

DANIEL AT PRAYER

The friends of God are few and feeble in our day and generation. We must not be discouraged at this. In the purpose of God, His children will yet be a multitude that no man can number; but in the process of their preparation during all the ages that have elapsed since Adam went forth in sorrow out of Eden, it has seemed good to the wisdom of God to get only a few ready at a time, and to have the children of folly in the preponderant majority all the time—and that while His few children are in affliction, the numerous wicked should prosper. The depressing nature of such a situation is part of the trouble by which the children of God are developed and tried. Are we liable to be too much depressed by it sometimes? Let us exercise our reason, and we shall be strengthened.

There are many things upon which reason may act with this effect. Let us choose this morning the one that is before us. We have Daniel at Babylon. Both Daniel and Babylon are realities to us, in spite of the sneer which the name of one or the other excites. For ages, Daniel has been a reality under Christ's recognition both of him and of the Scriptures of which he forms a part; and it has pleased God in recent times to make Babylon a reality also by the excavations of Layard and others on the banks of the Euphrates. Babylon has been brought to London in a very tangible form. In the relics and remains deposited in the British Museum, we are enabled to see with our very eyes the historic reality of a city whose existence was questioned by the sceptics of the last century. By the inscribed burnt clay tablet archives of the public offices of Babylon, we become almost spectators of the life of the city. By Nebuchadnezzar's own name-stamped bricks, that monarch is brought as it were into our presence.

When Daniel was there, Babylon was in her glory. It is advantageous to get a glimpse of that glory, in order to learn rightly the lesson of Daniel's case. We get a glimpse of it in the description of Herodotus who visited it, whose description is confirmed by the accounts of the writers who were with Cyrus, and by those of others who afterwards accompanied Alexander the Great in his conquest of the city. The few allusions to Babylon in the Scriptures are in harmony with the statements of these writers. Babylon was great architecturally as no city has ever been since. It covered an area of something like 400 square miles. It was surrounded by a wall about 300 feet high and 40 or 50 feet broad. The wall was surmounted by towers and pierced by gates at regular distances. Its interior was laid out in streets of great breadth and regularity—the houses well-built but not close to one another—leaving ground enough between for a year's tillage. The Euphrates went through the city, and was lined with magnificent wharves on each side.

The population was immense, and comprised people from every country, for Babylon had been the conqueror of all kingdoms, and was the centre of all traffic and the headquarters of everything honourable and important in the earth. Behold the picture, then, of this wealthy, populous and powerful city; and consider Daniel—one old man in the midst of this busy mass of human life. How did God look upon one and upon the other? We know, for He has told us.

Of Babylon he saith,

"I am against thee, O Thou most proud . . . Thou hast trusted in thy wickedness: thou hast said, None seeth me. Thy wisdom and thy knowledge have perverted thee and thou hast said in thine heart, I am, and there is none beside me. Therefore shall evil come upon thee . . . Desolation shall come upon thee suddenly . . . Babylon shall become heaps, a dwelling place for dragons, an astonishment and a hissing without inhabitant" (Jer. 50:31; Isa. 47:10; Jer. 51:37).

To Daniel he said,

"O man greatly beloved, fear not: peace be unto thee . . . thou shalt stand in thy lot at the end of the days"

(Dan. 10:19; 12:13).

Here, then, Babylon with its busy thriving population was nothing in the divine estimation, while Daniel was “*greatly beloved.*” Here is a study for us which we may find to yield lessons of comfort in our own situation when human glory spreads and vaunts itself so much, and nothing is so contemned as the hope which God has given us concerning Israel.

Why was this old man beloved while the stirring, important inhabitants of Babylon were of no account? This also we may know quite plainly; for we are told:

“From the first day that thou (Daniel) did’st set thine heart to understand and to chasten thyself before thy God, thy words were heard” (Dan. 10:12).

Could we have been in Babylon, we should have found Daniel as much an exception in this as those of a similar disposition are in the European or American towns today. We should have found all the people engrossed as they are today with the matters of the passing moment. We should have found that nothing seemed so worthless in their eyes as any attempt to “*set ourselves to understand*” or to “*chasten our hearts before God.*” We can see that lesson plainly enough. Where is the glory of Babylon and her people now?

“Hell (the grave) hath opened her mouth, and their glory and their honour have descended into it. They sleep a perpetual sleep, not to wake” (Jer. 51:39).

