Westlake Church Lausanne

Faithful to the End
Daniel 10-12

So today we're going to finish the Book of Daniel, by looking at chapters 10, 11 and 12 in one go. And the reason for that is that they contain a single vision that Daniel experiences. And this remarkable vision sets out the course of history for one corner of the world, from Daniel's time in 6th Century BC, to the end.

But before we look at it, just remember the context. As a young man Daniel had been led away from Jerusalem into exile in Babylon. And he has spent virtually his entire adult life there – seeking to live a life of faithfulness to God in a deeply pagan environment.

So in many ways Daniel exemplifies what you and I are called to do: to have a steadfast faith in a rapidly changing world. And this morning we're going to see that as Daniel approaches the end of his life, he wasn't letting up on that, and that a robust, steadfast, enduring faith in God can help us navigate life, when life seems to make no sense.

Daniel 10:1-21

Five points: When life seems a mess, know that you are loved, know that there's a battle, know that things might get worse, and know that the future makes faithfulness worth it.

When Life Seems a Mess
Look at 10:1, 'In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia.' So it's 536BC, and Daniel is an old man, he's aged at least 85. And Cyrus the Persian is king, and Nebuchadnezzar, and Belshazzar and the Babylonian Empire have gone, but Daniel is still standing.

But the question is, what is he still doing there? You see in v4 he tells us that he was 'standing on the bank of the great river (that is, the Tigris).' So Daniel's still in Babylon. And yet two years ago, in the first year of Cyrus' rule, after 70 years of exile, Cyrus had allowed the Jewish people to return to Israel and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. And some 40,000 people had made that journey home. So why didn't Daniel go with them? Why did he choose to stay rather than join that great column heading West? Was it because at 80+ he was simply too old, or frail for the journey? Was it because he felt his work here, under the new Empire of Persia, wasn't finished yet? That he could still be an influence for good? Was it that he knew the returning party had able leaders, like Ezra and Zerubbabel, and what they needed was strong workers and builders, not an old man? And did he agree to stay and pray rather than get in the way?

Well, we don't know. What we do know is that whilst the return party had started rebuilding, 2 years on they were facing growing opposition to the work, and the local Persian authorities had put a stop to it all. And the people who thought they would now be free, discovered they were anything but, as once again the power of the state pressed down on them.

And news of all this had obviously got back to Daniel. Verse 2, 'In those days I, Daniel, was mourning for three weeks.' So in response Daniel fasted and prayed, as the heavenly messenger says to him in v12, 'you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God.' So Daniel wants to understand what God is up to. He wants to understand why God fulfilled his promise to release the exiles after 70 years, only for more trouble to come, and everything to end in seeming failure. God, help me understand that – because I'm struggling to.

And sometimes life doesn't make sense, does it? You look at the world and it seems chaotic and dangerous, and you look at the church, God's people and they seem to be at the mercy of events. You look at your own life and, sometimes, it feels the same, and you wish you knew why God allows bad stuff to happen that you don't want, and why he doesn't allow good stuff to happen that you do.

Well, it's because of this desire to understand, and make sense of what is going on, that Daniel humbles himself. Interesting, isn't it? Here is a man who has spent his life among proud and powerful men. And when you do that, when you meet with success in your career and your life as Daniel did, there is this danger that you become proud like those around you. But Daniel's not proud. He humbles himself, and prays for a city he will never again visit, and a temple he will never get to enjoy, and a people hundreds of miles away. But as the apostle Peter tells us, whilst God opposes the proud he gives grace to the humble.

And it's when things don't make sense, and when the promises of God don't seem to match with experience, and Daniel humbles himself to understand, that God gives him this vision. Verse 5-6, 'I lifted up my eyes and looked and behold, a man clothed in linen… his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches… and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude.' And the experience is overwhelming, even crushing for Daniel. Verses 8-9, 'No strength was left in me… I fell on my face.' And even when this heavenly messenger touches Daniel, he's only able to get himself up, trembling, on his hands and knees.

Why? What is it about being in the presence of this being that leaves Daniel stripped of strength, and emptied of all self-confidence? Well, he's not the only person in the Bible to have experienced this, is he? And it's the great gulf between us, in all the sinfulness and brokenness of our humanity, and the glorious holiness of God.

