

Daniel in our Old Testament reading for today is deeply confused and concerned. Because we know from the first verse of Daniel chapter 10 that this was all happening in "the third year of Cyrus, the king of Persia." And we learn from the book of Ezra that that was a very difficult time for God's people. Because in the first year of Cyrus, the king of Persia, Cyrus commanded the temple to be rebuilt. So that was a very easy thing to be excited about, right? That's a very easy thing to be optimistic about. Everything seemed to be going right! But then the work on the temple came to a stop, because the Samaritans who were also living in the land didn't want it to continue. And so that's why Daniel is so confused, because he doesn't understand why this has happened. "Where is God," he says, "in the middle of all of this? Why does it seem like everything has gone wrong?" And Daniel struggles with this for a very long time. He tells us that he was "mourning for three weeks," doing nothing but praying and fasting, calling on God, and looking for an answer to these questions.

And Christians, do you find yourselves asking that same question? Where is God, we say, in the middle of all of this evil which we see around us, which seems to be getting stronger? Where is God, we say, when the world is becoming more openly hostile to the church? Where is God, we say, when following after God means that we have to make some very hard choices about our lives? What is going to happen to us? Why does it seem like it's so hard for us to stand firm?

But in the middle of all of this, Daniel has a vision, a vision of a man standing over top the Tigris River. And he's described in this way: "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." That all shows us that this is not just a man. It's not a man like Daniel. This is an angel sent from God to bring him a message. And when Daniel sees this angel, he says that he falls flat on his face, as if he was dead. Because it's a terrifying thing even for us as sinners to be in the presence of God's holy angels!

But the angel doesn't leave him there. The angel lifts him up and speaks to him the words that we heard in our reading for today: "O Daniel, man greatly loved! Understand the words that I speak to you, and stand upright, for now I have been sent to you." Because this angel has not come to destroy Daniel. This angel has not even come to terrify him. This angel has come to comfort him, to strengthen him, and to show him the way through a very dark time ahead.

Because that is the message which the angel brings to him: a time of great conflict in the years to come, a time that will be very difficult for God's people. It will be difficult for them both spiritually as well as physically. And we see that first of all from what the angel says he's been doing for these past twenty-one days. He says that "the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me." But this is not an ordinary man, Christians. We're not talking about Cyrus. We're not talking about the king. We are talking about an angel. Because Michael is also described as a "prince" here, and Michael in the book of Jude is called an "archangel." So we have a contest then between angels. But the prince of the kingdom of Persia is a demon, one who is ruling over that nation and leading them astray. We know this because in a passage like Ephesians 2 verse 2, Paul says that "the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience" is ruling over this world. That, of course, refers to Satan, the one who is called a "prince," the one who is at work in those who do not believe in God. So his agents, then, the

demonic spirits, are the ones who rule over the unbelieving nations, like the kingdom of Persia. And in fact, Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 10 verse 20 that these demons were worshiped as gods. Because Paul says: "What pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God." And the demons have this power, not because they are strong enough to stand equal to God, but because of the sin which is in the world. That is why Satan is called by Jesus "the ruler of this world." That is why Paul calls him the "god of this world." He is seeking to destroy God's people. He is seeking to destroy the church. That's why Paul warns us in Ephesians 6, verse 12, that "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, 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." These demonic forces, Christians, are seeking to destroy us. And they are driving the unbelieving world in that quest to destroy God's church. Because Satan wants to destroy those who belong to God.

That's a very difficult thing in itself to deal with, this great spiritual danger which we face. But the angel goes on to tell Daniel that there is also a physical danger for God's people, a great conflict which was going to come into the world. And in Daniel chapter 11, which we did not read, the angel gives to Daniel a vision of this coming time, a picture, an overview of the next four hundred years, and beyond that as well. And this picture that he gives to him is so clear and given in such detail that it reads like a history book. If you took a history book and set it next to Daniel chapter 11, you could fall along very, very easily. And just to give one example of this. In chapter 11 verse 3, he says "a mighty king shall arise, who shall rule with great dominion and do as he wills." This is a reference to Alexander the Great who conquered a tremendous empire in his lifetime, but he died a very young man. And the Scriptures tell us, just as history tells us, that "his kingdom shall be broken and divided toward the four winds of heaven." Which is exactly what happened. After his death, his great empire split into four pieces. And two of these kingdoms--the Ptolemies in Egypt and the Seleucids in Syria--were constantly at war with each other. And the angel describes these wars over the next couple hundred years in great detail, until he finally gets down to the coming of one great Seleucid king in 175 BC in chapter 11, verse 21, where he is described as "a contemptible person to whom royal majesty has not been given." This king was called Antiochus. And Antiochus not only carried on the war, he also persecuted God's people. He actually set up a pagan altar inside the temple of God itself. And he did everything that he could to make God's people go astray, to turn them into pagans, and he was successful with some of them. So not only do we see a time of great war with Israel caught in the middle of it, we also see a time of great persecution. Dark days indeed!

