

**Daniel 12:1-13, No. 18****“Life after Death”****April 2, 2017****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

Tonight we conclude our series of sermons on Daniel. I preached my first series of sermons on Daniel in 1983, some thirty-four years ago. It is remarkable how superior the current stock of commentaries on Daniel are to what was available in 1983. Back then there was really only one fine study, E.J. Young’s commentary, a book that has certainly stood the test of time, though aspects of its argument are dated. For most books of the Bible the commentaries available in the early 1980s are not to be compared with what is available today. We read the OT in particular much better now than we did then. I’m not saying that our doctrine has had to change. Not at all. The remarkable thing is that we are finding the same doctrine taught still more clearly, more beautifully, and more often than we had realized and are understanding it even better than we did before.

Now what we have before us this evening, among other things, is the Old Testament’s clearest assertion that conscious human existence continues after death and after the consummation of history. You know yourself, from your own reading of the Bible, that if you want to know about heaven or hell, even if you want a straightforward assertion of their existence, you will find little in the Old Testament to help you. There are, to be sure, statements that teach the existence of an afterlife, but none of them, *besides this one*, does it with anything like the detail that we get in the New Testament. The Hebrew word *sheol*, for example, can mean the place of the wicked dead, so a place of punishment after death. In such cases “hell” would be an appropriate translation. But in more places it means “the grave,” that state or condition of physical death into which all human beings must descend. But nowhere else in the Old Testament, besides here in Daniel 12, do we find a statement affirming the punishment of the wicked in hell upon their death, a statement like the many we find in the teaching of Jesus and in the rest of the New Testament. And nowhere else do we find such a clear assertion that both the wicked and the righteous await the resurrection and that upon the resurrection there will be a division between the righteous and the wicked, a commonplace of NT teaching. No wonder many biblical scholars have argued that the OT knows almost nothing of the future realities that are a staple of the teaching of the New Testament.

Clearly *that* overstates the case. There are statements that can hardly be taken in any other way. Think, for example, of the Psalmist’s confession in Psalm 73: “You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me into glory.” Fact is, if the Hebrews had no concept of an afterlife – which is sometimes claimed – they were the only people in the ancient world who didn’t! But no one can deny that the teaching about life after death, about heaven and hell, remains undeveloped in the ancient Scriptures. We awaited the Lord’s appearance and then his resurrection to be able fully to comprehend what was meant by the hints that we were given in the law and the prophets. But, we have more than hints in one place in the OT and that is here in the opening verses of Daniel 12. This is another reason why liberal biblical scholarship argues for a 2<sup>nd</sup> century date for the writing of Daniel. By the second century B.C. the Jews were giving expression to a much clearer doctrine of the afterlife, of heaven and of hell. But we’ve already said that there are too many good reasons to date Daniel to the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. We can expect

throughout the Bible a developing understanding of salvation, its ways, its means, and its results, and by the 6<sup>th</sup> century the Jews had a more explicit understanding of life after death, of the division between the wicked and the righteous in the world to come, and the difference between life in the one place and life in the other than they had had in the centuries before. That seems to be clear.

Before we begin reading we should notice that the chapter division – never original to the Bible, not introduced into copies of the Bible until a thousand years after Christ – might lead us to think that we have begun a new section of the book. Actually, the content of the vision that was given to Daniel in 535 B.C., the third year of Cyrus, king of Persia is still the subject. That vision has been the subject of chapters 10 and 11, and it continues to be the subject now in chapter 12. The “at that time” with which verse 1 begins connects what is now to be said to the subject of the previous verses. We argued last time that the final verses of chapter 11 moved the horizon of the prophecy from events in the ancient near east in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. to the end of human history and the consummation of all things. So what we now read concerns events on that far distant horizon.

### Text Comment

- v.1 We were introduced to Michael in chapter 10 where he was identified as the prince of the Jews or, shall we say, the “patron angel of Israel.” [Nickelsburg in Longman, 284] Michael will protect God’s people in what will be a time of unprecedented distress and danger. *How* Michael will help them, in precisely what way he will be the instrument of God’s protection of his people; *that is precisely what we do not know and are never taught anywhere in the Bible!* What the angels *do* as ministering spirits sent to help those who are inheriting salvation the Bible never explains.

