The Round Church at

St Andrew the Great

Cambridge

A Sermon Preached

on Sunday 11th January 2009

by Mark Ashton

10p

Daniel 10:1-11:1

Our need to hear from God

"Knowledge", they say, "is power", don't they? But I wonder? We all know the power of the blackmailer, who, knowing something secret about his victim, can extort money by threatening to reveal it. One British Foreign Secretary, Lord Castlereagh, killed himself by cutting his own throat with a penknife that he had bought for a shilling from a street trader on August 12th 1822, because a gang of London extortionists knew details about his sex life that would have ruined the career of a Nineteenth Century Minister of the Crown—the power of blackmail.

Then there is, closer at hand, the lure of gossip, isn't there? That delight of passing on titbits of information that other people don't know, but we do know. Or the pleasure of being part of the "in crowd", the ones "in the know", the select group who know what's what, how to behave and whom to acknowledge, in a particular social group. And then there's technical knowledge: knowing how the latest gadgets work, or the latest facts and figures about Global Warming, or some other area of scientific research. We love to know what others don't know . . . and then let them know that we know it. "Those of you who think you know everything are very irritating to those of us who do!"

There is no doubt that there is power in knowledge for human beings. But you know, spiritually things work rather differently—knowledge is not so much power, as weakness—or, at least, an awareness of weakness; as we will see in this chapter. We're in the book of Daniel, and let's start by considering him:

1. Daniel

1 In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia, a revelation was given to Daniel (who was called Belteshazzar). Its message was true and it concerned a great war. [That may mean that it was very burdensome, a hard message for Daniel.] ***The understanding of the message came to him in a vision. 2 At that time I, Daniel, mourned for three weeks. 3 I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over.*** It was probably about 537BC and Cyrus had allowed some of the Jews to return to Jerusalem from their exile in Babylon in the first year of his reign over the Babylonian Empire. So we can tell that Daniel, for whatever reason, clearly had not returned with them because we are now in the third year of Cyrus' reign. Daniel would be in his late 80s by now, and that in itself may account for his remaining in exile in Babylon. But it is also clear that this opportunity for his nation to return from exile had not filled Daniel with joy. In fact, we learn from verse 2 that he was in mourning, a self-inflicted weakness.

It sounds like a sad end to a long and faithful life. Notice the accolade he receives twice in this chapter: ***11 "Daniel, you who are highly esteemed"*** It means 'greatly loved' / 'one in whom God delights'. It is repeated: ***19 "Do not be afraid, O man highly esteemed,"*** and it was a term that had already been used of Daniel in the previous chapter: ***9:23 "As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed."***

We saw last week how Daniel identified himself with the sins of his nation in his prayer in chapter

9. That humiliation and confession were an important part of Daniel, but so is this high estimation from God. You see, [Figure 1] we tend

Figure 1

to range human beings along a scale from 'rotten sinners' to 'righteous saints', and like to put ourselves somewhere in the middle [Figure 2]. But

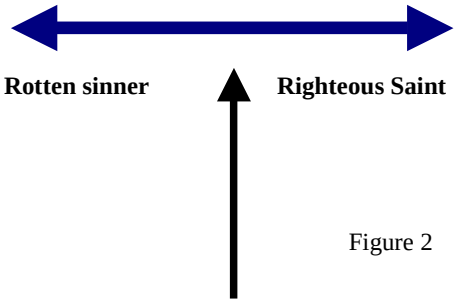

Figure 2

Daniel knew he was both [Figure 3]—back in

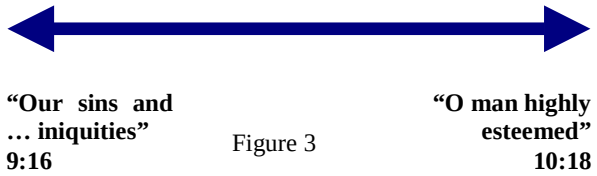

Figure 3

chapter 9 he had made it very clear that the sins and iniquities of the nation were his; he was a part of that. Here in chapter 10 we hear God's voice say to him [19]***"O man highly esteemed."*** The truth about human nature lies at both poles at once [Figure 4]. Can we see ourselves like that? More

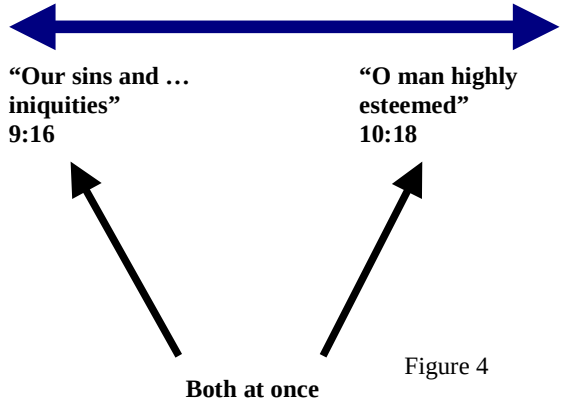

Figure 4

wicked than we ever feared and more loved than we ever dared to hope—that's what God's word says to us.

