

## ***A Country in Crisis, and a Crisis of Faith***

### **Dan 1:1-2a,21**

As we start a new sermon series – from the book of Daniel – we spend this week on an orientation to the book, and an overview of its basic message. This is readily accomplished cognitively, but not emotionally. Given our country’s military security over the last century and a half, and its relative sympathy toward religious faith, we cannot begin to imagine the times and situation in which Daniel lived. His nation had been destroyed, and his faith was under the most severe threat. Over a millennium earlier, God had promised to bless their forefather Abraham: he had promised innumerable descendants, a land of their own, and preeminence among the nations. And progressively those promises came to pass. But in one fell swoop, it was all lost. Why did such disaster befall them? And what will become of them now? These are the basic questions that Daniel seeks to answer for his generation, and for the Church under persecution in any time and locale.

#### **Day 1: Daniel 1:1-2a and Lamentations 1 A country and faith in crisis**

Daniel 1:1-2a makes the briefest reference to the most severe event in Judah’s history: “In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. <sup>2</sup> And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand.” The author does not need to spell out its significance for his generation, anymore than an American news reporter needs to elaborate on the significance of 9/11 when reporting the assassination of Osama bin Laden. The horror was only too well known in their time.

But not in ours. The entire book of Lamentations gives a fuller portrait, capturing well the horror of the destruction and the desperation of the survivors. Combined with their physical privations and emotional trauma was this reality: their nation was destroyed because their God willed it. They lost all his promises: their families were slaughtered; their land was invaded and they were deported; they were not preeminent among the nations, but victimized by them. They had turned from God, and he had turned from them.

We want to be cautious in applying this concept today. While God may still use natural disaster or war to punish a wicked nation or an apostate Church, we cannot infer the inverse. Not every natural disaster or war is the consequence of God’s judgment. Sometimes in a fallen world, bad stuff just happens. The lesson we can take from this, however, is to take

seriously God's warnings of judgment against sin. He warned Israel from the beginning of its history until the exile, but the people often ignored him. They were his; he was theirs: they were in no danger. He would protect them. Eventually God tired of their presumption, and acted on his warnings. And his judgment was severe. We do well not to assume that any disaster is God's judgment on others, or on us. At the same time, we do well to heed his warnings against sin.

### **Day 2: Daniel 1-6 What will become of the righteous individuals?**

Disputes over diet, interpreting the king's dream, surviving the furnace, an emperor gone mad, a disembodied hand writing on a wall, a night with lions, all these stories have one feature in common: they recount the courageous deeds of God's insignificant but faithful people, and his preservation of their lives. Half of the book of Daniel answers the implicit question: When God's people live as an oppressed minority in an antagonistic culture, what will become of them? Will they stand firm, remaining faithful to him, or will fear cause them to recant? If they stand firm, will God intervene to preserve their lives, or will they die under persecution? The answer of Daniel 1-6 is clear: God's faithful people *can* stand firm, if they so resolve, and, in so doing, they honor him, even if he does not preserve their lives.

Our thoughts rightly go to the members of Shouwang Church in Beijing, to the Copts of Egypt whose churches are being razed, and to other believers facing persecution around the world, whether for their faith or their ethnicity. We rightly also consider any mild situations of pressure on us to renounce faith, or simply to be silent about it. Like Daniel and his colleagues, we work diligently and cooperate socially, while living faithfully for God. And if ever our convictions are challenged, or our lifestyle rejected, we remain faithful, and leave the consequences to God.

### **Day 3: Daniel 7-12 What will become of the entire people of God?**

The second half of the book of Daniel – chapters 7-12 – is less about individuals than about nations and the corporate people of God. While the destiny of individuals is an important question, even more so is the fate of the nation and its conquerors. If YHWH is the one God over heaven and earth, how is it that his people are not preeminent over all nations? Instead, the most powerful nations worship other patron deities. Is their empire not proof that their gods are more powerful than he?

