
Day 264 - September 21

The Exiled Nation (585-535 BCE)

The Writing on the Wall

Readings: *Daniel 5:1-31; 9:1-27*

Reflections:

- The story of the finger writing on the wall is one of the most fascinating and somewhat bizarre stories of the Old Testament. Scholars place this story around 542 BCE and about seven years after the visions Daniel has about the future political realities surrounding Israel (the vision of the four beasts, and the vision of the ram and the goat). Belshazzar throws a huge party with wine and women, and he wants to drink from the holy cups taken from Solomon's temple. His love for lavish living leads him to defile the symbols of God's holiness. A hand appears and writes on the plaster wall in the palace. Belshazzar is so afraid he virtually passes out. Obviously he believes he has seen a ghost and that this is a bad omen. Like Pharaoh of old, he calls all the kingdom's astrologers and wise men. He promises the rewards of prestige (purple robe and gold necklace), power and possessions (3rd highest ranked official in the kingdom). Finally the queen mother encourages Belshazzar to call for Daniel. This account is reminiscent of Joseph's character and description. "This man...was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve difficult problems." Daniel rejects any interest in the gifts or the position but is willing to interpret the writing. Here we see modeled that serving the Lord is really all that matters to those that have their hearts set on God. The lure of wealth, prestige, or power has no attraction and in fact is to be rejected.
- It is a measure of judgment and for good reason. Nebuchadnezzar's life had modeled for Belshazzar the most important truths about the God of Israel. And yet, Belshazzar in his pride had completely rejected learning from the lessons of his father. "But you his son... have not humbled yourself, though you know all this. Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven.... But you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways." Here we see another important lesson. God expects us to learn from our past, and the life lessons of those around us. God's vision is that we would be able to build on top of the learning of those that have gone before us and not simply repeat the same mistakes of our parents, elders or mentors. In many ways, these stories

of our spiritual ancestors, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament, are given to us so that we can learn from their example and mistakes.

- The three words of judgment are essentially: numbered, weighed, and divided. Belshazzar is told at the very end of his life that his death is directly the result of his self-centered rebellion. What a sad way to end life. He is assassinated and another ruler, Darius of Medes, one who history knows virtually nothing about, takes power for three years before Babylon is slowly handed over to the ascending Persian Empire.
- Daniel 9 is the record of Daniel's prayer in response to reading Jeremiah's prophecy of 70 years of exile. It is followed up by Jeremiah's own prophetic word from God that will extend to the coming of the Messiah.
- In the prayer we see again a very clear depiction of the story of "what doesn't work" as Daniel confesses the complete failure of Israel. Daniel professes God's perfection and grace: "great and awesome," "keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands," "righteous," "merciful and forgiving." Daniel also confesses their sin: "we have not listened to your servants the prophets," "our unfaithfulness to you," "we have not obeyed the Lord our God or kept the laws he gave us," "All Israel has transgressed your law and turned away, refusing to obey you," "we have not sought the favor of the Lord our God by turning away from our sins and giving attention to your truth." Daniel's prayer reveals the complete failure of "give me the rules (Law), give me my space (the Promised Land), give me strong leaders (the kings), and give me harsh accountability (God's judgments)" to change the hearts of the Israelites. Daniel recognizes that God must act in mercy or people have no hope of ever changing. In the end all Daniel can pray is, "We do not make our requests of you because we are righteous but because of your great mercy."
- Gabriel now flies in (you have to love that) and appears to Daniel at the time of evening sacrifice. He gives Daniel a prophetic insight into how God will respond.
- "As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given..." What is interesting about this statement is that Gabriel is acknowledging that there was a time lag. God responded immediately but it took some time for Gabriel to appear with the message. Sometimes we wonder if God will respond to our prayers when there is a time lag. This reminds us that God does hear us and respond immediately but sometimes it takes time for the answer to reveal itself.
- The following prophecy about the "seventy sevens" is one of the most studied passages in Daniel. Christian apologists go to lengths to demonstrate the alignment of these prophecies with the events of the decree to reconstruct the temple and the coming of Jesus as the Messiah. Most scholars believe that the "Sevens" represents "seven years" instead of seven days or weeks based on Daniel's reference to Jeremiah's prophecy of seventy years. "Seventy sevens" in total with "seven sevens" (49 years) until Jerusalem is rebuilt and "sixty two sevens" (another 434 years) until the anointed one, or Messiah,

will appear. The Messiah will then be “cut off and having nothing.” This term implied death and complete rejection. Both of these ballpark dates can work with our basic understanding of the historical time frames. There are questions but it is workable.

- The bigger question is around the final seven. The description of the final destruction of Jerusalem and the rebuilt temple, the end of the sacrificial system, would fit better with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The key phrase “abomination that causes desolation” used here is repeated again in two other prophecies of Daniel (11:31; 12:11) as well in Mark 13:14 and Matthew 24:15 as Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple. This lines up well within the basic understanding of prophecy as divine pictures and symbols that enable the hearer to understand events as they unfold (rather than scientifically designed communications that are to be dissected ahead of time so that people can predict the exact timing of events still to come). The “abomination that causes desolation” conjures up an image of incredible defilement that brings about complete and utter judgment. It is safe to say that prior to the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem that this in fact happened. Josephus writes that Roman soldiers set up Roman standards in the temple courts and sacrificed pagan sacrifices to these standards. We also learn from Josephus that in 67 to 68 CE a rebel zealot group took over the temple, set up a mock priesthood and offered sacrifices in their own form of cultic expression that no doubt would have been viewed as defiling of the temple. It seems that the Roman sacrifices were more likely the sign to cue all Christians to flee the city. The time would have been short before the revolt against Rome would have started and the Roman armies would descend and surround the city.
- In this we see that there was a gap between the 69 sevens and the final seven. For those that attempt to make prophecy a science, this will be very challenging as they will attempt to find some logical answer to this reality of history. Again, for those that understand prophecy as picture and symbol, the exact number of years is not the point. These are images that are meant to orient the discerning hearer of the prophecy.
- With this said, what are the basic steps that we see in this prophecy:
 - The sin and wickedness of Israel will be dealt with by God and everlasting righteousness will be revealed as prophecy is fulfilled and the most holy is anointed (reference to the Messiah? – this is a potential translation);
 - A decree will come to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple;
 - Jerusalem will be rebuilt with streets and a trench but not in peace;
 - A Messiah will come but will be cut off and be left with nothing (or no one);
 - A second destruction of the temple and city will happen that will end the sacrificial system;
 - The destruction will follow a sign of an “abomination” that will lead to “desolation.”

- Incredible how accurate this prophecy is in the order and details of what unfolded.
- It should also be noted that this is the only place in the Old Testament that the term “anointed one” or “Messiah” (Hebrew) or “Christ” (Greek) is used. In this way we see the centrality of this passage in understanding Jesus as fulfilling this passage. The phrase of “son of man” will play an important role but significantly secondary to the term of “anointed one” (Messiah/Christ). Therefore we should take seriously that this passage is the anchor passage for the Jews of Jesus’ day as well for the first Christ-followers that saw Jesus as the fulfillment of this passage.
- If you put together the passages of Isaiah about the suffering servant and this passage it is easy to see in hindsight that the Messiah must suffer and die. Yet, for the Jewish leaders of his day, these passages could not mean what they seem to imply. We must ask the question then, are we at times explaining away what God may tell us because we can’t get our minds around what he is saying.
- Without a doubt, this passage makes it clear that God is sovereign and in complete control. His purposes will be done. It really is an amazing testimony to the truth of Jesus as God’s savior and Lord of all.