, madman.

Somewhere in the last part of this chapter it seems that the angel is no longer describing Antiochus IV but someone even greater than he. Christians consider this to be Antichrist. Certainly Antiochus is a model for Antichrist, as shown by Paul's description of the man of lawlessness (2 Thess 2:1-12).

Looking back later, Jews see the figure of Antiochus and his abomination of desolation fulfilled again in Pompey who captured Jerusalem in 63 BC and marched into the Holy of Holies, and again in Titus who destroyed the temple in AD 70, and again in Hadrian who turned Jerusalem into a Roman city in AD 135. But these three were Roman generals who had no delusions of divinity. But there were Roman emperors who had exactly these delusions, seeing themselves as god.

The last paragraph of the chapter (40-45) is dark. It suggests some final battle. The darkest and coldest hour is the hour before dawn. We have seen this before in chapters 7 and 8. But this last battle is not the final word. The last battle does not even happen. The last king "will set out in a great rage to destroy and annihilate many... Yet he will come to his end, and no one will help him" (44-45). But many faithful people have been killed.

While it may seem that these earthly rulers are in control, there are little indications that this is not so. There is a fifth set of words. There is an “appointed time” and a “time of the end.” Behind the activities of the human rulers, the sovereign Lord has set an appointed time. There is a final end when God will resolve all things.

In the Book of Revelation, which our women are studying, the churches face the challenge of living in a world controlled by the beast—at that time, the Roman Emperor. The seven prophetic messages to the churches indicate a variety of responses to living under beastly empire. The churches in Pergamum and Thyatira have compromised, whether out of fear or for advancement. The church in Laodicea has been so co-opted by the world that it is indistinguishable from Babylon. It says, “I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing” (Rev 3:17). It doesn’t even need Jesus, whom it has shut outside the door. The churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia have remained loyal to Jesus in passive resistance, and, as a result, are facing death in martyrdom.

In the book of Revelation there are four prophetic calls to wisdom and endurance, two each. Two calls for a mind with wisdom (13:18; 17:19), to see that the beast is not worthy of worship, that his empire is built upon sand. And two calls for endurance (13:10; 14:12), to be faithful to the Lamb even under threat of death; to be faithful in loyalty and devotion to the Lamb when everyone else is giving their loyalty and devotion to the beastly empire. Daniel and Revelation are both written to enable God’s people to resist faithfully; to be wise and thus able to endure.

We are not facing death. But we all face the challenge of living in the world while being faithful to Jesus. What do we faithfully resist and how do we faithfully resist? This calls for wisdom, which is what Daniel and Revelation can give us.

We resist being co-opted by the world. We resist responding to evil with evil, but instead overcome evil with good. We resist using the world’s methods, seeking power. We resist with integrity by remaining true. We resist by not using those four sets of words: empire, power, deceit and arrogance. We remain true to Jesus, whom

we follow.

Putin is a religious man, but his religion is a virulent religious nationalism. The Russian Orthodox church, combined with the Russian state and the Russian people is a potent combination. The Russian church has been co-opted; the Patriarch is very much under Putin’s thumb.

When Ukraine became an independent nation thirty years ago, the Orthodox church in Ukraine broke away to form the Ukrainian Orthodox Church within the Orthodox umbrella, much to the displeasure of the Russian Orthodox Church.

I am struck by some of the words in *Prayer for Ukraine*, written in 1885, that was sung on Saturday Night Live: “With learning and knowledge enlighten us...in love pure and everlasting let us grow... grant our people and country all your kindness and grace... bless us with wisdom, guide us into a kind world.”

The Lord Jesus gathered a motley crew to be his disciples. There was a collaborator with the Roman occupier: Matthew the tax collector. There were one or two who favored armed resistance against the occupier. He gathered them together to be a new family. And he gathered them together for a final meal. He started by washing their feet, demonstrating a radically different type of leadership. His idea of leadership was that the head nourish the body, not that the body nourish the head. His idea of leadership was that the leader lay down his life for the flourishing of his people, not use the people for his own promotion.

We are called to follow a very different type of leader, to be in a very different type of empire, one that does not follow the pattern of human empire. Our King has given himself for us so that we flourish and live wholesome lives. May God give us the grace to follow the Lamb as we seek to live in this world while also being loyal to the Lord Jesus Christ. One of our actions of faithful resistance is to engage in the subversive act of taking communion together.

