

Sovereignty & Unjust Suffering: Studies in Daniel, Part 2/2

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Through the grid of God's sovereignty, Daniel provides not only a practical philosophy of suffering for the Christian but also a foundation for action.

Paul could say to the church in Colossae, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of his body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (Col. 1:24). With a firm grasp on the sovereignty of Christ over his circumstances, to the Philippians he could say, "... my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel" (Phil. 1:12). What exactly were Paul's circumstances? Not a lot different to those of Daniel and his three friends—he was in prison for the sake of the gospel. Through the conspiring of both the Roman power-state and apostate Judaism, Paul found himself incarcerated and suffering for the gospel. His imprisonment was unjust but he didn't fret; God was still on his throne, and, in fact, his circumstances were designed sovereignly for the extension of the gospel.

The Book of Daniel, as with Paul's life, provides a dramatic demonstration of God's power through the machinations of envious and conspiring men. While they meant it for evil God meant it for good; and as the Psalmist so rightly said, "the wrath of man shall praise thee" (Ps.76:10). Therefore, a healthy perspective on suffering can only be developed through a grasp of the sovereignty of God and his oversight of all the affairs of men, particularly those of a politico-religious nature and their impact on the lives of the faithful. Through their invincible confidence in the sovereignty and power of God over the great Gentile empires of their age, Daniel and his three friends witnessed the greatest manifestation of divine power that had been seen since the God of Elijah answered by fire. Their abandonment to God, regardless of personal risk, released God's power into the Babylonian empire and demonstrated to kings that sovereignty and might belong only to the God of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

The source, in the life of the believer, of all effective witness and ministry is found in a biblical response to suffering. Paul in writing to the Corinthians could say,

We should like you to know, dear friends, how serious was the trouble that came upon us; the burden of it was far too heavy for us to bear, so heavy that we even despaired of life... This was meant to teach us not to place reliance on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.

2Cor. 1:8, NEB

Suffering is designed by God to bring us to the end of our own resources and in humility rely on God's intervention. As we "find help in time of need" we are enabled to function out of the reality of God's power and grace (Heb 4:16). Paul teaches this from his own life:

The Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation, or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer.

2 Cor. 1:3,4,6

In the process of suffering, if responded to with faith, God imparts grace and comfort to enable us to endure the trial with the joy and power of the Holy Spirit; and, as Peter said, "if you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of Glory and of God rests on you" (1Pet, 4:14). Daniel and his friends all responded to the moment of trial with faith in the integrity of God's character, confidence in his sovereignty over their lives, and the assurance of final vindication whether

in death or life, by the judge of all men (ch. 3 & 6).

Apart from developing a philosophy of suffering, Daniel, as already alluded to, teaches the absolute authority of the 'son of man' (ch.7) over the messianic aspirations of the world-powers and their leaders. In a day of political and economic turmoil when, before our eyes, godless ideologies and their empires (USSR), that have for virtually two generations held one-third of the earth's surface captive (Communism), fall into a heap of ruins, one cannot but marvel at the sovereign hand of God bringing down "every stronghold, argument and pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God" (2Cor.10:4, 5). Christ, as head of the nations has "determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation" (Acts 17:26). Empires rise and fall according to the predestinating hand of God and the obedience of kings and people to the law-word of Christ, the King of kings, who teaches and disciples the nations through the church (Mtt.28:19).

The course and destinies of nations are governed according to the will of God, for his own glory and for the succor of his people. To the degree a nation receives the light of the gospel, to that degree it will experience the blessing of God. Daniel, as with the Revelation, was written so that the covenant people who temporarily suffer the domination of godless powers will not lose heart, and, in fact, gain courage for action from the reality of Christ as "the ruler of the kings of the earth" (Rev. 1:4). This knowledge of the sovereign God will empower the faithful to take action and resist the encroachment of the messianic state and every pseudo-Christ system:

"...but the people who know their God will display strength and take action", or as the NIV renders it: "...but the people who know their God will firmly resist him [the messianic power-state]" (11:32).

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