That time, call it the “great tribulation” (Matt. 24:21), the “great apostasy” (since one effect of the tribulation will be the falling away of many erstwhile Christians; Matt. 24:9-12), “Satan’s little season” (W. Hendriksen, *The Bible on the Life Hereafter*, 124), “the rebellion” (2 Thess. 2:3) or, from Rev. 17:14, the final “war of the beast on the Lamb”, in its various descriptions in the Bible it is the last and the worst and the most global or comprehensive of all the persecutions that God’s people will ever have suffered. The Lord said a similar thing, if you remember.

“For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be.” [Matt. 24:21]

That the names of God’s people are “written in the book,” what in Revelation 20:12, 15 is called “the book of life,” is a matter for the assurance of the afflicted saints. The world may hate us, may seek to rid itself of us, may think us of no account whatever, but God knows our names and they are permanently inscribed in his book. No one on this earth, no matter how powerful, can erase them. [Davis, 162]

- v.2 We find very similar summary statements of the afterlife in the New Testament. For example, consider this one from John 5:28:

“Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.”

- v.4 That last verse sounds a lot like Amos 8:12, a verse that proclaims the Lord’s judgment on mankind and the unbelieving among his people in particular:

“They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.”

It is sometimes said that what is meant here is that the longer Christians think about this, about all of the prophecies of this time, and the more that time passes and the church matures, the church will gain a greater insight into the prophecy. That is a possible interpretation. [cf. Davis, 164] I think, however, that it is more likely that what is meant is that while knowledge increases, true understanding does not. The idea is not positive but negative. A kind of knowledge will proliferate, but true knowledge will not be found. Think of Paul’s description of those in the last days who are “always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.” [2 Tim. 3:7] Is that not a perfect description of our own time: extraordinary things that have been discovered and now are known about the interior workings of cells, the inner structure of the atom, even of the distant reaches of outer space; all sorts of extraordinary advances in knowledge and yet people remain clueless about everything that actually matters forever.

That the prophecy was shut up and sealed does not mean that it was to remain a secret. The original document was sealed and put in a safe place in order to ensure its preservation. But copies were made for public display so that people could know the contents. We have an example of that in Jeremiah 32:9-15: one sealed copy, one for public viewing. The point is not to hide but to preserve.

- v.5 Remember, as we learned in chapter 10, this vision, the content of which has been the subject of chapters 11 and 12, contained otherworldly figures who spoke to Daniel of things present and things to come. We return now to what it was that Daniel *saw* in the vision that he was given.
- v.6 The “man clothed in linen” is presumably the angel described in 10:5-6, probably Gabriel, though he remains unnamed in chapter 10 as here. Is the other one, the “someone,” Michael? Who can say for sure? But that seems likely. In his vision Daniel overheard a conversation between these two angels. And the questions asked are obviously the most obvious ones for any reader and must have been for Daniel: *how long will this oppression last, when will these things come to pass, and when will it all be over?*
- v.7 The double-handed gesture together with the oath serves to emphasize the certainty of the reply, but the reply itself is typically enigmatic. We want him to say, every generation of Christians since has wanted him to say, it will be over in November 2025. No such luck!

We've already encountered "time, times, and half a time" in 7:25, from that part of the prophecy of the four beasts that, we said then, concerns the distant future, the *finale* of human history, a further reminder that the various prophesies of Daniel cover the same ground. As in Revelation, the forecast of the end of history is given several times but in different ways. We said in our consideration of the statement in 7:25 that it appears to mean – in a typical apocalyptic numerical symbol – that the time of the kingdom of the little horn – a time of great persecution for the people of God, almost certainly a reference to the Great Tribulation – will seem like it will never end, because it will be so severe, but will, in fact, be cut off sooner than anyone thinks. [Keil in Longman, 190-191] Remember how the Lord referred to this great tribulation and then remarked, "If those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short." [Matt. 24:22] "Time, times, and half a time" means time cut short, - not a thousand years, which would mean a long time – a short time. Just remember, in apocalyptic prophecy numbers are always symbols and should never be taken literally.

