

## **God: Overpowering, but Kindly** **Daniel 10:1-19**

Daniel 10-12 is a single coherent section. For this reason, some commentators do not divide the chapters, but comment on the entire passage as a whole. Justifying a unified approach, the entire three chapters describe a single vision. At the same time, 10:1-19 serve a distinct function within the vision report, namely, as the introduction to the vision proper. Additionally, 10:1-19 are unified by a single theme repeated seven times, with a particular relevance to the vision that follows. So this week we consider the theme and application of 10:1-19.

### **Day 1 Daniel 10:1a “In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia”**

The book of Daniel is not always in chronological order, but jumps around a little. To help the reader follow the time shifts, the author helpfully provides chronological markers. Here we find ourselves in the third year of the reign of Cyrus, the emperor of Persia first met in 6:28.

The reference to Cyrus – and to his third year – provides not just an historical marker, but also a mood marker. Cyrus represents two moods: initially, hope, but, by his third year, discouragement.

First, hope. Because of its rebellion and sin, God surrendered the nation of Judah to defeat by the Babylonian empire. Their country was conquered; their cities burned to the ground; their citizenry deported. God sentenced them to 70 years in exile. Their sentence was up when Persia conquered Babylon. Cyrus was an enlightened ruler, who permitted exiles to return to their homelands (see Ezra 1).

Then the despair. Given the promises of Jeremiah and Zechariah, Judah expected that the return to Palestine would lead to a time of perpetual blessing and prosperity. Instead, when the people returned and sought to rebuild capital city and temple, they faced opposition from those who had settled in Palestine during their absence. The returnees dedicated an altar, and then began constructing a modest temple (Ezra 3), before a new emperor ordered the work stopped (Ezra 4:18-24).

This is the climate in which Daniel this vision: a time which appeared to herald great hope with the return from exile, but which quickly turned to despair in the face of frustration, discouragement, and opposition. A climate like – but far harsher than – we may experience periodically in our individual lives, or corporately in the current economic uncertainty. The first lesson we draw from Daniel 10 is that God does not always rescue his people from hard times, but he does speak to them in their struggles.

**Day 2 Daniel 10:1b What God says to his discouraged people**

“A great war is coming!”

This is hardly what they hoped for. Or the sort of thing we hope for. But it is a realistic recognition – and Scripture is nothing if not realistic – that bad times sometimes give way to worse, even much worse. Daniel 10:1-19 is nothing more than an elongated introduction for the extended description of war in Daniel 11. Worse yet, from a Jewish perspective, they were not actually active combatants in the coming war, but only collateral damage! Israel was a geographic buffer zone – a land bridge – between two aspiring superpowers, Egypt to the South, and Persia (later Syria) to the north. As each superpower challenged its rival, it first marched through – and pillaged – Israel. First one army, then the other, and then back again.

We’ll look at the detail next week, when we consider Daniel 11. For the moment it is sufficient to note that when Judah returned to the land, and found the going hard, God’s Word through Daniel was for them to hang in: tough times were about to get much worse. Life was going to get much harder, for a much longer time (490 years!), before it got markedly easier. Even for God’s people.

This is a lesson for us, too. In the aftermath of the dot.com bubble burst, and the housing market bubble burst, and the devaluing of the American dollar, some analysts predict that we stand on the cusp of an even more horrendous stock-market bubble burst. We see from Daniel 10 that tough times can get worse. Sometimes much worse. We may wonder when God will bring us relief as a nation, or what security he provides as individuals. He may well do both, or not. Either way, Daniel 10 shows us that he is with his people, even in the harshest circumstances.

**Day 3 Daniel 10:7-19 An encounter with God**

Daniel is not the least bit subtle about his point in this encounter with God. Seven times he describes one or another of the same two divine attributes: (1) he is intimidating, and, (2) he is kindly. (A preliminary note is in order: it is not actually God whom Daniel encounters, but an angel of God, 10:5-6. Still, given this is true of an angel, it is all the more true of the powerful and majestic God, whom the angel represents. What Daniel says of the angel is two things, and he says them seven times: the angel is (1) intimidating and fearsome, but (2) kindly.)

