

God & National Calamity

Daniel 7:1-28

The book of Daniel addresses the situation of Judah (southern Israel) after its destruction and exile. Daniel 1-6 focuses on the fate of individuals: its overall point is that God is in control, and he honors those individuals who honor him. Daniel 7-12 turns our attention to the fate of the nation. But its point is a lot less upbeat: Israel's history from this time forward will be a series of calamities, climaxing in unspeakable horror.

It may be hard for us to care about the moral and theological implications of national calamity because America rarely faces a national catastrophe. But calamity is a regular part of the experience of our world. And it is part of God's word. So we pay heed, if for no other reason, than because it matters to much of our world, and, of course, to our God.

Day 1: Daniel 7:1 A hope of good days to come ... or not!

Empires rise and fall in quick succession through Daniel chapters 5-7. Chapter 5 recounts the end of the Babylonian empire, with the assassination of Belshazzar, and the ascent of Darius 'the Mede'. Chapter 6 describes Darius' dealings with Daniel, and ends with a reference to his demise at the hands of Cyrus 'the Persian' (6:29) in 539BC. The very next verse, 7:1, propels us back fourteen years to the first year of Belshazzar's reign (553BC). Beginning there, the remainder of Daniel 7 highlights events that will occur over the next four hundred years, culminating in 167BC, with brutal persecution under 'the small horn' (7:8), Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV.

Why the chronological jump back, followed by a 400-year prospective?

Cyrus was an enlightened ruler. As he conquered the region, he released Babylon's captives, and permitted them to return to their national homelands. So he freed the Jews to return to Palestine, the land that God had promised them. Isaiah had predicted his reign, and his benevolence, going so far as to call him 'God's shepherd, the anointed one, the one whom God chose' (Isa 44-45). The books of Ezra and 2 Chronicles join Isaiah in speaking glowingly of this pagan emperor. So the reference to Cyrus anticipates the glorious freeing of Judah from captivity, and its long-awaited return to the land, under the blessing of God.

Or does it?

The remainder of this chapter – and the rest of this book – indicates that the return would not be what they hoped for. Instead, their suffering would linger for centuries and finally climax in a cataclysm of brutality under Antiochus IV.

What do we take away from this 400 year prospective of Judah's history, and from Daniel 7-12? Three lessons. First, life under God's blessing is not always a smooth sail; to the contrary, it can be tumultuous both for individual and for nation. Trials were inevitable during the exile, because it was a time of judgment. Yet here Daniel warns that their trials will persist, even deepen, even though their sins are forgiven and they return to the land. Second, Daniel tells them ahead of time, to reassure them that God remains sovereign: national crisis may take them by surprise, but not him. Third, in the end – though the end may be a long way off – he will eventually make all things right. All three lessons are important for the survival of God's people today who go through long stretches of suffering: being the people of God is no promise of a tranquil future, either personally, corporately, or nationally.

Day 2 Daniel 7:2-3 Four winds, an ocean, and four beasts

Anyone who is prone to seasickness on an off-shore fishing trip can only begin to appreciate what this imagery conjures up. Israel was situated on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean sea, but they were never a seafaring people. The sea was dangerous, prone to threatening storms, and the means by which some distant enemies reached them; it was a source of death, not recreational boating. So the image of ocean winds whipping up violent storms serves as the backdrop for Genesis 1, and other ancient Near Eastern creation stories: out of the chaos of sea and storm, God brings order. Similar imagery characterizes a second threat to early Israel's survival: slavery in Egypt and the flight through the wilderness, to the shores of the Red Sea, where God parted the waters in a great storm. Twice God had created order out of the chaos of wind and sea, to deliver his people. Daniel's readers could expect that under the hand of God, wind and sea might hold no further threat. But no, they whip up again.

So, we take away from this, that the relative peace and prosperity we enjoy as God's people in America is an unusual luxury, not our spiritual birthright. The experience of God's people is often much more brutal than ours, even under his sovereign care. While this text focuses on those who suffer, and does not address those who, like us, have life relatively easy, it is fair to suppose that we should at least: (a) pray for the suffering, persecuted church, (b) thank God for our comfortable life, and (c) resolve not to duck – or to exaggerate – any real opposition that comes our way.

Day 3 Daniel 7:4-8,19-25 From bad to worse

Daniel 7 uses images of beasts to represent nations, and he chooses

beasts of prey which attack and conquer. The first is doubly dangerous: a lion with the wings of an eagle. The second – a bear crunching on the bones of a victim – is ravenous. The third – a leopard with wings and four heads – has authority to rule.

