

“Fear Not”

The Nineteenth in a Series of Sermons on the Book of Daniel

Texts: Daniel 10:1-11:1; Revelation 1:9-20

Throughout our time studying the Book of Daniel, we have read of YHWH using dreams and visions to reveal to his prophet information about the future of the land of Judah, the city of Jerusalem, and the temple of YHWH. The purpose of this prophetic revelation is to encourage those Jews then living as exiles in Babylon—the former capital of the Babylonian empire, now occupied by the Persians. The exiles find themselves under YHWH’s covenant curse because of Israel’s past idolatry and unbelief. The good news is that this exile is about to end. The bad news is that their struggles will not. Daniel now learns that there is an invisible and spiritual war behind the day to day struggles of God’s people, a war which will be won by a coming of the Messiah.

During his remarkable life in exile, Daniel was called and equipped by YHWH to serve two of the greatest kings of that age: Nebuchadnezzar (Babylon) and Cyrus (the Persian empire). YHWH has also revealed to Daniel that four great middle eastern empires will successively rise and fall—the Babylonian, the Persian, the Greek, and then finally, Rome. Through the prophetic revelation given to Daniel, the exiles learn that they are about to return home and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. But YHWH will also reveal that the glory days for Israel are past, and they will not return until the mighty fourth empire of these visions, Rome, is finally subdued after its direct opposition to YHWH and his kingdom. YHWH’s final conquest will take the form of a messianic kingdom which conquers all of God’s enemies apart from the use of armies and political power, a victory won by a suffering Messiah who breaks the power of sin and undoes the curse.

As recounted in chapter nine, Daniel was well aware that Judah’s seventy years of exile foretold by the prophet Jeremiah was coming an end. Worried about his people, Daniel fervently prays for Judah (vv. 1-19 of Daniel 9). YHWH answered him by sending the angel Gabriel who revealed to Daniel that a time of seventy weeks has been decreed for God’s people, a period which begins to unfold with the Persian king Cyrus’ decree in 538 BC, to allow the Jews to return to Babylon and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. Furthermore, Gabriel explains that the seventy weeks will be fulfilled when a coming Messiah will finish the transgression, put an end to sin, atone for iniquity, bring in everlasting righteousness, seal both vision and prophet, and anoint a most holy place (v. 24). Gabriel also reveals that in the process of the Messiah redeeming his people, both Jerusalem and the temple will be destroyed, and then Jews will be dispersed into the ends of the earth. But the Messiah will complete his redemptive work and usher in the final jubilee and the eternal Sabbath at the end of the age.

So far in the dreams and visions of chapters 2, 7, 8 and 9, the focus has been on YHWH’s sovereign purposes for his people Israel, specifically how YHWH will keep his covenant promise to Israel, deliver his people from exile, and allow them to return to the land of promise. Although there will be the rise and fall of nations and empires throughout Israel’s immediate future, these dreams and visions reveal that any future warfare and political intrigue reflect the unfolding of YHWH’s greater purposes. Even times of trouble and turmoil are to be seen by God’s people as God working all things after the counsel of his will, and bringing all things into subjection to Jesus.

Yet one more vision remains for Daniel to receive and recount in the final chapters of his prophecy (10-

12). A mysterious figure reveals to Daniel that an invisible war is taking place behind the history we observe and recount. The vision which runs from Daniel 11:2-45 is the most comprehensive vision in the Book of Daniel. Once again, it is intended to comfort the people of God, so that despite the difficulties they will continue to face when they return to Judah from their time in exile, God's people understand that YHWH's purposes will be accomplished—despite their troubles.

But the scope and focus of this vision is much different than the preceding visions. At the end of this final vision we learn that not even our greatest enemy (death) will triumph in the end when Daniel reveals what is perhaps the clearest Old Testament text which speaks of the resurrection of all people at the end of the age (12:1-4). The historical events in this vision focus on the rise and fall of empires in the second and third century BC (specifically the remnants of Alexander's Greek empire—the Seleucids and the Ptolemies). This is important information for the returning exiles, since Judah is located directly between the Ptolemaic empire to the south (the Egypt of Cleopatra) and the Seleucids to the north (the kingdom of Antiochus IV Epiphanes), whom we met in the vision of chapter 8 which foretells of the rise of Antiochus from the Seleucid kingdom and his desecration of the Jerusalem temple.

