THE GREAT WAR

Daniel 11:2-35
Key Verse: 11:35

“Some of the wise will stumble, so that they may be refined, purified and made spotless until the time of the end, for it will still come at the appointed time.”

In the last chapter, Daniel struggled mightily to stand in the presence of the man sent to him by God. The man had come to give him the explanation of the vision Daniel had seen of a great war. Because of this vision, Daniel had mourned and fasted for three weeks. In the ensuing spiritual battle, the man was detained in coming to Daniel. Finally, he came, and his presence was overwhelming. Daniel struggled with all of his heart to receive and understand the vision God had given him concerning his people. Finally, he could stand when he was strengthened by God. It was Daniel’s sincere struggle to find God’s vision and prayer topics for his people for the coming years. May God bless us to struggle as Daniel did to find God’s vision and prayer topics for ourselves and for our nation! In today's passage, the man tells Daniel the interpretation of his earlier vision. It is the story of a great war between the North and the South, with Judah and the temple of God lying in between. It seems to be an endless struggle, and endless suffering for those caught in the middle. But God's people must find comfort in the fact that there is an appointed end. We also can find God's promise that those who endure to the end will be refined, purified and made spotless. May God bless you to find God's vision and God's hope for you through today’s passage!

First, the struggle for power (2-20). The explanation of Daniel's vision is related to the history of the Persian and Greek empires leading up to the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes, the king of the North who sought to destroy the worship of God among the Jews. It is clear that through this vision, God intended to give the Jews a detailed understanding of the history leading up to the time of great testing during Antiochus Epiphanes’ reign. Through it, we can also learn the characteristics of
the human struggle for power. It is this desire for power that leads to
the great conflict between God and man in the time of the end.

This vision was given to Daniel in the third year of Cyrus, king of
Persia (10:1). It was in this year, perhaps, that the Jews were first able
to return to Jerusalem after their 70 year exile under the Babylonian
kings. The Persian kingdom was indeed a source of blessing for the
Jews after their long suffering in exile. Eventually, Persian kings would
issue 4 separate decrees that permitted the Jews to rebuild their
temple and the holy city of Jerusalem. But as we learned in chapter 9,
this return to the temple was not the end of the Jews' sufferings for
their sins against God. There was a great trial still to come.

The angel's message mentions 4 Persian kings, the last being a man of
wealth and animosity toward the Greeks. After Cyrus, this fourth king
seems to be Xerxes, who ruled from 485 to 465 BC. His great wealth
and ambition are well described in the book of Esther. But when he
depended on his wealth, he could not defeat the Greeks, though he
tried to stir everyone up against them (2b). After Xerxes' failure
against the Greeks, the Persian empire began to decline over the next
100 years. Meanwhile, the Greeks had historically been a divided
nation, with many city-states, such as Athens, Sparta and
Thessaloniki. However, a Macedonian, named Philip, united the Greek
city-states under his kingdom. Alexander the Great, who was tutored
by Aristotle himself, had a vision to bring Greek culture and learning to
the whole world through conquest. And as verse 3 states, he rose to
power and defeated all the enemies from Persia, Egypt, Russia and
even India. No one could stop him, so that by the time he was 32, he
had conquered almost the entire known civilized world. But his
kingdom did not last. After his death at the age of 33, his family
members were all killed, and his empire was uprooted and parcelled
out to 4 of his generals. Alexander was a man of great power and
accomplishment, like no other man in human history! But his kingdom
passed away like the flowers of the field, precisely as the word of God
in Daniel foretold. 1 Peter 1:24-25a says, “All men are like grass, and
all their glory is like the flowers of the field; The grass withers and the
flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever.”
Daniel 11:5-20 tells us of the great struggle that then took place between the kings of the South and the kings of the North. Out of the four kingdoms that initially appeared after Alexander the Great, one of them under Ptolemy grew in strength, with its base in Egypt, to the South of Israel. A general, Seleucus, was initially given Babylon, but lost it to Antigonus. Eventually, Antigonus was driven out by the combined efforts of the other kings, and Seleucus was reinstated as king of Syria and Babylon, located to the North of Israel. The other Alexandrian kingdoms faded in strength, and these two were left. They were initially allies, and the alliance was further strengthened by marriage. However, this alliance soon fell apart over the same marriage, as Daniel describes in verse 6. The wife who had been displaced for the sake of the political marriage uniting North and South, Laodice, returned and prompted her husband to abandon the new wife, Berenice. Then she killed her husband and instated her son as king of the North. She had him kill Berenice and her son. This enraged Berenice’s brother, king of the South, and he invaded and nearly destroyed the empire of the North (7,8). Marriage is not a political or economic tool. Marriage is a sacred gift from God for the sake of establishing house churches in which the Bible can be studied and through which God's will can be done. May God have mercy on this nation to restore a right view of marriage as the foundation for our society, and not a tool for obtaining what we desire, humanly.

