

God & Dictators Daniel 8:1-27

The book of Daniel tackles some of the hardest questions of life and faith. For us as believers, in safe and prosperous America, personal misfortune or illness typically poses the hardest questions of life and faith: lose a job, or a loved one, and we ask, "Why, God?" But much of the Church around the world faces far more intense and perplexing issues of life and faith ... persecution and the possibility that the entire national Church will be destroyed. Consider, for example, the Church in Iraq; a news article begins: "During Easter weekend of 2010, [the pastor] secretly baptized 13 adults, most of whom were dead within a week."
(<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/july/joyinmidstofterror.html>)

This is the sort of thing that Daniel addresses. The nation of Israel has been destroyed, its religion decimated by the destruction of God's temple, and its people expelled into exile far from God and his promises of descendants, nation, and blessing. While such devastation and its challenges to faith are far outside our experience, we nonetheless do well to consider the issue because (a) it affects many of God's people, (b) it is within the teaching of Scripture, and (c) God's response to their crises is instructive of his response to ours.

Day 1 Clearing up a misunderstanding of Zechariah 1:1-8,14-21

We start this week's reflection with a brief glance at Daniel's contemporary colleague, Zechariah. Prophesying in the second year of King Darius, Zechariah calls the exiled Jews to repent: "'Return to me,' declares the Lord Almighty, 'and I will return to you'" (Zech 1:3). God promises to punish those nations that brutalized his people, and to bring repentant Judah back to Jerusalem. The temple will be rebuilt and the priesthood restored. They will live in prosperity and world preeminence (1:14-21). It would be easy for a desperate listener to fuse these two promises: restoration to the land and world preeminence.

Daniel 7-12 corrects an overly optimistic reading of Zechariah. Chapter 8 warns his generation against merging these two blessings – short-term restoration of land and temple, and eventual preeminence throughout the world. Israel will return to Palestine, but the focus of this chapter is that they will face centuries of domination, and then an especially brutal oppression. This chapter cautions us similarly, against expecting all God's blessings to be fulfilled in our own lifetime, much less in our personal lives. We are to be grateful for the blessings which come, without expecting life

to be one long, uninterrupted blessing.

Day 2 Daniel 8:1-25 No superpower lasts forever (except God)

Like its predecessor, chapter 8 records a vision of animals, representing the empires that rule over Israel. The particular images change: in place of a predatory lion-eagle, ravenous bear, rapacious leopard and a metallic beast, the author now employs a powerful ram (representing the Medo-Persian empire) and an even more powerful goat (Greek empire). Despite the shift in imagery, the beasts make the same point: Israel's enemies are formidable; God's people stand no chance. The imagery of the beasts shifts in a second respect. In Daniel 7, the beasts all attack Israel, until God comes to her defense. In chapter 8, the beasts attack each other.

Still, the point of the two chapters corresponds. The ram charges west and north and south: "No animal could stand against him, and none could rescue from his power" (8:4). Still, before long, a goat with a prominent horn charges the ram "in great rage ... attack(ing) the ram furiously, striking the ram and shattering his two horns. The ram was powerless to stand against him; the goat knocked him to the ground and trampled on him" (8:6-7). In turn, the goat "became very great, but at the height of his power his large horn was broken off, and in its place four prominent horns grew up toward the four winds of heaven" (8:8). Each superpower is supreme, until being defeated by the next.

Which all goes to say that at any given moment, the world's leading superpower always seems insuperable, and when it attacks the Church, survival seems impossible. Yet throughout history, every superpower has eventually been defeated. Whether God humbles them (Daniel 7), or he commissions another nation to do so (Daniel 8), even the most formidable temporal power is temporary. This is a word of comfort to the Church under persecution ... while suffering threatens the very survival of the Church, hang on; this shall pass, and the persecutor with it. For those who are citizens of the world's leading superpower, this chapter is a reminder not to get too comfortable; the United States will eventually go the way of every preceding superpower. The only kingdom that lasts forever is God's.

Day 3 Daniel 8:9-12 The power of superpowers

Notwithstanding the preceding point – that all superpowers eventually suffer defeat – the author acknowledges that their power can be enormous while it lasts. At first the horn is small. Then it grows enough to threaten Israel. Then it throws down angels from heaven and tramples on them. It grows until it challenges God himself, ending the daily sacrifice, defiling his

temple, persecuting the people of God, and suspending the Law (Torah). The evil empire succeeds at all points, even against God himself.