They are as much passed, perished and forgotten as the great creatures that once crashed through primeval forests, whose bones are occasionally found at great depth. But Daniel is “*written on high.*” To God, he lives, though dead. The moment is near for him to awake from that “*sleep in the dust of the earth*” in which he has been sweetly at rest for centuries; and from which he will emerge to take effectual part in earth’s public affairs.

We look at Daniel again as he appears in the chapter before us (ch. 9). We want a full view, because it is the picture of a man greatly beloved. We find him in prayer. But we must note the occasion and the theme of his prayer. They have nothing in common with the loud prayer-sayings of modern pulpitism. They are both related to matters as greatly in contempt with the theologies of our day as they were with the Babylonians of Daniel. Why did Daniel “*set his face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting and sackcloth and ashes?*” He tells us (v. 2):

“I understood by books the number of the years whereof the Word of the Lord, came to Jeremiah the prophet—that He would accomplish seventy years in the desolation of Jerusalem.”

The end of those years had come, and, therefore, Daniel prays for the end of the desolations. But why should he be anxious for the end of the desolations? Why should he, like the apostles after him, be so earnestly asking—

“Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel” (Acts 1:6)?

This opens up a history which Daniel himself glances at in his prayer; which is often rehearsed and alluded to throughout the Scriptures; which is very dear to all who “*set themselves to understand*” the work of God, like Daniel, and apart from which it is impossible to comprehend the drift of human life upon the earth. It is a history that goes back to the choice of Abraham, the increase of his posterity to a nation, their deliverance from Egypt and settlement in the Holy Land, and God’s dealings with them while living there for a thousand years. It is the history of the work of God upon the earth—a work not broken off though apparently interrupted—a work of which the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ is a continuance, and which only reaches its completion when Christ returns again to the earth, and establishes the name of God among men in power and great glory. From this work (a work among men and on the earth), immortal-soulism turns away the eyes of all people. Religious enthusiasm, originating in this corrupt spring, turns with disgust from the hope of Israel; while as to the irreligious, their affections are too much on earthly things to allow of their having any sympathy with the principles and objects of God’s dealings with the race of Israel. The Daniels stand aside from both, they are deeply concerned in the whole story which still works itself out before their eyes. They see in it the supremest ends of life involved: the ultimate well-being of man in the highest form.

Daniel had had a taste of what it was to have a kingdom founded on divine principles and conducted with divine objects. He was a member of the royal family of Jerusalem. He lived the first part of his life in Judah during the reign of Josiah and Jehoiakim, and, in the reign of the latter, was brought away captive from the Lord's land and taken to Babylon to ornament a pagan monarch's court. As a student of Jeremiah the prophet, he was aware that a limit had been fixed for the captivity at Babylon, and while living a stranger among the heathen, he looked forward with hope to the end of seventy years as the time when Jerusalem would be recovered from her ruins, and the Jews would return to occupy again the Lord's land, from which they had been expelled because of their insubordination to the law that God had given them. How much this involved to his imagination it is not easy for us to realise. We look back upon the restoration from Babylon as upon a naked and meagre transaction that could not have excited any man's ardour. But had we been living in Daniel's time, we should have felt, as he probably did (in the absence of any knowledge of times and seasons) that the end of the seventy years might be the end of all trouble, and the beginning of the establishment of Jerusalem as head of all the earth, so gloriously foretold throughout Isaiah, with whose writings Daniel would be as intimately acquainted as with Jeremiah. With such an expectation we should have felt all his interest and shared all his desire; for what would such a consummation have meant, but the attainment of every desirable condition for the earth and man upon it? —the blessing of all the families of the earth in Abraham as promised? —in fact, the setting up of the Kingdom of God, which yet remains the hope of mankind (though they know it not)—the divinely promised and provided remedy of which they are ignorant.

Is it a wonder that Daniel, with such views, should "*set his face unto the Lord God*" in prayer and supplications at the end of the seventy years? His prayer is given in extension. He confesses Israel's sins for many generations. He acknowledges the justice of the evil that had befallen them, as Moses had threatened. Yet he appeals to the "*great mercies*" of God, who had "*brought his people out of the land of Egypt,*" and who had thereby established a great name for Himself in the earth, to "*turn away His anger from Jerusalem,*" and for His own name's sake to forgive their sins, and to cause His face to shine upon his desolate sanctuary. The answer was swift and, in a sense, effectual. While he was yet speaking, Gabriel appeared to him, and informed him that at the beginning of Daniel's supplication, the commandment came forth from God to him (Gabriel) to repair to Daniel, and impart to him understanding of God's purpose in the matters he was asking about. The information brought by Gabriel was not of a kind to gratify Daniel. Daniel had asked for Israel's forgiveness with a view to an immediate and final return of God's favour to them. The information was that God had marked off a period for the finishing of transgression—"that seventy weeks," or 490 years, would elapse from the pending re-building of Jerusalem before that work should be done—that it would be done by the appearance and cutting off of the anointed (the Messiah or Christ), who should bring in everlasting righteousness by what he should do; after which, the city and sanctuary should again be destroyed, and desolation should set in a second time, and should prevail for an indefinite time, reaching to "*the consummation*" when the judgment determined should be poured upon the desolator.

