

Life in Exile & Life Everlasting (Daniel 10-12)

I have recently been reading a bit about Advent, this period in the lead up to Christmas. And traditionally, Advent has been less about *preparing for Christmas* and more about *preparing for the return of Christ*. And one of the major emphases in Advent is that “Advent begins in the dark.” Advent, contrary to the myriad of frivolous advent calendars and shopping malls with lights and carols playing from mid-October, is a gritty, realistic, time of sober reflection on the state of the world. At Christmas, yes, we remember that the light of God came into the world, but Advent encourages us to “take a fearless inventory of the darkness” that we still see in the world around us, and in ourselves.

This is how one writer describes it:

To practice Advent is to lean into an almost cosmic ache: our deep, wordless desire for things to be made right and the incompleteness we find in the meantime. We dwell in a world still racked with conflict, violence, suffering, darkness. Advent holds space for our grief, and it reminds us that all of us, in one way or another, are not only wounded by the evil in the world but are also wielders of it, contributing our own moments of unkindness or impatience or selfishness.

You could say, that Advent is about recognising that as believers, our life is lived in exile. We live in a time-between-the-times. We exist in the tension of the now and the not yet. We are citizens of God's heavenly kingdom, but we are still journeying through this earthly city. So it is rather appropriate that we finish our Daniel series at this particular time of the year. For these final chapters of Daniel are rich with Advent themes. And importantly, they are brimming with wisdom for us as we consider how to *live* for the light, in midst of the darkness.

So today, we're going to consider what these chapters tell us about how we can lean into that cosmic ache that characterises a life lived in exile. In particular, we will think about five instructions that arise from this final vision for a life lived faithfully in a foreign land. Are you ready?

1. Mourn the Darkness

So, number 1: *Mourn the Darkness*.

Here again, we take our lead from Daniel's example at the beginning of chapter 10. We're told that this final vision is given to Daniel in the third year of Cyrus King of Persia. Which means that by this stage, many Jews had returned to Jerusalem, and the rebuilding of the city and sanctuary was underway.

But, as we read about elsewhere, and as Daniel himself was told last week, this rebuilding was beset with trouble, as the Jews continued to suffer persecution, and continued to fall into sin. The whole return from exile is strangely anti-climactic. It is probably this disappointing news that explains Daniel's behaviour in *verses 2 and 3 of chapter 10*.

Daniel, still living in Babylon, knows that this is not the way that things are meant to be. The world is still hostile to God and his purposes, his people are still falteringly faithless, and the kingdom of God has not come in all its fullness. And so Daniel mourns. He weeps over the darkness that has not yet been dispelled.

One of the things I love about the Bible is its unapologetic realism. Life in exile is not all sunshine and lollipops. It is a time of dashed hopes, and disappointment, and a lingering darkness. Daniel knew this all too well, and we must honestly face this reality too. In Christ, we have been *called out of the darkness and into his wonderful light* as we are told in 1 Peter 2, but for the time being the darkness is still with us; around us, and often within us.

You wouldn't have to spend more than 5 minutes reading a newspaper or browsing the internet to know that is true.

The coming of Christmas, and the season of Advent bring this into stark relief, especially when we compare this message to what we see and hear in the world around us. And so we have a choice between the bland sentimentality and cheerful inoffensiveness of a commercial Christmas, or we can have the courage and character to name the darkness, and to mourn it. To weep, even as we wait for the kingdom of God to come in all its fullness.

Daniel shows us that life in exile will lead us to mourn the darkness.

2. Be Devoted in Prayer

But Daniel's response to the frustration of Life in Exile does not end in his weeping and mourning. For in his mourning, he prays. All throughout this book, Daniel has proved to be a man of prayer, and here it is no different. Through his example, he lays down a pattern for us to follow.

But even more than Daniel's own example, the content of Daniel's vision is a great encouragement to prayer as well. For what Daniel sees is this linen-wearing, lightning-faced figure, who completely overwhelms him. We will consider who this figure *is* in just a moment, but for now, let's notice a couple of things about what he *says*:

First of all, he reveals to Daniel that events that take place on earth are bound up in a greater spiritual reality. The material machinations of human existence are not all there is. In *verses 12-14*, the linen-lightning man tells Daniel about this cosmic struggle that takes place between the princes of human kingdoms and the angelic princes of God's kingdom. There is a great struggle that takes place in a grand spiritual realm. As the apostle Paul tells us in that famous passage in Ephesians 6,

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 realms.

And so we must fight a spiritual battle with spiritual weapons. We need to pray.

And secondly, not only do we need to pray, but we can pray confidently, because Daniel is also told that his prayers actually *do* something. Praying is *powerful*. Daniel is told in verse 12:

*“Don’t be afraid, Daniel, for from the very first day you applied your mind to understand and to humble yourself before your God, **your words were heard**. I have come **in response to your words**.”*

When we pray, our words are heard, and God acts in response to them. As Peter tells us, we cast out anxieties on the Lord because he *cares for us*. Through our prayers, we find ourselves *participating* in the cosmic spiritual struggle in the heavenly realms.