And if life can seem a mess because of external stuff that we struggle to understand, there's also the mess of our lives that we do understand – that comes because of our sin and bad choices that can leave us broken and on our faces.

So, how can our faith endure when life seems to make no sense, or the pieces lie broken before us?

Know You are Loved
So exposed to this glorious being, Daniel is reduced to a shadow of his former self. But then this angel touches him and, v11, 'He said to me, "O Daniel, man greatly loved."' And again in v19, "O man greatly loved, fear not, peace be with you; be strong and of good courage."

So even an 85 year old man, who has spent a life-time walking with God, sometimes needs to hear that he is loved by God. And in all the rise and fall of kingdoms with which this vision is concerned, God sends word to an elderly man that he's loved.

And when life doesn't seem to make sense, or when you are overwhelmed by God's holiness and your sin, and you're broken, you need to know you're loved. And in Jesus, you are greatly loved. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son. For God demonstrates his love to us in this that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. And the gospel tells you how messed up the world is, and it tells you how messed up your life is, but it also tells you how loved you are.

And when you know you're loved by God, you can face almost anything; as the angel says to Daniel, peace and strength and courage come. And it brings stability, and poise to the chaos of life. And it brings a hope that sets you back on your feet. Because you know you are loved by God in Christ.

But that's not the only thing the angel says.

Know That There's a Battle
Verse 12, as the angel says, '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.' So Daniel's prayer was heard immediately. So… why didn't the angel come immediately. Why the three week delay? Well, the angel tells him, v13, "The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days.'

So in coming to Daniel, this angel has met resistance. And so the Jewish people, they weren't simply facing human opposition and intrigue over there in Jerusalem, there was a spiritual side to this as well. And the conflict they were experiencing on earth was just a reflection of a greater conflict in the unseen world. And just for a moment this angel draws back the curtain so Daniel can see it. And if God's people were currently suffering at the hands of the Persians, that was because a dark power – the prince of Persia - was working to do them harm. And once Persia was gone, Greece would come. And Persia and Greece are more than just Persia and Greece, there is this other kind of power lurking behind them.

Now what do you think of that? Do you hear that and think, 'Really? The unseen world, dark powers, angelic forces, are we supposed to believe this?

Well, just think about it for a moment. It's ironic isn't it, that at a time when people might dismiss the idea of an unseen realm, existing in parallel with our own, that physicists propose the multiverse theory – that there might be other universes existing in parallel with our own. Or at the popular level, whilst we might laugh at the idea of angels, yet we devour books and films like Harry Potter, or the Lord of the Rings, or the various vampire stories, because somehow there's something in them that strikes this chord with us, and there's something inside us that likes the idea of communing with other beings, and accessing their worlds, and where does that come from. And ask yourself, how much of this scepticism is culturally determined? Because in other parts of the world, people take it for granted that there is an unseen world. So who's being shaped by their culture? And can we really know all there is to know about time and space and matter, to rule this out? And finally, aren't there times when you look at the world, or history, and the evil you see is too great to be explained in human terms? And whether it's Nazi Germany, or Stalin's Russia, or Mao's China, or Pol Pot's Cambodia, is it so crazy to think that there is some darker power, some deeper evil at work that we don't see?

And it's a glimpse into that unseen world that Daniel gets here. But not just Daniel. In our reading from Ephesians 6, Paul tells us that just like Daniel, we're caught up in this same battle. And it's not against flesh and blood, against people, but 'against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places' (Eph 6:12).

And it's understanding that you're part of this age old battle between good and evil, between the realm of darkness and the kingdom of God, played out in every age and generation, that can help you stay steadfast. As Paul says, to 'be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might… that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil… that you maybe able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.' (Eph 6:10-13). But you'll only do that – you'll only put on the armour of God, of truth and righteousness, of peace and faith, of salvation and God's word, when you realise it's not a picnic you're in the middle of, it's a war.

And Daniel finds himself a part of it through prayer. And Paul says the same will be true for us, so we also are to be 'praying at all times in the Spirit… To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints' (Eph 6:18). Praying for our leaders, praying for our children and young people, praying for our students, praying for our marriages, praying for our unity. Why? Because we're in this battle and we're not unaware of the enemy's schemes.