The details given in the vision to Daniel remarkably coincide with the details of the struggle between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid dynasties. The key factor in God's history is that these battles occurred with the nation of Judah lying in between, and often forced to become involved. According to verse 15, many of the Jews saw this involvement as the only way to improve or benefit themselves and even their nation. For example, the Jews hated Ptolemy IV, and celebrated his death in 203 BC. The Jews also celebrated mistakenly when they heard that Antiochus Epiphanes of the Northern Kingdom was killed in battle. They suffered greatly under him when the rumor was proved false. The Jews felt compelled to follow the political ups and downs as first one kingdom and then another were exalted and gained control over their territory. But the very fact that these ups and downs were foretold by the Angel to Daniel tells us that all of these events were ultimately
controlled by God. The people of Judah did not have to tremble because of one king or another. They needed to hold on to their faith in the Sovereign God. They needed to believe that God is in control of human history, and that God is with his people, even though they are not exalted politically, economically or in any other way. This is saving faith in God. We cannot find hope in the rise of one political party or leader over another. This does not mean that we should not work to support the one who best represents our prayer topics for this nation. But we should not imagine that any man can either help or hinder God in his working out of history. We must know that our lives are judged only according to whether we have stood by faith on God’s side in his carrying out of his plan for world salvation.

The history that God wanted the Jews to understand would culminate in the time period after the kings of the North gained control of Judah under Antiochus the Great, who was humbled by the Roman armies, and Seleucus IV, who instituted heavy taxes to pay off the huge war debts. Finally, Antiochus Epiphanes came to power after leaving Rome, where he had been a war hostage to ensure payment of the debt. He most likely arranged the death of Seleucus IV and gained the throne through intrigue over the claims of Seleucus’ son. He represented the epitome of human beings’ struggle for power and glory in this world.

Second, the attack on the holy covenant (21-35). The time of great testing for the Jews came under Antiochus Epiphanes. Antiochus’ reign is noted for his use of intrigue and subterfuge. Antiochus tried never to confront his enemies directly, but to undermine them so as to gain control even before fighting. That is, he was an accomplished liar and murderer, the characteristics of the devil (John 8:44). Because Antiochus had no particular moral standard or restraint, he was able to achieve tremendous success, and very nearly toppled the Southern Kingdom by causing it to be split into two. The Jews were hardly a factor in these things. But the Jews had strongly resisted him and his attempts at establishing a Greek culture uniformly throughout his empire. When they celebrated the rumor of his death, prematurely, Antiochus became determined to wipe the Jews and Jewish faith out.
Firstly, Antiochus returned from his great victory over the South in verses 25-27, and would punish Judah by killing a huge number of Jews (reportedly 80,000) and stealing many of the treasures of the temple. Then, he went back South to finish the Southern kingdom off. Unfortunately for him, the Romans came, and with a clear threat to defeat him as they had defeated his father, sent him back home, highly frustrated. Strangely, he blamed the Jews for his trouble, and took out much of his frustration on them by requiring them to abandon their faith and practice the Greek religion. It was a devastating and humiliating blow for the Jews. What is worse, it was facilitated by the compromised lives of many, even in the leadership of the Jewish nation. Antiochus, for example, was able to change the high priest three times in three years, by manipulating these men’s desire for money and power.

