

DANIEL AT BABYLON

One of the advantages of our coming together in this way, and reading the Scriptures together, is, that it helps us to escape from the depressing effect of our own immediate circumstances. These circumstances are apt to impress us with the idea that they are established and that we shall never get away from them. They seem so real and lasting that though in theory we would admit they are only for a time, and that for a short time, we are apt to be burdened with the feeling that they will never come to an end, and that things will always be as they are; and these things being evil things, such a feeling concerning them is liable to have the opposite of a helpful and cheering effect. A consideration of the things brought under our notice in the reading of the Scriptures, helps to dispel this dreary illusion and to exhilarate with the enlightened perception that *“the world is passing away, and the fashion thereof,”* and that we and all our affairs, borne on its bosom, as on a stream, are rapidly drifting to the goal of that futurity the nature of which has been revealed to us in the writings of the apostles and prophets. This effect is produced as much by the history of what has been as by the promise and prophecy of what is to come. Let us take the example before us in the ninth chapter of Daniel, read this morning.

The first thing that strikes us in the contemplation of the chapter is the fact that, at the writing of it, Daniel was in *“the realm of the Chaldeans.”* That realm was at the time the seat of empire throughout the civilised world. Babylon was the greatest of cities—greater in relation to the world at large than London is at the present time—greater in her imperial consequence—greater in her architectural wonders—greater in topographical extent—greater perhaps in her population—a city of mighty walls, of military greatness, of princely pomp and commercial importance and prosperity. Where is all this greatness? Where is all the glory and the bustle and the prosperity? Go to the banks of the Euphrates today and receive the answer in the wilderness of rubbish mounds that stretch away in miles of silent desolation where great Babylon used to be. What shall we say to this but that *“the purpose of the Lord standeth sure”*; for was it not written centuries before even Daniel’s day:

“Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees’ excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. It shall never be inhabited, neither shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation . . . but wild beasts of the desert shall lie there; and their houses shall be full of doleful creatures” (Isa. 13:19).

The same word has decreed that God will make a full end of all the nations among whom He has scattered Israel (Jer. 30:11), that the time will come when the haughtiness of man throughout the whole earth shall be humbled, and when the Lord alone shall be exalted, and when the whole earth shall be turned into the inheritance of the meek, the habitation of immortals, and the house of Yahweh’s praise (Isa. 2:11; Psa. 37:9; Rev. 21:4; Hab. 2:14). This will as assuredly come to pass as the passing away of Babylon’s glory, and we shall live to rejoice in the mighty change, if meanwhile we honour Yahweh in the reverence and obedience of His word.

Then we look at Daniel himself. What do we find him doing? Studying the book of Jeremiah the prophet, from which he understood that seventy years would be the limit of Israel’s desolation in Babylon. We may here note that we are in good company in the habit we have acquired of giving heed to and being interested in the writings of the prophets. If we cannot in this matter comfort ourselves with the countenance and approbation of the wise of this generation, we have the satisfaction of knowing that the prophet Daniel would be with us, if he were in the land of the living, in the place we give to the prophets in our studies and affections. One such is worth more than an army of professors; for Daniel was not only inspired to know what human discernment can never however assiduously applied—the knowledge of the future and of the purposes of God, but he was divinely honoured on the very account of his interest in the sure word of prophecy. He was informed that from the first day that he set his heart to understand, and to chasten himself before God, his words were heard (chap. 10:12), and that he was greatly beloved (verse 11).

We have next to consider the effect of his attention to what had been revealed to Jeremiah. The effect was a very profound interest and a very earnest solicitude concerning the affairs of Israel—a feeling so deep and strong as to lead him to make those affairs the subject of “*prayer and supplication, with fasting and sackcloth and ashes*” (verse 3). This was not by command or as the acting of a part assigned to him. It was the voluntary and natural expression of Daniel’s individual feelings. A certain communication of prophecy resulted from what he did; and we are rather liable to assume that all that Daniel did was a matter of course, and part of the divine arrangement. By this assumption, we deprive ourselves of part of the benefit of Daniel’s example which like every other part of Scripture was “*written for our learning.*” Daniel’s interest in the affairs of Israel was a spontaneous interest and part of his character. It is part of the character of every man who is really a child of the hope of Israel. It requires no simulation. It is not an artificial requirement. It is the natural state of the man’s affections who is begotten again to the lively hope that springs out of the purpose of God with the house of Israel. It is a something entirely foreign to the tastes and sentiments of all ranks and classes of Gentile society. The hope of Israel is an unfashionable affair altogether; and if we have to own and feel that in entertaining this hope we are outside the circle of popular sympathies, we can at all events reflect with satisfaction that we have the society and good fellowship of the prophet Daniel pronounced “*greatly beloved*” by an angel of God, and commended to our attention by the Lord Jesus Himself.