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LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

SERIES: ONE KING TO RULE THEM ALL

Daniel 12:1-13
Thirteenth Message
Bernard Bell
March 13, 2022

Today marks two years since we closed the PBCC campus early in the Covid pandemic. No one expected the tunnel to be so long and so dark. Several times we thought we had emerged into the light at the end of the tunnel, only to go back in as cases surged. We have lost count of how many waves we have been through. We hope that as we now emerge from the Omicron wave we really are exiting the tunnel.

Meanwhile Russia's invasion of Ukraine grinds on in its third week. The world is trying to adjust to this new normal now that Putin has unmasked himself. No one knows where this will lead and how it might end—how long the tunnel will be and how dark it will get. Despite the heroic resistance of the Ukrainians, the situation is getting darker with no light yet on the horizon.

I have been having my own tunnel experiences, preaching through these difficult chapters of Daniel. I feel the weight of them. Each Monday I wonder how I can create a sermon out of the text. Initially I see no light. But as the week progresses there is first a glimmer, an initial idea. The light grows until by Sunday morning I am out of the tunnel.

I am sure some of you have your own tunnel experiences.

In these six weeks we have accompanied Daniel through four visions. In each vision he has been told that dark days are coming for God's people. In this fourth vision the darkness intensifies under the "contemptible person" who acts against God's people in the holy city Jerusalem. The Jewish community is divided in its response. Some side with the oppressor in return for reward. They forsake and violate the holy covenant. They are corrupted by the ruler. Others resist him actively or passively. In particular, "the wise" engage in the passive resistance of teaching. They enable others to understand the times. They speak truth to power, unmasking evil. For this they are killed as martyrs.

The Ukrainians have been speaking with a united voice, much to the surprise of Putin. They are speaking truth to power, while Putin is hiding the truth behind a smokescreen of propaganda, deceit, and outright lies. The Ukrainians do not want to be saved by the Russians. Instead they want justice. They want retributive justice: for Putin to be held responsible for his war crimes. And they want restorative justice: for their shattered land to be rebuilt, perhaps using frozen Russian funds.

Retributive justice punishes the evildoer, but it doesn't heal the evil done by the evildoer. Restorative justice repairs the damage from the evil. The best restorative justice repairs the evildoer himself.

Where was justice, as the king of the North was attacking God's people in Daniel 11? Justice is needed for three groups of people. Justice on the oppressor: the contemptible person, the final king. Justice on those who have broken faith, been disloyal to covenant, by siding with the oppressor. And justice for those who have been martyred for being faithful. There is a need for both retributive and restorative justice.

Chapter 11 built to a disturbing climax: the final king "will set out

in a great rage to destroy and annihilate many" (11:44). This sounds just like Putin. Frustrated in his plan to bring Ukraine back within the Russian fold, he seems determined to wreak as much destruction as possible, as he did previously in the Chechen capital Grozny in 1999, and in Aleppo in 2016.

The king "will pitch his royal tents...at the beautiful holy mountain" (11:44-45). He encamps outside Jerusalem, the city of God and his people, ready to make a final assault. The Last Battle is nigh. But the battle is not actually fought. "Yet he will come to his end, and no one will help him" (11:45). Justice is meted out on the oppressor, the arrogant ruler. He meets his end, "at the time of the end." The Lord's appointed time for his end had arrived. Justice is accomplished: evil is halted and the evildoer is terminated. But what of the damage he has left?

Now we have a chapter break, but the angelic message, which forms the heart of this fourth vision, continues into chapter 12:1-4. (Chapter divisions were not added until c. 1220.) Verse 1 details what will happen at that time, the time of the end.

At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. (Dan 12:1 NIV)

It will be a time of distress, unprecedented, not since "the beginning of nations" (NIV), but since Israel's existence as a people. The actions of the final king are an existential threat to Israel, and therefore to God's purposes. Israel is not just any nation. God called Abraham out of the seventy nations to form a new people, God's people. Abraham was God's new beginning in response to the disorder and chaos of humanity gathered at the Tower of Babel. But his recovery plan seems in jeopardy. Evil and consequent suffering reach a crescendo, a great tribulation. As we have seen repeatedly in these chapters, the darkest and coldest hour is just before dawn. Is there any hope? Is there any light at the end of the tunnel at that time? Will God's restorative purposes survive?

Israel's tribulation will persist until that time, but help is on the way. At that time, Michael, the great prince of Israel, will arise. He is the heavenly counterpart of earthly Israel. The conflict on earth is mirrored in heaven. He has been busy fighting the prince of Persia and the prince of Greece, the demonic spiritual powers behind those great empires. Now he will come to Israel's aid.