But more than this, the angel says, Antiochus was just a picture of one who was to come. A far worse king who we hear of in verse 36 that "he shall exalt himself and magnify himself above every God, and shall speak astonishing things against the God of gods." The Scriptures call this king the Antichrist, the one who will set himself up over God and claim his authority for himself. And Satan will give his authority to that king. And in the book of Revelation chapter 13, he is described as a great beast who will "make war on the saints and conquer them. And authority was given him over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all who dwell on earth will worship him." He will be worshiped as a god by the unbelieving world, and he will make war on the church and have great success. Because it will be a time of great trial. Very dark days indeed!

What a dark picture! we might say. How depressing this all seems to us! It seems so hopeless. Where is God in all of this? And we might be wondering that as we see all the evil which surrounds us. The evil which seems to be getting stronger with each passing day. Because Christians, we are a church at war! Not just against earthly powers, but against the great evil powers, the spiritual authorities which hold sway over the sinful world. So the things that we see happening today, Christians, the way evil seems to be growing, how it seems to always be getting more and more power, and the church seems to be getting weaker and weaker, is not an accident. It's not just because we have the wrong people in power. It's because Satan is at work, strengthening the evil in the world. Because he wants to destroy the church. And he knows, as Revelation 12 tells us, that his time is short! He is doing all that he can to destroy us.

So what hope, then, do we have? Where is the light in the midst of this darkness? Christians, we have a great light, a great hope for many reasons! First of all, we have hope because God is the one who is in control. God is the one who controls all things, so that there is no such thing as an accident in history. You'll notice how many times in Daniel you hear things like "Alexander's kingdom shall be broken." Broken by who? Broken by God! He is the one who caused these things to happen, because God is in control. And the great beast in Revelation was "allowed to make war on the saints." Allowed by who? By God! Because he is the one who controls even what happens with the evil in the world. The demonic powers cannot act unless God lets them act. That's a great comfort for us, to know that they have no power to destroy us or to even war against us unless God, for reasons we may not understand, allows them to.

We have great hope because God sends his mighty angels among us. As we hear in Daniel chapter 12: "At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people." The angels like Michael are at war with these great spiritual powers. They are at war against the demonic forces that want to destroy us. They are binding them. They're holding them back, so that they cannot fight against us without opposition. The angels have been sent as a heavenly army fighting on our side, and those who are for us are far greater than those who are against us!

But Christians, above all, we have hope because we look to a final and complete victory in Jesus Christ. Because, as Paul tells us in Colossians 2, verse 15: "Christ disarmed the rulers and authorities"--that is, those demonic spiritual powers--"and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in the cross." Jesus's death on the cross has defeated the powers of evil. They no longer have the power to hold back against the church. They have been bound. And there is nothing they can do to stop the spread of the Gospel. Because the war, Christians, has been won! Satan has been defeated! And when this time of trouble comes to an end, "at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake." We shall rise with Jesus, Christians, because Jesus is alive. We shall be victorious, Christians, because the victory belongs to Jesus forever. We have hope, Christians, no matter how dark things may seem to be, because Jesus is king forever.

So Christians, stand firm in the Lord! Though there are dark days ahead of us, dark days that will be very difficult for us, we have the victory in Jesus. Lift up your heads! Your Lord is coming! And this short time of conflict will give way to a peace and a victory which will never come to an end.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, you have the victory over all things, for you have triumphed in your cross. We pray that you would strengthen us for the times ahead, knowing that you have the victory and give us the victory, and that as you have conquered, we shall be more than conquerors in you; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen.