

“Be Strong and Courageous”

Daniel 10

September 23, 2007

Chapters 10, 11, and 12 in Daniel are all part of the same piece. Over the next two Sundays, we are going to look at these three chapters. There is a more expansive explanation of the previous visions in Chapter 11 and we are only going to touch on that. For our purposes, Chapters 10 and 12 are going to hold most of our attention because they deal with Daniel.

Daniel 10.

By the time we arrive at Daniel 10, Daniel is an old man. King Cyrus began his reign in roughly 536, so this would have been about 534 or 533 BC. It is kind of an off-handed comment that begins the chapter, but it is one worth paying attention. Look at verse 2, “At that time I, Daniel, had been mourning for three weeks. I had eaten no rich food, no meat or wine had entered my mouth, and I had not anointed myself at all, for the full three weeks.”

Daniel’s lack of appetite is not all that surprising; it is not all that unusual for men in their late-80’s to stay away from rich foods, meat and wine. His lack of anointing for three weeks means – in part – that he had not bathed for three weeks.

Mourning or rejoicing?

Although Daniel does not say why he was in mourning, we can surmise a few things. In Cyrus’ first year of reign, he gave an order allowing the exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem. In the two years that followed, few had. It is entirely consistent with Daniel’s character to mourn the unfaithfulness of the people of God in failing to respond to the invitation to return to the Promised Land. The time of judgment was complete, and if the invitation to return had been issued, why had so few of God’s people been willing to return? They had become comfortable where they were. How frustrating it must have been for Daniel!

Jesus’ later described his frustration with God’s people. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

Friends, how have you responded to God’s invitation? Are you willing to act to pursue something better in hope or have you become comfortable in where you are now? It is the question of faith: will you go where God leads or plant yourself where you are comfortable? It is a question for you and me personally, and it is a question for us as a congregation.

Can we say we have responded to Jesus' call for us? In a few weeks, we are going to look at the Great Commission from Matthew 28, "Go, therefore, making disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded." We have seen a number of baptisms this past year; are we done? We have seen a number of new people here; are we done? We have had some classes and had some times of prayer and had some special events to help grow people in their discipleship; are we done?

I know this is uncomfortable to hear, but we need to be uncomfortable. Friends, we can not be comfortable. We cannot become insular. We must realize people all around this campus are lost. We – and by "we" I mean you in addition to me – we have been commissioned here to make disciples of all nations in our midst. Part of discipleship is teaching those new to the faith – the assumption is that we are bringing in new people all the time – we are to "teach them to obey everything Jesus has commanded."

In short, we are to help equip people for the spiritual battle that is underway all around us.

There is a spiritual battle going on beyond what we can see.

Later in the chapter, we find out that Daniel's mourning coincides with a spiritual battle taking place beyond his awareness. Look at verse 12,

He said to me, "Do not fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words. But the prince of the kingdom of Persia opposed me twenty-one days. So Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, and I left him there with the prince of the kingdom of Persia, and have come to help you understand what is to happen to your people at the end of days."

There is a spiritual battle underway; for three weeks, the messenger was delayed by the prince of Persia. The three weeks coincides with Daniel's three weeks of mourning. The messenger ties the two together. What does this mean?

It means we exist in the midst of hostile spiritual environment. It means that there are things going on in the spiritual realm that impact us even if we are unable to see them. Think about it: evil and the demonic are more than movie props. September 11 was perpetrated by people for whom death and destruction of lives is perceived to be *good*.

Think back to our sermon series on the gospel of Mark. The man who lived among the tombs was named Legion; the spirits had tried to drive him to destroy himself. There was the father of the "epileptic" boy, who would throw himself into the fire to try to destroy himself. Jesus recognized the demonic in both of these situations; would we make the same call today?

For so many years we ignored or dismissed the spiritual warfare going on all around us. We did not allow for anything beyond what we see. Culturally, we felt we outgrew all that spiritual language in the Bible; that just showed the ignorance of the people of the time. Even now, discussions about spiritual warfare seems more the kind of thing talked about by enthusiastic churches like Pentecostals than careful thinking Presbyterians. We still feel the impact of some of the most respected theologians of the last century who denied the existence of miracles; arguing there is no supernatural intervention in daily lives.

We see the empirical trend reflected in our own tradition. As Presbyterians we are known for our record keeping. Cora Gregory will tell you about this if you ask about the “congregational statistics” she is required to generate each year. We chart the number of members, total gains and losses, worship attendance, Christian education enrollment, contributions, adult baptisms and the number of children baptized. That’s only a small sampling of what we track.

There are things we do not report. Presbyterians in Africa have a column in their statistical report to track the number of people delivered from demonic oppression. It is a number to be celebrated because it reveals God’s hand transforming lives in the midst of a spiritual battle.