These verses call for two comments, one regarding interpretation, and the other, regarding application. First, regarding interpretation, can a human being – no matter how powerful – actually defeat angels and trample on them? Can a human being challenge God himself? Daniel – like parts of Ezekiel, and most of Revelation – is called ‘apocalyptic’, a genre which uses the language of heaven and hell, and images of the destruction of the world, to underscore his point. When this emperor throws down angels, this is just a dramatic way of expressing his astounding power against the people of God (who are under the protection of angels). Similarly, since the temple is the dwelling place of God, the sacrifice belongs to him, and the Law is his word, to put an end to them is to throw down God. Supernatural language emphasizes the power of this dictator.

Second, regarding application ... empires characteristically give rise to an apparently omnipotent emperor. At the peak of their power, Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, and Idi Amin each seemed to possess power over God himself, persecuting the Church, controlling worship, putting believers to death. God knows how hard life can be, how desperate things can look. Their power is enormous – in their time, so long as it lasts – and so they can make life miserable for God’s people. God acknowledges the suffering of his people, while exhorting them to look ahead, to what comes next.

Day 4 Daniel 8:13-14 “How long, O Lord?”

This is the most common refrain for God’s suffering people: “How long, O Lord?” The question takes us back to Zechariah 1: with Israel in exile, the angel of the Lord asks, “‘Lord Almighty, how long will you withhold mercy from Jerusalem and from the towns of Judah, which you have been angry with these seventy years?’” (Zech 1:12). God answers that their wait is over: “I will return to Jerusalem with mercy, and there my house will be rebuilt” (Zech 1:16).

Daniel, however, anticipates the time when Israel returns to its homeland, with temple rebuilt, yet foreign domination continues, and after four centuries culminates with a brutal invasion by Antiochus Epiphanes. Now the question recurs: “‘How long will it take for the vision to be fulfilled ... concerning the daily sacrifice, the rebellion that causes desolation, and the liberation of the sanctuary and of the host that will be trampled underfoot?’” (8:13). How long before Israel is free from this latest brutality? How long before the worship of God and the offering of sacrifice can resume? While we cannot be certain about the significance of

'2300 days' – whether it intends to be literal or symbolic (multiples of 23 seem symbolic in Daniel) – a reasonable interpretation proposes two connotations: (1) the time is limited, it will not drag on forever; yet, (2) it is a considerable time, not immediate. God seems not to give his suffering people today any more specific answer than that. Instead, he calls them to faithful endurance now, as in Daniel's time.

Day 5 Daniel 8:13-14 "How long, O Lord?"

The book of Revelation returns to this question when persecution breaks out under the Roman empire, in the latter half of the first-century AD. Martyrs gather around the throne of God and cry out, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" ... They were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed" (Rev 6:9-11).

So God's word to all who suffer, whether in Daniel's era (6th-century BC), under Antiochus IV (2nd-century BC), under the Roman empire (1st-century AD), or today, is that the days of suffering are numbered, not limitless; but they may last a while longer. For those of us who do not suffer, perhaps the most salient point is that if God asks some of his people elsewhere in the world to endure extended suffering, (a) we should be appreciative that he does not ask that of us; (b) we should not fuss about what he does ask us to endure; and, (c) we should be sympathetic toward those who endure much worse than us.

Day 6 Daniel 8:17,19 The end time

To contemporary readers, the phrase 'the time of the end' (8:17,19) conjures up the notion of the end times, as though its fulfillment is still future. But its descriptions clearly match Antiochus IV, in the 2nd-century BC. The same is largely true of Jesus' apocalyptic discourse, as he describes the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70, and again in Revelation, as it describes virulent persecution under the Roman emperors. So these texts are less about the future, than about the past. Still, they consistently reinforce a message that is germane to the Church wherever and whenever it suffers persecution. While state-sponsored opposition and persecution is an ever-present possibility in this world, and while the suffering may be severe, God remains in control. As Daniel says of Antiochus: "He will destroy many and take his stand against the Prince of princes. Yet he will be destroyed, but not by human power" (but by God). This is the hope of God's people wherever persecution rears.