Also at that time, God's people, Daniel's compatriots, will be delivered from the darkness and the tribulation. Who escapes? God has a register of names. Elsewhere this is called the book of life, or the book of remembrance. All those whose names are in the book will be delivered. How do they escape? Not *from* death but *through* death. Where then is justice if the righteous end up dead? We are told in v. 2.

Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some

to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. (12:2)

Many who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake. Sleep and awake are clear metaphors for death and new life. There will be resurrection. Those who awake do so to different destinies. Some rise to everlasting life. Others to shame and everlasting contempt; these are presumably those who broke covenant.

Verse 3 specifies the first group, those who rise to everlasting life.

Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. (12:3)

They are the wise who lead many to righteousness. They will shine brightly, like the brightness of the sky in the day time, like the brightness of the stars at night.

The blasphemous king had exalted and magnified himself above every god (11:36). He had made an assault on heaven. He was following in the pattern of the Babylonian king who said, "I will ascend to the heavens; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly... I will make myself like the Most High" (Isa 14:13-14). The arrogant ruler exalts himself to the heavens and is cast down. This is the pattern of every human ruler who does as he pleases.

God's faithful servants follow the opposite trajectory. They were cast down to the ground by their oppressors, killed while being faithful. But God exalts these faithful martyrs to the heavens. The wise will be vindicated and exalted. These are the faithful resisters of 11:33-35. By their instruction they lead many to righteousness. That is, they teach God's people how to remain true and faithful to his covenant, loyally devoted to him, while living in a foreign empire, while living in difficult times. They may die for their faithfulness, but they will be vindicated. This language is echoed by Jesus: "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Matt 13:43).

Here in 12:2-3 we have the clearest reference in the OT to resurrection. Conviction about resurrection arose from the problem of martyrdom. Where is justice when God's faithful people are killed specifically for being faithful, for being loyal to God? What would justice be for them? This has been an issue ever since Abel, who was the first martyr. He was killed *while* being faithful. He was killed *for* being faithful. His blood cried out from the ground to God. Retributive justice on Cain could not bring justice for Abel's spilt blood. The only adequate answer is resurrection—restorative justice.

The message of the vision ends on this positive note of resurrection. The time just before the end is very dark, but there is light at the end of the tunnel. God's faithful people will be vindicated by being restored to life in resurrection.

Daniel is to seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end, which from his vantage point is far in the future. How far in the future? Daniel wants to know, so he asks, "How long will it be before these astonishing things are fulfilled?" (6). He receives a cryptic answer, "It will be for a time, times and half a time" (7).

This is similar to the answer given in the first vision for how long the blasphemous little horn will oppress God's holy people. It will be "for a time, times and half a time" (7:25), where it is clear that the "times" is two times, for a total of 3½ times. It is assumed the same here. It is further assumed that this refers to 3½ years, that is 42 months.

We can empathize with Daniel who writes, "I heard but I did not understand" (8). I am sure all of us have felt this way throughout this

second half of the book.

Later Daniel is told two more time periods: 1,290 days and 1,335 days (11-12). These work out to 43 and 44½ months. The three time periods form a sequence: 42, 43 and 44½ months. Taking 42 as the baseline, the increase is one month and 2½ months for a total of 3½, which may or may not refer back to the 3½ times. The meaning of these three times is elusive.

As we draw this series to a close I want to look back over Daniel's four visions. There is a common pattern.

In the first vision (ch. 7), Daniel sees a sequence of four beasts, from which come ten horns, and finally a little horn. This final figure does evil against both God and God's people. The little horn speaks arrogantly and against God. It attacks and defeats the saints. But there is justice both on the evil oppressor and for God's faithful saints. Retributive justice against the little horn: its power is taken away and it is destroyed. And justice for the saints: the Ancient of Days issues a judicial ruling in their favor, and theirs will be the eternal kingdom. How long? For a time, (two) times and half a time.

In the second vision (ch. 8), Daniel sees in sequence a two-horned ram, a one-horned goat, from which come four horns, followed by a little horn which grows great. It exalts itself even to heaven. It attacks and destroys God's people. It terminates the daily sacrifice amid a rebellion that desolates. But it is destroyed by a non-human hand, that is, God. How long? For morning and evening 2300 times.

In the third vision (ch. 9), Jerusalem will be rebuilt, but a coming ruler will destroy both city and temple. He will terminate the daily sacrifice and install the abomination of desolation. How long? For seventy "sevens," broken down into 7+62+1.