- v.9 The sense seems to be that Daniel is to get on with his life; the time of these things is not now. He will not see these events unfold.
- v.10 The sense seems to be that life will go on, the wicked will continue to be wicked, God will turn many to righteousness as the years pass, and the world will go on much as it always has. The wise at least will understand the nature of human life and history and will keep looking forward to the end; they will understand their lives in terms of the events that are still to unfold. The wicked will always lack the perspective that comes with the knowledge of what will happen at the end of history. What we have here is a philosophy of history, an understanding of human life in the world up to the end.
- v.12 The final verses are difficult. If the abomination of desolation is the same as that mentioned in 11:31 and the prophecy has returned to the nearer horizon of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C., that is, to the days of Antiochus Epiphanes and the oppression of the Jews by him, there is no historical event of which we know that occurred at the end of 1,290 days or approximately three and a half years. Nor do we know what might have occurred 45 days after that. But then we don't expect such a number to be taken literally.

If we are still to be thinking of the end of history, as surely is likely, and so are being told of an abomination of which Antiochus' abomination was a mere foretaste or anticipation, such an abomination of desolation as the Lord Jesus prophesied in Matthew 24:15, we still are not told anything specific about this abomination. The Lord seems to view the abomination as a person, because he refers to it with a personal pronoun; perhaps it is simply another way to speak of the Antichrist. But God's people will endure and those who make it past the time of terrible persecution – 1,335 is a bit further than 1,290, forty-five days to be precise, the time of the persecution itself – will be blessed. Only God knows precisely what will happen or when, but what matters is that we stand fast. And God has here promised to send us the help we will need.

- v.13 As for Daniel and for most believers, who will live and die before the consummation of history, go on; live your life, serve the Lord, and die in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through Jesus Christ Our Lord.

Now, certain books of the Bible are famously single-minded. They have one great theme and expound that theme from start to finish and in various ways. These books are easy to summarize. If I were to tell you, for example, that Nahum contains the message that Jonah had wanted to preach, you will understand that Nahum is a prophecy of divine judgment against Nineveh and the Assyrian empire. That is what it is. If in your presbytery exam for licensure or for ordination you are asked to describe the message of the book of Nahum, that would be a sufficient answer: it is the message that Jonah wanted to preach, judgment against Assyria. In the same way, in the New Testament, Hebrews is a sermon on the necessity of a persevering faith. That is the subject from the beginning to the end. The faith of that community was wavering and the author preached them a sermon, and because not everyone in that Christian community had internet access, he wrote it down and sent it to them. That sermon was on the absolute necessity of a persevering faith in Jesus Christ. “Don’t shrink back; stand fast or you will never enter the heavenly country.” That’s Hebrews.

Daniel is like those books in its single-minded focus on one message. “In spite of appearances God is in control.” In the narratives that begin the book and in the prophecies that conclude it, this is Daniel’s theme. It is so much the theme that each of the prophecies, the one in chapter 7, the one in chapter 8, the one in chapter 9, and the one in chapters 10-12 all provide the same view of the future. And this is their forecast: trouble ahead for the people of God, suffering required, oppression and persecution is coming, but God is in control and will help us through. Each adds some interesting detail, each makes the point in a slightly different way, but each describes the same future for the people of God.

Now the challenge for a reader of Daniel, especially for a reader of Daniel living as long after Daniel’s life as you and I, is not to allow ourselves to be indifferent to this message, a message that, as we have pointed out, is found in many other places in the Word of God. One reason we would be tempted to yawn and move on is that we have heard this message so many times before. It is necessary that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. Ho hum. Tell me something I don’t already know. *But only comfortable Christians who’ve never really suffered terrible tribulations find this message jejune or banal or commonplace.* Believers who are holding on for their very lives; believers who have suffered terribly and lost precious things come to Daniel for the strength to hold on, if only by their fingernails.