In addition to undermining Jewish leadership, Antiochus Epiphanes sought to utterly devastate Jewish faith by profaning everything the Jews considered holy. He and his men brought prostitutes into the temple. He built an altar to Zeus there and sacrificed pigs on it. He forbade the practice of circumcision, and sought to destroy every known copy of Scripture. So many people were destroyed because of Antiochus’ campaign, that the Jews called him Epimanes, or “insane one.” Still, no one could dare oppose him or his power.

Finally, Antiochus’ campaign to destroy Judaism struck a nerve. The Maccabees were from a little town north of Jerusalem, perhaps the size of Macomb! At a sacrifice arranged to show everyone the new way in which they must worship, Matthias was commanded to sacrifice a pig on an altar. He refused. Then another man came forward in order to “make peace” and made the sacrifice in his place. Matthias killed the man and the soldiers, and he and his sons fled to the mountains, where they led the rebellion that eventually allowed the Jewish kingdom to be independent, briefly, and able to worship God as they saw fit until the time of Jesus and the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome. Their battle to preserve their identity as Jews, and to keep their worship of God pure, was not easy.
Look at verses 33-35. “Those who are wise will instruct many, though for a time they will fall by the sword, be burned or captured or plundered. When they fall, they will receive a little help, and many who are not sincere will join them. Some of the wise will stumble, so that they may be refined, purified and made spotless until the time of the end, for it will still come at the appointed time.” When the covenant of God with his people was under attack, many, many people felt helpless and powerless. We can blame this on the difficult conditions that the Jews were living under at the time. But the truth is that far too many people in every generation have no idea of the power and strength that is theirs through the holy covenant they have with God. They are compelled by their love of the world to go along with those who attack the covenant and deny God, thinking that in this way they can live in peace with God and men. But God gave to Daniel these clear words of prophecy so that God’s people might not have an excuse. The fact is that there is a battle going on between the children of the devil and the children of God. There is no neutral territory or lasting peace in this battle. It is a battle that must be fought from beginning to end, in each and every heart. It is a spiritual battle that is won not through superior tactics or subtle ploys, but when God’s people stand firm, resist the enemy, and get up after stumbling. Through this vision, God is encouraging his people not to deny his power as God to save them or cleanse them from sins. God is urging his people to experience God’s victory when we lean on him after stumbling, instead of leaning on our own understanding.

Peter was the Lord Jesus’ top disciple. He boasted to Jesus, “Even if all fall away, I will never betray you!” But when Jesus was arrested and brought to the High Priest’s courtyard, Peter could not remember his promise to Jesus. He stumbled before a little girl, and denied Jesus three times, until he heard the rooster crowing and broke down crying. Peter was a man of bold claims. But he compromised with his desire for comfort and peace when he had to stand by his faith in Jesus as the Christ and Savior. It was the time for Jesus to recognize Peter for the big mouth he was and anoint someone else as his top disciple. But Jesus had already told Peter, “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Lk.
22:31b-32). Now, Jesus just looked at Peter in the courtyard. It was to remind him of Peter's boast, and Jesus' promise. Daniel's vision was given to him as just such a reminder for the struggling people of God, not only in Antiochus' Epiphanes' time, but in our time as well. Our faith is going to be tested while we live in a world ruled by men who only seek power, pleasure and wealth. And there will be times when we will stumble. At the time of stumbling, we must not look at ourselves in self-pity or fear. We must look up to Jesus and to his cross. We must know that God is the God of victory when his people depend on him absolutely. The time of trial will be over, sooner or later. But the victory we win by holding on to God's promise by faith is forever.

May God uphold us and raise us up as heroes of faith in God's history, when we look up to remember God's promise in times of trial in fighting the spiritual battle!