Now in the fourth vision (ch. 10-12), Daniel sees a sequence of kings climaxing in a contemptible person, a ruler who in fury attacks God's people and temple. He is self-exalting, even to heaven. He desecrates the sanctuary, terminates the daily offering, and installs the abomination of desolation. God's people are divided. Some are seduced by the little horn and profit from aligning themselves with him. But the wise engage in passive resistance: they teach others to understand so they can be righteous not wicked, so they can be faithful not unfaithful, so they can be loyal to the one true God not switch their loyalty to a human king. This king will come to his end at the moment of his greatest assault. Then the faithful will be resurrected to life eternal. Those who sold out will go to shame and everlasting contempt. How long? For a time, times and half a time; for 1,290 days; for 1,335 days. Perhaps understood as 42, 43, 44½ months.

So we see the same pattern across all four visions. A human ruler exalts himself far above his proper station, even to the heavens; he grasps after equality with God. He attacks God's people, desecrating God's sanctuary. He seems all-powerful. But God will enact justice: judgment upon the arrogant ruler, and vindication for his faithful saints who receive resurrection and a place in his eternal kingdom. Retributive justice on the arrogant ruler. Restorative justice for God's faithful people. This is the pattern of history.

In the short term this pattern was fulfilled in Antiochus IV Epiphanes, ruler of the Seleucid Empire. This king proclaimed himself *Theos Epiphanes*, God manifest on earth. But he met his end. There followed a metaphorical resurrection as Israel became an independent kingdom for 80 years. But it was corrupt, the rulers abused power, and it ended in civil war. It is ironic that the Romans came in 63BC to put down the civil war between the Jewish factions. It became clear that Israel was as much a part of the problem as the

pagan empires. Israel had failed in its mission to be the new humanity.

It was into this darkness that God sent his beloved as the light. But his own did not receive him. Instead they put out the light. Saying “We have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15), the leadership of his own people handed him over to the empire of the day to be executed as a dangerous rebel. Evil had won. The one faithful human had been rejected and killed. Where was justice? What had happened to God’s purposes for humanity? The world lay in darkness that first day, through the second day, and into the third day.

Then God vindicated his martyred faithful servant in resurrection. He restored him to physical life in a physical body. Justice required this: death had no rightful claim on Jesus. Then God did a most surprising thing. He did not point his finger at rebellious, sinful humanity and demand retributive justice. Instead, he spread his arms wide and offered restorative justice. He invited rebellious humanity to come and receive forgiveness and new life in Christ. When we give our loyalty to Jesus and are “in Christ,” we participate in his death and resurrection. This is symbolized in baptism, in which we pass through the waters and emerge into new life. It is worked out daily, as we die to self and put on Christ, being renewed by the Spirit. And it will be fully realized when Christ returns: we shall be raised bodily in an incorruptible body.

We recited the Apostles’ Creed. “I believe in Jesus Christ...who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried...the third day he rose again;” then “I believe...in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” What God did with Jesus’s body he will do with ours: bodily resurrection. This is the ultimate restorative justice. But it goes beyond restorative justice. We will be more than we once were, for we shall be in transformed bodies, fully conformed to the likeness of Christ, and readied for God’s presence in glorious light from which all darkness has been banished. This is more than floating on a cloud with Jesus in heaven. The ultimate destiny is life on earth in a new heaven and a new earth that has been restored, indeed perfected to something beyond what it once was. This is the ultimate light at the end of the tunnel.

Meanwhile, we also affirm the communion of saints. Those who have gone before us into death in Christ, and we who are still alive in Christ, are in communion. We are knit together as one body, as one family.

Much of the imagery of Daniel is carried over into the Book of Revelation, which our women are studying and which I have been referring to each week. The imagery is re-visioned through Christ Jesus. He is the antithesis of the self-exalting ruler. The beast of Revelation is all the beasts and horns of Daniel rolled into one. He speaks arrogant words. He is worshiped by a deceived humanity. He wages war on the saints and conquers them. The martyrs cry out, “How long...until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” (6:10) How long? Five times we are told how long it is, using three different expressions: a time, times and half time; or 42 months; or or 1,260 days. During this time the holy city is trampled; the two witnesses prophesy and are killed by the beast; the woman is nourished in the wilderness; and the beast seems to have all the authority and power. I understand that all of these things are happening simultaneously throughout the entire Church age. God’s people bear faithful testimony to the Lamb, for which they are killed by the beast who conquers them. But the Church, God’s people as an entity, is preserved. The dragon, Satan, is raging mad because he has been thrown out of heaven in a war with the angel Michael, and