Let us ponder one or two features of his prayer. Mark the opening words of his address to God:

“O Lord, the great and dreadful God.”

This indicates one of Daniel’s thoughts concerning God which may not be common, but which is undoubtedly natural to the subject. It may not occur to us at first sight to think of God as the “*dreadful*” God. We think of Him as the good, the wise, the great. If we do not think of Him as the dreadful, it is because our minds do not easily rise to the estimation of His greatness. In proportion as the mind opens to a just conception of the greatness will it be impressed with the dreadfulness of the Being who contains in Himself the inconceivable immensity of the universe. It has been the characteristic of great minds in all ages to realise the dreadfulness of God in this aspect. It is a sign of greatness to be thus impressed and to have a sense of man’s smallness. It is a sign of smallness when man, either in self or neighbour, seems great, and when the universe is powerless to impress.

Let us try for a moment to realise how much reason there is to think of God as the language of Daniel describes Him:

“The great and dreadful God.”

It is a difficult effort, but one which is edifying, and which perhaps becomes easier with the endeavour. We can only rise to it through what we see and know. That which we see and know is a part of the greatness so to speak, by the interpretation of which, we are enabled, though in a very feeble measure, to apprehend that which cannot be seen or known. As Paul expresses it,

“The invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things which are made, even his eternal power and Godhead”
(Rom. 1:20).

The “*things that are made*” are before our eyes, at least a part of them—an infinitesimal part. In whichever way we look at them with the eye of intelligence, we see the tokens of matchless wisdom in combination with stupendous power everywhere. Beginning with the smallest objects, such as require microscopic aid to enable us to see them, we see the perfection of mechanical skill in the adaptation of means to ends. The structure of invisible plants, the organization of the minutest animalcula, show the presence of contriving wisdom even more palpably, perhaps, than the finished machinery of human life, or the beautiful proportions of the large animals, or even the balanced

motions of the heavenly bodies; for in these cases, there is something on which the mind can plausibly rest the notion of self-evolution and regulation of the forces at play; but who can apply the principle of “development” by exercise and “the survival of the fittest” to the elaborate and delicate mechanisms by which the functions of insect life—visible and invisible—in their endless diversification of form and exigency, are discharged? A few evenings with the microscope will enable anyone to feel the force of this. From the teeming world of life in a glass of water, you turn to man, who seems by comparison a giant of colossal proportions. Here in every part of his organization is a machinery of exquisite contrivance and arrangement for the generation and utilisation of life in its highest animal form. From the crimson corpuscles of his blood, which can only be seen under the microscope, to the graceful contour of his elohistic form and figure, his being in every atom and aspect of it, brings with it the felt presence of eternal wisdom, which from without, has fashioned into these exquisite forms, the material supplying the basis of the organization. Then from one man you go to the thousands of a great town. From a town, you extend your thoughts to a country even so small as Britain, which with its thousands of square miles and its millions of population, baffles you in the attempt to mentally weigh it, as it were. When from Britain, you vainly try to grasp the globe itself, you recoil dismayed. Your puny imagination collapses. Your mind will not stretch out to take it in. You are at the end of your journey long before you leave your native shore. Yet the earth is but an atom in the mass of the universe—a speck on the fields of space. Yea, the sun itself, many thousands of times the dimensions of the earth—and around which the earth makes humble journey—is but a star among the countless myriads of orbs that deck the shining firmament. These are not fables but demonstrable facts. The “Milky Way” is but an aggregation of the distant starry host so dense as to seem a cloud of glory. Are we not baffled, staggered, bewildered, overpowered by the greatness? It is a greatness that is a fact before our eyes. Is not the Being who holds this in Himself, a “*great and dreadful God*”?

