

WAITING AND WATCHING

SERIES: FORTIFIED FOR FAITHFULNESS

By Steve Zeisler

We are at the conclusion of a series of studies in the book of Daniel. It has been wild and unpredictable. You may have wondered, as I have, why things in this book aren't clearer at times, and why the things that are clear are so demanding and remarkable. But I have learned much. This study has been a wonderful experience for me, and I hope it has been for you.

I quoted an old revivalist hymn in the first message of the series:

*Dare to be a Daniel,
Dare to stand alone!
Dare to have a purpose firm!
Dare to make it known! (1)*

We know more about this man now than we did. We have a better sense of what it would be like to be such a man. At the end of the book, very near the end of his life, Daniel is in his middle-to-late eighties. We've followed him from boyhood to old age, and the challenge remains appropriate: dare to be like him.

As I said in the last message (Discovery Paper 4709), chapters 10-12 form a unit. We covered chapter 10 in that message. In this message we'll summarize chapter 11 and study chapter 12.

All three of these chapters are remarkable. They are hard to follow. We don't always know who is speaking. There are questions that remain unanswered, I believe by design. We can know enough to be informed, challenged, and built up in our faith, but the account is deliberately told in such a way that we are made to say, "Lord, there is more here than I will ever understand!"

In chapter 10 we saw that the exile of the Jews had ended and the first wave of Jewish believers had gone back to reoccupy the Promised Land. Daniel himself had left the cities of Babylon and Persia, never again to stand in the court of a king. He was evidently on some kind of spiritual retreat on the bank of the river Tigris, hoping for what God had promised to come to pass, seeking the presence of the Lord. Then a vision overwhelmed him, rendered him unconscious on the ground. I am convinced it was a vision of Jesus that he saw and heard. Someone, probably an angel, eventually roused him from his trance. Daniel described his state in verse 16: "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." This messenger restored his strength, then in effect pulled back a curtain, revealing warfare in heaven. Daniel's head was swimming, we have to imagine--ours certainly were from reading it--as his companion described princes of Persia and Greece, a king of Persia, and Michael engaged in war in heaven that was somehow congruent with the events of earth's history. Then he closed the curtain without explaining any of it.

In chapter 11, which we will not read, Daniel's angelic instructor tells of events that would take place 250 years from Daniel's time, after the breakup of the Greek empire. Two of the smaller kingdoms that remained after Alexander's death, ruled by the Ptolemies and the Seleucids, fought over the course of four or five generations. In this period the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV blasphemed God in a deliberate and aggressive affront, sacrificing a pig in the temple, claiming deity, and slaughtering many Jews. By the end of chapter 11 this beastly person has morphed into the antichrist who is still future to us, the final blasphemer, "the man of lawlessness... the son of destruction" (2 Thessalonians 2:3, NASB) who will occupy the stage at the end of history. He too will enter God's temple and desecrate everything that is holy.

We'll read chapter 12 now. The final battle is being described. Here is what Daniel heard at the end of the vision.

Astonishing things at the end

Verses 1-6:

"At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people--everyone whose name is found written in the book--will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. But you, Daniel, close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge."

Then I, Daniel, looked, and there before me stood two others, one on this bank of the river and one on the opposite bank. One of them said to the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, "How long will it be before these astonishing things are fulfilled?"

Once again, take note of how peculiar this is. This unnamed individual makes observations about Michael, who fights wars in heaven. From chapter 10 we know that he himself is sometimes the ally of Michael. He has been sent to tell Daniel of the future. Then Daniel observes other individuals--one on this bank of the river, one on the other bank, and one floating above the river. They are talking to each other. Daniel tells us all of this without explanation of what's going on. There is certainly a degree of deliberate disorientation in this, it seems to me. But that's exactly how Daniel experienced it. He was hearing extraordinary things and he never could quite get his footing. So as we read, we have the same experience he did.

Verses 7-13:

The man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, lifted his right hand and his left hand toward heaven, and I heard him swear by him who lives forever, saying, "It will be for a time, times and half a time. When the power of the holy people has been finally broken, all these things will be completed."

I heard, but I did not understand. So I asked, "My lord, what will the outcome of all this be?"

He replied, “Go your way, Daniel, because the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end. Many will be purified, made spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be wicked. None of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will understand.

“From the time that the daily sacrifice is abolished and the abomination that causes desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days. Blessed is the one who waits for and reaches the end of the 1,335 days.

“As for you, go your way till the end. You will rest, and then at the end of the days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance.”

“A time, times and half a time” very likely refers to 3 1/2 years. One might think the 1,290 days would be referring to the same time span. It’s close, but 1,290 is too many days, especially considering the 30-day months of the Jewish calendar in Daniel’s time. And no one seems to know how the 1,290 days turn into 1,335 days; there is no explanation.