But if that's sobering, the good news is that victory is certain. And it's certain because at the cross Christ took on these dark powers and broke them. As Paul says in Colossians 2, Christ 'disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in the cross.' (Col 2:15).

And yet, until the day when Christ finally destroys them, the battles will continue.

Know that Things Might Get Worse

And in chapter 11, God gives Daniel a detailed account of the future. And whilst we're not going to look at it in detail, the accuracy of the vision in its fulfilment is breath-taking. And in v2 Daniel is told a Persian king will 'stir up all against the kingdom of Greece' – just as King Xerxes did. But then, in v3, 'a mighty king shall arise', but, v4, 'his kingdom shall be broken and divided toward the four winds of heaven' – just as Alexander the Great's Greek empire was divided into four.

Then the angel tells Daniel in v6 about 'the king of the south… [and]… the king of the north'. And the kings of the south are the Ptolemies of the Egyptian kingdom, and the kings of the north are the Seleucid kings, of the Syrian kingdom. And verses 5-20 summarise 200 hundred years of Middle Eastern history, and their alliances and plots and one-after-another wars that these kings will fight against each other.

But just ask yourself. North and South of where? Where's the centre of the compass that Daniel's messenger is using?

And v16 tells us, it's 'the glorious land' – the promised land – the people of God for whom Daniel is praying. And this vision shows Daniel that God's people are going to be caught in the middle of these on-going power struggles. And sometimes the Seleucids of Syria will have the upper hand, and sometimes the Ptolemies of Egypt. And as a result God's people will suffer. But all these seemingly great kings, all these powerful men, they will all end up in the landfill of history. And so the message of the vision for God's people is: don't put your trust in them. They are not the centre of the compass. You are. God has his hand on you, no matter how bad things seem.

And though things might seem bad at the moment – the hard truth is, they will get worse. And in v21 Daniel is told that there 'shall arise a contemptible person', who will gain the throne of the north through trickery, and enjoy military victories, but ominously, v28, 'his heart shall be set against the holy covenant'. And having experienced military defeat in Egypt, he will, v30, 'turn back and be enraged and take action against the holy covenant.' And v31, he will 'profane the temple and fortress, and shall take away the regular burnt offering. And they shall set up the abomination that makes desolate.' And this is Antiochus Epiphanes, the little horn in Daniel's previous visions, who banned the Sabbath and the sacrifices, and punished by death anyone found in possession of the

Bible, the Old Testament. And In 167BC he entered the temple at Jerusalem, set up an idol to the Greek god Zeus, and sacrificed a pig on the altar.

But why does a king as great as Alexander the Great get one verse, while a small-time despot like Antiochus get a whole section? Why so much attention for this contemptible person. Because Antiochus wanted to impose an ideology. He wanted to make the Jewish people Greek. He wanted to make them indistinguishable from the people who surrounded them.

And Daniel is told that the Jewish people will respond to that challenge two ways. Verse 32, 'He shall seduce with flattery those who violate the covenant.' And many did fall in line with Antiochus. And they liked the idea of throwing off the Law of Moses with all its restrictions, and they liked the idea of becoming more Greek, more like the world around them. And others felt that the cost of opposing Antiochus was just too great – and compromised.

But others did stand against him. Verse 32, 'But the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action.' But whilst Daniel and his friends in Babylon had experienced remarkable deliverances when they stood firm, that wasn't going to happen this time: v33, 'they shall stumble by sword and flame, by captivity and plunder.' In other words, there will be a cost to faithfulness. And the contemporary historians tell us that tens of thousands were slaughtered by Antiochus.

And that is why the few years of Antiochus' reign get so many lines. Because what the people of God faced under him epitomises the on-going struggle God's people face up until today. It's the struggle of whether or not you will surrender to a culture that wants to swallow you up. It's the struggle of resisting the seduction and flattery of the world. The struggle of whether to fall in step with the powerful, or the cultural elite, and what they say, or stay faithful to what God says. It's the pressure you face, the squeeze, to think and live like everyone else, or pay the price.

