

The King of Bold Countenance

Daniel 8:22 – 9:10 · June 5, 2013

A Gap Between the Verses

The chapter we have before us tonight spans two very different kinds of material: the closing of the prophetic vision in chapter 8 and the opening of Daniel's great prayer in chapter 9. But before coming to either, there is something important to notice in the structure of chapter 8 itself.

Verses 20 through 22 describe what has already taken place historically — the death of Alexander the Great and the division of his kingdom among four generals. These things happened. They can be mapped onto history with precision, and secular scholars who will not allow the book to be genuinely prophetic are forced to conclude it must have been written after the fact. But beginning at verse 23 something shifts: at the latter time of their kingdom, when the transgressors shall have come to the full, a king of bold countenance shall stand up. At the end of verse 26 we are told the vision is for many days to come. These things did not take place in history. They await the time of the end.

Between verse 22 and verse 23, therefore, a vast stretch of time is compressed into silence. Alexander's generals, the centuries that followed, the coming of Christ, His death and resurrection, the entire age of the church — none of this appears explicitly. And it does not need to. This is what has been called a heavenly parenthesis: a period inserted into the flow of God's earthly purposes, during which He is gathering a heavenly people. Does this parenthesis change God's earthly purposes? Not at all. It is a parenthesis — you can read the sentence without it and it still makes sense. But it is there, and it is glorious.

*And the vision of the evening and the morning which hath been told is true. But close thou up the vision, for it is for many days to come. —
Daniel 8:26*

The King of Bold Countenance — Who Is He?

This figure is described in verse 23 as a king of bold countenance who understands riddles — or in other translations, dark sayings. He is mighty, but not by his own power. He destroys marvelously — a word that in its original sense means he causes marvel, though not of any pleasant kind. Monstrous would better capture it. He destroys the mighty and the people of the saints. Through his cunning he causes craft to prosper in his hand. He magnifies himself in his heart. And finally he stands up against the Prince of princes — and is broken without hand.

He goes by more than one name in Scripture, and each name brings out a different aspect. Here he is the king of bold countenance. In other passages he is the king of the north, a title that locates him geographically in relation to Israel, the always-central reference point of prophecy. In Isaiah 10 he is called the Assyrian — the rod of God's anger, the staff of His indignation sent against a hypocritical nation. These are not separate individuals. They are different facets of the same person, seen from different perspectives and with different emphases. He will be the last external adversary that God's earthly people must face before the Lord intervenes.

Power That Is Not His Own

The statement that his power shall be mighty but not by his own power is arresting. A man of impressive natural capacities — bold in appearance, skilled in the use of dark and occultic knowledge — and yet the power behind him is something he did not generate himself. The understanding of riddles, or dark sayings, points toward the supernatural and the occultic. These are traits that

appeal to the natural man, who is drawn to anything that transcends ordinary experience: the mysterious, the uncanny, the apparently paranormal.

The contrast with the Lord Jesus could not be more pointed. Of Him, Isaiah 53 says there was no beauty or attractiveness to the natural eye. He was despised and not esteemed. But this man will be quite the opposite: compelling in appearance, apparently endowed with supernatural insight, and surrounded by an aura of success — until the judgment falls. He is a counterfeit, and like all successful counterfeits he will be persuasive to those whose eyes are not open.

Transgression Come to the Full

Verse 23 speaks of the transgressors coming to the full. This is not primarily a reference to Gentile nations, but to those in Israel who will ultimately accept this man and allow him to displace the worship of God in the sanctuary. The indignation spoken of in verse 19 — and referenced again in Daniel 11 — is specifically about idolatry: Israel tolerating, and at length embracing, that which is an abomination in the eyes of God.

The Lord waits for iniquity to come to the full before He judges it. We read of the Amorites that their wickedness was not yet full when God spoke to Abraham. In the same way, God watches over these processes. There is nothing random or reactive in His dealings. He is not scrambling to respond to events. Every stage is known to Him, and when the measure is exactly full — not before, not after — His judgment falls. Man is left without excuse. The very completeness of the evil, allowed to ripen fully, means that when the judgment comes it is manifestly righteous.

There is a word here also for believers. Woe unto them that decree iniquitous decrees, says Isaiah 10, before he introduces the Assyrian. The passage is addressed to those who should know better. If we are not in the Lord's will, and trouble comes, where do we turn for help? To the One we have been disobeying?

The admonition is pointed: the activity of faith always hangs upon the point of view of God. We must think about these things as God thinks about them.