Notice how the progression unfolds when the angel appears: (i) the other men with Daniel do not even see the angel, but they flee in terror and hide themselves (10:7); (ii) Daniel turns deathly pale before fainting (10:8-9); (iii) a hand touches him and sets him on all fours, trembling

(10:10); (iv) at the angel's invitation, he stands, still trembling (10:11); (v) the angel speaks, while Daniel bows with his face toward the ground (10:15); (vi) the angel touches Daniel's lips so that he can speak, but all he can gasp out is anguish (10:16-17); finally, (vii) the angel touches Daniel, to strengthen him, and his strength returns (10:18-19).

So we see these two attributes of the angel of God: (1) by very nature, he is intimidating and fearsome; (2) yet he is kindly toward God's people. If this is true of the angel of God, it is all the more true of God.

#### **Day 4 Daniel 10:12-13; 10:20-11:1 A close encounter of the Third Kind**

Stephen Spielberg did not base his 1977 movie on Daniel 10, but he could have. In two terse, allusive and elusive comments, Daniel 10 references a third sort of being, in addition to the human Daniel, and the divine angel. The author does not explain the nature of "the prince of Persia" (10:13,20) and "the prince of Greece", but commentators generally – and reasonably – conclude that these are tutelary spirits over the respective nations, and that each nation or political entity is ruled not only by humans but also by spirit beings.

Neither Daniel nor the rest of Scripture tell us anything much about such beings. In fact, the Bible makes so little and such ambiguous reference, that we cannot even be certain they are supernatural beings, or whether they are invariably demonic, though both seem likely. What the author does tell us, and all that he apparently cares to tell us, is that post-exilic Israel faces a more fearsome opponent than the emperor of Persia and his armies, or the emperor of Greece and his armies. The nation also faces fearsome spiritual powers that oppose God and his people. Powers so fearsome that even an angel cannot defeat them, without help from the archangel Michael.

Daniel 10 does not tell us this so that we will war against tutelary demons (contrary to some popular 'Christian' superstition). Instead, he tells his audience, and us, about them for only one apparent purpose: to underscore the tough battle ahead. When Israel goes up against successive superpowers, it appears, they also go up against demonic superpowers.

#### **Day 5 Daniel 10:1-19 Pulling it all together**

What is the point of Daniel 10:1-19 for its original readers? As often in narrative, the answer lies in the juxtaposition of themes. Post-exilic Israel faces three discouragements and intimidations. They face the native peoples who now reside in Palestine, and oppose these returning exiles, and their plans to rebuild temple and nation (see Ezra). They face a

succession of superpowers and their potent emperors: Persia, Greece, Syria. Additionally, they face demonic powers. The entire nation finds itself in the same position as their hero, Daniel: the frightful prospect leaves them weak-kneed, trembling, and gasping for breath.

No, is the implicit application of this vision: the peasants living in Palestine are not the real power or threat. Nor are the empires and emperors of Persia, Greece, or Syria. Nor even the demonic overlords of this powerful empires. The real power in heaven and earth is God. And, to his people, he is no longer any threat.

This is the message of Daniel 10. Post-exilic Israel will face fierce threats to its survival, from both human and supernatural opponents. But this one reality offsets them all: God is the real power in this universe, and they have already made peace with him, and he, with them. Having a firm relationship with God, they can endure whatever else comes.

#### **Day 6 Daniel 10:1-19 The point for us**

This portrait of God is not relegated to the Old Testament. The New Testament book of Revelation alludes to Daniel often, including here. The author has a vision of Christ, and it matches Daniel's angel: a voice speaks, John falls down at his feet, Jesus touches him and says, "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last" (Rev 1:10-18).

We do not face nearly the level of crisis which threatened Israel in Daniel's time: 500 years of wars between superpowers played out on their territory. Still, as a country, and some of us as individuals, face worrisome economic struggles, over which we have no control, precipitated by powerful banks and government officials, over whom we have no influence. The powers that threaten us may be more economic than military; regardless, like Israel of old, we find ourselves way out of our league.

And so God tells us, as he told Daniel and his generation, the real power in the universe is neither emperor nor empire, neither banker nor politician, but God himself. Though God may not intervene to quell the impending crisis, and while we may suffer discomfort or painful loss, we can take comfort in this: that we have made peace with the power who ultimately matters, that God is with us and for us.

Whom – or what – then shall we fear?