What makes the vision of Daniel 11:2-45 so different from the others (specifically that of Daniel 8) is that the final vision comes from a divine visitor (the pre-incarnate Christ) who appears to Daniel and informs him that the historical struggle of people and nations reflects a much larger cosmic struggle between YHWH's kingdom and that of the Antichrist—an invisible but nevertheless quite real struggle between angelic legions of YHWH (including the two great angels, Gabriel and Michael) and those demonic powers which serve and support the pagans kings who seek to oppress and persecute the people of God. The warfare between Persian and Greek kings foretold in the vision—with Judah trapped in the middle—are but the physical manifestation of an invisible spiritual war between angelic powers whom we cannot see but who are as real as the kings and empires we can see. Given the spiritual nature of this combat, it must be revealed to Daniel that this spiritual war does not and cannot end until the final triumph of YHWH's kingdom when death itself is defeated with the resurrection on the last day.

As with the prior visions, the final vision opens with Daniel giving us the exact time frame for what follows. *“In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia a word was revealed to Daniel, who was named Belteshazzar.”* Cyrus (Darius the Mede) defeated the Babylonians and occupied Babylon in 539 BC. He issues his famous decree soon after in 538. The third year of Cyrus' reign would be 536 BC, indicating that this vision was given after the seventy weeks prophecy of Daniel 9 had commenced and Ezra and the exiles had already departed from Babylon and had returned to Judah. Daniel is about to learn that the rebuilding of the temple and the renewing of the sacrifices will provoke an unseen war between angels and demonic forces behind the rise of kings and empires that oppose the kingdom of YHWH.

Using his Babylonian court name, Belteshazzar, and by referring specifically to king Cyrus (as he did back in chapter 1, v. 7, 21) Daniel is, in effect, claiming to be the author of this entire book which bears his name. Critical scholars believe the author to be a Jew—writing shortly after the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes and the desecration of the temple in 167-68 BC, not in the 6th century BC. The details in this final vision will be fulfilled such great accuracy that critics of the Bible are forced by their presuppositions to conclude that this vision is history written after the fact, because no one (i.e. Daniel) could predict such things so accurately so far in advance. The answer to such a notion is that God knows the future because he ordains it, and he has revealed this Daniel in such a way to confirm both the inspiration and the authority of Scripture. Fulfilled prophecy has long been one of the surest proofs the Bible is the word of God. As they say, “you can't make this stuff up”—especially 350 years in advance.

In fact, Daniel makes this very point. “*And the word was true, and it was a great conflict.*” The content of this vision was “true,” meaning it was revealed in conjunction with the appearance of a divine visitor who is introduced shortly (vv. 4-6). Daniel also tells us that “*he understood the word and had understanding of the vision*” since it was revealed to him by this divine figure, who, as it turns out, is none other than the pre-incarnate Lord Jesus. The contents of the vision were greatly disturbing to Daniel, coming at a time after the exiles had left Babylon to return to Judah—Daniel remaining behind in Babylon likely due to his advanced age.

We find Daniel in great distress at this time, which comes as a bit of a surprise, since king Cyrus has already released the exiles to return home to Judah in fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy of seventy weeks of exile coming to an end. Perhaps Daniel has gotten word of the struggles Ezra and Zerubbabel have encountered in Judah upon their return.¹ We know from our time studying the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah that at this time things were not going well for Ezra and the newly returned exiles. The altar of the Jerusalem temple was rebuilt and sacrifices were offered again by 537 BC, but the rebuilding of the temple itself was a tough slog, with work coming to a complete halt by 530 BC. We also know that there was much political intrigue and opposition to the exiles from the Samaritans (their neighbors in Judah). Since he is an active member of the royal court, no doubt, Daniel is aware of these things. Daniel should be rejoicing that YHWH has kept his promise and that the exiles have returned to Jerusalem to rebuild. But he is not. He’s greatly troubled. He knows the exiles are struggling.