Just this last week, the UK press reported a case of a Christian university student who has been thrown off his social work course because he expressed a traditional Christian view of sexual ethics. And unless the courts overturn that decision, his job has been taken from him, because he's a Christian. A leader of one of the UK political parties, himself a Christian, has been exposed to vilification because he refused to distance himself from the same traditional Christian sexual ethic. It's the stuff of Antiochus, isn't it: you will pay if you don't think like us.

But the other reason Antiochus gets so many lines is that, just as in the previous visions, he serves as a prototype for a future ruler, the one the apostle Paul calls the Man of Lawlessness, and the apostle John calls the antichrist, under whose reign the people of God will suffer even more terribly. And in chapter 11v36-45,

whilst some of what the angel describes fits for Antiochus Epiphanes, other bits don't. Instead, this final king seems like an Antiochus plus. And he will exalt himself above every god, and v38, 'he shall honour the god of fortresses', in other words, he will worship war and power. And under him, chapter 12:1, 'there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time.'

So Daniel is being told, though things are bad now, they will get worse under Antiochus. And though things will seem really bad under Antiochus, they will get even worse before the end. Because faithfulness will always be costly.

And you don't have to be in a time of persecution for that to be true, do you? Life can seem hard, and then you're hit by something else on top – and you're faced with the question – do I stay faithful to God in this, or not? And that decision to stay faithful might cost you. It might be the sorrow you feel as you cling on to Christ, whilst your friends let go and walk away; it might be the cost of loving the person who speaks ill of you, or even hates you; it might be the cost of forgiving the person who hurts you; or of speaking up for Christ, and for truth, when that voice is no longer welcome.

So what can give you the courage to do that?

Know the Future that Makes Faithfulness Worth It.
And Daniel is told two things to steel his and his readers' courage. Firstly, deliverance will come. Chapter 12:1, 'At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people… but at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book.' In other words, the final outcome is certain. As Paul says of the Man of Lawlessness in 2 Thessalonians 2:8, 'the Lord Jesus will kill [him] with the breath of his mouth and bring [him] to nothing by the appearance of his coming.' And when you know you're on the winning side, you can endure suffering.

Sure, you might think, but that all depends on how long it lasts. And at the end of his vision, Daniel is joined by two other beings, and one of them asks exactly that question. Chapter 12:6, 'how long shall it be till the end.' And in response, the heavenly messenger says that it will be, v7, 'for a time, times and half a time.' And then v11-12, 'From the time that the regular burnt offering is taken away and the abomination that makes desolate is set up, there shall be 1,290 days. Blessed is he who waits and arrives at the 1,335 days.'

And 1,290 days is roughly three and a half years. And a time, times and half a time is three and a half time periods, which fits for the three and a half years the Jewish people suffered under Antiochus, before deliverance came through Judas Maccabeus. But it also tells Daniel, and us, that the suffering will not last forever. It will come to an end. And 1,335 days, is 45 days longer that 1,290 days. So even

when you think God's deliverance is overdue, even when you think it shouldn't last this long, there is this call to be faithful. Just a while longer.

But still, why pay the cost of faithfulness? If this life is all there is, is faithfulness to God and to Christ worth it? Well, this life isn't all there is. Chapter 12:2, 'And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.'

And it's knowing the hope of the resurrection, that Resurrection Day will be Reward Day, that makes costly faithfulness now worth it.

Stephen Hawking, the great physicist, said that the future resurrection is just a fairy tale for those afraid of the dark. Is he right? The resurrection of Christ says no. And Jesus is the firstfruits of all those he will raise from the dead at the last day. And that's what gives Daniel hope when the present seems so bleak. And in the very last verse of the book it's the hope he's given to sustain him: v13, after all these years of faithful service, 'You shall rest and shall stand in your allotted place at the end of the days.'

And so the thing that can give you the courage to stay steadfast, and keep seeking the welfare of the city where God has placed you, even when life seems a mess, or you face opposition, is when you're living for another city. When like Daniel, you're living for another world. When you know that after all the suffering, ultimate deliverance will come, and justice will be done.

And as he waits for the end, Daniel is told, v13, 'Go your way till the end.' However confusing life seems, go your way, keep doing what God has given you to do, and be steadfast in the hope of what Christ has done for you.