Only Christian faith can hold those two extreme truths about human nature together. Daniel knew he was sinful and he heard God tell him that he was loved. It does not help us to view Daniel as some great hero. It will help us more to see that he was like us, and that we can learn from his experiences here in the closing chapters of Daniel and especially chapter 10. It was an experience of weakness, like ours, as we shall see; but first our second point:

2. The figures Daniel met

[4]***On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river, the Tigris,*** [5]***I looked up and there before me was a man dressed in linen, with a belt of the finest gold around his waist.*** [6]***His body was like chrysolite, 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.*** [7]***I, Daniel, was the only one who saw the vision; the men with me did not see it, but such terror overwhelmed them that they fled and hid themselves.*** This figure sounds very like the description of the risen Lord Jesus Christ in Revelation 1 and His presence had a devastating effect upon Daniel and his companions.

[7]***I, Daniel, was the only one who saw the vision; the men with me did not see it, but such terror overwhelmed them that they fled and hid themselves.*** [8]***So I was left alone, gazing at this great vision; I had no strength left, my face turned deathly pale and I was helpless.*** But the figure is not clearly identified, and, if he is the same person all through the chapter, he goes on to speak and to act much more like an angel than the Christ. Notice from verse 11, he had been sent by someone to Daniel; verse 13, he had been resisted by another spiritual being, and needed the assistance of a third: [13]***But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia.*** That certainly sounds much more like an angel.

Nor is it made clear to us quite what manner of being this Prince of the Persian Kingdom was, nor the Prince of Greece in verse 20: [20]***So he said, "Do you know why I have come to you? Soon I will return to fight against the prince of Persia, and when I go, the prince of Greece will come".*** Persia and Greece were to be two of the great world superpowers of the coming centuries and that would be the significance of the association of these two spiritual beings with those two countries.

It would not be primarily geographical. I don't think there is any real warrant here for ideas about territorial demons, or 'spiritual mapping' as it is called—allocating particular areas to particular spiritual forces.

But we should notice that this passage focuses less on the precise identity of the figures Daniel met, than it does on the effect the meetings had on Daniel. Twelve out of twenty-two verses in this chapter concern Daniel's physical and psychological weakness. That is the emphasis of the chapter, not on the figures whoever they may be, but on the effect they had on Daniel himself. He was already in mourning and fasting. ***2At that time I, Daniel, mourned for three weeks. 3I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over.*** But then note:

3. The faintness Daniel experienced

8So I was left alone, gazing at this great vision; I had no strength left, my face turned deathly pale and I was helpless. 9Then I heard him speaking, and as I listened to him, I fell into a deep sleep, my face to the ground. 10A hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees. 11He said, "Daniel, you who are highly esteemed, consider carefully the words I am about to speak to you, and stand up, for I have now been sent to you." And when he said this to me, I stood up trembling. It took a touch of celestial first aid to prepare Daniel to receive this revelation. But then notice the effect it had on him: ***15While he was saying this to me, I bowed with my face toward the ground and was speechless.*** Up he comes in verse 11, but down he goes again in verse 15! And the whole process started again: ***16Then one who looked like a man touched my lips, and I opened my mouth and began to speak. I said to the one standing before me, "I am overcome with anguish because of the vision, my lord, and I am helpless. 17How can I, your servant, talk with you, my lord? My strength is gone and I can hardly breathe." 18Again the one who looked like a man touched me and gave me strength. 19"Do not be afraid, O man highly esteemed," he said. "Peace! Be strong now; be strong." When he spoke to me, I was strengthened and said, "Speak, my lord, since you have given me strength."*** Twice he had to be told not to fear, twice to be strong, and three times he had to be touched: in order to be ready to hear what is to come in chapters 11 and 12, the final and longest oracle in the book of Daniel.

So what was so devastating about these revelations from these supernatural beings that they so took Daniel's strength away? Let's look for a moment at verses 12-14 which turn Daniel from his nervous standing in verse 11, back to his prone dumbness again in verse 15: ***12Then he continued, "Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. 13But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia. 14Now I have come to explain to you what will happen to your people in the future, for the vision concerns a time yet to come."*** Daniel learnt that his three weeks of mourning and prayer over the sins of the Israelite nation were in some way linked to the powers of heaven. He thought he was just one weak, lonely, old man, long past his sell-by-date, having missed the return to Jerusalem, still frustrated in Babylon, bemoaning the failings of the modern world. Then he found he was a player on a supernatural battlefield.

It is like that moment in a Marx Brothers' film when I think it is Harpo who finds himself (in a moment of pure mayhem) standing in the place of the conductor in front of a full symphony orchestra, and every least twitch of his finger produces a deafening musical response from the musicians. You can't believe the fun he has standing there. I think it is 'A Day at the Races'?