According to Daniel’s testimony, we read in verses 2-3, “*in those days I, Daniel, was mourning for three weeks. I ate no delicacies, no meat or wine entered my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all, for the full three weeks.*” There are a number of possible reasons for Daniel’s fasting described here. It may be for reasons just mentioned, concern for his people, the recently departed exiles making slow progress in Jerusalem.² That Daniel did not anoint himself with oil was a sign of mourning.³ It may also be the time of the Passover and feast of unleaven bread when Daniel ordinarily would have remembered Israel’s release from captivity under the Pharaoh through fasting and prayer. But in light of struggles of the returning exiles were facing in Jerusalem, Daniel tells us that he did not eat meat or drink wine during this time (i.e., the Passover Lamb or the ceremonial wine). It was in the midst of this spiritual depression/funk that YHWH seeks to comfort Daniel with this third and final vision, revealing to Daniel YHWH’s control of the future and the invisible spiritual conflict which was then raging unseen.

Based upon the opening words of verse 4, “*on the twenty-fourth day of the first month,*” we know the exact date of the vision recorded by Daniel. The twenty-fourth day of the first month would be Nissan 536 (or April 23, 536 BC). The specificity here of date is important—either Daniel received this vision on this date, or the person writing hundreds of years later is lying, saddling the critical scholar’s reconstruction of the date of authorship with the fact that the second century BC author, supposedly writing after the fact. This turns the Book of Daniel into a pious fraud and makes us wonder why any critical scholar would deny Daniel’s authorship but still claim to find something of value in his prophecy. On the other hand, the specificity of the date given, puts Daniel into a particular historical context, which indicates that Cyrus issued his decree three years earlier (538), the exiles had returned home and things

¹ Greidanus, Preaching Christ from Daniel, 348.

² Steinmann, Daniel, 496.

³ Baldwin, Daniel, 200; Steinmann, Daniel, 497.

were not going well (537). Daniel is depressed by this news.

Because he is gracious and merciful to his prophet, YHWH does not leave Daniel in such a state. As the prophet goes on to recount in vv. 4b-6, “*as I was standing on the bank of the great river (that is, the Tigris), I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, a man clothed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist. His body was like beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude.*” We not only have the date of vision, we have the precise location where it was given, the Tigris river in what is now modern Iraq. We also have a description of the divine revealer.

While standing on the bank of the river suddenly Daniel sees someone in human form. The figure wore white linen, which refers to priestly garments (Leviticus 16:4, Zechariah 3). Such a theophanic figure also appears in Ezekiel’s vision of a mysterious personage who saves the remnant of believers in Judah from the destruction which the apostates in Israel are about to face at the hand of YHWH’s avenging angels (Ezekiel 9:2-3; 10:2-7). Ezekiel’s account of sparing faithful individuals from God’s judgment is very similar to that found in Revelation 7:3-8 and the sealing of 144,000. Daniel’s account here bears strong resemblance to a similar divine figure whose appearance is recounted in Ezekiel 1 and Revelation 1:13-16, part of our New Testament lesson (see the chart provided).⁴

Some take this figure who appears to Daniel to be an angel (Gabriel), because Gabriel had appeared to Daniel in previous visions. But given the striking similarity between this figure and the Lord who walks among the lampstands (the seven churches) in John’s vision (Revelation 1:9-20), I take this figure to be the same figure as that one “like a Son of Man,” from the vision in Daniel 7. The difficulty with this figure being divine (the pre-incarnate Christ) surfaces in what follows in verses 13 and 21 when YHWH seems to depend upon Michael to accomplish his sovereign purpose, as though YHWH’s power was limited and that the final outcome of the struggle is in doubt. The answer to this conundrum is as simple as remembering that God needs no help from Michael or any other creature (angelic or human) because he is all-powerful. But we know from the course of redemptive history that YHWH often uses means, human (or in this case, angelic) to accomplish his greater purposes. This is clearly in view, I think, when we consider that Michael, as powerful as he is, submits to the figure who appears to Daniel. The only one to whom Michael would submit is the “Ancient of Days” and that one like a “Son of Man.”

Daniel is with other individuals at the time the figure appears, but they did not see what Daniel saw, they only knew that something frightening was transpiring. According to verse 7, “*and I, Daniel, alone saw the vision, for the men who were with me did not see the vision, but a great trembling fell upon them, and they fled to hide themselves.*” This is quite similar to Paul’s “Damascus Road” experience recounted in Acts 9, when the Risen Christ appeared to Paul, but no one else saw what Paul saw, even though they heard the voice which spoke to the Apostle. The very nature of such appearances of Jesus to people such as Daniel and Paul (either before or after Jesus’ resurrection) always brings fear and an overwhelming sense of the holy, provoking human fear, guilt, and shame. This is why would should be suspicious of anyone who claims that Jesus appeared to them, or spoke to them apart from Scripture. If this actually happened, these people would be terrified by such a vision and presence, and completely overcome with a sense of their unworthiness and sinfulness. But they never are.

