

Surviving War, Recession & Hurricanes

Daniel 11:2-45

Preaching consecutively through an entire book of the Bible has at least two benefits: (1) it raises topics that would not typically come to mind if we were selecting themes from our own imagination (God's interests are broader than ours); and, (2) it provides us God's perspective on issues where we might otherwise simply listen to our own mutterings.

Daniel 11 is a case in point. Primarily it addresses superpower rivalry, militaristic colonialism, and the suffering of God's people in times of war. Though I have been a Christian for 40 years, I hardly knew that the Bible addressed these topics. Were I asked to preach on these topics, I would not have thought to go to Daniel 11, and I would not have thought to say what Daniel – what God – says here. And I am not alone: in those forty years, I do not recall hearing a sermon on militaristic colonialism or on superpower rivalry, much less, on Daniel 11.

For those bored by international politics, Daniel 11 is relevant beyond colonialism or war. On the basis of analogy, 'from greater to lesser', it applies also to all manner of other, and lesser, cruelties that are part of our routine lives, even in the U.S. If this text speaks to those who suffer such severe brutality, it can also speak to us in the lesser cruelties of our lives.

Day 1: Daniel 11:2-45 Brutal stuff happens

The entire chapter is a litany of battles between a superpower to the north of Israel (Syria), and a superpower to the south (Egypt). As we saw in the twentieth-century cold war, 'superpower' is a word which is comfortable only in the singular: where multiple superpowers exist, each vies for preeminence. For decades, Syria and Egypt fought it out. Israel had the bad fortune to be located between the two. So every time one superpower attacked the other, Israel was overrun.

The obvious lesson for us in this misery is that life is often brutal, or at least cruel. In the U.S., we do not face invasion by a superpower. (We are, instead, more commonly an invading superpower, which should cause us some pause.) But we face other, much lesser cruelties: death in the family, loss of a job, struggles in school; tornadoes, earthquakes, or hurricanes; collapse of the economy. Our first reaction is to be surprised: why did this happen to me? Our second reaction is to pray that God will remove the suffering. By all means, let us pray. But let us also read Scripture: God may relieve our distress. Or, he may call us – as he called Daniel and his generation – to persevere in faithfulness even in adverse circumstances.

Day 2: Daniel 11:16-45 Brutal stuff spills over onto God's people

The wars between Syria and Egypt warrant comment from Daniel only because of their ramifications for Israel, and the ramifications are not at all pleasant. "No one will be able to stand against [the king of Syria]; he will "establish himself in [Israel] and will have the power to destroy it (11:16). An Israelite king will be killed (11:22). The king of Syria will pillage Israel on his way back north (11:28). On a subsequent invasion, his ambitions will be checked by the ascending Roman empire, so he will take out his frustrations on Israel (11:30). He will exalt himself even over against God (11:36). Later, he will invade Israel yet again (11:41), establishing himself at Mount Zion itself (11:45). God does not protect his people from this marauding invader.

Nor, often, does he protect his people today, whether during the genocide in Rwanda, natural disaster in Haiti, or persecution in Iraq. This is the reality for Daniel in his day, and for the suffering Church in many countries today. Our relative national comfort in the U.S. can make us quite glib about the promises of God, and the suffering of the Church elsewhere, until personal crisis or economic downturn hits us, and jeopardizes our faith. Daniel offers no facile solution to his own crisis, and so, none to ours. But he does, at least, prompt us to a more realistic faith, to sober and modest expectations on God, to greater gratitude for our current abundance, and to deeper sympathy and greater generosity toward Christians who suffer poverty or violence in our day.

Day 3: Mark 13:19-27 Brutal stuff still spills over onto God's people

It is easy to dismiss Daniel 11 as irrelevant to us, 2500 years later. It's also foolish, since Jesus saw it as relevant to his own time, 500 years later.

Daniel 11 is set during the return from exile, around 538BC. It anticipates the eventual ascendancy and brutality of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, a Syrian ruler who conquered Jerusalem, killed Jewish loyalists, and desecrated the temple in 167BC (11:29-35). Jesus, toward the end of his life, then invokes Daniel 11 to describe the approaching Roman decimation of Jerusalem and temple in AD70: "Those will be days of distress unequalled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now ... If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect ... he has shortened them" (Mark 13:19-20). Jesus expects his followers to suffer as brutally as Jews did under Antiochus.

