

Strange Visions by the Tigris
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Daniel 10

Let's be honest and admit that this is a strange Biblical passage. It's not the sort of passage we would first turn to for our devotions. That's because this story is a kind of literature, a kind of writing we don't have much experience with. It's an example of apocalyptic literature. It's in the same literary category as the book of Revelation or the end of the book of Ezekiel. Of all the different kinds of writing in the Bible apocalyptic is perhaps the hardest for modern western people to read and understand. We find the other sorts of Biblical writing much easier to manage. There is narrative in the Bible, but that's not so strange, we know how to read stories. There is poetry in the Bible but we're used to those too. There are law books in the Bible and we have laws. There is wisdom literature in the Bible and we can relate to proverbs and practical advice. Virtually all the different types of writing have a modern equivalent - except for apocalyptic. It's simply a kind of writing we don't see much anymore. Because this writing is unfamiliar and difficult, we need to understand it a little better if we're going to hear it speak. God has a message for us in Daniel 10. It is part of God's word. If we are going to understand this message properly we must first understand the strange sort of writing God is using to bring this message. So let me spend a moment outlining three characteristics of this sort of writing.

First of all apocalyptic literature is heavily symbolic. It uses references to strange creatures, it uses references to numbers, it uses references to dreams and visions, and it uses them symbolically. It's not the kind of writing that focuses down to one application, one moral, one point; it's the kind of writing that opens you up to broad possibilities and multiple applications. It uses symbols and images because it wants the message to be general and to apply cosmically to a variety of times and places. So, for example, in Revelation 13 you have the image of the beast coming out of the sea. That's not just an image of the oppressive power of Rome and how the whole world started worshipped the power of the empire; it's also a prophecy about the potential for all nations and empires to become oppressive, to become idols. It's a warning against the dangers of nationalism throughout history. So the single image of the prophecy opens up; it has wide application.

A second characteristic of apocalyptic literature - it pulls back the veil. That's what the word apocalypse means - it means unveiling. As individual human beings living in a specific time and place - our perspective is narrow and shallow. We are narrow. We focus on what's happening right now, the problem right in front of our face. Today's issue takes up all of our bandwidth. Today's problem fills up our field of vision. And when you have that narrow vision, the danger is that things will seem chaotic and meaningless. It's something like this: you go to the Chicago Institute of Art and you would go up to George Seurat's Grand Jatte, the painting of bathers walking up and down the banks of the Seine in Paris, one of their featured paintings. Now imagine you looked at that painting from really close up. Imagine getting so close that all you could see is a square inch of the canvas. What would you see? A dab of color, a smudge, a point. It would be chaotic and formless with random colors and rough edges. That smudge is one of our days. That's what our days can feel like - a random smudge. It's only when you pull back and stand 20 feet away, that you see the big picture, the beauty of it, the plan of it. Apocalypse

keeps our vision from becoming too narrow. It pulls us back from the smudge of our days, and it unveils the big picture.

But we are not just narrow in our vision, we are shallow too. Not only do we fail to see the big picture in our days, we miss the deeper forces at work in our life. Life is not just about physical survival and physical appetites. It's not about food and shelter and sex and survival, at its depth it's about eternal things, it's a spiritual struggle between good and evil, light and darkness, the forces of our God and the forces of the evil one. As Ephesians 6 reminds us, our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the forces of evil in the spiritual realms. At every moment, including this one, deep spiritual things are happening. So apocalyptic literature is always pulling back the curtain of material existence and pointing out that spiritual struggle. It shows us that life is wider and deeper than we think.

And finally apocalyptic literature is writing that arises out of hard times. Apocalyptic writing is written by and written for people whose lives are difficult, people whose lives are chaotic, people who are under persecution. It's written for people who need an unveiling, who need the curtains of history opened up and some light to come in. Their lives are so dark and so difficult they are beginning to wonder if God is in control and if history has a purpose. The New Testament book of Revelation is an apocalypse. When was it written down? It was written by a man in prison, for a church scattered under persecution. Apocalyptic is the literature of the troubles and the persecuted.