But we know only too well how easy it is for us to take even the most desperately important, even the most fabulously wonderful things for granted and to live our daily lives as if a host of inconsequential things were much more important than the knowledge of the living God, the possession of eternal life through Jesus Christ, and the coming judgment day. We can go for days without thinking seriously about or shedding tears over the fact that we were going to hell and were saved in the nick of conversion and are now, by the sheer grace of God, going to live forever in a place where everlasting joy is on everyone’s head. We can pass by multitudes of people with nary a thought that they are utterly unaware that they are going to hell. We are like Tsar Nicholas II, the last Russian Tsar, who was famous for his apathy. He once received a

telegram telling him that the Russian fleet had been annihilated by the Japanese navy at Tsushima. He read it, stuffed it in his pocket and returned to his tennis game. [Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, in Davis, 161] We know only too well our tendency to do the same thing with the news we receive in Holy Scripture. But we must not! Above all things we must not. Catastrophe is all around us if only we have the eyes to see it. Bitter struggle is required of us, if only we realize it. What will we do with this knowledge?

Another reason we might not take the message of Daniel to heart is the all too common thought that it is not really talking about us. Daniel was told to go on with his life. He never saw any of the prophecies of the last days come to pass; he didn't even live to see the rise and fall of the empires forecast in Daniel 7, 8, and 11, the empires that bridged the historical period between Daniel's own lifetime and the suffering of the Jews in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. After two and a half thousand years, how likely is it really, that we are going to witness the rise of the Antichrist or to be required to endure the time, times, and half a time? Of course the reality of the resurrection ties our lives to that distant consummation, for on that day our lives – however we lived them in our own day – will be judged as all other human lives must be. That should be enough! But all of this unprecedented suffering, the great tribulation, we assume will be some other Christians' lot, not ours. So we think.

But surely it is one of the lessons of the characteristic foreshortening or telescoping of biblical prophecy that the trials of our present lives are similar to the trials that will overwhelm the church at the end of the age. The events in the near term are again and again used as a way of thinking about or imagining those events on that larger scale: the persecution more terrible, more deadly that will mark the end of history. Antiochus' great importance in Daniel was as a type or an enacted prophecy of a far greater and more sinister figure who will arise at the end of history. His abomination of desolation serves as an anticipation of a still greater threat to Christian faith and the worship of God that believers will face in the very last days. In other words, as John put it, the Antichrist is already with us. There are many antichrists in the world even as we await *the* Antichrist at the end of history.

And for the individual believer, the present antichrist may be just as bad and the present test of faith just as severe. People have been executed for their faith all along the way. People have suffered terrible loss for their loyalty to Jesus Christ throughout history. Tests of faith have been severe enough to overturn the faith of many supposed Christians. What the church will face at the very end is only more of the same, a great concentration of the same. So don't suppose this lesson is only for the believers who will happen to be living in the world in the last few years of human history.

Then, finally, we are tempted to pay little attention to Daniel's prophecy because we find it easy to imagine that, of course, we will be among those who stand fast in the day of testing. You think you would stand, you would endure, and you would prove faithful to the Lord in the face of deadly peril. Really? *I am morally certain that not all of you would.* I am morally certain that some among us would trade Christ for our jobs or our homes or our children or our very lives. It has happened times without number through the ages. Remember, not all who capitulated in fear of punishment in the days of the terrible persecution of the Jews in the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century were apostates. As we read in 11:33-35 concerning the days of Antiochus Epiphanes, *some of the*

*wise also stumbled.* They were then given help by the Lord and were purified, their sin was forgiven, or, as we read there, they were made white once again. And so it was in the days of persecution in early Christianity, not all true believers stood the test. Many left the church to spare themselves and never came back, but some turned and ran and then repented of their cowardice. The same is happening today in various parts of the world. But throughout Christian history many who thought themselves believers, who were taken by everyone else to be followers of Christ, when push came to shove, loved their skin more than the Lord. In any church of some size, there will be those who are Christians only until their faith is put to a severe test. All the biblical descriptions of the great tribulation include this warning that the love of many will grow cold or that, as we read in 11:32, that they will be seduced with flattery (or by threats) to join the other side.

