

Sunday, August 28, 2016

Daniel 1: 1-17

Daniel 4:9, 19-28

Daniel's Visions—7,8, 10

Daniel's Vision and Believers' Hope

We continue to look at different stories and topics as you selected for the summer. Today's focus is based on the Old Testament's Daniel. He a young Hebrew man who after Jerusalem was besieged, was brought along with several other young men to serve the king in Babylon. Along with other young men, Daniel was 'without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed quick to understand and qualified to serve in the king's palace.'"(Daniel 1:4) Daniel and his friends were each given new names and they were tested for their faith in God not just once but several times.

In Daniel ch1 we read that Daniel and his friends were tested to try royal food and wine but they refused. They ate only vegetables and drank water. After ten days they appeared to be healthier than others who were also being trained. But at the same time, Daniel was also gifted in interpreting dreams.

We might know the story of Daniel's friends who were further tested for their faith—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They remained faithful to God when the king decreed that everyone was to worship him and the golden image he had made. They refused. The King then sent them into a fiery furnace to die because they refused to support the king's decree. Yet God saved these friends of Daniel as a fourth person was in the furnace with them, a messenger of God. They were not burned at all when King N. released them and then promoted them in service of Babylon because of their faith.

King Nebuchadnezzar had dreams and his mind was troubled so much that he could not sleep. He wanted someone to tell him what his dreams meant but the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers could not even tell him what the dreams were, let alone what they meant. Daniel was the one who was tasked to execute these men for their lack of ability but said that he could interpret the dream that the king had. He went to King N. and explained the dream of a tree. The dream involved a "messenger coming down from heaven. He called in a loud voice 'Cut down the tree and trim off its branches; strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the animals flee from under it and the birds from its branches. But let the stump and its roots bound with iron and bronze remain in the ground in the grass in the field. Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven and let him live with the animals among the plants of the earth. Let his mind be changed from that of a man and let him be given the mind of an animal until seven times pass by for him. This is so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men.'" (ch.2)

Daniel is upset because his interpretation of the dream is about King N being the tree which is so strong and powerful but which will be driven away from people to live alone until the king would acknowledge the Most High as sovereign over the kingdoms of men. The kingdom would be restored to the king but only when he acknowledges that Heaven rules. Daniel then advises the king to renounce his sins and do what is right; and be kind to the oppressed. But he doesn't do this. And so a year later the dream becomes reality as he is sent away until such time when King N. believes in God.

During the time when King N is away, Daniel's faith is further tested. Leadership changes in Babylon and a different king Belshazzar does not tolerate Daniel's faith in God. Daniel tells the king that by using the silver and gold goblets from the temple in Jerusalem at a party that they were pushing the limits with God. Daniel tells this king what he has done wrong when a message appears on the wall telling him of his fate. But because the king still has the power, Daniel is then sent into the den of lions most likely to be eaten. But the next morning Daniel is found alive and the lions are still quiet. And it is this actions which stir up emotions and eventually bring about a change in belief in King Darius for he too comes to believe in the living God.

But Daniel has an even more significant role in the story of God's people. Daniel has visions which on some levels are similar to the visions of John of Patmos as written in Revelation but of course these visions occur hundreds of years before John writes down his experiences. Daniel's dreams are interpreted by many biblical scholars based upon world history, current events and even projections into the next century and beyond.

Daniel's prophecy begins in ch.7 with a vision of four beasts covering the same period of time as King N's visions in ch. 2 and represent different kingdoms. It has been interpreted as nations struggling against each other and this struggle leads to the reign of an individual over the world. There is also a battle between Syria and Egypt with Israel again the battleground. And the reality that will come lies beyond Daniel's world as he describes it in ch.10. Daniel has called people to pray with him and during this prayer meeting a man dressed in linen with a belt of fine gold and with a body of topaz, face like lightning and eyes like flaming torches and a voice of a multitude gathers all around him. This image reminds us of the vision of John in Revelation of what will happen in the last days. But it is when Daniel is praying and confessing the sins of the people as well as offering to God much praise when the image of a man appears. This man speaks to Daniel and encourages him, as well as giving him the strength he needs to understand what is occurring in that vision and what is to come. Daniel listens attentively and it is through him there is more discussion of what is to come. These images are of angels who speak and they bring Daniel comfort and strength so that he might understand. The question that often is raised in these visions—are whether they coincide with John's visions in Revelation or are they merely a vision not fulfilled at all.

Daniel's visions seem very far from our wonderful story of him in the lions' den and being saved because of his faith. Yet Daniel's story is more than not being lion chow. His story if

how he remained faithful to God and even in the midst of what seems to be a weird dream with angel visions, Daniel stops and prays. For many people, the lesson for us is that we need to pray no matter what we are experiencing. Daniel was in close communication with God throughout his life. When he was tested about his food, when he was supposed to bow and worship a king-made idol, and even when he was called upon to execute magicians and astrologers for not knowing the meaning of dreams. Daniel prayed. And when we pray God's answer is on its way the moment we begin to ask. The answers to Daniel's prayers seemed to come quickly but for many prayers that we share and petition to God, the answer may not arrive instantly because God is working out all the circumstances that must be altered in order for that prayer to be answered. God has the bigger picture in mind when we think he has not heard us. But God does answer prayer. Prayer is the means by which we enlist ourselves in the God's acts and with the help of his angels in carrying out God's plan. God wants us to ask Him to do what we can and what He says He will do.

We might even say that when we pray there might be delays because God's plan might be delayed or deterred by those who oppose what is happening. In Ephesians 6:12 we read that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm." And if this is the case, what are we to do? Pray for situations, for God to act when people are open to receive the Spirit and to pray for ourselves as we see challenges and changes in our world.

As we look to Daniel's faithfulness and visions and how much he truly believed in God, we need to also look within our hearts to see if we too have hope.

Each time Daniel responded to a specific request to share his faith- he gave hope for he had hope in whatever was to occur whether in the short term history of his day, or many years later. He believed in God, the One whom his parents had taught him about as a young child. He believed even though he was captured from his homeland and taken to live in the court of a different king. He found favour with God because of his strong faith and God looked after him. His relationship with God was strong as he prayed and when he received the visions- he was not afraid because He knew God was and is in charge.

How strong is your faith in God? How do you respond to hearing of Daniel's steadfastness and willingness to see and hear God speak to him. How do you see God and your relationship growing? Daniel knew that there would be a messiah before the end times. This messiah is Jesus whom we believe came to save us from our sins and who paid the price by dying on the cross. It is through Jesus' resurrection that we have hope for eternity. It is through Jesus' resurrection we have hope for today and tomorrow. It is through Jesus that we might have life and have it more abundantly. Do you know this Jesus? Do you profess him to be your Saviour and Lord?

Today we will share in what Jesus asked us to do. Remember him. Remember him in eating bread and drinking of the cup. Let us do so in celebrating his love for us and in giving thanks to God for fulfilling his promise of giving us eternal life through faith. Let us also remember that we are God's people and God hears our prayers and will answer them. And God will watch over us always. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray as we sing—On Eagles' Wings.

RESOURCE: Ray C. Stedman "On the Way to the Future: Daniel's Vision and the Believer's Hope", Grand Rapids, MI : Discovery House, 2014.