So if those are the characteristics of apocalyptic, how does that help us understand Daniel 10? Well, like all apocalyptic, Daniel 10 is definitely persecution literature. It's meant for people in trouble. The book of Daniel was written down long after the stories of Daniel happened. It was probably written around 160 BC., during a time when Israel was under the thumb of a terrible ruler named Antiochus Epiphanes. Antiochus Epiphanes persecuted God's people. He wanted to eliminate the worship of God from the Jewish people. He outlawed the Jewish religion. He did not allow the Sabbath to be observed. He put an idol of Zeus in the Jerusalem temple. He ordered all copies of God's word be destroyed. He ordered the Jews to eat unclean food. To worship God under the rule of this man was a terrible thing. It was darkness. It was chaos. The people under the rule of Antiochus Epiphanes would have identified with Daniel in verse 2 and 3. They would have identified with this picture of Daniel on his knees mourning for 21 days, looking for God's answer, and looking for God's presence and hearing nothing. For 21 days Daniel prayed without apparent answer or result. 21 days of praying and fasting and mourning where it seemed like nothing happened. From Daniel's narrow perspective, in the smudge of those 21 days, nothing was going on. But, from a bigger perspective there was a lot going on. The angel shows up and tells him, 'Sorry I'm a little late, you see I've been fighting on your behalf for the last 3 weeks.' The small scale perspective is powerlessness and abandonment. The big picture perspective is a powerful glorious God fighting on Daniel's behalf. God was fighting the evil ruler who was over the people and he would bring him down. From their narrow perspective, from the smudge of their days, the people who read this vision would have felt like nothing was happening, like God wasn't doing anything, like Antiochus Epiphanes was the Lord of their world. The vision shows them the big picture: Antiochus Epiphanes was not the Lord of history. God is the Lord of history.

That's the message for the original hearers. But what about us. Is there a message for us here? We are not a persecuted minority. Can apocalyptic speak to upper middle class North Americans? Certainly it can. Because we know trouble. And there are lots of times where our lives, our world, our families, our work, our hearts seem like chaos. I think there are at least two

images in this passage that are a good word for us tonight. The first is the Book of Truth. If your life seems like a chaotic, god-forsaken mess, if you feel like your prayers are falling on deaf ears, remember the unveiling of the book of truth in verse 21. What is the book of truth? It's God's plan for the world. It's the cosmic story line that God has written down for his creation and that cannot be moved or changed. Your life is a sentence or a phrase in this book, and it might be a sad sentence, or a confusing one. All by itself, the sentence of your life might make no sense to you. But God wrote the sentence of your life. It's part of his great work, the book of truth, and it is a masterpiece. It's rough in the middle and there are dark passages, but there is so much love on every page, and the end is wonderful. Knowing that this book ends well does not make our hard times go away. It does not magically turn bad into good. Our trouble is still trouble. But it does help us get through the trouble.

The story is told of a prison camp during world war two. Conditions in the camp were bad and anxiety was high among the prisoners. They had little food, they were cut off from contact from the outside world, their families didn't know whether they were dead or alive, and every day they had the barrels of loaded guns pointed at them. The camp was a depressing place. But then one day something happened in the camp. News came in via a smuggled in crystal radio that the Allies had landed in Normandy and were now pushing through France. Hitler was on the defensive and it was only a matter of time before he would be defeated. This news did nothing to change the conditions at the camp. The food was still bad, there were still armed soldiers, there was still no contact with loved ones, and they were still just prisoners dressed in rags. But this news did everything to change the mood of the soldiers. For three months, until they were rescued by the invading troops, they were able to endure their captivity with confidence and hope because they knew that the day would come when their captivity would be over and all things would be new for them. The book of Truth that the angel unveils to Daniel - it's like that radio message in that camp. It gives us the confidence to know that even while we are powerless prisoners, somewhere God is fighting for us. And he will win.

The Book of Truth is a grand cosmic big picture word to us. The second thing I want you to see in this passage is just the opposite. It is a small intimate act of comfort and mercy. I want you to notice the touching in this passage. Three times, Daniel is touched by an angel, and that touch is healing. Verse 10, he's lying face down and comatose when a hand touches him and gets him up on his hands and knees. In verse 15 Daniel is still speechless when the angel reaches over and touches his lips and he is strengthened to speak. And then finally in verse 18 a third time "the one who looked like a man touched me and gave me strength." Not only does Daniel receive this cosmic vision to strengthen him, he receives - very personally - the touch of God to restore his faded strength. When God helps Daniel he doesn't just give him a great vision that will give him bright hope for tomorrow. He gives him some strength for today.

And I think that's how God strengthens all of us. We get the grand supernatural promises on which to place our hope - but much more subtly, much more quiet, we get these touches of daily grace that give us the strength to get through the day. Whether it's a kind word from a friend, or a card from a fellow church member, or a comforting word from a Psalm, or a little square of bread or a sip of wine from this table - in all these small, subtle, but O so important ways God touches us. And when you think about it, isn't that exactly what you find here at church too? When you come here you're tired, you're frustrated, you're afraid, you're looking to be renewed and what do you get here? We give you the book of truth and the healing touch. We give you the big picture. We tell you about Jesus Christ the Lord of history who has conquered sin, conquered death, and conquered the evil one. We give you the glorious vision. But church is

also about the personal touch. If a church is what it is supposed to be, you will find here also friends to encourage you, people to support you when you're down, and people who pray for you when you need it. You find the bread, you find the wine, you find all these small and subtle ways in which you are touched by God's grace and strengthened for another week. Here in this community you find the book of truth and the daily touch of grace: and that is what we need to face the world. That's the grace that gets us through.

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