Of course, this is exactly the conclusion that Paul draws when he speaks of the spiritual armour that we receive in Christ. We wield the armour of God in a posture of prayer.

*And pray in the Spirit (he says) on **all** occasions with **all kinds** of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and **always** keep on praying for **all** the Lord’s people.*

If I can be blunt, to myself as much as anyone else, if we reach the end of the book of Daniel – if we have seen the pattern of his life, heard the promises of God that he heard, and grasped the picture of reality that God revealed to him – and we are not spurred on to greater devotion in prayer, *then we can be certain that we have not properly understood the message of this book*. Life is not a flat, 2-dimensional, material reality. It is a spiritual battleground, and by our own strength we simply will not be able to stand.

Life in Exile is a life of constant, and comprehensive prayer.

3. Depend on the Strength of Christ

Because it is through prayer that we draw on a strength far greater than what we, or any other power in the world, possesses. It is through prayer that we *depend upon the strength of Christ*.

For as we move into chapter 11, God reveals to Daniel that those who seek to live by their own strength, and to stand by their own power will always fall. Daniel is told in remarkable detail about events that will unfold over hundreds of years in the kingdom of Greece. One King after another will come and go. Through every means possible, from political intrigue, strategic marriages, and pure military strength, the Kings of the North and the South seek to secure power and dominion for themselves.

But time and time again, even after periods of great success, the Kings fall and their dominion is given to another. The whole of chapter 11 follows the same unrelenting pattern of rise and fall, rise and fall. You see it first in verses 3 and 4:

Then a mighty king will arise, who will rule with great power and do as he pleases. After he has arisen, his empire will be broken up and parcelled out toward the four winds of heaven. It will not go to his descendants, nor will it have the power he exercised, because his empire will be uprooted and given to others.

This first King of Greece is Alexander the Great, one of the greatest military leaders in all human history. But from God's perspective he is not much more than a footnote; he lived and he died, he rose and he fell.

Then like a steady drumbeat, we see this pattern repeated over and over again through the rest of the passage. *More than 10 times*, we read the word *BUT*. The Kings of the North and the South plot and scheme and build their strength. **But** they will not retain their power, **but** he will be forced to retreat, **but** he will be defeated, he will not remain triumphant, he will not have success, he will stumble and fall to be seen no more, he will be destroyed, he will not be able to stand. But. But. But.

Daniel's vision spans about 400 years of history in the Mediterranean, but the *main point* of this incredibly specific prophecy is something we can learn by opening to any period of human history. One writer expresses it perfectly,

Events have shown that human progress is an illusion, and that we live on the brink of the precipice all the time.

No matter how great our advances, whenever human beings exalt themselves and rely on their own strength, we still see the same rise and fall. Just consider the 20th century. The last 100 years saw more and faster progress, in so many areas, than any other period of human history. And yet at the same time the 20th century was the most *murderous* in recorded history. Over 180 million died over 100 years of almost unbroken war.

Humanly speaking, we cannot deliver ourselves from the grip of this pattern. Our strength is not sufficient for us to stand in the face of the Sin of the powers around us, or from our own sin and our own misuse of power. What we really need, is for deliverance to come from another sphere of power altogether.

And that's exactly what Daniel receives from the man in linen. For if the pattern of the Kings in chapter 11 is rise and fall. Daniel's pattern is *fall and then rise*. Listen again to what Daniel saw from chapter 10 verse 4:

On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river, the Tigris, I looked up and there before me was a man dressed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist. His body was like topaz, 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.

Of course, we're not told exactly who this figure is in this passage, but he is certainly presented in a way far more glorious than any angel is described in the rest of the book. And Daniel shows a reverence for this figure that the angel Gabriel does not receive. This figure has the appearance and power of divinity itself. Personally, I think there's a pretty strong case to be made, based on similarities of Daniel's vision and the description of Jesus by John in Revelation chapter one, that Daniel encounters Christ himself. Just like Daniel was given a picture of Jesus in the Son of Man of chapter 7, and the Anointed One of chapter 9, here in Daniel 10, the presence and strength of God the Father is mediated to him through the Son.

But even if you're not convinced by that, the important thing is to notice how Daniel's response sets him on a completely different trajectory to all the Kings of chapter 11:

I was left alone, (Daniel says) gazing at this great vision; I had no strength left, my face turned deathly pale and I was helpless. Then I heard him speaking, and as I listened to him, I fell into a deep sleep, my face to the ground.

Daniel recognises his own weakness, his own helplessness, and he throws himself at the feet of this figure in reverence and awe. But throughout the following verses, Daniel is lifted up. He is raised first to his hands and knees, and then set on his feet to stand. Trembling still, he bows again in verse 15, overcome and overwhelmed.

But again in verse 18,

Again the one who looked like a man touched me and gave me strength. 19 "Do not be afraid, you who are highly esteemed," he said. "Peace! Be strong now; be strong."