The dreadfulness is so great that we are liable to be drawn through to the other side of the subject, so to speak, and to feel as if the idea of one personal Father were incompatible with such inconceivable immensity. This tendency this we must resist. It is a mere feeling resulting from our smallness. It is not an induction of reason. If there is any reason in it at all, it is false reasoning. It starts with the assumption that mortal capacity is the measure by which the verities of heaven and earth are to be measured. It argues that because our created brains—mere agglomerations of atoms—cannot realise how one personality could fill and cope with infinite space, therefore there cannot be such a personality. Anyone can see the logical fallacy of this. There were eternal power and wisdom before our brains appeared on the scene, and those were in unity; for creation is a unit as we see. Our brains are a mere contrivance of this power and wisdom in unity. Shall the limited, feeble perishable contrivance set up its sensations in judgment upon the Eternal Contriver? This is what is done when men say the idea of God is too great for them to believe in. They are to be excused if they say God is too great for them to conceive of; for as the Scriptures testify and reason declares, “*His greatness is unsearchable*”: but when they say, “Therefore I will not believe in the existence of his greatness,” then they perform the most stupendous feat of folly, and earn the treatment to be accorded to men without understanding. Be it ours rather to recognise the self-evident fact that “*the Creator of the ends of the earth, who fainteth not, neither is weary, and of whose understanding there is no searching*” (Isa. 40:28), is a great and dreadful God whom we shall adore, and trust, and worship and obey, and before whom we will order our ways with the modesty becoming mere worms of the earth as we are, when compared with the sons of light, as we hope to become in His great goodness and mercy.

There is one other feeling which is natural and which we must equally keep at bay. We may avoid the mistake of making the surrounding greatness a reason for disbelieving in the personal form of that greatness in its root and power, and fall into another mistake equally hurtful. When we have scanned immensity, we may think it an incongruous idea that the Mighty Being in whom it all consists should deal with such small matters as occurrences among men on the earth which are less to Him than the motions of mites in a cheese are to us. From the “Milky Way” to Jerusalem may seem an impossible descent. Perhaps it does, but to whom does it so appear? To small man. Resist the feeling as the voice of unreason. Such a conjunction is only impossible to a mortal man. It is not for mortal man to judge the ways of God. It is part of the greatness of God to deal with the small as well

as the great—to note the “*thoughts and intents*” of an individual heart as well as to regulate the stupendous movements of suns and systems. It is part of His greatness to sustain the numberless stars (Isa. 40:22, 26), and at the same time, deal with His people Israel according to the law given by the hand of Moses. Dismiss the opposite feeling as an illusion of superficial thought. Say to Deism, which makes God too great to attend to small things,

“*Get thee behind me, Satan.*”

True reason is on the side of the Bible representation of matters. There must be detail to every form of things. There cannot be divine wisdom at work in the universe as a whole without that wisdom affecting its every part. You must either deny the wisdom in the general or admit it in the particular: deny it in the organization of heaven and earth or admit it in the resurrection of Jesus; deny it in past eternity or admit it now; deny it in the fields of space or admit it in the history of Israel. Of what avail would be wisdom in the general if not applicable in the particular. Of what true wisdom would be the splendour of the universe without a distribution of goodness to those inhabiting it? The framework exists for the filling in: the platform for the performers: heaven and earth for the fellowship of God and man. The Creator of all things speaking to man upon the earth, so far from being the narrow conception, which the wisdom of the wise would stigmatise it, is the mark of true divinity. Let us bow before the glorious truth of the matter and rejoice. Let us take our place by the side of Daniel the “*man greatly beloved*,” as he pours out his soul in confession of the sins of Israel when the time for promised favour had arrived.

Daniel says,

“*We have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even by departing from thy precepts and from thy judgments; neither have we hearkened unto thy servants the prophets, which spake in thy name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land . . . Therefore hath the Lord watched upon the evil, and brought it upon us: for the Lord our God is righteous in all his works which he doeth . . . Now, therefore, O our God, hear the prayer of thy servant, and his supplications, and cause thy face to shine upon thy sanctuary that is desolate, for the Lord’s sake. O my God, incline thine ear, and hear; open thine eyes, and behold our desolations, and the city which is called by thy name: for we do not present our supplications before thee for our righteousnesses, but for thy great mercies.*”

Thus Daniel prayed in his old age, on the expiry of the appointed period of Babylonish desolation. We live at the expiry of another period of desolation—much longer and more general, even “*the times of the Gentiles*” spoken of by Jesus, during which Jerusalem was to be trodden under foot (Luke 21:24). Have we not “*understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the Lord came*” to Daniel the prophet, and to his brother and fellow-exile in after years in Patmos, that he would accomplish 1,260 years in the desolation of Jerusalem, from the time of the establishment of the desolating abomination of the seven hills? And shall we not each at least in the privacy of his own impassioned petition, set our faces unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplication, with fasting and sackcloth and ashes? He that is able to receive it let him receive it, and the joint prayers of many such Daniels, within their closed doors, may bring forth a response such as, in the dreariness of their acquaintance with evil, they scarcely allow themselves to anticipate.

