

Sermon Given by

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At the Morning Service on 21<sup>st</sup> November 2010

## Daniel 10 – Angelic visitation

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I think I have mentioned before the story about a person who got given a dictionary, but who misunderstood the gift and mistakenly assumed that the book was a novel. He was very polite so he wanted to send a thank you note. He said, 'thank you very much indeed for the book you gave me: I'm finding it quite hard work to read, but at least it explains every word as you go along'.

I'm afraid I cannot make any such claim for my sermon this morning. Daniel 10 is not easy reading, and I am not going to attempt to make it easier by explaining it word by word or even verse by verse. I want instead to trace out three themes in the chapter.

### 1. HUMAN WEAKNESS.

This is apparent from the very start of the chapter...<sup>1</sup> ***In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia, a revelation was given to Daniel (who was called Belteshazzar). Its message was true and it concerned a great war.***<sup>[a]</sup> ***The understanding of the message came to him in a vision.***

<sup>2</sup> ***At that time I, Daniel, mourned for three weeks.*** <sup>3</sup> ***I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over.***

That dates the oracle at probably about 537 BC, the third year of Cyrus King of Persia's reign. Without stating it specifically, what that tells us is that some of the tumultuous world events which Daniel has foretold during his lengthy career as a prophet have now begun to happen. He has lived through one of the regime changes which he had predicted. Babylonia has given way to Persia.

The significant thing is that when he defeated the Babylonian empire Cyrus King of Persia had allowed some of the Jews to return home to Jerusalem from their long exile in Babylon, in the first year of his reign. And for some reason – Daniel has stayed in Babylon when he could have gone. Perhaps it could be because Daniel by now is in his late eighties – that might account for his staying in Babylon. It is now the third year of Cyrus's reign and Daniel is still where he has been for more than seventy years, in Babylon.

The fact is, of course, that the return had been something of a disappointment. In chapter 9 Daniel had prayed for the end of the exile – the seventy years which Jeremiah had spoken about were up – and bang on time came the decree of Cyrus.

But news travels back to Daniel in Babylon that the rebuilding of Jerusalem is fraught with difficulty and opposition. So he mourns and fasts... a self-imposed weakness admittedly but he is a picture of human weakness, is he not. A lonely old man, long past his sell by date, he's missed the return to Jerusalem, he's frustrated in Babylon, bemoaning the failings of the modern world.

And as the chapter develops, the events as they unfold only add to his weakness... let me just list the references to Daniel's pitiful condition...

In verse 8 ***I had no strength left, my face turned deathly pale and I was helpless In Verse 9: I fell into a deep sleep, my face to the ground.***

In verse 10: ***A hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees.***

In verse 11: ***And when he said this to me, I stood up trembling.***

Up he gets and then down again in verse 15 <sup>15</sup> ***While he was saying this to me, I bowed with my face toward the ground and was speechless.***

In verse 16 <sup>16</sup> ***"I am overcome with anguish because of the vision, my lord, and I am helpless. <sup>17</sup> How can I, your servant, talk with you, my lord? My strength is gone and I can hardly breathe."***

What follows in chapters 11 and 12 is the longest oracle in the book. Our verses today are the lengthy preamble to that oracle being given: lengthy because Daniel needed great encouragement. Twice he is given that lovely title: 'you who are highly esteemed', twice he has to be told not to fear, twice to be strong, and three times he has to be touched in order to be ready to receive the oracle. Such is his human weakness.

This is not something new – we've noticed before how Daniel was knocked for six by his dreams and visions. But I wonder if we have learned that lesson. I wonder if it dawns on us that there is a cost to being in fellowship with God: it is not a relationship of equals... That we cannot expect to come out of an encounter with God as if we can match him, strength for strength. Some of us will never actually be able to know God for ourselves until we accept that that must humble us. The novelist Dostoevsky put it like this: man must bow down before the infinitely great.

I think we easily buy into the idea that we are meant to be omni-competent – 'Glory to man in the highest! For man is the master of things'. That's what we would like to believe. But maybe some of us here are painfully aware of our frailties... and then it is actually encouraging to know that human weakness is acknowledged by heaven and that God upends our values – he pronounces here as 'highly esteemed' a weak, elderly saint.

