

COSMIC CONFLICT

SERIES: FORTIFIED FOR FAITHFULNESS

By Steve Zeisler

The work of God is greater, his concerns larger, the issues that are at stake more serious, and his presence grander than we often acknowledge. My hope in this message is that we see great truths that are higher and more stirring than we usually consider.

My normal approach in teaching through a book of the Bible is to explain what the text says in such a way that we can see it and apply it to our lives. But the section we have come to now, chapters 10-12, which are a unit, defies explanation. We are going to consider chapter 10 in this message, but I won't try to teach through it verse-by-verse or even paragraph-by-paragraph.

Verse 1 says this:

In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia, a revelation was given to Daniel (who was called Belteshazzar). Its message was true and it concerned a great war. The understanding of the message came to him in a vision.

In the opening chapters of the book we frequently saw Daniel standing before kings, witnessing with his life and words, saying with unflinching bravery what kings didn't want to hear. In the final chapters of the book we find him in the presence of God and heavenly beings.

Daniel was in his middle to late eighties at the end of his life. He had served in high positions of extraordinary authority in more than one empire, and now he saw Christ. He was knocked to the ground repeatedly, unable to speak. His telling of these experiences is a bit disjointed. It was certainly overwhelming to him, and is not explained at length. He speaks of matters that we can glimpse but not completely understand. This is Daniel's testimony. Listen to it in that way, and don't attempt to pin down details. Try to catch the power of what he experienced.

A vision of pre-incarnate Jesus

Verse 2-9:

At that time I, Daniel, mourned for three weeks. I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over.

On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river, the Tigris, I looked up and there before me was a man dressed in linen, with a belt of the finest gold around his waist. His body was like chrysolite, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude.

I, Daniel, was the only one who saw the vision; the men with me did not see it, but such terror overwhelmed them that they fled and hid themselves. So I was left alone, gazing at this great vision; I had no strength left, my face turned deathly pale and I was helpless. Then I heard him speaking, and as I listened to him, I fell into a deep sleep, my face to the ground.

This is the first great scene of this chapter. Here on the bank of the river Tigris, Daniel and some friends were out of the familiar surroundings of the city. We can imagine them camped in the wilderness on a spiritual retreat.

Daniel was too old to return from exile with the other captives who had set out for Jerusalem, but he decided to leave the great centers of pagan civilization with their claims to human power and authority, and go to a place where he could be with God. He was fasting and praying, worshiping, attending to God for three weeks. We saw at the beginning of chapter 9 as well that he fasted and prayed, and his prayer is recorded there. We know that at times like this his general approach was to wrestle with God regarding the difficult purposes of God. “How can you forgive people who don’t deserve to be forgiven?” he asked in chapter 9. It was now some time since the return of the exiles to Jerusalem, and I believe they had begun the work of restoration and were already starting to fail. How would God keep his promises? Why weren’t these faithful ones having more success? Why did they still face enemies who succeeded in opposing and hurting them?

At the end of three weeks of focus on the Lord, Daniel was knocked to the ground by this vision he saw and the words he heard. It is hard to know whether there was more than one person in the vision. I believe the figure he saw in verses 2-9 was the Lord Jesus. This one was very similar to the vision given to the apostle John, recorded in the opening chapter of the Revelation. Daniel saw a dramatic display of Jesus prior to his coming in history; John saw him after he had risen from and dead and ascended into heaven. In both cases, the glorified form of the Lord was presented. In Daniel’s vision Jesus began to speak, but Daniel never did learn what he said. Hearing the voice of Jesus so overwhelmed Daniel that he passed out.

In verse 10 another figure approaches him, probably an angel. Let’s read 10:10-11:2:

A hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees. He said, “Daniel, you who are highly esteemed, consider carefully the words I am about to speak to you, and stand up, for I have now been sent to you.” And when he said this to me, I stood up trembling.

Then he continued, “Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia. Now I have come to explain to you what will happen to your people in the future, for the vision concerns a time yet to come.”

While he was saying this to me, I bowed with my face toward the ground and was speechless. [Note that, having been to his knees and then to his feet, he is now back on the ground.] Then one who looked like a man touched my lips, and I opened my mouth and began to speak. I said to the one standing before me, “I am overcome with anguish because of the vision, my lord, and I am helpless. How can I, your servant, talk with you, my lord? My strength is gone and I can hardly breathe.”

Again the one who looked like a man touched me and gave me strength. “Do not be afraid, O man highly esteemed,” he said. “Peace! Be strong now; be strong.”