But none compares to the fourth. The first three are described in the passive (“it *was* lifted ... the heart of a man *was* given ... it *was* raised up ... it *was* told ... it *was* given authority”); the passive implies a certain submission and subordination to the sovereign control of God. But there is nothing passive about the fourth beast: it “*crushed and devoured* its victims and *trampled* underfoot whatever was left.” Instead of animal fangs and paws – fearsome in their own right – the fourth beast has metal teeth and claws. Even after the lion-eagle, the ravenous bear, and the four-wing leopard, this fourth beast stands apart as “terrifying, frightening, and very powerful”; it devours the whole earth. Hard days – four centuries of them – are coming, even for the people of God, penitent and forgiven, living under his blessing.

So far, Christians in America have escaped such fate, and we may always. But God’s people elsewhere have not. If we have a world-wide perspective, the moral challenge is formidable: how could God tolerate a world, for instance, in which 250,000 die in a single earthquake? or in which a nation suffers two hundred years of corruption and oppression? or in which generations suffer under entrenched poverty? The theological issue is acute, but it is not new: Judah faced the same, and Daniel wrote to support his people in their faith struggle under such circumstances. His word offers hope and resolution for us, too.

Day 4 Daniel 7:9-12,26 God triumphs – and the beast dies – in the end

In his own time, God rises up to take control. There is none like him: he is bright with holiness, his throne radiates power, millions attend him. He passes judgment, and sets all things right. The brutal horn cowers in fear; the beast that crushed and devoured is now destroyed. This is God’s promise to his people: they may have to wait – even wait centuries – but God will intervene. He will rescue his people. He will punish the oppressor.

This affirmation offers hope less to us, who do not suffer, than to the Church in countries where either famine or persecution wreak havoc. They will not always suffer. It may be a ways off still, but God remains sovereign, and will intervene. It is secondarily a word also to us: if ever we grow sympathetic enough to Christians who suffer, and take up their cause with God (which arguably we should do), this is his answer to our struggles over perpetual injustice: he will intervene, in the end, to set all things right.

Day 5: Daniel 7:13-14,27 One like a 'son of man'

At this point in Scripture, 'son of man' is not a formal title, nor does it signify the coming Messiah. It means simply 'a human being'. In this context, it carries a couple associations. For one, 'son of man' contrasts with the four animals – representing four pagan kingdoms – that appear elsewhere in the chapter. For the other, this image – like the images of the four animals – also represents a nation, in this case, Judah, the people of God. They are superior to the other nations, as human beings are superior to animals. Moreover, they eventually will receive authority, glory, and sovereign power, and reign on God's behalf. All other peoples, nations, and language groups will honor them, and they will reign forever.

This is a promise to the ancient people of God that though they may suffer oppression in this age, they will triumph in the end, and throughout eternity. While we may not be desperate for this assurance, it is a promise which applies also to us, the new people of God, and all the more to his suffering church around the world.

Day 6: Mark 8:31-38 One like 'a Son of Man'

'Son of Man' was Jesus' preferred self-designation. The other options – Messiah, Son of God – were too freighted with a pre-established meaning, and thus prone to misunderstanding. 'Son of Man' carried august associations from Daniel that Jesus could exploit, but was still vague enough for him to fill with his own meaning.

Here Jesus surprises. In keeping with Daniel 7, as Son of Man, he will one day come in judgment to rule the world (Mark 8:38). But first, surprisingly, he will suffer. His experience serves as a paradigm for his followers: first suffering, then exaltation (Mark 8:34-38).

Jesus' teaching prompts two reflections.

For one, these warnings of suffering are not especially cherry. American history and culture tend to breed optimism. But Daniel 7 is somber. Daniel himself responds, "I, Daniel, was troubled in spirit, and the visions that passed through my mind disturbed me" (7:15); "I, Daniel, was deeply troubled by my thoughts, and my face turned pale" (7:28). Both Daniel and Jesus recognize that life and national history can be very hard for very long.

For the other, sixth-century BC Israel and first-century AD followers of Jesus had considerable misery to look forward to in this life, they found hope in eternity. A glorious day awaits. It may be centuries off, and those centuries may be full of hardship and suffering. But this is the promise of God, and it has been enough to sustain his people throughout the ages.