The overall point of chapters 7-12 is that one true God exists, over heaven and earth, and he knows – indeed, he determines – what will

happen. In the end, he will conquer all kingdoms and all rulers who do not acknowledge him. Already Daniel 1 implies this: the chapter begins with Babylonia astride the world (1:1-2a), and ends with Persia conquering Babylonia (1:21). Those kingdoms hostile to God and his people do not even outlast the lifetime of his prophet Daniel. There is no power in heaven or earth that rivals this one true God.

This is, of course, a reassurance to the persecuted Churches around the world today, and to those who worry and pray for them: suffering will last for a time, but glory for eternity. The forces arrayed against God's people may seem strong today, but God will destroy them tomorrow. In the end, only one kingdom lasts forever: his.

#### **Day 4: Hebrews 10:26-31 Avoiding a crisis of faith**

Given that all the preceding comes from the Old Testament, it is worth asking, what does the New Testament make of it? Somewhere American Christianity has gotten the notion that all of theology can be reduced to a single fundamental proposition: grace. That whatever I do, or however I live, so long as I profess faith in Christ, I will escape judgment and spend eternity with God. From the first week of Eden to the last day of Revelation, however, the Bible affirms dual foci, not a single focus. (For math nerds, biblical theology is elliptical, not circular.) Scripture affirms two core realities: the grace of God initiating salvation, and the responsibility of man to respond with love and obedience.

The author of Hebrews warns, no less than Old Testament prophets, that those who refuse God, or who accept Christ but persist in catastrophic sin, run the same risk as Daniel's generation: "No sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God" (10:26-27). For hundreds of years, God's Old Testament people ignored such warnings, until the exile swooped down upon them with fury and destruction. Hebrews warns us not to ignore such warnings today. If you think that you may be under threat of judgment, either for resisting God or for flagrant sin, speak with a pastor, elder or deacon. Perhaps you are overly scrupulous, and causing yourself needless anxiety; perhaps you are indeed at risk. If you had symptoms of heart disease or cancer, you would have them checked out. If you need a spiritual checkup, do not hesitate to make the necessary appointment.

#### **Day 5: Hebrews 10:32-36 What will become of righteous individuals?**

Daniel 1-6 tells stories of brave people who stood firm in their faith, and risked their lives. They were ready to die for their faith, though, in the end,

God rescued them. The author of Hebrews reminds his readers that they previously demonstrated the same sort of courage: “Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering” (10:32). He does not promise that they will escape with their fortunes or their lives intact. Still, he calls them to persist with Christ: “You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised” (11:36).

It is highly unlikely that any of us will ever face such danger. So we do well to remain faithful to Christ in the face of whatever little harassment we do face, without responding obnoxiously. And we do well to pray for those whom we know or know of, who are facing comparable risk today, not just for their protection, but even more for their perseverance.

### **Day 6: Hebrews 10:37-39 What will become of the entire people of God?**

Daniel 7-12 looks ahead to the time when God will intervene to overturn empires, and to free his people from tyranny. So does Hebrews: “For in just a very little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay” (Heb 10:37). In the time that remains, God calls his people to perseverance: “My righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him” (10:38). At the same time, he ends on a note of confidence: “But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved” (10:39).

While Hebrews quotes here from Habakkuk, not from Daniel, both prophets wrote in the aftermath of Judah’s conquest and exile by Babylon. In quoting from the Old Testament, then, Hebrews underscores that Christians facing persecution are in the same position as Daniel’s generation: persevere in faithfulness to God and enjoy eternity with him; turn from God and be rejected by him. The original audience of Hebrews is in a similar position to Daniel’s audience in another regard: while they must hold on, God promises that it will not be much longer. He will come soon, defeat all opponents, and rescue his people.

So this is God’s word to the Church wherever it suffers today, and all the more to those of us who do not suffer. God will return, he will return soon, and he will make all things right, conquering those who oppose him, and rescuing those who love and serve him. Perseverance requires faith and courage, no less today than it ever did, but it also brings reward, no less today than it ever did. We pray for the suffering Church, and also for ourselves who do not suffer, that when God intervenes, he may find us faithfully awaiting him, whatever may happen to us, and however we may fare, in the meantime.