Even though Daniel had experienced such things before, the appearance of this figure is almost

⁴ Baldwin, Daniel, 200; Steinmann, Daniel, 497-499.

overwhelming to him. He tells us in verse 8, “*so I was left alone and saw this great vision, and no strength was left in me. My radiant appearance was fearfully changed, and I retained no strength.*” Daniel was physically weakened to the point of illness when this happened. This reminds us of his prior vision of chapter 8, vv. 16-18, when Daniel was frightened and fell on his face. Almost overwhelmed by what he saw, in verse 9 Daniel recounts how he now heard the man’s voice. “*Then I heard the sound of his words, and as I heard the sound of his words, I fell on my face in deep sleep with my face to the ground.*” Even an experienced and “veteran” prophet is terrified when in the presence of the Lord.

But this divine figure has not come to administer judgment or to punish Daniel, but to extend God’s mercy and graciousness to Daniel whom the Lord loves. The prophet explains in verses 10-11, “*and behold, a hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees. And he said to me, ‘O Daniel, man greatly loved, understand the words that I speak to you, and stand upright, for now I have been sent to you.’ And when he had spoken this word to me, I stood up trembling.*” Daniel is told that he is greatly loved and chosen by God to receive the words of revelation about to be spoken to him. Given great gifts by YHWH when he had first been taken in exile as a boy, Daniel will be capable of understanding the vision about to be revealed to him.

According to verse 12, Daniel’s divine visitor continued to speak. “*Then he said to me, ‘Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words.’*” “Fear not” are the same words spoken by the Risen Jesus to churches of the Book of Revelation, and to Abram in Genesis 15:1; “*the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: ‘Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.’*” These words are spoken both to comfort Daniel (a benediction), but also as an absolution, to remind him that his sins are forgiven.⁵ When sinful humans find themselves in the presence of God our fears need to be calmed, or else we would be completely undone and useless as recipients and communicators of divine revelation.

After comforting Daniel, the divine figure tells him, “*the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days, but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I was left there with the kings of Persia, and came to make you understand what is to happen to your people in the latter days. For the vision is for days yet to come.*” The heavenly figure recounts the nature of the spiritual war of which Daniel is unaware. Daniel has been praying and fasting for twenty-one days, but this figure has not come in answer to his prayer because of an unexpected reason—opposition from the “prince of Persia.” Obviously, this is not a Persian royal (Daniel is in the same court with them), but must refer to a spiritual being, a demonic power, which was working to thwart God’s purposes for the nation of Persia, which as we know from the visions given Daniel in chapters 2 and 7 is one of the great empires which arises to serve God’s purposes, specifically to bring God’s judgment upon the Babylonians and facilitate (through Cyrus) the release of the Jewish exiles in Babylon, only to fall in time under God’s judgment.⁶

This is the only place in all the Bible where such spiritual warfare, between angelic powers and demonic forces, who empower people and nations to do their bidding, is brought forth so explicitly.⁷ In

⁵ Steinmann, Daniel, 501-02.

⁶ Baldwin, Daniel, 201; Steinmann, Daniel, 502; Young, Daniel, 226-27.

⁷ Steinmann, Daniel, 502.

Revelation 12:7-9, we read of the complete defeat of these demonic forces after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. John tells us, "*now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.*" What we see in Daniel 10, is likely that opposition from the Samaritans in conspiring with the political officials to figure out a way to get Persian officials to stop the on-going work on the temple in Jerusalem is part of a much larger spiritual battle. What is in view is pagan religion and opposition to the kingdom of God which has been stirred up by unseen forces (a demonic power, here identified as the "prince of Persia"). There is a biblical case to be made that government bureaucracy is demonic!

The same angelic figure, Michael, also appears in both texts (Daniel 10 and Revelation 12) as a mighty warrior against such demonic forces. He also is mentioned in Jude 9, disputing with the devil over the body of Moses. "*But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you.'*" When Michael came and did combat with the prince of Persia, this divine figure was released to appear to Daniel. The image is one of real spiritual combat between angelic forces against demonic forces, yet which YHWH can wipe out with but a word, but which he instead allows to oppose his purposes until the time comes for them to be defeated at the cross and in the empty tomb, which sets the stage for the final destruction of all demonic foes. We know this to be the case from the demons themselves as recounted in Matthew 8:28–29. "*And when [Jesus] came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men met him, coming out of the tombs, so fierce that no one could pass that way. And behold, they cried out, 'What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?'*" According to Daniel 10:13, that time has not yet come.