The prospect of a renewal of affliction was depressing to Daniel to a degree that made him ill—which shows the intensity of his affection for the things concerned, for a man is not affected in his appetite by the postponement of prospects in which he has only a mild interest. The reflection suggested for our own comfort is this: here in the midst of great and busy Babylon, the man whom God favoured was a man who was deeply interested in the affairs of Jerusalem, which were of no moment to the crowds of people moving around him. He was the only man out of millions whose views were wisely formed and placed—barring such as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Are there no Babylons today? Are there no Daniels today? Are there not those who pray for the peace of Jerusalem in the midst of heedless communities of Gentiles? Who love her as David and Daniel loved her, though surrounded by the things dear to natural men? Whose hopes and hearts rise and fall with the waxing and waning signs of the Lord's returning favour? Our presence here this morning is an answer to these questions. We know in whom we have believed. It is not for the sake of the stones of which Jerusalem is built; it is not because of the geography of the land once the land of the Canaanites; it is not on account of the qualities of the stiff-necked race of Israel's sons, who "*Roam the scorning world around;*" it is not for any of these things that we feel our hearts glow with

inexpressible anticipation when we turn our eyes to the desolations of Jerusalem. It is that God himself has a purpose which He has disclosed, and that He has authenticated this purpose in an extensive and tangible manner by His wonderful works with Israel. His resurrection of Christ, His apostolic invitation to the world, the existence, preservation and circulation of His Bible in the lands of the Gentiles, and the wonderful fulfilment of His prophetic Word. Our confidence in the purpose is the confidence of reason that cannot be overthrown. It is a confidence that will be justified by the realisation of all that we are looking for. The life of all men will end; the mightiest empire will pass away; the loftiest edifice of human power will crumble to the dust. But the purpose of God lives for ever. It cannot die. It depends not on human help or human memory. It will stand in quiet strength if a hundred great Babylons laugh to scorn the hopes that are built on it. It will be accomplished if not a single human heart believed it. Christ will come, though the fourteen hundred millions of earth's population should join in one voice to deny him. Jerusalem will rise from her ruins if every man should shout himself hoarse in opposing it. The Kingdom of God will come though all the kingdoms of the world unite, as they will, in war to prevent it. Christ will reign at the appointed time, though there should not be a man in this generation to bid him welcome at his arrival. Looking at Daniel's lonely watch at Babylon, we gain strength. We claim him, not only as a brother in affliction but as a companion in hope. We are looking for the same things—he in the far east, we in the west. We have to rejoice that the night is nearly past, and are lifting up our heads in hope at the numerous tokens of the latter-day foreshown to him, but which he could not understand, as he said. Are we alone? So was he. Are we surrounded by multitudes who have no interest in the hope of Israel? So was he. Are we strangers in a strange land, feeling often weary in spirit, sighing and crying for the prevalent abominations within and without; and thirsting, —aye, fiercely thirsting in a land where there is no water? Such also was the experience of Daniel to whom the visions were shown. Let us not think that *"some strange thing hath happened unto us."* It is an old, old story. The children of God are in all ages one in experience as well as in hope. In moments of comfort and privilege, we are liable to forget this, and to think that by some arrangement we ought to be able always to dwell in pastures green. No man can redeem the present life from the vanity that is fundamental to it. Redemption draweth nigh, but will not be here till it comes. We please God and prepare ourselves by waiting patiently for it. Its clear light shines with electric brilliance at the end of the prophetic programme of the night imparted to Daniel.

"At that time thy people shall be delivered."

At that time, *"many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake."* At that time, *"they that be wise shall shine as the firmament, and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever."* That time is nigh, even at the door. For that time, let us patiently, faithfully, dutifully wait. Let us not cast away our confidence which hath great recompense of reward.

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