The response which Daniel received must have perplexed him sorely. While the words were yet in his mouth, the angel Gabriel came to him and touched him (to bring him into sympathy), and said,

“*O Daniel, I am now come forth to give thee skill and understanding. At the beginning of thy supplication the commandment came forth, and I am come to show thee; for thou art greatly beloved; therefore understand the matter, and consider the vision.*”

So far, this was very comforting; but Gabriel proceeded to inform Daniel, who was anticipating immediate forgiveness and restoration (now that the end of the seventy years had arrived), that “*seventy weeks*” were “*determined*,” or set apart, or arranged, concerning his people and the holy city, “*to finish the transgression, to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity*,” etc.; that this work would be accomplished in the cutting off of the “*Messiah the Prince*” (verse 25); that to the time of his appearing for this work, there would elapse the entire period of the seventy weeks except one, from the date of the coming forth of the then impending imperial decree for the restoration and rebuilding of Jerusalem: that after his appearing, “*the people of the prince that shall come should destroy the city and the sanctuary*”; that to the end of the war “*desolations were determined*” (verse 26), “*even until the consummation, and that determined shall be poured upon the desolator*.” Here was a something concerning which Daniel might well say as he said of another matter,

“I heard, but I understood not.”

He was looking for restoration; his expectation was right; it was endorsed by the angel Gabriel, in speaking of the forthcoming “*commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem*.” But after the restoration, here was the Messiah to be cut off, the city and sanctuary again to be destroyed, and the indefinite prevalence of desolation till a certain consummation, when the judgments appointed would be poured upon the desolator. (It says “*desolate*” in the common version, but it ought to be “*desolator*”). It appears all very straightforward to us, because we have the fulfilment of the prophecy to guide us in the understanding of the matter. But we cannot easily realise the discouragement it would cause to Daniel, whose interest and expectations were so strongly aroused on behalf of down-trodden Israel. Something of the intensity of his disappointment may be gathered from what he says in connection with the vision of the latter days, “*the time appointed*” for which, he says, “*was long*.”

“In those days I Daniel was mourning three full weeks.”

However, that is all past now. What we have to do is to look at the general bearings of the matter for our profit.

The seventy weeks have become plain from the course of events. They did not begin in Daniel’s day; for though in the very year of his death the proclamation of Cyrus was issued, authorising and inviting all Jews to “*go up*” to the land, “*the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem*” did not come forth with effect till the twentieth of Artaxerxes, nearly seventy years after (see Neh. 2). In that year, “*the walls of Jerusalem were (still) broken down, and the gates thereof were consumed with fire*” (Neh. 2:13). The date of the decree by the hand of Nehemiah was 456 B.C.: the year of Christ’s death A.D. 34—total 490. Consequently the “*weeks*” of the vision were weeks of years: $7 \times 70 = 490$. The cup of Israel’s abomination was filled up by the crucifixion of Christ, and in retribution thereof, the Romans were divinely employed to “*destroy the city and the sanctuary*”: and to the end of the war, desolations prevailed, as “*determined*.” These desolations have prevailed until now; but the time of the “*consummation*” has arrived, and they are beginning to abate. “*That which is determined*” is being “*poured out upon the desolator*.” The desolator in the current epoch, is the Turk, and the Sixth Vial has been poured upon him with the effect of consuming and destroying his dominion and preparing the way of the kings of the east. This is the process now going on before our eyes; the desolator drying up, and the way opening for Israel’s restoration. The process may appear slow, but it is unmistakable, and not really slow when estimated at the rate of historic progress. The effect of “*the end of the vision*” is very different from the effect of the beginning of it. At the beginning of it, there was a long prospect of darkness and downtreading which made Daniel dejected and cast down; at the end of it the prospect of the sunrise is calculated to make us feel in the mood expressed in Solomon’s Song,

“Lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land;

the fig tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away."

Thus will the Lord address his Bride on his arrival at the soon-coming end of the present dismal night. We sing with truth:

Long hath the night of sorrow reigned,
The dawn shall bring us light;
God shall appear, and we shall rise
With gladness in His sight.

Yet a little longer, and he that shall come will come. He will not always tarry. Only for the appointed time will he leave the earth unilluminated and un comforted by his presence. He will say to us in due time as he would say now if he might but speak,

"Be of good cheer!"

"Though ye have lien among the pots, yet shall ye be as the wings of a dove covered with silver, and her feathers with yellow gold."

We have need of comfort: for the night is dark and cold and prolonged, and the voices of snarling wolves fill the air. There is abundance of comfort for us in the holy oracles; but with our weakness we often fail to get the full benefit. Let us never despair, but ever renew the conflict while the necessity lasts. The assembling of ourselves together helps us. In this attitude of obedience, God may have compassion upon us and help us still further in the wondrous ways open to Him with whom all things are possible.

Taken from: - "Seasons of Comfort" Vol. 1
Pages 480-487
By Bro. Robert Roberts