Notably for us, both Daniel and Jesus describe such suffering as 'end-of-the-age'. At the very least, this is a way of dramatizing the cataclysm: the suffering will be so violent and brutal as to seem like the world is

coming to an end. At the same time, both Daniel and Jesus appear to intend more. The suffering of their day is a picture of what will happen on a large scale when the world actually does come to an end: suffering and distress will increase to a pitch never before experienced (Dan 12:1; Mark 13:19), then God will intervene, raising the dead and conducting the final judgment (Dan 12:2; Mark 13:26-27). Which is to say: such crisis comes not just in the second-century BC and the first-century AD, but also at least once more in the future, and not just upon ancient Jews or early Christians, but also possibly upon us.

And if this end-of-the-world sort of suffering may come upon us, surely we must expect other forms of crisis and brutality to visit us. We may enjoy – but cannot expect – and easier life than God’s people in Old Testament, or in New. So while things are relatively easy for us, we offer God our gratitude; if things turn severe for us, we are not surprised.

Day 4: Daniel 12:1-4 Brutal stuff will be set right in the end

Toward the end of the Old Testament, and then into the New, a new genre arose, which modern scholars call ‘apocalyptic’. One of its key features is dramatic visions of fantastic creatures and supernatural powers, as we find in Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation. Another key feature of apocalyptic is the postponement of divine intervention until ‘the end’. That is, evil will persist seemingly unchecked, and God’s people will suffer, for as long as time lasts. But eventually, he will bring time to an end, and settle all accounts. Wrongs are righted, and justice is established. But it occurs not in this life, or in this age, but at the end of time. The bleak scenarios of Daniel 11 are not the end of the story, though they may persist for a long time. Eventually, God will intervene, resurrecting all, either to salvation or judgment.

Ultimately, this is our hope, too. Life in the U.S. is so comfortable and safe, that we typically do not need divine intervention much at all. But to the extent that we – or Christians in much more tenuous positions than ours – need divine intervention, it sometimes comes in this life. Yet often not. So our faith cannot depend on deliverance from suffering within a set time frame, but only on the promise of God that he will one day set all things right, even if it is not until the end of time, and the final resurrection.

Day 5: Revelation 20:11-15 The New Testament concurs

Whatever we read from the Old Testament, we do well to confirm with the New Testament. Both come from the same God, and are part of the same Bible, so we rightly expect considerable continuity. Still, the coming

of Christ makes many things new. So every truth we derive from the Old Testament we confirm with the New, to assess whether this is a point of continuity or discontinuity.

In this instance, Revelation 20:11-15 holds out the same expectation of prolonged suffering in this life, followed by divine intervention which sets all things right, and holds all people accountable. The suffering Christians had previously appealed to God to intervene, but he responded with a warning of continued suffering: "If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he will be killed. This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints" (13:10). In Revelation 20, he sets out the final outcome for those who faithfully endured through suffering. All the dead, both powerful and insignificant, rise and appear before the throne of God, for the final judgment: those whose names are found in the book of life receive their reward; those who lived wickedly come under judgment.

So when we suffer misfortune or cruelty, this is our hope too. Not that God will necessarily relieve our suffering in this life, but that he will set all things right at the end.

Day 6: Daniel 1-12 Conclusion

Time and space do not permit a detailed review of the book of Daniel (a review was originally on the schedule for this week, but the hurricane changed that). Still, it would be a pity to finish a series on Daniel without a firm grasp of the entire book. To review, Daniel writes in response to the exile of Judah, in judgment for its sin. The book has two parts of six chapters each. Daniel 1-6 focuses on the period of the exile, and the lives of several individuals; it asks, "Can faithful people survive in this foreign – and often hostile – new country?" It answers: "While you are both refugees and a religious minority, those who are faithful to God can not only survive, but may even thrive in exile, despite ethnic resentment, economic insecurity and religious persecution." Daniel 7-12 focuses on the period after the exile; it asks, "Will God bring the nation back to the land after 70 years, as he promised? And will we finally prosper then?" It answers: "If you repent, God will bring you back as he promised; but life will be hard for a very long time, until God intervenes at the end of time."

Of course, we are less refugees or a religious minority (though see 1 Peter 1:1-2), and our lives are economically, socially, and politically much easier. So Daniel's message to us is all the stronger and louder: be faithful to God as we live in a sometimes adversarial world, and whatever our fate in this life, our destiny in the next is secure with God.