Broken Without Hand

When this man finally stands up against the Prince of princes, his end is immediate and total. He shall be broken without hand — meaning without human agency, without an extended military campaign, without any prolonged process. Paul writes in 2 Thessalonians 2:8 of the Lord consuming the lawless one with the breath of His mouth and annihilating him by the appearing of His coming. Isaiah says God will send His Spirit upon the Assyrian and he will fall. The Lord does not labour over these enemies when the time comes. The stone cut without hands in Nebuchadnezzar's vision shattered the image with a single blow. So it will be at the end.

This brevity and ease of the judgment is itself a testimony. It declares plainly who is sovereign. The most powerful earthly figure of that day, magnified in his own heart, standing up against the Lord of heaven — and he is gone in a moment. Every man who has exalted himself will be abased.

Daniel's Response — and What It Teaches Us

After receiving the vision, Daniel fainted and was sick certain days. Then he rose up and did the king's business, and he was astonished at the vision, but none understood it. One commentator remarks that the vessel was strained by what had been poured into it — the weight of sorrow and tribulation foreseen for God's people. And another notes that Daniel's distress was chiefly not for the suffering of the people, but for what was due to the Lord — how far they would have departed from Him, and what it would take to bring them back. It was the dishonour to God that grieved him most.

The last clause is also instructive: none understood it. Even those around Daniel did not grasp what he had been shown. A soul who is in the secret of the divine mind must be content to be unappreciated and to walk alone. The prophet of coming sorrows seldom finds as ready an ear as the prophet of smooth things. This was true in Daniel's day, and it remains true today.

Daniel Searches the Scriptures — Chapter 9 Opens

Chapter 9 opens with a significant detail. In the first year of Darius the Mede, Daniel is reading. Specifically, he is reading the book of Jeremiah and finds there the prophecy that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. He understands from this that the time is at hand.

Daniel was a prophet. God spoke to him directly, revealed visions to him, sent angels to interpret those visions. And yet, with all of that, we find him in chapter 9 searching the Scriptures. He did not sit back and wait for God to tell him directly how long the captivity would last. He went to what God had already said through His servant Jeremiah. He read. He studied. And from that reading, he understood.

This is a powerful example. If one who received direct revelation from God still found it necessary and fruitful to study the written word, how much more ought we who live in the age when all the Scriptures are completed and no new revelation is being given. The indwelling Holy Spirit can help us to understand the Scriptures. That is how truth comes to us today — not through private visions or dreams, but through the word already given, illuminated by the Spirit to the heart that seeks.

In the first year of his reign, I Daniel understood by the books that the number of the years whereof the word of Jehovah came to Jeremiah the prophet, for the accomplishment of the desolations of Jerusalem, was seventy years. — Daniel 9:2

Daniel Sets His Face to Pray

Having understood from Scripture what the moment required, Daniel did not congratulate himself on his insight and move on. He set his face unto the Lord God to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. The knowledge of God's purposes did not produce passivity in him; it produced prayer. He was moved to seek God for the fulfilment of what God had already promised.

This is always the right response to prophetic understanding. We are not meant to study prophecy as an intellectual exercise, to map out timelines and satisfy our curiosity about the future. We are meant to be moved by it — to be brought into communion with God's thoughts, to pray, to be humbled, to be purified. Daniel's whole posture here — fasting, sackcloth, ashes — is the posture of a man who has entered into the weight of what he has understood. The knowledge reached his heart, not merely his mind.

And the prayer that follows beginning in verse 4 is one of the great prayers of the Bible: deeply confessional, thoroughly honest, magnifying God in all His righteousness while taking the full weight of Israel's sin entirely upon himself.

We Have Sinned — A Priestly Prayer

One of the most striking things about this prayer is that Daniel confesses sin he did not personally commit. There is nothing in the record of Daniel's life that is blameworthy. Yet he says, without qualification, we have sinned, we have committed iniquity, we have done wickedly, we have rebelled. He makes no exception for himself.

He is performing a priestly function. In the Old Testament, when a priest offered a sin offering for the people, he ate a portion of it — an act that signified his taking the people's sin upon himself as he made intercession. Daniel's prayer is

that kind of intercession. He identifies himself entirely with his people's guilt, and brings it before God.

This is very different from the spirit of self-preservation that runs through fallen human nature. When trouble comes and a parent investigates, the natural response of children is: it wasn't me. Daniel's response is the exact opposite: it was us, and I am part of us. No excuses, no explanations, no equivocating.

We have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even turning aside from thy commandments and from thine ordinances. And we have not hearkened unto thy servants the prophets who spoke in thy name. — Daniel 9:5–6

The confession covers all classes — kings, princes, fathers, and all the people of the land — and all kinds of failure — transgression, iniquity, rebellion, not hearkening to the prophets. Nothing is left out. No corner of the nation is exempted from the acknowledgment. And through all of it, one thing is maintained consistently: Thine, O Lord, is the righteousness, but unto us is confusion of face. God is right in all that He has done. Israel is entirely to blame.