So let's move on to the next theme.

## **2. HEAVENLY POWER.**

This chapter is one of the most detailed descriptions of angelic and demonic powers in the Bible. It's a view of reality which is unseen and largely unacknowledged in our world today, but one which we need to be aware of.

There was a time once in the lifetime of Elisha the prophet where the king of Aram sent an army to get hold of the prophet Elisha because he realises that the prophet is effectively a secret weapon for Israel. He can't defeat Israel if Elisha is feeding information to the King of Israel. He has to get Elisha and neutralise him. So the Aramean army surrounds the town where Elisha is.

‘Don’t worry about it!’ Elisha tells his servant: ***‘Those who are with us are more than those who are with them’***. (2 Kings 6:16) And Elisha prays for him to see things as they really are. The servant ***‘looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha’***. (2 Kings 6:17)

It’s something like that here in Daniel 10. We may not always be aware of it, particularly if we are very conscious of our weakness, but the unseen reality is that there are powerful heavenly forces at work in our world. And greater forces for us than against us.

Daniel of course meets one such heavenly messenger in verses 4-6

***<sup>4</sup> On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river, the Tigris, <sup>5</sup> I looked up and there before me was a man dressed in linen, with a belt of the finest gold around his waist. <sup>6</sup> His body was like chrysolite, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude.***

There is some debate as to whether this figure is an angel or a vision of Jesus. But the language describing what Daniel saw sounds very similar to the vision of the Ascended Christ which John had at the start of his vision in the last book of the Bible, Revelation.

When you think that we have already had a heavenly being ‘like a son of God’ alongside the three people in the fiery furnace in chapter 3; and a glorious Son of Man figure in Daniel’s vision in Chapter 7, I don’t think it is out of the question to say that he is given a vision of the glory and majesty of Jesus Christ here.

And that vision is awesome. But it’s not the only heavenly force mentioned in the chapter – there are powerful evil forces as well... Did you notice that in verse 13?

***<sup>13</sup> But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia.***

The natural meaning of that phrase is that among the spiritual beings opposed to God, at least one is assigned to a territory or kingdom – namely Persia. Presumably his job was to darken the people of Persia to keep them from having the truth and light of God’s word.

And he has detained this awesome, heavenly messenger from coming to Daniel with the heavenly message for three weeks... He did not want the oracle which Daniel was to be given to get to him. That’s exactly what we would expect from what Jesus says about the devil that he is a liar and the father of lies. He is committed to suppressing God’s truth. Hence the activity of the prince of the kingdom of Persia in delaying God’s revelation from reaching God’s prophet.

But there is more – because in verses 20-21 two more messengers are mentioned. ***<sup>20</sup> So he said, “Do you know why I have come to you? Soon I will return to fight against the prince of Persia, and when I go, the prince of Greece will come; <sup>21</sup> but first I will tell you what is written in the Book of Truth. (No one supports me against them except Michael, your prince.***

So the awesome heavenly messenger is going back to fight against the prince of the Kingdom of Persia and defeat him. And then there will appear on the scene another great enemy spirit, the prince of Greece. In other words, as different kingdoms rise and fall, different demonic spirits hold sway and have to be dealt with by God’s angelic forces – who obviously include Michael.

It seems he has a special assignment to protect Israel. He is described to Daniel as 'your prince' in verse 21 but that doesn't mean that he is Daniel's guardian angel: the word for 'your' is in the plural. Michael is a spiritual power working for God's people and he is with the awesome heavenly messenger who comes to Daniel

So in the passing of history various empires rise and fall: Persia passes from the stage and gives way to Greece. In the midst of the clash of these great powers (the ram and the goat of chapter 8), the fate of a community of exiles seems unimportant. But this is not so – for beside them and for them stands and fights the Divine Messenger himself and Michael the archangel.