*When he spoke to me, **I was strengthened***

By the mighty hand of the man in his vision, and by the powerful word that is spoken to him, Daniel receives the strength he needs to stand. In all of this, Daniel experiences again what we have learnt all through this book: those who lift themselves up will be brought low, but the humble will be lifted up. Those who grasp from their own glory will fall, but the humble servant is exalted, set standing in a position of honour.

Daniel *knows his own weakness*, and so he depends upon the strength that God alone is able to give him.

Brothers and sisters, if we are to find the strength to stand in the face of all the pressures of exile, we too must look outside of ourselves and depend upon the strength that God freely offers to us in Christ. For when we depend on him the Lord Jesus will supply us with all we need. By his mighty hand and through the power of his word, he will set us on our feet and strengthen us to stand through every storm and trial.

Life in exile is filled with people and things that promise us safety and security and stability. But we are reminded in these chapters that such promises are a deception. If we place our hope in strategic investment, savvy politics, and scrupulous planning; if we rely upon our own strength and schemes the pattern of our life will only ever be rise and then certain fall.

Fall at the feet of Jesus in weakness and humility, however, and you will be lifted up and established on the foundation that leads to abundant and eternal life.

To survive in, to stand in the midst of chaos we must depend on the strength of Christ.

4. Remember the Future

And as we depend on Christ, we also look forward to the future. For as the waters of human of history rage, Christ stands high above the chaos and will bring about his plans and purposes.

This is what Daniel is told in Chapter 12, as his vision kind of morphs from the concrete details of the Kingdoms of Greece, to the very time of the end. This shift seems to take place toward the end of chapter 11, as Daniel is told about a final self-exalting King. This King is like the embodiment of all wicked and godless power, intent on destroying God's people and land. But even this ultimate power will be brought to an end. The great spiritual battle will come to its climactic conclusion. Evil will be destroyed, God's people will be delivered, and there will be resurrection to new life, even from the dead. *At that time*, Daniel is told,

Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.

This is the future that God reveals to Daniel. And it is the future that he has secured for us in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Amidst all human struggling and striving, God has acted decisively to overcome the darkness of sin and death, and establish his kingdom of light, and life, and love. As we read again in 1 Peter,

In God's great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.

Of course, this means that life now is filled with the very real tension between the kingdom of God that has broken into the world, and the kingdoms of men, that continue to exercise their power in this world. The dawn has broken, but it often feels like the darkness continues to reign. And it will always be a temptation to resolve the tension by simply giving in to the pressures that exile forces upon us. And so we must constantly be bringing to mind what God has promised to us in the gospel. We must remember the future.

And when we do that, when we remember the future, and live our lives now in the light of what has been revealed to us, we will shine brightly in the darkness to those around us. I think what we see in so many people in the world around us is people running here and there to increase knowledge, as Daniel is told in verse 5. People are desperately searching for meaning and purpose, people are looking for light shining in the darkness. But the places that people run to, in money, and success, and experiences, and power, and career, and family, and kids, and education, and whatever else, simply cannot satisfy.

So let us be wise, let us not run here and there, chasing after the fleeting mists of this world. Instead let us stand in the certain hope and knowledge that we have in Christ, and may God help us to shine like the brightness of the heavens, and lead many to righteousness through our lives and words of faithful witness to Christ.

As we live in exile, let us remember the future.

5. Continue to the End

And so finally, then, let us continue in all of these things to the end. Now I think if you are anything like me, you still probably have a whole heap of questions running round in your head. What's the deal with the time, times and half a times? What are the 1290 and 1335 days? Who are all of the people around the river?

But there are even bigger questions than that aren't there? Why hasn't this end come already? Why does God still allow wickedness and evil to flourish in this world? Why are so many of God's people hard-pressed and persecuted around the world today? We are surely right to call out, "How Long O Lord?"

Daniel certainly has this same response, he hears it all but he cannot fully understand. *"My lord, what will the outcome of all this be?"* he asks in verse 8. And even then, Daniel does not receive a simple answer, but a clear instruction and a certain promise:

Go your way Daniel, because the words are rolled up and sealed until the time of the end. Many will be purified, made spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be wicked. None of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will understand.

This is what life in exile is like. The time of the now and the not yet is a time of uncertain tension, and unanswered questions. But it is also a time during which God continues to work for the salvation of all who believe in Christ from every nation, tribe, and tongue. And God continues to work, sanctifying and cleansing his people, transforming his people day by day into the image and likeness of Christ.

And so life in exile is a time *for us to continue*. To Continue trusting the promises of God, to continue depending on him in prayer, to continue proclaiming the gospel to the world, to continue to live lives of faith, hope and love. Even in the tension, even as we weep and wait for God's kingdom to come in all its glory, to *continue til the end*. To walk the way of Christ, until he comes again to judge the living and the dead.

As we read in Hebrews 10, *Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.*

So brothers and sisters, as for us, let us go our way till the end. For we will rest, and then at the end of the days, we will rise to receive our allotted inheritance.

And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.