goes off to make war on the saints, using the beast. At the end the evil powers gather their forces for a final battle at the place called Armageddon, the mount of assembly. Three times we read of them gathering but each time it is over before the battle is even fought. The dragon, the beast, and the false prophet are thrown into the lake of fire. They are removed from the earth, together with all evil. And God issues a ruling in favor of the martyrs (20:4), just as he issues a ruling in favor of the saints in Daniel 7. They live in resurrection life, following in the footsteps of Jesus who was martyred but lives.

How is Daniel to live in the light of the vision he has received? The linen-clad man tells Daniel, “Go your way, Daniel...go your way to the end” (9, 13). The end is determined. God has an appointed time. Meanwhile, carry on living your life. But do so in the light of the wisdom, understanding, and discernment provided by the visions.

The crisis will create a divide between those who respond well and those who respond poorly. Some will be faithful, some will be faithless:

**Many will be purified, made spotless and refined,
but the wicked will continue to be wicked.
None of the wicked will understand,
but those who are wise will understand. (12:10)**

This verse has a chiasmic construction. In the inner pair, the wicked will continue to be wicked. Wicked is the opposite of righteous. Both are relational terms. The righteous person acts faithfully within his relationships; the wicked person acts unfaithfully. The wicked acts unfaithfully towards God and towards others. These are the ones who forsake the holy covenant, who violated the covenant (11:30, 32). They prospered because the king of the North favored and flattered them. But he corrupted them. They failed to understand the times, and thus failed to respond faithfully in the times.

The outer pair of the chiasm is about the faithful. They “will be purified, made spotless and refined,” a link back to 11:35. They are martyrs, killed for their faithfulness to God. How are they able to remain faithful even in the face of death? Because they are the wise who understand the times. They are able to see behind the curtain and discern the spiritual realities. They will not give their allegiance to the self-exalting ruler. Instead they stay loyal to the one true God—in the face of death and through death. They entrust themselves to God. He will vindicate them in resurrection. Through their martyrdom they are purified and refined, ready to shine brightly in the resurrection.

Daniel is the paradigmatic wise person in the book. In the stories of the first half he was able to work faithfully in the pagan king’s service, while also being loyal to God. Now he is to go his way, and carry on living faithfully in a pagan empire. He is now an old man. Soon he will die. But the book closes with this reassurance to him:

You will rest, and then at the end of the days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance. (12:13)

You will rest in the sleep of death. And at the end you will awake and rise to new life. You will receive your allotted inheritance. Not a place on a cloud, strumming a harp. But a place in a restored earth combined together with heaven. A place in a physical body on a physical earth.

We all face the challenge of how to live in the world while being loyal to a different kingdom. Daniel and Revelation are the two main apocalyptic works in Scripture. They draw back the veil to show us the unseen realities in the spiritual realm. This is not to feed

our curiosity. It is not to enable us to fill in detailed timelines. It is to give us wisdom, understanding and discernment so that we remain faithful to God while living here on earth in pagan empires, as Daniel did. Revelation calls us to wisdom and to endurance. The saints conquer the beast by the blood of the Lamb and by their faithful endurance, their loyalty to Jesus.

Our life in this world has value, whether in paid employment, parenting and homemaking, learning, or volunteer service. We live in a physical, material world that requires work. Full-time Christian paid ministry is not a higher calling, a status for those that are really committed. Whatever our arena of work, may we labor faithfully in all that we do as unto the Lord.

These two books speak truth to power. They unmask the powers for what they really are. Revelation reveals the Lord Jesus Christ as God's antithesis to the rulers of Daniel and the beast of Revelation. The Lion has conquered by being the slain Lamb. Power is turned upside down. God manifests his power in apparent weakness. We are

called to follow the Lamb wherever he goes. He is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. We follow him in that trajectory: in faithful witness, through death, to participation in his rule in God's eternal kingdom.

The book of Daniel encourages the wise to remain faithful. Revelation encourages us to remain loyal and devoted to the one who is truly worthy of our allegiance. Revelation shows us who is and who is not worthy of our loyal devotion.

Lord God, the light of the minds that know you, the life of the souls that love you, and the strength of the hearts that serve you: Help us...so to know you that we may truly love you, and so to love you that we may fully serve you, whom to serve is perfect freedom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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