You see the Bible is quite clear that there are powerful devilish forces at work in the world – and particularly that they are opposed to the truth of God's word. 2 Corinthians 4 verse 4 says the devil darkens the minds of unbelievers; Matthew 13 verse 4 says that the devil is busy plucking away the seed of God's word 1 Thessalonians 2:18 says he thwarts missionary activity and 2 Timothy 2 says he takes false-teachers 'captive to do his will', presumably by promoting error.

There are hostile spiritual powers at work in the world doing great spiritual damage –they have **great** power but not **ultimate** power. C. S Lewis used to say that there are two equal and opposite errors we can fall into with regard to the devil and his agents – and he is equally happy with either error. Either we pay no attention to them or we pay far too much attention to them.

We shouldn't disregard them – because they do exist and they are powerful and dangerous – but we shouldn't flatter them by giving them too much attention because as Elisha put it: Those who are with us are more than those who are with them. In particular Jesus is mightier.

I like the story about some students in America, who were taking time out from some draining study on the book of Revelation by playing basketball. And they noticed the gym caretaker was sitting reading. 'What are you reading, Jim?' they asked.

He replied, 'The Book of Revelation'. 'Phew', they sighed, 'Do you mind telling us what it's all about?' 'Easy', he said, 'Jesus wins'.

Revelation is like Daniel – it's the same challenging apocalyptic style. It was tough for Daniel to receive the revelation and it is tough for us to grasp it. But never doubt that the basic message is the same: Jesus wins.

Lets' take in that awesome vision in verse 5-6 before we move on: <sup>5</sup> ***I looked up and there before me was a man dressed in linen, with a belt of the finest gold around his waist.*** <sup>6</sup> ***His body was like chrysolite, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude.***

Let's review the ground over which we have travelled. We've seen a portrait of human weakness and a portrait of heavenly power. How do these two realities meet? How can heavenly power and human weakness come together.

One final heading, briefly: **humble prayer.**

### **3. HUMBLE PRAYER**

Our chapter started with Daniel mourning for three weeks, fasting and praying... **That** was what triggered the deployment of the awesome heavenly messenger. One man on his knees.

That is what Daniel is told in verse 12: <sup>12</sup> ***Then he continued, "Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them.***

Actually it is a very similar thing which Daniel was told by Gabriel about his praying in chapter 9. ***'As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given... (9:23)***

In our preachers group which met a few weeks ago somebody commented on how odd it was that with heavenly visions in chapters 7 and 8 and then another long vision in chapters 11 and 12, you have this interruption in chapters 9 and 10 where the focus is on Daniel praying.

The visions are all about the rise and fall of nations and empires. God is sovereign over all those happenings: heavenly power... But amazingly heavenly power works in response to human weakness.

In his time of course, Daniel had walked the corridors of power in the greatest power of earth. It must have been a bit like working in the West Wing of the White House for him during Nebuchadnezzar's reign. Now he is old, and weak, and still in exile, under a new empire.

But someone so small on earth is involved in something huge in heaven – **by his prayers...** As C.H. Spurgeon put it: 'Prayer is the slender nerve which moves the muscle of Omnipotence'.

I wonder if we believe that. In the hidden spiritual battle which cannot be seen by the naked eye, God has chosen to work through our prayers – to marshal his troops and to rout enemy troops through the humble prayers of his people.

It definitely raises the stakes for our prayer meetings, don't you think? Who can say what the outcome will be from our meetings on Tuesday morning and Wednesday evening this week.

And it gives us a challenge on the occasion of a Gift Day as well. Inevitably the Church Council asks the question when we encourage people to give money – what is our vision? What are God's purposes and how can we play a part in them?

I want to risk asking you not just to give to that vision, but to pray about it - if necessary with mourning and fasting.

I can't claim to have had a heavenly visitor as Daniel did, but I do have the sense that we are at something of a turning point in terms of what our place in God's purposes should be. And I have no doubt that All Saints will be more effective as an agent of God's plans here, in South Cambridgeshire and even further afield, if we are willing to mourn and fast and pray as Daniel did.

Let me conclude by quoting the great hymn-writer Cowper:

*'Ceasing from prayer we cease to fight  
Prayer makes the Christians armour bright  
And Satan trembles when he sees  
The weakest saint upon his knees.'*

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Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>.  
These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)