For Daniel, what seemed so small on earth was locked on to something so vast in heaven. His praying hands orchestrated spiritual forces that were linked to them. And, when Daniel realised how much was at stake, he was simply overwhelmed. ***15While he was saying this to me, I bowed with my face toward the ground and was speechless.*** He may have been a man accustomed earlier in his career to walk the corridors of power of the greatest empire on earth at the time (a bit like working in the West Wing). But this was something else. And it was too much for him. He had never realised so much was at stake.

And I wonder if we realise? Do we realise that the creator of the Cosmos has set His heart on us, the

sons of Adam and daughters of Eve? And that the spiritual forces which rule the universe are locked in combat over us? Our every least thought, word and deed echoes into eternity (maybe there was more truth contained in the film Gladiator than we thought at the time!). Do we realise how much is at stake? Is that too much for us to grasp, as it was for Daniel? You see, Daniel did not realise the vast metaphysical scope of his prayer. Just look back to chapter 9: ***[24]"Seventy 'sevens'*** [says Gabriel] ***are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy***—that, according to Gabriel, was what Daniel was praying for even if he himself did not fully realise it.

And that is what we are longing for if we are believers—and the destiny of the universe is tied up with that. It is the great tragedy of all our lives that we do not take good and evil as seriously as our Creator does. We just don't think it matters—the thoughts we have, we have no sense that they have an eternal echo. There are spiritual forces behind the universe which are locked in combat. And every time sin, selfishness, lust, greed, pride, or vanity rules your heart and mine, they are involved.

But it is God's purpose to deal finally with all sin and bring in everlasting righteousness. Sin, the evil that we experience, there will be an end to it all; and it will be His end. Your and my selfishness won't rule at the end of the day. Where you indulge yourself in what you want to do, what I want to do, it will be dealt with. He will finally deal with all sin, and He will bring in everlasting righteousness.

For Daniel to realise that, to know that, was an experience, not of power and enablement, but of weakness, because he knew that he himself could not do it, and nor can we. As a later hymn writer was to put it—"Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to your cross I cling". This is something that God alone can do; only He can bring it to completion. So, if we would share Daniel's knowledge, we must also share his weakness, or his awareness of weakness. And I think it is open to us to do that. This passage may have felt, when you heard it read to us earlier on, very cryptic, very hidden, very far from your experience and mine. I hope we are beginning to realise that it isn't. It is the truth of your life today, and tomorrow, and through this coming week.

But, finally, what did he see of the future?

4. The future Daniel saw

This being, whether he is the same one as before or not, says: ***[14]"Now I have come to explain to you what will happen to your people in the future, for the vision concerns a time yet to come." . . . [20]So he said, "Do you know why I have come to you? Soon I will return to fight against the prince of Persia, and when I go, the prince of Greece will come; [21]but first I will tell you what is written in the Book of Truth".*** Repeatedly in these final chapters of the book it is stressed that Daniel's visions concern the future. Back in chapter 8 Gabriel had said to him, ***[17]"understand, O Son of Man, that the vision is for the time of the end . . . [19]it refers to the appointed time of the end . . . [26]seal up the vision, for it refers to many days from now"*** And in the last chapter (chapter 12) he will be told, ***[9]"Go your way, Daniel, because the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end."*** So, repeatedly it is stressed that Daniel's visions concern the future—the ultimate, final future.

But whenever the natural question "Well, how long will that be?" is raised, the answer is extremely obscure—see 8:13-14, or Chapter 9, where Daniel's wonderful prayer was prompted by the thought that the 70 years the prophet Jeremiah had predicted for the exile might be coming to an end and Daniel's prayer is, in effect saying 'Lord is it now?' Notice how Gabriel answered him in chapter 9—***[22]He instructed me and said to me, "Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding. [23]As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed. Therefore, consider the message and understand the vision: [24]Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy".*** Let's just stop with that seventy 'sevens'. Remember Daniel is praying: have the seventy years been fulfilled that Jeremiah spoke of? Gabriel said, ***[24]"Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people***. Does that set up any echoes in your mind? Do you remember Jesus' answer to Simon Peter when he asked

whether he should forgive his brother as many as seven times? And Jesus replied: ***"I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven,"*** (Matthew 18:22). We sense Jesus did not mean Peter to keep a tally until he had reached 490 times. He meant just the opposite. "Don't try to keep a record, Peter. Don't count. Just forgive". So, as we shall see in the next two weeks, the Book of Daniel is saying, "Don't count, don't calculate, just trust".

The knowledge Daniel received for all his earnest Bible study and prayer was not the power to know the future—not like the knowledge we humans crave and spiritualism, horoscopes and the occult promise us. It was the knowledge to know his own weakness, a weakness that causes us to trust, because that is all we can do. Spiritual knowledge is not power (at least not as we humans normally understand power). It is the weakness that engenders faith. And I hope next week and the week after that we are going to see that more.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)