The divine figure is not yet through with Daniel. He must prepare the prophet for the vision which is soon to come in 11:2-45. We read in verse 15, that "*when he had spoken to me according to these words, I turned my face toward the ground and was mute. And behold, one in the likeness of the children of man touched my lips.*" Daniel, who was weak from fasting and overcome by the divine presence, needed additional comfort and strengthening. The figure appeared to him like the "children of man," literally like a "Son of man," harkening us back to Daniel 7:14. It was the pre-incarnate Christ who appeared to him, touching him on the lips, much like a similar figure touched Isaiah and Jeremiah on the lips to prepare them to receive their visions of heavenly things. Daniel replies in verses 16-17. "*Then I opened my mouth and spoke. I said to him who stood before me, 'O my lord, by reason of the vision pains have come upon me, and I retain no strength. How can my lord's servant talk with my lord? For now no strength remains in me, and no breath is left in me.'*" The presence of the Son of Man was so powerful and awesome Daniel is deeply afraid that he is physically not up to the task before him.

The divine figure meets Daniel in his weakness. As Daniel explains in verses 18-19, "*again one having the appearance of a man touched me and strengthened me. And he said, 'O man greatly loved, fear not, peace be with you; be strong and of good courage.'* And as he spoke to me, I was strengthened and said, '*Let my lord speak, for you have strengthened me.*" Daniel is now ready for the vision to follow. The divine visitor continues, "*do you know why I have come to you? But now I will return to fight against the prince of Persia; and when I go out, behold, the prince of Greece will come.*" There are a number of these demonic forces, an indication that this divine figure must wage war against demonic forces controlling two successive world empires (the Persian and then the Greek). He gives Daniel assurance that he and his people are not alone. "*But I will tell you what is inscribed in the book of truth: there is*

none who contends by my side against these except Michael, your prince.” YHWH has appointed his greatest angel, Michael, to protect the people of God (Judah) from unseen yet fearsome demonic powers which lay behind the tumult we will see play out on the stage of Persian and Greek history in the years to come, along with Judah’s plight, as a spoil of war for either of these empires. Armies will march and wage war, while angels and demonic princes fight an invisible war which YHWH will win.

Having prepared Daniel for the vision which follows, in the first verse of chapter 11 the visitor tells Daniel, *“and as for me, in the first year of Darius the Mede, I stood up to confirm and strengthen him.”* Daniel now understands that when Babylon was defeated by Persia, it was not merely Cyrus defeating Belshazzar, but that heavenly warfare was even then taking place, and will continue until the coming of Jesus and his glorious victory over Satan and his legions at the cross and in the empty tomb. Daniel’s visitor stood with Cyrus when he issued his decree to release the exiles. God will accomplish his purposes in both the visible and the invisible world.

What do we take with us by way of application? Many people are intrigued by the invisible combat between angels and demons as revealed here. While we must acknowledge that such things exist, we must also realize that God has made us to be divine image-bearers who as material (visible and creaturely) occupy both time and space. Our is the visible world of human history, complete with kings, empires, and war. We leave footprints in the sand. The empires of which the divine visitor is about to speak left behind palaces, art, and the refuse of daily life including burial places and skeletons of the dead. This is the realm with which we must be concerned. These things are foretold in the vision to follow which such accuracy that this proves the divine inspiration and authority of the Bible.

Whenever the invisible becomes visible our reaction is fear and terror. To be in the presence of holiness leaves Daniel undone and on his face. The most important words the divine visitor spoke to Daniel were words of comfort “fear not.” Whenever sinful humans find themselves in the presence of God we are immediately overcome by a sense of guilt and shame. But, unlike Daniel, we live in an age when that same invisible divine visitor has now taken to himself a true human nature, and as John tells us, *“that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us.”*

The good news for us is that one who is the word of life, who has nail-pierced hands and feet, and lived a public and visible life of perfect obedience, is now risen from the dead. He speaks to us these very same words of comfort through the gospel, which we have heard with our ears and in the very visible sacraments of bread and wine we will take in our hands and eat. “Fear not.”