Are you really so sure that you would stand fast? What if, as has happened so many times in history, you were faced with the demand to forsake your identity as a follower of Christ and as a member of his church or suffer the loss of your job, the loss of your home and your financial assets, or, worse, the loss of your children to the state, or face imprisonment, or actually be put to death? *If that were to happen to us, to this congregation this week, how many of us would be back next Sunday?*

You can hardly think such things don't happen. They are happening today as they have happened many times in the past. A few weeks ago a Czech missionary and two Sudanese pastors were convicted of "tarnishing Sudan's image" by documenting the persecution of Christians. The Czech man was sentenced to life in prison; the two pastors to twelve years. [CT (April 2017) 18] Think of that Czech believer today, awaking to another day in a Sudanese prison, perhaps never to leave it; he's a comparatively young man. Would you risk that? In Pakistan and elsewhere, Christians take their lives in their hands just going to church. True enough, we read here that a time is coming when it will be still worse, it will appear that the church of Christ is literally on the brink of utter annihilation, that darkness has won the day, and that the God of the Christians has been defeated and their hopes dashed. We are then encouraged to know that such a time will be shortened – it will be but time, times, and half a time – and that those who stand fast through that terrible time, God will vindicate, reward, and bless. But for many Christians who have lived, who live today, or who will live before that time, *in their own case it was or will be just that bad.* After all, you can only kill a person once. You can only thoroughly destroy his hopes for peace and happiness in this world. For the individual believer it doesn't change his circumstances if he is the only one, or one of only a few, or if it is only happening in his town or country. The great tribulation may be unlike any previous persecution of the church *in its scale*, but in its personal effect it is simply the same thing many believers have suffered through the ages. Antichrist is already with us, the Jews who suffered and died under Antiochus didn't suffer anything less than believers will suffer in the great tribulation!

What this relentless forecast of suffering and of testing is intended to do is not simply to prepare whatever generation of God's people will happen to be in the world when the great tribulation begins. It is rather to teach all believers, at all times, what it means to be a faithful Christian and by what means we must stand the test, when our day of testing comes. Anyone who desires to live a godly life will be persecuted. So said the Apostle Paul. It may not be the great tribulation, but for every one of us, it will be a test severe enough to destroy our faith if we are not prepared

to stand fast. *It is the pattern of believing life in this world and so it is the future of every believer to pass into glory only through suffering.* And so it is a highly useful exercise to imagine ourselves in that great tribulation and thinking hard about what that would require of us.

And what is required of us? How are we to train ourselves to stand fast when the evil day approaches? Whatever the test may be, however many or few Christians may face it at the time we do, however severe, we must be ready and willing. How do we make ourselves so? Well surely the answer to those questions is given us in Daniel. In fact, it is the entire purpose of Daniel to answer those questions. And what is that answer? Well it comes in several parts.

1. *It is, first of all, the conviction, to be nurtured in our hearts, that “in spite of appearances God is in control.”* A statement like that assumes that there will be times, perhaps many times, when – whether in the individual Christian life or the life of the church as a whole – *it is hard to believe that God is in control. It doesn’t seem that he is in control.* His people are suffering, their enemies gain strength at their expense, and no light appears at the end of the tunnel. One prayer after another after another seems to have fallen on deaf ears. But Daniel reminds us that this is all part of God’s plan. He has ordered history, all history, including our personal history. From the circumstances of Daniel’s personal life to the rise and fall of empires, God has done it. That is hugely important for Christians to know. It is God himself, *our God*, who had appointed such trials for us, such hardships, and such disappointments. It is part of his perfect plan for our lives and for the world. The world hasn’t spun out of control at all; in fact it is proceeding precisely according to his plan. True enough, we don’t understand the plan and the suffering may be no less intense, but any believer who really believes that his or her heavenly Father has ordered that suffering must be greatly strengthened to endure it. There is a good reason for it, there is a holy purpose in it, and there will be good to come from it. Right? Is that not so? Is that not what the Bible says repeatedly? “All things – and Paul means there in Romans 8:28 and following all the really hard things, all the bad things, the harmful things – all things work together for good to those who love God.” Daniel is about the sovereignty of God! We’ve got to write that fact on our hearts and confess it with our lips.