As we consider what to make of chapter 12, we’ll gather up themes that we’ve seen throughout the book. Let’s look at the first four verses. These are less ambiguous than the latter part of the chapter.

Distress, victory, and God’s righteous rule

The first point in these verses has been a strong theme throughout the book: there is no reason to assume times are ever going to get better. All cultures and nations are defiant of the rule of God. There will be better times and worse times, and some parts of the world will do better when other parts are doing worse. But there is no promise that everything will work out just the way we want it to for nations, cultures, or individuals. Things aren’t gradually getting better. Deterioration is always evident, and the last days will be the darkest.

Jesus uses the language of this chapter when he talks about first the fall of Jerusalem and then the terrible times of the end: “For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now--and never to be equaled again” (Matthew 24:21). John the revelator, speaking of the beast and of the terrible experiences of the final seven years of earth’s history, draws on exactly what Daniel is talking about here (see Revelation 12-13). Paul makes reference to “the man of lawlessness... the son of destruction” (2 Thessalonians 2:3, NASB), drawing on Daniel. These observations of Daniel’s become very important in the eschatology of the New Testament.

Another point to observe is that victory will come from heaven, not from a final triumph of truth and righteousness after a long struggle by the saints. Michael is referenced here, and he will come in the train of the Son of God, who will victoriously return to earth for his own.

A third point is that at the end of the events that take place on earth, there is going to be a resurrection. In this world we cannot ultimately make sense of the problem of pain, of why bad things happen to good people, why the kind and noble are very often shunted aside, why the horrible and banal are raised up. We can’t make sense of things until a final accounting is made. Every soul will be raised, the righteous and unrighteous alike. The day will come when our choices will lead either to everlasting life or, as he says here, to “everlasting contempt.”

These are big themes. The end is resurrection and the righteous rule of God, and then all the questions will be answered.

These truths require faith. Hebrews 11:1 says that faith has two great components: “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” What we hope for that has not yet occurred and the realities in the heavens that we cannot now see are real enough to us that we bet our lives on them. That is exactly what Daniel is being told here. We know enough to trust God, to have faith. Without revelation there is no good reason for hope, confidence, engagement; no answers to despair. But what Daniel is being told is that there is hope. There are unseen realities, and God’s action in the future that will make everything right. There is ample reason to stay engaged in following him now, because we know how things will turn out.

The timeless value of God’s word

The final point to make in these first four verses of chapter 12 concerns the reference to sealing up the scroll until the time of the end. I used to think that meant hiding it so it could not be observed until the end. But that doesn’t make sense, because the scroll never was sealed that way. It has always been available; I have mentioned that Jesus quoted from this chapter directly, and the New Testament writers actively drew on it. A better way to read the reference to sealing the scroll, then, is sealing in the sense of protecting, the way you might laminate an important document so it won’t get smudged or torn. The meaning here is, “Daniel, what you write is going to be valuable until the end times. It will never wear out or become useless or unimportant. This is critical material. Make sure you protect it--keep it available, don’t let it get lost.” Think about the lengths to which believers have gone to save the Scriptures over the centuries. In the dark ages almost all other aspects of learning were done away with, but there were monks in scriptoriums copying the Bible over and over again so that it wouldn’t be lost, so that it would be sealed, saved for generations in the future to have.

I was listening to a man on the radio the other day who was talking about a paper he’d written. He was a scientist, and he had data he had prepared years earlier on a Kaypro computer, which doesn’t exist anymore. The software he used doesn’t exist either. He stored the data on a floppy disk, the old kind of floppy that really *was* floppy, which doesn’t fit in modern disk drives. In short, there was no way he could get at his data. It struck me how many of the things that seem very important now--documents, ideas, pictures, speeches, declarations, constitutions or whatever--are not going to stand the test of time. However things are preserved, they’re not permanent. Documents will get lost, memories will fade, events will be forgotten. But Daniel was told, “Not your book, because this truth is going to speak loudly and clearly until the end. This has application now and forever.”

The vision again grows peculiar in verses 5-13. It is a very odd way to end the book. Some of the least explainable things are spoken of: the 1,290 days and the 1,335 days, conversations between beings of whom Daniel requests answers, and who don’t answer. They merely say, “Go your way.” We don’t know what happened to Daniel, where his friends who panicked and ran were (in chapter 10), where he went after this, how much longer he lived. The book just stops without telling us how it all turned out. There is no good resolution to it, only the word to Daniel, “You go and be who God has called you to be.”

What shall we make of such obscurities in the prophetic word, of references to future events that are clear enough to challenge us but not clear enough to explain everything? Well, prophecy has a number of important uses, whether everything is completely explained or not.