It is not difficult to discern that a spiritual battle is underway in the United States and around the world. The attack of terrorists and the constant threat of violence and mass destruction is one part of it. The sensational is not all, however. There are two much more subtle versions of spiritual warfare that we experience: pluralism and procrastination.

Pluralism is the temptation to validate any and every theology out there. A few years ago, there was a horrible case in Orange County in which a little girl, Samantha Runyeon, was abducted and her body was found by the side of the road. I remember seeing on CNN that the Crystal Cathedral hosted a community service in which they placed candles on the communion table to represent each of the religions; going so far as to include a candle to represent “the unknown God.”

Friends, this is a subtle form of spiritual warfare. The intention was good: to draw the community together for a time of grieving. The execution was awful. The sanctuary is dedicated to the proclamation of salvation through Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12) The First Commandment remains true, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods besides me.” (Exodus 20:2-3) We sing the old hymn, “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness; I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly trust in Jesus’ name. On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand, all other ground is sinking sand.”

The second form of spiritual battle – procrastination – is underway all around us. C.S. Lewis wrote a book called *The Screwtape Letters*, in which a senior demon is mentoring a

younger demon how to be successful in keeping people from salvation. He provides this awful counsel:

For this reason I am almost glad to hear (that the younger demon's subject) is still a churchgoer and a communicant. I know there are dangers in this; but anything is better than that he should realize the break he has made with the first months of his Christian life. As long as he retains externally the habits of a Christian he can still be made to think of himself as one who has adopted a few new friends and amusements but whose spiritual state is much the same as it was six weeks ago. And while he thinks that, we do not have to contend with explicit repentance of a definite, fully recognized, sin, but only with his vague, though uneasy, feeling that he hasn't been doing very well lately.

The dim uneasiness needs careful handling. ...As the uneasiness and his reluctance to face it cut him off more and more from all real happiness, and as habit renders the pleasures of vanity and excitement and flippancy at once less pleasant and harder to forgo (for that is what habit fortunately does to a pleasure) you will find that anything or nothing is sufficient to attract his wandering attention. You no longer need a good book, which he really likes, to keep him from his prayers or his work or his sleep; a column of advertisements in yesterday's paper will do. You can make him waste his time not only in conversation he enjoys with people whom he likes but also in conversations with those he cares nothing about, on subjects that bore him. You can make him do nothing at all for long periods. ...

Nothing is very strong: strong enough to steal away a man's best years not in sweet sins but in a dreary flickering of the mind over it knows not what and knows not why, in the gratification of curiosities so feeble that the man is only half aware of them, in drumming his fingers and kicking of heels, in whistling tunes that he does not like, or in the long, dim labyrinth of reveries that have not even lust or ambition to give them a relish...

You will say that these are very small sins; and doubtless, like all young tempters, you are anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness. But do remember, the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the Enemy. (pps. 54-56)

Spiritual warfare does not excuse us from discipleship. It is the reason why discipleship – discipline – is necessary. God responds to our cries and pleas for help and encouragement.

God responds to Daniel's prayers and tells him, "Be strong and courageous."

Thinking about the spiritual battle can be scary. When we *do* talk about this subject, we often go to Ephesians 6 and talk about putting on the "whole armor of God."

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For 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.

Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

The Ephesians passage would come centuries after Daniel, but the same principles apply. Daniel's strength comes from the Lord. Verse 18 this morning, "Again one in human form touched me and strengthened me. He said, 'Do not fear, greatly beloved, you are safe. Be strong and courageous!'" Daniel was strengthened.

God puts us in situations in which we know, in our own strength, we are ill equipped to succeed. As Daniel contemplated his previous vision and began to hear the words of the messenger, he was terrified. I suspect I would have been, too.

"Be strong and courageous" is a holy term of art. It has a specific history and a deep meaning. The Lord's commissioning of Joshua repeated this phrase multiple times. Joshua was taking over after the death of Moses, leading a people into a new and foreign land. "Be strong and courageous," the Lord says over and over. Joshua does not take his strength from his own talents, skills, reputation, or success; he does not look at the numbers around him; he looks only to the strength offered by God.

Daniel was frightened by the vision and the spiritual battle reported to him. The encouragement to "be strong and courageous" was a comfort to him, reminding him that God was sovereign.

This is the word to us, too. "Be strong and courageous." God heard Daniel's prayer "from the first day you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God." Help was sent because Daniel's prayers were heard.

Conclusion

So, what should we take away from this passage this morning? Three things:

1. That we are to be strong and courageous as we become aware of the spiritual battle taking place in a realm we cannot see;

2. That our strength and courage come – not from ourselves – but only from the Lord;
and,
3. Our job is to be faithful and respond to God’s call.

We can be strong and courageous because God is sovereign and faithful and true. He has already won the war, we are to be faithful in the midst of the battle. Trust in him, today.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

8:45 prayer and offering

10:00 offering