2. Second, *we are not alone; we have powerful friends to support us and defend us.* I think this is the reason why Gabriel and Michael are mentioned in this context. Surely it is the Lord himself who is the defender of his people. That’s said a thousand times in the Bible. The Lord could have left Gabriel and Michael out. If God is for us who can be against us, angels or not. But to mention the angels, to refer to Michael as virtually the patron angel of the people of God, is to emphasize in a memorable way the array of powerful princes that stand ready to defend the people of God in times of danger. The fact that we don’t know *how* they help us or *precisely what they do*, is, I think, some indication that the importance of mentioning them is to remind us that we are not alone. Not only is God with us, but the angels of God are arrayed to help us. How often do you remember that? I know I forget it entirely far too much of the time.

3. Third, *the victory is assured.* I think this is the great purpose of knowing about the great tribulation at the end of history for generations of people who will never actually suffer that great tribulation. If at the church’s worst moment, if when it seems her destruction is assured, if when humanly speaking all hope will have been lost, she is nevertheless certain suddenly and completely to triumph over her enemies and to remain alone standing in the field when the final



trumpet has sounded, then *a fortiori*, as an argument from the greater to the lesser, clearly in times of less intense, less worldwide suffering, the Christian's victory is all the more assured. Daniel himself would not live through the great tribulation, neither in all likelihood will you or I. But he had and we have our tribulations, our days of great darkness, and our times of testing. It makes, it must make all the difference in the world to know in such times both that they will not last and that God will eventually reward our faith.

4. Fourth, *heaven (and hell) await*. No matter how a Christian's life may end in this world, an old man or woman in his or her bed – as was Daniel's lot – or in a prison cell, or on a pyre or on gallows or a block – as was the case for many faithful Jews in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes and many Christians since – the day is coming when we will rise again and those who followed the Lord will embark on their everlasting life. No one can deny that such a prospect changes everything. No one can deny that suffering takes on a completely different meaning when eternal life looms before the believer in Jesus Christ. How different our suffering will seem when we look back upon it from heaven!

'Tis good that our props should from 'neath us be fled,  
If we drop into arms everlasting instead...  
My trials may deepen, my comforts may flee:  
I'm rich amid ruin with heaven and Thee!

Henry Lyte *Recollections*

Now all of this requires faith, confidence in the truth of God's word, the certainty of God's promises, and the faithfulness of God to his people. This is the reason why the angel raises his hands and swears that what he is about to say is true. It is precisely the inability to *see* these things at the time that makes faith the principle of the Christian life. Daniel is a summons to faith, to believe in the teeth of appearances to the contrary. Faith was the victory in Daniel's life, in the lives of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and faith must be the victory in ours. As Samuel Rutherford reminds us, "Faith's necessity in a fair day is never known aright." The real test is how much faith we have when we find ourselves in a day of trouble.

Faith in what? That our lives are unfolding according to God's plan, that our suffering will last only for time, times, and half a time, that we will prevail against all our enemies, and that eternal life stretches before us into a golden future. When we believe these things, really believe them, as we certainly have every reason to – not least because of the fulfillment of the Bible's prophecies, because of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, and because of the witness of the Holy Spirit in our hearts – life takes on a very different character and so do the trials and suffering that we must endure.

Here is Archibald Campbell, ninth earl of Argyle, Covenanter, to his daughter-in-law, Lady Sophia Lindsay, on the day of his death by execution in Edinburgh, on account of his loyalty to Christ and the Word of God:

"What shall I say in this great day of the Lord [– he knew the Lord had put him where he was –], wherein in the midst of a cloud, I have found a fair sunshine [he seems to be among those who, as we read tonight, "shall shine like the brightness of the sky above"]].

I can wish no more for you, but that the Lord may comfort you, and shine upon you as he does upon me, and give you that same sense of his love in staying in the world, as I have in going out of it.” [He was one of those wise men who turned many to righteousness!]

I say, there was a man who understood the book of Daniel, who believed its message, and put its teaching into practice in his life. May God give us grace to do the same!