The usefulness of prophecy

First, the ones who have to live through the events being prophesied make particular use of prophecy. The people who will live through the last seven years of earth's history and its tribulation will make particular use of Daniel and Revelation and the other places that speak of what will happen then. It will be much more important to them than it will be to those who are just looking off into the distance. An example of that in Scripture is Jesus' foretelling of his death to his followers. "The Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified," he said (Matthew 26:2). "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise" (Mark 9:31; see also Luke 9:44-45). He would quote the prophets and say clearly that his death was imminent, and his followers refused to believe it. But when they had to live through it, they recalled that he had said that these things would happen and that good would come of it.

Another use of prophetic foretelling of history is that it comforts the afflicted, because we know that God is in charge of history. Happy endings may not be imminent, but people who have hard lives, perhaps in disease-ridden places of the world or under the thumb of persecutors, realize that they are not the first and they won't be the last, and that God has not forgotten them.

On the other hand, prophetic foretelling of history afflicts the comfortable. The people who are too self-satisfied imagine that all the good, comfortable, pleasurable, and easy things that make up their lives are only what they deserve, and they will always have them. They find themselves a little shaken to realize that this comfortable existence is an anomaly, and there is no reason to think it will last. Maybe they should be ready for difficulty and loss. Maybe they should love those who are suffering now, so that if the day comes when they too must suffer, someone will love them.

A final use of prophecy is that it gives us boldness. We get that by having a big-picture faith. The whole world is not made up of just our feelings, our struggles, our days, our nights, our little circle of concerns. We serve a very big God who speaks in extraordinary terms, who is fighting wars in heaven and on earth, bringing about the establishment and destruction of empires, mapping out history, sending angels on errands. That enables us to be much bolder.

When I was in the fourth grade, I thought that sixth-graders were the biggest deal in the world. Being the highest grade in our school, they were at the top of the heap. I remember thinking that when I got to the sixth grade, I would have arrived. From the perspective of a fourth-grader, that is very important. But from the perspective of an eighth-grader, sixth-graders are nothing. Six-graders can say whatever they want--it's no threat to eighth-graders, because their world has become larger. Prophecy does that for us. It helps reduce the size of what seems overwhelming to us in the moment.

Let me say a word about the fascination with details that ought to fit but don't.

The right response to prophecy

The more I've read, on Daniel especially but on related themes as well, the more it strikes me that there are two types of people who come up with wrong answers. Both are overly fascinated with the intricacies of the details, and they miss the overwhelming, breathtaking experience of God's presence in this.

One type that gets it wrong is the liberal scholars. Their fascination with details comes out this way: “Well, if you read chapter 11 in the book of Daniel, you realize that clearly this is a description of the tensions, wars, and difficulties between the Ptolemies and the Seleucids. It is given in such great detail--reference to marriage, battles and so on--that it could not possibly have been written ahead of time. And here is another thing: There are three Greek words in the book of Daniel that refer to musical instruments. Therefore this couldn't have been written in the time of the Babylonian or Persian Empire. This is not a book of prophecy foretelling the work of God. Details like this give us the right to say so.” But this is a faithless attention to detail.

The other type of people who come up with wrong answers represent the most conservative efforts to take all of the details and fit them together. “This reference is to the European common market, and this is the Soviet Red Army, and this is where the tanks have to go under these circumstances to fight this battle.” Or, “This reference in Zechariah is the same as in Revelation.” And so on. Every detail is accounted for, and no mystery remains. Nothing unknown is permitted. But they have the same faithlessness. Those who have a system in which everything can be declared to be known, control it themselves. The outcome is not reverence for God.

Again, what we are given in Daniel is a clear outline of the future. I am convinced that it is foretelling and that it is miraculous. We are supposed to know that God is in charge of history, and we know enough about history, especially its end, to live with confidence, to pray with hope, and to not be fooled. But the book is deliberately written in such a way that it is somewhat disorienting, so that we will not find ourselves thinking we know everything there is to know about this. We are supposed to understand that we are in the presence of a God who is too big to contain. The essential response is worship. Both the liberals who would minimize the book of Daniel and the most conservative who would claim to understand every reference, miss the point because they end up too far from the worship of God.

Here are some questions to ask at the end of chapter 12 and the end of the book.

Has anything in this book enhanced your faith, so that you're more convinced of unseen realities, more certain of future hope?

Are you overwhelmed by the glory of God, your categories exploded, your sense of being in charge of your life shaken a bit, your imagination stirred? (The alternative is just knowing more in a puffed-up way. In 1 Corinthians 8:1, Paul said people who know everything end up proud. Those who are in God's presence end up on their knees, out of breath, unable to speak.)

Has your hunger for God increased, so that you find yourself wishing you could know more, see more, walk farther, trust more?

Do you have more courage, so that you've shaken off some of the things that used to hang you up--the old fears, the old silliness, the old shallowness?

What do you have to say at the end of the book? Will you spend your life telling people what God has done for you, and not settle for less? I hope so. The challenge is that you “dare to be a Daniel”--not just study Daniel.

Notes

1. Philip P. Bliss, *Dare to Be a Daniel*.

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