When he spoke to me, I was strengthened and said, “Speak, my lord, since you have given me strength.”

So he said, “Do you know why I have come to you? Soon I will return to fight against the prince of Persia, and when I go, the prince of Greece will come; but first I will tell you what is written in the Book of Truth. (No one supports me against them except Michael, your prince. And in the first year of Darius the Mede, I took my stand to support and protect him.)

There are two testimonies in this text. Daniel’s testimony is largely about getting knocked down and having his breath taken from him, being made to see what so overwhelmed him that he was rendered helpless. Away from the city, fasting and praying for three weeks, he was wrestling with God about the things that mattered to God, about things that weren’t turning out as expected. He was a man of high station and great opportunity, who had the authority to command wealth and ease. But instead he had gone on a retreat to give attention to God.

Daniel had stood in the presence of Nebuchadnezzar, the “head of gold,” who gloried in his riches and power, and had told him, “You are going to be made a fool.” He had stood before the drunken Belshazzar and said, “You have been found wanting.” Before the kings of successive empires he had never once flinched. And now he was in the presence of God, and he was cast to the ground, breathless, terrified, overwhelmed.

What happened to Daniel was very much like what happened to Job. This vision was not an explanation of mysteries. What happened to Daniel was a full-strength experience of the glorious presence of the Son of God. It didn’t answer the questions, it rendered the questions unimportant. In the book of Job, in chapter after chapter Job accused God, argued with God, wrestled and struggled with God. The Lord’s answer at the end was a tour of his own power and glory, and that simply silenced Job. “I don’t have the right to even ask the questions.” Daniel was similarly overwhelmed.

It’s important to hear the personal word to him, “You are highly esteemed.” Twice he was told that. The angel speaking to him said, “Be at peace! Be strong. Part of what you should be hearing in all of this, Daniel, is that you are well known and well thought of, and on the day you prayed an answer was sent, although it took three weeks to get here.”

Serious attention given to prayer leads us into the presence of God. We may not see a vision of Jesus in his glory as Daniel did, but we will see God. I know from my own life and from the Scriptures that it’s true. We may see him in small things. We may hear his voice in places where we haven’t been listening before. We may, like Elijah, find God not in a great wind or an earthquake or a fire but in a still, small voice (1 Kings 19:12). If we give attention to God, we will find him, and our lives will be changed by what we find. That is Daniel’s testimony.

Spiritual battles

The second testimony is that of an unnamed angel. This angel said, “The minute you prayed God dispatched me to give you an answer, but I couldn’t give it to you for three weeks because I had to fight my way across heaven in order to get here. I am about to go back, and once again I’ll engage a battle.” He spoke of a prince of Persia and a prince of Greece, a king of Persia, and Michael the angel of the people of God. He mentioned these things and then said no more about them. We find ourselves asking, “What in the world are you talking about? Who are these princes of Persia and Greece? Who is this king of Persia? Who is Michael? What battle is going on?”

Daniel was told that the matters that concerned him were more complicated than he had thought. There are unseen realities, dark powers behind the reasons that prejudice is so hard to uproot and horrors of the same kind happen over and over. There are powerful enemies and extraordinary champions, and what happens on earth is profoundly

affected by what happens in heaven, though we don't see it. That's why the New Testament is so clear that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). We are dealing with things that are bigger, scarier, and more wonderful than we usually consider.

In this chapter we observe Daniel at the end of his visions and at the end of his life, not filled with self-satisfaction or ease of circumstances, not paying attention to the things of earth, but spending time with God. We see an angel who finds it a privilege to serve God in heavenly places and fight wars we can't even imagine. The testimony of both of these brothers of ours, one prophetic and one angelic, is that a life poured out in service to the Lord is worth every difficulty.

How should it benefit us to hear testimonies like this? Well, it should stir us to want to be the same. I'm particularly taken with Daniel's age in his testimony. He spent a lifetime being faithful. He chose to go away and wrestle with God for the cause of his people, wonder about the future, ask for answers, engage the things of God, well into his ninth decade. Daniel became a man of courage and godliness who stayed strong until the end by trusting God in large and small things all his life. Stature in the ways of God is not achieved in one moment's act of heroism. It is grown over a lifetime of choosing to trust and obey.

The apostle Paul spoke of finishing the race. Listen to his declaration of a life lived all the way to the end for the right reasons: "For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing." (2 Timothy 4:6-8.) May we also find such a crown waiting for us on that day.

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10th Message
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